

The Tibetan Tradition of the Great Perfection*

by Jean-Luc Achard (CNRS, Paris)

Introduction

The system of the Great Perfection (rDzogs chen) or Atiyoga (*Shin tu rnal 'byor*) is one of the most fascinating features of Tibetan Buddhism even if our knowledge of its history and principles is rather limited since only a handful of its classical works have been translated into Western languages. rDzogs chen surfaced in Tibet at the time of the first diffusion of Buddhism in the Land of Snow, during the reign of king Khri srong lde btsan (755-797) and it is shared by the two oldest spiritual traditions of Tibet — still active today: the non-buddhist tradition of Bon and the Buddhist lineage of the rNying ma school.¹ The textual legacy of rDzogs chen as it is presented in these two traditions is far from being fully catalogued and its origins are still lost in the haze of Tibet's ancient history. In both Bon and rNying ma lineages, the teachings of the Great Perfection are described as being of foreign extraction and coming from countries vaguely situated West of Tibet: sTag gzig or Zhang zhung for the Bon po side of the tradition, and Oḍḍiyāna or Western India for the rNying ma pa lineage. Thus according to adepts of both schools, rDzogs chen was introduced *in* Tibet² — much earlier from the bon po side — and has remained one of the most influential religious systems to appear in the Land of Snow, down to the present day.

To dramatically sum up an approach of this tradition which has often been described as steep or abrupt, rDzogs chen teachings are solely aimed at practitioners and are not regarded as objects of intellectual discussions despite the numerous polemics raised by various scholars in the past centuries regarding some of the Great Perfection's crucial conceptions.³ In a sense, rDzogs chen is entirely centered on the experience of the natural state (*gnas lugs*): it is thus concerned with the methods leading to such an experience and with the means to retain it during meditation and post-meditation periods. According to the tradition, such methods are said to go back to highly revered Indian figures,

* I would like to thank Michael J. Hunt for his kind suggestions and corrections on the first draft of this paper.

¹ Both traditions differ from other Tibetan Buddhist sects in their acceptance of a system of Nine Vehicles (*theg pa dgu*), the ninth Vehicle being that of the Great Perfection. It should be stated here that as one of the most striking elements of Tibetan Buddhism throughout history, rDzogs chen has been adopted by some of the most illustrious masters of other Tibetan schools, but mostly on a personal level, rarely openly.

² This means that it was not conceived as being of indigenous origin but that it was transmitted to Tibetans by a handful of important foreign lineage holders. Several people have questioned this alien origin and are of the opinion that rDzogs chen (or some of its main texts) was elaborated in Tibet by Tibetans. (see for example S.G. Karmay, "An Open Letter by Pho-brang Zhi-ba-'od", *passim*). This opinion is shared by several people in Western academic circles.

starting with dGa' rab rdo rje, the first human master of the Buddhist lineage of rDzogs chen,⁴ who codified the various practices of the Great Perfection into written form. To adepts of this body of practices, the legendary accounts of the first masters in the lineage of transmission are taken as *verbatim* relations of historical events and cannot be in any way apprehended otherwise.⁵ It is certainly this emphasis on the need for an authentic lineage which has preserved numerous histories (*lo rgyus*) and biographies (*rnam thar*) of nearly each and every main lineage holder of rDzogs chen.⁶ These lines of transmission also appear in “prayers to the lineage” (*brgyud 'debs*) chanted in daily practices which reinforce the connection to the “tree” of transmission.

Despite the abundance of such historical materials, historians are still at great pains to describe the early history of rDzogs chen in any satisfactory way. There seem to be contradictions between what we can deduce from the presence of rDzogs chen texts during the imperial period (8-9th centuries) and what appears on the spiritual scene of Tibet from the beginning of the 10th century onwards. The fact is that if we refer to the traditional history of the Great Perfection, the largest part of the corpus of what we know as being rDzogs chen texts is supposed to have been translated or composed during the early diffusion of Buddhism in the 8th century. However, the conditions for the spread of these teachings were not perfect and a huge amount of texts are said to have been hidden in various places in Tibet, to be revealed at a later date for the benefit of future generations.⁷ This means that most of the works discovered from the 10th or 11th century onward trace their spiritual history back to the activities of important masters such as Vairocana, Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava.⁸ For the

³ On these critics, see S.G. Karmay, *The Great Perfection*, pp. 121-133.

⁴ On the twelve Revealers (*ston pa bcu gnyis*) who preceded him, see Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, pp. 49-53.

⁵ Even if it may sound offensive and probably insulting to question the authenticity of these accounts, it is necessary to approach them as literary legacy and to try to discern what actually stands beyond historical analysis. The example of the birth of 'Chi med gtsug phud (in the Bon tradition) retold as that of dGa' rab rdo rje (in the rNying ma school) is extremely important in this respect: more than a legend, the story is conceived as something else, as a hidden message for those who can decipher the principles of alchemical work (the similarity between the two masters and their birth was noted by S.G. Karmay in *The Great Perfection*, p. 19 n. 7). The historian is unfortunately often the less equipped to correctly apprehend these matters.

⁶ On the importance of the legitimacy and authenticity of one's lineage in Buddhism (in particular in Chinese Buddhism), see B. Faure, *La volonté d'orthodoxie, passim*. The largest work dealing with the history of rDzogs chen is Nyo shul mkhan po's *rDzogs chen chos 'byung* which has recently been translated into English. See the bibliography *in fine*. However, many obscure figures such as gNyan dPal dbyangs and Buddhagupta have certainly played an important role in the literary history of rDzogs chen but data regarding their lives and works are rather scanty.

⁷ The revealers of such texts are known as *gter ston*, Treasure Discoverers. The tradition of *gter ma* (treasure texts and artifacts) is with that of the *bKa' ma* (uninterrupted lineage of transmission) one of the main modes of transmission in the rNying ma tradition. Another mode is that of pure visions (*dag snang*) but it is not specific to this tradition.

⁸ Other masters and translators were involved in the first translations/compositions of rDzogs chen works in the 8th century, such as Buddhagupta (already mentioned in note 6 above), g.Yu sgra snying po and gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes. At the same time, a similar process of translating texts, composing others and hiding whole sets of works were taking place in the Bon tradition, with figures such as Dran pa nam mkha', Co za bon mo and Vairocana.

later (post 9th century) tradition of the rNying ma pas, the role played by these three personages in the legendary accounts of the introduction of rDzogs chen in Tibet is decisive:

- Vairocana was a buddhist monk sent to India in search of the rDzogs chen teachings;
- Vimalamitra was a highly revered *paṇḍita* who was invited for diffusing rDzogs chen teachings in Tibet;
- Padmasambhava was a famous tantric master who was especially invited for taming demonic entities and helping in the conversion of the Land of Snow to Buddhism. Among the three, he is the only one who was not explicitly implicated in the diffusion of rDzogs chen, despite the crucial role we see him play in this respect in the later tradition of revealed treasures (*gter ma*).

We have reasons to believe that some of the texts linked with Vairocana and Vimalamitra do go back to the dynastic period, but the tradition associated with Padmasambhava is more delicate to prove on this matter. The link of the *Man ngag lta ba'i phreng ba* — one of the early works attributed to Padmasambhava — to rDzogs chen is far from convincing. It rather appears that rDzogs chen as it is defined in this text is the fruit of the Anuyoga system and does not belong to the teachings of Atiyoga proper.

I. The Nature of the Great Perfection

As we have seen, the Great Perfection refers to a Vehicle (*theg pa*) — the ninth and ultimate Vehicle in both Bon and rNying ma schools — but it primarily designates the actual state of the abiding mode of mind (*sems kyi gnas lugs*), the real expression of the primordial state (*gdod ma'i gshis kyi gnas lugs*) of the individual. In this respect, it shares ideas and conceptions similar to those of higher tantric instructions such as teachings of the Great Symbol (*mahāmudrā*) but its practical means to achieve the realization of the primordial state differ greatly from other traditions. Indeed, it has particular practices — sometimes described as “specific richnesses” (*khyad nor*) — which are not to be found elsewhere. Also, as we shall see below, its Fruit is rather peculiar too.

1. The Base of the Great Perfection

The central idea in the teachings of the Great Perfection is designated as the Base (*gzhi*), to be conceived as the real expression or primordial abiding mode of one's Mind (*sems nyid*). In rDzogs chen terms, the Base is defined as being endowed with an empty Essence (*ngo bo stong pa*), a

luminous Nature (*rang bzhin gsal ba*) and an unceasing Compassion (*thugs rje ma 'gag*).⁹ The empty Essence of the natural state is also considered as primordially pure (*ka nas dag pa*); its Nature, as spontaneously accomplished (*lhun gyis grub pa*); and its all-embracing (*kun khyab*) Compassion aspect as endowed with a discerning Awareness (*rig pa*). This Awareness is the non-discursive knowledge of the natural state itself and it is through the experience of this same Awareness that the Base of one's mind is known in its real expression. In general, introduction to such a pure knowledge takes the form of a “direct confrontation with Awareness” (*rig pa'i ngo sprod*) which is transmitted by a qualified master to a student who has performed the prerequisite practices and who has trained accordingly until the arising of specific spiritual and physical signs. During the confrontation, the master introduces the real meaning of Awareness and in some cases actually infuses his own experience into the continuum of the disciple, thus chasing away all doubts and ensuring that the disciple resumes his practice in a correct way.

Furthermore, the Base of the natural state is generally described as the arising basis of realized Buddhas and of deluded beings. This means that if one discerns (*rig*) its real mode of being, one becomes a Buddha and if one fails to recognize this nature, one errs in conditioned existence. Therefore, the Base is defined as a Base of Liberation (*grol gzhi*) when one realizes its real nature, while it appears as a Base of delusion (*'khrul gzhi*) when one apprehends it in a dualistic manner.

To formulate this with further details, the *sNying thig* teachings of the Great Perfection say that the Base is endowed with an inherent profound Clarity (*gting gsal*) which radiates spontaneously as a natural dynamism (*rtsal*) arising as the display of three kinds of primordial manifestations: sounds (*sgra*), lights (*'od*) and rays (*zer*). When the nature of these manifestations is recognized as the visionary expression of one's own dynamism, then Buddhahood is directly reached whereas ignorance of the nature of these displays entails delusion into conditioned states of existence.¹⁰ However, the recognition or non-recognition of this state does not affect the Base itself: this means that the natural state remains eternal (*g.yung drung*), immutable (*'gyur med*) and undifferentiated (*dbyer med*), whereas its knowledge or Awareness is liable to fluctuate according to the individual.¹¹ In this respect,

⁹ These three modalities are known as the Three Wisdoms (*ye shes gsum*) of the Absolute Body (*chos sku, dharmakāya*).

¹⁰ The arising of ignorance is thus considered in rDzogs chen as the beginning of samsāra. This means that samsāra is not the outer material world as we see it but rather the discursive and deluded mode of beings. This clearly concurs with sūtric conceptions whereby a Buddha may come to the world and still remain purified or free from samsāric stains.

¹¹ The immutability of this state is demanded by its very nature: if it were susceptible to change, alteration, etc., the state of Buddhahood would not remain unaffected and one could spontaneously regress from such a realization. Therefore, the Essence (*ngo bo*) of the natural state remains immutable, while its Nature (*rang bzhin*)

Awareness can turn into non-awareness or ignorance (*ma rig pa*) when one fails to recognize the visions of the natural state. These visions are described as the “manifestations of the Base” (*gzhi snang*) arising as various displays of lights, rays, Buddha-Bodies (*sku*), Wisdoms (*ye shes*), etc., and are conceived as “occurring” on three occasions:

- their primeval display at a time beyond beginning, when the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra recognized his own nature in this very display and when sentient beings lacked this recognition and considered the visions as “other induced appearances” (*gzhan snang*);¹²
- their arising during the practice of the Path (*lam*), particularly when one enters the visionary practice of Passing-over-the-Crest (*thod rgal*), contemplating their ever-more intensified manifestations until their dissolution back into the Primordial Purity (*ka dag*) of the natural state;¹³
- their natural arising during the after-death state (*bar do*), specifically during the Clear-Light Bardo of Reality (*chos nyid 'od gsal gyi bar do*).¹⁴

2. The three trends of rDzogs chen teachings

As instructions leading to the manifest experience of the natural state, rDzogs chen teachings are divided into the three main following categories:

- the Mind Series (*Sems sde*) which stresses the clarity aspect (*gsal cha*) of the natural state;
- the Space Series (*Klong sde*) which emphasizes its empty aspect (*stong cha*); and
- the Precept Series (*Man ngag sde*) which defines it as the indivisibility of Clarity and Emptiness (*gsal stong dbyer med*).¹⁵

The differences between them are not that of individual historical developments but rather that of an emphasis on one aspect of the primordial state of the individual. In a certain sense, these differences are totally superficial insofar as the practices involved in the three Series are all centered upon

retains the potential or dynamism (*rtsal*) of infinite displays liable to strive for the welfare of all beings. In this manner, the altruistic activities of the Buddha are not impeded by its immutable condition.

¹² This means that they conceived these visions as being different from themselves, as having therefore another source than their own mind and consequently another nature.

¹³ On *thod rgal*, see below in § 3 dealing with the practice of rDzogs chen.

¹⁴ Such visions are said to arise at this time of the Bardo only for those who have trained in the practice of *thod rgal* during their lifetime (and who have at least reached the second stage of this practice). For ordinary beings, they don't even last an ekaśana.

¹⁵ The same classification occurs in the Bon tradition, even though according to Lopön Tenzin Namdak (oral communication), *Klong sde* teachings are not represented in the Bon po texts and should be regarded strictly as a rNying ma matter. However, previous masters such as Shar rdza bKra shis rgyal mtshan (1859-1934) have voiced a different opinion and classified under *Klong sde* teachings a set of works known as the *bsGrags pa skor gsum*. Recent research has shown that the texts belonging to the *bsGrags pa skor gsum* should rather be associated with *Sems sde* even if they also show characteristics of the *Man ngag sde* approach to the teachings. See S.G. Karmay, *The Great Perfection*, p. 220-223; Achard, “Le Tantra des Vingt-deux Perles de l'Esprit de Parfaite Pureté”, *passim*.

stabilization of the experience of the natural state and familiarization with its visionary manifestations. As far as visions are concerned, this may not be as evident for the *Sems sde* as it is for the *Klong sde* and *Man ngag sde* teachings but oral instructions associated with various *Sems sde* traditions — such as those included in the *gDams ngag mdzod* by Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas — do show that visionary developments also play an important role in the contemplation practice of the Mind Series. This is clearly stated in the *Gab pa dgu skor* of the Bon po tradition and particularly in the related set of *Sems smad* texts associated with this cycle.¹⁶

In the course of time, the *Man ngag sde* tradition gained a wider attraction, mostly because of its highly technical devices and practices, especially after the 14th century. In the *gter ma* texts for example, *Sems sde* and *Klong sde* teachings are barely represented, whereas they have kept a significant position in the uninterrupted tradition of the *bKa' ma*, down to the present day.¹⁷

3. The practice of rDzogs chen

As mentioned above, the main practice of rDzogs chen consists in experiencing the natural state of mind and becoming familiar with the increasing display of visionary manifestations which form the natural effulgence of one's real nature. In the *Man ngag sde* tradition, these two aspects of the practice are termed “Cutting-through-Rigidity” (*khregs chod*) and “Passing-over-the-Crest” (*thod rgal*). The first one entails remaining in the fresh and unaltered condition of mind, mostly by cultivating “the four modes of freely resting” (*cog bzhag bzhi*) which enable the practitioner to remain in the genuine nature of his mind. The four modes are styled as those of the mountain (*ri bo*, the posture), the ocean (*rgya mtsho*, the gaze), the Awareness (*rig pa*, the pure and perfect knowledge of the natural state), and the visions (*snang ba*). The last one is a link of some sort with the practice of *thod rgal* proper. When the yogi maintains the first three modes in a correct way, he should try to integrate all visions liable to appear during his practice and be able to remain stable in the experience of the natural state. In typical rDzogs chen terms, one says that he should remain in the condition of the mirror which is not affected by the reflections appearing on its surface. In this manner, he can also easily integrate the perceptions (*snang ba*, same word in Tibetan) of the five senses and remain again in the pure condition of the

¹⁶ The key work here is known as the *Rig pa'i khu byug* — not to be confused with the Father Tantra (*pha rgyud*) of the same tradition nor with the famed tantra bearing the same title in the Buddhist lineage of the Mind Series (see below) — of which sections are quoted and explained by Shar rdza bKra shis rgyal mtshan in his *dByings rig mdzod* and his *Kun bzang snying thig*. See Lopön Tenzin Namdak, *Heart Drops of Dharmakaya*, pp. 84 *et seq.*

¹⁷ On the lineages and general history of the three trends of rDzogs chen, see Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, pp. 25-53.

mirror. The key point here is to understand that the arising of visions and perceptions is natural and even inherent to the nature of mind. When these manifestations are just left as they are, they simply dissolve within the natural state without affecting the consciousness with discursive analysis, grasping, etc. In this way, the yogin is able to cultivate the experience of the natural state on all occasions and at every passing moment.

When he has become sufficiently familiar with this integration, he can then engage in the yoga of Passing-over-the-Crest. This practice is certainly the most representative of the rDzogs chen path. It is based on a series of key points (*gnad*) such as postures¹⁸, breathing techniques, object of focus, gazes, etc. Entirely performed during long retreats in total isolation, the practice itself relies on five kinds of supports: darkness (*mun pa*), the sky (*nam mkha'*) the sun (*nyi ma*), the moon (*zla ba*) and a butter lamp (*mar me*). During these practices, the yogin is confronted with the arising of four gradually intensified visionary experiences, namely:

1. the vision of manifest Reality (*chos nyid mngon sum gyi snang ba*) during which small visions of spheres of lights (*thig le*) and colors arise;
2. the vision of increased experiences (*nyams snang gong 'phel gyi snang ba*) in the course of which visions tend to become ever more complex and variegated;
3. the vision of the full measure of Awareness (*rig pa tshad phebs kyi snang ba*) which is characterized by the full development of the visionary aspect of the natural state displayed in infinite pure realms (*zhing khams*), etc.; and
4. the vision of the exhaustion of Reality (*chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba*) in the course of which the visionary process suddenly reverses and everything dissolves within the Primordial Purity (*ka dag*) of the natural state.

At the time of attaining the fourth vision, the yogin reaches the Rainbow Body (*'ja' lus*) of which four modalities are described in the texts: 1. the Body of the Great Transfer (*'pho ba chen po*), 2. the Great Rainbow Body (*'ja' lus chen po*), 3. the Small Transfer (*'pho ba chung ngu*) and 4. the Small Rainbow Body (*'ja' lus chung ngu*).¹⁹ There are various descriptions of these Bodies in biographical literature but the principles is that the mind of the yogin dissolves into the unborn (*skye med*) state of the Absolute Body (*chos sku*); his speech dissolves into mantric echoes while the physical matter of his

¹⁸ Three main postures are used in this practice but five were commonly mentioned in ancient cycles such as the *Bi ma snying thig* and the *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud*.

¹⁹ On these four modalities of the Rainbow Body, see Achard, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-154.

body transmutes into lights, rays, luminous spheres (*thig le*), etc. According to the level of realization achieved, relics such as hair and nails are left for worship whereas in other cases there are no remains of the physical aggregates left behind (*phung po lhag med*).

II. The history of the Buddhist tradition of rDzogs chen

It is nearly impossible to deal with all the main figures of the history of rDzogs chen without filling hundreds of pages on the subject. Here I have contented myself with a rather subjective choice of a few significant masters in each main period of religious history, mostly because an exhaustive approach would fill hundreds of pages. If the choice is indeed subjective, it has not been made at random as the masters who have been retained for the present study have left influential and significant works within the corpus of rDzogs chen teachings and have greatly contributed to its literary richness.

At present we have no evidence of any kind that would indicate that the rDzogs chen teachings originated in India. Of course, the tradition traces back its lineage to Indian figures but we have no objective source that could corroborate the fact. It is probably a dramatically fruitless task to research the matter but the assertion of the Indic origin should be investigated in the light of potential new discoveries in terms of literary legacy.²⁰

1. The revelation of rDzogs chen teachings in India

The first human master in the Buddhist lineage of rDzogs chen is known as dGa' rab rdo rje, a very shadowy figure whose legend is filled with allegories and visionary experiences.²¹ dGa' rab rdo rje was born to a virgin princess of Oḍḍiyāna and at still quite an early age, he received teachings directly from the sambhogakāya deity Vajrasattva. Later he defeated numerous paṇḍits in a debate held at the court of the King and his keen intelligence gained him fame. He appears to have spent most of his life in charnel grounds (*dur khrod*) where he gave tantric and rDzogs chen transmissions to non-human

²⁰ I have in mind here some works associated with the commentatorial tradition of the *Seventeen Tantras* (*rGyud bcu bdun*) — a corpus of teachings which was to have a tremendous influence on later compositions and revelations — which have been collected by Khempo Munsel in the newly compiled edition of the *bKa' ma*. I shall deepen the issue elsewhere.

²¹ On dGa' rab rdo rje, see H. Guenther, "Early Forms of Tibetan Buddhism", p. 86; Hanson-Barber, "The identification of dGa' rab rdo rje", *passim*; Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, pp. 31-33. For a faithful translation of the earliest account of dGa' rab rdo rje's life (the *Lo rgyus chen mo* from the *Bi ma snying thig*), see J. Valby, *The Great History of Garab Dorje, Manjushrimitra, Shri Singha, Jnanasutra and Vimalamitra*, pp. 15-21. See also Nyoshul Khenpo, *A Marvelous Garland of Rare Gems*, pp. 37-38.

beings and where he is said to have compiled all the instructions of the Great Perfection.²² At the end of his life, he reached the ultimate stage of the path of rDzogs chen, the Rainbow Body (*'ja' lus*), a sign of his total mastery over the teachings of the Great Perfection. At the time of his parinirvāṇa, he transmitted his ultimate testament (*zhal chems*, *'das rjes*) to Mañjuśrimitra, his main disciple.

With the latter master, we come to a figure who is also known beyond the circle of rDzogs chen teachings. Mañjuśrimitra is indeed recognized as a very important commentator of several works centered on Mañjuśrī, such as sādhanas, the famed *Mañjuśrīnamāsaṃgītī*, etc. As a renowned scholar, he was sent by the patriarchs of Nālanda monastery to debate with dGa' rab rdo rje and to demonstrate the heterodoxy of rDzogs chen. The fact that he was sent to dGa' rab rdo rje for such a purpose shows that these teachings had started to circulate and come to the ears of the monastic representatives of Buddhist orthodoxy. Upon meeting the master, Mañjuśrimitra realized the vanity of his intentions and asked dGa' rab rdo rje if he would accept him as his disciple. According to traditional accounts, Mañjuśrimitra collected all the rDzogs chen teachings from his master and later organized them into three series (*sde gsum*) which, as we have seen above are the Mind Series (*Sems sde*), the Space Series (*Klong sde*), and the Precepts Series (*Man ngag sde*).

The third master in the lineage was Śrī Siṃha who was to play a considerable role in the transmission of rDzogs chen teachings to three main personages: Jñānasūtra, Vimalamitra and Vairocana. Śrī Siṃha was of Central Asian origin and received the full transmission of his master Mañjuśrimitra. Later he retired to charnel grounds where he first taught Jñānasūtra, then Vimalamitra and finally Vairocana who met the master apparently quite some time after the transmissions given to Jñānasūtra and Vimalamitra. We'll see below that the type of teachings he received from Śrī Siṃha was also different. After he taught Jñānasūtra and Vimalamitra, the latter felt satisfied and left. Jñānasūtra on the contrary remained with the master and received further instructions from him, a series of innermost secret teachings he would in turn pass on to Vimalamitra. The quintessential teachings of these five masters — dGa' rab rdo rje, Mañjuśrimitra, Śrī Siṃha, Jñānasūtra and Vimalamitra — have been compiled in a collection known as the *Heart Drops Teachings of Vimalamitra* (*Bi ma snying thig*) that was supposedly hidden in the late 8th century and revealed later in the course of the 10th.²³

²² These amount to 6, 400, 000 verses according to traditional numbering.

²³ No version in Sanskrit or any Indian languages has yet been found of any of these texts. The tradition as we have it in terms of literature is thus entirely based on Tibetan texts (translations and compositions). Each of the five patriarchs mentioned above has left a testament (*zhal chems* or *'das rjes*) containing his ultimate teachings. See the translation of this set of works in Achard, *Les Testaments de Vajradhara et des Porteurs-de-Science*, pp. 97-118.

We have no trace of any Indian lineage after the last two masters — Jñānasūtra and Vimalamitra — and the role played by Padmasambhava in this line of transmission is rather obscure. He is said to have met both dGa' rab rdo rje and Śrī Siṃha and to have received advanced esoteric instructions from them but it is possible that he was linked back to this line of transmission in order to legitimize his spiritual legacy and to connect him to the highest of the Nine Vehicles.²⁴

2. The imperial period in Tibet

According to traditional accounts of the Great Perfection, the teachings of rDzogs chen were introduced in Tibet by Vairocana, Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava, all three disciples of Shri Siṃha. If it is difficult to clearly delineate the situation in which Great Perfection teachings concretely entered Tibet, there are nevertheless a few textual facts that seem to corroborate the traditional vision of these beginnings. Some texts have been found among the Dunhuang documents,²⁵ one of which is listed in the IDan kar ma *Catalogue*,²⁶ and some others may have existed in one form or another as early as the late 8th century.²⁷ The picture to draw from these elements is far from clear and convincing but what is certain is that the textual traditions which started to be discovered from the 10th century onwards — and which are said to be connected to 8th century masters — could not have come from nowhere, especially in the case of the *Man ngag sde* tradition which is a deeply complex one.²⁸

To roughly follow the traditional chronology of events, Padmasambhava was the first of the three masters mentioned above to play a particular role in the diffusion of higher tantric practices in the Land of Snow. He was a very famous magician and spiritual master, a double quality which was the main reason for his invitation in Tibet. According to later historical accounts, he took part in the foundation of the first monastery (bSam yas) and played a determining role in hiding treasure texts and artifacts (*gter ma*) throughout Tibet for future revelations. However, as far as rDzogs chen is concerned, his role still needs to be clarified since such a considerable set of texts have been

²⁴ Because data concerning this lineage exist only in the rNying ma school's own version of the early history of rDzogs chen, the common view in the field of modern tibetology is that of casting doubts on the overall authenticity of the tradition's assertions. In this perspective, the connection of Padmasambhava to this lineage appears questionable in view of the earliest texts associated with his name (such as the Pelliot 44 and the *Man ngag lta ba'i phreng ba*) which belong to the Mahā and Anuyoga systems. On the Pelliot 44, see Bischoff & Hartman, "Padmasambhava's Invention of the Phurbu", *passim*; Rob Mayer & Cathy Cantwell, "A Dunhuang Manuscript on Vajrakīlaya", in *Tibet Journal*, vol. XIX no. 1, pp. 54-67. On the *Man ngag lta ba'i phreng ba*, see Karmay, *op. cit.*, pp. 137 *et seq.*, and G. Baroetto, *L'insegnamento Esoterico di Padmasambhava*, *passim*, which is probably the best and most complete work on the subject.

²⁵ See Namkhai Norbu, *sBas pa'i rgum chung*, *passim*; S.G. Karmay, *The Great Perfection*, pp. 41-85. See also Sam Van Schaik, "The Early Days of the Great Perfection", p. 168 *et seq.*

²⁶ See M. Lalou, "Les textes bouddhiques au temps du roi Khri-sroñ-lde-bcan", text no. 610.

²⁷ See Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, pp. 240 *et seq.*

²⁸ I have discussed this at length in *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, *passim*.

associated with him since the 11th century onwards.²⁹ The essential cycle of Great Perfection teachings linked to him is the *Heart Drops of the Sky Dancers* (*mKha' 'gro snying thig*) which represents what is known as the “tradition of the mystic yogins” (*ku su lu pa'i lugs*), as opposed to other systems described as “traditions of erudites” (*paṇḍita'i lugs*), such as the texts associated with Vimalamitra. However, Padmasambhava himself stated that the time was not ripe for the diffusion of his *sNying thig* and that it was rather the perfect period for the teachings of Vimalamitra.

Vairocana was one of the first seven ordained monks in Tibet. He was a very bright child and was later sent to India in search of the Tantras of rDzogs chen. He received them from Śrī Siṃha and was authorized by the latter to transmit them to worthy recipients in Tibet. However, when he came back to the Tibetan court, he was banished to the eastern provinces where he actively spread the teachings of *Sems sde* and *Klong sde*.³⁰ One of his disciples, g.Yu sgra snying po, also played an important role in the transmission. The earliest rDzogs chen text available to us now is the *Rig pa'i khu byug*, which is described by the tradition as the first Great Perfection tantra introduced in Tibet by Vairocana (its translator). It is remarkably short, being composed of only six verses and has been found among the Dunhuang documents together with a commentary.³¹ This tantra has been the object of several books and studies but so far none of these have made use of other existing commentaries of this text in indigenous literature.³² Vairocana was subjected to criticism upon his return to Tibet and was eventually exiled to the Eastern regions of Khams where he spread the teachings he had brought from India.

At approximately the same time, Vimalamitra had been invited to Tibet, but he only started to teach rDzogs chen in the later phase of his stay in Tibet and apparently to a very limited audience. It also seems that, together with g.Yu sgra snying po, he played a decisive role in convincing the emperor Khri srong lde btsan to revoke Vairocana's exile in Eastern Tibet. Vimalamitra's translations

²⁹ The bulk of such works would amount to hundreds of volumes. Other masters such as Vimalamitra, gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes, etc., are associated with the *gter ma* phenomenon but on a lesser scale and with a more limited influence.

³⁰ For a translation of his biography known as the *Bee ro 'dra bag*, see Ani Jinpa Palmo, *The Great Image, passim*.

³¹ See S.G. Karmay, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-59.

³² I shall come back to the subject of this commentatorial literature in a forthcoming publication. So far, the most complete commentary available in English is Namkhai Norbu's *The Six Vajra Verses* which interprets the text according to the traditional framework of the Base, the Path and the Fruit. Another very important work from the same imperial period appears to have been the *sBas pa'i rgum chung* which was also thoroughly studied by Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche in *The Small Collection of Hidden Precepts*. Mysteriously this book by N. Norbu is barely ever quoted in academic literature despite the fact that it is probably one of the most interesting works written on the concerned period and on the literature associated in one way or the other with the root-text of the *sBas pa'i rgum chung*. The introduction and appendixes of *The Small Collection* should definitely retain the attention of scholars (even if the book saw print as early as 1984). For a later study of the *sBas pa'i rgum chung*, see S.G. Karmay, *The Great Perfection*, pp. 59-73.

of rDzogs chen texts were to have a lasting influence on the tradition of the Great Perfection insofar as he was involved in translating some of the most important works of the *Sems sde*, *Klong sde* and *Man ngag sde* teachings. He gave his *Heart Drops* teachings (the *Bi ma snying thig* and the *Seventeen Tantras*) to his main disciple Myang Ting nge 'dzin bzang po and departed for Wutaishan in China. Myang hid the texts in a pillar of the Zhwa'i lha khang temple while he transmitted the oral transmission related to these texts to 'Brom Rin chen 'bar ba, thus ensuring an uninterrupted transmission of these teachings.³³

The imperial period has also seen the coming of interesting figures such as Buddhagupta, gNyan dPal dbyangs and gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes who have left important works on rDzogs chen, with however a limited influence on later texts.³⁴ Sangs rgyas ye shes in particular composed a celebrated work entitled *The Lamp-Eye of Concentration* (*bSam gtan mig sgron*) which clearly delineates rDzogs chen as an individual Vehicle (*theg pa*) and which cites some of the most important Tantras of the *Sems sde* tradition.³⁵ In this work, the author patiently distinguishes the four main Buddhist traditions diffused in the imperial period: the gradualist and instantaneous approaches to Sūtra teachings, the tantric tradition of Mahāyoga (including the lineage of Anuyoga), and the teachings of the Great Perfection.

Towards the end of the 9th century, dramatic events shook up Central Tibet and the Yar lung dynasty, together with its administration, etc. However, a continuity of spiritual transmissions seems to have been maintained in various places in Tibet, involving various individuals such as gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes and a few others. Also, according to the tradition, the oral transmission (*snyan brgyud*) of numerous texts is said to have been upheld and faithfully handed over to the next generations of rNying ma masters, starting from the late 10th century onwards.

3. From the 10th to the 14th century

This period is certainly the golden age of rDzogs chen. During these four centuries, some of the most important Great Perfection collections were either revealed, composed or compiled. The first among these to appear during the late 10th century is that of the *gSang ba snying thig*.³⁶ It is a relatively

³³ This explains why the *Bi ma snying thig* and the *Seventeen Tantras* appear in both the *bKa' ma* and *gter ma* traditions.

³⁴ On Buddhagupta, see Namkhai Norbu, *op. cit.*, pp. 46 *et seq.* On gNyan dPal dbyangs, see Karmay, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-69. See also, S. Van Schaik, "The Early Days of the Great Perfection", pp. 190-195.

³⁵ It quotes the *Eighteen Tantras of the Mind Series* (*Sems sde bco brgyad*) which constitute the heart of the *Sems sde* trend of teachings.

³⁶ On the date of the rediscovery of a part of this cycle, see Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, p. 81.

complex set of inter-related texts roughly divided into two groups: a first set known as the *Seventeen Tantras* (*rGyud bcu bdun*) and a collection of related precepts known as the *Heart Drops of Vimalamitra* (*Bi ma snying thig*).³⁷ The history of these works and their introduction in Tibet started with a vision occurring in a dream: one of the Tibetan emperor's former ministers,³⁸ Myang Ting 'dzin bzang po, dreamt of a revered master named Vimalamitra, an expert in the teachings of the Great Perfection. Vimalamitra is then formally invited and teaches rDzogs chen in great secret to a chosen few (including the Emperor) but he only transmitted the complete set of teachings to Myang who, as we have seen, hid them in the Zhwa'i lha khang.³⁹ 'Brom Rin chen 'bar received his oral transmission (*snyan brgyud*) sometime around the late 8th - early 9th century and handed it over to sBas Blo gros dbang phyug who was the teacher of lDang ma dGe mchog. The latter was the father of lDang ma lhun rgyal, the then custodian of the Zhwa'i lha khang, and the one who discovered the hidden texts in a pillar of the temple. Later, Lhun rgyal transmitted them to lCe btsun Seng ge dbang phyug, an important figure in the early diffusion of these teachings.⁴⁰ The texts which make up the bulk of this revelation are probably the most important ones for the Buddhist lineage of rDzogs chen, all periods taken together. Their root-texts — the *Seventeen Tantras* — are often quoted in other revelations and are regarded as the canonical references around which the View, Meditation, etc., of rDzogs chen are build in a very coherent perspective. These works make up the tradition known as the Innermost Secret Cycle (*yang gsang bla med skor*) of the *Man ngag sde* teachings and are considered as containing the pith instructions of all rDzogs chen texts.

At the same time, several *Sems sde* and *Klong sde* transmissions were apparently handed over in a continuous way since the 8th century without having been hidden as *gter ma*. Some of these were apparently transmitted to Zur chen Shākya 'byung gnas (b. 954), a contemporary of lCe btsun — who was one of the key figure in the early development of the various trends that were to compose the rNying ma pa tradition in the middle of the 10th century. He was in particular associated with the A ro and Nyang traditions of *Sems sde* but he was also deeply interested in the *Man ngag sde* style of

³⁷ Traditionally, the collection is divided into three sets of teachings: 1. the *Seventeen Tantras*, 2. the *Bi ma snying thig*, and 3. the *119 Precepts* (*man ngag brgya bcu dgu*, most of which are actually included in the *Bi ma snying thig* while some seem to have been lost).

³⁸ The emperor at the time was Khri srong lde btsan (755-797) who issued a decree establishing Buddhism as the official religious tradition of Tibet. This led to the persecution of Bon in the central regions controlled by the Tibetan court.

³⁹ On this temple, see H. Richardson, "Tibetan inscriptions at the Zhwa'i Lha Khang", pp. 133-154. Interesting accounts of this temple are to be found in two works by Klong chen pa, *Zhwa padma dbang chen gyi bstod pa rol mo'i sprin phung*, pp. 158-165, and *Zhwa padma dbang chen gyi dkar chag gtsigs kyi yi ge zhib mo*, pp. 165-186. See also Mang rwa'i a nyag, *Zhwa padma dbang chen gyi gtsug lag khang gi lo rgyus phyogs bsdu lhaq bsam ljon pa*, pp. 55-66.

teachings. However, he could not receive the related instructions from his Buddhist masters, so he resolved to obtain such a transmission from a famed Bon po yogin living nearby. This Bon po master was called gShen rgyal lha rtse. According to the history of the *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud* lineage compiled by Bru rGyal ba g.yung drung (1242-1290),⁴¹ gShen rgyal lha rtse received rDzogs chen transmissions from two lineages holders of the *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud* tradition, Lhun grub mu thur and dPon chen btsan po.⁴² When he was living in his hermitage of g.Yung drung lha rtse, he was visited by Zur chen who, with much devotion and respect, requested the transmission of *Man ngag sde* teachings. gShen rgyal gave him a part of the *sNyan rgyud* instructions and even authorized him to "buddhicize" it by altering the vocabulary when necessary.⁴³ The line of transmission of this cycle is described (Bru rGyal ba, *op. cit.*, p. 566) as being the following: 1. gShen rgyal lha rtse, 2. Zur chen Shākya 'byung gnas, 3. lCe 'bum me, 4. lCe ston grags pa, 5. lCe gZung skyab, 6. lCe gZung po and bDud rtsi zhig po.⁴⁴

Rong zom Chos kyī bzang po (1012-1131) was another significant figure in the early development of the rNying ma school. He received many tantric teachings from the gSar ma or New Schools that were spreading during his time but he is also known as an important lineage holder of various *Sems sde* traditions such as the A ro lugs⁴⁵. He was a talented translator, a very famous scholar and was known as Rong zom Māhapaṇḍita. Unfortunately some of his works seem to have been lost in the course of time with the notable exception of his *Theg pa chen po tshul la 'jug pa* which is certainly one of his most important compositions together with his commentary on the *Guhyagarbhatantra*.

At approximately the same time, a bon po *gter ston* named sNye mo zhu yas (gNod sbyin 'bar)⁴⁶ discovered a set of rDzogs chen works belonging to the *sPyi ti* class of teachings and handed it

⁴⁰ On the chronology of the *Bi ma snying thig* and the cycle of the *Seventeen Tantras*, see R. Prats, "Tshe-dbang nor-bu's chronological notes", pp. 197-209; Achard, *L'Essence Perlée*, pp. 78-83.

⁴¹ *rDzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud kyī lo rgyus rnam thar dang bcas pa*, p. 566. See also Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, p. 215, for another story relating the integration of rDzogs chen bon po teachings by Zur po che within the rNying ma tradition.

⁴² This master is a highly revered figure, said to have translated the *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud* from the Zhang zhung language into Tibetan.

⁴³ This mostly means converting *bon* words into *chos* words, such as *bon sku* into *chos sku* (*dharmakāya*), *bon nyid* into *chos nyid* (*dharmatā*), etc. Bru rGyal ba states (*op. cit.*, p. 566) that the title Zur po che gave to the new version was *Rig pa khu byug* but this is certainly not in memory of the tantra of the same title in the *Sems sde* tradition but rather because one of the main ancient lineage holders of the *sNyan rgyud* teachings was the blue Cuckoo (*khu byug sngon po*), a manifestation of the Buddha 'Phrul gshen snang ldan. I have been unable to find any trace of this tradition modified by Zur chen in the collections available to me at the present time.

⁴⁴ bDud rtsi zhig po is known in the rNying ma tradition as Zhig po bdud rtsi (1143-1199) who extensively studied the system of *Sems sde* teachings diffused in the lCe lineage. His master lCe sgom Yon tan gzungs (1126-1195) is the same as the lCe gZung po mentioned by Bru rGyal ba.

⁴⁵ A system going back to the early master A ro Ye shes 'byung gnas. See Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, pp. 28-29.

⁴⁶ sNye mo is a toponym referring to a region west of Central Tibet. Zhu yas is the name of a famous bon po clan to which belonged the illustrious rDzogs chen master Zhu yas Legs po, a disciple of gShen chen Klu dga'. On both masters, see Dan Martin, *Bon Treasures*, *passim*.

over to Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1124-1192). This is probably the earliest mention of *sPyi ti* in any work available to us at present. The *sPyi ti* belongs to the *Man ngag sde* class of teachings and has been considered as referring to "general" (*spyi*) instructions of the Precepts Series. There is actually more to it than general instructions since this subdivision of the *Man ngag sde* appears as a very complex one. Some of the teachings clearly designated as *sPyi ti* have also been discovered in the late 15th century by Pa ro gter ston and were particularly in vogue in Kaḥ thog monastery in Eastern Tibet.

With Nyang ral again we come to the discovery of the first *Yang ti* Tantras of rDzogs chen. *Yang ti* cycles are considered as the ultimate pith instructions series and the core of all Great Perfection teachings. The most important work discovered by Nyang ral on this subject is his *rGya mtsho klong gsal* which is contained in the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* collections. Nyang ral is often associated with the Mahāyoga tradition because he revealed the famed *bKa' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* but his rDzogs chen *gter ma* are no less important. Nyang ral's son received his father's sets of revelations and transmitted them to Gu ru Chos dbang (1212-1270), a very famous *gter ston* of his own. Chos dbang revealed a bulk of rDzogs chen teachings centered on the *Yang ti* instructions called *Yang ti sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor*. The main Tantra associated with this cycle that he revealed is the *sPros bral don gsal* which has become the root-text for all *Yang ti* instructions, in the same way that the *Kun byed rgyal po* is the root-tantra of all *Sems sde* texts, the *Klong chen rab 'byams* for all *Klong sde* works, etc.⁴⁷ Gu ru Chos dbang's teachings spread throughout Central and Eastern Tibet, Nepal and Himalayan regions.

During the later part of the 13th century appeared a *gter ston* whose textual discoveries were to have a lasting effect on upcoming rDzogs chen literature: Padma Las 'brel rtsal. His dates are unclear (1293-1315?), mostly because Klong chen pa (1308-1364) claimed to be his rebirth. When he was still quite young, Padma Las 'brel rtsal took novice vows and received the name Tshul khriims rdo rje. Soon afterwards he found a Treasure list (*gter gyi kha byang*) as well as a key (*lde mig*) to open the Treasure site where was hidden the *gter ma* he was destined to reveal. At 23,⁴⁸ he revealed the *mKha' 'gro snying thig* cycle from the Khra bo rock in Dwags po. However, he was not able to connect with the proper consort at the time and had to hand over all the texts and transmissions to sPrul sku Legs ldan. Shortly after, Padma Las 'brel rtsa passed away in Phying dkar in Lower Byar region. sPrul sku Legs ldan gave the transmission of these works to the 3rd Karma pa, Rang byung rdo rje (1284-1339) who

⁴⁷ On this tantra, see Christopher Wilkinson, *Clear Meaning, passim*.

⁴⁸ Twenty-two according to our way of calculating age.

combined the teachings of the *Bi ma snying thig* and the *mKha' 'gro snying thig* into a single work later known by the tradition as the *Karma snying thig*.

Klong chen pa is probably the most important master of this period. His works are certainly those which would have the most lasting influence on the rNying ma tradition as a whole. He was first trained in both Sūtric and Tantric matters — according to both rNying ma and gSar ma schools — but he soon met his root-master Rig 'dzin Kumaradza (1266-1343), from whom he received the *sNying thig* teachings associated with the Vimalamitra tradition. Later on he would compose a famous cycle in two volumes on these *sNying thig* called the *Bla ma yang tig*. In his early 30's, he also received the *mKha' 'gro snying thig* through the intermediary of a yogi called 'Od zer go cha (and also through visionary transmission), and elaborated the teachings of this cycle into his own *mKha' 'gro yang tig* in three volumes. Later, he would combine the teachings of his *Bla ma yang tig* and *mKha' 'gro yang tig* into his celebrated *Zab mo yang tig* which thus contains the essence of the teachings associated with Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava. His masterworks remain however his famed *Seven Treasures* (*mDzod bdun*) which cover all the teachings of the rNying ma tradition, the masterpiece of this series being the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* (*Theg mchog mdzod*) which covers all key-points related to the *Seventeen Tantras*.⁴⁹

During the second part of the 14th century, Rig 'dzin rGod ldem (1337-1408) revealed an important body of texts that were to make up the system known as the Northern Treasures (*Byang gter*). The most significant among these are the *Kun bzang dgongs pa zang thal* which shares many similar passages (and sometimes whole texts) with the *Bi ma snying thig* and *mKha' 'gro snying thig*. It is a complex set of works linked to Padmasambhava, Vairocana and Vimalamitra.⁵⁰

During the later part of the 14th century appeared rDo rje gling pa (1346-1405) who is regarded by both the Bon and the rNying ma traditions as one of their most important Treasure revealers (*gter ston*). Indeed, under the name of Bon zhig g.Yung drung gling pa, he revealed several Bon *gter ma* such as the *rDzogs chen gser thur*, the *Tshe dbang bod yul ma*, etc. On the rNying ma side, he revealed three cycles which until now have been rather neglected in Western studies of rDzogs chen: 1. the “Father Tantra” (*pha rgyud*) cycle known as the *lTa ba klong yangs*; 2. the “Mother Tantra” (*ma rgyud*) collection called *Klong gsal nyi ma*; and 3. the *Hūṃ skor snying thig* which represents the *gnyis*

⁴⁹ Two of Klong chen pa's *Treasures* have been published in translations to date: the *gNas lugs mdzod* and the *Chos dbyings mdzod*. See the bibliography *infra* under Richard Barron.

⁵⁰ The *Ka dag rang byung rang shar* is another important rDzogs chen *gter ma* discovered by Rig 'dzin rGod ldem together with the *Kun bzang dgongs pa zang thal*.

med rgyud or Non-dual Tantras. rDo rje gling pa's activities were mostly centered in Bhutan, even if his textual Treasures spread in some way in Tibet. His Bon texts of rDzogs chen are regarded as very significant works for the Bon tradition and are still being taught and practiced by modern Bon pos, both in exile and in Tibet.

Dung mtsho ras pa phyi ma was another famous *gter ston* who appeared in Southern Tibet during the later decades of the 14th century. He was the incarnation of a former bKa' brgyud master of the previous generation and was named after him. He is mostly remembered because of one cycle of rDzogs chen teachings that he revealed on the sGam po mountain which is entitled *The Single Golden Syllable of the Great Perfection's Black Quintessence* (*rDzogs chen yang ti nag po gser gyi 'bru gcig*). This set of teachings is regarded as containing some of the most profound instructions of the rNying ma tradition. Due to their popularity in Eastern Tibet in the first part of the 20th century, several texts belonging to this collection have even been translated into Chinese, mostly according to the transmission of Gangs dkar rin po che who passed away in the 1950's.

4. From the 15th to the 17th century

This period, sometimes regarded as intermediate in the literary development of rDzogs chen, has seen the advent of numerous traditions of rDzogs chen. It was in fact a period of consolidation and of wide diffusion of the teachings of the Great Perfection.⁵¹ It has witnessed the coming of many great masters, starting with Ratna gling pa (1403-1479) who made the first coherent compilation of the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*, the rNying ma Canon. Ratna gling pa was an indefatigable recipient of rNying ma transmissions which he sought all over Tibet. During his time, several lines of teachings were on the verge of disappearing, mostly because only single copies of the endangered texts existed in isolated monasteries or hermitages. He is said to have found the bulk of his future *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* version at Zur 'Ug pa lung, the fief of Zur po che,⁵² and to have received the oral transmissions associated with these Tantras from the only surviving master holding this transmission, Mes sgom bSam gtan bzang po, a very old man who whispered to him the *lung*⁵³ of the texts on his death bed. Ratna gling pa was also a famous text revealer (*gter ston*) who discovered the *Klong gsal snying thig* cycle of rDzogs chen.

⁵¹ In this section, I have only retained a handful of names which have attracted my attention during past researches but it would be interesting to list here all masters of this period who contributed to the teachings of rDzogs chen.

⁵² Zur chen Śākya 'byung gnas, see above in section 3.

In the second half of the 15th century and early decades of the 16th century, Padma gling pa (1450-1521) contributed to the spread of new cycles of rDzogs chen teachings, such as the *Kun bzang dgongs 'dus* and the *Klong gsal gsang ba snying bcud*⁵⁴ which represents the main Great Perfection cycles associated with his tradition. He also revealed abridged versions of the *Seventeen Tantras* and numerous other *gter ma* dealing with tantric and rDzogs chen teachings. Padma gling pa was a controversial master but he was also regarded as an authentic incarnation of the famed Klong chen pa. His teachings and collected works spread throughout Bhutan, and Southern, Central and Eastern Tibet.⁵⁵

Around the same period, bsTan gnyis gling pa Padma Tshe dbang rgyal po (1480-1535)⁵⁶ gave a new impetus to the tradition of the “Quintessence” (*Yang ti*) with his revelation of the *Yang tig ye shes mthong grol*, an important cycle centered on the Peaceful and Wrathful deities (*zhi khro*) who appear during visionary manifestations experienced in the course of specific spiritual retreats.⁵⁷ bsTan gnyis gling pa is best known for his rediscovery of the *Sangs rgyas dgongs 'dus* corpus of teachings which covers no less than fifteen individual *gter ma* cycles, including Bon texts. With the exception of the *Yang tig ye shes mthong grol*, one of his most famous Great Perfection treasure appears to be his *Refined Gold of the Great Perfection* (*rDzogs chen gser zhun*) which has become one of the key cycles of Bon teachings on rDzogs chen. According to several works belonging to this cycle, it appears that Padmasambhava requested the *Refined Gold* directly from the god gShen lha 'od dkar during a visionary meeting with the deity in a palace located in the kingdom of Zhang zhung. He then entrusted it to his consort Ye shes mtsho rgyal who hid it as a treasure. Given its association with Padmasambhava and Ye shes mtsho rgyal, it would have been legitimate to consider this cycle as belonging to the “New Bon” (*bon gsar*) genre of teachings. However, mKhan po Nyi ma bstan 'dzin (b. 1813) has included it in his catalogue of authentic works making up the Bon *Kanjur* and it has since been considered as a relevant “Eternal Bon” (*g.yung drung bon*) cycle of its own.

⁵³ This takes the form of a reading transmission.

⁵⁴ This cycle belongs to some of the earlier discoveries made by Padma gling pa in Bum thang sNa ring brag. See for instance Padma gling pa, *dNgos gzhi'i khrid yig don khiril lam gyi sgron me*, p. 27.

⁵⁵ On Padma gling pa, see Padma Tshewang & al., *The Treasure Revealer of Bhutan*, *passim*.

⁵⁶ He is known as g.Yung drung Tshe dbang rgyal po or simply Tshe dbang rgyal po in the Bon tradition.

⁵⁷ Such retreats imply sky and sun gazing practices, as well as meditation in a completely dark cell and known as a “dark retreat” (*mun mtshams*, usually performed for 49 days), etc. On this cycle and its specific retreats, see Achard, “bsTan gnyis gling pa (1480-1535) et la Révélation du *Yang tig ye shes mthong grol*”, pp. 57-96. The spelling *yang tig* is recurrent in this cycle, although it should definitely be spelt *yang ti*, to differentiate these teachings from those presented as the ultra pith of *sNying thig* cycles. This spelling concurs with the standard usage of the expressions *spyi ti* and *a ti* with which the *yang ti* is often associated.

Another Tshe dbang rgyal po who was a younger contemporary of bsTan gnyis gling pa became famous under the name of sNang rtse gter ston Zhig po gling pa (1524-1583).⁵⁸ He was an active Treasure revealer (*gter ston*) and received nearly all the *bka' ma* and *gter ma* lineages available during his time. His *Heart Drops of the Three Bodies* (*sKu gsum snying thig*) is said to contain the quintessence of his rDzogs chen teachings.⁵⁹ Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552-1624), one of Zhig po gling pa's main disciple, upheld his master's lineage and wrote a celebrated defense of the rNying ma tradition. However, in the course of time, the texts belonging to Zhig po gling pa's tradition became very rare, probably because of the radical position taken by the Vth Dalai Lama towards Zhig po and Sog bzlog pa.

Some masters in this lineage were also associated with other lines of transmission of rDzogs chen teachings such as sTag bla Padma Ma ti (1591-1637) who studied under the guidance of 'Ja' tshon snying po (1585-1656). This important *gter ston* is directly linked to the early diffusion of the *Man ngag sde* as he is regarded as an emanation of Myang Ting 'dzin bzang po who hid the *Seventeen Tantras* in the Zhwa'i lha khang in Central Tibet. 'Ja' tshon snying po's most famous *gter ma* discovery is certainly that of the *Embodiment of the Precious Jewels* (*dKon mchog spyi 'dus*) but in the field of the Great Perfection, he is remembered for his *Wishfulfilling Gem of Hayagrīva and Vajravarahi* (*rTa phag yid bzhin nor bu*) which contains *Yang ti* teachings rarely described in other works. One of the characteristics of 'Ja' tshon snying po's *gter ma* is that they were made in public (*khrom gter*), a phenomenon which brought him numerous devoted disciples.

Among these appeared Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med (1597-1650) who was recognized as an emanation of both Vimalamitra and Klong chen pa. Nam mkha' 'jigs med discovered an extraordinary *gter ma* called the *bKa' gsang rdo rje snying po* which synthesizes most of the rNying ma teachings as a whole.⁶⁰ He is however best known for his *Rig 'dzin srog sgrub* cycle of *gter ma* texts which he widely diffused in Sikkim, initiating there a special lineage of rDzogs chen Atiyoga.

Earlier in this period, sPa gro gter ston Tshe ring rdo rje (late 15th- early 16th century?) was revealing an important set of *sPyi ti* rDzogs chen teachings which was widely diffused in Eastern Tibet and especially in Kaḥ thog monastery. His teachings cover the whole path of rDzogs chen, from preliminary practices down to the highly advanced yoga performed during dark retreats (*mun*

⁵⁸ Tshe dbang rgyal po was his novice name and Zhig po gling pa is *gter ston* name.

⁵⁹ It seems this cycle has often been rare and is no longer available.

⁶⁰ This cycle also contains interesting rDzogs chen teachings; see for example his *bKa' gsang rdo rje snying po las rdzogs pa chen po theg pa gzhan las khyad par du 'phags pa'i brjod don*, in his *Collected Works*, vol. 4, pp. 119-166.

mtshams) and visionary practices based on sun and sky gazing. This set of short works became very famous since most of the lineage holders of this cycle — not to mention unknown individuals — are said to have reached the Rainbow Body (*ja' lus*) in greater numbers than in other lineages of transmission.⁶¹

This *sPyi ti* tradition in Kaḥ thog was perpetuated in the treasure discoveries of bDud 'dul rdo rje (1615-1672) and gTer chen Klong gsal snying po (1625-1692), together with the long uninterrupted lineage of *bKa' ma* teachings which had become one of the trademarks of Kaḥ thog monastery. However, it seems that some of these traditions were disappearing during the middle of the 17th century in Kaḥ thog and one of Klong gsal snying po's sons (bSod nams lde'u btsan) had to receive it from gTer bdag gling pa in Central Tibet in order to spread them again in Kaḥ thog and surrounding regions.

This period was very rich in terms of *gter ma* discoveries, composition of new works, etc., and in this respect many contemporaries of bDud 'dul rdo rje and Klong gsal snying po appeared as significant masters in the literary legacy of rDzogs chen. Among them, rTse le sNa tshogs rang grol (b. 1608) is a very fascinating figure who brought together the lineages of Mahāmdurā (*Phyag rgya chen po*) and rDzogs chen. If this was certainly not an innovation on his part, his works had a lasting influence because of their clarity, conciseness and profound meaning. Several of these are now available in English, the most important one certainly being his *Nyi ma'i snying po* which contains a synthesis of rDzogs chen according to the *Man ngag sde* approach.⁶² sNa tshogs rang grol was recognized as an emanation of the translator Vairocana and studied under the guidance of 'Ja' tshon snying po (1585-1656), deepening his understanding and experience of the Great Perfection. His works were and still are quite widespread in the rNying ma and bKa' brgyud lineages.

One of his contemporaries, Rig 'dzin Phrin las lhun grub (1611-1662) had a similar eclectic influence and was an important link in the transmission of *Yang ti* teachings associated with bsTan gnyis gling pa. He was himself a disciple of Zur Chos dbyings rang grol (1604-1669)⁶³ and Gong ra lo chen (1595-1655)⁶⁴. He also trained his son, gTer bdag gling pa (see below), in all the rNying ma

⁶¹ This extraordinary cycle has been preserved by Kong sprul Yon tan rgya mtsho in his *Rin chen gter mdzod* compilation, vol. 90, pp. 373-417.

⁶² This work has been translated into English by Erik Pema Kunsang in *The Circle of the Sun* (see the bibliography under Tsele Natsok Rangdrol). See also, H. Guenther, *Meditation Differently*, pp. 95-192.

⁶³ He transmitted the *sNying thig* teachings to the Vth Dalai Lama.

⁶⁴ Gong ra lo chen (gZhan phan rdo rje) is also an important master in the *Yang ti* tradition (mostly that of Dung mtsho ras pa phyi ma). He had copies made of the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*, two of which he sent to Kong po and Khams (Dan Martin, "NGB Historical Notes, p. 5).

cycles he had had transmission of and especially in all the rDzogs chen teachings he received from his own masters.

Another *bla ma* who upheld both gSar ma and rNying ma lineages and who played an active role in the diffusion of rDzogs chen teachings at that time was Karma chags med (1613-1678), a young disciple of the Sixth Zhwa dmar (Gar dbang Chos kyi dbang phyug, 1584-1630) and a key figure in the transcription of the *gNam chos* teachings revealed by gTer chen Mi 'gyur rdo rje (1645-1667).⁶⁵

rDzogs chen Padma rig 'dzin (1625-1697) was a disciple of Karma chags med (1613-1678), the fifth Dalai Lama and several other important masters of the 17th century. He was a significant lineage holder of the *mKha' 'gro snying thig* revealed by Padma Las 'brel rtsal in the 14th century and was the founder of rDzogs chen monastery in the Ru dam region of Khams. He actually built a small hermitage called bSam gtan chos gling but given the fame of his teachings, his small retreat place rapidly grew into a monastery. He was an important link between the lineages developed in Central Tibet and those that had already spread or were then spreading in Khams.

gTer bdag gling pa (1646-1714), one of Padma rig 'dzin's masters, is certainly the major figure of this period. Together with his brother Lo chen Dharma Śrī (1654-1717), he prepared the first complete edition of the *bKa' ma* teachings and was also responsible for bringing together a version of the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*. He was also a very important *gter ston* in his own right and revealed the famed *A ti zab don snying po*. This cycle contains some of the clearest instructions belonging to the *Man ngag sde* style of teachings, including a history of the rDzogs chen tradition, preliminary practices (*sngon 'gro*), the main practice (*dnegos gzhi*) with its teachings on Cutting-through-Rigidity (*khregs chod*) and Passing-over-the-Crest (*thod rgal*), dark retreats (*mun mtshams*), sleep and dream yogas, as well as a rare set of instructions dealing with confrontations (*ngo sprod*), with the various aspects of the natural state. His daughter, Mi 'gyur dpal sgron (1699-1769), contributed a famed extensive commentary on this *gter ma*, mostly centered on the preliminaries. Lo chen Dharma Śrī himself wrote an appendix to this collection dealing with the practice of Cutting-through-Rigidity. gTer bdag gling pa's teachings were quite influential but eventually became rather neglected by the later generations of rNying ma pa masters. Like so many other cycles, they were eclipsed by the *Klong chen snying thig* of 'Jigs med gling pa (see below), even though this cycle contains the quintessence of

⁶⁵ Some of Karma chags med's teachings on rDzogs chen have recently appeared in two books: *A Spacious Path to Freedom* and *Naked Awareness*. See bibliography under Karma Chagmé.

all rDzogs chen teachings going back to Vairocana, Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava. gTer bdag gling pa was also a disciple and a master of the great Vth Dalai Lama (Ngag dbang Blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617-1682) to whom he transmitted numerous *gter ma* cycles, including his own *A ti zab don snying po*.

5. From the 18th to the 20th century

The 18th century was marked by 'Jigs med gling pa (1729-1798), a remarkable figure whose life and works influenced the whole rNying ma tradition.⁶⁶ He was an eclectic personage and a renown yogi who discovered the *Klong chen snying thig*, a cycle of teachings which is probably the most widely spread rnying ma cycle. In certain branches of the lineage it has even eclipsed the *sNying thig* texts of the preceding centuries. 'Jigs med gling pa's work is a complex one, blending all the instructions of the rNying ma tradition and containing works associated with Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga.⁶⁷ He is also the author of a very famous work known as the *Treasury of Qualities (Yon tan mdzod)* which covers the teachings of Sūtra, Tantra and rDzogs chen in a very coherent fashion.⁶⁸ The text has been commented by the author himself and by various lineage holders and is a key-reference in modern rNying ma pa circles. The teachings of the *Klong chen snying thig* were so influential that they also developed branches in other Buddhist traditions, such as the bKa' brgyud pa and Sa skya pa orders. One branch of the bKa' brgyud school — the 'Bri gung bka' brgyud lineage — is especially connected to this cycle and its present head, rTogs ldan rin po che, is an active contemporary leading exponent of the *Klong chen snying thig*.

'Jigs med gling pa's foremost disciple was the first rDo grub chen rin po che ('Jigs med phrin las 'od zer, 1745-1821) who strived for the diffusion of these teachings.⁶⁹ Among the other heirs in the

⁶⁶ On 'Jigs med gling pa, see J. Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self, passim*; and also S. Goodman, "Rig-'dzin 'Jigs-med gling-pa and the *kLongchen sNying-Thig*", pp. 133-146. For translations of the root rDzogs chen texts of the *Klong chen snying thig*, see the following note.

⁶⁷ The section of Atiyoga texts — with the notable exception of the *Ye shes bla ma* — has been translated by S. Van Schaik in *Approaching the Great Perfection, passim*. The *Ye shes bla ma* is the most important work of the collection and is a compilation of techniques widely available in previous *sNying thig* cycles.

⁶⁸ Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1998. This new edition of the *Yon tan mdzod* is based on a xylographic version of the text prepared by bSod nams dar rgyas and was published by the Shri Simha monastic college of rDzogs chen monastery in Eastern Tibet. The original text of the *Yon tan mdzod* was composed by 'Jigs med gling pa in Padma 'od gling in Central Tibet at the behest of Chos rje Brag phug pa from La stod. See *Yon tan mdzod*, pp. 130-131. According to T. Thondup (*Masters of Meditation and Miracles*, p. 334), this Chos rje Brag phug pa was one of the foremost recipients of the *Klong chen snying thig* cycle.

⁶⁹ It is through him that 'Jigs med gling pa had contact with the royal house of sDe dge, a connection which is supposed to have led up to a xylographic edition of the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* prepared by 'Jigs med gling pa. The fact is however not properly established since there is apparently only one xylographic edition of the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* in sDe dge and it is that of 'Gyur med Tshe dbang mchog grub. See Achard, "La liste des Tantras du rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum selon l'édition établie par Kun mkhyen 'Jigs med gling pa", *passim*. 'Jigs med gling pa made a list of the texts that should constitute the *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* but this list is different from that of the actual contents of the xylographic edition of the collection made by Tshe dbang mchog grub. See *id.*, "Rig 'dzin Tshe dbang mchog grub (1761-1829) et la constitution du rNying ma rgyud 'bum de sDe dge", pp. 43-89.

lineage of transmission are 'Jigs med rgyal ba'i myu gu (18th-19th century) and one of his main disciples, dPal sprul rin po che (1808-1887, O rgyan 'Jigs med chos kyī dbang po), together with several other important figures. dPal sprul rin po che in particular played a key role in the reviving of ancient *sNying thig* cycle and even wrote a celebrated commentary on the three stanzas of dGa' rab rdo rje's testament, the *Tshig gsum gnad brdeg*.⁷⁰

The second most important disciple of rGyal ba'i myu gu was the famed 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po (1820-1892) who was a founder of the *Ris med* movement, together with Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813-1899) and gTer chen mChog gyur gling pa (1829-1870). mKhyen brtse was a remarkable individual who received all the main lineages of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism, as well as several Bon po lineages of transmission.⁷¹ He was a visionary and a *gter ston* himself, revealing many Treasures of various length and contents. The most famous rDzogs chen cycle he revealed is the *lCe btsun snying thig*, an important work linked to the 11th century figure of lCe btsun seng ge dbang phyug. He also composed numerous works on diverse subjects and became an inspiring master for generations of disciples.

Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, mKhyen brtse's friend, master and disciple, is certainly the one who played the most influential role in the dissemination of the *gter ma* teachings. He undertook to assemble all the major *gter ma* lineages in a large collection known as *The Treasury of Rediscovered Teachings (Rin chen gter mdzod)*, thus reviving traditions that were on the verge of disappearing. The Atiyoga section of this collection contains selections of the most important rDzogs chen *gter ma* teachings, with the exception of *Klong sde* instructions which are rather scarce among *gter ma* discoveries. However, several individual texts and cycles dealing with the Great Perfection are spread throughout the collection (i.e., not only in the Atiyoga section), starting with the *rDor sems thugs sgrub* of gTer bdag gling pa, etc. In another of his compilations, the *gDams ngag mdzod*, Kong sprul collected various rDzogs chen lineages — this time of *Sems sde*, *Klong sde* and *Man ngag sde* — from the *bKa' ma* tradition, together with Mahāyoga and Anuyoga cycles of instructions.

Kong sprul's collection of the *Treasury of Rediscovered Teachings* greatly benefited from the various revelations made by mChog gyur gling pa. Despite his early death at the age of 41, mChog gyur gling pa was able to reveal a considerable body of texts, including key-works for the rDzogs chen

⁷⁰ On the root-work by dGa' rab rdo rje, see Achard, *Les Testaments de Vajradhara*, pp. 97-102. For dPal sprul's commentary, see *id.*, *Le Docte et Glorieux Roi*, *passim*.

⁷¹ He was both a master and a disciple of gTer ston bDe chen gling pa (1833-1893) with whom he shared numerous teachings. He also financed the printed edition of the 13 volumes of this *gter ston*'s revelations.

tradition. His *Rigs gsum snying thig* for instance contains significant works on *khregs chod* and *thod rgal* but his most important Great Perfection teachings were those included in his *rDzogs chen sde gsum* and his *Kun bzang thugs tig*.⁷²

Nyag bla Padma bdud 'dul (1816-1872) was an earlier contemporary of these three masters and has become famous because for reaching the ultimate stage of rDzogs chen, the Rainbow Body (*'ja' lus*). From mDo mkhyen rtse Ye shes rdo rje (1800-1859?), he received the transmission of the *Klong chen snying thig* as well as numerous oral instructions pertaining to the *sNying thig* genre. Later, in 1853, he received the teachings associate with the *Yang ti* cycle revealed by Dung mtsho ras pa and practiced them intensively. He actually did a six year retreat and started to write down the visionary teachings he received during that time from dākinīs. He has revealed several textual treasures including the celebrated *Natural Freedom Embracing the Sky* (*mKha' khyab rang grol*) which he transmitted to some of his most faithful disciples.⁷³ Among these were Rig 'dzin Byang chub rdo rje (who was also a disciple of Shar rdza bKra shis rgyal mtshan for whom see below) and A 'dzom 'brug pa ('Gro 'dul dpa' bo rdo rje, 1842-1924).⁷⁴

A 'dzom 'brug pa dedicated his entire life to the practice of rDzogs chen. In the first part of his life, he was a fully ordained monk but he later became a lay master and refused to take on the charge of leading a monastic community. He received Great Perfection teachings from the most famous and accomplished masters of his time, including mKhyen brtse'i dbang po, Kong sprul and several others. Through these transmissions, he was connected to the ancient *sNying thig* cycles such as the *Heart Drops of Vimalamitra* (*Bi ma snying thig*) and the *Heart Drops of the Sky Dancers* (*mKha' 'gro snying thig*)⁷⁵ but also to the newer traditions such as that of 'Jigs med gling pa (with the *Klong chen snying thig*) or the *gter ma* revealed by some of his contemporaries.⁷⁶ He also had Bon po masters as well as several disciples from this tradition. He had some of the money donated to him used to prepare xylographic prints of many important rDzogs chen cycles, including the *Seventeen Tantras* (*rGyud bcu bdun*) and many others.

⁷² These three cycles respectively correspond to the 7th, 9th and 29th *gter mas* revealed by mChog gyur gling pa. See dKon mchog 'gyur med bsTan pa'i rgyal mtshan, *gTer chen mchog gyur bde chen gling pa'i rnam thar bkra shis dbyangs kyi yan lag gsal byed ces bya ba*, pp. 217-225, 225-229 and 249-250.

⁷³ Together with the *mKha' 'gro snying thig* and other cycles, the *mKha' khyab rang grol* is an important collection belonging to the Eastern Treasures (*shar gter*) which were widely spread in Khams and neighboring regions.

⁷⁴ On Padma bdud 'dul, see Namkhai Norbu, "Il Canto dell' Energia", *passim*. For a full translation of Padma bdud 'dul's biography, see Oriol Aguilar Vila, *El Loto del Nyag rong*, *passim*.

⁷⁵ Together with their complements written by Klong chen pa and making up the collection of the *sNying thig ya bzhi*.

⁷⁶ In particular, he received the *lCe btsun snying thig* from mKhyen brtse'i dbang po.

The master who probably best exemplifies the rDzogs chen tradition in the early 20th century was Shar rdza bKra shis rgyal mtshan (1859-1934). He was a renown Bon po monk who upheld the traditions of Eternal Bon (*g.yung drung bon*) and New Bon (*bon gsar*), considering both lineages as authentic lines of transmissions going back to sTon pa gshen rab⁷⁷ and various 8th century figures such as Dran pa nam mkha', Vairocana and even Padmasambhava. His *Collected Works (bka' 'bum)* in 16 volumes show a remarkable scope of interest, even if rDzogs chen and higher tantric instructions are the most widely representative of his teachings. Shar rdza rTogs ldan, as he is often referred to by his contemporaries, studied with dBra ston bsTan 'dzin dbang rgyal (1832-?) and gTer ston bDe chen gling pa (1833-1893) from whom he received numerous teachings on Sūtra, Tantra and rDzogs chen. He was closely associated with a famed *gter ston* called gSang sngags gling pa (b. 1864) who brought him several of his *gter ma* teachings including a very important tantra called *The Tantra of the Principles of the Three Bodies (sKu gsum don rgyud)*. Basing himself on this tantra and the precepts of the *A khrid* and *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud* traditions, he combined the instructions of these cycles and elaborated an impressive set of teachings known as the *Natural Arising of the Three Bodies (sKu gsum rang shar)* which contains the core of all rDzogs chen teachings.⁷⁸ He also authored the *Treasury of Space and Awareness (dByings rig mdzod)*, a two volume work covering all rDzogs chen lineages of Bon (although not those of New Bon). This *Treasury* is certainly his masterpiece and is regarded by modern Bon po lineage holders as one of the most important works of the whole tradition. Shar rdza rin po che even gave a reading of this text to the young 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse Chos kyi blo gros (1896-1959) as he was in the sDe dge region. At the end of his life, Shar rdza rin po che realized the Rainbow Body (*'ja' lus*) in Eastern Tibet and his lineage of transmission has been kept very precious down to the present day, both among Bon pos in exile and in Tibet.

III. Contemporary masters of rDzogs chen

The 20th century has seen the coming of many great spiritual masters of the Great Perfection, but not necessarily in greater number than during the previous centuries. It would seem that the relative widespread of rDzogs chen teachings in the West is a sign that there are more masters of the Great Perfection than in the past but this is a misleading deduction. If it is true that rDzogs chen was taught

⁷⁷ sTon pa gshen rab mi bo che is regarded by Bon followers as the founding Buddha of their tradition. According to them, gSang ba 'dus pa, an enlightened figure of the Bon pantheon, was requested by sTon pa gshen rab to manifest as the Buddha Śākyamuni in order to convert heretics to the Dharma.

⁷⁸ In modern Bon po circles, the collection has been nick-named as “the real teachings” of rDzogs chen.

in stricter contexts before the dramatic events that befell Tibet in the late 1950's, it does not mean that there were less rDzogs chen masters in the past. On the contrary what is true is that the activities of the *Ris med* movement in the last decades of the 19th century and early decades of the 20th century had a lasting influence on the spiritual masters from Eastern Tibet who went into exile in the late 1950's. One of the characteristics of this movement was the emphasis put on rDzogs chen and its particular practices.

Since the exile of Tibetans during the late 50's and early 60's, several great lineage holders of various rDzogs chen traditions have taught in the West and other countries (Nepal, India, Russia, Taiwan, etc.), perpetuating the teachings of the Great Perfection with much care and dedication. It is beyond the scope of the present article to portray them all, so I shall limit myself to a handful of these masters, especially to those who had a particular personal connection to rDzogs chen and who stressed or still stress it in their teachings. sNyo shul mkhan po 'Jam dbyangs rdo rje (1932-1999) was one of them. He is the author of a history of rDzogs chen (*rDzogs chen chos 'byung*) in two large volumes, a work of tremendous importance for the later stages of the history of rDzogs chen.⁷⁹ sNyo shul mkhan po's teachings were mostly based on the *Klong chen snying thig* and the works of rGyal ba Klong chen pa for whom mKhan po had a particular devotion. mKhan po also stressed the importance of other lineages of rDzogs chen, such as the trends of *Sems sde* and *Klong sde* which have been rather neglected in the discoveries of most *gter ston* and in recent times.

Nam mkha'i nor bu rin po che is also a very famous figure in contemporary rDzogs chen circles. He is a 'Brug pa bka' brgyud *sprul sku* educated in a Sa skya lineage but also trained in rDzogs chen by two of his uncles. He also assisted a famous master of Eastern Tibet, Byang chub rdo rje, who was a direct disciple of Shar rdza bKra shis rgyal mtshan. Byang chub rdo rje appears to have been a very eclectic figure and received from Shar rdza important teachings of the New Bon (*bon gsar*) tradition which flourished in Eastern Tibet since the 14th century onwards.⁸⁰ Nam mkha'i nor bu has written a considerable amount of teachings transcribed in various languages and he is also an authentic *gter ston*, having brought to light various cycles of *gter ma*, such as the *Klong gsal* of which five volumes have been published at present.

⁷⁹ This book was recently translated into English by Richard Barron and published under the title of *A Marvelous Garland of Rare Gems* (see bibliography under Nyoshul Khenpo).

⁸⁰ The teachings he received from Shar rdza rin po che are those of the *dMar mo mdzub tshug* compiled by Kun grol grags pa (1700-?), particularly the section on preliminaries (*sngon 'gro*) for which Shar rdza has written a famous instruction treatise (*khrid yig*). See Shar rdza bKra shis rgyal mtshan, *Khrid yid dmar mo mdzub tshug gi sngon 'gro'i rnam bshad*, Dehra Dun, 1985. On the transmission of the *dMar mo mdzub tshugs* to Byang chub rdo rje, see Su la sKal bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, *Shar rdza'i rnam thar*, pp. 435-436.

On the bon po side of the rDzogs chen lineages, Yongs 'dzin bsTan 'dzin rnam dag was probably the first to publish a full teaching on the advanced practices of the Great Perfection in 1993.⁸¹ He is regarded as a highly accomplished master in all Bon teachings, including Sūtras, Tantras, cosmology, etc. He was first trained in the rDzogs chen preliminaries of the *A khrid* cycle by his root-master Gang ru Tshul khriims rgyal mtshan (b. 1893) whom he served and attended for several years. However, his main introduction to the Great Perfection was with Slob dpon Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin from whom he received the most important rDzogs chen cycle of the Bon tradition: the *Oral Tradition of the Great Perfection in Zhang zhung* (*rDzogs chen zhang zhung snyan rgyud*). Yongs 'dzin rin po che is also a lineage holder of the teachings of Shar rdza rin po che which he received from two lines of transmission.⁸²

The foremost disciple and future successor of Yongs 'dzin bsTan 'dzin rnam dag is the actual sMan ri Slob dpon, Phrin las nyi ma rin po che (b. 1962), who is in addition the spiritual heir of the famed Ya ngal lineage of Dol po. In particular, he received the *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud* and other cycles of rDzogs chen teachings from the Ya ngal line of transmission, as well as from Yongs 'dzin rin po che and His Holiness Lung rtogs bsTan pa'i nyi ma, the 33rd abbot of sMan ri monastery.⁸³

I have only mentioned here a very limited number of masters who have been or are still very active in the field of rDzogs chen teachings and their spread in exile, in Western countries, etc. There are obviously many others, such as mKhan po Tshul khriims rgya mtsho who has transmitted the teachings of the Great Perfection in various countries of the world, as well as 'Khrul zhiḡ rin po che, the lineage holder of the famed *Yang ti nag po* cycle revealed by Dung mtsho ras pa phyi ma in the 14th century, mKhas btsun bzang po rin po che who is one of the most knowledgeable master of rDzogs chen alive today, the actual sMon rgyal lha sras rin po che in Tibet, and the late Rag shi rTogs ldan of Klu mgon monastery,⁸⁴ etc. It is impossible to elaborate on this without mentioning His

⁸¹ See his *Heart Drops of Dharmakaya*, Snow Lion, 1993. Even though the book does not contain a complete translation but rather a summary of the text it is based upon, it has detailed notes which are a transcription of Lopön's the oral teachings.

⁸² In the first line of transmission, Yongs 'dzin rin po che is the fifth lineage holder, as shown as follows: 1. Shar rdza bKra shis rgyal mtshan, 2. rGyal tshab Blo gros rgyal mtshan, 3. mKhan po Tshul khriims phun tshogs, 4. mKhan po g.Yung drung dge legs, and 5. Yongs 'dzin bsTan 'dzin rnam dag. g.Yung drung dge legs did not survive the havoc of the Cultural Revolution and appears to have passed away in the 1960's. In the second line of transmission, Yongs 'dzin is the 3rd lineage holder: 1. Shar rdza bKra shis rgyal mtshan, 2. sPrul sku br'Tson 'grus rin po che who passed away in the 1980's in Dolanji, and 3. Yongs 'dzin bsTan 'dzin rnam dag.

⁸³ On the Ya ngal lineage, see Snellgrove, *The Nine Ways of Bon*, p. 4 n. 4. This lineage is famous since several of its holders played a key role in the diffusion of the *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud* and *Nyams rgyud* teachings, such as Yang ston Shes rab rgyal mtshan (12th century) and his two sons, Dam pa bum rje and Klu brag pa.

⁸⁴ On Rag shi rTogs ldan rin po che's life and works, see Dri med g.yung drung, *Dri med g.yung drung dgyes pa rtsal gyi nyams gru phyogs bsgrigs*, Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1999. Dri med g.yung drung is one of the various names of Rag shi rTogs ldan.

Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama who has transmitted rDzogs chen on many occasions and who has even received Bon po transmissions on the matter. One of his books, simply called *Dzogchen*,⁸⁵ embodies the quintessence of the Great Perfection in a very precise way and with a clarity which is lacking in many books dealing with the same subject.

It now seems that the fate of rDzogs chen in the decades to come is to escape the field of academic research and become more widespread as it is being re-appropriated by the tradition⁸⁶ — rarely if ever referring to advances in scientific investigation on the history and philosophical developments liable to have affected rDzogs chen in the course of centuries. This opening to a larger public has however unavoidable drawbacks as some of the most technical aspects of the highest Great Perfection teachings are being adopted by various New Age groups, without proper guidance and lineage connections. Lifting up the curtain of secrecy was certainly conceived with an altruistic perspective and was also a necessity for preserving this tradition for the future. But if the tradition is to survive outside of its own cradle, it should be expected that this preservation complies with the rules of the tradition itself and that it does not distort the teachings themselves or integrate conceptions extraneous to their primeval contents. Opening and preservation may appear as contradictory, even as irreducibly incompatible modalities, but the activities of the contemporary masters mentioned in the present section show that it is possible to comply with both aspects and still prevent the tradition from becoming corrupted.⁸⁷

Bibliography

Achard, Jean-Luc

- *Les Testaments de Vajradhara et des Porteurs-de-Science*, Paris, Les Deux Océans, 1995.
- *L'Essence Perlée du Secret — Recherches philologiques et historiques sur l'origine de la Grande Perfection dans la tradition rNying ma pa*, Brepols, Bibliothèque de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, vol. 107, Turnhout, 1999.
- *Le Docte et Glorieux Roi*, Paris, Les Deux Océans, 2001.

⁸⁵ *Dzogchen — The Heart Essence of the Great Perfection*, Snow Lion, 2000.

⁸⁶ The first notable studies of rDzogs chen have been those of H. Guenther, as early as the late 1960's. Despite a rather misleading choice of vocabulary, he has influenced numerous young students and stimulated their interest for a field which was nearly totally blank at the time. Since then, rDzogs chen studies have started to gain an esteemed audience in related academic circles and are now evolving as one of its main fields of Tibetan studies.

⁸⁷ It is worth noting here that most scholars working on rDzogs chen in the last two decades have had repeated contacts with the heads of the Great Perfection lineages and that some of them are well aware of the necessity to both open the tradition and to preserve it, even more so when younger Tibetan *bla mas* living in the West tend to adapt the teachings to a Western audience, provoking cultural changes within the tradition itself to the risk of heterodoxy.

- “La liste des Tantras du *rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum* selon l'édition établie par Kun mkhyen 'Jigs med gling pa”, *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, Octobre 2002, no. 1, pp. 62-89.
- “Rig 'dzin Tshe dbang mchog grub (1761-1829) et la constitution du *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* de sDe dge”, *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, Juin 2003, no. 3, pp. 43-89.
- “bsTan gnyis gling pa (1480-1535) et la Révélation du Yang tig ye shes mthong grol”, *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, Avril 2004, no. 5, pp. 57-96.
- “Le Tantra des Vingt-Deux Perles de l'Esprit de Parfaite Pureté — un exemple d'intertextualité entre les traditions Bon po et rNying ma pa”, *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, no. 15, pp. 57-104.

Aguilar Vila, Oriol

El Loto del Nyag rong. Un estudio sobre la vida de Nyag bla Padma bdud 'dul y su transmisión del conocimiento, PhD, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, 2005, 364+121 pages, unpublished.

Ani Jinpa Palmo

The Great Image, The Life Story of Vairochana the Translator, Shambhala, Boston & Londo, 2004.

Baroetto, Guiseppe

L'Insegnamento Esoterico di Padmasambhava — La collona delle visioni, Shang-Shung Edizioni, 1990.

Barron, Richard

- *The Precious Treasury of the Way of Abiding*, Padma Publishing, 1998.
- *The Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomena*, Padma Publishing, 2001
- *A Treasure Trove of Scriptural Transmission, A commentary on The Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomena*, Padma Publishing, 2001.

Bischoff F & Hartman, C.

“Padmasambhava's Invention of the Phurbu”, *Etudes Tibétaines dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou*, Paris, 1971, pp. 11-28.

Dalai Lama, The XIVth

Dzogchen, The Heart Essence of the Great Perfection, Snow Lion, Ithaca, 2000.

dKon mchog 'gyur med bsTan pa'i rgyal mtshan

gTer chen mchog gyur bde chen gling pa'i rnam thar bkra shis dbyangs kyi yan lag gsal byed ces bya ba, The Expanded Redaction of the mChog gyur bde chen gling pa Revelations, vol. 38, Paro, 1986, pp. 1-629.

Dri med g.yung drung

Dri med g.yung drung dgyes pa rtsal gyi nyams mgur phyogs bsgrigs, Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, Beijing, 1999.

Faure, Bernard

La volonté d'orthodoxie dans le bouddhisme chinois. Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1988.

Goodman, Steven,

“Rig-'dzin 'Jigs-med gling-pa and the *kLongchen sNying-Thig*”, in Steven D. Goodman & Ronald M. Davidson (eds.), *Tibetan Buddhism — Reason and Revelation*, New York, 1992, pp. 133-146.

Guenther, H.V.

- “Early Forms of Tibetan Buddhism”, *Crystal Mirror Series III*, pp. 80-92.
- *Meditation Differently — Phenomenological-psychological Aspects of Tibetan Buddhist (Mahamudra and sNying-thig) Practices from Original Tibetan Sources*, Delhi, 1992.

Gyatso, Janet

Apparitions of the Self, The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary, Princeton, 1998.

Hanson-Barber, A.W.

“The Identification of dGa'-rab rdo-rje”, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 55-63.

'Jigs med gling pa (1729-1798)

Yon tan rin po che'i mdzod, Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1998.

Karma Chagmé (1613-1678)

- *A Spacious Path to Freedom — Practical Instructions on the Union of Mahāmudrā and Dzgochen*, with commentary by Gyatrul Rinpoche, translated by B. Allan Wallace, Snow Lion, 1998.
- *Naked Awareness — Practical Instructions on the Union of Mahāmudrā and Dzgochen*, with commentary by Gyatrul Rinpoche, translated by B. Allan Wallace, Snow Lion, 2000.

Karmay, Samten G.

- “An Open Letter by Pho-brang Zhi-ba-'od”, *The Tibet Journal*, vol. V-3, 1980, pp. 1-28.
- *The Great Perfection, A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism*, Brill, Leiden, 1988.

Klong chen pa (1308-1364)

Zhwa padma dbang chen gyi bstod pa rol mo'i sprin phung, *Collected Miscellaneous Writings of Kun mkhyen Klong chen rab 'byams*, vol. I, Paro, 1982, pp. 158-165.
Zhwa padma dbang chen gyi dkar chag gtsigs kyi yi ge zhib mo, *ibid.*, pp. 165-186.

Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813-1899)

Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo, pirate Chinese edition, Chengdu, ca. 1994, vol. 90.

Lalou, Marcelle

“Les textes bouddhiques au temps du roi Khri-sroñ-lde-bcan”, *Journal Asiatique*, vol. CCXLI, 1953, pp. 313-353.

Mang rwa'i a nyag

Zhwa padma dbang chen gyi gtsug lag khang gi lo rgyus phyogs bsdus lhag bsam ljon pa, *Bod ljongs nang bstan*, 2, 1990, pp. 55-66.

Martin, Dan

- “NGB Historical Notes — A Chronologically arranged list of prints and manuscripts (both available and unavailable) of the Rnying-ma Rgyud-'bum, based mainly on narrative historical sources”, unpublished, 13 pages.
- *Unearthing Bon Treasures — Life and Contested legacy of a Tibetan Scripture Revealer*, Brill, Leiden, 2001.

Mayer, Rob & Cantwell, Cathy,

“A Dunhuang Manuscript on Vajrakilaya”, in *Tibet Journal*, vol. XIX no. 1, 1994, pp. 54-67.

Namkhai Norbu

— *sBas pa'i rgum chung — The small collection of hidden precepts, A study of an ancient manuscript on Dzogchen from Tun-Huang*, Shang-Shung Edizioni, Merigar, 1984.

— “Il Canto dell' Energia di Nyag-bla Padma bdud 'dul”, *Orientalia Ioshephi Tucci Memoria Dicata*, Serie Orientale Roma LVI, 3, Roma, ISMEO, pp. 1021-1028.

Nyoshul Khenpo

A Marvelous Garland of Rare Germs — Biographies of Masters of Awareness in the Dzogchen Lineage, translated by Richard Barron, Padma Publishing, 2005.

Padma gling pa (1450-1521)

Klong gsal gsang ba snying bcud kyi grol byed khrid kyi skor las: dNgos gzhi'i khrid yig don khrid lam gyi sgron me, in *The Rediscovered Teachings of the Great Padma gling pa*, vol. 17, Paro, pp. 3-27.

Padma Tshewang, Khenpo Phuntsok Tashi, Chris Butters, Sigmund Saetreng

The Treasure Revealer of Bhutan — Pemalingpa, the Terma Tradition and its Critics, Bibliotheca Himalayica series III, volume 8, Kathmandu, 1995.

Prats, Ramon

“Tshe-dbang nor-bu's chronological notes on the early transmission of the Bi-ma snying-thig”, in L. Ligeti (ed.), *Tibetan and Buddhist Studies Commemorating the 200th Anniversary of the birth of Alexander Csoma de Korös*, Budapest, vol. II, pp. 197-209.

Richardson, Hugh

“Tibetan inscriptions at the Zhwa'i Lha Khang”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, part I (1952), p. 133-154; part II, (1953), pp. 1-12.

Shar rdza bkra shis rgyal mtshan (1859-1935)

— *Heart Drops of Dharmakaya, Dzogchen Practice of the Bön Tradition*, Snow Lion, Ithaca, 1993.

— *Khrid yig dmar mo mdzub tshug gi sngon 'gro'i rnam bshad bde chen thar pa'i lam bzang, An exegesis of the preliminary practice of the New Bon Rdzogs-chen (Bon gsar) teachings revealed by Kun-grol-grags-pa*, Miling Yungdrung Ling Monastery, Dehra Dun, 1985.

Snellgrove, D.L.

The Nine Ways of Bon, London Oriental Series, vol. 18, London, 1967.

Su la bsKal bzang bsTan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1897-1959)

Shar rdza bkra shis rgyal mtshan gyi rnam thar, Krung go'i bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang, 1990.

Tsele Natsok Rangdrol

The Circle of the Sun — A Clarification of the Most Excellent of All Vehicles, The Secret and Unexcelled Luminous Vajra Essence, translated from the Tibetan by Erik Pema Kunsang, Ranjung Yeshe Publications, Hong Kong, 1990.

Thondup, T.

Masters of Meditation and Miracles, Boston, Shambhala, 1996.

Valby, Jim

The Great History of Garab Dorje, Manjushrimitra, Shri Singha, Jnanasutra and Vimalamitra, Shang Shung Edizioni, Merigar, 2002.

Van Schaik, Sam

- “The Early Days of the Great Perfection”, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2004, pp. 165-206.
- *Approaching the Great Perfection — Simultaneous and Gradual Methods of Dzogchen Practice in the Longchen Nyingthig*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2004.

***Vimalamitra (8th century)**

Lo rgyus chen mo, in *Bi ma snying thig*, vol. III, Darjeeling, 1975, pp. 427-510.

*