


On the Life of gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes*

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 Nubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes is renowned as an important master of the *rNying-ma* school of Tibetan Buddhism, and in particular as the author of two seminal works of early Tibetan *Vajrayāna*, the *Mun-pa'i go-cha*¹ and the *bSam-gtan mig-sgron*.²

In two previous articles I discussed the latter work, examining the section on dreams in the gradualist chapter³ and gNubs-chen's exposition of *Atiyoga* in the seventh chapter.⁴ In the present essay I would like to bring together the information we have for the life and dating of its author. I will be drawing on the various sources available for Sangs-rgyas ye-shes' life, all the while seeking to distinguish, insofar as this is possible, historical fact from pious fiction.

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¹ gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, *Mun-pa'i go-cha*, in NKD, vols.50/wi-51/zhi.

² 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, Smanrtsis shesrig spendzod, vol.74, Leh: Tashigangpa, 1974.

³ Esler, Dylan, 'Note d'oniromancie tibétaine : réflexions sur le Chapitre 4 du *bSam-gtan mig-sgron* de gNubs-chen sangs-rgyas ye-shes', in *Acta Orientalia Belgica*, vol.25, 2012, pp. 317-328.

⁴ Esler, Dylan, 'The Exposition of *Atiyoga* in gNubs-chen sangs-rgyas ye-shes' *bSam-gtan mig-sgron*', in *Revue d'Études Tibétaines*, no.24, October 2012, pp. 81-136.

In the *bSam-gtan mig-sgron* the author signs gNubs-ban, meaning 'the venerable (Skt. *vandya*) of gNubs', and also Ban-chung, meaning 'small venerable'.⁵ This is none other than gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, who is known as a *bodhisattva* of the fourth stage⁶ and counted among Padmasambhava's twenty-five main disciples.⁷ Indeed, Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las (1640-1718) recounts that Sangs-rgyas ye-shes attained the fourth *bodhisattva* stage while practising in a charnel ground in India, whereby he had a vision of the protectress Ekajaṭī and gained the realization of wisdom arising in phenomena's open dimension (Skt. *dharmadhātu*).⁸ Already in Nyang-ral nyi-ma 'od-zer's (1124-1192) *Chos-'byung me-tog snying-po*, gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes is listed as one of the twenty-five disciples to have been initiated by Padmasambhava into the eight injunctions (*bka'-brgyad*). He is mentioned at the beginning of the list, after King Khri-srong lde'u-btsan, Vairocana and gNubs Nam-mkha'i snying-po.⁹ Sangs-rgyas ye-shes is also renowned as an eminent translator of both *sūtras* and *tantras*.¹⁰ Concerning gNubs-chen's importance for the *rNying-ma* tradition, Dudjom Rinpoche (1904-1987) cites a saying according to which the *Vajrayāna* of the *rNying-ma-pas* "fell first to gNyags, fell to gNubs during the intermediate period, and fell to Zur in the end."¹¹

Birth

The dates of gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes are difficult to establish with certainty, and we will return to this problem below. According

⁵ See gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, *bSam-gtan mig-sgron*, p. 497.5; cf. also p. 375.6 (gloss), p. 419.2 (gloss).

⁶ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*, Translated and edited by Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstein, vol.1: The Translations, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991, p. 613.

⁷ Tulku Thondup, *The Origin of Buddhism in Tibet: The Tantric Tradition of the Nyingmapa*, Marion: Buddhayana, 1984, p. 152. Note, however, that the lists of Padmasambhava's chief disciples vary from each other.

⁸ Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, Leh: Tashigangpa, 1972, p. 165.5-6.

⁹ Nyang-ral nyi-ma 'od-zer, *Chos-'byung me-tog snying-po sbrang-rtsi'i bcud*, Lhasa: Bod-ljongs mi-dmangs dpe-skrun-khang, 1988, pp. 341f. The first nine disciples in Nyang-ral's list are King Khri-srong lde'u-btsan, Vairocana, gNubs Nam-mkha'i snying-po, gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, rGyal-ba mchog-dbyangs, Ye-shes mtsho-rgyal, 'Brog-mi dPal-gyi ye-shes, Rlangs dPal-gyi seng-ge and gNyags Jñānakumāra.

¹⁰ Achard, Jean-Luc, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret: Recherches philologiques et historiques sur l'origine de la Grande Perfection dans la tradition rNying ma pa*, Turnhout: Brepols, 1999, p. 17; Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 163.1, p. 167.3-4.

¹¹ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 599.

to Dudjom Rinpoche, he was born in sGrags (Central Tibet) in the first month (*ca.* February) of the water male mouse year (*chu-pho byi-ba'i lo*);¹² depending on the sixty year cycle, this could refer either to 772 or to 832 CE.¹³ Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, however, gives the date of his birth as the first month of the wood male mouse year (*shing-pho byi-lo*), which is twelve years later.¹⁴ In this he follows the *rGya-bo-che*, which purports to be gNubs-chen's autobiography.¹⁵ This could refer either to 784 or to 844 CE, again depending on the sixty year cycle. The dates of the earlier sixty year cycle (i.e. 772 CE according to Dudjom Rinpoche, or 784 CE according to Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las) would make gNubs-chen a contemporary of Śāntarakṣita (d. 797), from whom he is said to have been ordained as a monk.¹⁶ Sangs-rgyas ye-shes being his religious name, his secular name was rDo-rje khri-gtsug, and his secret name was rDo-rje yang dbang-gter.¹⁷ Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las further specifies that the name Sangs-rgyas ye-shes was bestowed on him in a vision by Vajrapāṇi which occurred while he was in Bodhgayā.¹⁸ This again accords with the *rGya-bo-che's* account,¹⁹ whereby it is noteworthy that some of the lines describing this visionary event in the latter text are found echoed in the *bSam-gtan mig-sgron*.²⁰

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 607.

¹³ Dorje, Gyurme, and Kapstein, Matthew, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*, vol.2: Reference Materials, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991, p. 54, n.715.

¹⁴ Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 160.5.

¹⁵ gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes (attributed to), *Sangs-rgyas ye-shes rin-po-che'i lo-rgyus gnubs-kyi bka'-shog chen-mo*, in NKJ, vol.42/ni, pp. 693-745, esp. p. 696.4. On this text, see Dalton, Jacob, 'Preliminary Remarks on a Newly Discovered Biography of Gnubs chen sangs rgyas ye shes', in Bogin, Benjamin E., and Quintman, Andrew (eds.), *Himalayan Passages: Tibetan and Newar Studies in Honor of Hubert Decler*, Somerville: Wisdom Publications, forthcoming.

¹⁶ Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, p. 17; Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 167.3.

¹⁷ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 605.

¹⁸ Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, pp. 164.6-165.2.

¹⁹ Cf. *bKa'-shog chen-mo*, p. 705.

²⁰ See gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, *bSam-gtan mig-sgron*, Chapter VIII, §2 (p. 498.4-5). The lines in question are as follows, with the *bSam-gtan mig-sgron's* variants in square brackets: *[dzab [SM: 'dzab] grangs yid la bzlas pa'i tshe/ [chos nyid sems [SM: blo] la gsal ba'i tshe/ [...]]/lha srin [SM: sde brgyad kyis bdag la dbang bskur ro]/ku co 'don pa'i tshe [SM: bton no]*. Note that paragraph numbers for the *bSam-gtan mig-sgron* refer to editorial divisions in my English translation of this text, which is yet to be published.

gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes descended from two of the most respected clans in Tibet, the gNubs²¹ and the mChims, from his father's and mother's sides respectively. Before his birth, a sandalwood tree is said to have appeared miraculously in the burial ground of his gNubs ancestors. A Chinese teacher prophesied that this was an omen for the birth of a high emanation and ordered specific rites to be performed in connection with the tree.²²

Travels and Teachers

According to tradition, gNubs-chen was initiated in his youth by Padmasambhava into the *sGrub-pa bka'-brgyad*; his tutelary deity was Yamāntaka and he mastered the fierce spells (*drag-sngags*) associated with this practice.²³ In this regard, it is reported that as he was meditating on Yamāntaka in the caves above bSam-yas, all the deities of Yamāntaka's configuration (Skt. *maṇḍala*) spontaneously appeared before him.²⁴ He is also believed to have received further teachings from Padmasambhava in the rDo-rje rtse-lnga cave on the Nepali-Indian border.²⁵ In the *rGya-bo-che* gNubs-chen is made to say:²⁶

Then the great Guru imparted
 To me, the small venerable, all that was needed:
 The nine *tantras* of the fierce spells,
 Their dissimilar modes of accomplishment, etc.,
 As well as all the minor points connected to the activities.

Since in the system of the eight injunctions (*bka'-brgyad*) Yamāntaka is the wrathful form of Mañjuśrī, the *bodhisattva* of sapience (Skt. *prajñā*), gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes' association with this practice is particularly significant, both in terms of his exceptional

²¹ In the ancient historical documents, this name is sometimes also spelt sNubs. See Norbu, Namkhai, *sBas-pa'i rgum-chung: The Small Collection of Hidden Precepts: A Study of an Ancient Manuscript of Dzogchen from Tun-huang*, Arcidosso: Shang-Shung Edizioni, 1984, pp. 77f.

²² See gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, *bSam-gtan mig-sgron*, preface. This episode is recounted in Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 160.4-6.

²³ Reynolds, John M., *The Golden Letters*, Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1996, p. 251.

²⁴ Tarthang Tulku, 'The Twenty-five Disciples of Padmasambhava', in *Crystal Mirror*, vol.4, 1975, pp. 35-74, esp. p. 46.

²⁵ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 607; Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 163.3-4.

²⁶ *bKa'-shog chen-mo*, p. 700.3-4: */de nas gu ru chen po yis/ /drag po sngags kyi rgyud dgu dang/ /de yi sgrub lugs mi 'dra sogs/ /las kyi kha tshar thams cad dang/ dgos pa tshang bar ban chung bdag la gnang/*.

intelligence and his reputed mastery of the arts of black magic. Furthermore, his alleged longevity will not be particularly surprising from a traditional perspective, given that Yamāntaka is in effect the ‘Slayer of the Lord of Death’.

His intelligence manifested itself from an early age, as he is said to have learnt to read and write by the age of seven. It is around this time that he is believed to have been ordained by Śāntaraṅkṣita and to have first met the Nepali master Vasudhara in bSam-yas, who was to play an important role throughout his life.²⁷

During King Ral-pa-can’s (alias Khri-btsug lde’u-btsan) reign (814-836 CE), gNubs-chen is held to have visited India, Nepal and Gilgit (*Bru-sha*)²⁸ seven times,²⁹ making his first trip to Nepal and India at the age of thirteen³⁰ (or eleven, following Klong-chen-pa).³¹ In this he was following the advice of Vasudhara, who, before returning to Nepal, told Sangs-rgyas ye-shes to travel to Nepal and India in search of the teachings.³² Before departing for Nepal, gNubs-chen, who came from a wealthy family, sold some of his lands and orchards to convert them into gold for his journey.³³ Although these trips are held to have taken place during King Ral-pa-can’s reign, it will be seen below that this is improbable historically.

²⁷ Guru bKra-shis, *Gu-bKra’i chos’byung: bsTan-pa’i snying-po gsang-chen snga’gyur nges-don zab-mo’i chos-kyi byung-ba gsal-bar byed-pa’i legs-bshad mkhas-pa dga’byed ngo-mtshar gtam-gyi rol-mtsho*, Beijing: Krung-go’i bod-kyi shes-rig dpe-skrunkhang, 1990, p. 246; see also Rig’dzin Padma ‘phrin-las, *bKa’-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa’i rnam-thar*, p. 161.1-2.

²⁸ According to Beckwith, *Bru-sha*, the Tibetan name for Gilgit, is related to modern names for the Hunza people and their language, Burusho and Burushaski. See Beckwith, Christopher L., *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 116, n.44. On the Burushaski language, see Berger, Hermann, *Das Burushaski – Schicksale einer zentralasiatischen Restsprache*, Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1992.

²⁹ Tulku Thondup, *The Origin of Buddhism in Tibet*, p. 153; cf. *bKa’-shog chen-mo*, p. 734.6.

³⁰ Rig’dzin Padma ‘phrin-las, *bKa’-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa’i rnam-thar*, p. 163.5.

³¹ Klong-chen-pa cites the same passage with some variants and reads ‘eleven’ (*bcu-gcig*) instead of ‘thirteen’ (*bcu-gsum*). Cf. Klong-chen rab’byams, *Chos’byung rin-po-che’i gter-mdzod bstan-pa gsal-bar byed-pa’i nyi’od ces-bya-ba*, Beijing: Bod-ljongs bod-yig dpe-rnying dpe-skrunkhang, 1991, p. 406. One might note in passing that the attribution of this work to Klong-chen-pa is doubtful, since it employs doxographical categories not met with otherwise in Klong-chen-pa’s corpus, and since the name Thugs-mchog-rtsal found in the colophon does not correspond to any known name used by Klong-chen-pa. See Arguillère, Stéphane, *Profusion de la Vaste Sphère: Klong-chen rab’byams (Tibet, 1308-1364): Sa vie, son œuvre, sa doctrine*, Leuven: Peeters Publishers & Oriental Studies, 2007, pp. 176f.

³² *bKa’-shog chen-mo*, p. 697.3-6; quoted in Rig’dzin Padma ‘phrin-las, *bKa’-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa’i rnam-thar*, p. 161.3-4.

³³ *bKa’-shog chen-mo*, p. 698.1.

In India he studied under Śrīsiṃha, Vimalamitra, Śāntigarbha, Dhanaśīla and Dhanadhala, among others.³⁴ In Nepal, where he returned in his fifty-fourth year, he studied under King Vasudhara. The latter then sent him to his own teacher, Prakāśālaṃkāra, in Vārāṇasī.³⁵ Prakāśālaṃkāra (gSal-ba'i rgyan) was an Indian master also known as Ācārya gSal-ba rgyal³⁶ and Sukhodyotaka (bDe-ba gsal-mdzad); he is said to have written a number of short texts on evocations and empowerments based on the *dGongs-pa 'dus-pa'i mdo*, which were collected, edited and translated by Sangs-rgyas ye-shes.³⁷ After studying the *dGongs-pa 'dus-pa'i mdo* with Prakāśālaṃkāra, gNubs-chen proceeded to Gilgit, where he continued his studies under Dhanarakṣita, Dharmabodhi and Dharmarāja.³⁸ He also studied extensively with Lotsāwa Che-btsan-skyes from Gilgit, who translated many *Anuyoga tantras* into Tibetan.³⁹ Dudjom Rinpoche, whose account in the main accords with that of Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las,⁴⁰ also lists Kamalaśīla, Khrag-'thung nag-po, Dhanasaṃskṛta, gNyags Jñānakumāra and the latter's disciples, the Sogdian dPal-gyi ye-shes and Zhang rgyal-ba'i yon-tan, among his teachers.⁴¹ From the Sogdian dPal-gyi ye-shes in particular he received the pith instructions relating to the mind section (*sems-phyogs*) of *Atiyoga*.⁴² Nyang-ral nyi-ma 'od-zer recounts that gNubs-

³⁴ Reynolds, *The Golden Letters*, p. 251; Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 163.2.

³⁵ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, pp. 608f.

³⁶ gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, *bSam-gtan mig-sgron*, p. 412.4, p. 413.3. His name also appears as Ācārya gSal-ba rgyal in gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, *rDo-rje gzong-phugs-kyi 'grel-pa*, in NKJ, vol.103/pe, p. 398.2.

³⁷ Dalton, Jacob, *The Uses of the dGongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo in the Development of the rNying ma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, PhD thesis, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2002, pp. 145f, n.20.

³⁸ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 609. Note that according to Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, the full form of Dharmarāja's name is Dharmarājapāla (Chos-rgyal skyong). See Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 162.3-4.

³⁹ See Reynolds, *The Golden Letters*, p. 250. Note that these *Anuyoga tantras* are collectively referred to as *rNal-'byor grub-pa'i lung* and are much quoted in the *bSam-gtan mig-sgron*. The bibliographic reference for the *rNal-'byor grub-pa'i lung* (alias *dGongs-pa 'dus-pa'i mdo*) is as follows: *rNal-'byor grub-pa'i lung*, in NGM, vol.16/ma, pp. 2-617. For further details on gNubs-chen's studies of the *dGongs-pa 'dus-pa'i mdo* with these masters and his role in the codification of this scripture, see Dalton, Jacob, 'Lost and Found: A Fourteenth-Century Discussion of Then-Available Sources on gNubs chen sangs rgyas ye shes', in *Bulletin of Tibetology (Special Issue, Nyingma Studies)*, forthcoming.

⁴⁰ Cf. Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 163.2.

⁴¹ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, pp. 607f.

⁴² Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 163.1-2; Guru bKra-shis, *Gu-bKra'i chos-'byung*, p. 249.

chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes received the combined transmissions of the nine disciples of gNyags Jñānakumāra,⁴³ which indicates that he was separated from the latter by one generation.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, this need not in itself be construed as signifying that he did not meet gNyags Jñānakumāra, since, as pointed out by Germano, the *lDe'u chos-'byung* (11th century) explains that gNubs-chen's root teacher was the Sogdian dPal-gyi ye-shes, but that dissatisfaction with him led gNubs to seek out the latter's own teacher gNyags Jñānakumāra. The same account specifies that his trip across the Himalayas at the age of fifty-four was motivated by dissatisfaction with the teachings which gNyags Jñānakumāra had made available in Tibet.⁴⁵ Hence, it would seem that gNubs, while mainly studying with the master's disciples, did have occasion to meet gNyags Jñānakumāra himself. In the hagiography by Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, gNubs-chen is made to say that he had eleven⁴⁶ masters, of which four were particularly close: Śrīsiṃha, Khrag-'thung nag-po, Śāntigarbha and Vasudhara.⁴⁷ The *rGya-bo-che* further states:⁴⁸

The pith instructions were imparted to me
By the Indian sage Vimalamitra,
The preceptor from Oḍḍiyāna, Padmākara,
The Nepali sage Vasudhara
And the Tibetan sage Jñānakumāra.

In brief, it can be said that in gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes the traditions of *Mahāyoga*, *Anuyoga* and the mind-section (*sems-sde*) of *Atiyoga* converged.⁴⁹

⁴³ Nyang-ral nyi-ma 'od-zer, *Chos-'byung me-tog snying-po*, p. 436f.

⁴⁴ Germano, David, 'The Seven Descents and the Early History of rNying ma Transmissions', in Eimer, Helmut, and Germano, David (eds.), *The Many Canons of Tibetan Buddhism, Proceedings of the Ninth Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies, Leiden 2000*, Leiden: Brill, 2002, pp. 225-263, esp. p. 253.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 254, quoting lDe'u jo-sras, *lDe'u chos-'byung (Chos-'byung chen-mo bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan)*, Lhasa: Bod-ljongs mi-dmangs dpe-skrunkhang, 1987, p. 321.

⁴⁶ Note that Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las also mentions ten and, quoting the *bKa'-shog chen-mo*, p. 709.5-6, thirteen masters.

⁴⁷ Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 164.2-3.

⁴⁸ *bKa'-shog chen-mo*, p. 715.2-4; quoted in Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, pp. 163.4-164.1: *rgya gar mkhas pa bi ma mi tra dang/ o rgyan mkhan po padma 'byung gnas dang/ lbal po'i mkhas pa ba su dha ra dang/ l bod kyi mkhas pa jñā na ku mā ras/ l bdaḡ la gnaḡ ba'i man ngag 'di rnam yin/*

⁴⁹ Tulku Thondup, *The Origin of Buddhism in Tibet*, p. 153. For detailed lists of the various lineages which gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes received, see Tulku Thondup, *Masters of Meditation and Miracles: Lives of the Great Buddhist Masters of*

Although, as noted above, gNubs-chen is said to have been ordained as a monk in his youth by Śāntarakṣita, he later became a non-celibate tantric practitioner, a *mantrin* (*sngags-pa*). In fact, it is possible that his repeated reference to himself as the 'small venerable' contains an allusion to his former status as a monk that is both humorous and self-depreciatory.

Conflicts in Tibet

gNubs-chen's main hermitage was sGrags-yang-rdzong. It is here and in the vicinity that he spent extensive periods in retreat, coming to a realization of the unique self-originated seminal nucleus (*rang-byung thig-le nyag-gcig*) and liberating mind's beingness (*sems-nyid*) after nine months of practice.⁵⁰ As he wanted to settle there with his disciples, the political situation in Central Tibet deteriorated; gNubs-chen's hagiographies place this episode of his life during King Darma Khri-'u dum-btsan's reign (b. ca 803; r. 836-842 CE), though we will see below that this is problematic. The latter king, popularly known as Glang-dar-ma, is believed to have instigated a persecution against the powerful monastic estates. This shift in the government's attitude towards Buddhism must, however, be understood in its proper historical context. Glang-dar-ma's predecessor, Ral-pa-can, had extended state sponsorship of the Buddhist monasteries beyond all reasonable limits, causing a deficit in the government's budget. Glang-dar-ma's attempts to redress the financial situation of the royal treasury appear to have exacerbated tensions between various clans. A series of revolts (*kheng-log*) eventually ensued, and it is these revolts that appear to have been the real cause for the destruction of Central Tibet's religious sites,⁵¹ but Tibetan historians have generally remembered Glang-dar-ma as the persecutor.

During this tumultuous period, two of gNubs-chen's sons were killed.⁵² Nyang-ral nyi-ma 'od-zer, however, writes that Sangs-rgyas ye-shes had six sons, of which four were killed during the revolt, one died a natural death and one seems to have been lost to

India and Tibet, Boston: Shambhala, 1999, pp. 25f (for *Mahāyoga*), pp. 28f (for *Anuyoga*) and p. 31 (for the mind and expanse sections of *Atiyoga*).

⁵⁰ Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 166.3-4.

⁵¹ Davidson, Ronald M., *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 64-68.

⁵² Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 171.4; Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 610.

unembrarrassed debauchery.⁵³ The histories of Dudjom Rinpoche⁵⁴ and Guru bKra-shis (18th century)⁵⁵ inform us that because gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes was the rebirth of the butcher (*gshan-pa*) Ma-ru-rtse of India, he had to continue taming those (presumably by wrathful means) who remained from his previous life.⁵⁶

During this time he faced much hardship, undergoing persecution and three years of poverty.⁵⁷ According to some accounts, in his sixty-first year he destroyed thirty-seven hostile villages with the fierce spell of Yamāntaka.⁵⁸ In this regard, it is believed that he was also an adept of the deity Vajrakīlaya, the mastery of which enabled him to shatter rocks with a touch of his dagger (Skt. *kīla*).⁵⁹ An episode is recounted from this period, where Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, having abandoned his residence of sGrags-yang-rdzong and fled to sNye-mo bye-mkhar, found the surrounding mountains covered with soldiers. He thereupon invoked the protectors of the doctrine (*chos-skyong*), pointed his acacia-wood dagger towards one of the mountains, and the mountain blazed up in flames, burning the hostile armies.⁶⁰ His close connection with the guardians of the teaching is made explicit in the *rGya-bo-che*, which says that he beheld the Bliss-gone Ones (Skt. *sugata*) of the three times and the protectors of the doctrine,⁶¹ as well as in the *bSam-gtan mig-sgron* itself, where in Chapter VIII gNubs-chen alludes to the gods and ogres (*lha-srin*) who conferred on him their empowerment.⁶² Nyang-ral nyi-ma 'od-zer suggests that during this period of turmoil Sangs-rgyas ye-shes planned to go to Nepal

⁵³ Nyang-ral nyi-ma 'od-zer, *Chos-'byung me-tog snying-po*, p. 447.

⁵⁴ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, pp. 609f.

⁵⁵ Guru bKra-shis, *Gu-bKra'i chos-'byung*, p. 247.

⁵⁶ Note that gShan-pa Ma-ru-rtse is included in the retinue of the protector deity Srog-bdag dmar-po. See Nebesky-Wojkowitz, René de, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: the Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*, Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1975, p. 92.

⁵⁷ Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 170.1.

⁵⁸ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 611; Guru bKra-shis, *Gu-bKra'i chos-'byung*, p. 248. Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, for his part, appears to distinguish the destruction of the thirty-seven villages from the intermediate revolt which occurred when Sangs-rgyas ye-shes was sixty-one and which he recounts as a separate event. Cf. Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 168.1-2.

⁵⁹ Tarthang Tulku, 'The Twenty-five Disciples of Padmasambhava', p. 46.

⁶⁰ *bKa'-shog chen-mo*, pp. 733.6-736.3; Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, pp. 611f; Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, pp. 168.3-169.6; Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, pp. 19f.

⁶¹ *bKa'-shog chen-mo*, p. 739.3.

⁶² See gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, *bSam-gtan mig-sgron*, Chapter VIII, §2 (p. 498.3).

disguised as a beggar to meet his masters.⁶³ This might refer to the trip that, according to Dudjom Rinpoche, he is said to have made aged fifty-four,⁶⁴ although the dates do not match, since the hostilities of which gNubs-chen was a victim occurred in his sixty-first year. Perhaps the trip referred to by Dudjom Rinpoche is the last he made under relatively normal circumstances, before being caught up in the revolt that was to cost the life of several of his sons. Whatever the case may be, the fact that gNubs-chen came under repeated attack indicates that he held a certain degree of prestige and power in the region, something which probably attracted the jealousy and hostility of rebellious elements.⁶⁵

Other Activities

gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes is famed for using his magic powers (first manifesting nine yak-sized scorpions,⁶⁶ then shattering a nearby bolder with lightening) to frighten Glang-dar-ma, thereby ensuring that unlike the community of monks, the 'white community' of non-celibate *mantrins* (*sngags-pa*) would not be persecuted.⁶⁷ The following passage gives a hint of the master's activities at that time:⁶⁸

I, the small venerable of gNubs,
 Have, from my heart, produced the [enlightened] mind
 according to the doctrine;
 Hateful enemies granted me no respite.
 It is in order to protect the Buddha's teaching
 That hatred was immediately born.
 Thinking of the purpose of great righteousness,
 I studied the documents of the evil spells.

⁶³ Nyang-ral nyi-ma 'od-zer, *Chos-'byung me-tog snying-po*, p. 447.

⁶⁴ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 608.

⁶⁵ Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, p. 20, n.33.

⁶⁶ According to Dudjom Rinpoche's account, it was one yak-sized scorpion that appeared nine storeys above gNubs-chen's finger. See Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 612.

⁶⁷ Reynolds, *The Golden Letters*, pp. 250f.

⁶⁸ Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 168.1-2: /bdag 'dra gnubs kyi ban chung yang/ /snying nas chos bzhin bya sems skyes/ /zhe sdang dgra bos byed ma ster/ /sangs rgyas bstan pa bsrung ba'i phyir/ /zhe sdang de ma thag tu skyes/ /dkar po'i che ba'i 'don (sic!) bsam nas/ /ngan sngags yig cha sna tshogs bsabs/. The passage is quoted in Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 610; Guru bKra-shis, *Gu-bKra'i chos-'byung*, p. 247; and Norbu, *sBas-pa'i rgum-chung*, p. 67. For a French translation, see Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, p. 19.

Even after frightening Glang-dar-ma, gNubs-chen, unable to endure the religious persecution which the latter instigated, decided to kill him using the fierce spells he had brought back from his studies under Vasudhara in Nepal.⁶⁹ However, when lHa-lung dpal-gyi rdo-rje, the ninth abbot of bSam-yas monastery, murdered Glang-dar-ma instead, gNubs-chen concealed these spells as treasures lest they be misused.⁷⁰

The later *rNying-ma* tradition often appears to portray Sangs-rgyas ye-shes as an addict to black magic, who wrote the *bSam-gtan mig-sgron* in his old age to purify his previous misdeeds.⁷¹ However that may be, the detailed treatment of his subject matter and the subtle philosophical distinctions he makes in the *bSam-gtan mig-sgron* prove him to be the first great metaphysician and writer of 10th century Tibet.⁷² Moreover, in the Tibetan context there was no contradiction in being both a philosopher and a magician, as was moreover often the case in Renaissance Europe.⁷³

Apart from the *bSam-gtan mig-sgron*, other texts which gNubs-chen is said to have composed include the above-mentioned *mDo'i 'grel-chen mun-pa'i go-cha* (a commentary on the *dGongs-pa 'dus-pa'i mdo*, the root *tantra* of *Anuyoga*), the *dKa'-gcod smra-ba'i mtshon-cha*, and the *sGyu-'phrul brgyad-cu-pa'i mngon-rtogs 'grel*.⁷⁴ It should be noted that the latter two works appear no longer to be extant. Furthermore, Higgins⁷⁵ has recently drawn attention to another extant text by Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, the *rTse-mo byung-rgyal 'grel-pa*,⁷⁶ whereas Guarisco⁷⁷ points out that an extract from the *Pan-grub-rnams-kyi thugs-bcud snying-gi nyi-ma* is also attributed to gNubs-chen Sangs-

⁶⁹ Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, p. 21.

⁷⁰ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 612; Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 173.5-6.

⁷¹ Cf. Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 169.6; Guru bKra-shis, *Gu-bKra'i chos-'byung*, p. 249.

⁷² Karmay, Samten Gyaltzen, *The Great Perfection: A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2007, p. 100.

⁷³ Reynolds, *The Golden Letters*, p. 250.

⁷⁴ See Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 612.

⁷⁵ Higgins, David, *The Philosophical Foundations of Classical rDzogs chen in Tibet: Investigating the Distinction Between Dualistic Mind (sems) and Primordial Knowing (ye shes)*, Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien Universität Wien, 2013, p. 43.

⁷⁶ gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, *rTse-mo byung-rgyal 'grel-pa*, in NKJ, vol.103/pe, pp. 179-230.

⁷⁷ Guarisco, Elio, et al. (trs.), *The Marvelous Primordial State: The Mejung Tantra, A Fundamental Scripture of Dzogchen Semde*, Arcidosso: Shang Shung Publications, 2013, p. 72, p. 183, n.11, p. 243.

rgyas ye-shes (who signs gNubs-chung rdo-rje yang-dbang).⁷⁸ In fact, there seem to be a few other texts attributed to gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes as author. Mention may here be made of the *Byang-chub sems bde-ba 'phra-bkod-kyi don-'grel*⁷⁹ and the *rDo-rje gzong-phugs-kyi 'grel-pa*.⁸⁰ This is to say nothing of the many texts on which Sangs-rgyas ye-shes worked either as translator, compiler or editor, but I will reserve a more exhaustive inventory for a future publication. Indeed, Germano suggests that part of gNubs-chen's prominence may stem from the fact that he composed works in his own name rather than anonymously as was usually the case at the time. He thus could subsequently become an iconic figure of early tantric activity in Tibet, serving in retrospect as a rallying point for the authentication of *rNying-ma* lineages.⁸¹

Judging from the gloss referring to Glang-dar-ma's persecution of Buddhism,⁸² gNubs-chen would certainly have written the *bSam-gtan mig-sgron* later than 842 CE,⁸³ and, if there is any truth in the tradition that he composed it in his old age, he would have written it in the early 10th century. Nevertheless, this argument must be accepted with some caution, since the explanatory glosses are probably insertions by a later hand.⁸⁴ However, there is another element that corroborates an early 10th century composition date for the *bSam-gtan mig-sgron*, and this is the fact that its author repeatedly quotes the *rDo-rje sems-dpa'i zhus-lan* by gNyan dpal-dbyangs,⁸⁵ and that the latter lived in the early 9th century.⁸⁶

Following the above-mentioned revolt and the three years of poverty that ensued, gNubs-chen retired to his fortress to deepen his contemplative practice. He then taught in bSam-yas monastery, having been invited to do so by the prince.⁸⁷

⁷⁸ *Pan-grub-rnams-kyi thugs-bcud snying-gi nyi-ma*, in BG, vol.1, pp. 1-172; the text is on pp. 84.3-99.2. Namkhai Norbu has prepared an edition of this text (to which the page numbers in Guarisco's annotations refer) entitled *Byang-chub-kyi sems rmad-du byung-ba'i nyams-khrid*.

⁷⁹ gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, *Byang-chub sems bde-ba 'phra-bkod-kyi don-'grel*, in NKJ, vol.103/pe, pp. 303-326.

⁸⁰ gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, *rDo-rje gzong-phugs-kyi 'grel-pa*, in NKJ, vol.103/pe, pp. 381-398.

⁸¹ Germano, 'The Seven Descents', p. 254.

⁸² gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, *bSam-gtan mig-sgron*, p. 15.4.

⁸³ Karmay, *The Great Perfection*, p. 102.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 94, n.44; cf. Esler, 'The Exposition of *Atiyoga*', pp. 128-130.

⁸⁵ gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, *bSam-gtan mig-sgron*, p. 30.3-4, pp. 201.6-202.1, p. 202.4-5, p. 219.3-4, p. 225.2-5, p. 228.1-5, p. 240.1-4, pp. 255.6-256.6, p. 277.3-5.

⁸⁶ van Schaik, Sam, 'The Early Days of the Great Perfection', in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol.27: 1, 2004, pp. 165-206, esp. p. 190.

⁸⁷ *bKa'-shog chen-mo*, p. 736.4-6; Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 170.1-2.

gNubs-chen had five main disciples: sPa-gor Blon-chen 'phags-pa, Sru-ston Legs-pa'i sgron-me, Dan-gyi yon-tan mchog, So Ye-shes dbang-phyug and his 'supernal son' (*sras-kyi dam-pa*) Khu-lung-pa Yon-tan rgya-mtsho.⁸⁸ Whereas Karmay appears to hold that the latter was Sangs-rgyas ye-shes' biological son, probably because of the title gNubs-chung sometimes placed before his name,⁸⁹ there seems little reason in doing so. Indeed, in Dudjom Rinpoche's *Chos-'byung* it is mentioned that Khu-lung-pa Yon-tan rgya-mtsho met gNubs-chen in his thirtieth year while on a hunting expedition,⁹⁰ an account which precludes any biological relationship. Furthermore, the title gNubs-chung ('the small gNubs') simply indicates that he was gNubs-chen's disciple.⁹¹

Death

As far as the date of gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes' death is concerned, according to Dudjom Rinpoche, he passed away in the water tiger year (*chu-stag*) in the district of Khyon-mi, aged a hundred and eleven, realizing the rainbow body;⁹² depending on the sixty year cycle, this could be either 883 or 943 CE. Guenther, following Klong-chen-pa (1308-1364),⁹³ gives his age at the time of his

⁸⁸ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 613.

⁸⁹ Cf. Karmay, *The Great Perfection*, p. 101, n.91.

⁹⁰ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 614.

⁹¹ Martin, Dan, 'The Early Education of Milarepa', in *The Journal of the Tibet Society*, vol.2, 1982, pp. 52-76, esp. p. 56.

⁹² Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 614; see also bDud-'joms 'Jigs-bral ye-shes rdo-rje, *Chos-'byung*, in *The Collected Writings and Revelations of H.H. bDud-'joms Rin-po-che 'Jigs-bral ye-shes rdo-rje*, vol.1/ka, Kalimpong: Dupjung Lama, 1979-1985, p. 300. The later Chengdu edition of the Tibetan text (cf. bDud-'joms Rinpoche, *bDud-'joms chos-'byung*, Chengdu: Si-khron mi-rigs dpe-skrunkhang, 1996, p. 241) gives gNubs-chen's age at the time of his death as a hundred and thirteen, and there are several other discrepancies: whereas in the Kalimpong edition, Khri-srong lde'u-btsan's death is placed in the earth tiger year (*sa-stag*), with gNubs-chen aged twenty-seven at the time, the Chengdu edition places this event in Sangs-rgyas ye-shes' seventeenth year, in the earth dragon year (*sa-brug*). Similarly, the Kalimpong edition says that gNubs-chen lived for thirty-seven years after Glang-dar-ma's religious persecution, but the Chengdu edition turns this into forty-two years. Nonetheless, at least both editions agree that gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes was born in the water male mouse year (*chu-pho byi-ba'i lo*) and that he died in the water tiger year (*chu-stag*). Hence, the Chengdu edition's statement that he lived to be a hundred and thirteen is evidently an error, as in that case the year of his death would have to be the wood male dragon year.

⁹³ Klong-chen rab-'byams, *Chos-'byung rin-po-che'i gter-mdzod*, p. 406.

death as a hundred and twenty,⁹⁴ whereas Tulku Thondup, who agrees with both Nyang-ral nyi-ma 'od-zer⁹⁵ and 'Gos Lotsāwa gZhon-nu dpal (1392-1481),⁹⁶ states that he died aged a hundred and thirteen, but also quotes a saying attributed to gNubs-chen himself stating that he lived to be a hundred and thirty.⁹⁷ The same saying is cited by Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, who writes:⁹⁸

Although it is explained in some histories that gNubs-chen lived to be a hundred and thirteen, he himself said: "I, the small venerable of gNubs, have reached the age of a hundred and thirty."

This exceptional longevity has caused some historians, notably dPa'-bo gtsug-lag 'phreng-ba (1504-1566), to posit the existence of two persons with the name Sangs-rgyas ye-shes: a sGrags Sangs-rgyas ye-shes who was a disciple of Padmasambhava, and a gNubs Sangs-rgyas ye-shes who was born during Ral-pa-can's reign, travelled to Nepal, India and Gilgit, studied with Lotsāwa Che-btsan-skyes, and lived to be a hundred and thirteen.⁹⁹ However, Namkhai Norbu has pointed out that there is no valid reason to assume the existence of two persons simply on the basis of the names sGrags and gNubs, as Sangs-rgyas ye-shes was in sGrags before fleeing to the area of gNubs, and was evidently linked to both places.¹⁰⁰ A similar point is made by Guru bKra-shis, who argues that gNubs refers to the master's bone-lineage and sGrags to a place name, so that there is no basis for holding that there were two persons called Sangs-rgyas ye-shes.¹⁰¹

⁹⁴ Guenther, Herbert V., 'Meditation Trends in Early Tibet', in Lai, Whalen, and Lancaster, Lewis R. (eds.), *Early Ch'an in China and Tibet*, Berkeley: Buddhist Studies Series 5, 1983, pp. 351-366, esp. p. 361, n.6.

⁹⁵ Nyang-ral nyi-ma 'od-zer, *Chos-'byung me-tog snying-po*, p. 342.

⁹⁶ Roerich, George N. (tr.), *The Blue Annals*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007, p. 105.

⁹⁷ Tulku Thondup, *The Origin of Buddhism in Tibet*, p. 153.

⁹⁸ Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 173.3-4: *de yang lo rgyus 'ga' zhiq tu gnubs chen dgung lo brgya dang bcu gsum bzhugs par bshad kyang/ nyid gyi gsungs las/ gnubs kyi ban chung sangs rgyas ngas/ lo ni brgya dang sum cu lon/*. We find the same citation in Norbu, *sBas-pa'i rgum-chung*, p. 75.

⁹⁹ dPa'-bo gtsug-lag 'phreng-ba, *mKhas-pa'i dga'-ston*, vol.1, Beijing: Mi-rigs dpe-skrun-khang, 1986, p. 614.

¹⁰⁰ Norbu, *sBas-pa'i rgum-chung*, p. 77; quoted in Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, p. 21.

¹⁰¹ Guru bKra-shis, *Gu-bKra'i chos-'byung*, p. 246.

The Problem of gNubs-chen's Dates

The problem of gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes' dates is that he is made a contemporary of Khri-srong lde'u-btsan (r. 755-797 CE), of Ral-pa-can (r. 814-836) and, beyond Glang-dar-ma (r. 836-842), of the latter's grandson dPal 'khor-btsan (r. 893-910).¹⁰² 'Gos Lotsāwa gZhon-nu dpal suggests that he was born during the reign of Ral-pa-can and lived up to the time of Khri bkra-shis brtsegs-dpal, the son of dPal 'khor-btsan.¹⁰³ Guru bkra-shis, while he mentions the latter opinion, concludes that gNubs-chen was born during the reign of Khri-srong lde'u-btsan, attained the accomplishment of an awareness-holder of longevity and hence "appears to have lived up to the time of dPal 'khor-btsan."¹⁰⁴ Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, as mentioned above, bases himself on gNubs-chen's allegedly verbatim statement that he lived to be a hundred and thirty, and likewise concludes that he lived from the time of Khri-srong lde'u-btsan to that of dPal 'khor-btsan.¹⁰⁵

Karmay, for his part, is in favour of placing gNubs-chen in the late 10th century. In support of this he quotes the *Deb-ther sngon-po*, which states that there was only one teacher between gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes and Zur-po-che Śākya 'byung-gnas,¹⁰⁶ who lived from 1002 to 1062 CE.¹⁰⁷ Karmay further advances the argument that Mi-la ras-pa (1040-1123) is said to have been instructed in the arts of black magic by lHa-rje gNubs-chung (called lHa-rje Hūm-chung in the *Deb-ther sngon-po*).¹⁰⁸ Although the latter has at times been identified with gNubs-chen's disciple Khu-lung-pa Yon-tan rgya-mtsho, due to his title gNubs-chung which is shared by the latter,¹⁰⁹ this seems improbable, as it would place gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes far too late in the 10th century.¹¹⁰ It therefore appears more likely that lHa-rje gNubs-chung was the grandson of Yon-tan rgya-mtsho, as is moreover maintained by Dudjom Rinpoche.¹¹¹ This would imply that

¹⁰² Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, pp. 20f, n.36; Norbu, *sBas-pa'i rgum-chung*, p. 75.

¹⁰³ Roerich, *The Blue Annals*, p. 108.

¹⁰⁴ Guru bkra-shis, *Gu-bKra'i chos-'byung*, p. 246.

¹⁰⁵ Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 173.4.

¹⁰⁶ Roerich, *The Blue Annals*, p. 109; the passage is quoted in Guru bkra-shis, *Gu-bKra'i chos-'byung*, p. 250.

¹⁰⁷ Karmay, *The Great Perfection*, pp. 101f.

¹⁰⁸ Roerich, *The Blue Annals*, p. 109.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Karmay, *The Great Perfection*, p. 101, n.91.

¹¹⁰ Martin, 'The Early Education of Milarepa', p. 54, p. 56.

¹¹¹ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 615. Cf. Martin, 'The Early Education of Milarepa', p. 55, p. 57.

there were four generations between gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes and lHa-rje gNubs-chung (Mi-la ras-pa's magic teacher).

Let us summarize the different clues we have for the time frame of Sangs-rgyas ye-shes' life. As we have seen, Dudjom Rinpoche gives the indications water male mouse year for his birth and water tiger year for his death;¹¹² there are two possibilities, depending on the sixty year cycle: 772-883 or 832-943 CE. On the other hand, Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, following the *rGya-bo-che*,¹¹³ gives the wood male mouse year for his birth, which is twelve years later. While he refrains from giving a date for gNubs-chen's death, he seems to favour the view that he lived to be a hundred and thirty.¹¹⁴ Hence, the dates suggested by Padma 'phrin-las would be, depending on the sixty year cycle, 784-914 or 844-974 CE.

There are vast discrepancies in the dating of this period; thus, Dudjom Rinpoche gives 858 CE (rather than 797) as the date for Khri-srong lde'u-btsan's death¹¹⁵ and 901-906 as the dates for the persecution of Buddhism under Glang-dar-ma.¹¹⁶ These disagreements arise due to the difficulties in deciding how many sixty year cycles elapsed between the collapse of the dynasty (842 or 846 CE) and the later propagation (*phyi-dar*) of Buddhism in the late 10th century.¹¹⁷ This, in turn, is because the first cycle of sixty years started only in 1027 CE, after the introduction of the *Kālacakra* to Tibet.¹¹⁸

Conclusions

The most plausible solution to the problem of gNubs-chen's dates has been pointed out by Vitali:¹¹⁹ Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, again citing the *rGya-bo-che*,¹²⁰ writes that the persecution faced by Sangs-rgyas ye-shes occurred during his sixty-first year at the time of the intermediate revolt (*kheng-log bar-pa*).¹²¹ This is an important clue, for

¹¹² bDud-'joms 'Jigs-bral ye-shes rdo-rje, *Chos-'byung*, p. 290.5, p. 300.1; Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 607, p. 614.

¹¹³ bKa'-shog chen-mo, p. 696.4.

¹¹⁴ Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 160.5, p. 173.3-4.

¹¹⁵ Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 614.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 950.

¹¹⁷ Dorje and Kapstein, *The Nyingma School*, vol.2, p. 95, n.1351.

¹¹⁸ Cornu, Philippe, *L'astrologie Tibétaine*, Millau: Les Djinn, 1990, p. 85.

¹¹⁹ Vitali, Roberto, *The Kingdoms of Gu.ge Pu.brang*, Dharamsala: Tho.ling gtsug-lag-khang lo.gcig.stong 'khor.ba'i rjes.dran.mdzad sgo'i go.sgrig tshogs.chung, 1996, pp. 545-547.

¹²⁰ bKa'-shog chen-mo, p. 733.6.

¹²¹ Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, *bKa'-ma mdo-dbang-gi bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*, p. 168.2-3.

it refers to the second of three revolts which occurred as a result of the clan hostilities and gradual fragmentation of the Tibetan empire in the wake of Glang-dar-ma's assassination. This second revolt took place during dPal 'khor-btsan's reign (r. 893-910 CE); the latter is known to have reigned for eighteen years after succeeding to the throne at the age of thirteen upon the death of his father 'Od-srung (840-893 CE). Hence, it is impossible for gNubs-chen to have been born in a wood male mouse year during Khri-srong lde'u-btsan's reign (i.e. in 784 CE), for in that case he could not have been sixty when this second revolt broke out.¹²² Simultaneously, this argument also invalidates the water male mouse year proposed in Dudjom Rinpoche's *Chos-'byung*,¹²³ for even if we take the later sixty year cycle with gNubs-chen's birth in 832 CE, the revolt would have had to take place in 892 CE, which is too early to fit dPal 'khor-btsan's reign.

It seems, therefore, that the only acceptable birth date for Sangs-rgyas ye-shes is the wood male mouse year of 844 CE, with the revolt taking place when he was sixty-one in 904 CE,¹²⁴ a few years before dPal 'khor-btsan's assassination in 910 CE.

This implies that gNubs-chen's association with the reign of Khri-srong lde'u-btsan cannot be considered historical, but rather serves the purpose of making him a direct disciple of Padmasambhava and Śāntarakṣita, the illustrious masters responsible for the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet.¹²⁵ This would have been a consequence of the development of the legends surrounding Padmasambhava:¹²⁶ as the latter grew in importance, other figures of the early spread of Buddhism were drawn into Padmasambhava's orbit, even though they may actually have lived later. In our present case, gNubs-chen's discipleship of Padmasambhava might be seen as ideal, in the sense that he studied under gNyags Jñānakumāra, one of Padmasambhava's closest disciples. Similarly, the statement that he was ordained by Śāntarakṣita must probably be interpreted to mean that he was ordained in the monastic lineage established by the latter. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that gNubs-chen's connection with the twenty-five disciples of Padmasambhava is *not* a late

¹²² Vitali, *The Kingdoms of Gu.ge Pu.brang*, pp. 546f.

¹²³ bDud-'joms 'jigs-bral ye-shes rdo-rje, *Chos-'byung*, p. 290.5; Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School*, vol.1, p. 607.

¹²⁴ Vitali, *The Kingdoms of Gu.ge Pu.brang*, p. 547.

¹²⁵ Achard, *L'Essence Perlée du Secret*, p. 21.

¹²⁶ See Dalton, Jacob, 'The Early Development of the Padmasambhava Legend in Tibet: A Study of IOL Tib J 644 and Pelliot tibétain 307', in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol.124:4, 2004, pp. 759-772.

development, since it goes back, as already pointed out above, to Nyang-ral nyi-ma 'od-zer (12th century).¹²⁷

Furthermore, it is also apparent that gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes cannot have been a contemporary of Glang-dar-ma, as claimed by later Tibetan historians, since he was born two years after the latter's assassination. The persecutions suffered by Sangs-rgyas ye-shes occurred not during Glang-dar-ma's reign but, as explained above, during the second revolt that took place in 904 CE. It follows, of course, that the trips gNubs-chen made abroad in search of teachings cannot have taken place during Ral-pa-can's reign, but happened much later, probably in the 860s-870s, when Sangs-rgyas ye-shes was a young man. The story of gNubs-chen intimidating Glang-dar-ma into protecting the white community of *mantrins*, while obviously invalidated historically, probably indicates that, whereas the institutions of religious learning gradually disintegrated in the wake of Glang-dar-ma's policies, the non-celibate tantric *yogins* remained relatively unharmed and were able to preserve their lineages outside of monastic structures. Considering his remarkable achievements in codifying and interpreting the teachings he inherited, it is likely that gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, a *mantrin* himself, had no small role to play in the preservation and transmission of these lineages during the period of fragmentation (*sil-bu'i dus*) that followed the collapse of the dynasty. It is only natural, therefore, that the later tradition should have made him directly responsible for the *mantrins'* physical survival and hence elaborated the account of gNubs-chen's encounter with Glang-dar-ma, especially considering the general confusion that exists with respect to the dating of this period of Tibetan history.

The various sources agree that gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes lived to be older than a hundred, though there is divergence of opinion as to whether he died at the age of a hundred and eleven, a hundred and thirteen, a hundred and twenty or a hundred and thirty. While it may be difficult to take these figures literally, especially as they contradict each other, this longevity need not in itself be seen as particularly unlikely, since throughout all times and places there have been individuals whose lifespan has been longer than average. It seems quite possible, therefore, that Sangs-rgyas ye-shes witnessed the first three, perhaps four, decades of the 10th century.

Among gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes' emanations are counted rGya Zhang-khrom rdo-rje 'od-'bar (11th century),¹²⁸ Dri-med kun-

¹²⁷ See Nyang-ral nyi-ma 'od-zer, *Chos-'byung me-tog snying-po*, p. 341.

dga' (late 14th century), gSang-bdag 'phrin-las lhun-grub (1611-1662), rTsa-gsum gling-pa (1694-1738)¹²⁹ and, more recently, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche (1920-1996).¹³⁰ His continued spiritual influence over the centuries within the *rNying-ma* tradition is further exemplified by such recent masters as mKhan-po mNga'-dbang dpal bzang-po (1879-1941) of Kaḥ-thog monastery and 'Jam-dbyangs mkhyen-brtse chos-kyi blo-gros (1893-1959), both of whom had visions of gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes.¹³¹

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Abbreviations

- BG *Bai-ro'i rgyud-'bum*, 8 Volumes, Leh: Tashigangpa, 1971.
- NGM *rNying-ma rgyud-'bum*, mTshams-brag edition, 46 Volumes, Thimphu: Royal National Library, 1982.
- NKD *rNying-ma bka'-ma rgyas-pa: A Collection of Teachings and Initiations of the rNying-ma-pa Tradition, passed through Continuous and Unbroken Oral Lineages from the Ancient Masters*, Edited by bDud-'joms Rinpoche, 58 Volumes, Kalimpong: Dupjung Lama, 1982-1987.
- NKJ *sNga-'gyur bka'-ma*, Edited by Kaḥ-thog mKhan-po 'Jam-dbyangs, 120 Volumes, Chengdu: Kaḥ-thog, 1999.
- SM gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas ye-shes, *bSam-gtan mig-sgron*. See publication details below.

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¹²⁸ Martin, 'The Early Education of Milarepa', p. 56; Dorje and Kapstein, *The Nyingma School*, vol.2, p. 65, n.908.

¹²⁹ Tulku Thondup, *The Origin of Buddhism in Tibet*, p. 154.

¹³⁰ Nyoshul Khenpo, *A Marvelous Garland of Rare Gems: Biographies of Masters of Awareness in the Dzogchen Lineage*, Translated by Richard Barron, Junction City: Padma Publishing, 2005, p. 435.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 247, p. 302.

¹³² See Arguillère, *Profusion de la Vaste Sphère*, pp. 176f.

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¹³³ This title is given by Namkhai Norbu in his edition of the text.

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