

NEGOTIATING THE ABSENCE OF RITUAL:
DZOGCHEN IN THE TANTRIC MANUSCRIPTS OF DUNHUANG
AND BEYOND*

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ABSTRACT

Although the contemplative approach of Dzogchen (Tib. *rdzogs chen*) occupies a prominent position in the Nyingma (Tib. rNying ma) (and indeed Bon) tradition, where it is considered to be the pinnacle of vehicles leading to enlightenment, its origins are not quite clearly understood. Several scholars have suggested that it may have emerged from the tantric matrix of Mahāyoga ritual, before gradually developing into an independent contemplative approach characterised, especially in its early phases, by the absence of tantric ritual.

Some of the manuscripts recovered at Dunhuang (敦煌) reflect this tension. This paper will examine and compare three thematic groups of Dunhuang manuscripts: (a) IOL Tib J 437 and a text comprising Pelliot tibétain 353 and IOL Tib J 507, which use the term *rdzogs chen* within the context of Mahāyoga ritual practice; (b) IOL Tib J 454 (= Madhusādhu's instructions) and IOL Tib J 470 (= the *rDo rje sems dpa'i zhus lan*), which do not make prominent use of the term *rdzogs chen* itself, yet provide a contemplative framework for Mahāyoga that rhetorically challenges some of the more ritualistic concerns of this approach; and (c) IOL Tib J 594 (= the *sBas pa'i rgum chung*) and IOL Tib J 647 (= the *Rig pa'i khu byug*), which present Dzogchen very much in line with the early "mind orientation" (Tib. *sems phyogs*).

Reference will also be made to several unstudied Dzogchen commentaries by Nupchen Sangyé Yéshé (ca. 844 to mid-10th c., Tib. gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes), a highly significant figure in the formation of the Nyingma school, for by reflecting on (near-)contemporaneous developments in other parts of the Tibetan cultural world, we can observe that these Dunhuang manuscripts bear witness to a wider process of negotiating the absence of ritual as a means to demarcate a doxographical space. Since an important subject of the article is the difference

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articulated between Mahāyoga and Dzogchen, the transcendence-immanence distinction will be used as a relational axis against which such varying paradigms of Tantric Buddhist praxis can be analysed.

1. Introduction

The contemplative approach of Dzogchen (Tib. *rdzogs chen*) plays a prominent role in the transmission lineages of several of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism, most notably the Nyingma tradition and Bon. In looking at the early development of Dzogchen, the Tibetan tantric manuscripts of the Dunhuang oasis, which mostly can be dated to the late 10th century (Dalton and van Schaik 2006: xxi), provide us with a glimpse into the ways the term *rdzogs chen* was understood on the outskirts of the Tibetan Empire. Such understandings can then usefully be compared with religious developments occurring in Central Tibet in order to (a) gain a wider perspective on the processes involved in the doxographical demarcation of Dzogchen; and (b) show that not all of the latest Central Tibetan developments were necessarily transmitted to Dunhuang.

If we seek for traces of Dzogchen in the Dunhuang manuscripts, we are likely to encounter three main scenarios: (a) the use of the term *rdzogs chen* within a Mahāyoga ritual context; (b) an apophatic trend in the interpretation of Mahāyoga ritual that foreshadows some of the basic Dzogchen ideas; and (c) an approach self-consciously identifying Dzogchen as a distinct mode of contemplation, in line with what would become known as the “mind orientation” (Tib. *sems phyogs*).¹ In what follows, I will first examine several Dunhuang manuscripts that illustrate these three scenarios, drawing on the valuable studies made by previous scholars.² I will then bring these sources into conversation with some of the unstudied Dzogchen commentaries by the Central Tibetan master Nupchen

¹ The designations “mind section” (Tib. *sems sde*) and “mind orientation” (Tib. *sems phyogs*) are here used retrospectively to describe the earliest texts of Dzogchen, although neither term seems to be attested prior to the 11th century (see van Schaik 2004: 167, n. 6).

² For useful descriptions of the manuscripts examined here, see Dalton and van Schaik 2006: 182–184 (for IOL Tib J 437), 196–197 (for IOL Tib J 454), 214–216 (for IOL Tib J 470), 231–233 (for IOL Tib J 507), 289–290 (for IOL Tib J 594), 292 (for IOL Tib J 647).

Sangyé Yéshé (ca. 844 to mid-10th c., Tib. gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes), since the latter bear witness to the codification of Dzogchen as a distinct doxographical category. In order to better appreciate the nature of the difference between Mahāyoga and Dzogchen, I will draw on the transcendence-immanence distinction, as this notion articulates a relational axis against which such varying paradigms of Tantric Buddhist practice can be analysed.

2. Dzogchen in the Mahāyoga Ritual Context

The earliest references to the word *rdzogs chen* can be traced to four passages in the **Guhyagarbhatantra* (mid-8th c.), where the term is associated with the culmination of the completion phase (Tib. *rdzogs rim*) and signifies a charged moment of heightened enlightened awareness. The four passages in question (Germano 1994: 214–215) present *rdzogs chen* as being the inconceivable spontaneously present *maṇḍala*;³ as being a description of the *tathāgata*'s absorption (Skt. *samādhi*), once all the *maṇḍalas* have condensed into one;⁴ as referring to awakened body, speech and mind, identified with the primordial and spontaneous completeness of Samantabhadra, wherein all qualities and activities are perfected;⁵ and as signifying the pledge of equality.⁶ Already in this Mahāyoga context, the term *rdzogs chen* carries the sense that all the qualities aspired to on the path towards enlightenment are primordially complete and spontaneously present, a meaning which is close to its usage in the later Dzogchen approach. However, there is no indication here of a stand-alone technique-free meditative approach (van Schaik 2004: 167–168).

In line with this treatment of the word *rdzogs chen* as signifying the culmination of the completion phase, the Dunhuang manuscript IOL Tib J 437, which consists of two evocations (Skt. *sādhana*), mentions the term in the context of swallowing the sacramental drop consisting of the sexual fluids (Dalton 2011: 296). In early Mahāyoga, the sacramental

³ *Guhyagarbhatantra*, ch. 6, v. 1; edited and translated in Dorje 1987: 200, 626.

⁴ *Guhyagarbhatantra*, ch. 13, prologue; edited and translated in Dorje 1987: 231, 982.

⁵ *Guhyagarbhatantra*, ch. 14, v. 4; edited and translated in Dorje 1987: 235, 1054.

⁶ *Guhyagarbhatantra*, ch. 19, v. 13; edited and translated in Dorje 1987: 253, 1186.

sexual fluids were both bestowed on the disciple's tongue by the master at the culmination of the rite of the secret empowerment (Skt. *guhyā-bhiṣeka*), and ingested by the practitioner as a form of self-consecration at the end of the practice of sexual *yoga*. It seems that it is the latter practice which is being referred to in IOL Tib J 437 (Dalton 2004: 17, 22). More specifically, the drop is described as “the elixir of the awakened mind of the integral being (Skt. *mahātman*)⁷ of Great Completeness” and said to be “arrayed in the inexpressible open dimension (Tib. *dbyings*) of Samantabhadrī,” this latter expression referring, of course, to the womb.⁸ Also of interest is the second item on the manuscript, since it describes the pair Samantabhadra-Samantabhadrī (Dalton 2011: 303, 309); while the description as such occurs within a Mahāyoga framework, we can see several elements that will be important in the Dzogchen appropriation of this pair as well:

The objects and the mind should be ascertained as being twofold.⁹ Externally, objective phenomena are the female Samantabhadrī, who soars in space and is without centre and periphery. Internally, the subjective comprehension, the apprehending psyche, is the father Samantabhadra. The intent of the two is the *bodhicitta*.¹⁰

There is an obvious continuity between the associations found in this passage, which harken back to the **Guhyagarbhatantra*'s linking of Samantabhadrī and Samantabhadra to the primordial goodness of phenomena and of the mind respectively,¹¹ and the way the pair is understood in the Dzogchen Seminal Heart (Tib. *sNying thig*) literature, where Samantabhadra symbolises the sapiential lighting up of intrinsic awareness (Tib. *rang rig*),

⁷ On this term and its translation, see Esler 2012: 91–94.

⁸ IOL Tib J 437, fol. 13v–14r: *brjod myed kun bzangs dbyings su rab bkod cing/ rdzogs cen bdag nyid chen po thugs kyi bcud/* For a translation and edition, see Dalton 2011: 302, 309.

⁹ Here, Dalton's translation (“Establish the two kinds of mental objects”) seems to be somewhat misleading.

¹⁰ IOL Tib J 437, fol. 1v–2r: *yul sems rnam gnyis gtan la phab par bgyi ste/ phyi 'i yul chos bya ba mo kun tu bzang mo mkha' lding dbus mtha' myed pa la bya/ nang gyi yul rtogs pas tshus bcad pa ni/ yid yid byed kun tu bzang po la bya de yab/ yab yum rnam gnyis dgongs pa byang chub kyi sems/*

¹¹ *Guhyagarbhatantra*, ch. 2, prologue; edited and translated in Dorje 1987: 185–186, 437–438.

and Samantabhadrī symbolises the spacious field of the *dharmadhātu* (Guenther 1989: 197–198; Achard 1999: 175, n. 70). Yet, as will be shown below, such intimations may already be found in the texts of the mind section of Dzogchen.

A further Dunhuang document which deserves mention as a Mahāyoga ritual text alluding to *rdzogs chen* is a manuscript now divided between Pelliot tibétain 353 and IOL Tib J 507. Again, we are firmly planted within the Mahāyoga milieu; the evocation describes characteristics of the natural *maṇḍala*, which is connected to the principles of discerning knowledge (Skt. *prajñā*) and expedient means (Skt. *upāya*). What is of interest is that the teaching is said to be taken from “the detailed and extensive *tantras* of Secret Mantra and the *sūtras* of the Great Completeness.”¹² However, there is little in this Dunhuang text that is typical of Dzogchen. The *maṇḍala* is said to be inhabited by various goddesses, most prominently Ekajaṭī, who is said to pervade the entire *maṇḍala* (IOL Tib J 507, fol. 7r.5–7). The closest we come to anything resembling Dzogchen is the introductory contextualisation of the practice, which refers to the *dharmakāya* as comprising all phenomena and as compassionately pervading all sentient beings and the three realms of *samsāra*.¹³ Yet the contextualisation itself does not seem to depart markedly from the structure of the three absorptions of Mahāyoga (van Schaik 2004: 177, n. 33). We are thus left with the impression that the above reference to “the *sūtras* of the Great Completeness” may be to a vague category of authoritative status as yet devoid of definite content. Nonetheless, this allusion to the category of Dzogchen may be reminiscent of the way that Dzogchen is often portrayed as a set of quintessential instructions (Tib. *man ngag*) alongside the tantric scriptures; it has been suggested that such quintessential instructions, passed on from master to disciple and serving to highlight the contemplative elements of tantric ritual, may have formed the core of what eventually developed into the scriptures of the mind section (Germano 1994: 215, 235; van Schaik 2004: 194–195).

¹² Pelliot tibétain 353, fol. 1r.2–3: *zhlb cing rgya chen nl gsang ba'i sngags tan tra rdzogs pa chen po'I mdo las zhlb tu 'chad del*

¹³ Pelliot tibétain 353, fol. 2r.4–2v.1; for a translation of the passage, see van Schaik 2004: 177–178.

We will end this section by looking briefly at two more Dunhuang manuscripts, IOL Tib J 644 and Pelliot tibétain 656 (Dalton 2005: 147–150), where we witness a shift from ritual to doxographical concerns. These manuscripts provide more content with regard to the rubric “Dzogchen,” or here rather “Atiyoga,” although it must be said that Atiyoga still occupies the same doxographical space as Mahāyoga. In IOL Tib J 644, the view of Atiyoga is explicitly identified with that of Mahāyoga. Moreover, as regards the accomplishment, it is defined (in terms very similar to Anuyoga) as relating to spontaneous accomplishment and as being situated on a plane where the specific *vidyādhara* levels do not apply.¹⁴ Similarly, in Pelliot tibétain 656, the Atiyoga perspective is explained as a way of framing tantric praxis that emphasises the ultimate level of reality and the identity of all animate and inanimate phenomena with awakened body, speech and mind.¹⁵ Thus, the tantric practices of union and liberation, when interpreted according to this hermeneutical framework, come to signify the union of the open dimension and wisdom on the one hand, and liberation through great equality on the other.¹⁶ Likewise, the pledge (Skt. *samaya*) of Atiyoga is said to be singular, for it pertains to guarding the state of spontaneous presence – it is in the very nature of such a pledge that it cannot be transgressed.¹⁷ We will return to the central notion of spontaneous presence below.

3. Towards a Contemplative Contextualisation of Mahāyoga Ritual

The next Dunhuang manuscripts to be examined do not make prominent use of the word *rdzogs chen* as such, but they present certain similarities in their ideological orientation to the texts of the mind section of Dzogchen. IOL Tib J 470, a manuscript copy of the *rDo rje sems dpa'i zhus lan* [Questions and Answers on Vajrasattva] by Nyen Pelyang (9th c., Tib. gNyan dPal dbyangs), a text repeatedly quoted by Nupchen in discussing Mahāyoga in his *bSam gtan mig sgron* [Lamp for the Eye of Contemplation;

¹⁴ IOL Tib J 644, fol. 1v.6–8 and fol. 3r.2; translated and edited in Dalton 2005: 164–165, 167–168.

¹⁵ Pelliot tibétain 656, lines 33–37; translated and edited in Dalton 2005: 170, 173.

¹⁶ Pelliot tibétain 656, lines 53–55; translated and edited in Dalton 2005: 171, 174.

¹⁷ Pelliot tibétain 656, lines 40–42; translated and edited in Dalton 2005: 170, 174.

henceforth SM],¹⁸ does in fact mention the term *rdzogs chen*. It does so while distinguishing a particular mode of gaining accomplishments (Skt. *siddhi*), whereby the latter are not granted from above, as in the external method (which is compared to a king appointing a minister), but rather self-originate, as when the subjects offer their kingdom to the king because of his innate authority and charisma.¹⁹ While Nyen Pelyang clearly considers Mahāyoga to be the ultimate vehicle and the meditative identification of the practitioner with a deity to be of central importance, in his *Questions and Answers on Vajrasattva* he tends to eschew ritualistic concerns and to focus instead on the ultimate level of deity *yoga* (Skt. *devatāyoga*) and on the concomitant ideas of spontaneous presence and non-meditation (Takahashi 2010: 90, 93). For example, he declares that in actuality there is no self that could depend on a meditational deity (Tib. *yi dam*), both the action and the agent of propitiation (Skt. *sevā*) being non-existent.²⁰ In a passage reminiscent of Dzogchen texts, Pelyang points out that the mind is inherently spacious and unproduced like the sky, so there is no need to seek to wilfully transform or to purify it, since enlightenment is beyond cause and effect.²¹ He is also aware of the need to reconcile apparent contradictions entailed by this apophatic approach, and thus addresses the issue of the initial effort applied by those on the path in relation to the spontaneous accomplishment of the fruition.²²

The themes discussed in this Dunhuang manuscript also appear in Nyen Pelyang's other treatises, notably those known as the *sGron ma drug* [Six Lamps], many of which are quoted in Nupchen's SM.²³ These

¹⁸ The quotations have been highlighted in Takahashi's edition of the *Questions and Answers on Vajrasattva* (Takahashi 2010: 114–140) and are also identified in my full translation of the *Lamp for the Eye of Contemplation* (Esler 2018), so this need not be repeated here.

¹⁹ IOL Tib J 470, panel II.26; translated and edited in Takahashi 2010: 100, 118.

²⁰ IOL Tib J 470, panel III.53–IV.55; translated and edited in Takahashi 2010: 103, 123.

²¹ IOL Tib J 470, panel I.19–21; translated and edited in Takahashi 2010: 99–100, 119.

²² IOL Tib J 470, panel VI.92–94; translated and edited in Takahashi 2010: 107, 130–131. The passage is quoted in the SM 225; for a translation of the latter, see Esler 2018: 206.

²³ Unless specified otherwise, all these citations have been identified in Esler 2018. For the *mTha' yi mun sel sgron ma* (translated in Karmay [1988] 2007: 80–82), SM 306 (ch. 7, section concerning the fourth of six questions concerning the view) quotes gNyan dPal dbyangs, *mTha' yi mun sel sgron ma*, in NKJ, vol. 82/zu: 1048.2–3; SM 318 (ch. 7,

texts seem to combine two apparently contradictory trends: on the one hand, direct recommendations to engage in Mahāyoga tantric practice (though these are often couched in rather general terms and avoid discussing the technicalities of meditation), and, on the other hand, discussions of the ultimate view and realisation as being utterly beyond the structure of effortful endeavour. It would seem that Pelyang's use of apophatic language functioned in the manner of a rhetoric of unmediated absence, a device enabling him to reframe the more technically oriented meditations of Mahāyoga and to clear a space wherein the ultimate nature of reality might shine through without being reified into something conceptually graspable (Takahashi 2018: 160, 166–167, 172). The way these texts are quoted in the SM, with Pelyang's name being retained in the Mahāyoga context yet omitted in the Atiyoga chapter, has raised the attention of scholars, with the suggestion being put forward that through such selective omission, Nupchen may have been complicit in transforming authored texts into revealed scripture (van Schaik 2004: 197). During this process, Pelyang's most significant contributions to Mahāyoga, those which extrapolated the view of non-duality from the matrix of ritual praxis within which it had been embedded so far and which thus were most

section on the view free from thematic focus) quotes gNyan dPal dbyangs, *mTha' yi mun sel sgron ma*, in NKJ, vol. 82/zu: 1049.2–3, identified in Takahashi 2015: 12.

For the *Ita ba rin po che sgron ma*, SM 195 (ch. 6, section on the view of phenomena as the enlightened mind) quotes gNyan dPal dbyangs, *Ita ba rin po che sgron ma*, in NKJ, vol. 82/zu: 1052.1–2, identified in Takahashi 2015: 7; SM 269 (ch. 6, section on completing the accumulations and the arising of the three bodies in the context of the Mahāyoga fruition) quotes gNyan dPal dbyangs, *Ita ba rin po che sgron ma*, in NKJ, vol. 82/zu: 1054.2–4; SM 275 (ch. 6, section on the intrinsic arising of accomplishments in the context of the Mahāyoga fruition) quotes gNyan dPal dbyangs, *Ita ba rin po che sgron ma*, in NKJ, vol. 82/zu: 1052.5–6; SM 306 (ch. 7, section concerning the fourth of six questions concerning the view) quotes gNyan dPal dbyangs, *Ita ba rin po che sgron ma*, in NKJ, vol. 82/zu: 1052.2–3.

For the *Thugs kyi sgron ma*, SM 197 (ch. 6, subsection on searching for the enlightened mind in the context of the view of phenomena as the enlightened mind) quotes gNyan dPal dbyangs, *Thugs kyi sgron ma*, in NKJ, vol. 82/zu: 1018.6–1019.1; SM 204 (ch. 6, section on the view of non-duality) contains a rough paraphrase of gNyan dPal dbyangs, *Thugs kyi sgron ma*, in NKJ, vol. 82/zu: 1020.6–1021.6.

For the *Ita ba yang dag sgron ma*, SM 59 (ch. 3, section on the qualities of meditation) quotes gNyan dPal dbyangs, *Ita ba yang dag sgron ma*, in NKJ, vol. 82/zu: 1045.6, identified in Takahashi 2015: 7; SM 241 (ch. 6, subsection concerning the simultaneous approach to tantric meditation) quotes gNyan dPal dbyangs, *Ita ba yang dag sgron ma*, in NKJ, vol. 82/zu: 1047.4–5 (under the name *Yi ge chung ngu*).

compatible with an Atiyoga orientation, ended up being incorporated within an Atiyoga corpus without their instigator being acknowledged (Takahashi 2015: 13, 15).

Let us now turn to IOL Tib J 454, a manuscript containing the instructions of the Indic master Madhusādhu, whose teachings, twice mentioned in the SM in the Mahāyoga chapter,²⁴ were probably transmitted to Tibet during the mid-9th century (van Schaik 2008b: 9). Here no reference whatsoever is made to the words *rdzogs chen* or *atiyoga*; the work clearly belongs to the same intellectual milieu as the *Questions and Answers on Vajrasattva* (van Schaik 2008b: 19). One can thus observe the same emphasis on the total self-sufficiency of meditating on the deity, the latter being identified with the true nature of mind,²⁵ and exhortations to remain in the state of spontaneous presence (Tib. *lhun grub*).²⁶ Spontaneous presence is indeed an important topic in Madhusādhu's instructions, where it signifies the fact that awakening is independent of all efforts made by the practitioner to reach that state. As pointed out by Sam van Schaik (2008b: 12), it is a notion that is typical of the *Māyājāla* group of *tantras*. It is thus a recurrent theme in the **Guhyagarbhatantra*: we already noted its association, in Chapter 6 of the *tantra*, with the term *rdzogs chen* in referring to the spontaneously present inconceivable *maṇḍala*.²⁷ A similar usage of *lhun grub* occurs in Chapter 13, denoting the spontaneous presence of the *maṇḍala* as a sign of having mastered the practice.²⁸ In Chapter 8, the term signifies the spontaneous blessing of the limbs as being the *maṇḍala*;²⁹ and in Chapter 14, we see infinite emanations spontaneously appearing in an instant.³⁰ The implication of

²⁴ SM 187 (ch. 6, introduction) quotes IOL Tib J 454, panel IV.72–73, translated and edited in van Schaik 2008b: 29, 41; SM 210 (ch. 6, section on the view of equality) alludes to IOL Tib J 454, panel VI.133–134, translated and edited in van Schaik 2008b: 33, 45.

²⁵ IOL Tib J 454, panel III.49–55 and panel V.113–115; translated and edited in van Schaik 2008b: 28–29, 40; and 32, 43, respectively.

²⁶ This is mentioned at the very beginning of the text: IOL Tib J 454, panel I.3; translated and edited in van Schaik 2008b: 26, 38.

²⁷ See reference above; see also *Guhyagarbhatantra*, ch. 6, v. 11; edited and translated in Dorje 1987: 202, 628.

²⁸ *Guhyagarbhatantra*, ch. 13, v. 12; edited and translated in Dorje 1987: 233, 984.

²⁹ *Guhyagarbhatantra*, ch. 8, prologue; edited and translated in Dorje 1987: 210, 711.

³⁰ *Guhyagarbhatantra*, ch. 14, v. 6; edited and translated in Dorje 1987: 236, 1055.

these passages, particularly the one in Chapter 13, is that effortful visualisation of the deities is no longer necessary, for they naturally begin to appear to the practitioner; the underlying idea is that this manifestation corresponds to the actual nature of reality, which is considered to be pure.³¹ This brings us to another important theme, that of the fundamental purity of phenomena.³² While the typically Dzogchen term *ka dag* (“alpha-purity”) does not seem to occur in the **Guhyagarbhatantra*, we do find the somewhat related (though in no wise identical!) expression *ye nas dag mnyam* (“primordial purity and equality”) with reference to the tantric pledges in Chapter 19.³³ Moreover, Chapter 12 clearly states that the Buddha is identical to mind’s beingness (Tib. *sems nyid*) and thus should not be sought for externally.³⁴

This very topic is addressed in IOL Tib J 454, where Madhusādhū points out the total identity of the Buddha and the practitioner’s mind, explaining that it is unnecessary to search for awakening elsewhere.³⁵ This, again, is connected to the notion that the highest wisdom, which realises non-duality, is spontaneously present,³⁶ in the sense mentioned above that it cannot be artificially created. The ultimate nature of mind, in a passage reminiscent of Dzogchen exegesis, is compared by Madhusādhū to the sky, since both are empty, without self and without characteristics.³⁷ Of course, while such themes seem to presage the Dzogchen tradition, it is clear that they occur within the context of practising tantric deity *yoga*, which is probably why Nupchen, who was involved in the practice

³¹ See the explanations of Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo (fl. 11th c., Tib. Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po) regarding this point in his *sNang ba lhar bsgrub* [Establishing Appearances as Divine], translated and edited in Köppl 2008: 100–102, 119–121.

³² This is referred to repeatedly in the SM in the Mahāyoga chapter: SM 196 (ch. 6, section on the view of phenomena as the enlightened mind); SM 204 (ch. 6, section on the view of integral being); SM 206–207 (ch. 6, section on the view of non-duality). For a translation of the relevant passages, see Esler 2018: 185, 191–193.

³³ *Guhyagarbhatantra*, ch. 19, v. 10; edited and translated in Dorje 1987: 253, 1186. For further discussion regarding the themes of pledges, purity and transgression, see Dorje [1992] 2012: 86, 90–92; van Schaik 2010: 65; and, for a perspective on intercultural exchanges taking place in Dunhuang regarding the tantric pledges, see Sørensen 2019: 9–10; 12–13.

³⁴ *Guhyagarbhatantra*, ch. 12, v. 14; edited and translated in Dorje 1987: 231, 952.

³⁵ IOL Tib J 454, panel IV.87–91; translated and edited in van Schaik 2008b: 30, 42.

³⁶ IOL Tib J 454, panel IV.72; translated and edited in van Schaik 2008b: 29, 41.

³⁷ IOL Tib J 454, panel IV.95–V.96; translated and edited in van Schaik 2008b: 31, 42.

and transmission of a number of tantric lineages (Esler 2014: 8–11), did not see fit to quote from them in the Atiyoga chapter of his SM. In any case, it must be borne in mind that the implicit negation of ritual witnessed in the manuscripts just discussed, which is further intensified in the early texts now classified in the mind section of Dzogchen, does not necessarily entail the actual rejection of ritual on the level of practice, but must rather be seen as a “rhetoric of absence” (Germano 1994: 205–207) that serves to contextualise and reframe Mahāyoga ritual concerns. If such texts are considered exemplars of proto-Dzogchen, then it appears that from its beginnings Dzogchen was linked to Tantric Buddhism, both in terms of its literary forms of expression and the practices it took as its referent (van Schaik 2008b: 20–21).

4. The Dzogchen Manuscripts of Dunhuang

There are only two Dzogchen texts proper among the Dunhuang manuscripts: these are IOL Tib J 647 (*Rig pa'i khu byug* [The Cuckoo of Awareness]) and IOL Tib J 594 (*sBas pa'i rgum chung* [Buddhagupta's Small Birdseed]).³⁸ The first of these, IOL Tib J 647, contains a short root text consisting of six verses, followed by a commentary (Karmay [1988] 2007: 41–59). The root text, the *Cuckoo of Awareness*, is foundational in more than one sense, in that, among the eighteen texts of the mind section (*sems sde bco brgyad*), it is placed at the head of the list of the five early translations, and as such is considered to have been the first such text to be translated by Vairocana (Liljenberg 2012b: 49). It is quoted twice in the Atiyoga chapter of the SM;³⁹ both citations are from the same passage, the two final verses of the root text:

Since all is already finished, one relinquishes the illness of effort.
Abiding spontaneously, one rests.⁴⁰

³⁸ This meaning for *rgum*, the short form of *rgum bu*, is provided by Tudeng Nima: “a substance for birds to eat, or food for nourishing birds” (*byas za ba'i dngos rdzas sam bya gso byed kyi zan chas*). See Nima 1998: 525; Skorupski, Dorje and Nima 2002: 696.

³⁹ SM 323 (ch. 7, section on the view of spontaneous presence); SM 347 (ch. 7, section on the view free from action and searching); the latter citation only quotes from the penultimate line.

⁴⁰ IOL Tib J 647, fol. 1r.3: */zin pas rtsol ba'i nad spangs te/ llhun kyis gnas pas gzhaq pa yin/* For a translation and edition, see Karmay [1988] 2007: 50–51, 56.

The *Cuckoo of Awareness* seeks to reconcile the apparent diversity and complexity of ordinary perception and thinking with the deeper simplicity discovered through the contemplative practice of Dzogchen. This reconciliation of surface and depth is apparent in several of the verses of the root text, which juxtapose the diversity of phenomenal existence with non-duality and freedom from elaboration (vv. 1–2), and which evoke non-discursiveness without rejecting appearance, the latter being considered as totally good, an obvious play on the name of Samantabhadra (vv. 3–4). The end result, described in the final verses quoted above, is that one is advised to relinquish the disease of effortful striving and instead to rest in spontaneity (vv. 5–6).⁴¹ The justification for such an attitude is that all that needed to be achieved is already finished (Tib. *zin pa*), as is further made clear in the commentary, which explains that whatever is required is spontaneously present without one having to pursue it.⁴²

Looking at the Dunhuang commentary to the *Cuckoo of Awareness*, one of its striking features is its self-conscious discussion of Samantabhadra as occupying the central place usually held by Vajrasattva. The reason given is that Vajrasattva is the central deity in contexts emphasising effort and striving, whereas Samantabhadra occupies the prominent position when one has gone beyond any goal-oriented endeavour.⁴³ This explicit discussion, which occurs at the very beginning of the commentary, seems to bear witness to an underlying negotiation taking place between different modalities of tantric doctrine and practice, some of them characterised as involving effort, the others as being effortless. More will be said on Samantabhadra below.

Furthermore, the commentary makes several references to the categories of both mainstream and Tantric Buddhist practice. These references occur in what Karen Liljenberg (2012b: 42–43) has suggested might be identified as the second part (fol. 3v.2–5r.6) of the commentary, which, departing from the word-by-word elucidation provided in the first part (fol. 1r.4–3v.2), discusses the “general meaning” (Tib. *spyi don*) and may possibly, according to her hypothesis, reflect an earlier stage of development,

⁴¹ IOL Tib J 647, fol. 1r.2–3; translated and edited in Karmay [1988] 2007: 50, 56.

⁴² IOL Tib J 647, fol. 3r.5–3v.1; translated and edited in Karmay [1988] 2007: 54, 57.

⁴³ IOL Tib J 647, fol. 1r.4–6; translated and edited in Karmay [1988] 2007: 52, 56.

where Dzogchen exegesis was more closely tied to tantric modes of presentation. Here, the commentary alludes to the basic vows of avoiding killing, sexual misconduct, stealing and lying,⁴⁴ and also to the tantric ritual categories of accomplishment, pledge and donating offerings (Tib. *mchod sbyin*),⁴⁵ yet in each case giving a distinctly Dzogchen interpretation which eschews the need to pursue effort. For example, the vow against killing is interpreted as referring to spontaneous liberation from the belief in reified entities: “The mere name of reified entities subsides; [...] liberation abides in spontaneity;”⁴⁶ whereas the tantric pledge is interpreted to mean “not relinquishing anything whatsoever.”⁴⁷

The other Dunhuang Dzogchen manuscript is IOL Tib J 594 (Norbu 1984: 97–111; Karmay [1988] 2007: 59–76). The title of this text, *sBas pa'i rgum chung*, incorporates the author's name, Buddhagupta (late 8th c.), which in Tibetan is rendered as Sangs rgyas sbas pa (Karmay [1988] 2007: 60). As argued by both Namkhai Norbu (1984: 37–38) and Samten Karmay ([1988] 2007: 61–63), Buddhagupta needs to be distinguished from the slightly earlier Buddhaguhya (mid-8th c., Tib. Sangs rgyas gsang ba), a master of Yogatantra, particularly of the *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi*, who was active in the Kailash region and was also involved in some of the Mahāyoga developments (Germano 2002: 229–231), although later Tibetan scholars have often tended to conflate these two masters.⁴⁸ Both figures are, in any case, clearly differentiated in Nupchen Sangyé Yéshé's SM.⁴⁹

In terms of content, the main theme of *Buddhagupta's Small Birdseed* is the association of the ultimate nature of mind with space and the

⁴⁴ IOL Tib J 647, fol. 3v.6–4r.5; translated and edited in Karmay [1988] 2007: 54–55, 57.

⁴⁵ IOL Tib J 647, fol. 5r.5–6; translated and edited in Karmay [1988] 2007: 56, 58.

⁴⁶ IOL Tib J 647, fol. 3v.6–4r.1: *'di na dngos po mying tsaṃ yang rab tu nub pas/ [...]* *sgrol ba lhun kyis grub par gnas sol*

⁴⁷ IOL Tib J 647, fol. 5r.5: *gang yang ma spangs pa ni dam tshig/*

⁴⁸ The problem of the identification of these masters is also discussed in Kapstein 2000: 62–63.

⁴⁹ Whereas Buddhaguhya (given in Tibetan, as above) is mentioned in SM 198.4 (ch. 6, section on the view of the inseparability of expedient means and discerning knowledge) and in SM 204.6 (ch. 6, section on the view of non-duality), Buddhagupta (spelt *'Bu ta kug ta*) is mentioned once in the context of Mahāyoga (SM 223.1, ch. 6, section on the quintessential instructions for tantric meditation) and twice in the chapter on Atiyoga: once in SM 344.6 (ch. 7, section on the view free from action and searching) and once in SM 414.1 (ch. 7, section on the fourth system of Dzogchen meditation).

concomitant rejection of the need for structured forms of religious practice, including of bodily posture in meditation. Thus we read lines such as the following:

Ungraspable space is without rectification;
 Sitting upright in a cross-legged posture
 And all such physical contrivances
 Originate from discursive thoughts and habitual craving related to the body.
 Space without activity is uncontrived.
 When abiding like the sky,
 There is no sitting upright with the legs crossed.⁵⁰

Of course, such passages need to be put into their context, which is one of structured tantric practice involving complex visualisations and ritual procedures, incantatory repetition of *mantras*, and, more generally, lengthy periods of seclusion devoted to contemplative pursuits. This is made very clear, for instance, in the SM (Esler 2012: 112), where despite the text's generally pro-Dzogchen stance, lengthy passages are nonetheless devoted to the necessity of establishing a proper retreat environment.⁵¹ It is precisely within such a context that the (rhetorical) deconstruction of the need for these formal elements of meditative praxis would acquire its full psychological force (Germano 1994: 210–211). Moreover, while exhortations to remain in uncontrived spontaneity, resting effortlessly and doing nothing, may look like an easy way to enlightenment (indeed, Dzogchen is presented as the fast and easy route!), it must also be observed that the non-engagement with the mind's contents – the ceaseless flow of thoughts, as well as the wish to arrest or control these thoughts, or to seek to improve them in various ways – itself requires a form of disciplined learning. In this context, meditation is, strictly speaking, “non-referential” (Tib. *dmigs med*), in that it does not make use of a specific object of focus (Higgins 2011: 52–53; Esler 2017a) but rather

⁵⁰ IOL Tib J 594, fol. 2r.1–3: 'dzin myed mkha' la bcos myed na/ dkyil krungs drang gdug (sic! = 'dug) bcas pa dang/ lus kyi bcos pa thams chad kyang/ lus rtog mngon par zhel (sic! = zhen) las byung/ las* myed mkha' la bcos su myed/ nam mkha' lta bur ye gnas la/ dkyil krung drang gdug (sic! = 'dug) bcas pa myed/ For a translation and edition, see Karmay [1988] 2007: 72–73, 75–76. *Note that Karmay here has *lus* (“body”), but Norbu's edition (1984: 102) confirms the reading of the Dunhuang manuscript, which is *las* (“activity”).

⁵¹ SM 5–13; 20–23 (ch. 1); translated in Esler 2018: 30–36; 42–43.

consists in repeating and prolonging the ability to rest, “effortlessly,” in a state of awareness (Tib. *rig pa*) identified as being already perfect in every way. Such a training would involve a degree of restraint – refraining from falling into the patterns of distraction and of meddling, with the accompanying sense of preserving a spacious openness to timelessness within the flow of time, a growing familiarity with awareness as the deeper nature of the mind. Remaining uncontrived may not be quite as easy as it sounds!

Buddhagupta’s teachings must have been appreciated in their day, for a generation or so later they were being incorporated and slightly reworked in several of Nyen Pelyang’s writings (Karmay [1988] 2007: 60–61). This integration was so seamless that when Nupchen quoted the latter master’s works, he was probably unaware that Buddhagupta was the “original” author of the lines he cited (Takahashi 2015: 14). True to his name, Buddhagupta ended up being hidden by the *Small Birdseed* he penned and the pastiches he helped to inspire. Thus, when the SM quotes the *Small Birdseed*, it is Nyen Pelyang’s *Man ngag rgum chung* [Small Birdseed of Quintessential Instructions] that is being referred to, but in two cases the verses cited incorporate lines from Buddhagupta’s eponymous work. The quotations occur in the following places:

- SM 382 (ch. 7, section on the ninth and final Dzogchen view, discussing the elusiveness of the ground). This quotation incorporates verses from *Buddhagupta’s Small Birdseed*.
- SM 404 (ch. 7, section on meditation discussing the means of resting the body). Here we have three quotations from the *Small Birdseed of Quintessential Instructions*, all of them dealing with the futility of physical posture in meditation and the danger of getting caught up in grasping towards the body. Only the last of the three citations includes a partial parallel with *Buddhagupta’s Small Birdseed*.
- SM 440 (ch. 7, section concerning the non-rectification of defects arising during meditation). The quotation, which emphasises the sky-like nature of the mind abiding within itself, makes no reference to *Buddhagupta’s Small Birdseed*.

A somewhat different case of intertextuality occurs in SM 463 (ch. 7, section on the fruition in Atiyoga), where the manner of experiencing

realisation is presented as lying beyond the subject-object structure of temporary meditative experiences. Here the following lines from the *Sems bsgom pa'i rgyud* [Tantra on Meditating on Mind], in nine-syllabic metre, are quoted:

Profound, it is without discursive examining;
 If one craves for clarity as a state of the intellect,
 How can one experience the profundity of non-discursiveness?
 Because it is experienced, it is non-discursive.⁵²

It is interesting that a slightly abbreviated form of the lines in seven-syllabic metre is found in the final verse of Nyen Pelyang's *mTha' yi mun sel sgron ma* [Lamp Dispelling the Darkness of the Extremes],⁵³ which itself is almost identical to the first four lines of *Buddhagupta's Small Birdseed*:

How could the profound [state] without discursive thoughts
 Appear as an object of the intellect?
 Experiencing profound non-discursiveness,
 Since it is experienced, it is not [discursive].⁵⁴

What we see here is a single verse circulating in slightly different forms across various texts; while the versions of Nyen Pelyang and Buddhagupta are very close, the version of the *Tantra on Meditating on Mind* is slightly longer, presenting a more elaborate metre – it is the latter that is quoted by Nupchen, who mentions the *tantra* by name.⁵⁵ It is of course difficult to tell with certainty whether (a) Buddhagupta's verse was metrically expanded and incorporated into the *Tantra on Meditating on Mind*; (b) the incorporation happened the other way round, with the metre

⁵² *Sems bsgom pa'i rgyud*, in NGM, vol. 3/ga: 603.3–4 (with SM variants noted in square brackets): *ji tsam brtag* [SM var. *rtag*] *tu med pa'i zab mo zhig/ blo'i ngang du gsal bar zhen zhe* [SM var. *de zhen*] *na/ gang la mi rtog zab mo'i nyams* [SM var. *don*] *myong ba/ myong ba yin phyir de ni rtog ma* [SM var. *pa*] *yin/*

⁵³ gNyan dPal dbyangs, *mTha' yi mun sel sgron ma*, in NKJ, vol. 82/zu: 1049.4; translated and edited in Karmay [1988] 2007: 82, 83.

⁵⁴ IOL Tib J 594, fol. 1v.1–2: *ji tsam rtog myed zab mo zhig/ blo'i yul du snang na/ myi rtog zab mo nyams myong na/ myong ba yin phyir de nyid myen* (sic! = *myin*)/ Translated and edited in Karmay [1988] 2007: 71, 74–75.

⁵⁵ The *Sems bsgom pa'i rgyud*, in NGM, vol. 3/ga: 642.4, is also quoted in SM 44.6 (ch. 2, section discussing the qualities of meditation).

being contracted in the versions of Buddhagupta and Pelyang; or (c) both texts are drawing from an independent source. It is nonetheless conceivable that the anonymous redactor(s) of the *Tantra on Meditating on Mind* drew on well-known lines, including this verse by Buddhagupta, in compiling this *tantra*, perhaps expanding on them somewhat and weaving them with other appropriate textual materials.⁵⁶

5. Nupchen Sangyé Yéshé's Dzogchen Commentaries

We have already had occasion to mention the SM in the course of this paper. This treatise, which can be considered Nupchen Sangyé Yéshé's masterpiece, has attracted the attention of scholars for over forty years⁵⁷ because it is one of the first texts to unambiguously refer to Atiyoga as a distinct vehicle.⁵⁸ In the present section, I will also refer to several unstudied Dzogchen commentaries by the same author, which I believe were written at an earlier point in his career. In a sense, they could be seen to be leading up to the SM which, it must be emphasised, repeatedly styles itself as a commentary⁵⁹ (though not on a specific text). This would tend to underscore the importance of the textual heritage its author seeks to elucidate and organise (Esler 2018: 21–23), a concern which is especially obvious in the SM but which also transpires in these earlier works. The commentaries I will look at are the *rJe btsan dam pa'i 'grel pa* [Commentary on the *Holy Revered One*; henceforth JDG]; the *Byang chub sems bde ba 'phra bkod kyi don 'grel* [Meaning Commentary on the *Inlaid Jewel of Bliss, the Enlightened Mind*; henceforth DPG]; and

⁵⁶ On the manner of redacting/compiling tantric scriptures, cf. Esler 2020: 13–14, 137. Though the article deals with the 12th century and the Mahāyoga context, the procedures employed may not be all that different.

⁵⁷ Notably, Guenther 1983; Norbu 1984: 259–294; Karmay [1988] 2007: 103–120; Achard 1999: 16–23; Dalton and van Schaik 2003; Meinert 2003 and 2004; Donati 2006; Baroetto 2010; Lopez 2014; Esler 2012, 2017b and 2018.

⁵⁸ There are several instances in Nupchen's massive commentary on the *dGongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo* [The Gathering of Intentions], called the *Mun pa'i go cha* [Armour Against Darkness], presumably written before the SM, where the term “vehicle” is used to designate Atiyoga. For the precise page references, see Dalton 2016: 169, n. 8.

⁵⁹ This self-depiction occurs at the end of each chapter, viz. SM 23.2, SM 45.5–6, SM 64.6, SM 118.3, SM 186.3, SM 290.5, SM 494.2 and SM 499.5.

the *rDo rje gzong phugs kyi 'grel pa* [Commentary on the *Piercing Awl*; henceforth DZG]. These works are devoted to three of the eighteen texts of the mind section, namely the *rJe btsan dam pa* [The Holy Revered One]; the *Byang chub sems bde ba 'phra bkod* [The Inlaid Jewel of Bliss, the Enlightened Mind]; and the *Nam mkha'i rgyal po* [The King of Space], respectively.⁶⁰ What I would like to do in this section is to revisit several key themes of Dzogchen encountered earlier in this paper, and to see how Nupchen presents them in his commentaries.

The first notion to be examined is not so much an abstract idea but is better understood as a symbolic personification of the Dzogchen approach as such, namely the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra. In section 2 of this paper, I briefly touched upon the Mahāyoga background to this figure, and in section 4 I noted that the Dunhuang commentary to the *Cuckoo of Awareness* makes a point of placing this Buddha at the centre of its ethos of effortless practice. Turning to the SM, it is clear that Samantabhadra is already pre-eminently associated with the principle of primordial perfection that is so central to the Dzogchen approach, for the name Samantabhadra is attested in a number of the scriptures quoted by Nupchen Sangyé Yéshé.⁶¹ Furthermore, his feminine counterpart, Samantabhadrī, also figures prominently in a passage discussing the indications that manifest at the time of the fruition, where she is associated with an experience of bliss and sky-like openness.⁶² Nupchen also identifies Samantabhadra with the result of the path of Dzogchen as distinct from the result of Mahāyoga.⁶³

Now, the name Samantabhadra is of central concern to the JDG, since Samantabhadra is the referent of the title of its root text, the *Holy Revered One*. The JDG therefore goes to quite some lengths to explain why Samantabhadra may be considered superior to other buddhas, such as

⁶⁰ For translations and critical editions of the root texts, see Liljenberg 2012b.

⁶¹ SM 329, quoting the *sPyi bcings* (see Liljenberg 2012a: 147, 151–152); SM 332, quoting the *rJe btsan dam pa*, in NGM, vol. 1/ka: 593.1–2; SM 335, quoting the *rMad du byung ba*, in NGM, vol. 2/kha: 806.4–6; SM 338, quoting *rNal 'byor grub pa'i lung*, in NGM, vol. 16/ma: 350.3–7; SM 371, quoting the *rTse mo byung rgyal*, in NGM, vol. 1/ka: 609.6–7. For full translations of the passages, see Esler 2018: 266, 268, 270, 271, 289.

⁶² SM 465; translated in Esler 2012: 120.

⁶³ SM 469; discussed in Esler 2017b: 180–182, 187.

Vairocana and Vajrasattva. The reason for his superiority is that he is identified with the universal ground, and so can be said to virtually encompass all the other buddhas (JDG 292.5), and that everything can be considered his ornamentation (JDG 293.1). The JDG then launches into a discussion concerning various doxographical categories – admittedly not as thorough or systematic as in the SM – where the state of Samantabhadra is placed above lower stages of realisation, including those of the auditors (Skt. *śrāvaka*), of the independent buddhas (Skt. *pratyekabuddha*), of the Mahāyāna, and of the Mantrayāna (JDG 294.1–5). A further reference to Samantabhadra occurs at a later point in the text, where Nupchen explains that he is a refuge for those *yogins* who have broken their pledges, for remaining in the state of great peace without deteriorating from the bliss of Samantabhadra is presented as a self-sufficient means to atone for any broken pledge (JDG 296.3–4). This is also connected to the notion that in Dzogchen there is only one all-suffusing pledge (Tib. *snum pa'i dam tshig*), which encompasses all the twenty-eight pledges of Mahāyoga.⁶⁴

I will next look at spontaneous presence, another key theme that we have encountered in the course of this paper. As I have shown elsewhere (Esler 2012: 88–91), the view of spontaneous presence is one of the perspectives that Nupchen uses to explain the ground in his SM. It is also an important trope in the Mahāyoga context (see above, sections 2 and 3), yet Nupchen's usage of the term in his Dzogchen commentaries clearly anticipates the more exhaustive discussions found in his SM. At the very beginning of the DZG, in the homage which plays on the syllables of the Buddha's epithet *bcom ldan 'das*, Nupchen introduces the state in which all the various wisdoms are spontaneously complete (DZG 382.1). At the outset, he thus highlights the gnoseological dimension of the term. To point out that this state is intrinsic to the individual, and using a metaphor that is picked up in the SM,⁶⁵ that of the wish-granting gem (Skt. *cintāmaṇi*), he describes spontaneous presence as “the great excellence

⁶⁴ JDG 299.4–5: [...] *dam tshig nyi shu rtsa brgyad la sogs pa bsrung ba'i phyogs yod pa la snum pa'i dam tshig ces bya'ol* On these twenty-eight pledges, see van Schaik 2010: 71–72. On the Atiyoga understanding of “pledge” as beyond transgression, see Dorje [1992] 2012: 86.

⁶⁵ SM 320; translated in Esler 2018: 262.

in self and others.”⁶⁶ Nupchen is also careful to elucidate the content of spontaneous wisdom as being free from any objective scope, and indeed from the dichotomising tendencies of the ordinary mind, comparing it to space which transcends verbal modes of expression (DZG 386.2–3). Words (Tib. *tshig kun*) are criticised for seeking to define spontaneous completeness (Tib. *lhun rdzogs*) as either existent or non-existent (DZG 395.3), whereas in actuality it transcends both.

The theme of sky-like spaciousness just mentioned is fundamental to the way that Nupchen writes about both intrinsic awareness and the meditative practice that gives access to it:

Intrinsic awareness, aware of space, is free from thoughts:
Endowed with the force of abiding naturally,
It is without thoughts and occurs like the sky itself.⁶⁷

In this context, meditation can best be described as non-meditation, since there is nothing to meditate on, there being no reified objects for the kind of knowing here alluded to (DZG 396.4–5). Meditation in Dzogchen is thus a practice which does not involve any mental props (DZG 386.4–5). This, then, is the basis on which Nupchen seeks to establish the superiority of Dzogchen meditation over tantric forms of evocation, a theme also taken up in the SM where the quintessential instructions *without support* are deemed to be the speciality of Atiyoga.⁶⁸ In the DZG, Dzogchen meditation is declared to transcend the use of *mudrās*, mental objects of thematic focus (Tib. *gza' ba'i yul*) and incantatory repetition (Skt. *japa*) of *mantras* (DZG 386.6–387.1), yet at the same time, in an obvious play on the tantric pledge never to interrupt the practice of the *mudrā* and *mantra* (van Schaik 2010: 67, 78), Nupchen assures his readers that there is no impairment, since “the unwavering *mudrā* and the *mantra* of the inexpressible incantatory repetition are themselves free from appearance and expression.”⁶⁹ The point being made is that, although Dzogchen

⁶⁶ DZG 382.2–3: *yid bzhin nor ltar lhun grub bdag gzhan legs pa che/*

⁶⁷ DZG 397.4–5: *rang rig mkha' la rig pas bsam dang bral/ de la rang bzhin gnas pa'i mthur ldan pas/ bsam du med pas nam mkha' de nyid 'byung/*

⁶⁸ SM 222.4–5 (ch. 6, section on the quintessential instructions required for tantric meditation); translated in Esler 2018: 203.

⁶⁹ DZG 388.6–389.1: *sngags dang phyag rgya bral yang nyams pa med/ mi g.yo phyag rgya bzlas brjod med pa'i sngags/ de nyid bdag la snang brjod bral nyams med/*

meditation is ostensibly free from the *mudrās* and *mantras* of regular tantric evocation, it is claimed to be superior to the latter because it realises the ultimate significance of these ritual elements on a higher level which transcends their external performance.

Thus we can see that the rhetorical denial of ritual, already mentioned in previous sections of this article, is part of a process of negotiation in which Dzogchen is defined not only by its exclusion of ritual elements but also by its transposition of these elements on to a higher (or inward) plane. Yet the very fact that the ritual components of tantric praxis keep being mentioned only to be denied or sublimated goes to show that they continue to haunt Dzogchen by their absence (Germano 1994: 209). This impression is reinforced if we look at the JDG, which explicitly maintains that despite transcending the effortful practices of *mantra*, *mudrā* and visualisation that are integral parts of tantric evocation, the non-referential vehicle (i.e. Atiyoga) is an evocation insofar as the meditator constantly remains in the quintessential meaning and thereby abides in the flow of the practice.⁷⁰ The implication here is that, despite the absence of those external factors that define what an evocation is in the tantric context, Dzogchen meditation is in no wise lacking, since it fulfils the essential requirement of maintaining the continuity of a practice of non-practice.

The DPG similarly engages in a Dzogchen reinterpretation of fundamental tantric categories, notably the correlation of the female and male sexual organs with the principles of discerning knowledge and expedient means respectively (see above, section 2). The womb is thus associated with the spontaneously present open dimension of infinite space, whereas the phallus is connected to the functionality of appearances (DPG 310.1–2). The hermeneutical shift is quite subtle, since it does not contradict the usual tantric connotations but brings them into the focus of a meditative culture of effortlessness and naturalness by alluding to particular states (openness and multifarious appearance) accessed through Dzogchen contemplation. This process of hermeneutical probing is also applied to the specific symbols used to instantiate the masculine and feminine principles,

⁷⁰ JDG 297.2–4: */klung du gnas pas bsgrub thabs so zhes bya ba/ [...] sngags dang phyag rgya dang/ sgom sgrub rtsol ba'i sa la mi gnas kyi/ mi dmigs pa'i theg pa kham ssum las nges par 'byung ba'i don gyi snying po la rtag du (sic! = tu) gnas pa nyid bsgrubs pa'i thabs so/*

namely the *vajra* and the lotus respectively. The former is specifically explained, on a secret level, as non-dual and hence as beyond the distinctions of male and female. Likewise, the lotus is understood to refer to meditation without the subject-object dichotomy implied in more wilful forms of practice, a meditation which reconciles the two poles of discerning knowledge and expedient means.⁷¹ In these ways, tantric symbols are appropriated and then subtly subverted to highlight the superiority of the Dzogchen approach which, through its effortlessness, is held to transcend the dichotomising framework of tantric practice.

Given the extensive use of symbols in tantric praxis on the one hand, and the importance in Dzogchen meditation of encountering, recognising and remaining in mind's beingness on the other, Nupchen raises the interesting question as to whether and to what extent this deeper dimension of the mind is compatible with being symbolised at all. He does this in his DPG in a lengthy discussion concerning the syllable *HŪṂ* and its capacity to adequately symbolise mind's beingness. The passage shifts across various positions on this delicate subject: from "*HŪṂ* searching for *HŪṂ*, yet *HŪṂ* not being found,"⁷² which is *not* taken to be indicative of a problem with the syllable itself but rather, more fundamentally, with pinpointing what the nature of mind is in the first place, through an invitation to scrutinise whether or not the mind and the syllable are one and the same (DPG 314.3), to their *apparent* identification ("*HŪṂ* is the awakened mind's intrinsic insignia").⁷³ This latter identification is not straightforward, however, and is qualified by two considerations that are supposed to set it off from normative tantric understandings: it is unique rather than manifold (as in the case of the five wisdoms, for example), and it is the self-arising of intrinsic awareness (DPG 314.6). Whether or not the latter can function as a convincing argument is open to question, given the pervasiveness of "self-originated" symbols in tantric doctrines in general, yet it is used by Nupchen to demarcate Dzogchen symbols as

⁷¹ DPG 310.2–4: *[gnyis su med pa'i rdo rje la] [zhes pa] de ltar chas bsnyad pa la ngo bos yab yum 'byed pa'i rtsol ba med de gsang ba'i rdo rje'ol l'dzin chags med pa'i pad ma'ol [zhes pa] phrin las ci mdzad pa ched du byed pa'i gzung 'dzin tsam gyis kyang ma bsgom pa'i phyir thabs dang shes rab lhun gyis rdzogs pa'ol*

⁷² DPG 313.3: *HŪṂ gis HŪṂ tshol HŪṂ mi rnyed*

⁷³ DPG 314.5–6: *HŪṂ ni thugs kyi rang rtags yin*

apparently less contrived (or more natural) than their tantric counterparts. Despite what might appear as a slight ambivalence on this topic, Nupchen concludes that ultimately “the quintessence, the enlightened mind, does not abide in syllables,”⁷⁴ and that awakened body, speech and mind cannot be accomplished by means of such syllables, since it is the wisdom of awareness wherein they are spontaneously present.⁷⁵

I would like to close this section with some wider reflections on Dzogchen’s somewhat critical stance towards tantric symbols, and what this might mean for the way this approach establishes a connection between the transcendent and immanent dimensions. Jacob Dalton correlates the phases of Tantric Buddhism’s historical development with a process of gradual interiorisation of tantric ritual (Dalton 2004: 3, 26–27). In addition, I would like to draw on the transcendence-immanence distinction, a relational axis of fundamental importance in the religious sphere in general (Kim 1987; Stünkel 2017), and to suggest that the paradigms of Mahāyoga and Dzogchen can be seen to present differing ways of articulating and of dealing with this complementary polarity, with Dzogchen being an intensification of some of the basic positions expressed in the tantric ethos. A fundamental tenet of Mahāyoga thought is the non-duality of the conditioned world of *saṃsāra* and of the unconditioned dimension of *nirvāṇa*.⁷⁶ This has numerous repercussions on the level of tantric praxis, where the ritual evocation of a deity (Meinert forthcoming),⁷⁷ which involves the practitioner’s meditative identification with that deity, is held not only to bring about a deconditioning of the impulses that bind one to the world of illusory appearances, but also to correspond to a more fundamental order of reality, to thusness (Skt. *tathatā*) or the way things

⁷⁴ DPG 315.5–6: */snying po byang chub sems de ni/ lyi ge la yang mi gnas shing/ [...]*.

⁷⁵ DPG 315.6–316.1: *rig pa’i ye shes ’bru gsum re res mtshon pa’i tha snyad med par gsum lhun gyis grub pa’i ngo bo’ol*

⁷⁶ Nupchen’s SM discusses a view of non-duality at length in the Mahāyoga context; see SM 204–210 (ch. 6). A view of the same name is also presented in the Atiyoga context; cf. SM 356–369 (ch. 7). For a translation of the relevant passages, see Esler 2018: 191–196; 282–287. For a detailed discussion of the Mahāyoga view of non-duality, and an examination of the differences to the Atiyoga understanding of the same, see Esler 2018: 606–610, 657–658.

⁷⁷ Carmen Meinert’s article provides an extensive discussion regarding the application of the transcendence-immanence distinction in the context of the tantric practice of evocation.

truly are. That is to say, when the afflictions (Skt. *kleśa*) and their imprints (Skt. *vāsanā*) are transfigured through tantric meditation, what shines through is their deeper dimensionality of wisdom. This mode of presenting things might thus be said to be bringing the transcendent (= wisdom) into the sphere of the relative and immanent (= the afflictions, *samsāra*, etc.). In Dzogchen, the optic is quite the same, but with one significant difference: it is no longer necessary to resort to the symbols of primordial perfection (the *maṇḍala* which the practitioner visualises and the deity with which he identifies himself in the tantric context), for perfection is seen to be spontaneously present as the mind itself. The symbols having yielded their inward reality, effortful clinging to their outward shell is pointless; the only obstacle to realising the mind's primordial completeness is the tendency to strive for perfection teleologically (Esler 2017b: 175–176, 181). If Mahāyoga's non-dual stance seeks to reconcile the transcendent-immanence distinction by stating the fundamental identity of both poles, Dzogchen may be said to take this a step further, by holding that the very act of channelling the transcendent into the immanent through the medium of culturally potent symbols vitiates the mind's unaltered completeness. Perfection, considered to be the natural state of the mind, is thus squarely placed in the immanent dimension, with effort being a symptom of malaise. The locus of perfection has shifted from the symbol (= the syllable, the deity, the *maṇḍala*) to the symbolised (= the mind). The central paradox of Dzogchen thought, then, is the embeddedness of the transcendent (i.e. intrinsic awareness, mind's beingness) within the immanent (i.e. the ordinary mind), without awareness being stained by the ordinary mind, the latter being not only its veil, but also its expression and playing field (Arguillère 2016: 478).⁷⁸

6. Concluding Remarks

While the tantric manuscripts of Dunhuang are generally dated to the late 10th century (Dalton and van Schaik 2006: xxi), we should not forget that the doctrines and practices they describe may well antedate this period, representing the state of Tibetan religion between the mid-8th to

⁷⁸ On the complex relationship of the ordinary mind and awareness in classical Dzogchen thought, see Higgins 2013: 21, 26, 30.

mid-9th centuries (van Schaik 2008a: 50). This is clearly the case with the teachings of both Nyen Pelyang and Buddhagupta, which we encounter in the Dunhuang manuscripts, and again, either as direct citations or mediated by intervening redactions, in Nupchen Sangyé Yéshé's SM. It also bears mentioning that the Dunhuang tantric manuscripts, valuable as they may be, only provide us with a particular and localised window into the Central Asian religious landscape; as such, they may not always accurately reflect the overall state of Tibetan literature at the time (Achard 1999: 16–17). The fact that two Dzogchen texts are found among the Dunhuang manuscripts – viz. the *Cuckoo of Awareness* (IOL Tib J 647) and *Buddhagupta's Small Birdseed* (IOL Tib J 594) – indicates that there was sufficient interest in Dzogchen for these texts to have circulated at Dunhuang, though it is also clear, when compared to the vast number of Dunhuang manuscripts dealing with Mahāyoga ritual, that this interest must have been rather limited. Nonetheless, the presence of quotations from these works in the SM alongside an entire body of Dzogchen texts would tend to suggest that the overall state of Dzogchen literature in the 10th century was already fairly developed, if still slightly disorganised.

Indeed, the inclusion of the *dGongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo* [The Gathering of Intentions], a scripture later classified as belonging to Anuyoga,⁷⁹ as the most quoted source in the SM's Dzogchen chapter, gives the impression that Nupchen was seeking to impose an order on a somewhat disparate body of texts, and that this order was still relatively fluid (van Schaik 2004: 199). It must not be forgotten, however, that Nupchen also quotes from almost all of the eighteen texts of the mind section, a group of texts itself (subsequently?) subdivided into five earlier (Tib. *snga 'gyur lnga*) and thirteen later translations (Tib. *phyi 'gyur bcu gsum*), all of them said to have been transmitted from Śrīsiṃha to Vairocana (Karmay [1988] 2007: 23–24).⁸⁰ In fact, not only are several of these texts the subjects of Nupchen's

⁷⁹ The *Gathering of Intentions* does not refer to itself as pertaining particularly to Anuyoga, since it covers the full range of inner *tantras*, viz. Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga, and indeed presents itself as a tantric appropriation of the nine vehicles, including those that are not in themselves tantric. See Dalton 2016: 33–47, 137.

⁸⁰ Whereas the five earlier translations are attributed to Vairocana, the thirteen later translations are attributed to Vimalamitra and his colleagues, notably Yudra Nyingpo (Tib. g.Yu sgra snying po) and Nyak Jñānakumāra (Tib. g.Nyags Jñānakumāra); see Liljenberg 2012b: 25, 86.

briefier Dzogchen commentaries considered above, but in Chapter 2 of his SM, while discussing the books that are required by a *yogin* of the Atiyoga approach, Nupchen even explicitly refers to them as a group of “twenty or eighteen minor texts on the mind.”⁸¹ While the differences between the various lists of this group of eighteen (or twenty) texts among various influential authors of the Nyingma school may justifiably lead to the suspicion that we are actually dealing with an ideal canon rather than a concrete textual collection (Lopez 2018: 57, 84, 87), it is clear that the various texts included in this fluid corpus exhibit many common doctrinal and literary features (Liljenberg 2012b: 47–48, 51), and that by Nupchen’s time they were perceived as having a separate identity and distinct transmissional lineage (Lopez 2018: 61–62). It therefore seems fair to say that while Nupchen surely played an important role in organising and codifying what would become the mind section of Dzogchen, he was not creating a category out of nothing but was rather building on and systematising an existing literary corpus.

Moreover, as suggested by both Karen Liljenberg (2012b: 36) and David Higgins (2013: 38), the concern with clarifying doctrinal issues and establishing doxographical boundaries for Dzogchen is not limited to Nupchen, but is also witnessed in a work attributed to one of Nupchen’s own masters, Nyak Jñānakumāra (fl. 9th c., Tib. gNyags Jñānakumāra), whom Nupchen is believed to have sought out after being dissatisfied with the teachings of Jñānakumāra’s student, the Sogdian Pelgyi Yéshé (Tib. dPal gyi ye shes) (Esler 2014: 11). The work in question, the *sPyi gsang sngags lung gi ’grel pa* [General Commentary on the Authoritative Scriptures of Secret Mantra], is a commentary to one of the eighteen texts of the mind section, the *sPyi chings* [The Universal Bind]. Both the root text, which Liljenberg (2012a: 147, 152; 149, 153) has succeeded in restoring from the lemmata found in Jñānakumāra’s work, and its commentary warn against the negative consequences of mixing up the teachings of the different registers of Chan and Tantra, and repeatedly make reference to Dzogchen as a discrete category.⁸²

⁸¹ SM 33.5: *sems phran nyi shu’am bco brgyad la sogs pa bsten nol*

⁸² gNyags Jñānakumāra, *sPyi gsang sngags lung gi ’grel pa*, in NKJ, vol. 103/pe: 471.6–472.2; translated in Liljenberg 2012b: 36. See also the following passages which

The recognition that the germs of certain Dzogchen ideas may have developed within a Mahāyoga matrix should not lead us to overlook the vast differences, at once theoretical and practical, between the worlds of Mahāyoga and Dzogchen (Achard 1999: 75–76), discussed in this article with regard to the varying ways both approaches come to terms with the transcendence-immanence distinction. What it should enable us to see, however, is that Dzogchen developed within a tantric milieu, and that this tantric milieu encompassed a range of different approaches, some of them more visionary oriented, others more focused on the technicalities of ritual and magical mastery, and yet others emphasising effortless and spontaneous modes of contemplation. In the writings of Nupchen Sangyé Yéshé we witness a tendency to erect distinct doxographical boundaries around these different approaches (van Schaik 2004: 167, 195, 201), yet this tendency seems already prefigured in those of his older contemporary Nyak Jñānakumāra. So while it is probably anachronistic to portray Atiyoga as a fully fledged vehicle during the 8th to 9th centuries, it is equally important to recognise that the trends that eventually crystallised into various clusters of Dzogchen teachings may well have had roots going back to the earliest currents of tantric transmission to Tibet. Acknowledging the multivalent understandings of tantric practice in early Tibet would explain the level of coherence which is visible both in the ideas and the corpus of authoritative texts drawn on by Nupchen in his exegetical works on Dzogchen, while also allowing for a parallel situation of greater doxographical porosity (see Meinert 2007), witnessed for instance in some of the Dunhuang tantric manuscripts.

Abbreviations

- DPG gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes, *Byang chub sems bde ba 'phra bkod kyi don 'grel*. In NKJ, vol. 103/pe: 303–326.
- DZG gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes, *rDo rje gzong phugs kyi 'grel pa*. In NKJ, vol. 103/pe: 381–398.

refer to Dzogchen as a discrete rubric: 451.4–5 (Dzogchen as the single taste of mind's beingness); 464.3–4 (Dzogchen as the vehicle of the fruition); 481.1 (a reference to the root text as an authoritative scripture of Dzogchen).

- IOL Tib J Tibetan Dunhuang Manuscripts preserved at the British Library in London (formerly in the India Office Library, IOL).
- JDG gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes, *rJe btsan dam pa'i 'grel pa*. In NKJ, vol. 103/pe: 292–301.
- NGM *rNying ma rgyud 'bum*. mTshams-brag edition. 46 Vols. Thimphu: Royal National Library, 1982.
- NKJ *sNga 'gyur bka' ma*, ed. Kaḥ thog mKhan po 'Jam dbyangs. 120 Vols. Chengdu: Kaḥ thog, 1999.
- SM gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes, *rNal 'byor mig gi bSam gtan or bSam gtan mig sgron: A Treatise on Bhāvanā and Dhyāna and the Relationships between the Various Approaches to Buddhist Contemplative Practice*. Reproduced from a manuscript made presumably from an Eastern Tibetan print by 'Khor-gdong gter-sprul 'Chi-med rig-'dzin. Smarntsis shesrig spendzod, vol. 74. Leh: Tashigangpa, 1974.

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gNyags Jñānakumāra, *sPyi gsang sngags lung gi 'grel pa*. In NKJ, vol. 103/pe: 439–483.

gNyan dPal dbyangs, *lTa ba yang dag sgron ma*. In NKJ, vol. 82/zu: 1045–1047.

gNyan dPal dbyangs, *lTa ba rin po che sgron ma*. In NKJ, vol. 82/zu: 1051–1055.

gNyan dPal dbyangs, *Thugs kyi sgron ma*. In NKJ, vol. 82/zu: 1001–1043.

gNyan dPal dbyangs, *mTha' yi mun sel sgron ma*. In NKJ, vol. 82/zu: 1047–1049.

rNal 'byor grub pa'i lung. In NGM, vol. 16/ma: 2–617.

rMad du byung ba. In NGM, vol. 2/kha: 774–856.

rTse mo byung rgyal. In NGM, vol. 1/ka: 606–618.

Sems bsgom pa'i rgyud = Thams cad nam mkha'i ngo bo skye ba med pa'i byang chub kyi sems bsgom pa'i rgyud. In NGM, vol. 3/ga: 592–645.

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