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## Architecture and Absence in the Secret Tantric History of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*)

### *Historical overview*

The Nyingma (*rNying ma*; “ancients”) sect of Tibetan Buddhism claims to stem in lineal succession from religious groups active during the dynastic period of Tibetan history (600-842 CE), which they maintain endured in non-monastic lay groups though the dark period (842-978) ensuing upon the collapse of centralized political authority in Tibet. As this latter period gives way to the classical period (978-1419) of Tibetan civilization sparked by economic revival and limited political centralization, competing religious traditions emerge under the rubric of the Sarma (*gSar ma*; “modernists”).<sup>1</sup> The Nyingmas were known as such in con-

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This article benefited greatly from discussions during a symposium on *rdzogs chen* at the University of Virginia in April 1994, and I would thus like to thank its principal participants: Ronald Davidson, Janet Gyatso, Jeffrey Hopkins, Matthew Kapstein, Anne Klein and Dan Martin. In particular I would like to thank Janet for her criticism of an earlier draft of the paper, and Matthew for very helpful conversations prior to and following the symposium. Paul Hackett also offered me constructive criticism on the opening sections. Finally my remarks on the importance of the body in these contemplative techniques are in part based on extensive discussions with Charles Herreshoff and Herbert Guenther.

1. I am well aware that some will object vehemently to my rendering of *gSar ma* as “modernist” (the Tibetan term literally means “the new” or “the fresh”). I do not intend to directly compare the use of the term to the various *specific* usages of the English rubric “modernism” in the twentieth century, but I do think it accords with the general significance of “modern thought, character, or practice” and even its more specialized contemporary definition as “the deliberate departure from tradition and the use of innovative forms of expression.” It also has the advantage of making clear the pure ideological force of these terms for competing groups during this period, while simply utilizing

trast to these groups actively and self-consciously reimporting Buddhism from India from the late tenth century onwards. Thus these rubrics “ancients” and “modernists” are not Indic in origin, but rather first came into use in Tibet to signify these two discernible periods of Tibetan translation of Buddhist texts: “ancients” refers to the activity of the translator Vairocana (late eighth century) up to Paṇḍita Smṛti(jñānakīrti) (late tenth century or early eleventh century), while “modernists” signifies Rin chen bzang po (958-1055) onwards.<sup>2</sup> The distinctive identities of both traditions were mutually co-constituting during the eleventh century and beyond, since both had their inception as self-conscious and distinct movements in intimate dialogue with each other. In addition, the earlier communities and their associated religious traditions were divided up into two broadly defined camps based upon whether or not they considered themselves explicitly Buddhist in affiliation: the Buddhist “ancient ones” and the non-Buddhist Bonpos (*bon po*).<sup>3</sup>

While the dark period continues to be obscure from our contemporary perspective, as it comes to a close we find those groups adhering to the rubric of the ancients dominated by two tantric-based traditions of practice and theory generally transmitted in conjunction with each other: Mahāyoga (*rnal 'byor chen po*) and the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*). The former constitutes a classic tantric system with the full spectrum of beliefs and practices characterizing late Indian Buddhist tantric movements (i. e. eighth century onwards). Thus representing the Tibetan importation of cutting edge Indian Buddhist tantra in the eighth to ninth centuries, this system constituted mainstream tantra for the Nyingmas, just as the Anuttarayoga tantras would eventually fulfill the same func-

the Tibetan terms suggests their semantic content is slight (the flat “new ones” speaks little to a reader).

2. See kLong chen rab 'byams pa's *Grub mtha' mdzod* 315.6. The important early Nyingma master Rong zom chos kyi bzang po was said to be a direct reincarnation of Paṇḍita Smṛtijñānakīrti (see Dudjom 1991, 703).

3. The early Great Perfection traditions are mainly found within these two communities. While the associated practices and literature are quite similar in both, in the present context I will be focusing exclusively on the situation within the communities of the ancients. Though it is imperative that the two be studied in tandem, research has not yet progressed to a state where this is readily possible in many cases.

tion for the modernists. The Great Perfection, however, defined itself by the rhetorical rejection of such normative categories constituting tantric as well as non-tantric Indian Buddhism. This pristine state of affairs known as the “Mind Series” (*sems sde*) movement stemmed above all from Buddhist tantra as represented by the Mahāyoga tantras, but was also influenced by other sources such as Chinese Chan and unknown indigenous elements. Over the course of the next four centuries traditions going under the name of the “Great Perfection” radically altered in nature. These alterations primarily consisted of rethinking its relationship to the wider tantric domains of discourse and praxis that formed its original and continuing matrix of significance. This rethinking was pursued in dialogue with more normative tantric traditions both from within their own tradition (primarily the Mahāyoga) and from the burgeoning modernist movements (such as the Mahāmudrā and Anuttarayoga tantra cycles); it was driven by its own interior logic of development as well as the multiple transformations induced by the modernists philosophically, institutionally and ideologically. The entire process constituted nothing less than a stunningly original and distinctively Tibetan reinvention of Buddhist tantra in a large body of canonical and commentarial *Tibetan* language texts, many of which are philosophical *and* literary masterpieces. Of the many new systems thus generated under the continuing rubric of the Great Perfection, the most important was known as the “Seminal Heart” (*snying thig*). The process finally culminated in the corpus of the fourteenth century scholar-poet kLong chen rab ’byams pa (1308–1363), who not only systematized the creative ferment of the preceding centuries, but also carefully contextualized it in terms of the standard doctrinal and contemplative structures that were beginning to define Tibetan Buddhism in general. It is this process from the ninth to fourteenth century which forms the subject of my present inquiry.

*The denial of tantra and rhetoric of absence in the formation of Great Perfection traditions*

From a very early point onwards, the Mahāyoga *Guhyagarbha Tantra* (*gSang ba snying po*) represents the most normative vision of what constitutes a tantra for these Nyingma lineages. Tibetan exegetical works on it discuss it in terms of ten or eleven “practical principles of tantra” (*rgyud kyi dngos po*) understood as summarizing the distinctive features of mainstream tantric systems overall. For example, Rong zom



chos kyi bzang po (eleventh century)<sup>4</sup> speaks of nine such principles in his commentary: maṇḍala, actualization, empowerment, commitments and enlightened activities (as the five foundations), along with mantra, “seals,” contemplation and offering (as the four branches). The earlier *sPar Khab* commentary of Lilāvajra adds the dyad of view and conduct to the five foundations to formulate seven principles. rDo grub 'jigs med bstan pa'i nyi ma (1865-1926) then structures the second half of his own commentary, the *mDzod kyi lde mig*, around ten principles termed “supporting conditions for the path”:<sup>5</sup> view of suchness, resolving conduct, arraying maṇḍala, empowerments for sequential traversal, commitments which are not to be transgressed, play of enlightened activity, actualization of aspirations, unwavering contemplation, offerings presented to the appropriate (divine) sites and recitation of mantras with binding seals. Mi pham's (1846-1912) exegesis of the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*<sup>6</sup> is structured around the same set of topics, though he counts the final two separately to arrive at eleven principles and sequences them differently: the triad of view, contemplation and conduct; the triad of maṇḍala, empowerment and commitment; the triad of actualization, offering and enlightened activity; and the dyad of seals and mantras. The first triad consists of the view or outlook, the contemplative means to instantiate that view in one's own being, and the conduct by which one integrates these with one's ongoing lifestyle and behavior. The second triad then relates to the integrated configurations (“maṇḍala”) of divine energies representing this world being articulated or revealed, the transference of intense energy that begins to purify stains and thus empower one to take part in this maṇḍala, and the guidelines for the preservation of this new integration, i. e. the commitments that must be sustained. The third triad is comprised of the ritual and meditative means to actualize these changes, the offering practices to surrender oneself up to this new vision of reality while acknowledging the power and beauty of its chief incarnations (i. e. the buddhas, etc.), and the charismatic efficacious activities that begin to unfold from the practitioner's newly found place in the universe. Finally there are seals which bind or secure these dimensions to prevent relapse and the mantras representing

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4. The descriptions from Rong zom chos kyi bzang po as well as the *sPar khab* are drawn from *mDzod kyi lde mig* 145ff.

5. *Ibid.*, 145ff.

6. *gSang 'grel phyogs bcu'i mun sel gyi spyi don 'od gsal snying po* 65.5.

the use of language to evoke this world as well as sustain its integrity. These ten principles, with the detailed theories and practices they signify, thus constitute the quintessential identity and infrastructure of normative tantra for the Nyingma tradition. In Tibetan Buddhism in general (i. e. both the modernists and ancients), a complimentary classification identifying a system or text as belonging to the tantric mainstream is that of the dyad of generation stage and perfection stage theories and praxis.<sup>7</sup>

The early Great Perfection is characterized by constant rhetorical denials of the validity and critical relevance of not only this dyadic system of tantric contemplation, but also the entire tenfold structure of tantra precisely as represented in the ancients' own mainstream tantric traditions (Mahāyoga). It is precisely such denials that were involved in critics' rejection of Great Perfection texts as authentically tantric, as well as the texts' own attempts at differentiating between themselves and tantra. An early prominent example of such rhetoric is the important ninth chapter of the *Kun byed rgyal po*, where normative tantric principles are negated under the rubric of the "ten facets of the enlightening mind's own being" (*rang bzhin bcu*). Identified as the "view of the great perfection, the enlightening mind," these ten constitute a rejection of the relevance of the tantric principles defining Mahāyoga:<sup>8</sup> there is *no* meditative cultivation of a view; *no* preserving of commitments; *no* skill or exertion in enlightened activities; *no* obscuration of primordial gnosis; *no* cultivation or refinement of meditative stages; *no* path to traverse; *no* subtle phenomena;<sup>9</sup> *no* duality with relationships (between such discrete

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7. See my discussion of this dyad below.

8. *Kun byed rgyal po* 32.1.

9. I interpret "subtle phenomena" as constituting a rejection of attempts to articulate some type of description of the ultimate nature of things (*chos*) as discrete manipulable things or building blocks that language can get a sufficient handle on. The tantra elaborates that "deviations and obscurations emerge in relation to phenomena via the grasping at a unitary dimension which is not some-thing to be grasped." Instead it is only in releasing oneself into the nothingness of reality (*chos nyid*) that the truly subtle reveals itself, at the level of the whole and *its* logic. Thus the tantra says "I am primordially beyond subject-object duality, and hence there is no designation of 'subtle' . . ."—giving oneself up to this unitary dimension of the invisible, one finds one's personal identity as part of its field, not in terms of some more subtle self still conceived along discrete lines. Similarly the rejection of duality and linkages in the following item rejects understanding this

phenomena); *no* delineation of definitive scriptures aside from the mind; and *no* resolution in terms of esoteric precepts since it is beyond all reductionism, whether reifications or negations. While not identical to the Mahāyoga lists, the similar numeration and partial correspondence is unmistakable.

In his commentary on the *Kun byed rgyal po*,<sup>10</sup> kLong chen rab 'byams pa speaks of the "tenfold nature of tantra" (*rang bzhin bcu*) in preface to citing a passage from the same ninth chapter: view or perspective, meditation, commitments, enlightened activity, maṇḍala, empowerment, cultivating stages (in a gradated path), traversing paths, purifying obstacles, and pristine awareness or buddha activity. He further specifies that these aspects can not be found upon analysis to exist as discrete tangible essences, and describes it thus: "this tenfold nature which is pure from the ground is resolved as a great non-meditation." However, the passage kLong chen rab 'byams pa cites provides brief descriptions of the same list of ten specified above from the *Kun byed rgyal po* (except it omits the tenth) and thus does not directly correlate to his own prefatory list. kLong chen rab 'byams pa adds "maṇḍala," "empowerment," splits "meditation on a view" and "no obscuration of primordial gnosis" each into two elements, and omits "subtle phenomena," "non-duality" and the final two regarding scriptures and precepts. In addition, while kLong chen rab 'byams pa simply applies absence to all ten facets, the passage he cites oscillates back and forth between dimensions which are "absent" (*med pa*) and dimensions which pertain (*yin*), thereby intertwining positive and negative identifications of this dimension being evoked. In the *gNas lugs mdzod*,<sup>11</sup> kLong chen rab 'byams pa cites an earlier passage from the ninth chapter of the *Kun*

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dimension in terms of "relationships" between discrete (i. e. dualistically conceived) entities, a type of discourse stemming from the karmic focus on individual subjectivities and their interaction as discrete centers on the basis of discernible patterns of cause and effect. Thus the tantra explains that "deviations and obscurations in terms of linkage occur via the emergence of linkages in relation to a unitary dimension which is devoid of duality"; "because my form pervades all, primordially it is not dual."

10. *Byang chub kyi sems kun byed rgyal po'i don khrid rin chen sgru bo*. All my page references are to Lipman's translation (1987, 34).

11. *gNas lugs mdzod* 60.5.

*byed rgyal po* and identifies the “view of the great perfection” as the “realization of the absence of ten natures”: view, commitments, empowerment, maṇḍala, stages, path, enlightened activity, primordial gnosis, fruit and reality itself. However, his list again only partially corresponds to the quote it prefaces: he adds “empowerment and maṇḍala” as well as “fruit and reality,” and ignores the final four elements in the tantra’s enumeration. He concludes with a citation from the tantra’s forty–eighth chapter<sup>12</sup> which explains six “foundations”: view, commitment, enlightened activity, path, stage, and primordial gnosis. These discrepancies result from kLong chen rab ’byams pa modifying the original list to resemble a more straightforward account of ten principles governing tantra in particular<sup>13</sup> as well as a more direct Nāgārjunian-style negation of each. This apparently relates to his agenda of bringing the Great Perfection tradition into more explicit dialogue with the types of concerns characterizing the Buddhism of the normative academic institutions beginning to take shape in Tibet. In the current context he links it to the authoritative Middle Way (*dbu ma*, *madhyamaka*) system and carves out a distinctive space for it in relation to standard tantric systems.

The Great Perfection thus originates on the periphery of the vast discursive terrain of the Mahāyoga, the latter being none other than the complex web of doctrines and practices constituting normative tantra during that period. A vacuum is created in this landscape through the systematic expulsion of every standard tantric principle. Just as in Dignāga’s theory of language where meaning derives from exclusion (*apoha*),<sup>14</sup> it creates itself through denial, rejection, and negation, resulting in a space with nothing at all. What could this possibly signify in itself, since it is by its own definition nothing? Yet this absence, just as in signification, is utterly defined by what it has excluded—it is not a simple absence, but rather an absence of precise systems, systems which are thus inexorably evoked though now under erasure. The entire spectrum of tantric ideologies and praxis haunts this pristine space of absence. The subsequent history of the Great Perfection then constitutes the cycling back of the tide, the inexorable return of the expelled, as

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12. *Kun byed rgyal po* 141.

13. Most are also standard principles of non-tantric Buddhism, though the definitions emphasize their uniquely tantric interpretation.

14. For example, see Klein 1986, 145.

tantric ideologies and practices flow back into this excavated space of Atiyoga. Yet as they return, they are transformed to become something other than their source—while permeable, the boundaries of the space remain. These boundaries in some way continue to demarcate a space of absence, but now the absence coexists with affirmation. The end result is that this becomes a place where a genuinely Tibetan transformation of Buddhist tantra takes place, an innovative appropriation and thoroughgoing revision in the cauldron of Tibetan ideologies, culture and language. This carved out space of absence thus functioned partially to maintain a bounded zone in which Tibetans could think, resisting the pressure of domination from the flood of Indic culture through rhetorical negation, and then while still holding it at an arm's distance, perform the alchemy of cultural assimilation.

Thus, at least at the level of literary expression, for the next six centuries (ninth to fourteenth) the Great Perfection was subject to a process of gradual alteration as these (*rhetorically*) exorcised demons gradually flowed back into its very core. Given the at times highly unusual way in which these “demons” made their reappearance, it is crucial not to assume that this process should be characterized pejoratively as regression or simple assimilation, rather than as ongoing creativity and innovation. From a very early period we find Great Perfection texts being transmitted together with more normative tantric material and practices, and the key to understanding its fluctuations over the centuries among its different principal authors and lineage holders is to see a shifting boundary line that delineates the Great Perfection from the tantric ocean it is borne and sustained within in Tibet. We must trace how that oceanic background shapes it at any given time, as well as how the constantly shifting explicit divestiture *and* incorporation of diverse elements from its tantric context continued to alter its identity, at times in startling new directions. In addition, it is important not to exclusively privilege these valorized authors and lineage figures as distinct from what might have been quite different movements among unknown figures, withholding the pejorative designation “popular.”

The rhetorical denial of early Great Perfection texts later classified as the “Mind Series” can thus not simply be taken at face value. On the one hand it could be largely intended for those who have already gone through these tantric processes with their complex meditations and rituals—for an authoritative voice to suddenly pronounce the whole infrastructure as meaningless and irrelevant would in that context possess a

tremendous psychological power. Yet simultaneously its restriction to such a context would prevent it from actually undercutting or discouraging an initial or even ongoing immersion in such practices. Aside from such considerations, obviously rejecting such principles is a way of talking about them, which evokes and conjures them even in its denial, thus living a parasitic existence dependent on its own alterity. While the precise significance of this Mind Series strategy of rhetorically negating these normative tantric principles is thus far from straightforward, it should be noted that there are additional standard Great Perfection approaches involving *reinterpreting* these principles in terms of internal process-oriented experiences of the psyche's embodied nature rather than externally conceived and performed structured activities. This can consist in poetic evocation that still clarifies little as to any practical approach: while there is a naturally occurring view, it is not forcefully cultivated; while there are commitments, they are not actively maintained vows; ordinary appearances are the desired vision rather than transcendent pure realms, and so forth. Alternatively, such an approach can involve a reinterpretation of standard practices such as evocation rituals that present their many details (such as offering, confession and feast) in terms of internal psychological processes revolving around deep contemplative awareness. Although the practice is thus streamlined and interiorized, it remains clearly implementable—i. e. the visualization of the relevant deity and chanting of liturgy are still enacted.

*The Great Perfection's early sources: Chinese Chan, Tibetan Mind Series and the cutting edge of Indian Buddhist tantric contemplation*

In Kennard Lipman's study of an important Mind Series text,<sup>15</sup> he characterizes early Great Perfection movements as growing out of tantric speculation on the notion of the "enlightened mind" (*byang chub sems, bodhicitta*), and emphasizes the use of concepts drawn from non-tantric "mind only" (*sems tsam, cittamatrā*) literature. In addition, while overt citation of Indian buddha-nature literature in the Great Perfection only becomes prevalent in the fourteenth century with kLong chen rab 'byams pa, tantra itself in general is based ideologically and hermeneutically on buddha-nature traditions.<sup>16</sup> In similar fashion, the Great Perfection is from its inception an integral part of this long standing Indian

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15. Lipman 1987, 11.

16. Snellgrove 1987, 125.

tradition of speculation on the practical implications of using the trope of the Buddha to talk about the ongoing dynamics of one's own being, both that which lies in the grasp of one's vision and that which exceeds it. Philosophically it is a tantric interpretation of buddha-nature discourse or "the enlightening mind" (*byang chub sems, bodhicitta*), emphasizing original purity (*ka dag*) or emptiness as well as valorizing continued action and dynamism under the heading of "spontaneity" (*lhun grub*). In doing so, it relentlessly undercuts the dominance of ordinary human subjectivity in preference for consistently adopting the mysterious "buddha-perspective." Regardless of which elements are stressed, the Great Perfection in its origins and development clearly belongs in the continuum of South Asian Buddhist traditions. The impressions of some contemporary Tibetologists to the contrary are partially due to the influential presuppositions of traditional and contemporary adherents to logico-epistemological strands of Indian Buddhism in our interpretations of the history of Buddhist thought and textuality.<sup>17</sup> When an understanding of thought and language is assumed and consequently applied across the spectrum as if natural, the differences elided are immense, and it becomes difficult to articulate a response when that elision falls unacknowledged, a shadow across the clear light of reason.

The major modern historical study to date of the specific origins of early Great Perfection lineages is Samten Karmay's *The Great Perfection*. He argues<sup>18</sup> that it involves the blending of elements drawn from three principal sources: (i) movements emphasizing the instantaneous nature of enlightenment (*cig car ba*) deriving from Chinese Chan traditions that were very active in Tibet during the eighth to ninth centuries; (ii) tantric teachings found in such Mahāyoga texts as the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* and presumably deriving in the main from Indic areas of South Asia; and (iii) "Mind Series" type teachings. How or whether he distinguishes the third element from the second element, i. e. whether the Mind Series is simply a rubric for this development out of the tantric

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17. I have in mind conversations I have had over the years with various scholars. It also must be said that the quality and extent of modern academic work done in these and other sūtra-based Indian and Tibetan Buddhist traditions remains superior to that done in tantra-based traditions. For these reasons, there is a quite natural tendency for the former to unduly dominate our critical perspectives.

18. Karmay 1988, 216.

perfection phase meditations in the Mahāyoga Tantras<sup>19</sup> or a priorly existent movement, is not clear. In fact, the center of Karmay's text is the proposition that Padmasambhava's *Man ngag lta ba'i phreng ba*, a commentary on perfection phase contemplative processes outlined in the *Guhya garbha Tantra* framed by a discussion of a doxography of nine vehicles, represents a state at which the Great Perfection is beginning to separate itself from its tantric origins. Approximately half of Padmasambhava's text concerns the Great Perfection presented as the third of the triune process (*tshul*) of the "tantric vehicle of inner yogic means":<sup>20</sup> the generation mode, perfection mode, and great perfection mode. At this early stage, the Great Perfection thus is not understood as an independent vehicle, but rather as an expansion of the traditional tantric dyad of generation phase and perfection phase meditations into a triad which it culminates. Its rationale may be to focus in on the formless meditations of the perfection phase,<sup>21</sup> thereby enabling them to become contemplative sessions in and of themselves divorced from not only generation phase visualizations, but also the techniques of complex internalized visualizations that also go under the rubric of "perfection phase" (reflected in subtle body theory and praxis). In this way, perhaps, proponents were able to engage in complex and difficult contemplative processes, but also rhetorically and experientially preserve a space in which such language as "natural," "uncontrived," "stress-free" and "open" could apply. It is essential to keep in mind that Mahāyoga just represents the cutting edge of Indian Buddhist Tantrism in the eighth to ninth centuries, similar to the rubric "Anuttarayoga" in the tenth to eleventh centuries for the modernists—in fact the two are basically very similar movements despite the polemics. Karmay also points to references in modernist tantras themselves that indicate "great perfection" (whatever Indic term this may translate) was used to refer to a "high level of spiritual attainment reached through the practice of *rdzogs rim* contemplation"<sup>22</sup> or the perfection phase itself.

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19. Karmay 1988, 120.

20. Karmay 1988, 146.

21. The term "formless" is problematic, since such meditations are subtly thematized or in-formed by the aphoristic language of "instructions" as well as the overall context in which they are practiced.

22. Karmay 1988, 141.



In the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* itself we find repeated uses of the term *rdzogs*, but only four references to “great perfection.” Each of the references clearly relates to the term’s later usage, though none unambiguously imply it functioning as a rubric for a coherent system of theory or praxis. The first reference:<sup>23</sup>

Primordial gnosis considered in terms of a center with four directions  
Is an inconceivable, spontaneous maṇḍala, which is a *great perfection*  
(*rdzogs chen*) -  
The visionary who realizes it  
Experiences the origin of everything within this great maṇḍala.

The second reference:<sup>24</sup>

Then all the maṇḍalas of the adamantine enlightened body, speech, and mind of the Buddhas from throughout the ten directions and four times became condensed into one. Thus the Great Joyous One entered equipoise within the contemplation of the cloud-array of the intensely secret commitment’s nucleus, i. e. that all phenomena are primordially spontaneously present within the *Great Perfection* (*rdzogs chen*).

The third reference:<sup>25</sup>

Om! The *great perfection* (*rdzogs pa che*) of enlightened body, speech and mind -  
Totally perfect and complete in terms of enlightened qualities and activities!  
Totally positive (*kun bzang*) in its primordial spontaneous perfection/completeness!  
A great seminal nucleus of the gathered great assembly! Hoh!

The fourth reference:<sup>26</sup>

Remaining within the commitment of sameness  
Which evenly links you to sameness,

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23. Chapter six; Tibetan and translation in Dorje 1987, 200, 626. All translations provided here are my own.

24. Chapter thirteen; Tibetan and translation in Dorje 1987, 31, 982.

25. Chapter fourteen; Tibetan and translation in Dorje 1987, 235, 1054.

26. Chapter nineteen; Tibetan and translation in Dorje 1987, 253, 186.

You will obtain *the great sameness-perfection* (*mnyam rdzogs chen po*);  
 If you transgress it, you will never be expansively awakened into buddhahood.

This connection between the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* and early Great Perfection movements is supported by the traditional characterization of the final three vehicles (Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga) as tantra (*rgyud*), scripture (*lung*) and esoteric precept (*man ngag*).<sup>27</sup> This suggests that Mahāyoga constitutes the traditional tantric cycles, while Atiyoga functions as highly specialized and experiential precepts presenting the cycles' essence in contemplative form.

In saying that Padmasambhava's text gave "birth to the doctrine of rdzogs chen as a syncretic teaching drawing mainly from [the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*]" (152), Karmay again tersely qualifies this by characterizing it as "tinged with thinking deriving from the [Mind Series] 18 series of texts."<sup>28</sup> The relevant passages are ambiguously expressed, and it is quite possible that Karmay does not intend to suggest two separate movements. However, for the purpose of my current discussion I would like to briefly pursue the possibility of distinct strands in Tibet that then merged during these early centuries. The contention is that the Mind Series may have constituted a separate and independent movement of unspecified origins, which then transformed into the Great Perfection in Tibet through merging with a separate development flowing out of Mahāyoga perfection phase theory and practices. This then gradually detached itself from its origins into a tradition that evolved a self-understanding of itself as an independent vehicle. The origins of this hypothesized early Mind Series could have been a largely oral and non-monastic movement among Himalayan yogic circles belonging to a similar Buddhist milieu as that which generated other such traditions reflected in Dohā literature<sup>29</sup> and Mahāmudrā. While clearly tantric in nature, it was an aestheticized and streamlined variety distancing itself from other tantric movements focusing on sexuality, violence and complex ritual practices encompassed by generation phase

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27. See, for example, the *Theg mchog mdzod* vol. 2, 97.4.

28. This set of texts is discussed in Karmay 1988, 24.

29. This is of course related to Kvaerne's theory on the origins of Bon Great Perfection.

and perfection phase contemplation.<sup>30</sup> While possessing scattered attempts at literary production, its literary identity was fairly unformed, and thus it was able to easily blend with a more literary-based movement growing out of speculations on the implications of a type of contemplation known as the “great perfection” emerging out of perfection phase practices (themselves drawn from the extensive Mahāyoga tantra cycles). While both the Mind Series and new Mahāyoga developments may have largely took shape in Tibetan areas as Karmay continually implies, clearly there were also substantial ties to Indian Buddhist circles via Tibetans traveling abroad as well as various foreign yogis / scholars wandering through Tibet.

As opposed to the subsequent Seminal Heart transformation of the Great Perfection which is quite different from Chan and intensely tantric in nature,<sup>31</sup> the early Great Perfection tradition eventually subsumed under the Mind Series rubric obviously bears many striking similarities to Chinese Chan (as well as differences). Given early references to the subterranean survival of Chan in Tibet, it would thus not be surprising that Chan constituted one of the important strands fueling the Great Perfection’s initial development. Despite this, its main sources are obviously tantric in nature; the earlier characterizations of it as the “residue of Chan in Tibet” having been thoroughly criticized by Karmay, I will not repeat it here.<sup>32</sup> Robertson and Tanaka<sup>33</sup> likewise have strongly criticized Tucci’s claims that the Great Perfection has a direct genetic relationship to Chinese Chan such that it partially represents the preservation of Chan practices and beliefs in Tibet. While the criticism of Tucci’s fallacious arguments is excellent, they base themselves on a single text, such that the scope of refutation is too narrow and consequently the claims made are too strong in disregarding more subtle versions of

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30. See Robertson 1992, 162 for a discussion of how the Mind Series movement takes its stand independently of tantric features, claiming its “inexpressible spontaneous presence of pure and complete mind” is outside of the generation / perfection phase structures (also see Karmay 1988, 55-58, 119-120).

31. For this reason, questions regarding how the Seminal Heart’s innovativeness may be genetically related to other traditions must be pursued elsewhere.

32. Karmay 1988, 86-106.

33. Robertson and Tanaka 1992.

Chan's possible influences on early Great Perfection traditions. Such influence could have taken place outside of Tibetan cultural domains, and / or in the late eighth century some one hundred and fifty years prior to *bSam gtan mig sgron*'s composition (the text Robertson and Tanaka use to argue that Chan and the Great Perfection were considered to be quite distinct traditions). Nonetheless, I do agree that even these early Great Perfection traditions were clearly profoundly tantric in character by at least the latter half of tenth century, which indicates its principal roots were non-Chan in origin, despite the lack of overtly tantric visualization techniques. This type of doctrinal argument is echoed by Norbu.<sup>34</sup> However even if we posit the Great Perfection as emerging through a process of detachment from Mahāyoga tantric practices and literature, its development in Tibet took place in a milieu where Chan influence was at times very strong indeed. Given their striking similarities as well as the references to Chan in Nyingma literature,<sup>35</sup> it would be very odd if the Great Perfection was not significantly influenced by its dialogues with Chan, even if its original genesis and primary impetus is to be located elsewhere.

Scholarship clearly must thus move beyond an "either / or" type of framework that posits the Great Perfection as a survival of Chan in Tibet, or disavows any relationship whatsoever. It is also important to note that the later Seminal Heart movement could never be confused with Chan in any of its ordinary forms, with the exception of its incorporation of earlier Great Perfection movements in its "absence" (*med pa*) discourse articulating "breakthrough" (*khregs chod*) contemplation. A more interesting line of inquiry is to ask how the Great Perfection might have important implications for our re-reading of the history and nature of Indian Buddhism as a tantric tradition offering important hermeneutic and philosophical innovations rather than simple anti-nomian practices, new terminology, or new "styles" for contemplation.<sup>36</sup> Finally, it is

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34. Norbu 1984.

35. See Karmay 1988, 93, for a reference to a seventh generation of Chan teachings in reference to an important Great Perfection master around 1000 C. E.

36. An example of the understanding of tantrism that I find problematic can be found in Snellgrove 1987, 189: "... the vast variety of tantric imagery, when divorced from the actual tantric practices of the kind we have illustrated, becomes in effect nothing more than new styles for old practices ... tantric

essential to keep in mind that the Great Perfection was not at all a monolithic tradition, but rather during these early centuries consisted of a wide variety of heterogeneous movements with often quite different sources and agendas. In many ways the quest for pinpointing its "origins" is yet another futile search ill-fated because of its faulty premises.

Whatever its origins, in Tibet, at least, the term "Great Perfection" came to signify a series of interlinked poetically thematized styles of meditation codified into varying traditions grouped together as the "Mind Series" (*sems sde*). The term became a rubric for extended discourses on the subject gradually understood as a discourse making sense in and of itself, even to the extent (in some circles) of constituting a self-sufficient praxis without reliance on other more tangible technique-oriented systems of Buddhist contemplation. At some point in this process, its adherents thus began to refer to it as a "vehicle" (*theg pa, yāna*), which connotes a soteriologically efficacious and autonomous way. Recent research<sup>37</sup> indicates this may have been already in process by the late eighth century in India. However, simply the term "vehicle" does not by itself indicate that the Great Perfection had gained any type of self-sufficient identity for itself either in terms of extended literary cycles or forms of praxis, although it may have had such an identity as a largely oral phenomena only gradually elaborated in graphic forms. The strands that fueled this initial development in Tibet appears to be this triad of early Vajrayāna speculation and practice, then known under the heading of "Mahāyoga" (the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* in particular);<sup>38</sup> Chinese Chan traditions encountered from Sichuan, Dunhuang, and elsewhere; and unknown indigenous influences, perhaps including heterodox Buddhist movements circulating in Tibet prior to the late eighth cen-

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Buddhism seems to offer little new in results, which earlier forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism do not already supply . . . ." Despite such problems, Snellgrove's *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* vol. 1 remains the standard work on the history of Indian Buddhist tantra.

37. I have in mind here the ongoing doctoral research of Phil Stanley at the University of Virginia into the early nine vehicle doxographical systems of Nyingma literature.

38. See Eastman 1981, 1983.

ture.<sup>39</sup> This discursive independence of the Great Perfection is clearly indicated textually during the tenth century in Tibet by gNubs sangs rgyas ye shes's *bSam gtan mig sgron* and the codification by unknown hands of earlier short tantras into the critical *Kun byed rgyal po*. The former is the earliest surviving substantial exegetical work on the Great Perfection attributed explicitly to a Tibetan author, and its main section discusses four distinct Buddhist traditions hierarchically arranged from lowest to highest: the gradual approach of the Mādhyamika taught by Kamalaśīla, the sudden approach of the Chan taught by Hva-shang Mahāyāna, the non-dual approach of the Mahāyoga and the spontaneous approach of the Great Perfection.<sup>40</sup> The *Kun byed rgyal po*, on the other hand, is the main canonical work of the Great Perfection as it emerges from the "dark period" (850 to 1000 C. E.) into the light of the economic and religious transformations of the eleventh century. While the dark period was marked by economic depression, political decentralization, and a paucity of historical records,<sup>41</sup> it was thus also apparently the site of these non-institutionalized developments of early Vajrayāna movements that resulted in the gradual articulation of a self-conscious Great Perfection movement in Tibet, as well as the more graphically tantric Mahāyoga systems.

*A digression into the history of rhetoric and practice in Buddhist tantric contemplation: the triad of generation phase, perfection phase and the great perfection*

The later phases of Buddhist tantra in India known under the rubric of the "Anuttara-yoga Tantras" generally classified their various contemplative techniques into two sequentially ordered types: "generation

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39. See Kvaerne 1972, 38-40, where he suggests that Bonpo Great Perfection traditions stemmed in part from the activities of Buddhist tantric adepts and possibly Śaivite yogis in western Tibet (then the kingdom of Zhang Zhung) during the seventh to eighth centuries. In other words, the eighth century transmission of Buddhism from China and India into central Tibet under the auspices of the Yarlung dynasty was not the earliest or exclusive source of Buddhist transmissions in ancient Tibet. Also see Kvaerne 1976.

40. *bSam gtan mig sgron* 65-118, 118-186, 186-290, 290-494 respectively. See Guenther 1983 for a discussion of this text; also Ruegg 1989, 6-7, etc..

41. Ronald Davidson delivered an excellent summary of issues related to this period and its end in an unpublished talk entitled "The Eleventh Century Renaissance in Central Tibet" (April 1994, University of Virginia).

phase" (*bškyed rim*, *utpatti-krama*) and "perfection phase" (*rdzogs rim*, *sampanna-krama*) practices respectively. This categorization was partially an attempt to introduce innovative contemplations (the latter) and theoretically justify them as complimentary processes to previously standard tantric contemplative practices (the former). The perfection phase is thus understood as bringing the generation phase practices to "perfection" or "completion," thereby both integrating with, and subordinating, the earlier standard modes of contemplation. One gives rise to a vision of transcendence in stark contrast to one's mundane existence (*generation*), and that vision is then fully embodied as it culminates in the visionary's physical incarnation of a new order of existence (*perfection*), a new organizing principle that begins to assert itself in and as oneself.<sup>42</sup> "Generation phase" in general signifies a concern with visual images, and in particular the various practices of "generating" visualizations of deities' bodily images that became so popular under the rubric of Buddhist tantra. Its various systematizations correspond to different procedures and corresponding classifications for how one goes about such visualization in an organized sequence of steps.

"Perfection phase," however, covers two distinct rubrics: an earlier body of practice focused on the absence of images and a later system of techniques focused on the human body as a directly sensed reality. The first aspect indicates form-less types of contemplation directly on the ultimate nature of one's mind utterly devoid of any fabricated or spontaneous visual images. Often discussed as the dissolution of visual images back into the visionary, one could explain them as a felt experience of being grounded in the body, guided by the felt gravity of the body's presence without any cathexis to external images. They can also be understood in part as attempts to formally incorporate the non-exoteric styles of meditation on emptiness (that were increasingly normative in orthodox monastic environments) into tantric practice and ideology. This was done so with a degree of self-identity that provided rhetorical justification of their Buddhist character, as well as perhaps a means to transform a discourse and praxis that may have become a stifling orthodoxy.<sup>43</sup> It is important both to note that the actual "content" and style of these meditations when isolated out from their context is near identical,

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42. See Cozort 1986, 27 and 41.

43. See de Jong 1984, 98, for a discussion of Matsunaga's notion of the "ritualisation of Mahāyāna ideas" in Buddhist tantra.

and yet, when contextualized discursively and practically, the distinct semantic shapings of that similar "content" results in arguably quite different practices despite their formal similarities. In other words, exoteric contemplation of emptiness and esoteric dissolution of images is simultaneously radically similar, and radically different. The second rubric of perfection phase contemplation signifies *internal* meditations on a subtle or imaginal body-image through visualizing its triune elements known as "the channels, winds, and nuclei" (*rtsa rlung thig le*). This is in contrast to focusing on *external* visualizations of deities in front of one's self, or as one self, or even internal visualizations of constellations of such deities as a "body maṇḍala." These types of perfection phase meditations are innovative and distinctive in the history of Buddhist tantra in that they introduce overtly sexual symbolism as the basis for contemplation through reliance on non-anthropomorphic representations of a subtle body. Correspondingly they mark a move towards *felt* tactile sensations (especially sexual bliss and sensations of warmth) rather than exclusive reliance on our capacity for vision. In this way it marks a movement towards embodiment and processes internal to our body, with sexuality involving intensely tactile felt presences in contrast to vision, the coolest and most metaphysical of our senses.<sup>44</sup> We can thus only fully embody and assimilate these transformations by coming to terms with our body, a space that somehow resists the influence of the detached image.

This distinction of two dimensions of "perfection phase" practices is at times discussed as "with signs" or "symbolic" (*mtshan bcas*) in distinction to "without signs" or "non-symbolic" (*mtshan med*).<sup>45</sup> In other

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44. See Levin's 1988 analysis of the nature of vision and its contemporary distortion in "The Yielding of the Visible" (60-69) and "The Technological Eye" (95-107), as well as how he contrasts vision's distance to the immediacy of touch in "Vision in Touch" (253-256).

45. Of course this distinction between images / appearances and emptiness has an ancient pedigree in Indian Buddhism, and even the precise terminology of "yoga with signs" and "yoga without signs" is used to discuss the contemplative techniques found in the earlier tantric systems eventually classified as the Action, Conduct and Yoga tantric classes (see Hopkins 1987, 189-203; Hopkins 1987a, 52; Sopa 1985, 24-27). In that context it refers primarily instead to contemplation of a deity in contrast to contemplation of emptiness, since the elaborate notion of a subtle body and consequent focus on the body's felt interior only emerges in the later Anuttarayoga tantras. Beyer



contexts the distinction is terminologically expressed as “the path of efficacious means” (*thabs lam*) and “the path of freedom” (*grol lam*).<sup>46</sup> A significant point of contention in India and Tibet appears to have been whether the latter styles of contemplation could constitute a meditative session with particular techniques to generate and sustain it (regardless of rhetorical denials of formal meditation), or even an entire “vehicle” in and of themselves. The more conservative position maintained the necessity of their linkage to imaginal processes involving visual images as a necessary preliminary and / or complement, i. e. generation phase practices. Obvious reasons for the necessity of such linkage range from the felt need to imbue these practices’ powerful effects with a strong sense of orthodox Buddhist ethics,<sup>47</sup> to the circular logic that Beyer alludes to<sup>48</sup>—since normative Buddhist circles have come to set up such practices as presupposing that “the practitioner is a deity . . . formed through a series of magically potent contemplative events,” mastery of generation phase techniques is an absolute prerequisite. However such circular logic is hardly convincing outside of a traditional discourse, and the motivations and necessity of this privileging of deity-discourse remains an open question.<sup>49</sup> Just as Sharf has pointed out in other con-

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(1973, 132) discusses this distinction in the context of the latter, identifying “signless” as “gathering in the divine body-image and arising from the clear light of emptiness” (*bsdud ldang*).

46. Dorje 1987, 117.

47. This need is particularly evident when considering contemporary Qigong in the PRC, where the paranoia of “masters” obsessed with the manipulation of their own energy is legendary. I particularly remember a discussion with a Chinese friend of mine living in a remote Tibetan monastery after forsaking following in the footsteps of his father, a famous Qigong master in Beijing. Despite having had numerous experiences of the tremendous power such practices have, he had been unable to cope with what *he* viewed as the dominant tone of manipulation and control in their guarding secret techniques, martial applications, amassing of wealth and general disregard of ethics. It was precisely for the immersion in a Buddhist world-view that he had come to the monastery, despite the hardships.

48. Beyer 1973, 131.

49. The broader subject of the role of visually conceived symbols is somewhat different from this issue of how visualization of deity-images came to dominate Buddhist tantric practice.

texts, certainly in Tibet also there was a continual oscillation in such practices between the actual presence of felt experiences in the perceptual fields of the practitioner's body and the dominance of discursive / ritual systematizations, with the latter generating, and fulfilling, a wide variety of needs quite distinct from the psycho-physical transformation of an individual.<sup>50</sup>

The term "Great Perfection" or "great completeness" then seems to have first had a limited currency in India (and perhaps elsewhere) as a technical term referring to a higher development of "perfection phase" yogic states (eighth century?). This was eventually codified into a triadic transformation or expansion of the increasingly normative dyadic classification of tantric contemplation: the generation phase, perfection phase and great perfection. In some sources this triad apparently signified the different stages of meditation an adept must pass through.<sup>51</sup> In this context, "great perfection" apparently referred to a kind of technique-free "natural" immersion in a non-conceptual state that became a frequent experience for some practitioners after prolonged use of perfection phase techniques, a psychological space which was intensely tantric by virtue of its matrix. As examples of textual evidence, the important Anuyoga text the *mDo dgongs 'dus pa* represents the final three vehicles as generation, perfection, and total perfection (*yongs su rdzogs*).<sup>52</sup> Dudjom Rinpoche<sup>53</sup> cites at length two such passages from modernist tantras, the *'Jam dpal zhal lung* of Buddhaśrijñānapāda and its commentary by

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50. See Sharf 1992. The strong reading of Sharf's argument against assuming phenomenological interpretations of Buddhist texts' reference to subjective contemplative experiences simply does not hold water in Tibet. There are numerous very specific and pointed discussions of personal experiences, as well as pointed discussions of contemporaries who have, and have not, experienced various types of markers in Tibetan texts (see the *gTer bdag gling pa* passage cited below). In addition, my own personal experience, and conversations with various religious practitioners in various parts of the Tibetan cultural zone clearly indicates how misleading such a strong argument would be. Despite this, his arguments mitigated with caution are quite valid, and offer valuable hermeneutics as to how these practices and discourses can have numerous functions intersubjectively that have little to do with any "authentic" inner experiences.

51. Karmay 1988, 18 and 138.

52. *mDo dgongs 'dus pa* 302.7.

53. Dudjom 1991, 313.

Vitapāda (*'Phags pa 'jam dpal dbyangs kyi zhal lung gi 'grel pa*). The texts as a pair explicitly identify the term “Great Perfection” as referring to the second stage of the perfection phase, i. e. the “non-symbolic” as opposed to “symbolic.” The former characterizes it as “the second stage which is the essence of all the glorious ones,” which the latter interprets as the “second stage of the second [i. e. perfection] stage.” In the much later *Chos dbyings mdzod*,<sup>54</sup> kLong chen rab 'byams pa explicitly labels the Great Perfection as “secret mantra” in terms of situating it within Indian Buddhism, and further specifies that from the secret mantra’s two divisions of “generation” and “perfection” phase, it is the latter. Finally, in terms of the two types of perfection phases — “greater and lesser”—it is the “great” type. In his *bSam gtan ngal gso*,<sup>55</sup> kLong chen rab 'byams pa also refers to it as “the great perfection phase” (*rdzogs rim chen po*), defined as “resting in the pristine unfabricated enlightening-mind of awareness.”

The orthodox position in Tibet was certainly that perfection phase practices sequentially follow, and are contextualized by, standard Mahāyāna meditations such as “engendering an altruistic motivation to enlightenment” (*sems bskyed*) and tantric generation phase visualizations—one Tibetan author even defines perfection phase practices without such conjunction as essentially non-Buddhist practices.<sup>56</sup> Often the advocated mastery of visualizations in the generation phase required to move on to perfection phase contemplations is extraordinary, to the point where one must be “capable of visualizing the entire maṇḍala palace and occupants as contained within a shining drop at the tip of the nose, heart center, or genitals, and of holding that precise hologram stable for several hours.”<sup>57</sup> Frequently Tibetans will speak of needing to see the “whites of the eyes” of each of the innumerable deities in a given maṇḍala. However, there are many indications that such extreme strictures are largely theoretical or exhortatory in nature, while in practice the situ-

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54. *Chos dbyings mdzod* 350.7ff.

55. *bSam gtan ngal gso* 80.2.

56. Matthew Kapstein informed me (private communication, April 1994) that he had seen precisely such a reference in 'Jam mgon Kong sprul's corpus, while similar statements are scattered throughout Tibetan Buddhist texts. See the *Yid bzhin mdzod* (665.7) for a typical assumption of such conjunction.

57. Thurman 1994, 73.

ation is much more fluid. Beyer<sup>58</sup> cites a conversation with a “highly placed incarnate lama” who admitted to being only able to roughly visualize the subtle deities, though he quickly cited an elder yogi who supposedly had perfect visual mastery. Gyatso’s<sup>59</sup> detailed account of perfection phase practice in the Geluk tradition provides a very succinct set of relatively simple visualizations for those who cannot do the more extensive ones (specifying it as the *minimum* requirement for proceeding onwards). Lest one think such a reference is an accommodation for contemporary students, I should point out that in the *Shing rta chen po*<sup>60</sup> kLong chen rab ’byams pa details a practice that is said to be for “those who only take up perfection phase practices, whether because they can’t engage in extensive generation phase meditation or because they have little problem with discursiveness.”

This question of the autonomy of perfection phase contemplation is pertinent whether the context is a particular meditative session, or some type of sequential progression outlined by a path structure. If it is held that the non-symbolic formless meditations themselves are sufficient, since there is no longer a preliminary engagement of vision that can be said to energize or contextualize the consequent states of dissolution, a natural question arises: in what way are such meditations delineated from standard types of non-esoteric “calming” practices (*zhi gnas*, *Samatha*) and meditations on emptiness? Far from being the “ultra-peak” (*yang rtse*) of all Buddhist practices as claimed, such associations instead link them to doxographically inferior non-tantric preparatory types of contemplation. This appears to have been a frequent point of attack in Tibet, since Great Perfection literature stresses that its meditations are not fixated or exclusionary as calming practices generally are—instead they enable a vibrant and ceaselessly active type of awareness to come to the fore, which is then integrated into every day life.<sup>61</sup> A fur-

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58. Beyer 1973, 75.

59. Gyatso 1982, 14-16.

60. *Shing rta chen po* vol. 2, 112.5.

61. This is indicated in passages such as the following from the *Tshig don mdzod* (349):

No matter whether it (i. e. awareness) is shining forth hither to objects of the six consciousnesses or abiding within indwelling cognition, the dimension of awareness is a naked natural clarity, vivid in its clarity and awareness. Though vile thoughts arise, it is nakedly present in

ther implicit type of delineation appears to be how their discourse's surrounding semantic field flavors the practitioner's understanding of such states of contemplation, such that their inherently tantric textual (graphic and oral) discourses shape and give body to these simple, yet difficult, states of being. In this way, one could argue that even a tradition not actively appropriating visualization in praxis could be profoundly tantric by virtue of this discursive shaping of the contemplative arena. This is particularly clear in the Great Perfection, where such "formless" contemplations cultivate not only an alert, vigilant, eyes-open awareness, but also are shaped in distinct styles of psychological inquiry by poetic thematization.<sup>62</sup>

There were at *least* two major religious traditions in Tibetan areas during the eleventh to twelfth centuries that attempted to rhetorically (leaving open the question of actual praxis in specific life-contexts) present themselves as self-sufficient *tantric* vehicles that exclusively engaged in "formless"<sup>63</sup> types of contemplation: the bKa' brgyud tradi-

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inherently cleansed wakefulness; though noble thoughts arise, it is purely present and awake in its freedom from limitations. Though awareness abides within its own place, it uninterruptedly gazes with wide open eyes, untransformed by objects, unadulterated by grasping, and without involvement in notions of things to abandon and their antidotes. This dimension of awareness in its intense clarity and unwavering lucidity is identified as the Body of Reality in its naked unimpededness. If it is not cognitive and aware, forget about it; but if it is, since it's impossible that its essence is not the Body of Reality, you must recognize it as such.

62. Examples of such poetic thematization are the four styles of letting-be, twelve adamantine laughs and seven marvelous esoteric words described in the Seminal Heart tradition as means for Breakthrough meditation (especially see the *Tshig don mdzod* 346ff).

63. I continue to use scare quotes around "formless" to frighten away inappropriate connotations. They are only form-less in relation to their lack of standard Buddhist contemplative forms and their deconstruction of foetal vision, while in fact they are very concerned with the nature of our visual field as well as in-forming experience.

tions of the Great Seal (*phyag rgya chen po, mahāmudrā*)<sup>64</sup> and the Ancients / Bon traditions of the Great Perfection (i. e. the Mind Series, not later developments). In their early forms, both represent innovative codifications of non-symbolic perfection phase practices separated off from their intimate partners in tantric contemplation, and thus in essence are tantric transformations of earlier calming (*zhi gnas, śamatha*) and insight (*lhag mthong, vipāśyanā*) meditations. These latter meditations are modified in terms of actual practice as well as shaped by the tantric discourses in which they are rhetorically contextualized. Both traditions are thus referred to as “great” (*chen po*), a word that in Tibetan generally functions along the lines of the English “super.” They are the “super” part of perfection / completion phase practices, such that the “Great Perfection” can be interpreted as the “super style / dimension of perfection phase practices.” In other words, these traditions do not concern themselves with the interiorization, sexualization, and de-anthropomorphic imaging of visualization in the subtle body (i. e. symbolic perfection phase practices), but rather only with the more seemingly amorphous realms of (visually contrived) form-less meditation. They ultimately aim at haunting or reshaping everyday experience rather than becoming mystic trances departing from and re-entering the conventional domain.

The question as to what degree these were actually *implemented* apart from any other types of more normative tantric practices, and particularly subtle body meditations, is crucial. For the moment, my emphasis is simply on their *rhetorical* exclusion of such practices, which at the very least appeared to be a basis for the polemical attacks launched by other groups (as well as a basis for the bKa’ brgyud-Nyingma syncretism over the centuries that finally issued forth in a full blown ecumenical (*ris med*) movement in nineteenth century Eastern Tibet). For example, a typical passage from the *bSam gtan mig sgron*<sup>65</sup> rejects any type of physical discipline, including the simple discipline of a prescribed sitting posture as one meditates—the practitioner “should instead do whatever is comfortable.” However in the history of Buddhism we often find the rhetorical negation of a practice serves a variety of functions without

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64. The history and nature of the various movements that have gone under the rubric of the “Great Seal” in Tibet has yet to be critically studied. Such a history should shed considerable light on these issues.

65. See the *bSam gtan mig sgron* 403-5; also Karmay 1988, 119. The cited phrase is on 403.6.

necessarily entailing the literal rejection of the practice in question. For instance, such negative rhetoric can discourage becoming rigidly fixated on particular techniques as producing desired experiences or states, such that one loses sight of the eventual necessity to dissolve boundaries between contemplative practice and daily life. Subsequent Great Perfection traditions indicate that such styles of meditation begin with a symbolic indication of the mind's nature in an encounter with one's teacher referred to as a "pointing to" or "introduction to" the mind's nature (*sems khrid; ngo sprod*).<sup>66</sup> While contemporary teachers tend to contextualize such an event within a swelter of other practices which it then serves to reinterpret, it is not clear to what extent such may have been the case during these earlier periods.

Following such an "introduction" constituting a type of initiation into the tradition, one can envision at least five possible ways in which disciples may have been directed to contextualize Great Perfection rhetoric and thus understand the traditions' specific practical parameters. (i) The first possibility ("semantic contextualization") is that they were directed to simply reinterpret visualization practices (already part of their daily praxis) with an enhanced sense of the importance and priority of the visualized images' dissolution processes (*thim tshul*). (ii) An alternative possibility ("calming techniques") is that oral precepts may have instructed disciples to continue and transform traditional "calming" types of concentration exercises (again presupposing such daily praxis) by moving towards integration and expansiveness rather than the isolation (from daily experience) and intense concentration that such practices tend to initially generate. This would make perfect sense of the frequent exhortations in this literature to "relax" and "integrate" such that artificial boundaries are deconstructed. (iii) Another possibility ("formless meditation") is that practitioners were advised to embark on extended sessions of sitting meditation (such as in some strands of Chan) devoid of any specific techniques or imaged content, as well as any preliminary exercises to "ease" entry into such states. This also may have presupposed initial familiarity with visualization practices and their dissolution, with the contemplation following dissolution gradually detached to create

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66. Generally a heavily ritualized event, this at times preserves an existential freshness and highly contextualized personal significance. See Das 1992 for stories of such events involving flatulence (54-5), a drunken beating (20-1), forbidden alcohol (155), and others.

a separate meditative session devoid of dependency on the initial visualization phases. (iv) A fourth alternative (“poetically thematized meditation”) is the employment of psychological inquiries that utilize oral instructions or graphic texts to engage in guided reveries, analyses, or poetic thought. This can be quite complex in its own right, but does not necessarily involve the body in such direct ways as contemplative techniques using posture, visualization and the like. These inquiries could directly presume a background in calming exercises, visualization practices, “formless” sitting meditation, or no such background at all. (v) Finally, as critics often imply, some teachers may have interpreted (“non-meditation”) the rhetoric as simply advocating doing as they please (*ci dgar*), taking these new teachings as a radical justification of complete immanence that places the “seal” (*phyag rgya*) of approval on their own ordinary life styles without the slightest necessity for any type of formal contemplative praxis—the emotional distortions (*nyon mongs*) are primordial gnosis (*ye shes*), after all. Obviously all of these interpretations were present to some degree, and the controversies that raged are powerfully presented in the famous story of the origination of the demonic Rudra in the fourteenth century “rediscovered” text *Pad ma bka’ thang* by O rgyan gling pa.<sup>67</sup> The story revolves around his archetypal account of two radically different interpretative takes, and consequent life styles, possible in the Great Perfection’s teaching of “do as you please.” One student—“the secretive / definitive pig” (*Dan phag*)—departs from his teacher’s shadow to engage in sitting meditation, while one student—“black liberation” (*Thar pa nag po*)—departs with an enhanced sense of legitimacy for his ordinary coarse behavioral patterns. The difference is a hermeneutical one that in many ways still rages on in modern Buddhological research, and has far reaching social implications.

Particularly relevant to this issue is the question of the extent to which some Great Perfection circles were strictly opposed in practice to normative tantric contemplations of generation / perfection phases (in particular *sādhana*s—visualizing a deity, reciting its mantra, etc.), and the extent to which for others these contemplations’ negation was purely rhetorical while in practice individuals routinely resorted to such techniques. For example, kLong chen rab ’byams pa in his *Grub mtha’*

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67. See Kapstein 1992 for an interpretation of this story found in chapters five and six of the *Pad ma bka’ thang*.



*mdzod*<sup>68</sup> describes generation and perfection phases as being rejected by the Great Perfection since they involve speculative or intellectualized contemplation. In contrast, the Great Perfection itself is said to be beyond all such mental constructs and fixation, instead locating the primordial knowing (*ye shes*) of radiant light's immediacy as its view. In fact it may be that early differences within those movements aligning themselves with the rubric "the Great Perfection" were in large due to three factors: the distinct lineal transmissions of the teachings; geographical differences and distances; and this issue of how literally anti-sādhana rhetoric (and other rhetoric) was understood in terms of actual practice. At some point it became common among the ancients to speak of the revealed treasure (*gter ma*) tradition as summarized by the triune rubric "life force-perfection-enlightened heart" (*bla rdzogs thugs*), or in less terse language, "guru-great perfection-compassionate Avalokiteśvara:<sup>69</sup> (i) teachings on the lama / guru (in particular guru-yoga practices and guru Padmasambhava); (ii) teachings on the Great Perfection; and (iii) teachings as well as visualization practices revolving around Avalokiteśvara, the "Greatly Compassionate One" (*Thugs rje chen po*). This triune classification could be interpreted either as supporting the thesis that the formless meditations of the Great Perfection were generally pursued in conjunction with sādhana-types of practices utilizing visualization, or alternatively as suggesting a tension that had called this (forced) rubric into being. In other words, the Great Perfection of its own momentum may have tended to break away from its contextualized relation to other practices and ideologies, a rupture that may have had dangerous implications for some institutions and / or individuals.

These early Great Perfection movements were rhetorically (at least) linked to rejection of more literal tantric interpretations (power substances in general and body-fluids in particular, as well as graphic violence and sexuality), de-emphasis of the profusion of contemplative techniques, stress on direct experience rather than scholastically mediated knowledge, de-emphasis of ritual, mocking of syllogistic logic (despite its not infrequent use), and in general resistance to codifications of rules for any life-processes. How these rhetorical orientations played

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68. *Grub mtha' mdzod* 380.3ff.

69. See the numerous references in Dudjom 1991, 396, 724, 764, 765, 791, 821, 827 and 881.

themselves out at a practical level is a matter of considerable controversy, especially with regards to their simultaneous rejection of normative contemplative techniques *and* linkage to the dominant contemporary Mahāyoga Tantras that incarnated such techniques. It was precisely this rhetorical linkage of doctrinal negation and social antinomianism that appeared to have made this movement so politically explosive—the *tantric* nature of its rhetorical codification of the formless (or en-vehicling, in Buddhist terminology) was crucial in the controversies that swirled around the Great Perfection. Its tantric origins link it to explosive ethical questions—form-less can seem to signify ethic-less, and thus to disparage the conventionalities of ethical structures / codes is in some sense linked to disparaging systematic visualization practices. For instance, in terms of the traditional dyad of accumulating “gnosis” (*ye shes*) and “merit” (*bsod rnam*s), tantric visualization *and* ethics<sup>70</sup> are linked to “merit,” supporting the notion that we need to engage in rule-governed activities to develop as individuals. These troubling (to some) ethical implications were aggravated by the tantric spin on formlessness, which coupled an arguably theoretical undercutting of ethics with the suggestion of an active energetic exploration of the violent, dark impulses that also constitute who we are, particularly as summed up in the infamous Mahāyoga rubric of “unifying and liberating” (*sbyor sgröl*). Such a rubric seemed to some no more than an euphemism for sex and murder. It is important to note, however, that unlike Mahāyoga which matched the graphic sexual and violent imagery in the transgressive elements of the modernists’ own doctrines (i. e. the Anuttarayoga Tantras), the Great Perfection represents an aestheticized brand of tantra. Transgression is limited / expanded to a thorough resistance to rule-governed hermeneutics of all types, rather than a focus on manifest transgressions involving sexual fluids, ritual sacrifice and shocking public displays. An overwhelming need to invert the law in its socially focused manifestations, in other words, becomes more an imperative to resist the

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70. See Hopkins 1987, 14, and Gyatso 1982, 191 and 208, for discussions of how deity yoga and other contemplative focuses on a divine body image are linked to the accumulation of merit, and thus the eventual manifestation of enlightened forms for the benefit of other living beings. This contrasts to contemplation on emptiness or formless light, which is particularly connected to the accumulation of gnosis, leading to the realization of the Buddha’s Reality Body (*chos sku, dharmakāya*).

law in its subtle orderings of our being, whether ethical, imaginal, intellectual or otherwise.<sup>71</sup> Whereas other tantric discourses are dominated by intuitions of danger, of the violent impulses that constitute our embodied identity and instinct for self-preservation, the Great Perfection seems instead to be driven by a stronger intuition of an underlying positive force enfolded in our bodies with the capacity to simply dissolve these forces, an instinct for relationship.<sup>72</sup> Thus the formlessness unleashed in perfection phase praxis can also undercut the importance of images of sex and violence. Indeed the Seminal Heart later reintroduces graphic sexual and horrific imagery with its set of peaceful and wrathful (*zhi khro*) deities, but the imagery is curiously detached without manifest crudity of other tantras and it is conjoined with a de-emphasis of sexual yogic processes.<sup>73</sup> This is reflected in part by kLong chen rab 'byams pa's doxographical correlation of the Great Perfection to the sophisticated discourses of the "non-dual" modernist classification, i. e. the *Kālacakra Tantra*.<sup>74</sup> In other words, Mahāyoga and the Great Perfection both undercut a certain type of ethics, but do in different ways: the former actively advocates transgressive types of behavior, while the latter aesthetically deconstructs formal ethical systems without a corresponding urgent compulsion to actively explore the dark side of ethical deconstruction. In addition, the latter has an alternative and quite sophisticated way of coping with concerns of intersubjective relations, which is found within its discussions of the third quality of the ground of being—literally "compassion" (*thugs rje*), it is its capacity to resonate with, and know, the other.

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71. This resistance to the worship of codified rules is the empathetic basis of kLong chen rab 'byams pa's positive reference to the eighth century Chan master Huashang who was so maligned in later Tibetan Buddhist polemics (see his *gNas lugs mdzod* 68.7).

72. See Levin 1988, especially "Revisioning the Body Politic" (295-340).

73. See Snellgrove 1987, 152-176 for a discussion of issues pertaining to this crudity in Buddhist tantras; Sanderson 1987 has an excellent discussion in the context of Hindu tantra of how early "cremation grounds culture" was later internalized, deodorized and aestheticized. See the passage from kLong chen rab 'byams pa cited below for a criticism of ordinary tantric sexual practices.

74. See below for a more detailed discussion of these doxographical correlations.

However, one can easily imagine the vehemence of emotions that swirled around these issues, especially since in the public imagination the Great Perfection came to be linked to supposed Mahāyoga excesses.<sup>75</sup> From its own side, its discourse denigrates conventionally valorized religious and non-religious activities in preference for a simple phenomenological “looking” (*lta ba*), and this seemingly lawless dynamic devaluing structure is also experienced as threatening groups attempting to articulate norms and establish institutional mechanisms. The normative position of the modernists (to the degree we can speak of one) became a general suspicion of allowing the formless or the lawless to exist in itself, with its implied or explicit discarding of conventional consensually validated order. Does naturalness constitute a practice of the self in the same way that violent inversion constitutes a practice of the self in other tantras (a practice the necessity for which it calls into question), or does it constitute a denial of the need for such discipline all together? In the latter eventuality, we can imagine a fairly benign cultivation of natural experiences (sexuality, art, etc.) and experiences of nature, as well as an actively negative appropriation (such as Rudra evokes) that utilizes this rhetoric to authorize self-aggrandizing practices of a violent and disruptive nature.

Finally, the term “generation-perfection-great perfection” (*bskyed rdzogs rdzogs chen*) can be interpreted as signifying that the great perfection is the “great consummation” of the generation and perfection phases—the latter’s lighting-up or vision (*snang ba*) and the former’s openness (*stong pa*) are experienced in a dynamic and perfect simultaneity. In Seminal Heart terms, the generation phase is thus interpreted as “spontaneous presence” (*lhun grub*) and the ground-presencing (*gzhi snang*) of its ascendancy; perfection phase signifies “original purity” (*ka dag*) and the ground (*gzhi*) of its ascendancy; and the Great Perfection then evokes their primordial intertwining. An example of such a reinterpretation of standard tantric contemplative terminology can be found in kLong chen rab ’byams pa’s *Zab mo yang tig* (vol. 11, 344.2-6):<sup>76</sup>

(The Great Perfection) style of “ritual approach and actualization” (*bsnyen sgrub, sevā-sādhana*) is superior to that of stress-filled actualization involved in ordinary generation and perfection (phase

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75. See Karmay 1988, 121ff.

76. *Zab mo yang tig* vol. 2, 344.2-6:

tantric contemplations) . . . : (i) “ritual approach” (*bsnyen pa, sevā*) is recognizing the Reality Body as self through being self-introduced to self-emergent primordial gnosis; (ii) “culminating approach” (*nye bar bsnyen pa, upasevā*) is sustaining yourself within that state; (iii) “actualization” (*sgrub pa, sādhana*) is dissolving fixation on (discrete sealed-off) “selves”; and (iv) “great actualization” (*sgrub pa chen po, mahāsādhana*) is the fruit coming to the fore.

In addition, while early Great Perfection traditions may have understood themselves as engaging in exclusively non-symbolic styles of perfection phase praxis, with the Seminal Heart and associated movements we find the reintroduction of symbolic styles as well. This occurs not only in its unique subtle body theories (“luminous channels”; *’od rtsa*) revolving around an interiorized lighting-up of the Ground (*gzhi snang*) and its embrace of a radical new version of generation phase praxis in its avocation of spontaneous vision (*thod rgal*), but also in its literary incorporation of standard generation and perfection phase practices in its cycles, as well as somewhat more customized variants such as “sleep yoga” and “eating the winds.”<sup>77</sup> The Seminal Heart thus, as we will see, marks the radical re-influx of the body and its cult into the domain of the Great Perfection.

*A brief overview of Mind Series (sems sde) literature and lineages*

Traditional Nyingma histories emphasize that the Great Perfection had only a very limited circulation outside of Tibet, and trace its non-Tibetan origins through a series of six shadowy Indic figures known as “Mystics” (*rig ’dzin; vidyādhara*): Surativajra (*dGa’ rab rdo rje*), Mañjuśrimitra (*Jam dpal bshes gnyen*), Śrīsiṃha (*Shri sing ha*), Jñānasūtra (*Ye shes mdo*), Vimalamitra (*Dri med bshes gnyen* or *Bi ma la mi tra*) and Padmasambhava. Of these six, two actually visited Tibet during the late eighth century and early ninth century (Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava) while one other is said to have worked closely with Tibetan translators outside of Tibet during the same period (Śrīsiṃha). While Śrīsiṃha and his Tibetan disciple Vairocana are the principal figures mentioned in colophons to the early Mind Series texts, with the emergence of the Esoteric Precepts traditions, Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava are increasingly prominent. The early Great Perfection

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77. See *Tshig don mdzod* 319-327.

is represented literarily by what came to be classified as "Mind Series" texts, the most important of which were the very lengthy *Kun byed rgyal po* (by far the major Mind Series source cited by kLong chen rab 'byams pa) and a number of texts that at some point came to be transmitted as a group known as *The Eighteen Texts of the Mind Series* (*Sems sde bco brgyad*). These were said to have been translated into Tibetan via the activity of the Vairocana (in conjunction with Śrīsiṃha and later Vimalamitra) and Vimalamitra (in conjunction with other key Tibetan translators of this period). The former text was circulating at least by 1032, when Pho brang zhi ba 'od criticized it as a composition by a unknown Tibetan by the name of Drang nga shag tshul.<sup>78</sup> At least five of the set of eighteen texts are identifiable with chapters in the present recension of the *Kun byed rgyal po*,<sup>79</sup> the former being quite short on the whole in striking contrast to the latter's sprawling length. In the lengthy discussion of the Great Perfection found in the important tenth century *bSam gtan mig sgron* by gNubs sangs rgyas ye shes, a number of these eighteen texts are cited at length and there is a marked absence of any of the characteristic Seminal Heart doctrines. The fact that he does not appear to cite the *Kun byed rgyal po* (?) at all suggests that this tantra was most likely a Tibetan composition in the late tenth century functioning to integrate previous shorter canonical works (in part perhaps genuine dynastic period translations of non-Tibetan originals) as well as introduce more systematically innovations that had developed in Tibet over the intervening decades.

Whereas the *Kun byed rgyal po* is a tantra presented as a transcript of a teaching by a Buddha (traditionally said to be translated into Tibetan by Vairocana and Śrīsiṃha during the dynastic period), and possesses the consequent dramatic setting of a dialogue between a Buddha and his / her retinue, the eighteen Mind Series texts appear to have been understood initially as simple human-authored compositions by one of above six Indic figures. Most lack any colophon indicating an author, but on the whole lack references to the dialogues between a Buddha and retinue that characterize normal tantras. It may be that initially there were no specifically Great Perfection Tantras in its early stage as "esoteric precepts" (*man ngag*) to the other tantric systems (especially Mahāyoga). This early literature could have been subsequently systematized into

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78. See Karmay 1975, 151.

79. Karmay 1988, 207.

tantras (especially the *Kun byed rgyal po*) as it began to develop a distinctive self-identity in Tibet constituting an independent movement that needed the authorizing force of its own unique canonical body of tantras. Another distinctive grouping of Mind Series literature which may have also been generated during this intermediate phase is the twenty five tantras constituting the third volume of the *mTshams brag* edition of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum*, though it is currently unknown at what point these circulated as a set. At any rate, these traditions developed in a number of different lineages as yet uncharted through the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, until gradually they became displaced by the overwhelming success of more vision-oriented movements such as the Seminal Heart.

Karmay's simplified analysis<sup>80</sup> of their diversity focuses on the Khams tradition (*lugs*) in Eastern Tibet founded by A ro ye shes 'byung gnas (eleventh century) and the Rong tradition in Central Tibet founded by Rong zom chos kyi bzang po (eleventh century). The Rong system remains unclear since all of Rong zom's specifically Great Perfection works remain unavailable.<sup>81</sup> The *Chos 'byung rin po che'i gter mdzod* by rGyal sras thugs mchog rtal describes the Rong tradition transmission as beginning in the eighth to ninth centuries with gNyags Jñānakumāra, and passing through Sog po dpal gyi ye shes and gNubs sangs rgyas ye shes;<sup>82</sup> the *Deb ther sngon po* also refers to gNubs sangs rgyas ye shes's *bSam gtan mig sgron* as belonging to the Rong tradition. However 'Jam mgon kong sprul's (1813-1899) *Shes bya kun khyab* and Zhe chen rgyal tshab's *Legs bshad padma dkar po'i rdzong bu* later link the Rong tradition to Rong zom. At an unknown date, reference to "Three Traditions of the Mind Class" (*sems sde lugs gsum*) came to be normative in some circles—Dudjom Rinpoche cites it as having been studied by gTer bdag gling pa (1646-1714).<sup>83</sup> Kapstein and Dorje first identify it as consisting of these two traditions plus either "the original cycles of the Mind Class," but later identify the third as the *A ro thun bdun* system of A ro ye shes 'byung gnas (though this is often instead considered as a special division of the Khams tradition).<sup>84</sup>

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80. Karmay 1988, 207-8.

81. Karmay 1988, 125.

82. Karmay 1988, 125-6, 207-8.

83. Dudjom 1991, 827.

In addition, Kapstein has verbally conveyed to me his belief that *rGyud 'bum of Vairo(cana)* represents the Mind Series lineages of the Zur tradition, referring to the well known Zur family.

Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer's (1136-1204) famous *Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud* contains an appendix outlining the history of the early development of Nyingma tenet systems.<sup>85</sup> He begins by highlighting *The Eighteen Mind Series Texts*, the cycle of the *Kun byed rgyal po* with its nine mother-son texts (*Kun byed ma bu dgu skor*) and a general reference to "Mind orientation texts" (*Sems phyogs mams*). He also provides a lineage for a *Sems so* tradition deriving from gNubs sangs rgyas ye shes, though this apparently is not limited to Mind Series texts.<sup>86</sup> He subsequently<sup>87</sup> provides the following lineage transmission for *Sems phyogs a ti*: Chos sku kun tu bzang po, dPal rdo rje sems dpa', rDo rje snying po, Yang sprul dga' rab rdo rje, 'Jam dpal bshes gnyen, five hundred learned ones such as the twenty five lineal descendants, Paṇḍita Shri Singha, Lotsāwa Vairocana, gYu sgra, Jñāna, Sog po dpal gyi ye shes, sNubs yon tan rgya mtsho, Ye shes rgya mtsho,

84. Kapstein and Dorje 1991, 121, 279. Their index provide the following references for existent literature concerning these traditions. The *rDzogs chen khams lugs* is described by Sog bzlog blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552-c. 1624) in the *gDams ngag mdzod* vol. 1, 305-55; and in the *rNying ma bka' ma rgyas pa* vol. 17. The *rDzogs chen rong lugs* is described by Kaḥ thog pa nam mkha' rdo rje (dates?) in the *gDams ngag mdzod* vol. 1, 270-95; and in the *rNying ma bka' ma rgyas pa* vol. 17. It is important to note that both texts are relatively brief and are written by much later authors. The *A ro thun bdun* ("Seven Sessions of Aro [ye shes 'byung gnas]") is found in the *gDams ngag mdzod* vol. 1, 356-371; and in the *rNying ma bka' ma rgyas pa* vol. 17. This was also known as the *A ro khrid mo che (don skor)*, *Aro'i thugs bcud* and *rDzogs chen aro lugs kyi man ngag*; the term "seven" derives from A ro ye shes having held the Indian and Chinese lineages during the seventh generation of their development. The text as we currently have it is written by Zhwa dmar II mkha' spyod dbang po (1350-1405).

85. *Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud* 482-498. At the Virginia rDzogs Chen symposium mentioned above, the consensus was that this section may not have been written by Nyang ral himself, but if so, was most likely written by either his son or another direct disciple.

86. *Ibid.*, 483.

87. *Ibid.*, 488.



Padma dbang rgyal, Nyang chen nyang chung, and Zur po che. He then gives another lineage<sup>88</sup> for the Great Perfection, which he specifies as the five *Proclamation Tantras of the Perfect Completeness of Esoteric Primordial Gnosis* (*bKa' ye shes gsang rdzogs rgyud*) and the twenty one *Profound Treasure Scriptures* (*Zab ma gter gzhung*), along with the empowerment and introduction. The lineage is as follows: the great translator Vairocana, gYu sgra, sBa sgom rdo rje rgyal mtshan, Rab snang lha'i dbang phyug, Gru mchog gi ye shes, Nyang shes rab 'byung gnas, Nyang rdo rje snying po, Nyang ri khrod pa chen po zag med kyi sku brnyed pa 'dar ston dge 'dun, gNyan lcags byil ba, sPa se ras pa, rTse phrom bar lhas pa, gLan rdzing 'bring ba, gLan shākya mgon po, dBas grub thob pa, and so forth. In addition, A ro ye shes 'byung gnas, a disciple of sNyags jñāna who was an emanation of Mañjuśrī from lower Amdo, taught such things as the Outer Cycle (*phyi skor*), Internal Cycle (*nang skor*), the Secret Cycle (*gsang skor*) and the Greater and Intermediate Spikes (*gzer ka che 'bring*). The transmission from him onwards involved Zangs ka mdzod khur, Kha rag gru sha rgyal bu, Ya zi bon ston, Gru gu glog chung, Kong rab mtsho, lTam dar ma, Tshe me byang chub rdo rje, sBa sgom bsod snying, Kha rag sgom chung, Ba rang sgom chen, Ma gcig nyang mo, and Dam pa shākya rgyal. He then provides a lineage for the cycle of the *Kun byed rgyal po* with its nine mother-son texts (*Kun byed ma bu dgu skor*) in which A ro ye shes 'byung gnas figures prominently. He concludes by explaining the Khams tradition of Mind Series as referring to Dha tsha hor po and Dam pa shākya rgyal po; the sKor tradition referring to that which passed through sKor ston shes rab grags pa; and the Rong tradition as that which passed through the gTsang master (Rong zom) chos kyi bzang po. Finally he gives brief lineages for a “Brahmin tradition” (*bram ze'i lugs*)—Vimalamitra, Nyang ting nge 'dzin bzang po, 'Dan ma lhun gyi rgyal mtshan and Shangs pa lce chung ye shes rgyal mtshan—as well as the “unsurpassed great perfection” (*rdzogs chen bla med*)—Vimalamitra, Nyang ting nge 'dzin bzang po, bSam yas kyi zhang chen po, rJe (i. e., lCe) btsun seng ge dbang phyug, lCe sgom nag po, and sKal ldan yo so (at which point “its exegesis and practice spread”). These latter two movements<sup>89</sup> apparently signify visionary

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88. *Ibid.*, 490-1, 491-2, 492.

89. I would like to thank Matthew Kapstein for first pointing out this passage's significance to me.

movements sharing similar lineages of transmission involving Vimalamitra, Nyang ting nge 'dzin bzang po, concealment as treasure and members of the lCe clan. The latter clearly refers to the Seminal Heart tradition proper, which is frequently styled as the "unsurpassed secret" (*gsang ba bla na med pa*) division of the Esoteric Precept Series, while the former apparently refers to texts from the *yang ti* tradition of the Great Perfection. The *yang ti* texts collected in volume seven of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* (*gTing skyes*) are in Kaneko's catalogue<sup>90</sup> labeled as the "*yang ti* Brahmin cycles" (*rDzogs pa chen po yang ti bram ze'i skor*), the bulk of which are traced back to Vimalamitra.

This brief outline merely touches upon this complex issue of beginning to untangle the many different threads constituting the first six centuries of the Great Perfection (ninth to fourteenth). Further progress can only come from systematically collecting all early references to internal divisions and lineal transmissions, particularly within the material currently collected in the various recensions of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum*. In conclusion, I would like to note the innovative nature of the Mind Series trilogies developed by kLong chen rab 'byams pa in the fourteenth century, which I discuss in more detail below: the *Ngal gso skor gsum* and the *Rang grol skor gsum*. In addition, Mind Series discourse and praxis was transformed in its assimilation by the Seminal Heart under the rubric of breakthrough contemplation.

#### *Early Mind Series contemplation*

The early Great Perfection was principally a tantric development of buddha-nature discourse without any complex systematic literature or meditative practices. It is thus difficult to ascertain precisely what type of formal contemplation might have been associated with early Mind Series literature, since it devotes little space to such practical presentations. The language of the early texts suggests that in the beginning its proponents may have had little use for visualization, but (as discussed above) this does not necessarily entail a process-oriented rejection of any structure involved in formal contemplative procedures. In fact, later developments indicate that at least among certain circles there was probably cultivation of mental concentration via calming techniques (*zhi gnas*) using the standard seven point posture, as well as precisely thematized meditation topics (provided in lineally transmitted discourses) that functioned psy-

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90. Kaneko 1982, 127.

chologically within the context of such cultivation. Thus the basis of contemplation appears to largely have been a type of extension of “calming” practices at times involving concentration exercises as preparatory techniques, but ultimately aiming at a technique free immersion in the bare immediacy of one’s own deepest levels of awareness. Thus formless types of meditation were valorized over the complex fabrication of visual images found in other tantric systems such as Mahāyoga, though it may very well be that during these early phases it was largely practiced in conjunction with other types of more normative tantric practices of that type. I have also suggested that certain groups may have exclusively adhered to Mind Series traditions, even if its “main” transmitters were doing so in conjunction with other types of tantric lineages. The accompanying literature consisted of evocative descriptions of, and exhortations to, this process, that served to contextualize this contemplative inquiry as the unfolding of a type of interior primordial purity known as the “buddha” (literally “purifying-expanding”—*sangs rgyas*). This also functioned to relate the inquires to the buddha-nature strand of Mahāyāna discourse as well as more aestheticized strands of Vajrayāna. Based on this belief in a primordial state of enlightenment within, the literature is characterized by the language of letting-go, relaxation, naturalness and simplicity, in stark contrast to the rhetoric of control, analysis, and “marshaling of resources” found in Indian Buddhist logico-epistemological treatises, as well as the strands of tantric discourse dominated by sexual and violent imagery. The latter is found in the Mahāyoga traditions of the ancient ones as well as the Anuttarayoga tantra traditions that subsequently emerge in the modernist traditions. There is also a consistent antinomian tendency in these discourses, a rhetorical lawlessness asserting a primordial dimension that is neither accessed by, nor governed by, law-abiding patterns.

The nature of these traditions is indicated clearly in the famous incident in Mi la ras pa’s biography when he is directed to his first encounter with Marpa by a Great Perfection teacher, after Mi la ras pa fails to understand his own teachings. The teacher, known as Rong ston lha dga’, greeted Mi la ras pa’s request for liberating teachings with the following words:<sup>91</sup>

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91. See Lhalungpa 1992, 42.

This Teaching of the Great Perfection leads one to triumph at the root, to triumph at the summit, and to triumph in the fruits of achievement. To meditate on it by day is to be Buddha in one day. To meditate on it by night is to be Buddha in one night. For those fortunate ones with favorable karma who merely chance to hear it, without even meditating on it, this joyous teaching is a sure means of liberation. That is why I wish to give it to you.

It comes as little surprise that the youthful Mi la ras pa figured he had it made, and slept through the next few days, after which the Lama discerned he wasn't up to such a subtle doctrine and sent him packing to Mar pa. In other words, he sent him to much more complex and intensely tantric contemplative systems utilizing visualization within, and without, the body.

However, regardless of whether or not its earliest phases involved largely quiet sitting partially thematized by aphoristic contemplation themes, from at least the eleventh century onwards Great Perfection groups began to experiment increasingly with various contemplative techniques and procedures generally classed under the two rubrics of "generation phase" and "perfection phase." The course these experiments took became one of the key factors behind the further development of different traditions, the more radical of which begin to position themselves under pre-existing and / or new rubrics in distinction to the "lower" Mind Series teachings. Yet eventually the Mind Series itself apparently yielded to this experimentation and began to include to a certain degree contemplative praxis drawn from generation and perfection phase traditions. The principle of incorporation is that of simplicity, of rejecting highly structured visualizations such as complex maṇḍalas of deities to instead focus on limited images, spontaneous imagery or naturally occurring objects (meditation on water, fire, etc.). This is reflected in the rhetoric of being simple (*spros med*), natural (*rang bzhin gyis*), stress-free (*'bad rtsol med pa*) and the like.

*Doxographical gymnastics:*

*Spanning the abyss between the modernists and the ancients*

The classical example of these transformed Mind Series-based contemplative systems is kLong chen rab 'byams pa's *Ngal gso skor gsum* and

*Rang grol skor gsum* In his own catalogue to his corpus,<sup>92</sup> kLong chen rab 'byams pa's final two rubrics classify works as being "general explanations of crucial topics of esotericism" and "detailed exegesis of the crucial topics of the unsurpassed great esotericism." The latter embraces his main Seminal Heart works such as the *Tshig don mdzod* and *Theg mchog mdzod*, while the former is divided into the three series, with the Mind Series classification containing his commentary on the *Kun byed rgyal po* and *Rang grol skor gsum*. The former also contains a prefatory section including the *Man ngag mdzod* and *Ngal gso skor gsum* that is introduced thus: "... in order that the significance of all the spiritual vehicles be understood as a preliminary to or mere means of entering the path of the Great Perfection, (these texts) clarify treatises which teach the stages of the path along with fruits to lead people onwards in accordance with any (tradition of Tibetan Buddhism)." In fact, the *Ngal gso skor gsum* is traditionally classified with the *Rang grol skor gsum* as essentially a Mind Series treatise. Its primary focus is, as kLong chen rab 'byams pa's own characterization clearly indicates, on relating the Great Perfection Mind Series tradition to everything that preceded it in Buddhism, and creating a discursive and contemplative momentum towards experiencing the Mind Series as its natural culmination. While there are a few points at which an Esoteric Series-perspective surfaces, on the whole he systematically avoids reference to the Seminal Heart's technical vocabulary in the cycle, as well as to its contemplative procedures known as the direct transcendence. kLong chen rab 'byams pa's apparent motivations are most likely his ongoing defense of the Great Perfection in the context of the wider sphere of Tibetan Buddhism through relating it to other non-tantric and tantric Buddhist movements, and his desire to provide a deeply Great Perfection-based system of study and practice that reached out to other yogic and intellectual circles through such linkage. There are thus numerous references to "your own tantric cycles" or "the tantric cycle you are involved with." It may have also stemmed from a time in kLong chen rab 'byams pa's life when his disciples were increasing in number as well as diversity and background, such that the always dangerous issue of tantric "commitments" (*dam tshig, samaya*) increasingly

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92. I have used a copy of this catalogue as appended to the contemporary sDe dge printing of kLong chen rab 'byams pa's *gSung thor bu*; no other publishing information available.

weighed on his mind.<sup>93</sup> The relatively straightforward Mind Series is quite a bit less intense than the Seminal Heart in such terms, and thus in the *Ngal gso skor gsum* kLong chen rab 'byams pa systematically avoids the theoretical and contemplative details of later developments (i. e. the Seminal Heart).<sup>94</sup> Such a Mind Series practice-focused cycle not only provided a way to disseminate the Great Perfection intellectually and contemplatively in a trans-sectarian fashion, but also transformed the Mind Series into a springboard for particularly committed disciples to eventually leap into the more quirky and unique world of the Esoteric Precepts Series. While clearly the *Ngal gso skor gsum* was quite innovative in many ways in the context of the Mind Series, the extent of its innovativeness is as yet unclear and it is thus particularly provocative for the types of questions I have raised about formal practice in the Mind Series prior to the fourteenth century.

In kLong chen rab 'byams pa's very self-conscious attempts in this cycle to integrate the Great Perfection into the tantric movements increasingly normative in Tibet, one of his strategies is doxographical. He seemingly identifies (rather than simply correlates) the three main uniquely Nyingma tantric systems (Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga) with the modernists' three internal divisions of Anuttarayoga tantra (father, mother and non-dual).<sup>95</sup> As far as I know this is the earliest instance of such a correlation. In the ensuing discussion, he indicates that the Mahāyoga "father" tantras principally focus on generation phase practices, while their perfection phase practices are focused on winds; the associated tantras cited are the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* (*gSang ba 'dus pa*) and the *Mañjuśrī Yamāri* ('*Jam dpal gshin rje'i gshed*).<sup>96</sup> The

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93. Matthew Kapstein suggested this possibility to me (April 1994).

94. It appears to be a common phenomena that prominent Great Perfection teachers who once openly taught become increasingly conservative as they age, often attributing health-related or other problems to their open teaching of such esoteric traditions. For instance, I have on more than one occasion heard such stories about the contemporary teachers sMyo shul Khanpo and Bya bral Rinpoche.

95. *Shing rta chen povol.* 2, 8.5ff.

96. While the former is of course one of the main modernist Anuttarayoga tantras, and also exists in an earlier translation as a principal tantra in the Nyingma Mahāyoga classification, I could not locate the latter's title in either the Tōhoku or Peking catalogues of the Tibetan canons. There are,

Anuyoga “mother” tantras, on the other hand, focus on perfection phase practices in general, while their particular brand of such practices emphasize the seminal nuclei; the associated tantras cited are the *Yang dag*, *Vajrakīlaya*, *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* and *Hevajra Tantra*.<sup>97</sup> The Atiyoga “non-dual” tantras then focus on the integration (*zung ’jug*) of generation and perfection phase practices, while its perfection phase practices concentrate on the great primordial gnosis in its inconceivable radiant light of bliss, radiance and non-conceptuality generated from the channels, winds and nuclei.<sup>98</sup> Although the first two categories thus ignore the standard Nyingma association of Mahāyoga with the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* and Anuyoga with the *mDo dgongs ’dus pa* in preference for standard modernist associations, in *this* category kLong chen rab ’byams pa ignores the modernist association of it with the *Kālacakra Tantra*<sup>99</sup> and instead refers to the “*sGyu ’phrul drwa ba*” (*māyājāla*) and so on” (later indicating this refers to the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* in particular).<sup>100</sup> Subsequently in his discussion of empowerments<sup>101</sup> he reiterates the identification of “Ati” with the non-dual tantric classes, and in particular with the *sGyu ’phrul drwa ba*, which he characterizes as “the peak of all vehicles” in contrast to “the stage of general secret mantra.” This fissure in some contexts between how he identifies “Atiyoga” and the Great Perfection is further suggested in his “practical instructions” (*don khrid*) on the *Sems nyid ngal gso*, where he presents the text’s contemplative system as a sequence of one hundred and forty one topics divided up into three rubrics: (i) the exoteric causally oriented vehicle of characteristics (sūtra); (ii) the inner extraordinary result-oriented vehicle of adamant secret mantra (tantra); and

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however, two similar titles in the *gTing skyes* edition of *rNying ma rgyud ’bum* (Kaneko 239 and 248).

97. The last two tantras are of course the standard modernist Mother tantras, but the previous two would seem to refer to Nyingma Mahāyoga tantras.

98. See the *Shing rta chen po* vol. 2, 12.3ff for further details on the types of practices associated with these three tantric classes.

99. While some traditions classified the *Kālacakra Tantra* as part of a third “non-dual” division, the Geluk rejected a threefold division of the Anuttarayoga tantras and thus instead classified it as a “mother” tantra (see Wayman 1980, 250-269 and Sopa 1985, 31).

100. It is cited under this title in the *Shing rta chen po* vol. 2, 14.6.

101. *Shing rta chen po* vol. 2, 47.2-3.

(iii) the vehicle of the unsurpassed great perfection, the fruit of the definitive nucleus of esotericism (the Great Perfection). Tantra is then divided into the standard set of four systems, with the fourth labeled “the unsurpassed Mahāyoga tantras” (*rnal 'byor chen po bla na med pa'i rgyud*, *mahāyoga-anuttara tantra*).<sup>102</sup> As above, it is subdivided into the father, mother, and non-dual, with the non-dual identified as the *sGyu 'phrul drwa ba*.

Interestingly, however, in the *Ngal gso skor gsum gyi spyi don legs bshad rgya mtsho*, kLong chen rab 'byams pa's discussion of tantra clearly delineates between the modernist tantras and the Nyingma tantras along the lines of the doxography in his *Grub mtha' mdzod*.<sup>103</sup> While he continues to correlate Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga to the modernist classification of father, mother and non-dual tantras,<sup>104</sup> the listing out of titles corresponding to the modernist triad and the Nyingma triad in no way overlap with each other, and instead reflect precisely their traditional textual associations.<sup>105</sup> In particular, the Atiyoga section<sup>106</sup> lists out groups of Mind Series texts, pointedly ignoring Seminal Heart traditions despite earlier citing two of its main works.<sup>107</sup> Among the possible reasons for this doxographical discrepancy within the same cycle is that kLong chen rab 'byams pa is attempting to reach out to non-Nyingma scholars and practitioners in the earlier passages by presenting a syncretic doxography that emphasizes the thematic and contemplative points of contact between the modernist and Nyingma tantric traditions, while in these later passages he is acknowledging the clear lineal differences (that this approach intentionally obscures).

Mahāyoga is thus pivotal to this strategy: he not only links the “Mahāyoga” tradition as a whole with the “Anuttara tantras,”<sup>108</sup> he also identifies the key Mahāyoga group of texts referred to under the rubric *sGyu 'phrul drwa ba chen po* as the “non-dual” division, thus presenting the Great Perfection as outside, and beyond, that triad. At the

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102. *Byang chub lam bzang* 514.1.

103. *Ngal gso skor gsum gyi spyi don legs bshad rgya mtsho* 176.4-193.1 and 193.1-207.5 respectively.

104. *Ibid.*, 199.5ff.

105. *Ibid.*, 190.3-193.1 and 203.1-207.5 respectively.

106. *Ibid.*, 205.1-207.5.

107. *Ibid.*, 196.4 and 201.3.

108. *Shing rta chen po* vol. 2, 4.5.



same time, he elsewhere correlates Atiyoga with this non-dual category,<sup>109</sup> thus implying an Atiyoga-Guhyagarbha tantra connection. In general, he thus tends to treat the *sGyu 'phrul drwa ba*, and its main exemplar, the *Guhyagarba Tantra*, as a unique and profound tantric system distinguished from others, somewhat analogous to how the Geluk tradition tends to treat the *Kālacakra Tantra* cycle as a category unto itself.<sup>110</sup> In fact there are points where he explicitly suggests a connection between the two systems, such as the comparison of their presentations of subtle body theories in the *Shing rta chen po*.<sup>111</sup> While kLong chen rab 'byams pa ranges through a tremendous variety of non-tantric and tantric Buddhist materials in the *Ngal gso skor gsum*, apart from the Great Perfection it is clearly the *Guhyagarba Tantra* above all else that forms the hermeneutical core of the cycle. For example, the two main subdivisions of the ninth chapter (which is focused on the developing and perfection phases) are “a general discussion of the significance of secret mantra” and “a detailed exegesis of the *sGyu 'phrul drwa ba*”<sup>112</sup> Thus the cycle offers a prominent example of an influx of Mind Series ideology into the exegesis of Mahāyoga materials, as well as the reverse, i. e. the influx of more normative Mahāyoga traditions back into the pristine spaces of Mind Series discourse. Such intersections allow him to authorize and introduce the Great Perfection in connection to potentially mainstream tantric movements, as well as begin to intertwine the former into the latter’s very foundation (a strategy eventually flowering in the nineteenth century non-partisan movement). Thus his “practical instructions” (*don khrid*) on the *Sems nyid ngal gso*<sup>113</sup> describes the culminating meditation of tantra (prior to the Great Perfection) as “the great perfection of pristine primordial gnosis, the quintessential core of the definitive ultimate in the unsurpassed perfection phase of the *sGyu 'Phrul* (cycle).”

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109. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 47.2.

110. For example, see Ngag dbang dpal ldan’s well known *gSang chen rgyud sde bzhi’i sa lam gyi rnam gzhag rgyud gzhung gsal byed*. He contrasts the “general Anuttarayoga tantra” to the *Kālacakra* in his presentation of Anuttarayoga tantras (540.1ff).

111. *Shing rta chen po* vol. 2, 18.3-19.3

112. See kLong chen rab 'byams pa’s own structural outline of the text (vol. 2, 418.2-422.1).

113. *Byang chub lam bzang* 524.6-525.1

This presentation closely corresponds to that found in the lengthy doxographical twelfth chapter of kLong chen rab 'byams pa's modernist oriented-survey entitled the *Yid bzhin mdzod*. He begins by specifying four tantric sets,<sup>114</sup> the first three of which are the standard triad of "outer" tantras: Action, Conduct, and Yoga. The fourth set is first specified only as "perfection phase" and "inner,"<sup>115</sup> followed by the specification "inner unsurpassed secret mantra" (*nang pa gsang sngags bla na med pa*) and "the unsurpassed Mahāyoga" (*rnal 'byor chen po bla na med pa'i rgyud*).<sup>116</sup> He begins by differentiating it into "father" and "mother" tantras on the basis of the deities involved and their apparel, but his main discussion subsequently<sup>117</sup> divides the "unsurpassed Mahāyoga" into the triad of father, mother, and non-dual on the basis of criteria very similar to those in the *Shing rta chen po*. Father tantras emphasize generation phase contemplation and perfection

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114. *Yid bzhin mdzod* 553.2. This doxography of four tantric classes along with the terminological distinctions of a dyadic or triadic internal division of the fourth only penetrated Tibet in the eleventh century with the modernists. The term "Anuttarayoga" evidently itself stems from Buddhist-Śaivite yogic circles in Northeastern India (see Snellgrove 1987, 462-3 and 504-5). Earlier the term "Great Yoga" (*Mahāyoga*) was used to classify certain tantras that had taken directions distinctive enough that it was felt necessary to doxographically distinguish them from other tantras known as "Yoga tantras." The term also was used in early modernist circles to signify what came to be known as the "father" tantras in contrast to the yoginī / prajñā" tantras, or "mother" tantras, leading Snellgrove (505) to suggest a fivefold classification of tantras—Action, Conduct, Yoga, Great Yoga and Yogini / Prajñā. While in Tibet it became the standard among modernists to artificially classify all tantras outside of the first three classes as "Anuttarayoga," itself divided up into "father" and "mother" (or with a third "non-dual" subdivision), this was simply one scheme among many. The Nyingmas instead opted for the triune division of its higher tantric classes into Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga. The differences between the modernists and ancients on tantric doxography is thus due to three factors: the temporal period of the reception of tantric traditions from outside Tibet (seventh to tenth centuries vs. eleventh to twelfth), the geographical location outside of Tibet of their transmissions' sources, and the intervening development of received traditions in Tibet during the four centuries they existed prior to the modernists' arisal.

115. *Yid bzhin mdzod* 554.6.

116. *Ibid.*, 555.2 and 563.4 respectively.

117. *Ibid.*, 565.6ff.

phase techniques focused on winds, in addition to which they teach a variety of enlightened activities and are said to be for taming males. Mother tantras, on the other hand, focus on perfection phase techniques overall, and in particular those involving the nuclei, while they stress the powerful activities (*dbang gi las*) and are said to be for taming women. Non-dual tantras then emphasize primordial gnosis with an equal balance on generation and perfection phases, correlated to efficacious means (*thabs*) and insight (*shes rab*) respectively. His textual correlations with these categories are as follows: father tantras with the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, *Yamāri* and so forth; mother tantras with the *Cakrasamvara*, *Catuḥ Piṭha Tantra* and so forth; and non-dual tantras<sup>118</sup> with the *Kālacakra Tantra* and *sGyu 'phrul drwa ba* (“and so forth” is not specified). The key difference is that he makes no correlation here of this triad to the Nyingma triad of Mahā, Anu and Ati, and thus no suggestion of a split between Atiyoga and the Great Perfection.<sup>119</sup> Additionally, the relationship between the *Guhyagarba Tantra* and the *Kālacakra Tantra* is here made explicit, a relationship suggested in the *Shing rta chen po* passage cited above. It is clear that this is in part an attempt to authorize the controversial Mahāyoga tantra by reference to this widely accepted modernist tantra differing markedly on many points of theory and praxis from other modernist tantras.

The *Grub mtha' mdzod* is by its very title defined as kLong chen rab 'byams pa's doxographical analysis par excellence, and as might be expected, devotes its final four chapters to an analysis of tantric literature, ideas and practices. Chapter five offers an overview, chapter six concerns modernist tantras, chapter seven presents the ancients' tantras

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118. Despite his consistent use of the “non-dual” category in his presentations of the Anuttarayoga tantras as triune in nature, in the *Ngal gso skor gsum gyi spyi don legs bshad rgya mtsho* (192.5-193.1) kLong chen rab 'byams pa argues that it is inappropriate to speak of a class of tantras that are “non-dual” separate from the father and mother categories.

119. An additional difference in the treatment of tantra between the *Yid bzhin mdzod* and *Ngal gso skor gsum* is the lack in the former of the latter's distinctive use of the triune experiences of bliss, clarity and non-conceptuality (also understood as the triune radiant light) to structure its presentation of perfection phase practices. Such differences clearly indicate a later date of composition for the latter, which is in many ways a reworking of the former driven by kLong chen rab 'byams pa's new agenda of integrating the Great Perfection Mind Series traditions into Buddhism as a whole.

(including the Great Perfection), and chapter eight is devoted to the Seminal Heart tradition in particular. In his analysis of the modernist tantras, he presents the standard fourfold division, labeling the fourth “the unsurpassed yoga” and subsequently “the great yoga,” indicating the two rubrics are interchangeable.<sup>120</sup> His analysis of the fourth category<sup>121</sup> again utilizes the standard triad of father tantras emphasizing efficacious means, mother Tantras emphasizing insight, and unsurpassed tantras emphasizing non-duality (he also subsequently provides a very detailed differentiation of the father and mother tantras by means of seven distinctions).<sup>122</sup> In this context, he provides detailed lists of modernist tantras correlating to the first two rubrics, while for the third he only specifies the “*Jam dpal rtsa rgyud sgyu 'phrul drwa ba*, the *Kālacakra Tantra* and so forth.” The first title refers to one of the key texts<sup>123</sup> in the important *sGyu 'phrul* collection of Mahāyoga Tantras that the various versions of the *Guhyagarba Tantra* also belong to.<sup>124</sup> This particular text was also later translated, and thus accepted, by the modernists, in which context it is known as the '*Jam dpal gyi mtshan yang dag par brjod pa* (*Mañjuśrī nāma saṃgīti*). Through reference to this common text, kLong chen rab 'byams pa thus cleverly connects the *Guhyagarba Tantra* with the *Kālacakra Tantra*, as well as the *sGyu 'phrul* Mahāyoga tantric traditions with the modernist Anuttarayoga cycles, without explicitly referring to the controversial *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. In the following chapter in which he presents the Nyingma tantras, he begins by outlining the standard list of nine vehicles.<sup>125</sup> The last six are split into an outer triad (Action, Conduct and Yoga), and an inner triad (Mahā, Anu, and Ati). He proceeds to again correlate Mahāyoga with father tantras, Anuyoga with mother tantras, and Atiyoga with non-dual.<sup>126</sup> However, the list of texts, despite some problematic aspects, clearly reflect principally Nyingma tantric literature.

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120. *Grub mtha' mdzod* 319.4 and 320.5 respectively.

121. *Ibid.*, 328.1ff.

122. *Ibid.*, 331.5-335.1.

123. Kaneko 196; Pelliot Tibetain 849.

124. For a thorough discussion of this collection, see Dorje 1987, 37-58.

125. *Grub mtha' mdzod* 336.4ff.

126. *Ibid.*, 342.3ff.

kLong chen rab 'byams pa's *Theg mchog mdzod* devotes an entire chapter to Nyingma doxography<sup>127</sup> organized around the nine vehicles, and thus lacking any reference to the standard four tantra sets of modernist doxography. Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga are discussed in terms of the specifically Nyingma tantric traditions without any reference to mother, father and non-dual classifications, or the concomitant distinctions.<sup>128</sup> His *Chos dbyings mdzod*<sup>129</sup> discusses the nine vehicles, but is so focused on Atiyoga that discussions of the lower vehicles is largely simply to contrast them to the Great Perfection. Finally, it is interesting to note his modernist-oriented presentation of tantric doxography in his principal commentary on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*, the *Phyogs bcu mun sel*. Here kLong chen rab 'byams pa divides the Secret Mantra vehicle into two: the external and the internal.<sup>130</sup> The external includes the standard triad of Action, Performance and Yoga, while the internal signifies the following triad: the yogis' tantras (correlated with Mahāyoga and a focus on winds in contemplation), the insight-mother tantras (correlated with Anuyoga and perfection phase techniques) and the non-dual tantras (correlated with Atiyoga and primordial buddhahood).

The variations in kLong chen rab 'byams pa's various doxographies of tantra relates to the different agendas of each work. For example, these final two treasures (the *Theg mchog mdzod* and *Chos dbyings mdzod*) are principally focused on the Great Perfection tantric traditions (the former on Seminal Heart and the latter on a Mind Series-oriented reading of the Seminal Heart), and thus are not concerned with assimilating or catering to such modernist concerns as the four categories of tantras. The *Grub mtha' mdzod*, however, ranges over a wide variety of traditions, and in doing so presents the modernist and Nyingma tantric doxographies separately, though it does also correlate them. The *Ngal gso skor gsum* then is concerned to integrate the Great Perfection orientation into the wider Tibetan religious scene without insisting on the unique specificity of its own terminology, practices and sources, and thus explicitly synthesizes the modernist and Nyingma tantric doxography. kLong chen rab 'byams pa even completely identifies the three

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127. *Theg mchog mdzod* vol. 1, 62-119.

128. *Ibid.*, 96.7-119.6.

129. *Chos dbyings mdzod* 104.2ff.

130. *Phyogs bcu mun sel* 149.5ff.

Nyingma inner tantras with the three divisions of the modernist Anuttarayoga Tantras, such that the only specifically Nyingma tantra mentioned is the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. In contrast, the *Yid bzhin mdzod* is solidly modernist in its tantric orientation, and consequently ignores the Great Perfection as well as Nyingma doxography to focus on the standard four tantric sets of the modernists.

*Mind Series contemplative systems in kLong chen rab 'byams pa's* Trilogies (sKor gsum): *the impact of modernism and the reappropriation of tantric techniques*

The point of this extended doxographical digression is to contextualize the possible innovation of the Mind Series contemplation system presented in the *Ngal gso skor gsum*. The system itself is presented in different ways, one of the most clear being the “practical guidance” commentary on the *Sems nyid ngal gso*. This text outlines one hundred and forty one sequentially arranged contemplative techniques split into three sections: exoteric Buddhism (92), tantra (22) and the Great Perfection (27). Evidently dPal sprul o rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po (commonly referred to as dPal sprul Rim poche; 1808-1887)<sup>131</sup> maintained the lineage of using this as a teaching tradition by teaching one topic each day with regular practice sessions over the course of one hundred and forty one days. 'Jam mgon kong sprul tried to keep this alive, as evidenced by his including the text in the first volume of his large compilation entitled the *gDam ngag mdzod*, but eventually it apparently lost its last main advocate with the death of mKhan po ngag chung (1879-1941). It is currently used primarily as background combined with other systems, rather than itself functioning as a principal practice text.

The twenty-seven aspects of Great Perfection contemplation clearly avoid any reference to Seminal Heart contemplative systems, as well as the auxiliary perfection phase techniques closely linked to them. However, it should be noted that in the opening lineage account he specifies the Seminal Heart lineage of Indians and Tibetans.<sup>132</sup> In addition, having specified that the Esoteric Precept Series is the highest teaching

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131. Matthew Kapstein is the source of the following information on its use in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as an actual practice text (in conversation, summer 1994).

132. *Byang chub lam bzang* 526.4ff.

from among the three Series (*sde gsum*) of the Great Perfection, he identifies his present account as in accord with practices for engaging those with “intellects wrapped up in objective references” (*dmigs pa yul gyi blo can*) and the breakthrough practices.<sup>133</sup> The former is a standard term used to identify lower order tantric-based practices associated with Great Perfection contemplation as adjuncts, but not considered intrinsically part of it. The presentation of precepts on contemplative practices themselves is divided into three rubrics:<sup>134</sup> (i) determining (the ground) through (understanding) the view (precepts 115-118); (ii) sustaining yourself in the state (of this view) through contemplative cultivation (119-138); (iii) and the fruit (of such contemplation), divestiture from all hopes and fears (139-141). The four precepts of the first rubric are mainly analytical contemplative techniques for evoking a sense of the emptiness or intangibility of external objects and the internal psyche. Apart from the reasoning process involved in such deconstruction, no specific techniques or postures are identified. The three precepts of the third rubric contain no indications of discrete contemplative procedures, but rather are poetic reveries on the phenomenological significance of the expanse, the five spiritual bodies, and the five types of primordial gnosis invoked in discussing the ideal of perfected (wo)man (i. e. the Buddha).

The twenty precepts of the second rubric, however, do involve contemplative techniques and procedures beyond such thematic inquiries. They are classified into two groups: a general discussion of contemplative processes classified in accordance with three levels of practitioners (lower, intermediate and higher; precepts 119-129) and a detailed explanation of the particulars of skill in means (precepts 130-138). As for the first division, the lower level of practice (precepts 119-125) is discussed in terms of calming techniques (*zhi gnas*), insight techniques (*lhag mthong*) and their integration (*zung 'jug*). The calming techniques (precepts 119-122) are all specified as following (and thus contextualized by) the standard practice of guru yoga and utilizing the standard seven point posture. All four involve developing concentration through simple techniques of focusing on various external objects or internal images. While as a whole they utilize such tantric techniques as visualizing the subtle body's three main channels, visualizing the breath with colors, modulating the length of inhalation and exhalation, focusing on

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133. *Ibid.*, 526.3.

134. *Ibid.*, 527.2-543.2.

internal images, visualizing one's own body as a deity, or emanating and contracting light rays, the technique in question is always very simple in form and the focus remains on the generation of concentration rather than any quality of the technique in and of itself. The use of deity visualization is entirely incidental and appears to simply be used as a convenient and familiar object to focus the psyche on, given the wide spread use of such practices. Other things to note are the emphasis on the body's sensory experience, with visible forms, sounds, scents, flavors and tactile sensations all forming the objective pole for contemplation. The insight techniques and "integration" (precepts 123-125), however, involve no specific techniques beyond analytical or poetic shaping of a preexisting contemplative state, with a focus on directed inquiries into emptiness. The intermediate (precepts 126-128) and higher (precept 129) levels of practice involve no techniques beyond the standard lotus posture, and are again poetically thematized styles of contemplative inquiry attempting to evoke and / or pinpoint such key dimensions as emptiness, clarity, awareness and primordial freedom.

The second division (precepts 130-138) is fourfold: calming techniques, insight techniques, their integration, and their finalization (*la zla*). In general these techniques represent a furthering of the earlier techniques in their emphasis on integrating realization with ordinary activity, and direct rather than analytical or analogical experience. (i) The calming techniques (130-132) are as follows: visualizing an image such as a lotus at one's heart which then runs down into the depths of the earth to create a sense of stability, after which it is contracted into one's heart (130); incidentally using an image of a deity to dissolve distorted mental activity and focus on emptiness (131); and integrating this calm state with activity such as walking, thinking and conversing (132). (ii) The insight techniques (133-135) all lack any particular techniques of postures, visualization, or the like, instead focusing on the seemingly intangible experiences of appearance's illusory quality and emptiness. (iii) The integration techniques (136-137) are twofold, the first of which again is a thematic type of contemplation focused on finding the valorized state of awareness while sitting in the standard posture. The second technique, identified as an "enhancer" (*bogs 'byin*) to the first, involves utilizing specific postures and gazes to contemplate a lucent cloudless sky. This causes one's inner sky to clear up, such that reality manifests as the "secret nucleus of radiant light" (*gsang ba 'od gsal snying po*). While in the Seminal Heart this would refer to the particular



visions of direct transcendence contemplation, here it apparently refers more to a sense of the luminous expanse or an inner vastness, as indicated by its description as “beyond centers and peripheries.” (iv) The final technique, that of finalization, appropriately returns to pure Mind Series contemplation.<sup>135</sup>

The bulk of these contemplative styles are thus technique-free, exhortatory and evocative in nature, poetry and analysis on a cushion. Of the twenty seven forms of contemplation kLong chen rab 'byams pa details under the rubric of the Great Perfection, twenty are of this technique-free variety appropriate to the rhetoric of early Mind Series literature (excepting posture), while seven involve some type of limited application of either early Buddhist calming techniques or later principles of tantric contemplation. A seven point lotus posture is consistently stressed even within the context of the former set of practices, making quite clear that these involve formal meditative sessions sitting on a cushion, not simply a vague spin put on experience in the back of one's mind as one goes through daily activities. As for the latter set of practices, though they draw upon tantric practices and other normative Buddhist meditative techniques, the guiding principle is extreme simplicity (*spros bral*), and always priority remains on the mind's state, not the imported practice's specific details. The emphasis in such practices is simply on concentrating the mind, and then dissolving that concentration. In addition, they are clearly positioned as “inferior” styles of meditation, while the higher levels are purely of the former type. Again, it is not clear how innovative the formal inclusion of such meditative practices was in the context of fourteenth century Mind Series traditions—it may have been partially an attempt to revive this genre in ecumenical ways not possible for the Seminal Heart. Yet even overlooking its possible innovativeness, it is striking that as late as the fourteenth century we find 74% of a famous Mind Series contemplative system involving no formal techniques of any type, and the remaining 26% simply involving basic concentration exercises.

The contemplative structure utilized in the second text of the trilogy (*bSam gtan ngal gso*), is based upon the standard triad of contemplative experiences (*nyams*): bliss (*bde ba*), radiance / clarity (*gsal ba*) and non-conceptuality (*mi rtog pa*). The *Shing rta chen po* identifies this

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135. *Ibid.*, 138.

triad as the three aspects of radiant light (*'od gsal*):<sup>136</sup> the radiant light of bliss involves contemplations bringing the seminal nuclei into the central channel and consequently *tactile* sensations; the radiant light of clarity involves contemplatively working with the inner winds and consequently *visual* sensations of lights; and the radiant light of non-conceptuality involves contemplating the mind directly (or *psychic* sensations). In chapter three (the principal section) of the *bSam gtan ngal gso* and its auto-commentary the *Shing rta nam dag*, this triad is the main structure kLong chen rab 'byams pa utilizes to present the trilogy's main Great Perfection-based contemplative system. That presentation is further delineated in terms of the standard tripartite sequence of preliminaries, main practice, and concluding phase. The intermediate phase is particularly important, since it is considered to be the heart of the system.

The preliminaries consist of a triad that can be correlated to the three vehicles: the general preliminaries on impermanence and renunciation of cyclic existence (the Lesser Vehicle); the special preliminaries on compassion and the engendering a compassionate motivation (the Great Vehicle); and the supreme preliminaries, which are identified as the generation phase, perfection phase and guru yoga.<sup>137</sup> This serves to contextualize the system in terms of the standard range of Buddhist teachings and practices in Tibet, simultaneously relegating them to a lower status even while emphasizing their necessity. In fact he makes a point<sup>138</sup> of emphatically stressing the necessity of doing four types of preliminaries prior to "meditation on the path of the Great Perfection," the latter which he characterizes as "settling into the unfabricated pristine enlightening mind of awareness" (*rig pa byang chub kyi sems ma bcos rnal du 'jog pa*). He indicates that among his contemporaries there were many who attempted to directly meditate on the path without such preliminaries, but he characterizes them as deviant or mistaken. In this context, he specifies the four as (i) impermanence, compassion, generation of an enlightened motivation (*bodhicitta*); (ii) imaginatively generating all appearances and life-worlds as the pure lands of the Buddhas and deities; (iii) chanting mantras and focusing the mind on the subtle yoga; and (iv) meditation and supplication in guru yoga.

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136. *Shing rta chen po* vol. 2, 12.6ff.

137. *Shing rta nam dag* 72.5ff.

138. *Ibid.*, 80.2ff.

Although he refers to the perfection phase techniques of “channels, winds and nuclei” in this context of the preliminaries,<sup>139</sup> in fact the commentary does not elaborate on any such techniques at that point. In contrast, the practices classified as the “main” and “concluding” phases clearly are modifications or variants of such techniques. In fact his opening discussion of the main phase<sup>140</sup> describes a variant of the standard perfection phase fierce woman (*gtum mo*) practice described as “following the (preliminary) generation of the deity and guru yoga.” I interpret this as reflecting his desire to modify the Mind-Series style of Great Perfection contemplation to include such normative tantric techniques, but in the process to thoroughly modify them in line with the Great Perfection’s ideological and psychological premises. For this reason, he rhetorically identifies ordinary perfection phase techniques as “preliminary,” and then takes pains to point out how the similar yet modified techniques classified as the latter two phases (main / concluding) are instead specifically Great Perfection in character. In the commentary,<sup>141</sup> kLong chen rab ’byams pa refers to this presentation as uniquely Great Perfection in its orientation precisely in this classification of the above triad of practices as “preliminary” since they involve objective references (*dmigs bcas*); in contrast, ordinary tantra teaches the “real path” as “meditation on a single seat alternating between generation and perfection phase techniques / states.” Thus the system again shows kLong chen rab ’byams pa’s emphasis on the perfection phase rather than generation phase practices, just as in his presentation of tantric contemplation in the *Yid bzhin mdzod*. In the latter context he describes<sup>142</sup> the “main phase” (*dnegos gzhi*) of meditation as the utilization of perfection phase techniques to contemplate “primordial gnosis in its radiant light” (*’od gsal ye shes*), explicitly positioned as posterior to preliminary meditation on engendering an enlightened motivation and generation phase techniques. This is not to deny the frequent passages in the *Shing rta rnam dag* that stress the inappropriateness of “perfection” without “generation,” as well as describe a “path without a deity” as not being a mantric path.<sup>143</sup> This would appear to be a veiled criticism of those who

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139. *Ibid.*, 73.

140. *Ibid.*, 81.4ff.

141. *Ibid.*, 73.3.

142. *Yid bzhin mdzod* 665.

143. *Shing rta rnam dag* 76.5.

construe the Great Perfection's rhetoric to explicitly deny the use of any type of practice involving vision or visualization, though it is important to note that this particular statement is in the context of "preliminary" practices of generation and perfection, and hence does not apply, strictly speaking, to the Great Perfection per se.

The *Shing rta mam dag* then outlines the main practices in terms of contemplative techniques / states (*bsam gtan*) focused on the respective experiences of bliss, radiance and non-conceptuality. The practices under the rubric of "bliss" are a variant on the sexual yogic practices centered on seminal nuclei (the key technique of many perfection phase systems under the rubric of "fierce woman" [*gtum mo*]), and involve the manipulation of visualized syllables and so on within the subtle body system to evoke experiences of intense bliss. The practices dealing with "radiance" utilize techniques involving the body's winds / breath and the visualization of light within the body, ultimately focusing on the consequent experiences of internal and external luminosity. The techniques dealing with "non-conceptuality" involve contemplation of the sky's vast openness with the aid of an extremely simple visualization and chant, and subsequently focusing on the concomitant sensations of non-conceptuality. In this modification of perfection phase techniques, the key principles are that of extreme simplicity (*spros med*) in terms of procedures and visualizations, in striking contrast to the often amazingly complex and convoluted (*spros bcas*) contents of generation phase practices; the frequent invocation of the importance of balance, smoothness, and avoidance of stress; and a constant return to, emphasis on, and culmination in, contemplation of the open spaces of the mind's final nature beyond and within all specific images and sensations. This inter-linked triune tact is what, for kLong chen rab 'byams pa, constitutes this as a uniquely Great Perfection contemplative system, despite its obvious departure from what one might imagine as a pristine uncompromising Mind Series-based contemplative style.

The discussion of the concluding phase is not at all perfunctory, but rather includes discussions of new contemplative techniques under the rubric of "branches which aid the practice of the main phase."<sup>144</sup> Thus kLong chen rab 'byams pa interprets this category in the sense of "background teachings" (*rgyab chos*) to discuss more extensive and complex tantric techniques, without, however, admitting them into the principal

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144. *Ibid.*, 92.4.

system itself. Of the four sections, two explicitly deal with new contemplative techniques: (i) contemplative experiences (*nyams*) and (ii) techniques for enhancement or energization of one's contemplation (*bogs 'byin*). The former is not particularly interesting for our present purposes, as it consists of pointers to cope with the inevitable attachment that occurs to the intense new sensations generated by contemplation. The latter is presented in terms of (i) techniques for curing defects in one's contemplative experiences (*nyams skyon can bcos thabs*) and (ii) techniques for intensifying (*gong du 'phel ba*) the gnosis of bliss, radiance, and non-conceptuality. In discussing the curative techniques, he specifies that the best practitioners simply have recourse to the "view" (*lta ba*), the intermediate to "meditation" (*sgom pa*) and the inferior to "conduct" (*spyod pa*).<sup>145</sup> Thus for the "best" we find that pure Mind Series contemplation without any specific techniques, even to the extent of calming practices, is sufficient. In this way kLong chen rab 'byams pa acknowledges the older tradition (whether it was simply rhetorical or practical) and the supremacy of such simple contemplation within the pristine view. But the slight space given it in comparison to the other two types of practitioners clearly constitutes a pragmatic recognition that such an uncompromising position simply isn't sufficient for most individuals—as a tradition, it seems one must involve oneself in "meditation" and "conduct" (key words for different types of practice), despite the "view's" ontological accuracy in its claims to be "beyond meditation and conduct" (*sgom med, spyod med*). Thus the traditional triad of a view, its meditative cultivation, and its behavioral implementation (*lta sgom spyod*) is used to justify this extension out of pure Mind Series contemplation, whether or not such an extension is actual, or a mere rhetorical acknowledgment of a pre-existing state of affairs. Additional elements of this strategy are the triad of bliss, radiance and non-conceptuality—it suggests Mind Series is focused more on the non-conceptuality, but other techniques are more adequate to the equally important experiences and intuitions of bliss and radiance. Finally the widespread hierarchization of individuals' varying contemplative capacities (as seen above) is utilized: the lower on the yogic ladder you get, the more elaborate techniques are needed (though the most elaborate elements of this contemplative system remain considerably simpler than the elaborate maṇḍalas and procedures of some tantric systems).

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145. *Ibid.*, 96.1-98.6, 98.6-103.2, and 103.2-107.2 respectively.

The instructions for curative techniques in "meditation" for the average practitioner all consist of very simple techniques used to cure precise problems that arise in the above three practices. For example, if one has problems with preventing ejaculation in the "bliss" practice, one visualizes a dark blue *hum* syllable within the penis-vajra. From this a fire blazes and incinerates all the seeds, and one visualizes it as empty. If one has problems with the mind being too agitated to focus, one visualizes a lotus or crossed double vajra at one's heart, from which a cord extends downward. This cord increases in length until it reaches all the way down to the universe's very foundation. With prolonged meditation, this will clear away the agitation. Finally, if one has a problem with mental fogginess and torpor while doing practice of non-conceptuality, one can clear it away with the following technique: a glittering presence resembling a globe of light raises from one's heart, and one focuses on it hovering in space an armspan above one.

"Conduct" is then explained in terms of utilizing different postures (*lta stangs*), substances (*rdzas*), and supporting links (*rten 'brel*). The rubric of postures includes some simple postural adjustments in support of the above three types of practice, as well as an extended discussion of why the classic seven point posture is so crucial.<sup>146</sup> "Substances" concentrates on diet, as well as the type of company to keep and geographical environment, in relation to the particular type of practice one is engaged on. "Supporting links" involves using particular types of material substances such as charmed cords and sandalwood.

kLong chen rab 'byams pa begins his discussion of "intensifying" techniques with a trenchant criticism of those who reject all meditative references (*dmigs pa*) or specific icons such as visualization (*mtshan bcas*).<sup>147</sup> Without the use of such "key points" (*gnad*), he indicates one will not have the slightest meditative experience and thus will not be able to stabilize one's mind. He instead stresses the importance of beginning with meditative objects, and only subsequently releasing them into non-referential (*dmigs med*) meditation. In the present context, he identifies "meditative references" as the blazing and dripping of the nuclei in the bliss practices; the colorized inner winds in the radiance practices; and the pure sky in the non-conceptuality practices. Subsequently he con-

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146. *Ibid.*, 103.3-104.5.

147. *Ibid.*, 107.3-116.3 and 107.3-108.3 respectively.

cludes this section<sup>148</sup> in a similar vein with an admonition that for the energization of all these contemplative techniques a practitioner should generally value the standard range of meritorious activities: amassing the two accumulations of gnosis and merit, purifying obscurations, meditation on generation and perfection phase techniques, and doing guru yoga. Thus in the intervening discussion, he indicates how to energize the bliss practice in particular by providing more particulars on its four phases of descent, reversal, dispersal and indictment (as empty) of the seminal nuclei in one's body, including pointers on posture and so forth that facilitate them.<sup>149</sup> Of particular interest<sup>150</sup> is what appears to be his justification for including sexual yoga in a Great Perfection contemplative system: the focus *here* is on the final phase of finding the originally pure emptiness within these sensations of intense bliss, in marked contrast to the "stressful and forced" (*rtsol ba can*) practices of those who just continually concentrate on the descent, reversal and dispersal of the seminal nuclei within their bodies along with the concomitant intense orgasmic sensations. In his account of the energization of the radiance practice,<sup>151</sup> he also emphasizes its difference from ordinary perfection phase techniques, characterizing it as superior to standard breath techniques visualizing the breath as colored, with temperature, shapes and so on. The energization of the non-conceptuality practice,<sup>152</sup> however, is just an outline of several simple techniques; dissolving all conceptuality into an intent focus on a meditative reference such as the statue of a deity; holding the lungs empty and staring intently at mountains, rocks and so on; or focusing the mind on letters, lights, or deity images at the four wheels of the subtle body while holding one's breath inside.

Finally, I would like to point out that this entire system is summarized into an attractively simple sequence of preliminaries, main practice and concluding phase in the "practical guidance" (*don khrid*) on this text.<sup>153</sup> While space prevents me from outlining it here, it suffices to point out that it presents the above in a very stream lined package giving one the

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148. *Ibid.*, 115.6-116.3.

149. *Ibid.*, 108.3-112.4.

150. *Ibid.*, 112.3.

151. *Ibid.*, 112.4-114.6.

152. *Ibid.*, 114.6-115.6.

153. *Yid bzhin nor bu* 126.3-129.4.

sensation of a truly Great Perfection-based reading of the standard range of Tibetan Buddhist contemplative practices, inclusive yet non-compromising in its adherence to the principle of simplicity (*spros med*).

As with the *Ngal gso skor gsum*, kLong chen rab 'byams pa's *Rang grol skor gsum* cycle enables him to present the standard Buddhist vehicles with a focus on practice in the Mind Series. It also is novel to some degree, as indicated by its status as a "pure vision" (*dag snang*) received by kLong chen rab 'byams pa directly from Ye shes mtsho rgyal.<sup>154</sup> This trilogy provides a sustained interpretation of the Mind Series from the perspective of the Esoteric Precept Series, such as when it utilizes the unique terminology of the four visions of direct transcendence to discuss the progression of breakthrough / Mind Series contemplation, or its clear references to dream practices associated with the Seminal Heart tradition.<sup>155</sup> Thus it would seem kLong chen rab 'byams pa thought of this trilogy as an intermediate bridge between the solidly Mind Series-based *Ngal gso skor gsum* and specifically Seminal Heart scriptures, probably intended to gradually introduce modernists to the latter's unique and quirky world both terminologically and contemplatively through the medium of the more palatable Mind Series tradition. In other words, it was intended as a springboard for orienting people towards the Esoteric Precept Series vision of the Great Perfection.

The first text of the trilogy, the *rDzogs pa chen po sems nyid rang grol*,<sup>156</sup> devotes its lengthy second chapter to contemplation, but its intensely beautiful and experiential account provides little detail on actual contemplative procedures aside from the standard poetic-evocative Mind Series style of meditation. Its auto-commentary (another "practical guidance" (*don khrid*) text), however, has more specifics in its triune presentation of a graded path of meditation:<sup>157</sup> (i) instructions on

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154. See *Buddha Mind* (356) for a lineage with several intermediate figures; a different lineage list for the *Chos nyid rang grol* and *mNyam nyid rang grol* provided in their respective "practical guidance" commentaries (329.6 and 377.4) goes directly from Ye shes mtsho rgyal to kLong chen rab 'byams pa himself (the latter text specifies the "Padma couple," i. e. Padmasambhava and Ye shes mtsho rgyal).

155. See Thondup 1989, 335-6.

156. All page references to this and its commentary are to Thondup's translations for the reader's convenience.

157. *Lam rim snying po* 357-367, 367-370 and 370-373 respectively.



natural freedom in contemplative practice in this current lifetime; (ii) instructions on radiant light as the pure source-potential within the post-life intermediate state; and (iii) instructions on the fruit of definitive actualization. The first section begins with seven preliminary phases of contemplation (the first six are done for seven days apiece, and the seventh for a few additional days): (i) a standard, and fairly complex, tantric guru-yoga centered on the visualization of Padmasambhava and Ye shes mtsho rgyal; (ii) maṇḍala offering utilizing visualization; (iii) purificatory meditation on Vajrasattva; (iv) contemplation of impermanence; (v) going for refuge to visualized presences; (vi) the standard Mahāyāna generation of an altruistic motivation towards enlightenment; and (vii) finally a triune meditation on calming, insight, and their integration. None of these involve any visionary or visualization practices unique to the Seminal Heart tradition. These preliminaries are then followed by the main and concluding practices, which on the whole involve no iconic-specific visualizations, breathing modulations, or other such tantric techniques. Thus typical Buddhist meditations are relegated to a “preliminary” phase, while the main contemplations are concordant with the anti-nomian (from a normative Buddhist scholastic and contemplative vantage point) discourse of early Great Perfection literature. The only exception is the “enhancement” (*bogs dbyung*) section of the concluding practices, which describes a practice involving going to a solitary spot and acting out whatever comes to your mind. This practice is drawn from the Seminal Heart tradition, where it is known as “the differentiation between cyclic existence and transcendence’s respective domains” (*’khor ’das ru shan*).<sup>158</sup>

The intermediate state section, however, is an abbreviated account of the processes of dying and post-death existence accompanied by a terse outline of the associated contemplative precepts involving lights, visualization, and so on, drawn from the tenth adamantine topic of the Seminal Heart tradition. The final section on the fruit is not so clearly experiential in nature, and largely involves theories of the nature of a Buddha’s activity and realization. Thus overall we find again an incorporation of standard tantric practices that have been streamlined and simplified, the prominence of calming / insight techniques, and a subdued incorporation of certain aspects of Seminal Heart terminology and contemplative practices. Despite the presence of these tantric techniques, there is absolutely

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158. See the description in *Tshig don mdzod* 372.4-374.3.

no focus on the iconic presence of any one deity or set of deities as in ordinary generation phase practices, nor is there any emphasis on bringing the internal winds into the body's central channel as in ordinary perfection phase practices.

I will defer a similarly detailed examination of the other texts in the trilogy, except to note that in general they follow the pattern of the first set of texts: they frame the breakthrough style contemplation with more conventional preliminary tantric and Mahāyāna contemplations, there is an infusion of bardo ideology and praxis, the modernist and Seminal Heart focus on radiant light and vision is pronounced, and despite its obvious influence, they refrain on the whole from utilizing the characteristic Seminal Heart terminology or describing the critical direct transcendence contemplation. The emphasis on radiant light and the bardo is even more pronounced, and the other two "practical guidances" structure their discussion of contemplative instructions around the traditional triad used to structure Seminal Heart treatises' presentations of contemplation: (i) a description of contemplative procedures to be used in this life for the sharpest of practitioner; (ii) instructions for the post-death intermediate states for practitioners of intermediate abilities; and finally (iii) precepts for those of inferior abilities, which basically consists in utilizing the practice of transference of consciousness (*'pho ba*) to be reborn in a pure land. kLong chen rab 'byams pa uses this emphasis on the intermediate state and radiant light to bring an Esoteric Precept Series perspective to bear upon the Mind Series without, however, bringing its dangerous "commitments" (psychically and politically) into play since he avoids explicitly invoking the former. It may have been that the bardo discourses had gained a wider acceptance in Tibetan Buddhist communities by virtue of their widespread popularity among the lay, as well as their displacing these unusual doctrines from the mainstream arena via situating them in the liminal zone of death. Thus kLong chen rab 'byams pa saw them as the most appropriate teachings to function as a bridge between the world of the Mind Series and modernist traditions, and that of the Seminal Heart.

Finally, I will briefly summarize the contemplative system outlined in kLong chen rab 'byams pa's own commentary on the principal Mind Series text, the *Kun byed rgyal po*.<sup>159</sup> His account is particularly inter-

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159. *Byang chub kyi sems kun byed rgyal po'i don khrid rin chen sgru bo* 29-52. This text has been translated by Kennard Lipman and Merrill Peterson

esting since it is closely based on the text itself, thus revealing how he unfolds a series of practices from a text which never describes any formal contemplative scenarios. The description is divided up into the traditional triad of a contemplation session: the preliminaries (here identified as guru yoga), the main practice and the concluding practices (here specified as techniques for sustaining the visions and experiences). The guru yoga begins with simple visualizations of a syllable emanating light rays, continues with self-visualization as the deity *Sems dpa' rdo rje*, a visualization of an image of the guru upon your head, and further visualizations of surrounding lineage masters and so forth. In addition, you utilize a special breathing technique called "vajra repetition" (*rdo rje'i bzlas*)—you pronounce *ōm* as you inhale, *āḥ* as you hold the breath momentarily, and *hūm* as you exhale. This practice is a quite standard tantric contemplation, but it is important to note this is introduced as a preliminary which serves to contextualize the main practice, which would be the Great Perfection proper.

The main practice involves four subdivisions:<sup>160</sup> determining (the ground) through the appropriate view, finalizing through contemplative cultivation (of this view); clearing away treacherous pathways through your conduct; and divesting yourself from all hopes and fears as the fruit. The view section involves exclusively poetic / analytic thematic meditative inquiry or reverie, though the two references to how many days should be spent on it clearly indicate that formal meditative sessions are indicated.<sup>161</sup> The contemplation, conduct and fruit sections begin with relaxing in the seven point lotus posture, but are in fact in their entirety "technique-free" yet highly experiential scripts for working with one's own psyche. The concluding phase provides some simple practical techniques for coping with various situations.<sup>162</sup> As strategies for dealing with obstacles to one's meditative practice, kLong chen rab 'byams pa advocates traditional Buddhist techniques such as supplicating one's Master, trusting in pure vision, cultivating love and compassion, and training one's mind to be constantly aware of karmic conse-

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as *You are the Eyes of the World* (1987). All page references here and in the following are to this translation for the reader's convenience.

160. Lipman and Peterson 1987, 31-50.

161. *Ibid.*, 33, 35.

162. *Ibid.*, 50-2.

quences of one's actions as well as impermanence. While other solutions are again more cognitive in nature, he offers specific advice for feelings of drowsiness and distraction towards objects—"stick to a cool room with a high seat, exert yourself and do physical exercises."<sup>163</sup> He also reiterates the importance of stabilizing concentration on an objective reference, the precise content of which is not relevant,<sup>164</sup> followed by a clear explication of how such stabilization is utilized. The beginning level of such practice involves the achievement of a calm, collected state of mind, which, however, is periodically interrupted by the movement of thought (*sems gnas thog nas 'phro*). The intermediate level of familiarization with such contemplation is reached when one begins to gain the ability to find such calm amidst the movement of thought (*'phro thog na gnas*); the advanced level is when calmness and thoughts manifest without any duality or fissure (*gnas 'phro gnyis med du shar ba*).

In conclusion, this brief look at kLong chen rab 'byams pa's fourteenth century writings on Mind Series contemplation indicates quite clearly an important, though limited and modified, role of ordinary tantric contemplative principles distinct from their possible importance as an assumed background. It clearly represents a simplification of perfection phase techniques infused with the spirit of Great Perfection rhetoric while consciously avoiding complicated generation phase production of images, resulting in an attractively simple yet evocative system. In addition, it indicates the importance of calming techniques as a central means for preparing one's psyche for the tricky nature of such seemingly intangible styles of contemplation. Finally, his accounts both indicate how highly experiential these at times vague sounding contemplations can be in terms of providing precise means for working directly with one's psyche, sensory experience and sedimented interpretative patterns, as well as stress the importance of pursuing these in a formal setting while seated in a supportive posture and disengaged from other activities. It is only in the context of cultivating such concentration in extended meditative sessions that his avocation of integrating such experiences with ordinary activities makes sense, as well his frequent invocations of "relaxation" and "naturalness." Further research must be done on earlier Mind Series literature with a specific focus on evidence of contemplative praxis to assess kLong chen rab 'byams pa's innovativeness. In par-

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163. *Ibid.*, 51.

164. *Ibid.*, 52.

ticular, a systematic review of the *rGyud 'bum of Vairo(cana)* is vital if Kapstein is correct in his characterization of it as a middle to late twelfth century redaction of Zur Mind Series traditions.

*The path from bodhicitta to bindu*

As the eleventh century begins, the Great Perfection is already characterized by these webs of lineages known as the Mind Series, separated from each other by such factors as geographical distances and clan affiliations. The emergence of the modernist movements from this point onwards resulted in new religio-cultural heterologues sparking a series of crises and transformations in pre-existing Buddhist groups (beginning with their constitution as the “ancients”). The eleventh to thirteenth centuries are a time of tremendous ferment as a variety of interlinked yogic systems of theory and praxis are not only being imported from outside Tibet, but are also being developed and refined in Tibet itself. This latter process took place intellectually, literarily and experientially, and for a few explosive centuries literally thousands of tantric flowers bloomed, most eventually withering away within the restricted circles wherein they first emerged, forever beyond retrieval. Amidst this mutually constituting creativity in modernist and ancient circles, startling new developments emerge within these Great Perfection traditions. While grounded in classical Indian Buddhist thought, they also represent systematic Tibetan innovations of an extremely sophisticated and creative nature.

The most interesting were those experimenting with imaginal processes interlinked with the human body through pushing outwards the boundaries demarcating the Great Perfection from the other tantric traditions being transmitted with it,<sup>165</sup> as well as incorporating in interesting ways tantric doctrines and practices circulating in modernist camps. These developments reversed its probable initial process of formation in which it separated itself off from other areas of tantra to gain its own distinctive self-identity. As these boundaries of discourse and praxis fluctuated outwards, the incorporated materials / techniques *themselves* were altered in ways both subtle and striking by their new setting and use, as well as altering the very identity of the Great Perfection in the process. These fluctuations and reintroductions of tantric elements were taking place across an immense geographical landscape over a number

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165. This is clear from hagiographic and lineage records.

of centuries, and it is not yet possible to give a competent outline of the various heterogeneous systems, nor their interrelationships and differences. We have yet to adequately analyze the existent literature to discern the outlines of these groups, much less ask questions as to philosophical and contemplative differences that may have constituted their respective boundaries (beyond the mere clan affinities, lineage transmissions, and geographical locations). The situation is particularly complex in that much of the early materials were being introduced as canonical tantras attributed to a cosmic buddha, or compositions by Indian and Tibetan figures of the seventh to ninth centuries. As such, they were often introduced into collections without any further colophonic data.

The "Seminal Heart" (*snying thig*) emerged out of such ferment from the mid eleventh century onwards. The Seminal Heart was also known as the "unsurpassed" (*bla med*), perhaps echoing the modernist term "Unsurpassed Yoga Tantras" (*rnal 'byor bla na med pa'i rgyud*). While it is startlingly different from the world evoked by the classic Mind Series texts, its innovativeness in the context of related movements in the Great Perfection cannot be assessed until further research has been done on surviving textual materials from this time period.<sup>166</sup> Since these traditions were in intimate dialogue with the emerging modernist tantric and yogic developments as well, comparative studies should also yield detailed correspondences. With the emergence of such movements, various classification systems or doxographies begin to develop to make sense of older Great Perfection traditions in this new context. Early developments gaining wider acceptance with their proposed rubrics for self-identification (*yang ti*, *spyi ti*, *a ti* and so forth) thus began to create systematized genres as early as the eleventh century. Eventually a certain spectrum of these that went furthest in assimilating perfection phase techniques were understood as variations of a single classification known as the "Esoteric Precept Series." The most standard overarching doxography included this in a triune hierarchically sequenced series (*sde gsum*): the Mind Series, Space Series, and Esoteric Precepts Series (*man ngag sde*). The Mind Series functioned as a systematization of older traditions, as well as eventually more conservative innovations, while the Esoteric Precepts Series and its internal divisions authorized and positioned the radical developments led by the Seminal Heart. Thus

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166. Particularly important are the key "Space Series" (*klong sde*) works and those grouped under the rubrics *yang ti* or *spyi ti*.

while people were continually going off into the vast Tibetan wilderness and pursuing their own interests in isolated conditions, the pervasive institution of lineages and the complimentary Tibetan instinct for collectivization constantly acted to counterbalance these tendencies towards fragmentation and isolation. Some early passages about the interrelation between *yang ti* and *spyi ti* clearly indicate these were separate currents with self-conscious identities,<sup>167</sup> although this is not to deny that later classificatory attempts (such as those found in the ordering of texts in the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum*) introduce artificial divisions as they attempt to fit heterogeneous material into a few rubrics distilled out from this creative period. In particular, later attempts to confine this into a standard four divisions of the Esoteric Precepts Series seems to reflect a late hegemonic attempt to homogenize these developments into a unified scheme. While in the Seminal Heart's earliest emergence in the eleventh century it was one of many tentative inquiries into the expansion of the Great Perfection, this particular line of development eventually become so dominant in Tibet that the term came to be understood as synonymous with the Great Perfection itself in many circles. Even later traditions claiming distinct visionary roots in the eighth century are clearly heavily indebted to the practices, terminology and

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167. For example, a revelation of Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer entitled *rGyud kyi rtse rgyal nyi zla 'od 'bar mkha' klong rnam dag rgya mtsho klong gsal rgyud* currently found in the *mTshams brag* edition of *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* (vol. 10, 624-671; Kaneko 124) has references to *spyi ti* and *yang ti*; also see the references in the chapter titles of two other Nyang revelations (Kaneko 93-4). A Padmasambhava treasure (the discoverer is unspecified) located immediately after those texts (Kaneko 95) has numerous references to *spyi ti*, *yang ti* and *a ti* (the *rGyud thams cad kyi rgyal po nyi zla'i snying po 'od 'bar ba bdud rtsi'i rgyal mtsho la 'khyil ba'i rgyud*). Chapter 47 discusses the view of *spyi ti*, which it identifies as "original purity" (*ka dag*), while the following chapter discusses the view of *yang ti*, which it explicitly identifies as "higher" than *spyi ti*. Chapter 48 then discusses the view of "the totally perfect direct transcendence" (*yongs rdzogs thod rgal*). Chapter 72 further discusses the "difference between *a ti* and *spyi ti*," and actually presents it in terms of a debate between two proponents. Systematic research into such passages will eventually yield a clearer understanding of what is implied by each rubric.

direction first formulated in the Seminal Heart circles (this is particularly true of the important fourteenth century *dGongs pa zang thal* cycle).<sup>168</sup>

*The history of the Great Perfection's transformation into the Seminal Heart*

Traditionally, the Seminal Heart is said to have been the exceedingly secret core of the Great Perfection, and as such was only transmitted to literally a handful of people during the late eighth and ninth centuries as Buddhism took hold in dynastic period Tibet. This new Great Perfection movement was then introduced to the wider Tibetan public from the eleventh century onwards under the auspices of "recovered" texts called "treasures" (*gter ma*), which included both transcendental buddha-authored tantras and their human-composed exegetical literature. In terms of the former, there were a series of new tantras in the classic format said to be dynastic period translations by either Vimalamitra or Vairocana in conjunction with Śrīsiṃha, from which a set of seventeen was gradually codified under the rubric of *rGyud bcu bdun* (The Seventeen Tantras). In addition, there emerged a body of exegetical literature attributed to six Indian figures (see below) and eventually collected into a set known as *Bi ma snying thig* (The Seminal Heart of Vimalamitra), the name pointing to the supposed eighth century Indian redactor who is said to have brought the texts to Tibet and redacted them there as a collection. These texts' origination and transmission were both attributed to the shadowy non-Tibetan figures said to play the key roles in the Great Perfection's emergence in this world system and initial very limited circulation (prior to its unprecedented expansion in Tibet)—Surativajra, Mañjuśrimitra, Śrīsiṃha, Jñānasūtra and Vimalamitra. The main early figure that is historically attested seems to be ICe btsun seng ge dbang phyug (active in the eleventh century), who was said to have played a major role (some claim "authorship" in many cases as the most appropriate description)<sup>169</sup> in the rediscovery of these two principal textual

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168. It is necessary to carefully chart the way in which Seminal Heart developments were appropriated by other systems as the centuries passed on, since the special treasure-revelation mechanisms of the ancients was often utilized to create separate sources of authorization clouding their immense debt to the original Seminal Heart corpus. For information on the phenomena of "treasure," see Thondup 1986 and Gyatso 1986, 1993.

169. See Karmay 1988, 210.



collections that were to put the Seminal Heart teachings on the spiritual and intellectual map in Tibet.<sup>170</sup> These two collections later formed a triad with the important *mKha' 'gro snying thig* (The Seminal Heart of the Sky Dancer), a group of texts ascribed to the authorship of Padmasambhava in conjunction with his Tibetan consort Ye shes mtsho rgyal yet only re-revealed in Tibet during the late thirteenth century by Padma las 'brel rtsal (1291-1316). Traditional accounts of this ensuing period thus speak of their concealment in Tibet and subsequent "rediscovery" as actual physical manuscripts or visionary documents, an extremely complex and confusing series of events over a period of four centuries that is in part certainly beyond our retrieval. Along with the repeated disclaimers explaining why these teachings and doctrines had been totally unknown prior to this time (roughly the eleventh century), this indicates the quite innovative nature of these Seminal Heart teachings in the context of what was understood to signified by the "Great Perfection" when they first appeared. Even within the context of Nyingma communities, and more so in the wider Tibetan religious landscape being reshaped by the modernist movement, these teachings were quite controversial. The uniqueness of the Seminal Heart tradition in the context of the Great Perfection is due equally to its complex mytho-philosophical presentation of the cosmos' unfolding within an explicitly soteriological and psychological framework, as well as its incorporation of complex visual images and imaging into its mainstream (though in a quite different style than traditional tantric praxis).

Given the period's complicated maneuvers regarding ascription of authorship as motivated by desires for legitimation in the often fractious conflicts between the modernists and ancient ones, attributions to Indian figures such as Vimalamitra and even to Tibetan figures beginning with lCe btsun seng ge dbang phyug (though from fairly early on he is cited as the source of the Seminal Heart innovation) cannot be taken at face value without independent corroboration. The situation is further confused by the fact that many of the early figures were visionaries who

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170. I am currently working on a detailed analysis of this literature in an article provisionally entitled "kLong chen rab 'byams pa's *sNying thig* Sources: The "Original" *sNying Thig* Literature Canonized in the 14th Century." The most pressing task in reconstructing a literary history is a systematic cataloging and comparison of the huge amounts of Great Perfection literature produced during this period.

received texts in varying states of detail within visions,<sup>171</sup> texts which subsequent transmissions would speak of as belonging more to the envisioned author than the visionary him / herself. In addition, to some degree genuinely ancient texts lost or concealed during the dark period were being recovered and recirculated from the late tenth century onwards, just as is happening now in Tibetan regions following the far darker period that transpired under Chinese Communist rule during the sixties and seventies. Finally, these texts, as well as other texts, were often sites of continuing creative development that in some cases lasted over several centuries or more, such that reference to a text or collection by name is not clear evidence that it existed at that point in its present codified form. It is important to realize that traditional and modern accounts of a type of "renaissance" of Tibetan religious culture from the tenth century onwards as essentially creative, dominant and active modernist movements pushing along reactionary, weak and passive Nyingma and Bonpo movements is profoundly inaccurate. Instead it was a joint explosion of creativity shared by all three, with the Seminal Heart in particular marking the profundity of the changes occurring in the Nyingma camps.

The traditional account of the emergence of this literature can be found in the *sNying thig lo rgyus chen po* (The Great Chronicles of the Seminal Heart), a historical work found in the *Bi ma snying thig*, possibly authored by Zhang ston bkra shis rdo rje.<sup>172</sup> In this account, Vimalamitra brings the texts to Tibet towards the end of the eighth century, but decides against disseminating them at that point, and instead conceals the texts in mChims phu (the retreat site associated with bSam yas monastery in Central Tibet). He transmits some materials to the

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171. A contemporary Great Perfection Teacher in Golok Serta, mKhan po 'jigs med phun tshogs, is quite famed for his visionary reception of texts in perfect syllabic meter. This being the twentieth century, disciples scramble for the tape recorder and microphone when he appears to be going into such a state. In his own community, and in the wider religious community if they gain legitimation as genuine, these compositions are attributed to the eighth or ninth century and the subsequently discussed as the "root" of a fourteenth century text and so on. An excellent discussion of this tradition of "treasure" (*gTer ma*) texts revealed physically or in non-material visions can be found in Thondup 1986.

172. See Karmay 1988, 209. See Thondup 1984 for a good syncretic presentation of such accounts.

Tibetan Nyang ting nge 'dzin bzang po, who conceals those texts at the Zhwa'i temple. In order to maintain the lineage, he transmitted it in some type of oral form to 'Bron rin chen 'bar ba, who in turn transmitted it to dBu ru zhwa'i ldang ma dge mchog. The latter's son, gNas brtan ldang ma lhun gyi rgyal mtshan then rediscovered some portion of the texts from Zhwa temple. He transmitted these to lCe btsun seng ge dbang phyug, who further re-located some of the texts at mChims phu, but also re-hid these texts. lCe sgom nag po then thirty years later recovered some of those texts. From this point on we have datable figures: lCe sgom nag po's disciple Zhang ston bkra shis rdo rje (1097-1167), Zhang's son Nyi ma 'bum (1158-1213), Nyi 'bum's nephew Guru jo 'ber (1172-1231), Jo 'ber's disciple 'Khrul zhig seng ge rgyab pa (1200s), the latter's disciple Me long rdo rje (1243-1303), and Me long rdo rje's disciple Kumārādza (1266-1343), the root teacher of kLong chen rab 'byams pa (1308-1363). The materials developed during the pre-kLong chen rab 'byams pa period bear traces of a number of quite different authorial hands, often in a single text. However material attributed to Vimalamitra's (traditionally seen as the key redactor of this material) own hand often seems stylistically unified, internally structured and possibly forming the corpus of a single individual. The key issue in part, then, is whether we can pinpoint a historical figure who most likely penned a substantial portion of these materials, whether it be lCe btsun seng ge dbang phyug, lCe sgom nag po, or some later figure. Interestingly, Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer's twelfth century *Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud* clearly refers (see above) in passing to the emerging Seminal Heart tradition under the rubric of "the unsurpassed (tradition of the) Great Perfection" (*rdzogs chen bla med*), though he confines himself to a brief description of the lineage.

It is helpful to understand the history of the Seminal Heart in terms of three phases. (i) The initial period of formation (early eleventh century to early twelfth century?) was marked by the longer texts (such as the *sGra thal 'gyur* and *Rig pa rang shar* tantras) and two main collections of texts (*The Seventeen Tantras* and the *Bi ma snying thig*) gradually taking shape over the course of decades via a number of authors. This is suggested by the reoccurring theme of visions of Vimalamitra and texts which are re-covered, re-concealed and re-recovered. Thus at some time in the eleventh century this new movement began within the framework of the Great Perfection drawing upon a variety of sources: new modernist doctrines, indigenous Tibetan religious concepts, inno-

vative strains of the Great Perfection such as in the Space Series and other unknown influences. It may even be that these visionary practices were partially already present as an oral transmission largely contemplative in nature in conjunction with a limited graphic tradition focused on tantric themes of buddha-nature and primordial purity; the Seminal Heart may then reflect the subsequent gradual elaboration of this into a systematic philosophical discourse. It then spread for several centuries with literary production basically confined to “tantras” claiming to be transcripts of celestial doctrines rather than human compositions, and / or texts claiming to be rediscoveries of fifth-ninth century non-Tibetan Great Perfection masters. The formation of the two basic collections said to stem from the time of ICe btsun seng ge dbang phyug was most likely the product of gradual “discovery” and composition reaching a codified form only later in the late thirteenth century, though it may be that it was present in a core form already in the eleventh century with ICe btsun seng ge dbang phyug’s, or ICe sgom nag po’s, literary activity (“archaeology” and composition).

(ii) In the intermediate period (early thirteenth century to early fourteenth century) the tradition starts to take stable form and move into wider patterns of circulation with Me long rdo rje and Kumārādza. In this way, the Seminal Heart tradition with its texts and associated practices eventually began to experience quite a bit of success, such that in the early fourteenth century we find such a prominent modernist figure as the third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284-1339) deeply involved in their transmission and study.<sup>173</sup> In this process, the *mKha' 'gro snying thig* played a critical role, as indicated by its great popularity in the fourteenth century.<sup>174</sup> The factors behind this popularity lie partially in its direct linkage to the evolving cult of Padmasambhava that was beginning to dominate the Nyingma lineages, but also in its stylistic qualities, organization, and pragmatic usefulness. Whereas the *Bi ma snying thig* represents a sprawling mass of often quite obscure and certainly heterogeneous materials, this later collection (as one might expect) is tightly written, characterized by an evocative yet clear style, and presents the entire range of philosophical treatises, ritual manuals, and contemplative instructions in a single easy to consult cycle. This is yet another reason for the importance of kLong chen rab 'byams pa's

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173. See Dudjom 1991, 572-4.

174. See Ehrhard 1992, 54.

exegetical work, since he also brought much needed order and organizational clarity to the at times chaotic mass of the Vimalamitra-transmitted Seminal Heart scriptures inherited from Kumārādza (also the relevant teacher of Rang byung rdo rje ). In addition, Kumārādza's biography has the following interesting comment: “. . . Kumārādza was able to explain the instructions of the Innermost Spirituality (*snying thig*) without mixing them with others' systems of the stage of perfection; and thus he created a philosophical system in the technical language [of the Great Perfection itself] . . . .”<sup>175</sup> In their annotation to this, Kapstein and Dorje indicate that they suspect this may indicate Kumārādza played an important role, perhaps even a literary one, in the systematization of the Seminal Heart tradition with its peculiar terminology that kLong chen rab 'byams pa received.

(iii) In the “final” period (fourteenth century) kLong chen rab 'byams pa systematized and codified these literary and oral traditions into a complex, yet clear architectonic structure. This resulted in the redaction of the literature into the vast *sNying thig ya bzhi* (*The Seminal Heart in Four Parts*) along with the canonical *Seventeen Tantras*. Further research into other Great Perfection figures of the time may reveal alternative Seminal Heart-inspired or related traditions that bypassed kLong chen rab 'byams pa's systematization, though it is unlikely any do so in such masterly fashion. Prior to the fourteenth century, there appears to have been little *explicitly* commentarial literature being attributed to Tibetan scholar / practitioners, although presumably many of the tantras found in the various editions of *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* were being produced, revealed, or rediscovered during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries under circumstances that are less than clear. This entire developmental process of a complex and highly architectonic discourse over three centuries then culminated with the life and writings of kLong chen rab 'byams pa, who produced a massive corpus of writings on the Seminal Heart constituting its first systematic exposition attributed explicitly to an indigenous Tibetan author. Not only did he put thus put the tradition in its classical form, he also managed to integrate its doctrines and practices into the increasingly normative modernist discourses that had taken shape from the contemporary Indian Buddhist logico-epistemological circles, Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and tantric traditions of the late tenth to thirteenth centuries. This is in line with the general tenor

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175. See Dudjom 1991, 571-2.

of the fourteenth century, a time when the preceding centuries' creative and at times chaotic ferment was being everywhere systematized and codified, and the Tibetan version of the academic industry was kicking into gear. kLong chen rab 'byams pa's overall corpus is brilliant, and has enjoyed a commensurate reputation in all Tibetan traditions from the fourteenth century onwards. It had an immediate impact, and in subsequent centuries was to serve as the explicit model for many Nyingma compositions. In particular, his Seminal Heart writings were intensely philosophical as well as contemplative, and architectonic in nature. Though on the whole their characteristic doctrines and terminology are present in the earlier literature stemming from lCe btsun seng ge dbang phyug onwards, their terminological precision, eloquent style, systematic range and structure, and integration with normative Buddhist discourse constitute a major innovation in and of themselves. To his credit, kLong chen rab 'byams pa's alternative identities as a poet and accomplished yogi enabled him on the whole to avoid the scholastic sterility that many Tibetan scholars were already becoming trapped within.

A period of striking creativity was thus brought to its culmination by kLong chen rab 'byams pa, while in the following centuries (right up to the present), many figures in the Nyingma tradition (and other sects) composed their own Seminal Heart systems (generally known by such titles as the *Pad ma snying thig* [Lotus Seminal Heart] and so on) such that earlier traditions of the Great Perfection became marginalized and Seminal Heart came to be widely recognized as the premier form of the Great Perfection. Indeed, it was viewed as the pinnacle of the entire "nine vehicle" (*theg pa dgu*) systematization of tenet systems in Nyingma literature. However, despite, or perhaps because of, the immensity of his accomplishment, kLong chen rab 'byams pa's corpus had a relatively limited circulation for the ensuing four centuries. It was finally simultaneously established as authoritative, and partially displaced, in the eighteenth century by 'Jigs med gling pa's (1730-1798) immensely popular *kLong chen snying thig* cycle. This functioned to simplify much of kLong chen rab 'byams pa's Seminal Heart systematization, but also altered the fundamental structure of its literature and praxis by drawing upon normative (and transformed) deity visualization-oriented practices as found in Mahāyoga cycles for its key structural framework. In addition, his *Yon tan mdzod* basically rewrote kLong chen rab 'byams pa's *Ngal gso skor gsum*. While both works were to prove considerably more popular than their inspiration in kLong chen

rab 'byams pa's corresponding compositions, they also solidified the tradition of according the latter an authoritative position in the field of the Great Perfect, and opened up a space within which kLong chen rab 'byams pa studies flourished (relatively speaking). In addition, it sparked the famous "non-partisan" (*ris med*) movement that spread over eastern Tibet in the nineteenth century, for which this renewed Seminal Heart formed the visionary and intellectual heart.<sup>176</sup> Much of the Nyingma school's ensuing (nineteenth and twentieth centuries) production of systematic exegetical literature on the great Mahāyāna exoteric classics can be profitably viewed as an attempt to pursue Great Perfection concerns in the new arena of discourses formerly dominated by the modernists. However the history of Seminal Heart post-fourteenth century to the twentieth century remains a complicated matter requiring further extensive research, as well as the same issue of parallel movements in the Great Perfection that may have been formulated in separation from, in dialogue with, or in dependence upon the Seminal Heart traditions.

Just as with the Mind Series traditions, an important issue in the Seminal Heart's historical development is the extent to which its Heart must be contextualized pedagogically and contemplatively in terms of other Buddhist doctrinal, contemplative and ritual systems. For example, in most Nyingma scholastic centers established in the refugee communities outside of Tibet, monks are generally required to engage in years of systematic study of other traditions before (if ever) instructed in highly technical literature of the Seminal Heart tradition. On the other hand, at mKhan po 'jigs med phun tshogs's contemporary institute located at Go log gser rta in far east Tibet, he regularly teaches such literature to the monastic assembly, and as a result I found monks in their early twenties with whom I could have quite specialized discussions. In addition I once had an interesting discussion with the contemporary Bonpo master sLob dpon bstan 'dzin rnam dag in which he expressed his worries that the contemporary marginalization of these traditions within the normative study curriculum was contributing to their decline. On the other side of the religious fence in Tibetan cultural zones, there are numerous accounts of distinguished great Perfection teachers and practitioners who were not ritually, scholastically, or at times even lin-

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176. See Smith 1969, 1970, and Samuel 19993, 525–552, for an excellent overview of the ecumenical movement.

guistically literate in the wider Tibetan Buddhist domain. A charming example is related by Namkhai Norbu<sup>177</sup> in telling how his teacher Byang chub rdo rje fumbled his way through a standard ritualized sequence of events (since he lacked formal training in these complicated tantric structures) after being pressured by his eager young scholastically-trained student (Norbu himself) to fit into his preconception of what a Tibetan Buddhist teacher should do. However, the contemporary norm is that prior to engaging in the main practices such as Break-through and direct transcendence, one must perform the lengthy practices of the five hundred thousand preliminary practices, the recitations-actualizations of the three roots (master, tutelary deity, and sky dancer), and channel-wind practices (*rtsa rlung*).<sup>178</sup> The shifting diachronic and synchronic lines of the Seminal Heart's relationship to other traditions at the practical rather than theoretical level is thus an important area for further research. The intent of this vastly oversimplified and brief historical sketch is to offer a preliminary schema to facilitate further discussion, and has no pretense of doing justice to a complex and murky situation.<sup>179</sup>

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177. See Norbu 1986, 15-19.

178. For example see Jampal Zangpo 1988, 12.

179. In particular, my historical sketch makes no attempt to integrate the complex developments of the Bonpo traditions of the Great Perfection, about which I have only begun study the past few years. In addition, it is necessary to systematically survey all Nyingma and Bon literature prior to the fourteenth century for references to such specific technical terminology and themes as *snying thig*, *thod rgal*, *khregs chod*, *gzhi snang* and *kun tu bzang po'i grol tshul*, as well as indications of awareness of different types of Great Perfection lineages existing during the author's lifetime. In this way we can begin to accurately delineate the formation of these doctrines from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries by tracing the gradual codification of a standard set of terminology, structures and so on. Thus we can clarify interrelations between various elements of the Nyingma tradition, as well as the nature, extent and histories of alternative attempts at renovating the Great Perfection tradition during these first few centuries which failed where the Seminal Heart-Essence succeeded. Finally, systematic studies of the vast uncharted textual territory of the various editions of *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* as well as biographical literature are a vital necessity for further progress. For example, there is a large number of texts in the various editions attributed to Padmasambhava, for which it would be extremely helpful to analyze for the



*The Seminal Heart's innovations: the spontaneous visions of absence, the cult of the body and the transformation of tantric contemplation*

The core of the Seminal Heart's difference from earlier Great Perfection traditions can be summed up as a focus on the spontaneous dynamics (*lhun grub*) of the Ground, a spontaneity which one visually experiences in mandalic images in death and death-in-life, i. e. contemplation. This emphasis on spontaneity and vision is related not only to the modernists' emphasis on techniques of vision, but also to the need for the ancients to present themselves ideologically as having a "vision." In other words, the communities of the ancients needed to show their own cultural vitality, and undercut caricatures of themselves as stagnant conservatives with new visions of a specific nature rather than mere amorphous formlessness. Evidently even in the fourteenth century there continued to be conservatives in the Great Perfection tradition who rejected the Seminal Heart, and instead focused on the austere dyadic poles of a primordial ground and the distorted worlds of samsaric life forms. KLong chen rab 'byams pa alludes to this continuing controversy in the following discussion of the four visions of Direct Contemplation practice:<sup>180</sup>

These four visions (*snang ba*) of such natural spontaneity are eloquently borne witness to in the great canonical tantras, scriptures (*lung*) and esoteric precepts (*man ngag*), and yet nowadays (many) are with respect to their internal radiance within the great lighting-up of the primordial ground (*gzhi snang*), the lighting-up (*snang*) of the originally pure essence. They thus fail to recognize these visions / lighting-up of natural spontaneity, the sheath (*sbubs*) of gnosis' radiant light, existing between the primordial ground and the distortions of the six life-forms (in *samsāra*). I consider such people to be exceedingly misguided, despite their conceited pretensions to understanding the Great Perfection. I myself have seen all of this lighting-up (or

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type of terminology, doctrines, and overall consistency that characterizes this group of texts. At the University of Virginia we currently have a computer-based project to index, correlate and summarize individual texts in these editions—for further information, I can be contacted at Department of Religious Studies, Cocke Hall, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903.

180. *Zab don rgya mtsho'i sprin* 108.3.

“these visions”) through the inspiration of Padmasambhava and his consort, and it appeared exceedingly similar to (how they are described) in the *Rang Shar* scripture.<sup>181</sup> Having seen it like that, I’ve set it down here for the sake of future generations . . . .

Though this clearly indicates controversies were raging still in central Tibet over the identity of the Great Perfection, by the seventeenth century gTer bdag gling pa says “practically nothing much survived of the Mind Series apart from the transmission of the “permission” (*lung*) in his time,”<sup>182</sup> indicating that the victory of the Seminal Heart over the heart and soul of the Great Perfection was almost total. This occurs in the context of a discussion<sup>183</sup> of the extent to which such esoteric traditions in both the modernists and Nyingma circles survived as experiential systems beyond a mere exegetical continuity. In particular he says that many Mind Series systems (*lugs*) previously flourished, such as the *Rong*, *Khams*, *sKor*, and *Nyang*, but that in contemporary times the Mind Series and Space Series systems barely survive in terms of the traditional triad of their respective empowerments, experiential guidances and verbal transmissions. In contrast, he describes the Esoteric Precept Series—i. e. the two traditions supposedly stemming from Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava respectively—as having been preserved in its unique exegetical form as well as experientially, though without any great expansion. The ensuing discussion goes into considerable detail as he mentions contemporary or recent figures and their experiential accomplishments of these systems, in the context of which his concern for these as living contemplative traditions is manifest. It should be noted however that the contemporary Great Perfection teacher Namkhai Norbu (among others) has taught both the Mind Series and Space Series as practices over the past few decades, and his characterizations of their status has been far milder: “. . . the [Mind Series] has tended to become rather overshadowed by the presentation of the [Esoteric Precept

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181. The *Rang shar* is one of *The Seventeen Tantras* (*rGyud bcu bdun*).

182. Karmay 1988, 208; see further information on this text’s discussion below (this passage is on folio 351).

183. *gTer chen chos ki rgyal po gter bdag gling pa gar dbang ’gyur med rdo rje’i zhal snga nas mchog sman rnams kyis dri ba sna ishogs pa’i lan rim par spel ba rin chen phreng ba* (*chab shog*) (350.4ff).

Series], and at various times it has been necessary to re-emphasize its importance.”<sup>184</sup>

In broader terms, the Seminal Heart innovations within the previous Great Perfection environment can be discussed as fourfold. (i) It articulates a deeply phenomenological and partially mythic overarching narrative about the origination and telos of the human world that serves to structure the entire tradition. This can be summed up by a primordial ground, its unfolding in the ground-presencing, its split into *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and its culmination in enlightenment. (ii) It directly introduces visionary practices into the heart of Great Perfection contemplation in a way intertwined with this evolutionary or developmental ethos. This is the “direct transcendence” discourse. (iii) It incorporates a wide range of tantric types of practices as auxiliary and supporting praxis, which on the whole involve relatively simple techniques of visualization in contrast to the intricate maṇḍalas of modernist focus. (iv) It injects a far greater range of tantric doctrines into its discourse, ranging from subtle body theory to the set of one hundred peaceful and wrathful deities based on the five Buddha families. In this way, an extensive set of new technical vocabulary (*gzhi snang*, *gdangs / mdangs*, *thod rgal*, *khregs chod*, *ru shan*, etc.) emerges that is not attested in earlier Great Perfection literature. In terms of the classic tantric split between traditions that give rhetorical voice (and often actual practical implementation) to explicit sexual imagery, violence and horrific imagery and those traditions that are more aestheticized and overtly symbolic in nature,<sup>185</sup> the new Seminal Heart system remains relatively desexualized and aestheticized in comparison to the often shockingly crude discourses of the modernists’ tantras and the Nyingma’s own Mahāyoga tradition (the antinomianism operative in the Great Perfection is more hermeneutical than social). However the influx of tantric vocabulary, themes, and even sexual practices as adjuncts do sexualize and embody the tradition to a greater extent than seems to have been the norm previously.

In the Seminal Heart, the contemplative discourses on internal movements of energy within a “subtle” or imaginal body that characterize later phases of Indian Buddhist tantra are reincorporated into the Great Per-

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184. Norbu 1986, 24-5.

185. This split is variously referred to in Western literature as “crude” vs. “refined,” “bindu” vs. “nada,” or “sexual fluids” vs. “aestheticized symbolism,” “cremation grounds culture” vs. “deodorized” traditions.

fection, and furthermore instantiate and transform its cosmogonic discourses of the movement from formless unity to hierarchized multiplicity. It is particularly interesting how processes of “intelligence” or “gnosis” operative in a wide range of dimensions are both models for, and modeled by, these cosmogonic imaginal bodies of understanding and experiencing. We must note the “dislocation” of intelligence as a trope and how that interplays with the shifting parameters of ordinary and authentic modes of subjectivity—how does realization involve ontological processes constitutive of our ordinary modes of being? How does the theme of unitary beginnings in potentia relate to the experienced presence of complex hierarchies of actualized plural structures? In understanding the nature of Seminal Heart subtle body theory and practice, it is critical to look at the different styles in which these imaginal discourses take place, beginning with a tentative triadic classification into tactile (the “hydraulics” of the body), photic (the electrical “wiring” of the body), and phonic (the “graphing” of the body) dimensions of this body of practices that graphically inscribe cosmogonic tales of beginnings and philosophical controversies over gnosis and subjectivity into our sensually experienced bodies.

*Nyingma doxographies of the ninth vehicle:*

*“writing the view” in a infinite regression of nuances*

Before going into greater detail as to the specific nature of the Seminal Heart, I will briefly discuss the doxographical ways in which it was apparently integrated with the previous Buddhist and specifically Great Perfection traditions such that the latter were both incorporated into, and subordinated to, the new Seminal Heart school. Here also I can only offer tentative sketches, since a systematic history of early doxographical schemes in the Nyingma tradition remains to be written. The standard doxographical scheme in the Nyingma tradition of systematizing the entire range of inherited Buddhist thought and praxis was a structural framework of “nine vehicles,” each further characterized by internal structuration.<sup>186</sup> The initial triad constitutes the way of renunciation (*spong lam*): (i) the listeners (*nyan thos, śrāvaka*) and (ii) the self-

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186. See the extensive discussion in Dudjom 1991, 151-374. I have here given the standard list of nine vehicles, though there are variations—see Karmay 1988, 172-3) Norbu 1989, xii and Stanley’s ongoing research (see above).

awakened ones (*rang sangs rgyas, pratyekabuddha*) representing Hinayāna; and (iii) the spiritual heroes (*byang chub sems dpa', bodhi-sattva*) signifying Mahāyāna. The intermediate triad is the way of purification (*sbyong lam*) representing the lower three tantric classes from the standard set of four found in modernist traditions (here termed “outer tantras”): (iv) the Action Tantras (*bya ba'i rgyud, kriyā*), (v) the Conduct Tantras (*spyod pa'i rgyud, caryā*), and (vi) the Yoga Tantras (*rnal 'byor rgyud, yoga*). The final triad, the way of transformation (*bsgyur lam*), represents the uniquely Nyingma set of tantric classes referred to as the “inner tantras”: (vii) the Great Yoga Tantras (*rnal 'byor chen po'i rgyud, mahāyoga*), (viii) the Subsequent / Complete Yoga Tantras (*rjes su / yongs su rnal 'byor rgyud, anuyoga*), and (ix) the Transcendent Yoga Tantras (*shin tu rnal 'byor rgyud, atiyoga*). Though the first six vehicles represent codifications of traditions undeniably non-Tibetan in origin, the status of the final three vehicles' texts and practices has traditionally been controversial, with many modernists claiming they are wholly Tibetan developments in nature (a potent claim in a world where Indic origins became the most powerful tool of legitimacy). However, it appears that in fact the tantric core of the Mahāyoga traditions represented by the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* and associated works, the key canonical texts of Anuyoga, and some early key short Mind Series texts of Atiyoga are in fact pre-eleventh century non-Tibetan works which to some degree go back as far as the ninth century. On the other hand, the elaborate “eight pronouncement deities” (*bka' brgyad*) traditions of Mahāyoga and most of the Atiyoga tradition (especially the Seminal Heart) are clearly, at least in terms of received literature, products of a uniquely Tibetan religious imagination.

While initially the ninth vehicle (Atiyoga generally is used synonymously with the term Great Perfection) apparently referred to the type of limited tradition of formless meditation and poetic reveries on buddha-nature discussed above, with the development of more elaborate and complex movements under the wider rubric of the Great Perfection (as well as new specific sub-rubrics such as Seminal Heart),<sup>187</sup> an elaborate

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187. Phil Stanley verbally informed me (1/94) that he had yet to see the term *snying thig* in his research into early doxographical accounts in the Nyingma tradition. Other such terms as *yang ti* and *spyi ti* along with *snying thig* need to be researched as to their earliest occurrences and the full range of their uses in early literature.

system of internal divisions developed to discuss the changing identity of the ninth vehicle. The motivation was clearly in part the need to make sense of the different strands of the Great Perfection that had developed historically, and which partially continued to coexist with each other. A simplified presentation of these systems is the basic hierarchically organized triad cited above, with each member possessing its own existent texts and practices: the Mind Series (*sems sde*), Space Series (*klong sde*)<sup>188</sup> and the Esoteric Precept Series (*man ngag sde*). It is not yet clear at what point historically these rubrics came to refer to distinct movements, and it may very well be that these doxographical distinctions preexisted such a point. The Mind Series, in particular, serves partially as a rubric to classify the earlier states of the Great Perfection prior to the development of the Seminal Heart movements. “Mind” (*sems*) is understood as referring to the “enlightening mind” (literally “purifying / encompassing mind”—*byang chub kyi sems, bodhicitta*), connoting how these traditions were in large part tantric-influenced meditations on the presence of an enlightened psychic force within. It also points (in contrast to the use of term *thig le*) to an orientation towards a non-tantric traditional focus on the mind, and Mahāyāna’s particular usage of the notion of “the enlightened mind.” The Space Series and Esoteric Precept Series then came to serve as rubrics for later developments of the Great Perfection which increasingly experimented with re-incorporating tantric contemplative techniques centered on the body and vision, as well as the consequent philosophical shifts this became interwoven with. This is why the Mind Series is connected more to the tradition of continuously transmitted scriptures (*bka’ ma*), while the Esoteric Precept Series is intimately bound up with the

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188. Almost no Euro-American research into the surviving texts of the Space Series has been done. However, Matthew Kapstein has verbally informed me that he has seen passages in the writings of both rTse le sna tshogs rang grol (1608-?) and Karma chags med (1605-1670) insisting on a strong connection between the Space and Esoteric Precept Series. If this is borne out by textual research, this could be a valuable piece of the many interlocking puzzles surrounding the formation of the various Great Perfection traditions during the tenth to thirteenth centuries. A careful study of these doxographies of Atiyoga will also shed further light on these issues—in particular, it is necessary to trace the earliest occurrences of the “three series” (*sde gsum*), which probably preexisted its use by lCe btsun’s lineages to legitimize, integrate and differentiate its new Seminal Heart-Essence teachings.

emerging “treasure” (*gter ma*) ideology of freshly revealed scriptures without obvious historical precedent.<sup>189</sup> In this context, “esoteric precepts” (*man ngag*)—a term usually referring to a teacher’s private instructions to his / her disciple on the precise details of contemplation—connotes how the Seminal Heart traditions elaborate in much more detail the actual contemplative practices that may be utilized for existential realization.

The Esoteric Precept Series is also characterized by a complex set of internal divisions,<sup>190</sup> the most straight forward one being a fourfold set of cycles: the outer cycle (*phyi skor*), inner cycle (*nang skor*), secret cycle (*gsang skor*) and unsurpassed secret cycle (*bla na med pa skor*). kLong chen rab ’byams pa identifies the Seminal Heart with only the fourth cycle, indicating that even here there was a complex set of developments with enough differences existing that it was felt important to stress these internal divisions’ separations. Its literary correlate is most frequently identified as *rGyud bcu bdun* (The Seventeen Tantras).<sup>191</sup> “Lower” divisions deal with many of the same themes, but on the whole do not so with the elaborate sweep, detail and narrative force of texts falling under this classification. It thus may be that a type of threefold division of the Great Perfection or Atiyoga existed as far back as the late eighth century (if we accept the traditional account of the Great Perfection’s arrival into Tibet), and that this threefold division was then later adapted, manipulated and transformed by Seminal Heart proponents and

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189. For example, see *gTer chen chos ki rgyal po gter bdag gling pa gar dbang ’gyur med rdo rje’i zhal snga nas mchog sman rnams kyis dri ba sna tshogs pa’i lan rim par spel ba rin chen phreng ba (chab shog)* (351.2).

190. The aforementioned article in progress on “kLong chen rab ’byams pa’s *sNying-thig* Sources” includes an analysis of the internal divisions of Esoteric Precept Series.

191. See *Chos dbyings mdzod* 350.4-5, where kLong chen rab ’byams pa says there are an inconceivable number of tantric series associated with this division, but that all can be summarized in terms of *The Seventeen Tantras*. Also see his *Grub mtha’ mdzod* 370.4-5, where aside from the mention of a text in the *Bi ma snying thig*, *The Seventeen Tantras* are the only texts mentioned as belonging to the Esoteric Precept Series that are actually cited by kLong chen rab ’byams pa elsewhere. Finally, see Kaneko’s 1982 index, which clearly indicates it is these tantras alone that correspond to the rubric “unsurpassed secret cycle” in the *gTing skyes* edition of *rNying ma rgyud ’bum*.

other groups for their legitimizing potency with little regard for their original references. This is suggested in part by these internal divisions of Esoteric Precept Series, which may have stemmed from the attempt to transform a pre-existing category to account for new developments. Examining these divisions of the Esoteric Precept Series and their existent literary correlates should be very helpful in beginning to sort out the various currents.

Since kLong chen rab 'byams pa's way of presenting the internal divisions of the three Series<sup>192</sup> is exceedingly complicated and he fails to associate the divisions with literary works, I suspect these doxographical divisions are often more thematic in nature and evocative in intent than classifications of real bodies of literature, practice, or even transmission lineages. For example, divisions of the Mind Series often resemble contemplative themes more than distinct traditions, such as the twenty one contemplative strands discussed by kLong chen rab 'byams pa in his "practical guidance" commentary on the *Sems nyid ngal gso* (see above). Since these various contemplations are often simply different poetic aphorisms subtly flavoring the meditative state in question, it is easy to miss their experiential implications, as well as to misunderstand them as referring to distinct traditions. This is particularly clear in the complex discussion in the *Grub mtha' mdzod* of the three Series' internal divisions, which seem to bear little relation to any existent literature or lineal transmissions. This has also been noted by Ken Eastman:<sup>193</sup> "In the Tibetan dynastic period there were a number of different schemes for categorizing tantra, but these were abstract rankings of doctrine or understanding rather than the bibliographic systems of classification they became in the medieval period; and neither the nine-fold nor the four-fold schemes are found precisely as given above in the archaic literature." These neat classificatory schemes thus do not always clearly reflect the actual rubrics under which distinct movements flourished during this time period. A clear history of these various rubrics and their historical permutations has not yet been written, but of clear importance is the triad of *a ti*, *yang ti* and *spyi ti*, a classificatory scheme utilized in the various recensions of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* to indi-

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192. A classic example is in *Grub mtha' mdzod* 351.7-369.6.

193. Eastman 1983, 44.



cate distinctions between visionary literature and practices that were emerging within the tradition of the Great Perfection.<sup>194</sup>

*The intertwined Books of Life and Death:  
ordinary vision, spontaneous vision and visualization*

These particular developments of the Seminal Heart were thus spawned in a variety of yogic circles (sometimes consisting of a single person and a few followers) who were “rediscovering” texts and experimenting with new techniques and ideas, especially as revolving around the human body and its capacity to see light. It was a reclamation of the value of images to speak within the purview of the Mind Series’ pristine absence, and the potent significance of the human body despite its abyssal lack of any discrete, definable ontological ground. Contemporary interpreters refer to these innovations when they say<sup>195</sup> that if not properly analyzed, the Mind Series appears similar to the extreme of nihilism (*chad pa’i mtha’*) with its frequent antinomian invocation of absence and the inadequacy of language to represent our experience; the Space Series, however, appears similar to the opposing extreme of permanence (*rtag pa’i mtha’*) with its focus on images and the visually discernible presence of a primordial Buddha within all sentient beings. In this way over the centuries the Great Perfection has paradoxically been attacked on both fronts as representative of these two traditional poles of heresy in Buddhism, of erring on the side of too much *and* too little commitment, commitment to ontologies, to language, to human conventions. This tension is unabashedly the central focus of the Esoteric Precept Series, reinscribed philosophically in its central hermeneutic of potentiality (*nang gsal*) and actuality (*phyir gsal*) while reflected contemplatively in its conjunction of the breakthrough and direct transcendence.

Thus, in addition to these doxographical demarcations, two strands are discernible in the early Seminal Heart systems: the breakthrough (*khregs chod*) and direct transcendence (*thod rgal*) discourses. I have named these after its two principal styles of contemplation, which corre-

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194. I will defer further discussion of these to the article on “kLong chen rab ’byams pa’s *sNyid thig* Sources,” since only a detailed presentation is likely to be of any use.

195. This comment was attributed to the contemporary teacher mKhan po smyo shul during a visit to Penor Rinpoche’s monastery in the early 1990s.

spond directly to its central philosophical dyad of “original purity” (*ka dag*) and “spontaneous presence” (*lhun grub*), the Great Perfection version of emptiness and interdependent origination recast as nothingness seething with dynamic webs of relatedness. The direct transcendence incorporates most of what is unique to the Seminal Heart, while the breakthrough serves as a rubric for those older elements of the Great Perfection continuing to play an important role in its new formulations. Interestingly, the breakthrough discourse also subsequently served as a way to both assimilate, and respond to, the modernists’ attack on the Great Perfection as a reifying self-oriented heresy, since these sections and texts tend to be resolutely apophatic in their emphasis on an immediate formless (yet in-forming) awareness. The breakthrough clearly corresponds to non-symbolic types of perfection phase contemplation, just as the direct transcendence corresponds to the generation phase (as well as symbolic types of perfection phase techniques). Thus while the Seminal Heart in part is a recognition of the need for the latter types of practice—for form, image and spontaneity—the eventually codified order of practice (in which the former precedes the latter) equally reiterates the traditional Great Perfection inversion of the normative sequencing. In other words, it precedes perfection phase contemplation with competence in the generation phase, emptiness before interdependence, openness before figural image. Conversely, the standard account<sup>196</sup> of the manner in which breakthrough contemplation is inferior to the practice of direct transcendence indicates clearly these communities’ recognition of the inadequacy of a mere rhetoric of no-practice (even if conjoined with formal types of calming techniques and other image-less extensions), and the consequent need for a prioritization of working directly with the human capacity for the generation and experience of images.

The Seminal Heart’s innovativeness thus basically boils down to an unusual technique of spontaneous vision (*thod rgal*) said to yield an orderly regularity of images in terms of temporal sequencing and content, along with a systematized technical vocabulary developed to articulate an ideological structure integrating those visions into previous Great Perfection discourse. Thus the most interesting historical question concerns the sources of this visionary praxis (as distinct from the sources of

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196. See the *Tshig don mdzod* 365.4-368.7 for a discussion of seven points in which direct transcendence is superior.

the non-Seminal Heart Great Perfection): an indigenous shamanistic set of techniques perhaps first incorporated by the Bonpos,<sup>197</sup> contact with Illuminationist Sufis to the West, Daoist yogas to the East,<sup>198</sup> Kashmiri Śaivism to the Southwest, or perhaps even some subcurrents of Indian Buddhist tantra (such as reflected in the *Kālacakra Tantra*)? In most ways, however, the tradition is clearly profoundly Buddhist to the core, and has systematic affinities with the many other fragile yogic systems circulating around and through Tibetan areas during the eleventh century. For example the visions in question are centered around the five Buddha families which were *the* standard set of deities in Buddhist tantra,<sup>199</sup> though here enframed in the expanded maṇḍalas of the “one hundred peaceful and wrathful deities” (*zhi khro*). In fact, the Seminal Heart can be discussed as the influx of *symbolic* perfection phase tantric practices back into the Great Perfection as vision again assumes a dominant position, though in a strikingly innovative way with its theories of “light channels” (*'od rtsa*) and the spontaneous visual imagery flowing out from them. Regardless of the sources, there is also the issue of what *motivated* certain Great Perfection groups to so radically transform their tradition in ways evidenced by the emergence of the direct transcendence-based body of contemplative and philosophical materials. While they may have generally returned to their own tantric traditions for the reappropriation of tantric contemplative techniques, and only surreptitiously to the new modernist tantric systems, clearly the new threat and presence of modernist communities was one of the main factors impelling these changes. Ideologically, the many tantric systems based on “radiant light” (*'od gsal*) definitely had an impact as well as the Anuttarayoga emphasis on the body, and one can well imagine Great Perfection advocates experimenting with the significance and practice of such doctrines to see how they could fit in their own tradition. In addition, certainly one line feeding into these changes was simply a natural

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197. It is at this point not yet clear in which camp these techniques first emerged, since until more systematic research has been done all traditional Bonpo datings of early materials must be considered highly unreliable.

198. See Robinet 1993 for an account of the Mao-shan tradition that yields interesting affinities; also see Deng 1990 for a contemporary assertion of the affinity of the Great Perfection with Daoism.

199. See Snellgrove 1987, 189-213.

progression of their own practices and ongoing inquiries.<sup>200</sup> For example, kLong chen rab 'byams pa's "practical guidance" for the *Sems nyid ngal gso* presents a sky meditation as an "enhancement" or "energizer" practice in his Mind Series contemplative system, which involves using certain postures to gaze into a cloudless sky.<sup>201</sup> After a while one's inner sky clears up, and for a moment reality itself (*chos nyid*), identified as "the pure sky of the esoteric nucleus of radiant light," manifests. It could be that early Great Perfection advocates utilized contemplation of the sky to evoke a sensation of vast emptiness, but that for some practitioners strange lights began to appear, and they followed their experiences.

Arguably the most vital source of this tantric influx into the Great Perfection was the Indian Mahāyoga tantras (especially the *Guhya-garbha Tantra*), which were the original location of the set of "one hundred peaceful and wrathful deities."<sup>202</sup> This maṇḍalic set also was central to the accounts of post-death visions in the so-called "Tibetan Book of the Dead" literature, and in fact Mahāyoga was one of the most important strands woven together to form this highly popular literature and its associated practices that came to be relied upon by all traditions in dealing with the dead. Research on its historical development and codification as a genre should yield light on the intimately related rise of the Seminal Heart, which embraces the "Book of the Dead" topics as a sub-

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200. This issue is in some ways reminiscent of the long standing controversy over the Upanishadic transformation of Vedic religious culture in the sixth century B. C. E. Scholars such as Heesterman (1985) emphasize the internal logic of these changes from within the Brahmanical system (the interiorization of sacrifice's violence, etc.) while others such as Olivelle (1992) stress the importance of external factors (urbanization, etc.) and the discontinuity of the new symbolic order from the previous Vedic world. I have tried to strike a balance between these two poles in my analysis of the transformations of the Great Perfection during this time period.

201. *Byang chub lam bzang* 539.2-539.4.

202. I know of no study as yet that clearly analyzes this important set of deities in terms of its historical rise, or precise correspondences to maṇḍalas found in modernist tantric cycles. Particular points of interest are the earliest ascertainable mention of a wrathful version of the set of five Buddhas, such a set with the precise names found herein, and whether *The Nucleus of Mystery* itself or only its exegetical literature explicitly mentions the entire one hundred member maṇḍala.

set. It seems that the famous fourteenth century “rediscovery” of Karma gling pa (1327-1387) entitled the *Bar do thos grol* was in large part a systematization of Seminal Heart teachings:<sup>203</sup> the latter’s technique of spontaneous vision yielding curiously specific and ordered types of visual images is perfectly mirrored by the “Book of the Dead’s” teachings of how the peaceful and wrathful deities appear following death (especially striking is this shared manifestation of the same set of deities). Similar to the using of direct transcendence, they *naturally* and *spontaneously* overflow out of one’s heart following the primal manifestation of one’s core radiant light (*'od gsal*) in death, and yet are said to take this very *specific* visual form regardless of one’s acquaintance with them during life. The practice of direct transcendence thus can be characterized as an incorporation of post-death experience into our lives, and understood as the this-life contemplative praxis of the Book of the Dead. In fact its crucial forty nine day dark retreat is termed the “bardo retreat,”<sup>204</sup> the number forty–nine obviously corresponding to the period said to be the limit for post-death existence: in both, vision is borne within darkness, whether naturally (death) or artificially induced (the sealed off enclosure of the dark house). Furthermore, the two genres of literature and practices are closely interrelated given the obvious unity of four different central notions: the psycho-cosmogony<sup>205</sup> of the ground (*gzhi*) and Ground-presencing (*gzhi snang*), the post-death visions, the four visions of direct transcendence contemplation, and the experiences or activity of a buddha. kLong chen rab 'byams pa’s account of the ground-presencing in his *Zab don rgya mtsho'i sprin*,<sup>206</sup> for instance, is clearly modeled / modeling accounts of post-death experience, even to the point of talking about “contemplation days” (*bsam gtan gyi zhag*) over which the sequence of manifestations take place. Thus a pressing task is the history of the development of the bardo literature in Tibet, and in particular how the various modernist doctrines drawn from

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203. See Schmidt 1987 and Orofino 1990 for translations of explicitly Seminal Heart-Essence oriented works on the bardo. The latter is a partial translation *Nyi zla kha syor*, one of *The Seventeen Tantras* which is in fact a systematic presentation of bardo-related topics.

204. Freemantle 1987, 11.

205. Kerry Skora (University of Virginia) first pointed out the usefulness of this term in the present context.

206. *Zab don rgya mtsho'i sprin* 96.5-109.2.

Anuttarayoga Tantras (such as the “bardo” and “radiant light” in Nāropā’s “six yogas” systematization of perfection phase practices) figure in.<sup>207</sup> Nyingma communities giving voice to the Seminal Heart transformation were obviously creatively appropriating tantric discourses on the bardo, as well as possibly indigenous proto-bardo literature, ideologies or practices, into the framework of the Great Perfection, appropriations which also contributed to the rise of a separate genre finally codified with Karma gling pa’s fourteenth century “rediscovery.” In other words, the articulation of such themes as spontaneous vision and the dissolution of physical energies was developed in a complex pattern of interrelation as both an account of actual death and post-death experiences *and* as meditative techniques for this life. The ongoing dialectical unity of the two is also clearly indicated in how the Seminal Heart discusses bardo accounts under the rubric of “how you obtain enlightenment if you are unable to be freed in this life.”<sup>208</sup>

Thus the Seminal Heart’s transformation of the Great Perfection marks a return to its Mahāyoga roots sparked by a constellation of reasons, one of the principal of which is indicated by the coincidence of its origins with the onset of the modernist movement. This return first appropriates tantric techniques and ideology in unusual ways, but eventually returns to a fuller embrace of traditional sādhana practice revolving around the visualization of deities according to strictly prescribed patterns. This extension of the Mahāyoga’s incorporation into the Great Perfection occurred with Jigs med gling pa’s (1730-1798) famous *kLong chen snying thig* three volume cycle, which has come to be as normative as any cycle could be given the fissured state of Nyingma lineages. It marks the most important transformation in Seminal Heart discourse following kLong chen rab ’byams pa. I am struck by how much more ritualistic and conventionally tantric in nature the *kLong chen snying thig* seems in comparison to kLong chen rab ’byams pa’s own

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207. See Guenther 1978, 82-86 and Hopkins 1981.

208. Alternatively, this is expressed as being precepts for “average” practitioners, while the standard practices are for the “best” practitioners—the latter become free in this very life and hence have no need for additional precepts. This is often complemented by a third category for those of inferior diligence or capacities—precepts on how to be reborn in a pure land and eventually become enlightened there. For example, see the structure of the discussion of the path in *Zab don rgya msho’i sprin* 329.2-453.6.

Seminal Heart writings.<sup>209</sup> This is not to deny its unconventional aspects such as in the *Thig le rgya can*,<sup>210</sup> but simply to point out its general characteristics. This cycle not only directly and extensively incorporates the “eight proclamation deities” (*bka’ brgyad*) that form one of the two main strands of Mahāyoga Tantras, but also grants a far more prominent role to traditional sādhanas (i. e. meditative sessions relying on prescribed and detailed visualizations). Certainly one could argue that previous Seminal Heart movements often involved intense reliance on associated sādhana practices, and there is no question that its earlier cycles often contained short descriptions of such practice. However it is

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209. Karmay 1988, 213, makes similar but vague comments in characterizing the Seminal Heart-Essence system of ‘Jigs med gling pa as “pervaded with a type of sādhana, hence very ritualistic” in opposition to the “serene contemplator” of the Mind Series and the “profound meditation of the calm ascetic” of the Space Series. Eva Dargyay (1977) has characterized it as a mixture of the old Great Perfection system and the Mahāyoga cycles centered around sādhanas of the set of deities referred to as the “eight pronouncements” (*bka’ brgyad*). A detailed survey of post-kLong chen rab ‘byams pa transformations in the Seminal Heart tradition remains to be written, and thus for the aforementioned article (“kLong chen rab ‘byams pa’s *sNying thig* Sources”) I am currently compiling analytical lists of surviving Seminal Heart literature.

210. I owe the following comments on this sādhana entirely to a discussion with Janet Gyatso (April 1994). The *Thig le rgya can* sādhana is phrased in terms of direct transcendence terminology, with the act of the deity’s body-image coming into appearance understood in terms of its four visionary phases. While this does not undercut my comments, it is important to note the degree to which some authors may have been altering normative sādhana structures. In addition, this constant worry about the tendency to give ourselves over to concretizing instincts, to the security of in-place structures, has a long pedigree in Buddhism: in generation phase praxis and exegesis, the deity springs out of and returns to emptiness, and there is a deliberate attempt to avoid attachment to images of deities with the constant reminders that they are only projections, rainbows, and so on. The visions and visualizations of Great Perfection are arguably even more concerned with this constant immersion in fluidity and openness, but it is a question of degree rather than striking difference. We also find this constant oscillation in ‘Jigs med gling pa’s autobiographical writings, where he constantly deprecates particular visions he has as only more signs or images (*mushan bcas*) among many. In contrast to the valorization of the always unformulated ground, there at times seems no ground to favor one image over another.

surely of significance that with 'Jigs med gling pa's revelation these practices are formally included in elaborate form within the main cycle—the balance has clearly shifted from the earlier *Bi ma snying thig*, *mKha' 'gro snying thig*, *bZab mo yang tig* and others. This may in part be why 'Jigs med gling pa is so insistent on his inspiration / authorization by kLong chen rab 'byams pa himself in a series of visionary encounters (though not those relating to the *kLong chen snying thig* system directly) and on his own work incarnating the essence of kLong chen rab 'byams pa's Great Perfection writings (which they are often explicitly modeled after). This is reflected in the (surreptitious and perhaps unconscious) naming of the cycle as a whole after him ("great sphere" being "*klong-chen*") such that, in ignorance of its visionary attribution to Padmasambhava from the eighth century, ordinary monks often mistakenly refer to the system as the Seminal Heart of kLong chen rab 'byams pa.<sup>211</sup>

Analysis of the structure of the cycle clearly indicates its focus on *sādhana*s:<sup>212</sup> it is explicitly structured principally around a wide variety of *sādhana*s centered on two sets of deities—eight tutelary deities (*yi dam*, *iṣṭa-devatā*) referred to as "awareness holders" (*rig 'dzin*, *vidyā-dhara*) drawn from Mahāyoga sources and seven "religious protectors" (*chos skyong*, *dharmapāla*)—while overtly Seminal Heart materials are mainly present in the third volume. The principal work of what I below term "scholastic Seminal Heart" constitutes one hundred and sixty four pages in that volume, and is titled the *Khrid yig ye shes bla ma*. Goodman refers to this as a "practice text,"<sup>213</sup> and while I argue below

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211. See Goodman 1992a, 143. I add the "surreptitiously" since, as Janet Gyatso stressed to me in conversation, the visionary retrieval of this cycle involved no visions of kLong chen rab 'byams pa and in that it is understood as a direct transmission from Padmasambhava, there can be no manifest question of the title relating to the fourteenth century kLong chen rab 'byams pa's personal name. Thus Kapstein and Dorje's (Dorje 1991, 243) rendering of it as "Innermost Spirituality of kLong chen rab 'byams pa" is misleading. However, whether motivated consciously, unconsciously, or visionarily, the semantic leakage is undeniable.

212. Goodman 1983, chap. 4, 118ff.

213. Goodman 1983, 128. This must be understood in conjunction with his characterization (135) of 'Jigs med gling pa's *Yon tan mdzod* as "a classical presentation of rDzogs chen philosophy." While it is directly modeled on kLong chen rab 'byams pa's *Ngal gso skor gsum*, the former also ends with a



that this is a misleading designation for this genre of literature except as a terse indication of its phenomenological orientation, it could in part indicate how much less philosophical, and more conventionally tantric (i. e. focused on *sādhana* practice), the entire cycle really is. My cursory examination of this text indicates that it is a non-innovative and fairly perfunctory summary of older materials offering a simplified presentation that comes to be normative. This overall emphasis on standard tantric visualization practices and the corresponding liturgical requirements could go a long way to explaining its quick ascendancy in subsequent Nyingma communities, since its revelation came at a time that Nyingmas were beginning to systematically respond to modernist challenges through assimilating *their* traditions institutionally and doctrinally. Thus this doctrinal and contemplative move in the direction of more normative tantric practices may be seen as marking a shift towards modernist traditions, a tendency which flowered in the nineteenth century non-partisan (*ris med*) movement culminating with Mi pham 'jam dbyangs rnam rgyal's (1846-1912) systematic attempt to reinterpret normative non-esoteric Mahāyāna scriptures *from* a Great Perfection perspective. It also accorded with the institutional assimilation that occurred as Nyingmas began to focus more on monastic institutions rather than its ancient roots in villages, sacred pilgrimage routes, and small temples. The ancient anti-rule orientation of Great Perfection

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discussion of Seminal Heart tradition. At the moment my reading of the text does not permit me to compare that discussion with *Khrid yig ye shes bla ma*, nor characterize it overall in terms of its agenda. My suspicion about Goodman's characterizations is that I consider the earlier materials of the Seminal Heart intensely philosophical in their own right, and I find problematic hints that the "real" philosophy is instead found in these works that accommodate modernist concerns. dPal sprul Rim poche continued this trend in the nineteenth century with his very popular *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, which was one of a number of texts that emerged dealing with the "preliminaries" or "introduction" (*sngon 'gro*) to Seminal Heart cycles (in this case to 'Jigs med gling pa's *kLong chen snying thig*). Despite its charming style, it is essentially a very standardized presentation containing little that is uniquely Great Perfection or even differing from the politically normative modernist traditions. This is quite in contrast to *kLong chen rab 'byams pa's* trilogy, a complicated series of interlocking texts containing many unusual doctrines and practices.

hermeneutics, philosophy, and contemplation did not fit in well with the collective mentality of monastic institutions, and the necessity for codified rules governing the collective.

Further research on other cycles including Seminal Heart materials between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries (such as the seventeenth century *gNam chos*) is required to fully trace its gradual alteration, and normalization, along these lines. In doing so, it is important not to quickly extrapolate from literary documents to wide ranging generalizations about actual practice—for example, *sādhana* practice may have been a pervasive reality of the Great Perfection from the beginning, despite its anti-*sādhana* rhetoric. It is also important to ask what forces were at work in these changes, as well as inquire into the differences between “tactile” and “visual” styles of contemplation, and between spontaneous and codified uses of imagery. From both psychological and socio-political perspectives, we must ask what has been lost and what gained? The dynamic is partially that the Seminal Heart innovations were increasingly mixed in with other types of materials as they gained wider circulation post fourteenth century. In this way large collections such as the *gNam chos* may contain Seminal Heart elements, but quite different materials constitute the logic driving their overall organization. Given the absolutely central role<sup>214</sup> of Mahāyoga to Nyingma lineages ritually, contemplatively, and literarily, it is comes as no surprise that it should be the principal dynamic that increasingly exerts its influence. It should also be noted, however, that as early as the fourteenth century we find examples of the converse direction, i. e. in how kLong chen rab 'byams pa reinterprets the *Guhyagarba Tantra* from a

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214. See Dorje 1987, 7-58, for two passages from kLong chen rab 'byams pa and Mipham that describe the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* in glowing terms as the pinnacle of all Buddhist traditions, on the basis of which Dorje concludes that “the rnying ma tradition therefore regards this text as its fundamental tantra, whether it is interpreted as mainstream Mahāyoga or as an Atiyoga source.” I would only qualify this assertion with the caveat that no “Nyingma tradition” as such ever existed, of course, and the diachronic and synchronic oscillations in the wide range of Nyingma communities on this issue of the priority of Mahāyoga principles are an important topic for further study. For example, kLong chen rab 'byams pa clearly values the Great Perfection corpus over the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* (if one were to make such hierarchical judgments), a fact evidenced in his Atiyoga-based interpretation of the latter.

resolutely Atiyoga-based vantage point, such that influence between the two was a mutually constituting process.<sup>215</sup>

*The scholastics (grub mtha') of simplicity (spros med; phyal pa)*

It is fairly well known that from the eighteenth century onwards as spurred by 'Jigs med gling pa, the "non-partisan" movement in Eastern Tibet resulted in the production of important and extensive Nyingma scholastic literature on the same Mahāyāna topics that had been, until then, the traditional stronghold of the modernists, and of little interest to those in Nyingma circles. This literature's orientation often derived from the Great Perfection, yet contained relatively slight direct discussion of the latter in its own right. Yet what about this Seminal Heart tradition as it formally began with the startling "discoveries" by Ice btsun seng ge dbang phyug, developed through a series of further "discoveries" of texts attributed either to transcendental sources or the near transcendental and semi-legendary seventh to ninth centuries non-Tibetan Masters of the Great Perfection tradition (Surativajra etc.), and finally culminated in kLong chen rab 'byams pa's corpus? It is often assumed that there was little such systematic thought or literature in the Great Perfection itself, which is taken to be a type of poetic exhortation to non-discursive experiences of natural simplicity, often caricatured as a simplistic or paradoxical call to "experience." Thus complex philosophical speculation is seen as constituting a problem rather than a solution—you either get it, or you do not, just as in the famous encounter of Milarepa with the Great Perfection teachings. In addition, while the Great Perfection lacks the sexually and wrathfully stylized antinomianism of the Anuttarayoga Tantras, it is characterized by a hermeneutical or philosophical type of antinomianism that expresses itself in more abstract types of ethical transgression and a thorough going resistance to the codification of rules (literarily, doctrinally and contemplatively). This would appear to conflict with scholastic ventures, and indeed perhaps even with rigorous thought itself, though Buddhist Tantra's own general antinomianism failed to prevent the eventual rise of a scholastic industry in both India and Tibet. Thus for many traditional and Euro-American scholars the notion of a Great Perfection systematic literature

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215. See Dorje 1987, 21, 58, 88-8 and 123-7. Also see Guenther's *The Matrix of Mystery* for a brilliant presentation of such an Atiyoga-based explanation of the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*.

even seems contradictory, given this widespread reputation of being a largely contemplative tradition with textual expressions limited to often lovely but vague poetic invocations and exhortations.

While it is true there is a consistent valorization in these traditions of the possibility of a culturally unsophisticated and even illiterate individual incarnating its realization, there is also an equally strong valorization of experientially-based intellectual and graphically textualized traditions of immense literary and intellectual complexity. This complexity is interlaced with equally consistent calls to simplicity, to direct and seemingly unmediated experience (*mngon sum*) and criticism of the futility of conceptual thought with its discursive expressions (*spros bcas*). In particular, I would argue that in fact an elaborate scholastic literature can be found in the Nyingma school very early on within the Great Perfection traditions themselves, namely the extremely technical genre of Seminal Heart literature I have discussed above.<sup>216</sup> While continuing the earlier emphasis on non-discursive experience and simplicity thematically and hermeneutically (especially as incorporated into its breakthrough discourse), the Seminal Heart literature is clearly a genre of philosophical tantra that is systematic, complex and extremely architectonic. Despite the seeming contradictions of a systematic body of discourse centered on non-discursive experiences and exhortations to transcend the discursive proliferation of thought and language, this discourse flourished, and its architectonic nature is revealed most clearly in its various thematic structures. Often this is expressed as a set of overarching rubrics termed “adamantine topics” (*rdo rje'i gnas*), themselves characterized by a complex set of interlinked subdivisions, which form the architecture of these texts. Though an analytic presentation of these structures is crucial for understanding the scholastic nature of this literature, at present I will confine myself to more general remarks.<sup>217</sup>

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216. I am thus not thinking of the Great Perfection-flavored Nyingma version of the “stages of the path” (*lam rim*) genre of Tibetan Buddhist literature which kLong chen rab 'byams pa initiated with his *Ngal gso skor gsum*, though this genre does form an important subset of Great Perfection literature from that time onwards.

217. The highly distinctive terminology, practices and beliefs governing this tradition are discussed in detail in an article I am currently finishing, “Building within Absence: the Infra-structure of Seminal Heart-Essence.”

kLong chen rab 'byams pa's *Tshig don mdzod*<sup>218</sup> is the most succinct yet detailed instance of this genre of technical literature in the Great Perfection tradition best described as "scholastics" or "systematic thought," the latter term lacking the pejorative connotations of the former (divestiture from embodied experience, lack of textual aesthetics and divergence from non-textual contemplative praxis). However, considered in its root meaning of simply a love of study without these negative connotations of irrelevancy for lived experience and an overwhelming desire for closure, this text may be accurately described as Great Perfection scholastics, though under such a rubric we may perhaps find our understanding of scholastics strangified beyond recognition (a familiar experience in the shifting realms of Great Perfection textuality). This genre of literature is scholastic not only in its clear love for language and thought for its own sake, but also in its intense structuration with analytical internal outlines (*sa bcad*). kLong chen rab 'byams pa's own title self-consciously embraces this paradox with its celebration of words and thought in unfolding the pristine simplicity of the Great Perfection. Its divergence from other types of Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism, however, is revealed in the striking tension between scholasticism's systematic and analytical form and the Great Perfection's *own* valorization of poetry, analogy and allegory as the primary mode of serious philosophical thought, its dismissal of literalness-obsessed intellectualism, its rejection of syllogistically-bound analysis and its constant invocation of natural spontaneity. kLong chen rab 'byams pa's hermeneutical explication of the term "main practice" (*dnegos gzhi*) is illuminating in this light, a term designating the principal phase of contemplation between preliminaries and concluding activities, yet literally meaning "real-basis."<sup>219</sup> He interprets *dnegos* as referring to "real" contemplative experiences and *gzhi* as an verbally articulatable intellectual "basis" for contextualizing and explicating those experiences. Through a series of analogies revolving around seeing a king, he stresses the vitality of both in the Great

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This most clearly explicates the systematic architectonics of the tradition's primary literature.

218. See Germano 1992 for a study and partial translation of this work. I am now completing a translation of the entire text as well as a separate study of it.

219. See the *Theg mchog mdzod* vol. 2, 250.

Perfection: (i) the “basis” (*gzhi*) without the “real” (*dnegos*) is like seeing the palace but not the king; (ii) the real without the basis is like seeing the king, but not being able to discern his characteristics; (iii) lacking both the real and the basis is like neither seeing the king nor palace; and (iv) the real with the basis is like seeing the king and thoroughly understanding all his characteristics. In other words, the stress on the phenomenological, on this being a practice of the self, cannot be at the expense of the hermeneutical, on the literary-intellectual expressions that shape and are shaped by such practice. This dual intertwined emphasis is characteristic of Seminal Heart literature from its onset, with its founders as interested in intellectual-literary traditions as they are in the body.

kLong chen rab 'byams pa further systematized this tradition into forms which have served as its guiding paradigms for the following six centuries (fifteenth to twentieth) and which, despite their own rich ambiguity and disseminative play eluding and eliding attempts at closure, functioned to cap off the tremendously fertile period of its preceding development. In other words, his systematic writings on the Great Perfection mark the transition from a creative tradition-in-ferment to a received tradition whose basic paradigms of contemplation and thought are no longer at stake. This gives rise to the perennial question—what and where is the difference between paradigms at stake, structures in playful and dramatic process, and inherited paradigms that are assimilated, structures no longer at stake or risk? One could of course argue that experientially the tradition remains a risky business, but it would seem to me that six centuries of closure, and often *dilution*, in graphic systematic incarnations reflects a hermeneutical, and human, series of losses. This suspicion of loss has been compounded by my frequent frustration with contemporary Tibetan figures' tendency to gloss over the intricate textuality of the early traditions and their hermeneutical instincts for closure in the face of clearly fissuring circles of meaning. This frustration, however, is laced with a respect for the deeply experiential involvement of some with the tradition, an involvement that manifests clearly on an interpersonal level in an unusual blend of caring, intelligence and psychological acuteness. It must also be kept in mind that the hermeneutically complex tradition of systematic thought and textuality that kLong chen rab 'byams pa incarnated was not widely read in the subsequent centuries, though the more simple narrative outlines of that tradition are easily discernible in the oral textuality of even the most

intellectually simple of Great Perfection visionaries. This is not to suggest a straight forward contrast between lived narratives and scholastically elaborated narratives, since autobiographical references clearly indicate kLong chen rab 'byams pa and his predecessors were on the whole intimately familiar with the contemplative traditions at the heart of the Great Perfection. In addition, one of the most complex facets of their textuality is its intricately phenomenological nature, i. e. cultivated experiences are irretrievably embedded in the most systematic, detailed aspects of their writings. One of the most remarkable features of these early traditions is their production of a scholastic body of literature that paradoxically curbs the disembodied and reifying tendencies (the *metaphysical*) of such graphically conceived / expressed systematic lines of inquiry, so that it remains simultaneously an inquiry into the embodied experience of lived worlds. Such inquiry requires commitment and risk to quests which weave in and out of the texts that one lives through, entailing attempts to transform the very nature of one's physical being and modes of perception. kLong chen rab 'byams pa himself is thus generally considered to be a perfect exemplar of the traditional Tibetan Buddhist ideal of someone who is a brilliant scholar intellectually, and yet who also has experientially transformed his own body and perception via contemplation (*mkhas grub*; literally scholastically "learned" and experientially "accomplished"); wisdom and compassion that inform each other in ways that allow each to bypass their own potential dead-ends. kLong chen rab 'byams pa's own corpus is marked by frequent attacks on both intellectuals whose understanding remains metaphysical (expressed as being "dry" in its lack of the lived experience's fluidity, lost in the infinity of words (*kha 'byams*)) and contemplators (*sgom chen*) whose intellectual naiveté distorts and undercuts their experiential inquiries. In fact the term "Great Perfection," or its more literal rendering as "Super (*chen*) Completion (*rdzogs*)," itself yields the slipperiness and strangeness of the enterprise: it tricks one into expecting closure, the definitive take, the master narrative that will finally bring the uncomfortable ambiguity of this long human journey to an end, and yet in fact its "completion" is in many ways a complete deconstruction of the structures one brought to the text, an opening up to the process ambiguity of life-in-formation. This is not the completion we bargain for in a typical scholastic structure, just as we might find the "buddha" (*sangs rgyas*) we thought was within is a buddha whose face, or masks, we find strangely unfamiliar, a sensation the tradition would argue is inter-

twined with an awakening recognition of the strangeness of what is familiar.

*The graphic locus of the classical Seminal Heart tradition*<sup>220</sup>

Since the principal goal of my recent research has been to articulate the significance evoked by the rubric of the Great Perfection in what came to be its classical form during the period when the basic religious paradigms of Tibetan civilization took shape (eleventh to fourteenth centuries), I have concentrated not on its earliest occurrences but rather on those bodies of Seminal Heart literature which first give systematic expression to the full range of its contemplative and philosophical facets. Yet even to make sense of this chaotic array of early materials it is also necessary to precisely understand its classical systematization, such that earlier texts can be evaluated not only by what is present, but also by what is absent. To pursue this inquiry, my point of departure is thus the figure universally acknowledged as the key juncture between the present and the past, between normative Mahāyāna Buddhist scholasticism and the Great Perfection, between creative ferment and received tradition, between culturally, ideologically and doctrinally heterogeneous roots and a clearly unified Tibetan reality: kLong chen rab 'byams pa. His corpus is generally taken to be the definitive expression of the Great Perfection with its precise terminological distinctions, systematic scope, and integration with the normative Buddhist scholasticism that became dominant in Tibet during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. As for his own sources in his systematic technical Great Perfection writings, they can be grouped under the following four rubrics: (i) the *Kun byed rgyal po*, (ii) *The Seventeen Tantras of the Great Perfection* (including two closely affiliated tantras—the *kLong gsal* and *Thig le kun gsal*), (iii) the Seminal Heart system of Vimalamitra (*Bi ma snying thig*) and (iv) the Seminal Heart system of Padmasambhava (*mKha' 'gro snying thig*). Classical Seminal Heart literature thus consists of the massive corpus of kLong chen rab 'byams pa along with these four heterogeneous collections of texts that he positions himself as an interpreter of: (i) the tantra representing the systematization of earlier Great Perfection movements;

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220. I have kept the present section quite brief, since my article cited above on kLong chen rab 'byams pa's sources involves a very detailed analysis of the complex identity of Seminal Heart literature from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries.



(ii) the principal early Seminal Heart tantras; and (iii-iv) the two main cycles of early commentarial literature on the latter. None of these sources include significant texts *explicitly* authored by Tibetans, since they claim to be either (i) primary tantras with anonymous behind-the-scenes authors or (ii) a commentarial tier citing and interpreting those tantras in texts attributed to legendary Indian figures such as Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra. Thus not only did kLong chen rab 'byams pa inherit a large body of already existent systematic exposition which he brought into explicit dialogue with normative modernist themes, but he was also the first Tibetan figure in the tradition to write systematic treatises in this vein and acknowledge his / her authorship of them. The vast majority of the inherited literature was presumably produced in Tibet from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, but most was written in canonical assumed buddha-voices rather than exegetical forms, and as such its authorship was deferred to an experiential domain without discrete conventionally specifiable locations.

The Seminal Heart tradition can thus be defined as those texts which take *The Seventeen Tantras*, *Bi ma snying thig* and subsequent works developing out of them as authoritative. This literature consists of (i) tantras with the standard psycho-cosmic dramatic setting of a dialogue between a Buddha and his / her retinue; (ii) cycles or systems such as kLong chen rab 'byams pa's *bLa ma yang tig* providing a comprehensive interlinked series of texts with lineage histories, supplication prayers, empowerment rituals, indexes, meditation handbooks and philosophical exegesis; and (iii) more strictly philosophical works ranging from the scholastic (kLong chen rab 'byams pa's *Theg mchog mdzod*) to the intensely poetic (his *Chos dbyings mdzod*), as well as works focusing on a particular contemplative topic. Only the second category of texts offers a comprehensive system containing everything necessary to transmit, study and implement it along traditional lines. Apart from the four principal collections of the early Seminal Heart tradition outlined above, a massive body of other literature on the Great Perfection was also produced during the tenth to fourteen centuries including canonical tantras, supposed "translations" of texts attributed to Indian figures such as Padmasambhava, and works penned by indigenous Tibetan lamas. Thus much research remains to be done in discerning other textual gestalts and their interrelations with the corpus deemed canonical by kLong chen rab 'byams pa. It is also an imperative to study later affiliated traditions in the Great Perfection incorporating these

new visionary trends which may have had a distinct identity from the Seminal Heart traditions, analyzing their canonical sources, terminology, and distinctive structures.<sup>221</sup> If the primary source of any given text or cycle is *The Seventeen Tantras* or cycles established as belonging to its lineage, it would be classifiable as Seminal Heart. If, on the other hand, it does not draw upon these literary sources but uses strikingly similar terminology and practices, it will be necessary to look carefully at its textual authorities, and consider whether or not the creator of that tradition was surreptitiously borrowing from Seminal Heart circles while utilizing the “treasure” (*gter ma*) ideology to obscure its debt. In doing so, one must analyze the role of Space Series materials in bridging the gap between Mind Series and Esoteric Precepts Series, as well as the precise significance of such alternative rubrics as *yang ti* and *spyi ti*. Finally, it is essential to chart out the transmission of the original Seminal Heart literature during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to discern lineages for which kLong chen rab 'byams pa's work was not the final say, or even necessarily quite that relevant.<sup>222</sup> In this way, it will be possible to begin to discern whether there were alternative sources for direct transcendence practice and its associated ideologies, or attempts to appropriate Seminal Heart innovations without crediting it as the source, as well as sketch out the historical circulation of the direct transcendence-based uniqueness of Seminal Heart within Great Perfection circles from the twelfth century onwards.

*The Seminal Heart's ambivalent relationship to other Tibetan tantric yoga systems and ideologies*

The eleventh to twelfth centuries in Tibet witnessed the flowering (and in many cases simultaneous withering) of a tremendous variety of yogic systems experientially based upon the human body and claiming to offer comprehensive systems to arrive at the ultimate realization of buddhahood. The systematization and codification of the ensuing centuries

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221. Examples are Rig 'dzin rgod kyi ldem 'phru can's (1337-1408) *dGongs pa zang thal*, Sangs rgyas gling pa's (1340-1396) *bLa ma dgongs 'dus* and Mi 'Gyur rdo rje's (1645-1667) *gNam chos*.

222. For example, Ronald Davidson pointed out in his presentation at the U. Va. Great Perfection symposium that U rgyan gter bdag gling pa does not even list kLong chen rab 'byams pa in his “teachings received” under Esoteric Precepts Series, but rather places gYung ston rdo rje dpal after Kumārāḍa.

produced a widespread acknowledgment of a limited range of such systems as the most prominent, most of which focus on perfection phase practices with a consequent emphasis on interior movements of energy, breath, sexuality and perception normally constituting unconscious organismic processes. There are numerous passages<sup>223</sup> where a set selection of these are listed out as reflecting experiential paths with a certain unity on the ground (identified by kLong chen rab 'byams pa as "seeing the dimension of the mind-as-such")<sup>224</sup> that may seem lacking in the more intellectualized practices of the various tenet systematizations of each sect and sub-sect. Some of the more prominent systems are the Great Perfection, the Great Seal (*phyag rgya chen po*, *mahāmudrā*), the Sakya tantric synthesis of the path and the fruit (*lam 'bras*), the six doctrines of Nāropā (*naro chos drug*),<sup>225</sup> the six doctrines of Niguma (*ni gu chos drug*) in the Shangpa Kagyu tradition (*shangs pa bka' brgyud*),<sup>226</sup> the pacification (*zhi byed*), the object of cutting (*gcod yul*), the various practices stemming from the *Kālacakra* tantric system, the six yogas (*sbyor drug*, *ṣaḍāṅgayoga*) and five phases (*rim lnga*, *pañcakrama*);<sup>227</sup> these are often further linked back to non-tantric ideologies through references to the "great Middle Way" (*dbu ma chen po*, \**mahāmādhyaṃaka*)<sup>228</sup> and the "transcendent consummation of insight

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223. See Dudjom 1991, 926, for a famous passage by Paṅ chen bla ma blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1567-1662); Schmidt 1987, 90-1 for a passage by rTse le sna tshogs rang grol (b. 1608); kLong chen rab 'byams pa's *Yid bzhin mdzod* (673.2) and *Shing rta rnam dag* (119.4).

224. *Shing rta rnam dag* 119.3.

225. See Guenther 1978 and Gyatso 1982.b

226. Kapstein (1992a, 200) says that the six yogas of Niguma differ from Tilopa / Nāropā's six yogas primarily in points of emphasis, the most striking difference being Tilopa's emphasis on the fierce woman (*gtum mo*) and radiant light (*'od gsal*) contemplations as opposed to Niguma's focus on the illusory body (*sgyu lus*) and dreams (*rmi lam*). Niguma (Kapstein 1992a, 193) is said to be either the wife or sister of the famous siddha Nāropā. Khyung po rnal 'byor (?-c. 1135), the Tibetan founder of the Shangpa Kagyu tradition, claims to have studied with her and received texts authored by her. See Mullins 1985 for extensive comments on this version of the six yogas.

227. See Cozort 1986, 66-67, footnote 114, for a list of the six yogas and five phases, followed by a detailed discussion.

228. As explained by Hookham (1991), this term was used in two principal ways in Tibet: (i) to refer to the "emptiness of other" (*gzhan stong*) traditions

(of abiding reality)" (*gnas lugs don gyi shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa*;  
A typical passage can be found in kLong chen rab 'byams pa's *Yid  
bzhin mdzod*:<sup>229</sup>

Now is the introduction to the manifestation of the indwelling innate naturally radiant primordial gnosis which comes to pass through these techniques:

The primordial gnosis of expansive insight coming to pass via  
such techniques  
Is the glowing lucency beyond all expression indicating it as  
localized or not localized,  
Existent or non-existent, something that is or is not the case,  
Within the range of radiance and bliss.

Self-awareness is vivid in its non-discursive brightness and  
radiance,  
Like the sky in its lack of fragmentation and polarization,  
Resembling the solar and lunar maṇḍalas in its unwavering  
brightness and radiance,  
Like the ocean free from the turbidity of reifying concepts.

This is what the sacred ones introduce you to  
As self-emerging primordial gnosis, mind-as-such, and radiant  
light -  
This body of reality, innately co-emerging,  
Should be perpetually contemplated.

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of Yogācāra-Madhyamaka and (ii) a syncretic and contemplatively-oriented interpretation of Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga with a special emphasis on the *Uttaratantra*. While clearly kLong chen rab 'byams pa's reference below indicates a thoroughly experiential and phenomenological interpretation of Madhyamaka, it should be noted that earlier in the text (549.2) he identifies the "Great Madhyamaka" as referring to the Prāsaṅgika tradition. Interestingly, van der Kuijp (Hookham 1991, 157) claims the term's earliest occurrence is in Great Perfection tantras.

229. *Yid bzhin mdzod* 672.4.

Our own sacred master, the glorious precious lord of the sacred teachings,<sup>230</sup> contextualized the primordial gnosis involved in the four great seals in precisely this manner.<sup>231</sup> When previously meditating on the winds one's awareness of radiance is non-conceptual, while when meditating on the seminal nuclei one's awareness of bliss is radiant. But in both states you look nakedly at the face of self-awareness, and thus there is no question of either abiding or non-abiding even in these mere [experiences of] bliss, radiance, and non-conceptuality. Within the essence of this radiant empty self-awareness, there is only a dimension totally beyond thought, expression or even analogies, devoid of such considerations as existence or non-existence, being or not being the case. This self-purifying self-awareness is like the ocean in its pellucidity and non-wavering depths, like the solar and lunar maṇḍalas in its radiance and non-conceptuality, and like the maṇḍala of the clear sky devoid of fragmentation and polarization. He thus introduced [us] to this very self-awareness in which the discursiveness of the mind and its operations fade away as the [true significance of the] reality body, the great seal and self-emerging primordial gnosis. He also spoke of precisely this as being the Great Perfection, the Great Middle Way, the essence of the six branched yoga, the essence of the path and fruit system, the pacifying which calms all elaborations without exception, and the transcendental consummation of insight of the abiding dimension of reality.

I myself as well have had a little experience of this, and have seen clearly that this dimension is described as such in the sutras and tantras. *The Guhyasamāja Tantra* describes it thus:

Not meditating is the real essence of meditation;  
 Having meditated is not meditation  
 Since the real thing is not a thing  
 Meditation is devoid of objective referents . . . .

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230. Presumably this refers to his own root Great Perfection teacher Kumārādza.

231. The four "great seals" (*mahāmudrā*) evidently refers to the standard list of four dimensions of a consort participating in sexual yogic practices: the action seal, gnosis seal, great seal and commitment seal. The action seal is explained as an actual physical woman; the gnosis seal is a visualized goddess stemming from generation phase practice; the great seal is an empty-form goddess appearing via perfection phase contemplation; and the commitment seal then is the integration of all three.

Aside from such phenomenological claims of identity and at times striking surface differences, all of these systems are based on the same milieu of late Buddhist tantrism in India and associated regions, and hence are inextricably interconnected. They are simultaneously somewhat heterogeneous anthologies, and coordinated integrations into a single pathway, of yogic techniques for going beyond the mere visualization of deity images to coming to terms with the human body and radical emptiness, to bring these images back home to their grounding matrix in a body of emptiness. The hagiographic and exegetical literature abounds with very clear and particular references to the experiential implementation of these systems for psycho-physical transformation of individual practitioners (for example note the passage by gTer bdag gling pa cited below), clearly indicating that from a very early period the prevalent talk of experience in these texts was not mere rhetoric (which is not to deny the diverse rhetorical usages of such discourse, as well as the variegated social functions of ritual and contemplation in Tibet).<sup>232</sup>

I would thus like to briefly look at two Nyingma authors' (kLong chen rab 'byams pa and gTer bdag gling pa) attempts to delineate Great Perfection practices from other Tibetan tantric yoga systems, since even attempts to assert difference also reveal the lingering shadows of similarity. The symbolic perfection phase practices, i. e. those centered on internal manipulations of energy utilizing visualization, breathing, and tactile sensations, are generally referred to in Tibetan as "channel-wind"<sup>233</sup> (*rtsa rlung*) practices. This derives from their focus on the human body, which in its experiential felt presence (termed the "adamantine body" (*rdo rje'i lus*)) is discussed as a triad of qualities: channels (*rtsa*, *nāḍī*), winds (*rlung*, *vāyu*) and seminal nuclei (*thig le*, *bindu*). In short, these can be understood as characteristic patterning lines of energy in the body, the movements of energy through those lines, and the particular intelligences and organizing capacities borne by those movements. In addition to the Seminal Heart transforming these symbolic perfection phase techniques in innovative ways (especially those centered on "radiant light"), its cycles also include versions of those standard techniques as "ancillaries" or "adjuncts" to its main practices. They thus incorporate the practices of the fierce woman (*gtum mo*), dream yoga, sexual yoga and so on, but generally refrain from the

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232. See Sharf 1992.

233. For example see kLong chen rab 'byams pa's *Yid bzhin mdzod* 672.3.

emphasis on focusing energy in the central channel as well as constantly criticize the rhetoric of manipulation and control that ideologically underlay such techniques.

Given their inordinate importance for understanding Tibetan Buddhism in general, and the Seminal Heart traditions in particular, I will briefly summarize perfection phase ideology based on kLong chen rab 'byams pa's succinct summary in the twentieth chapter of the *Yid bzhin mdzod*. As the early Seminal Heart tradition often does, he divides these practices into two overarching rubrics:<sup>234</sup> (i) wind-yoga<sup>235</sup> focusing on the "winds," the body's internal currents of energy closely linked to the breath; and (ii) practices focusing on the "seminal nucleus," the body's organizing points of energy closed linked to the sexual fluids (he also associates these two rubrics with the father and mother tantras respectively, the standard internal dyadic classification of Anuttarayoga Tantras). In fact, the latter practices generally also deal with the winds or breath, while the former category functions to embrace practices that almost exclusively focus on the winds themselves. Leaving a more detailed discussion of kLong chen rab 'byams pa's presentation to a later forum, I would merely like to point out that the principal contemplative processes are characterized by two central intertwined ideologies focused on the body, and based on the resolute belief that our mental images and experiences are heavily dependent on internal transformations and states of energy (which is why all such manipulation of internal energy is marked by unusual visual experiences): (i) dissolving or confining all winds into the body's central channel (*dbu ma* or *kun 'dar ma*) as marked by a series of visual experiences of light (smoke, fireflies, etc.) and (ii) mastering the movement of energy within that central space, generally described as impelling seminal nuclei up and down through the body's four main energy "wheels" (*'khor lo, cakra*) accompanied by orgasmic sensations of bliss graded into a set of four "joys" (*dga' ba, ānanda*). The Geluk scholar Geshe Kelsang Gyatso<sup>236</sup> summarizes such techniques as "generating simultaneous bliss," which is done in conjunction with emptiness meditation. He divides them into two categories: the fierce woman or inner fire (*gtum mo*) practices in which a visualized flame at the navel ignites the melting of seminal bliss

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234. *Ibid.*, 666.4ff.

235. *Ibid.*, 668.6.

236. Gyatso 1982, 18.

from the crown's lunar treasury, and sexual yoga, which relies on sexual intercourse to stimulate the movement of energy up the body's center. He further<sup>237</sup> characterizes the inner fire practices as the "foundation" of all perfection phase techniques—its process of igniting internal warmth and consequently melting the two types (white / red) of seminal nuclei (sometimes summarized as "blazing and dripping") is at the heart of such techniques, directly or indirectly. While kLong chen rab 'byams pa's presentation here is somewhat more complex than this, it does in general correspond to the structure of a short text in his *Zab mo yang tig* entitled the *Zab mo phra khrid*. In that presentation of channel-wind practices, he divides them up into three categories corresponding to channels, winds and seminal nuclei respectively. The third category<sup>238</sup> is entitled "esoteric precepts on the great bliss of the [nuclei]" and is further subdivided into "techniques on your own body" and "relying on another's body." He clearly specifies<sup>239</sup> that prior to engaging in sexual yoga with a partner, one must first master these fierce woman practices utilizing merely one's own body.

The key throughout is this concentration and manipulation of energy in the body's center, usually discussed in terms of "dissolving" (*thim*) or "taking hold" (*zin*)<sup>240</sup> of the winds into a central channel running through the upper torso's center, connecting the genitals and brain. Clearly there is a strong physiological (the lungs, blood circulation, nervous energy) and experiential basis to this focus on tactile sensations in the center of the torso, which are strikingly similar to practices found in other traditions, such as Daoist Qigong,<sup>241</sup> Hindu kuṇḍalīnī / hāṭha

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237. *Ibid.*, 33.

238. *Zab mo phra khrid* 376.3-389.2.

239. *Ibid.*, 382.6.

240. See Cozort 1986, 73, and Guenther 1978, 60.1, Tibetan on 256 respectively.

241. See Robinet 1993 and Deng 1990. I am largely indebted to John Alton, who studied for several years in Beijing with a contemporary Chinese teacher, for my exposure to the physical orientations and implications of such practices, as well as general discussions concerning body-oriented contemplation (see his autobiographical account of Qigong to be published by Shambhala with the title *Adventures with Qi*).



yoga<sup>242</sup> and even the Christian Hesychasts.<sup>243</sup> Thus we find a focus on breath and sexual sensation, both critical and immediately accessible experiences one has of the body's internal flows of energy, and in particular, of its intensification in the center. It could be argued that symbolic perfection phase techniques begin as breath and sex, felt sensations of currents of movement and bliss running up the center of the body, which are then contemplatively mimicked, controlled, altered, and deepened; its non-symbolic dimensions, in contrast, begin in experiences of absence, of the intangible. In the *Yid bzhin mdzod*,<sup>244</sup> kLong chen rab 'byams pa responds to criticism of channel-wind practices as inferior (since they are shared by non-Buddhists) by linking them to exoteric Buddhist techniques of meditating on the breath—by focusing on inhalations and exhalations to calm the ordinarily frenetic activity of your mind, one can give rise to deep contemplation (*ting nge 'dzin*):

The following reconciles sutric and tantric contemplative techniques:

Since the sutras and their exegetical literature teach that you actualize  
 “calming”  
 Through focusing the mind on the winds (breath) and external  
 objective supports,  
 I see this as similar to these (tantric techniques).

Some people think that since these wind-channel [tantric practices] also exist in the non-Buddhist “outsiders” traditions, they are an inferior path. Yet the sūtras and associated exegetical literature of the Lesser and the Great Vehicles such as the *Nyi ma'i snying po'i mdo* and the *mDzod* all teach that you meditate on the winds [breath] as an antidote to conceptuality out of control, and thus give rise to contemplation. In these people's view, we would have to say that this also is inferior. Since all the sūtras and tantras are thus in harmony with each other in terms of techniques for giving rise to contemplation, there is no conflict here.

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242. See Silburn 1988 and White 1995.

243. See Palamas 1983, 5, 8, 9, 14-16, 46, 47 and 129 for discussions of the Hesychasts' body-based approach to spirituality with its focus on the navel, breathing, and the heart.

244. *Yid bzhin mdzod* 672.3.

In fact, the term for “winds” (*rlung*) is often used interchangeably to refer to the literal breath (*dbugs*), a semantic linkage founded on metaphorical and physiological grounds. With these techniques, one discovers extraordinary dimensions of breath and semen, i. e. other movements and charges of intensity in the body that can be actually experienced in ways analogous to ordinary experiences of the coursing of breath and stimulation of orgasm. In addition to the emphasis on tactile sensations in the body’s interior with the concomitant feelings of bliss, the phenomenology of this intensification of energy within the body’s center focuses on light, a luminosity that has its own logic experientially and philosophically. This unfolding radiant light (*'od gsal*) both creates a felt impression of the body’s own luminosity and sparks changes in one’s visual field as flashes of light begin to dominate experience externally and internally. Thus perfection phase practices are generally characterized as meditation on “radiant light” (the title of chapter twenty in *Yid bzhin mdzod*) or “primordial gnosis,” indicating these practices unfold radiance and gnosis from one’s embodied being, our bodies being pervaded by luminosity *and* intelligence.

The Great Perfection’s notion of a triune ground—empty (*stong pa*), radiant (*gsal ba*) and self-organizing intelligence (*thugs rje*)—reflects the traditional triune characterization of this ultimate dimension, “emptiness” being the third (along with radiant light and primordial gnosis). Additionally there is the standard categorization of meditative experiences (*nyams*) into bliss, clarity and non-conceptuality (*bde gsal mi rtog*). The various gradations and sequences described in discussing these practices—such as the four joys, four visions (*snang ba bzhi*) and four emptinesses (*stong pa bzhi*)—thus represent attempts to talk about the phases in one’s increasing realization of this unitary triune dimension, simultaneously an immersion in the felt human body of experience and in its grounding in, and as, an intense luminosity that is no-thing at all, yet reveals itself as intensely blissful sparks of light.<sup>245</sup> In this way,

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245. While Gyatso (1982) is perhaps the clearest and most detailed factual account of these processes, the most interesting English language account interpretatively is found in Beyer 1973, 127-143. My one quailm about Beyer’s account is he almost entirely ignores the physiological / experiential basis of these processes (taking note of his disclaimer on 133 and his invocation of an “experiential given” on 135) to exclusively focus on the symbolic logic of the contemplative systems, a logic which he brilliant unpacks.

the dual emphasis of perfection phase techniques on immersion in the human body (*symbolic*) and in emptiness (*non-symbolic*) intertwine, as the divine images of the generation phase are brought home to an interior of swirling currents of sensed energy (heat, stimulation, rippling movements), an interior which also gradually reveals itself as a groundless abyss of possibilities. Beyer points this out in his consistent emphasis on both dissolving the divine image-representations of magical simulacra (which one is) into the emptiness of radiant light *and* re-emerging from that dissolution as a gnostic body that now represents one's own inner embodied fluidity given new form. Obviously there is a great degree of latitude in what type of experiential aspects are emphasized in this progression—Beyer focuses on the Hindu emphasis on sonic experiences in contrast to Buddhist privileging of the visual,<sup>246</sup> while other traditions focus almost exclusively on tactile sensations (together representing our three major senses); another important issue is the extent of analogical associations. From the perspective of the collapse of typical habituated patterns we talk of dissolution or dissipation (the *byang* of *byang chub* and *sangs* of *sangs rgyas*), while from the perspective of the gradual unfolding of an inner luminosity we are impelled to speak of these events as taking hold of an inner citadel (*btsan sa zin*), an increasing apprehension of a palace implicated within nothingness (*chub*; *rgyas*). Buddha-nature thus represents a trust in embodied identity, that the breakdown of socially enfram ed structures does not lead inevitably to chaotic instinctual violence,<sup>247</sup> but also can allow the emergence of new self-organizing patterning more sensitive to interior and exterior worlds of experience, as well as the abyssal field of possibilities that constitutes the life-process. Thus these contemplative ideologies are based upon processes said to occur in the body at moments of gap or fissure, when our typical strategies of ordering the body collapse: orgasm, sleeping, fainting and death.<sup>248</sup> Luminosity unfolds during these “shifting interstices”<sup>249</sup> (*bar do*) in which paradigms shift and foundations

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Given this tendency, it tends to partially obscure other possibilities as he tightly interweaves the entire contemplative process in a very traditional way.

246. Beyer 1973, 136.

247. See Levin 1988, particularly 303-317.

248. See Cozort 1986, 72 and Beyer 1973, 139.

249. Beyer 1973, 138.

tremble, since radiant light is none other than the fluid process of life-energy, the self-organizing intensity ordinarily trapped and repressed within entrenched structures and dominant frames, the ground zero which contemplation aims at contacting, and then channeling more directly.

Despite this theme of collapse and fissure, a consistent tantric rhetoric of control, domination and manipulation is *also* evident, of forcing a collapse of the ordinary to marshal one's forces into an extraordinary intensity. One contracts one's ordinarily dispersed energy into a central conduit, arrest its fluctuations and confine it to quarters, so to say, with the justification of making it "pliable" (*las su rung*),<sup>250</sup> more amenable to the demands and needs of the center (often imaged with explicitly political tropes—kings, ministers, armies, etc.). In this way, discourse-practices situating themselves as non-symbolic perfection phase systems often rhetorically denigrate such practices as lower order techniques dominated by danger, stress, politicization and forced contrivance, even to the point of placing themselves beyond the entire generation / perfection ideology all together, though in fact they are all heavily dependent on the ideological and contemplative landscape shaped by such practices. In the *Yid bzhin mdzod*'s account of conventional tantric practice we find an integrated approach acknowledging this indebtedness with little of the aggressive rhetoric of denial and transcendence that we find in kLong chen rab 'byams pa's Great Perfection writings. He begins his account with a warning that these wind-channel practices are not the real or ultimate path, but still strongly urges the prospective practitioner to exert him / herself in these contemplative systems until they are perfected, given their essential importance in facilitating progress along the path.<sup>251</sup> After detailing the systems, he then turns to the Great Perfection in a very low key manner<sup>252</sup> by speaking of an "introduction" (*ngo sprad*) to the manifestation of indwelling primordial gnosis which is coemergent with the natural radiance and clarity produced by such techniques. He advocates intently gazing upon self-awareness against this backdrop of these unusual experiences of mental clarity, bliss, and non-conceptuality produced by reliance upon the contemplative techniques manipulating the winds and seminal nuclei, this striking fluidity or lumi-

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250. *Yid bzhin mdzod* 667.1.

251. *Ibid.*, 666.7.

252. *Ibid.*, 672.4ff. See my translation above.

nosity in one's perceptual field, such that one begins to sense an intelligence or wisdom at work deep within one's embodied unconscious. It is this vivid, lucent, unfragmented and non-conceptual dimension that is specified as the heart of the Great Perfection, Great Middle Way, Six-branched Yoga, Path and Fruit, and so on. In the ensuing discussion he even casually cites a key Great Perfection text, the *Kun byed rgyal po*,<sup>253</sup> and in giving general guidelines for meditation refers to its meditation on awareness (*rig pa*) as a third alternative along with focus on the winds and seminal nuclei, depending on "which is comfortable".<sup>254</sup> However, the overall context makes clear that the key is to first work with one's embodied psyche's energy via the winds and nuclei contemplative techniques, and only then does direct contemplation of one's own vivid radiant awareness, such as detailed in Mind Series texts, become a natural further deepening of the practice. Obviously his intent in the *Yid bzhin mdzod* is in part to provide a mildly Great Perfection-influenced reading of Mahāyāna and other Vajrayāna traditions that can reach out to other circles of Tibetan Buddhism not directly involved with the Great Perfection's own unique terminology and practices (though this is quite subtle as opposed to the more manifest agenda of the *Ngal gso skor gsum*).

Such conciliatory motivation and corresponding expression is quite distinct from the tone of kLong chen rab 'byams pa's explicitly Great Perfection corpus in passages where he deals with the relationships of Seminal Heart practices to seemingly similar techniques found in the modernist tantras. For example, in the following passage from the *Theg mchog mdzod*,<sup>255</sup> he attempts to strictly differentiate between the visual appearances of spheres or circles of light (termed "seminal nuclei") which appear in the practices of direct transcendence and the similar apparitions appearing in the context of other Tibetan Buddhist tantric practices:

Although both (i) the seminal nuclei (*thig le, bindu*) of radiant light's primordial radiation and (ii) the seminal nucleus of rainbow light [deriving] from holding the winds and mind are similar in terms of being empty forms, in fact they are exceedingly different.

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253. *Kun byed rgyal po* 675.1.

254. *Yid bzhin mdzod* 675.4.

255. *Theg mchog mdzod* vol. 2, 103.5.

[The former manifests in Seminal Heart contemplation], in which these seminal nuclei of natural thorough purity are the lighting-up of the expanse and awareness. For this reason they are bright and lucent, while provisionally in the "intensification" [vision of Direct Transcendence contemplation] they shine forth up until [the manifestation of full] maṇḍalas [of buddha images]. [Since these visions] are not dependent on holding the winds, emotional distortions and conceptuality naturally cease, and they are adorned by the meditative state of naturally abiding within lucency.

However, the thoroughly pure ten signs of wind-channel [practices that the latter involves] is brought about in the wake of strenuous activities involving the winds.<sup>256</sup> For this reason, they are quite unstable, constantly oscillating between intensification and obscuration—following non-lucency, partial obscuration, coarse conceptuality and emotional distortions, there is only a little moisturization of clarity's emergence and stable focus. For these reasons and others, the difference is exceedingly great.

Though such [visions] manifest when you meditate on the Path and the Fruit, the six yogas, and the Phra tik(?) of the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, when compared to the immediacy of the Seminal Heart (practices), the difference is like between gold and brass.

In a later passage from the same text,<sup>257</sup> kLong chen rab 'byams pa strictly differentiates Great Perfection meditation from lower order subtle body contemplations, including the well know "six yogas" (*sbyor drug*).<sup>258</sup> In general he describes these techniques as being very

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256. These ten signs are phenomenological markers describing visual images one sees and feels as one progresses further and further in controlling the body's internal currents of energy, or "winds," in the "fierce woman" (*gtum mo; caṇḍāli*) practices, with each step corresponding to a particular type of visual image. See Guenther 1978, 60-1; a somewhat different account is given by Cozort (1986, 74), in correlation with the dissolution of the winds into the body's central channel, whether by perfection phase practices or normal phenomena such as sleep, orgasm, and fainting. Both Hopkins (1981, 18) and Gyatso (1982, 70) give the same account as a series of eight, eliminating the first two signs, and referring to breathing patterns rather than visual experiences. Cozort (1986, 124-5) and Dhargyey (1985, 135) also discuss this in the context of the night yoga practiced in *Kālacakra* system.

257. *Theg mchog mdzod* 195.2-196.2.

258. These are explicated in Cozort 1986.

“strenuous” in their directly attempting to forcefully manipulate and redirect one’s conventional energy (i. e. physical body and ordinary thought activity), such that they are beset by obstacles and potential pitfalls. In contrast to this, direct transcendence contemplation works directly with one’s inner spontaneous gnostic energy, avoiding the coarse dimensions of one’s body, speech and mind apart from their mere “restriction” via the three modes of non-wavering (see below). Since it thus only involves “undistorted” ultimate gnostic energy, the many potential obstacles and pitfalls inherent in working with distorted, materialized energy are absent. In addition, these lower order contemplations tend to deviate through fixating on the various psychic experiences and sensations (*shes nyams*) that emerge during contemplation. Direct transcendence contemplation, however, does not prioritize or cling to these psychic experiences, and instead remains focused on the “visionary experiences” (*snang nyams*) of the radiant light’s natural radiation, i. e. the exteriorized images of awareness’ radiation that fills one’s surrounding space. The *Tshig don mdzod*<sup>259</sup> explains this contrast between “psychic experiences” and “visionary experiences” as referring to internal sensations and external visions respectively. Since in these visions one perceives primordial gnosis in direct sensory experience, there is no possibility of error or deviation, unlike the changing succession of inner psychic sensations. Finally, kLong chen rab ’byams pa differentiates direct transcendence from the “six yogas” thus: direct transcendence involves “awareness’ radiation” (*rig gdangs*) which is like “the light of a lamp” and is the “radiation of (awareness’) actual radiant light, i. e. pure appearances” via which one can become free; the six yogas instead involve “the winds’ radiation” (*rlung gdangs*) which is like “the light of a jewel” and is “the radiation of awareness’ impure dynamism, i. e. distorted appearances” via which one cannot become free. This distinction between different types of “radiation” is one I have heard echoed several times in oral explications of the difference between Seminal Heart visions and those inspired by the modernist *Kālacakra Tantra*.

kLong chen rab ’byams pa explicitly criticizes the perfection phase’s principal ideology of confining the winds into the central channel in the following discussion of the gnostic winds from the *mKha’ ’gro yang tig*:<sup>260</sup>

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259. *Tshig mdon mdzod* 390.4ff.

260. *mKha’ ’gro yang tig* vol. 2, 161.6ff.

In brief, “gnostic winds” is just a label applied to compassionate resonance’s essential awareness—since it is present with the indivisible triune identity of essence, nature and compassionate resonance, it is termed “primordial (ye) cognition (*shes*)” (the literal rendering of “gnostic”). It is termed “wind” (*rlung*) in that its mere stirring and mere aware-ing share concordant qualities with wind. The “real” energy winds (i. e. the karmic winds) should be understood as its dynamism manifesting in terms of the ordinary “mind” [i. e. the neuroticized mind], such that primordial gnosis’ radiation as a mere “aware-ing” is carried off by the wind-horses, and operates in terms of the pluralized modes of ordinary perceptual consciousness (*nam shes*).

The gnostic winds themselves are beyond all extremes of discursiveness by force of being empty in their essence-dimension; they light-up as the spiritual bodies and primordial gnosises by force of being radiant in their nature-dimension; and they manifest in terms of the primordial gnosis sensitive to everything’s [final reality] and the primordial gnosis sensitive to all their specifics by force of being aware in their compassionate resonance-dimension. Though this is itself labeled “wind,” it in fact manifests in the contemplative path of visionaries as primordial gnosis’ inner radiance, and its thoroughly pure radiation as it externally manifests.

The “channel / winds” [praxis and theory] of lower spiritual vehicles are ignorant of this, such that they view the non-elaborated essence of the moving winds as the gnostic winds. Having thus seized hold of them, they insert the coarse winds from the right and left [channels] into the central channel. In this way bringing about [sensations of] “clarity” through the right channel’s winds, “bliss” through the left channel’s winds, and “non-conceptuality” through the central channel’s winds, the winds remain in the central channel with these triune [sensations of] bliss, clarity and non-conceptuality, such that [visions of] seminal nuclei and rainbow light emerge. Furthermore, this is [believed] to be the sign of taking hold of the [body’s] five elemental energy-winds [fire, earth, water, wind and space].

This is, however, a quite distorted view. If the five moving winds had color, then why does not the wind of our mouth and nose [i. e. breath] come with color? As for attaining stability upon taking hold of these [winds], though they claim they have taken hold of the gnostic winds, actually they are not cognizant or aware of even an iota of their true dimension, except for having simply heard the name “gnostic winds.” I do not believe that enlightenment can be attained through checking the winds of the mouth and nose, since [nothing ensues] through these practices of the lower vehicles taking hold of those



“gnostic winds,” apart from a type of non-conceptuality deriving from the non-movement of breath. Such a practice resembles the filling and emptying of a bellows—not only do no enlightened qualities ensue upon exerting yourself in this, but your body grows cold and shakes, your speech becomes trivial and false, your mind becomes even more coarse than before in its dualistic conceptions, and cannot withstand any [adverse] conditions.

Here [in the context of the Great Perfection tradition, in contrast], we say that taking hold in the following manner is termed “gnostic winds”: when in a single period you bring together the three watching postures and the three enlightened gazes via the three spiritual bodies [i. e. the key points of direct transcendence contemplation], you experience a radiant, immaculate, crystal clear state of consciousness which is beyond discursiveness through the emptiness of essence, to which radiant light manifests through the clarity of nature, and which is utterly non-conceptual through the awareness of compassionate resonance. While not conceptualizing anything at all, the visual dimension of whatever might appear remains unceasing. [Because we hold that, when you say “gnostic winds” we say it is taken hold in this manner].

In his *Grub mtha' mdzod*<sup>261</sup> kLong chen rab 'byams pa also incisively criticizes these normative modernist tantric practices of forcefully inserting the energy winds into the central channel in the attempt to achieve primordial gnosis. He contrasts this to Great Perfection contemplation in which the body's luminous channels are let be, and thus naturally expand outwards from their current presence as a thin thread of light at the body's center, so as to directly permeate one's entire existence and dissolve all energy blockages therein. He retains the emphasis on the body's center and light-experiences, yet undercuts the tone of control and manipulation. This indicates the reoccurring issue of whether contemplation should be the forceful assertion of a predetermined pattern, or a more personalized quest to find one's own way, patternings that reveal themselves only when one releases the attempt to fore-structure them:

The lower secret mantra [systems] hold that by inserting the wind-mind energies of your solitary and flavor channels [i. e. right and left]

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261. *Grub mtha' mdzod* 382.1-383.3. See Dudjom 1991, 40-341, for a translation of his abridged account, which is simply a reworded presentation of kLong chen rab 'byams pa's comments.

into the central channel, a primordial gnosis of bliss, clarity and non-conceptuality will emerge, which they identify as innate [gnosis]. However in fact this in no way reverses your ordinary eight fold consciousness based on the universal ground: the blissful sensation is due to the ordinary egoic psyche and the emotionally distorted psyche, while the lack of conceptuality in the undivided lucency is the universal ground. The slight clarity and lucency [they experience] is the universal ground consciousness, while that which appears in terms of the individual five types of coarse sensory objects and cognitive faculties [such as visible forms and sounds] are the five sensory modes of consciousness. Yet if those [modes of consciousness] are not reversed, you will not become free of cyclic existence, since you are manifestly not free from the mind-sets of cyclic existence. Since this style of practice is not different from that outlined in the Sāmkhya scriptures [he cites a passage from therein . . .], they do not accomplish freedom from the mind-state of the formless meditative states [*dhyāna*].

They hold that the joy of mixing the channels, winds and seminal nuclei into a single flavor is the pristine dimension [*maḥ ma*], and thus believe that the respective enlightened qualities manifest by force of liberating the corresponding channel-knots as the winds and seminal elements enter the central channel from the flavor and solitary channels. Thus there are many obstacles—as the winds enter the channel-petals energetically corresponding to the various six types of living beings, many delusory appearances manifest. In this way it constitutes the key point of why deviation comes to pass [for such practitioners].

Since in the context [of Great Perfection contemplation] the winds are left to naturally calm down of their own accord, there is no insertion into the central channel. When the wind currents of the individual channel petals become naturally purified, the gnostic winds of the luminous channel shines of their own accord in their own state. Thus there is a lighting-up of primordial gnosis as there manifests such visions as the spiritual bodies, lights, and pure realms, while no distorted appearances at all manifest. As the luminous channel in the center intensifies, the channel-knots sequentially pass into light and are free—this is what we assert. The enlightened qualities of the [spiritual hero/ine] stages manifest in a self-presencing way. To expand on that, by force of the first two channel-knots becoming liberated into light, twelve hundred Buddha realms manifest within the luminosity that lights up externally . . . .

Thus this is exceedingly superior to the level of the lower vehicles. If your mind is of cyclic existence when you practice, the result will be cyclic existence. . . . Since [the Great Perfection] is free of the mind-sets of cyclic existence via the path, this is the key point of rapidly

arriving right at the fruit. Nowadays those who desire Buddhahood from the ordinary mind do not understand this key point, and thus do not know the real path—primordial gnosis and the mind substantially contradict each other. . . .

Finally, in the following passage from the *Tshig don mdzod*<sup>262</sup> kLong chen rab 'byams pa criticizes two key contemplative procedures associated with perfection phase systems—sexual yoga and the yogic body exercises known as “magical wheels” (*'phrul 'khor, yantra*):

Furthermore, it is taught that ordinary minor psychic attainments and depth-contemplation [which involves the mind's stabilization] can be accomplished on the path in reliance upon the conventional catalytic seminal nuclei, yet the supreme spiritual attainment [the meditative state wherein the Reality Body and primordial gnosis naturally flow] can be made directly manifest only in reliance upon the ultimate seminal nuclei of radiant light. Since along these lines the tradition of the Great Perfection does not view the conventional seminal nuclei as an essential part of the spiritual path, it advocates meditation on radiant light in reliance upon the ultimate seminal nuclei. However, some individuals' psychic makeup is such that engaging the conventional seminal nuclei here [in the Great Perfection tradition] becomes necessary. In this sense, the means of meditation on the conventional seminal nuclei, reliance on a sexual consort and so forth are taught simply as a kind of special method or “efficacious means” for taking care of those otherwise blocked from the Great Perfection path, so that those people obsessively addicted to the conventional seminal nuclei can circuitously enter [the path of the Great Perfection]. Then, subsequently the stage of engaging the ultimate seminal nuclei is taught to such individuals. As for that prior stage [of yogically manipulating the conventional seminal nuclei], the *sGra thal 'gyur* says:

Since you desire to rely on the reality of seminal nuclei,  
[I will discuss the contemplative techniques]  
Relating to the ultimate and conventional [seminal nuclei].

[i] Those who for the time being desire buddhahood  
In reliance upon the conventional seminal nuclei should do as  
follows:

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262. *Tshig don mdzod* 258.

Your consort should have the complete requisite characteristics -  
 When you spot one with the perfect characteristics  
 Whether she be a goddess, demi-goddess, brahmin,  
 Low caste, or a heretic,  
 You begin with the techniques for attracting her,  
 And then you must perfect your body  
 Via the object of reliance [i. e. consort], the channels,  
 And the focus of visualization [i. e. the seminal nuclei, etc.].

Then, you must bring the conventional seminal nuclei down, retain  
 them, reverse them [back upwards]  
 Disperse them within the channels, and mix them with the winds;  
 You then must rely upon emptiness, eradicate your intellect,  
 And reverse your ordinary body and mind.

[ii] On the other hand, through reliance upon the ultimate seminal  
 nuclei  
 You can meet with the objects of the empty reality body:

Stimulating the lamp of the empty seminal nuclei  
 You train on awareness' efflorescent dynamics,  
 And when you finally gain deep attunement such that [their lumi-  
 nosity  
 Is vividly clear] without ordinary distinctions between daytime and  
 nighttime,  
 These [luminous nuclei] directly manifest without any exertion on  
 your part -  
 This is the measure indicating experiential mastery [of this practice].

Therefore, the two classifications of seminal nuclei are related as fol-  
 lows: the conventional seminal nuclei are not the real spiritual path,  
 aside from simply being a belief and interest-inspiring efficacious  
 means of entering [certain types of people] into this path [of the Great  
 Perfection]. Thus, here in this text these systems of practice will be  
 left at that, while since the ultimate seminal nuclei *are* the real path, I  
 will discuss them extensively. The stimulation of the [empty seminal  
 nuclei] lamp is discussed in particular within the chapter on the  
 "objective sphere" [chapter seven], and thus you should take [those  
 discussions] as the point of departure for understanding it. This is an  
 extremely important point, since nowadays some people assert that  
 both the conventional and ultimate seminal nuclei are the Great Perfec-  
 tion path, and in particular, those people fixated upon the conventional  
 seminal nuclei do not see these [luminous nuclei's vital] significance.

They advocate many strenuous practices in training on the conventional seminal nuclei such as “binding” with yogic physical exercises [yantras] and forced visualizations, while as fruit of such training they desire the bliss and emptiness of depth-contemplation within the coarse body. The Great Perfection tradition is quite the opposite: in its avocation of a series of triadic key points in contemplation [your body being unshakable from the “watching postures” and so on] and its desired attainment of a body of light, there is a very important distinction.

The “ultimate seminal nuclei” are synonymous with the “luminous seminal nuclei” discussed above, and are principally located within the solitary, all-encompassing and luminous channels). These light nuclei play the key role in direct transcendence contemplation, and thus are the principal focus of Seminal Heart meditation and theory as the internal bases or supports for the contemplative optimization and revelation of one’s internal latent nucleus of gnostic light. They should be understood in opposition to the conventional nuclei which concentrate within the flavor channel, and in general are distributed throughout the body’s internal channels in their various red and white forms (the concentrations of the white nuclei at the crown and the red nuclei at the navel play key roles in “lower” contemplation techniques). These conventional seminal nuclei ultimately all stem from the “white and red” nuclei initially inherited from one’s father (white) and mother (red) at conception. Their coarser forms are the material sexual fluids involving the male’s white sperm and the female’s red blood / ovum, such that both their subtle and coarse forms play the key role in sexual sensation, intercourse and orgasm.

For those who do not have any trust or belief in the significance and importance of the ultimate luminous nuclei or spiritual concerns in general (which are not immediately manifest to reason or experience), working with the conventional nuclei (whose role in sexuality provide an easily accessible path to their dynamics) is an alternative means to engage them on the path. Thus they can be gradually led to see the reality and importance of the ultimate nuclei, and overcome their initial disparagement of any type of spiritual practices concerning the non-material (which they otherwise confuse with the “immaterial”). For this reason kLong chen rab ’byams pa briefly outlines the techniques of sexual yoga, but does not go into any detail since these lower order contemplations are not actually part of the system of Great Perfection meditation proper. In kLong chen rab ’byams pa’s other Great Perfection

writings, however, sexual yoga is discussed in extensive detail, purportedly as a popular and efficacious means to help people enter the spiritual path who would otherwise be disinterested or bewildered by the practices of breakthrough and direct transcendence. Needless to say, the rhetorical disclaimers do not exorcise such practices from the system, but rather situate them within it in particular ways. The final paragraph refers to subtle body contemplations such as sexual yogas which involve complicated physical movements, complex forced visualizations, difficult breathing techniques and so on which forcibly "bind" and restrict our energies to prevent ordinary neurotic thought activity, none of which play a part in Great Perfection contemplation. In particular "yogic exercises" (*'phrul 'khor, yantra*) refer to various physical postures and movements performed along with certain patterns of breathing (ranging from simple to near impossible), which are designed to manipulate our body's internal energies (i. e. the seminal nuclei and wind-currents); "visualization" (*dmigs pa*) indicates the various visualizations utilized in the channel-winds practices of the lower vehicles, which are contrived in their forcible manipulation and concentration of physical and psychic energy. In contrast to this, direct transcendence contemplation involves only very simple postures and gazes, while the focal object is self-manifest visions (*snang ba*) spontaneously unfolding without any fabricated visualizations. kLong chen rab 'byams pa thus contrasts these two contemplative systems both in terms of their techniques and the desired "fruit" or "climax": the Great Perfection involves very simple, natural postures and spontaneous visions rather than difficult contortions and forced artificial visualizations, while the ultimate goal is a "body of light" wherein all corporeality dematerializes rather than simply sensations of bliss and concentration within our current corporeal body. As for being "unshakable" from the body's "way of looking" or "watching postures," these are explained<sup>263</sup> as the three "postures" or "looks" which the body should remain within without any wavering. Together with speech being unshakable from silence and mind being unshakable from undistracted non-conceptual gazing at the center of the open sky, they form the three modes of being "unshakable" in direct transcendence contemplation. In general, the key points of this contemplation simply emphasize being "unwavering" in the sense of remaining within a calm, natural

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263. *Ibid.*, 375.6-7.

state of quiet disturbed by neither the ordinary turbulence of neurotic activity nor strenuous yogic contortions.

I will conclude with a brief look at a very interesting section of a text written by gTer bdag gling pa (1646-1714) entitled *gTer chen chos ki rgyal po gter bdag gling pa gar dbang 'gyur med rdo rje'i zhal snga nas mchog sman rnams kyis dri ba sna tshogs pa'i lan rim par spel ba rin chen phreng ba (chab shog)* (The Garland of Answers to Various Questions with the Supreme Medicine).<sup>264</sup> This particular reply is ostensibly written in response to inquiries as to the difference between the Great Seal and Great Perfection traditions. In understanding this text, it is essential to keep in mind that gTer bdag gling pa lived during times when Nyingma traditions had fallen upon hard times in Central Tibet, and that he was a key figure in stimulating their revival. He discusses the Great Perfection in terms of the standard three Series, which he individually correlates to particular modernist yogic systems. Despite his acknowledgment of a certain surface similarity, he stresses critical differences that he perceives between the two members of each dyad. The Mind Series is associated with the Great Seal, with the major difference being that the latter seals external objects located “thither” in the field of our experience, while the former ascertains the subject located “hither,” mind-as-such, empty awareness’ original purity. The Space Series is then associated with, and differentiated from, “the five stages,” the popular systematization of perfection phase techniques deriving from Nāgārjuna’s exegetical work on the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*. He specifies that the similarity is in their common focus on radiant light (*'od gsal*), while the difference lies in the latter’s forceful binding of the internal winds in contrast to the latter’s no-activity praxis divested of any such objectifications or forced foci. The Esoteric Precept Series then is associated with the “six yogas” (*sbyor drug*), an important systematization of perfection phase techniques also deriving from the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* literature. The similarity lies in the emphasis on light visions, while the difference is again presented in terms of “exertion” and “stress”: the latter utilizes sexual practices and forcefully binds the winds into the body’s central channel, while the latter involves releasing all such willful manipulation, and instead perceiving the self-radiant abiding reality in

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264. This text is written in the forms of questions and answers; this particular section can be found at 345.6-357.6.

sensory immediacy. He also<sup>265</sup> stresses the importance of how the Esoteric Precept Series' exegetical traditions with its own unique terminology had been maintained through kLong chen rab 'byams pa's efforts without becoming mixed up with other esoteric yogic traditions such as the Great Seal.

### *Conclusion*

While the Great Perfection represents one of the most interesting, complex, and vital set of contemplative / scholastic traditions in Tibetan religion, until recently in Euro-American circles<sup>266</sup> it was largely known for its controversial claims to non-Tibetan roots, its supposed anti-nomian rejection of normative Buddhist categories and its *mystic* emphasis on an arguably phenomenological notion of awareness' bare simplicity. In particular, there has been a persistent tendency to literalize its rhetoric, ignoring the complex ways in which a language of denial can function on the ground. This has led many casual observers to assume these movements involved a paradoxical rejection of formal contemplation, or intense adherence to simple contemplative techniques with neither serious intellectual inquiry nor a corresponding production of complex literature. There have also been few non-traditional attempts to account for the internal dynamics of the growth and transformation of these traditions over time, perhaps in part because the seeming absence of rigor would appear to entail a lack of historical dynamism and change. The common thread of these misunderstandings has ancient roots in Tibetan Buddhist polemics, namely that an emphasis on process dynamics and the organismic intelligence of the unconscious at the expense of established normative structures often rhetorically appears to others as

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265. *Ibid.*, 351.6.

266. I am aware of the inadequacies of the term "Euro-American" with regards to scholarship as opposed to contrasting "modern" to "traditional" to acknowledge the contemporary work of Japanese, Indians and other ethnic groups. However I do not think that my current usage implies restricting participation in privileged "modernism" to Europeans and North Americans, and I worry that using the term modernism broadly can legitimize evolutionary strategies put forward implicitly by many authors to privilege their own cultural world views, as well as contribute to the stigmatization of discourses and practices that do not seem to belong to our collective illusion of "modernity."



deviating into simplistic chaos or even inaction (*bya bral*). To articulate a quite different vantage point viewing these traditions as located in the dangerous yet stimulating oscillation between architecture (structure, images, the intellect) and absence (process, emptiness, the body), my present inquiry has centered around the issues of rhetorical negation and contemplative practice in the early Mind Series (*sems sde*) traditions, the emergence of the Seminal Heart (*snying thig*) movement within that matrix, and the relation of both to the tantric categories and practices forming their overarching background. I have thus traced the general outlines of the true heterogeneity and interrelationships of the movements that went under the rubric of the Great Perfection in Tibet from the ninth to fourteenth centuries, their complex relationships to the tantric categories and practices being imported by other groups under the banner of “modernism,” their intricate balancing act between architecture and absence, and the deep human significance of what at first may seem abstruse issues.

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*Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* by dPal sprul o rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po. Chengdu: Sichuan Minorities Press (1988). See Kazi 1989 for translation.

*kLong chen snying thig* by 'Jigs med gling pa. Published in three volumes. New Delhi: Ngawang Sopa (1973); I-Tib 73-904268. See Goodman 1983 for a study of this cycle.

*kLong gsal*. As cited in *kLong chen rab 'byams pa's Zab mo yang thig* (vol. 1, 473.3, 478.4, 487.6 and so on), this text is found in vol. 24 (“Ra”) of the contemporary print of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* available in *sDe dge* (344a.1-361b.7) with the title *Kun tu bzang mo klong gsal nyi ma'i gsang rgyud*. The colophon identifies it as transcribed by Ye shes mtsho rgyal from Padmasambhava's words.

*Khrid yig ye shes bla ma*. This text is found in the *kLong chen snying thig*.

*mKha' 'gro snying thig*. This cycle is found in the *sNying thig ya bzhi*.

*mKha' 'gro yang tig*. This cycle is found in the *sNying thig ya bzhi*.

*Grub mtha' mdzod*. This text is one of the *mDzod bdun*.

*dGongs pa zang thal* by Rig 'dzin rgod kyi ldem 'phru can. Published as volumes 60-64 of the *Smanrtsis shes rig spendzod*. Leh, Ladakh: S. W. Tashigangpa (1973).

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*Ngal gso skor gsum gyi spyi don legs bshad rgya mtsho*. This text is found in *Ngal gso skor gsum* (vol. 3, 131-244).

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'*Jam dpal zhal lung* by Buddhaśrījñānapāda. Toh. 1853-4. The full title is ('Phags pa) '*jam dpal (gyi de kho no nyid sgrub pa'i) zhal lung* (*Dvikramataitvabhāvanānāmamukhāgama*). There is also a shorter version entitled *Mañjuśrīmukhāgama*.

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*rNying ma bka' ma rgyas pa*; also a xylographic edition published by Sonam Kazi (1973); I(Sik)-Tib 73-905823; and (ii) *sPyi don legs bshad snang bas yid kyi mun pa thams cad sel ba* published in volume 27 of the *rNying ma bka' ma rgyas pa*; also a xylographic edition published by Sonam Kazi (1973); I(Sik)-Tib 73-905821.

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*Zab mo yang tig*. This cycle is found in the *sNying thig ya bzhi*.

*Yid bzhin nor bu*. This text is found in *Ngal gso skor gsum* (vol. 2, 761-766).

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