

# Immeasurable, Yet No Bigger than Your Thumb: The *Tshon Gang* in Bon Dzogchen

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## Introduction

he Bon text entitled *Twenty-One Nails* from the Aural Transmission of Zhang Zhung presents the notion of the wisdom (*ye shes*) *tshon gang*. The nature of this wisdom *tshon gang* is expressed in the following quote from Nail 5 of the *Twenty-One Nails*:<sup>1</sup>

It is formless wisdom beyond form, shape, and color.  
It is inexpressible wisdom beyond letters, words, and names.  
It is non-conceptual wisdom beyond the concepts and discernment of  
the intellect.<sup>2</sup>

This passage echoes many familiar descriptions of the natural state (*gnas lugs*); however, the physical locality of the wisdom *tshon gang* is described later in Nail 9 of the *Twenty-One Nails*:<sup>3</sup>

The physical heart of flesh  
Is like a jeweled vase of alloyed metals.  
The luminous wisdom *tshon gang*  
Is like a lamp inside that vase.

Thus, the wisdom *tshon gang* presents the paradox that the enlightened Reality Body (*bon sku*), the king of awareness (*rig pa'i rgyal po*) which is beyond form, shape, and color has, nevertheless, a prescribed size and

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<sup>1</sup> Italicized names of texts, such as "*Twenty-one Nails*," may be used as identifiers for finding texts in the Bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> *The Twenty-One Nails*, pp. 507: *gzugs med ye shes kha dog dbyibs gzugs bral/ brjod med ye shes ming tshig yi ger bral/rtog med ye shes rtog dpyod blo dang bral*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Twenty-One Nails*, pp. 509ff: *gdos pa sha'i tsi ta nil/ 'phra men rin chen bum pa 'dral/ gsal ba'i ye shes tshon gang ni/ bum pa nang gi mar me 'dral*.

location in the physical heart.

The purpose of this paper is to further dimensionalize this paradox using canonical textual sources and examining historical precedents. We will not focus on resolving the inherent paradox, but instead attempt to create a semantic field for the term *tshon gang*. In doing so we will highlight the Bon tradition's willingness to preserve and disseminate ambiguous and controversial teachings over many centuries.

Our approach is as follows. First, we look at the unusual word "*tshon gang*." Then we consider presentations of similar phenomenon in early non-Buddhist Indian works. Then we take a brief look at the usage of the *tshon gang* in a Bon tantric cycle. Next, we successively look at the role of the *tshon gang* in the most significant Dzogchen works of the Yungdrung (*g.yung drung*) Bon tradition, those constituting the exemplars of the Mind Class (*sems sde*), Vast Expanse Class (*klong sde*), and Quintessential Instruction Class (*man ngag sde*). We then summarize our findings, integrating the treatment of the *tshon gang* by the twentieth century Bon master, Shardza Tashi Gyaltzen.<sup>4</sup> After drawing some speculative conclusions, we review some of the deficiencies of this work with an eye to directions for future research.

### Meaning and etymology of *tshon gang*

A straightforward interpretation of the Tibetan word *tshon gang* comes from interpreting *gang* to mean "a unit of measure" and *tshon* (or, as we shall occasionally see, *mtshon*<sup>5</sup>), to mean "the first phalanx of the thumb." Thus, *tshon gang* means the size of the first phalanx of the thumb, or, more briefly, thumb-sized. Henceforth, for simplicity we will periodically use "thumb sized" to abbreviate this meaning. We find this meaning accords with the opinion of contemporary Bon teachers, and fits well in all contexts quoted below. Probable Sanskrit equivalents will be considered later.

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<sup>4</sup> Shar-dza Bkra-shis rGyal-mtshan (1859–1934).

<sup>5</sup> Regarding this inconsistency in spelling – *tshon* / *mtshon* – Tibeto-Burman linguist Nathan Hill offers the comforting comment "m- comes and goes a lot." (Personal communication).

## The *aṅguṣṭhamātra* in non-Buddhist works and Buddhist Critiques of It

### The *aṅguṣṭhamātra* in Vedānta

In addition to the inherent paradox of the term *tshon gang*, our interest in the *tshon gang* is fueled by its similarity to the *aṅguṣṭhamātra*, an important concept of non-Buddhist schools such as Vedānta (Tibetan: *rig byed mtha'*). It is easy enough to make the connection of the Tibetan term *tshon gang* with the Sanskrit *aṅguṣṭhamātra*. *Aṅguṣṭha*, meaning thumb in Sanskrit, corresponds to *tshon*, and the Sanskrit *mātra*, meaning measure, to *gang*. Moreover, the notion of a thumb-sized being or person (*puruṣa*), resident in the heart, may be found in a few of the Upaniṣads, a principal scriptural family of Vedānta:<sup>6</sup>

The *puruṣa* who is of the size of a thumb (*aṅguṣṭhamātra*) is like a flame devoid of smoke and Lord (*iśānā*) of the past and the future.<sup>7</sup> (*Katha Upaniṣad* 4.13)

The *puruṣa*, the size of a thumb (*aṅguṣṭhamātra*), the inner Self (*ātman*), is always seated in the heart (*hrdaya*) of all living beings.<sup>8</sup> (*Katha Upaniṣad* 6.17)

Assuming a form the size of a thumb (*aṅguṣṭhamātra*), by virtue of the intellect, emotion, imagination, and will, the *puruṣa* dwells in the hearts (*hrdaya*) of all living beings as their inner Self (*ātman*). Those who realize this become immortal.<sup>9</sup> (*Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 3.13)

Norelius has recently thoroughly surveyed the evolving concept of *puruṣa* through the vedic periods, with references to *aṅguṣṭhamātra* (Norelius, 2017). What is most relevant to our discussion is that certainly by the time the Tibetan's encountered these doctrines through Indian Buddhist critiques of the Vedānta school, the *puruṣa* (Tibetan: *skyes bu*) had become practically synonymous with the *ātman*

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<sup>6</sup> We follow the translations of the works cited in the bibliography with only minor editing, and, for ease of identification, we offer the relevant Sanskrit words in parentheses without declension. Olivelle works to capture the meaning of these and other upaniṣads *at their time of composition* in his *The Early Upaniṣads*. On the other hand, in our selection of translations we are guided by the desire to capture the meaning of these texts as they had come to be interpreted by the Vedānta school, just as Indian and Tibetan Buddhists encountered it.

<sup>7</sup> *Katha Upaniṣad* 4.13: *aṅguṣṭhamātrah puruṣo jyotir iva adhūmakalī / iśāno bhūtabhavyasya sa evādyā sa u śvaḥ //*

<sup>8</sup> *Katha Upaniṣad* 6.17: *aṅguṣṭhamātrah puruṣo 'ntarātmā sadā janānāṃ hrdaye sanniviṣṭaḥ //*

<sup>9</sup> *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 3.13: *aṅguṣṭhamātrah puruṣo 'ntarātmā sadā janānāṃ hrdaye sanniviṣṭaḥ /hrdā maṅṣā manasābhikṣpto ya etad vidur amṛtās te bhavanti //*

(Tibetan: *bdag*).<sup>10</sup> The similarity between the wisdom *tshon gang* in Bon that was described earlier, and the all-pervasive *ātman* of the *aṅguṣṭhamātra puruṣa* is obvious. Moreover, while the dates of these two quoted Upaniṣads is widely contested, they surely occur hundreds of years before the Bon works we consider.

It is worth mentioning that the all-pervasive *ātman* could be reduced to the size of a thumb and located in the human heart was just as problematic and paradoxical to non-Buddhist schools as the *tshon gang* is to Bon and Buddhism. All commentators on sutra 1.3.24 of the text known variously as the *Vedānta Sūtras* or the *Brahma Sūtras*, have opined on the precise nature of the *aṅguṣṭhamātra puruṣa*. Specifically, from Śankarācārya in his *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, to contemporary Swāmīs, each commentator has felt obligated to try to resolve the inherent paradox of these statements.

In any case, Bon's exposition of the wisdom *tshon gang* must have surely faced direct or indirect criticism from other Buddhist schools over the ages because of Buddhist critiques of the *aṅguṣṭhamātra puruṣa* concept in Vedānta. One example of such an explicit criticism of the *aṅguṣṭhamātra puruṣa* comes from Jamyang Zhepa<sup>11</sup> in his comprehensive examination of tenet systems known as the *Great Exposition of Tenets*.<sup>12</sup> In his presentation of the tenets of the Vedānta (Tibetan: *rig byed mtha'*) school,<sup>13</sup> and subsequent refutation, Jamyang Zhepa explicitly references "a self (*bdag*) that is like pure crystal and is the size of the first part of the thumb (*mthe bong cha dang po*) ...".<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, Jamyang Zhepa's refutation of the tenets of Vedānta centers on their view, as he presents it, of a permanent, unitary, self-powered self. Hopkins has translated Jamyang Zhepa's work in his book *Maps of the Profound*, and the translation addresses Vedānta on pp. 130ff.

Jamyang Zhepa's presentation of Vedānta quotes Bodhibhadra,<sup>15</sup> and by investigating the origin of these quotes we can see that Jamyang Zhepa follows closely a commentary on Āryadeva's *Jñānasārasamuccaya*<sup>16</sup> by Bodhibhadra, entitled *Jñānasārasamuccaya*

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Norelius, 2017, page 463. Nevertheless, the semantic field of *puruṣa* in Indian literature is quite large, and it is simply translated into Tibetan as "person" (*skyes bu*).

<sup>11</sup> 'Jam-dbyangs Bzhad-pa'i Rdo-rje (1648-1721/22).

<sup>12</sup> Thanks to Dan Martin for this reference.

<sup>13</sup> *Great Exposition of Tenets*, p. 141 ff.

<sup>14</sup> *Great Exposition of Tenets*, p. 142: *shel sgong dag pa lta bu'i bdag mthe bong cha dang po tsam mam/*.

<sup>15</sup> Tibetan: *byang chub bzang po*; 11th century.

<sup>16</sup> Toh. 3851; volume 57, pages 881-885 of the *Pedurma Tengyur*.

nāma nibandhana.<sup>17</sup> There, considering the arguments of the Vedānta school, we again read of “a self like a pure crystal egg the size of the first part of the thumb ...”<sup>18</sup> The point here is that the concept of a thumb-size self has been the object of criticism in polemical writings of Indian and Tibetan Buddhists since the 11th century.<sup>19</sup>

That said, as we noted above, the Tibetan texts quoted use the phrasing “first part of the thumb” (*mthe bong cha dang po*) rather than *tshon gang*. All this might cast some doubt as to whether these texts are actually talking about the *aṅguṣṭhamātra* at all. Fortunately, a Sanskrit-Tibetan edition of the *Jñānasārasamuccaya nāma nibandhana* exists (Penba, 2008) and we can find there *aṅguṣṭhamātra* appropriately used in the Sanskrit corresponding to the Tibetan quoted and translated in the paragraphs immediately above.<sup>20</sup> As a result, while it is clear that the *tshon gang* and *aṅguṣṭhamātra* have similar meanings, we can provide no evidence that *tshon gang* was ever used to translate the Sanskrit word *aṅguṣṭhamātra*. For example, the Mahavyutpatti associates *aṅguṣṭham* with *mthe bo*<sup>21</sup> and Negi’s Tibetan-Sanskrit Dictionary gives *aṅguṣṭhal* for *mthe bong*.<sup>22</sup>

### **The *aṅguṣṭhamātra* as the particular form of a transmigrating consciousness**

Another element of the semantic field of *aṅguṣṭhamātra* in non-Buddhist works is the notion that an individual’s consciousness or soul transmigrated from life-to-life taking the particular shape of the *aṅguṣṭhamātra*. This goes back at least to the Mahābhārata. In the Vana, or as it is also known, the Aranya Parva, of that epic,<sup>23</sup> Yama, the lord

<sup>17</sup> Toh. 3852; volume 57, pages 886-934 of the *Pedurma Tengyur*.

<sup>18</sup> Volume 57, page 885, of the *Pedurma Tengyur: shel sgong dag pa lta bu’i bdag mthe bong gi cha dang po tsam mam/*.

<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note that it does not appear that either Bodhibhadra or Jamyang Zhepa attribute to the Vedāntins the notion that of the thumb-sized self is particularly located in the heart.

<sup>20</sup> *viśuddhasphaṭikagolakasadrīśam aṅguṣṭhamātraparimāṇam*. Penba, 2008, p. 192.

<sup>21</sup> *Mahavyutpatti*, volume 1, p. 271, Entry 3977.

<sup>22</sup> *Tibetan-Sanskrit Dictionary*, volume 5, p. 2122.

<sup>23</sup> *The Mahābhārata*, Volume 3, The entire sub-plot is contained in the *pativratā māhātmyam sarva*, volume 3, Sections CCLXLI-CCLXLVII (291-297). Yama’s plucking of the *aṅguṣṭhamātra puruṣa* occurs in Section CCLXLV (295), pp. 630ff. Sanskrit for the *Mahābhārata* may be found in Unicode format at GRETIL. ([gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/#MBh](http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/#MBh)) In that edition the numbering is a bit different and Yama’s plucking occurs at 3.281.016.

of death, shows his respect for Satyavan by personally coming to claim his soul, and plucks Satyavan's *aṅguṣṭhamātra puruṣa* from his body, leaving Satyavan lifeless.<sup>24</sup>

### The *aṅguṣṭhamātra* in Śaiva tantric practice

In works from Zhang Zhung's neighbor in Kashmir, particularly in the commentary on the *Svacchanda Tantra* by Kṣemarāja (11th century), we find a number of themes that will be relevant to our discussion. First following McCarter,<sup>25</sup> we note that key elements of Śaiva ritual practice are the identification of the practitioner's body with the deity and the re-enactment of the manifestation of the cosmos. In what Flood calls the "central locus model,"<sup>26</sup> the particular bodily center for this identification and re-enactment is the heart. Further, in the elaborate and many-layered description of the manifestation of the cosmos in the *Svacchanda Tantra*, further clarified by Kṣemarāja's commentary, Arraj highlights a particular rudra named *rudraḥ aṅguṣṭhamātra*, amidst the set of *mahādevāḥ*. Arraj states "Kṣemarājaḥ interprets this rudraḥ as a subtle form, assumed for meditation, evidently equal to the brahmanical *angusṭhapuruṣa* (sic)." <sup>27</sup>

Having worked to establish a bit of the semantic field of the *aṅguṣṭhamātra puruṣa* in non-Buddhist Indian works, we now return to our principal focus, the *tshon gang* in Bon.

### The wisdom-being *tshon gang* in Bon tantric works

When trying to extrapolate a pattern from a series of data points, it can be useful to gather as many prior data points as possible. Thus, we will take a step back, so to speak, and examine the use of the *tshon gang* in tantric works, before turning to Dzogchen proper. While we find references to the *tshon gang* throughout Bon tantric works, later we will be giving a lot of attention to the Aural Transmission's exposition of the *tshon gang*. For this reason, we focus on the tantric cycle of Zhang Zhung Me Ri, held by tradition to be the tutelary deity of the masters of the Aural Transmission of Zhang Zhung.

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<sup>24</sup> This association of the *aṅguṣṭhamātra puruṣa* with the individual consciousness or soul rather than the universal ātmān gave Śankarācārya some consideration in his commentary on sūtra 1.3.24 in his *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*.

<sup>25</sup> McCarter, 2014, pp. 739ff.

<sup>26</sup> Flood, 1993, pp 22ff

<sup>27</sup> Arraj, 1988, pp. 248.

The Aural Transmission's principal explanation of Zhang Zhung Me Ri practice is entitled *A Rosary of Illuminating Fire-crystal: A Sādhana of the Heroic Champion Me Ri*,<sup>28</sup> written by Kyangtrul Namkha Gyaltsen.<sup>29</sup> In this *sādhana*, a familiar sequence of tantric *sādhana* ritual is enacted a number of times: the commitment being (*dam tshig sems dpa'*) of the deity is imagined and then the wisdom being (*ye shes sems dpa'*) is invited. In other segments, the practitioner is directed to meditate on the wisdom being without the preparatory steps of imagining the commitment being and inviting the wisdom being. Below we translate a brief portion of the latter approach, focused on the peaceful deity Ati Muwer. The broader context is that here, in preparation for mantra recitation, the deity Ati Muwer is meditated on,<sup>30</sup> without any need for visualization or generation, and then a second Ati Muwer is meditated on as the wisdom being in the form of a *tshon gang* within the larger Ati Muwer's heart. Then at the heart of the *tshon gang* sized Ati Muwer is an *Aḥ* syllable encircled by the essence mantra:<sup>31</sup>

*As for meditating according to the successive stages of contemplation:*

Meditate: I am myself the Kunzang Ati Muwer. At my heart, is a solitary enlightened body (*sku*) *tshon gang*, the deity, the wisdom being Ati Muwer, on a seat of sun, moon, and lotus, amidst a fireball of wisdom.

The use of the precise term *tshon gang* to describe the size of the wisdom deity is common in the Bon and Nyingma (*rnying ma*)

<sup>28</sup> *Me ri dpa' bo gyad phur gyi sgrub thabs gsal byed me shel phreng ba*. Pages 43-175 of *The Practice Cycle of Zhang Zhung Me Ri*.

<sup>29</sup> sKyang-sprul Nam-mkha' rGyal-tshan (1770–1830). Thanks to Dan Martin and Geshe Namgyal Dangsong for Namkha Gyaltsen's dates.

<sup>30</sup> Unlike many more recent *sādhana*s in which the entire *sādhana* is intended to be recited, this *sādhana* mixes extended instruction with references to other liturgical manuals. The liturgy associated with this particular portion of the *sādhana* is in a separate text for the practice of Ati Mu Wer entitled *Peaceful, without any Necessity of Generation* (*Zhi ba bskyed mi dgos*, found in *The Practice of Zhang Zhung Me Ri*, pp. 365-387). In the practices "without any necessity of generation" the premise is that the deity does not need to be imagined or visualized, and is amenable to being meditated on directly precisely because it is already available, at least in essence, in the practitioner's heart. That said, in practice, the nuance is subtle, because simply because the practitioner's attention is directed in that way by these instructions, that does not mean that the practitioner, without conception or effort, finds the deity there. More on this in the Speculative Conclusions section.

<sup>31</sup> *The Practice Cycle of Zhang Zhung Me Ri*, page 118: *de nas dgongs rim 'di ltar bsgom stell //bdag nyid kun bzang a ti mu wer gsal ba'i/ thugs ye shes kyi me dpung 'bar ba'i gyur du nyi zla pad ma'i gdan la/ lha ye shes sems dpa' a ti mu wer sku tshon gang ba cig sgom/ de'i thugs ka na yi ge aH dkar po gsal la 'tsher ba gcig gi mtha' la snying po rnam gsum rim pa gsum du bskor tel/.*

traditions, although the term is rarely used in later traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. The interpretation of the precise nature of the wisdom being in Buddhist tantra varies from school to school in Tibetan Buddhism and is held to require careful explanation lest the practitioner fall to the extreme of eternalism. Further, taken out of context, it is easy to take the expression of Ati Muwer's size as only a convenient device of the imagination. After all, the upper portion of the thumb is a suitable size for imagining a deity at the heart. However, as we saw in the quotations from the *Twenty-One Nails* given earlier, Bon literature treats the wisdom *tshon gang* as more than simply an imaginal support. So, what is the relationship between the wisdom *tshon gang* and the wisdom-being *tshon gang*? This will be discussed in the Speculative Conclusions. In the meantime, here we add the wisdom-being *tshon gang* (*ye shes sems dpa'i tshon gang*), as well as the enlightened body (*sku*) *tshon gang*, as additional points in the semantic field of the *tshon gang*.

### The *tshon gang* in Bon Dzogchen

Having briefly treated the role of the *tshon gang* in Bon tantra, we now look at its use in Bon Dzogchen, particularly in the Yungdrung Bon Dzogchen that does not include the later treasures of the New Bon (*bon gsar*). The principal traditions of Bon Dzogchen are contextualized in Shardza's historical work that is translated by Karmay as *The Treasury of Good Sayings*. In this work, we read: "Although the texts of the Great Perfection are innumerable, they can all be reduced to *The Four Cycles of the Scriptural Transmission*, *The Three Cycles of Propagation*, and *Nine Cycles of Mind Abatement*."<sup>32</sup> *The Four Cycles of the Scriptural Transmission* (*bKa' rgyud skor bzhi*), can be easily identified with *The Four Cycles of Scriptural Transmission* of the Aural Transmission of Zhang Zhung, and these cycles are contained in volume 171 of the *Bon Kanjur*. Shardza identifies this cycle as the exemplar within the Quintessential Instruction Section (*man ngag sde*) of Dzogchen.<sup>33</sup> The *Nine Minor Texts on Mind* are identified by Shardza as the exemplars of the Mind Class (*sems sde*) and are presented in volumes 172 and 173 of the *Bon Kanjur*. The *Three Cycles of Propagation* constitute volumes 174 and 175 of the *Bon Kanjur*.

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<sup>32</sup> *The Treasury of Good Sayings*, page 51. Karmay's translation of Shardza's description of these texts, "*sems smad sde dgu*", as "*Nine Cycles of Mind Abatement*" is misleading. We prefer to render this phrase as "*Nine Cycles of Minor [Texts on] Mind*."

<sup>33</sup> *The Treasury of Space and Awareness*, volume 1, page 7.

As we shall see, the *tshon gang* figures in each of these works, and they are discussed successively below.

### The *tshon gang* in Mind Class Literature of Bon Dzogchen

Shardza Tashi Gyaltsen's two volumes of *The Precious Treasury of Space and Awareness* are his masterwork on the theory and practice of Dzogchen. The first volume more fully enumerates Bon Mind Class (*sems sde*) literature:

As for the first, the root is the *Nine Cycles of the Hidden* (*Gab pa dgu skor*) and the branches are the *Nine Minor [Texts] on Mind* (*Sems smad dgu*) or the *Nine Mirrors of Minor Tantras* (*rGyud phran me long dgu*).<sup>34</sup>

An inventory of the principal Bon Mind Class literature is presented in detail by Keutzer (Keutzer, 2012). Briefly, as Shardza notes, the primary text of this class is the *Cycles of the Nine Hidden*, volume 172 of the *Bon Kanjur*, and secondary are the *Nine Minor Texts on Mind*. All of these are texts discovered by Shenchen Luga.<sup>35</sup> An account of the hiding of the Bon treasures at the time of King Gri Gum bTsad po and their discovery by Shenchen Luga has been published in *Collection of Rare Bonpo Texts* (Namgyal, 2009).<sup>36</sup>

While not a predominant topic of the *Cycles of the Nine Hidden*, the *tshon gang* is referenced in numerous works of this cycle. For example, the *nature* of the *tshon gang* is referenced.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *The Treasury of Space and Awareness*, volume 1, page 46.

<sup>35</sup> gShen Chen Klu dGa' (996–1035). This date is mentioned incidentally in the biography of Blo Gros rGyal mTshan by Jean-Luc Achard at <http://www.treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Azha-Lodro-Gyeltsen/13092>. Accessed January, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> This account, attributed to the Bon scholar sGa sTon Tshul Khrim rGyal mTshan, contains a section on the Southern Treasures. Martin suggests that this account belongs to the late 14th century (Martin, 2001, p. 280). Other materials on the *Cycles of the Nine Hidden* include the *Catalog of the Bon Kanjur*, where this title is cataloged as volume 99. This catalog also gives as additional references on the *Cycles of the Nine Hidden*: Karmay's *Great Perfection*, pp. 201 ff., and Martin's own, *Unearthing Bon Treasures*, pp. 253-255 (Martin, 2001).

<sup>37</sup> *Bon Kanjur* volume 172; page 67. This belongs to the volume of the *Cycles of the Nine Hidden*, and one of the branch texts entitled *zur rdeg yan lag lnga pa*, that form the thirty-seven branches. See Keutzer, 2012, Section 2.1: *sems rang 'byung gi gshen lha dkar pof thugs gsal ba'i ye shes tshon gang las/ lha yis kyang 'ches su yang med lal 'dre yis bza' ru yang med pa yin/*.

Shenlha Karpo, the self-originated [*bodhi*] mind,  
 With regard to the wisdom *tshon gang* of his clear heart:  
 Gods cannot at all praise it.  
 Demons cannot at all devour it.

Referencing the *location*:<sup>38</sup>

In the center of the jewel *tsi ta* is  
 The enlightened-body (*sku*) *tson gang* of crystal.  
 Because his face sees everything in the ten directions, [and]  
 Because his enlightened body is not limited by front or back, [and]  
 Because of the meditation on light rays emanating out in ten  
 directions,  
 It is said that one can accomplish the enlightened body of a deity  
 without separating mind and body.

In this passage, we highlight a reference to the jewel *tsi ta*. The connection to the Sanskrit word *citta*, with a similar semantic range including both physical associations with the heart as well as mental associations, is obvious. The use of *tsi ta* in Dzogchen literature generally, and Bon Dzogchen literature in particular, also warrants a thorough study, but here we content ourselves with the observation that in this context the term gives a precise location of the *tshon gang* in the physical heart, the fleshy *tsi ta*, as we will see later in the *Six Lamps*. In this passage, we also see an allusion to the natural capacity of the *tson gang* to emanate light in all ten directions. Finally, we see the allusion to the crystal-like nature that reminds of us the “self like a pure crystal” that was criticized by Bodhibhadra and later by Jamyang Zhepa.

Elsewhere in *The Cycles of the Nine Hidden* the *tshon gang* is referenced as:

- A little man of light (*'od kyi mi chung tshon gang*) ejected out the crown of the head. This use seems more reminiscent of the use of *aṅguṣṭhamātra puruṣa* in the Mahābharata as the conveyor of consciousness from life to life, than of the wisdom *tshon gang*. (volume 172, Bon Kanjur, p. 415)
- A light (*'od*) *tshon gang* that is a location for emanation and dissolution. (volume 172, p. 415)

<sup>38</sup> *Bon Kanjur* volume 172, page 86. This belongs to the volume of the *Cycles of the Nine Hidden*, another one of the branch texts entitled *Gab pa mde'u thung gi yan lag*, that form the thirty-seven branches: *tsi ta rin po che'i dbus su/ shel gyi sku tshon gang pal zhal phyogs bcu yongs su gzigs pas/ sku la mdun rgyab mi mnga' bas/ 'od zer phyogs bcur 'phros ba gcig bsgoms pas/ lus sems ma bral bar lha yis skur grub po zhes gsungs tel*.

- A light ('od) *tshon gang* not covered by inclinations (*bag chags*). (volume 172, p.477)

So, what is the difference between the *tshon gang* as described in *The Nine Hidden*, and the *tshon gang* as described in tantric works, such as the *sādhana* of Zhang Zhung Me Ri discussed earlier? Briefly, gone is the ritual of first imagining the symbolic being and then inviting the wisdom being. In this cycle, the practitioner is expected to meditate without any conceptual elaboration.<sup>39</sup>

### The Commentaries on the *Cycles of the Nine Hidden*

There are a number of commentaries on the *Cycles of the Nine Hidden*. One of the most important is an extensive commentary attributed to four sagacious men (*mkhas pa bzhi*), in volume 173 of the *Bon Kanjur*,<sup>40</sup> and its discovery is attributed to Shenchen Luga. The *tshon gang* is not referenced in this commentary. A related work is the commentary known as *Ocean of Awareness* whose composition is attributed to the legendary figure Drenpa Namkha<sup>41</sup> and whose discovery is attributed to the treasurer-revealer Khutsa Daöd<sup>42</sup> in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>43</sup>

In the section of *Ocean of Awareness* devoted to consideration of the view,<sup>44</sup> there are subsections on the non-Buddhist Tirthika's (*mu stegs pa*) views of nihilism and eternalism.<sup>45</sup> Here eternalism is characterized as the view that an eternal self exists in the center of the heart of migrating beings. This self is characterized as thumb-sized (*mthe bong tsam*) in large beings and the size of a small grain in small beings. Furthermore, this self emanates white light.<sup>46</sup> No attempt is made in

<sup>39</sup> Whether, in fact, they are able to do so is an indication of their readiness for Dzogchen practice.

<sup>40</sup> Volume 173 of the *Bon Kanjur* pp. 17-353, *Byang chub sems kyis gab pa dgu 'grel*. This work can also be found in the *Bon Katen*, where it is entitled *Sems lung gab pa dgu skor gyi 'grel ba rgya cher bshad pa* and cataloged as work 216-5.

<sup>41</sup> *Dran-pa nam-mkha'* (8th century).

<sup>42</sup> *Khu-tsa Zla'-'od*.

<sup>43</sup> This commentary is the focus of a paper by Kapstein (Kapstein, 2009). Kapstein does a nice orientation to this work and, particularly relevant to our discussion, alerts the reader to the commentary's discussion of a thumb-sized self. The commentary discussed by Kapstein is a refactoring of the original commentary of the four sagacious men, and its composition is attributed to Drenpa Namkha. It should not be confounded with the commentary more directly attributed to the four sagacious men in the *Bon Kanjur*.

<sup>44</sup> *Ita ba'i sgong 'grel, Ocean of Awareness*, pp. 226.

<sup>45</sup> *Ocean of Awareness*, pp. 470ff.

<sup>46</sup> *Ocean of Awareness*, pp. 470ff.

the commentary to compare or contrast the notion of the wisdom *tshon gang* residing in the heart, as described in the quotations from the *Cycles of the Nine Hidden* above, with the notion of the thumb-sized self that is directly criticized. In fact, in the lengthy commentary, the *tshon gang* is not even mentioned.

This same criticism of the Tirthikas was presented to western students by Yongzin Tenzin Namdak,<sup>47</sup> arguably the most universally respected living Bon master, during an oral teaching on the Mother Tantra (*ma rgyud*). According to the transcript the master said:<sup>48</sup>

“They [the Tirthikas] say the *ātman* stays in the center of the heart; inside the heart you find the eternal *ātman*. ‘Which size he is?’ (sic) Their answer is that a bigger man has a bigger *ātman* and a smaller being a smaller *ātman*, the biggest size is that of one finger joint whereas the smallest is that of a mustard seed.”

We are fortunate that an audience member asked the question we might all have at this point:

“Question: In the Zerbu [i.e. the *Twenty-One Nails*] it states that there is a Wisdom Tsönkhang (*ye shes kyi tshon gang*) and a Light Tsönkhang (*‘od kyi tshon gang*) and this Tsönkhang is of the size of a thumb joint. Isn’t there some similarity?”

To which the master responds:

“Yes, this text mentions the symbolic size but the same text explicitly states before and after mentioning this, that it is a symbol and that you cannot measure the size at all.”

Thus, the debate continues to this day, and one means of reconciling both the paradox of the *tshon gang* and the doctrinal tensions surrounding it is to consider the *tshon gang* as simply a symbol for the natural state, Reality Body, and other equivalents.

### **The *tshon gang* in the Three Proclamations: the Vast Expanse Class literature of Bon Dzogchen**

The *Cycle of the Three Proclamations* (*bsgrags pa skor gsum*) is composed of three sub-cycles: the upper portion contains teachings for gods (*lha*)

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<sup>47</sup> Yongs-'dzin Bstan-'dzin rNam-dag (b. 1926). Also, known as Slob-dpon Bstan-'dzin rNam-dag.

<sup>48</sup> Namdak, 2003, p. 27.

and forms volume 174 of the *Bon Kanjur*. The intermediate portion is aimed at humans (*mi*), the lower portion is aimed at subterranean beings (*klu*), and these two portions form volume 175 of the *Bon Kanjur*. Traditionally, the *Three Proclamations* is considered one of the three principal cycles of Dzogchen teachings in Bon. A few of its works are widely quoted in later exegetical literature, including the *Golden Turtle* (*gSer gyi rus sbal*) and the *Six Texts* (*Lung drug*). As noted in the quote above, Shardza associates this cycle with the Vast Expanse Class of Dzogchen. While a full consideration of this point is beyond the scope of this article, this categorization seems something of a convenience to provide placeholder to fill the category of the Vast Expanse Class, as the content of the cycle ranges all the way from tantric imaginal practices to pointing out instructions for direct introduction to the natural state.

Following the discussion in *A Catalogue of the Bon Kanjur*, where this cycle is cataloged as volumes 100 and 109, we observe that the *gter ston* for this cycle is Zhöton Ngodrup<sup>49</sup> who discovered the cycle in a Dragon year, either 1088 or 1100.

Generally, much as in the *Cycles of the Nine Hidden*, the *tshon gang* appears in this cycle, though not predominately. For example, in the first volume of the *Three Proclamations*, on page 112 we read of the “Shenlha Karpo *mtshon*<sup>50</sup> *gang*” and in that same volume:<sup>51</sup>

Meditate clearly:

In my heart is the enlightened body of the wisdom-being *tshon gang*,  
His eyes see everything in the ten directions.  
His enlightened body without front or back.

Similar references are found in the second volume of the *Three Proclamations*, for example:<sup>52</sup>

I become the enlightened body of Shenlha; nothing higher,  
An enlightened body of light, the *tshon gang*, *bodhicitta*.  
Seeing everything in the ten directions,  
An enlightened body without front or back.  
Well, through realizing the meaning of that: Buddhahood.

<sup>49</sup> bZhod-ston dNgos-grub.

<sup>50</sup> As mentioned earlier, we periodically see *mtshon gang* for *tshon gang*.

<sup>51</sup> Volume 174 of the *Bon Kanjur*, p. 172: *bdag gi snyang kha ru ye shes sems dpa' sku tshon gang ba cig la/ zhal phyogs bcur gzic pa/ sku la mdun rgyab med par gsal bar sgom mo/*.

<sup>52</sup> Volume 175 of the *Bon Kanjur*, p. 107: *rang nyid gshen lha'i sku ste bla na med/ 'od kyi skur gyur tshon gang byang chub sems/ phyogs bcu yongs gzigs sku la mdun rgyab med/ 'o na de don rtogs pas mngon sangs rgyas/*.

Later in the second volume of the *Three Proclamations* we encounter a text entitled *Cycle of Intentions of Enlightened Mind (Thugs kyi brnag pa)*.<sup>53</sup> Here the *tshon gang* plays a more central role. Early in the text we find a familiar presentation of the *tshon gang*:<sup>54</sup>

In the middle of the palace of my heart<sup>55</sup> [is]  
The enlightened body-mind of Kuntu Zangpo,  
A *tshon gang* without measure.

As the text continues the theme of emanation and gathering is repeated a number of times, sometimes originating from the *tshon gang* and other times from the *ye shes sems dpa' tshon gang*. Then the text presents a novel view of the *tshon gang*:<sup>56</sup>

The expression “*tshon gang*” is a symbol (*rgya*) of permanence.  
It is also taught in *tantras* and *agama (lung)*.  
If the understanding is not disturbed by partiality,  
Then there is liberation.  
[However,] if the essence of the meaning of “*tshon gang*” is not understood,  
If one understands it as having a measure, or,  
If one understands it as [simply] like light,  
Then, one deviates toward the Tirthikas.  
This is a very [serious] and difficult [error].

Feeling that attributions of permanence must be considered carefully, at my request, the contemporary Bon scholar Geshe Namgyal Dangsong<sup>57</sup> explained “*tshon gang*” in the above passage as “a symbol of the permanence of the natural state (*gnas lugs*), the wisdom of awareness that does not change in the three times.”<sup>58</sup> Here in the text, as well as in the statements of Geshe Dangsong and Yongzin Namdag,

<sup>53</sup> Volume 175 of the *Bon Kanjur*, p. 115ff.

<sup>54</sup> Volume 175 of the *Bon Kanjur*, pp. 118ff: *bdag gi she thun mang wer gyi dbus su// kun tu bzang po yid kyi sku/ chag tshad med pa'i tshon gang yod/*.

<sup>55</sup> Here the Zhang Zhung *she thun mang wer* is used for “palace of the heart.” Compare p. 375 of Nyima, 2003.

<sup>56</sup> The original Tibetan from volume 175 pp. 128 ff. of the *Bon Kanjur* was quite corrupt, and a later edition from Menri was not any clearer. This translation follows Jean-Luc Achard's suggestions on both the Tibetan and the translation: *tshon gang bya ba rtag pa'i rgya yin te/ rgyud lung 'ga na bstan pa yang/ rgya ma chad na grol bar bshad/ tshon gang bya ba don gyi ngo bo ma go bar/ chag tshad can du rtogs sam/ 'od lta bu rtogs na/ mu stegs su gol ba in/ de ni shin du dka'ol/*.

<sup>57</sup> dGe-shes rNam-rgyal Drang-song. (<http://www.dangsongnamgyallama.org>) Accessed February 11, 2018.

<sup>58</sup> *tshon gang bya ba ni gnas lugs rig pa'i ye shes dus gsum du 'gyur ba med pa rtag pa'i phyag rgya*. Private communication.

the doctrinal tension is relieved by treating the *tshon gang* as merely a symbol.

This is the only scriptural instance that we have found in which a text acknowledges that the *tshon gang* is a shared term of the non-Buddhist Tirthikas and Bon. Not surprisingly, the assumption is that the Bonpo properly fathom the meaning of the *tshon gang* whereas the Tirthikas do not. Other texts either criticize the concept of the *tshon gang* as belonging to non-Buddhists, or present it implicitly as a valid concept of Bon. Only here do we find an attempt to contrast the two traditions' views of *tshon gang*.

### **The *tshon gang* in the Aural Transmission of Zhang Zhung: The Quintessential Instruction Class literature of Bon Dzogchen**

So far, we have demonstrated that the notion of the *tshon gang* can be found in the principal texts of both the Mind Class and Vast Expanse Class of Bon Dzogchen. While the contexts in which we find the *tshon gang* are sensible and consistent with our growing understanding of the term, we cannot say that the *tshon gang* plays an important role in these two classes of literature. In fact, one might argue that it is more of an oddity. Next, we will consider the principal exemplar of the Quintessential Instruction Class of Bon Dzogchen, the Aural Transmission of Zhang Zhung, henceforth simply "Aural Transmission." In the literature of the Aural Transmission, we will see the *tshon gang* plays a more central role. This is significant because the Aural Transmission is not only the exemplar of the most profound of the three classes of Bon Dzogchen, it is also the cycle that is most esteemed by the living tradition of contemporary masters of Yungdrung Bon. Surely due in part to this, the *Aural Transmission* is the most studied and translated tradition of Bon in the West.

Before we go into the details, we wish to provide a bit more context on the literature that we will be citing. Both the historical lineage of the Aural Transmission and the literary tradition of the Aural Transmission are divided into:

- a. the Four Cycles of the Scriptural Transmission and
- b. the Experiential Transmission.

In other words, at points in its history the lines of transmission of the literature of the Aural Transmission were split into two different human lineages with the literature of the Scriptural Transmission going down one lineage and the literature of the Experiential Transmission going down another.

The *Four Cycles of the Scriptural Transmission* is the principal scripture of the Aural Transmission and constitutes the bulk of volume 171 of the *Bon Kanjur*.<sup>59</sup> The Experiential Transmission consists of teachings from individual human masters of the lineage and has traditionally not been included in collections of the *Bon Kanjur*. To further contextualize the sources we will cite, let us generally describe the categories of the *Four Cycles of the Scriptural Transmission*:

- The outer: the general presentation of the view
- The inner: experiential commentary on the quintessential instructions
- The secret: nakedly seeing awareness
- The utmost secret: profound certainty on the natural state

Further orientation to the *Four Cycles of the Scriptural Transmission* is given by Achard (Achard, 2006). A detailed analysis of the lineage of transmission of the *Aural Transmission* is given by Blezer (Blezer, 2009). Blezer's work attempts to reconcile the presentation of the literally timeless (or a-temporal) lineage traditionally ascribed to the Aural Transmission with the known human history. In this analysis, he notes that the first individual in the lineage that we can reconcile to historical sources is Yangton Sherab Gyaltsen<sup>60</sup> who Blezer places in the last quarter of the 11th century.

In the literature of the Aural Transmission, the *tshon gang* is principally described in the *Twenty-One Nails*, the primary text of the utmost secret cycle of the *Four Cycles of the Scriptural Transmission*. A commentary on the root text is attributed to a key legendary figure of the lineage, Nangzher Löpo<sup>61</sup> who, according to tradition, belongs to the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Among the *Twenty-One Nails*, the *Fifth Nail* is entitled *The Tshon Gang, the Reality Body*, and entirely devoted to that topic. Till now, we had to pan carefully for gold amidst diverse streams of texts to find small nuggets to contribute to our semantic field of the *tshon gang*; however, in the *Twenty-One Nails* we find a motherlode. The *Twenty-One Nails* was translated into English earlier<sup>62</sup> but, due to the nature of this "utmost secret" tradition, at the request of living masters, these translations were only privately circulated. Following the open publication of Reynold's interpretive translation of the

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<sup>59</sup> We are relying a version edited by Yongzin Tenzin Namdak which we identify as *The Four Cycles of the Scriptural Transmission* in the Bibliography.

<sup>60</sup> Yang-ston Shes-rab rGyal-mtshan.

<sup>61</sup> sNang-bzher Lod-po.

<sup>62</sup> Achard, 1992; Keutzer, 2003.

*Twenty-One Nails* and its commentary,<sup>63</sup> traditional restrictions have loosened up.

### **The wisdom *tshon gang* in the *Twenty-One Nails***

We include in the Appendix the Tibetan for *Nail 5* together with a translation of both the root and the commentary.<sup>64</sup> We will accentuate a few key features in this section. We first look at a practice manual of the system of the Aural Transmission, *The Practice Manual of Drugyelwa Yungdrung*.<sup>65</sup> Eight centuries later this work continues to be the primary practice manual for the Aural Transmission. Aside from helping us choose some of the most relevant passages of the Aural Transmission, this manual demonstrates that the wisdom *tshon gang* was, and continues to be, a vital part of the *practice* of this living tradition. *The Practice Manual* is divided into: Preliminaries, Actual Practices, and four auxiliary sections on View, Meditation, Conduct, and Result. The *tshon gang* is first presented in the section on the View, in the context of instructions on direct introduction (*ngo sprod*). To provide context on this usage, we quote the preparatory instructions before the verses.<sup>66</sup>

“Control the vital points of the body. Unite the breath and mind; after awareness separates the pure from the impure, consciousness is exposed as clear and radiant. When [the student] has confidence, point out while letting [the student] directly stare into the essence of that [radiant consciousness]. The wisdom of awareness is the awakening of the ultimate natural state. The non-conceptual consciousness of this very moment arises as that which is transparent, unobscured, raw and lucid. This is it.”

This is followed by the verses from *Nail 5* of *The Twenty-One Nails*, typically recited by the master during the direct introduction:<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Reynolds, 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Our translation of the root follows Achard's (Achard, 1992) closely, but not exactly.

<sup>65</sup> Composed by Drugyelwa Yungdrung; 1242-1290.

<sup>66</sup> From a working translation of *A Practice Manual* by Jean-Luc Achard and Kurt Keutzer that is based on a variorum edition of the Tibetan prepared by Kevin O'Neil and Kurt Keutzer: *lus gnad gcun rlung sems kyi sbyor ba bya ste/ rig pa'i dwangs snyigs phyed nas/ shes pa gsal mdangs legs po thon nas yid ches pa'i dus sul kho'i ngo bo la cer re lta ru bcug la ngo sprod de/ rig pa'i ye shes gnas lugs don gyi sangs rgyas de/ dus da lta'i rtog med kyi shes pa sa le rjen ne ba/ sgrub med zang thal du shar ba 'di yin tel.*

<sup>67</sup> *The Twenty-One Nails*, p. 507. Quoted in *A Practice Manual*: *ye shes tshon gang snang med bon gyi sku/ gshen lha dkar po gdags med kun gyi gzhi/ ngo bo nyid kyi rig pa zhes su grags/.*

The wisdom *tshon gang*, free of appearances, the Reality Body,  
Shenlha Karpo, the base-of-all that cannot be named,  
Is well known as “awareness of essence-in-itself.”

The association of the *tshon gang* with Shenlha Karpo has been one of the consistent themes in the Bon Dzogchen literature we have reviewed. In these few lines, it is interesting to see this association juxtaposed with the association of the *tshon gang* with the Reality Body (*bon sku*) because Shenlha Karpo is more typically associated with the Completion Body (*rdzogs sku*).

Other recurring themes are an enlightened body without front or back and an eye that sees in the ten directions. Here we find in *Nail 5*:<sup>68</sup>

When the eye of wisdom arises as an eye in the enlightened body  
*tshon gang*,  
It is an enlightened body without front or back that sees everything  
in the ten directions,  
An unobscured eye that sees all without looking.

Aside from the greater length of the presentation of the *tshon gang* in *The Twenty-One Nails*, another distinguishing feature is the presentation of two *tshon gang*: the wisdom *tshon gang* and the light *tshon gang*. This distinction is also discussed by Shardza in volume 1 of his *The Treasure of Space and Awareness* (277ff); however, his discussion relies entirely on the *Twenty-One Nails*. Briefly, the wisdom *tshon gang* is self-originated wisdom, the Reality Body, free of attributes. The notion of the light *tshon gong* arising from wisdom *tshon gang* is described in *Nail 5*:<sup>69</sup>

From the *tshon gang* of the great luminous wisdom,  
Naturally arises the *tshon gang* of the great manifested light.

In truth, as the commentary guides us, the wisdom *tshon gang* and the light *tshon gang* are never gathered or separated. Their relationship is like light (the light *tshon gang*) which naturally arises from the core of the sun (the wisdom *tshon gang*).

One point of interest of *Nail 5* is that the physical location of the *tshon gang* is never mentioned. In fact, it would be easy to read *Nail 5* as simply another retelling of the familiar relationship between awareness/*rig pa* (here, the wisdom *tshon gang*) and its dynamic

<sup>68</sup> *The Twenty-One Nails*, p. 507: *tshon gang sku la ye shes spyan shar na/ phyogs bcu yongs gzigs mdun rgyab med pa'i sku/ ma ltas kun mthong sgrib g.yogs med pa'i spyan/*.

<sup>69</sup> *The Twenty-One Nails*, p. 510: *gsal ba'i ye shes chen po tshon gang las/ snang ba'i 'od chen tshon gang rang bzhin shar/*.

display/*rtsal* (here, the light *tshon gang*). However, in the quote presented in the Introduction of this paper, we saw that in *Nail 9* the wisdom *tshon gang* is placed in the jewel *tsi ta* of the heart.

Another element of the semantic field of the *tshon gang* is presented in *Nail 10*. There we read of the wisdom *tshon gang* giving rise to the five lights of appearances:<sup>70</sup>

From the wisdom *tshon gang* of natural awareness  
Arise the five radiant lights of appearances.

*Nail 10* then continues to describe how from these five radiant lights the physical elements, channels, body, and mind are generated.

The intermediate state (*bar do*) is the focus of *Nail 19*. There we read:<sup>71</sup>

For the person who is accustomed and familiar [with this instruction],  
Body and *maṇḍala* arise in their completeness.

And the *Commentary on the Twenty-One Nails* explains:<sup>72</sup>

“For those who are accustomed and familiar with this instruction: At that time [of the *bar do*], from the *tshon gang*, the king of awareness, your own body appears as a body of light four cubits in size. That body appears without front or back and is free of cardinal or intermediate directions.”

This material on the *bar do* is also woven into the section of Drugyelwa's *Practice Manual* devoted to Conduct, and this is one of the two places in his manual that the *tshon gang* is mentioned there. The connection here may not be immediately apparent but it is in the Conduct section that the instructions on the intermediate state (*bar do*) are given.

With this our discussion of the *tshon gang* in the *Twenty-One Nails* is complete. We now continue with a consideration of another work from the Aural Transmission, *The Six Lamps*.

<sup>70</sup> *The Twenty-One Nails*, p. 507: *rang rig ye shes tson gang las/ snang ba'i 'od gdangs rnam lngar shar/*.

<sup>71</sup> *The Twenty-One Nails*, p. 516: *goms shing 'dris pa'i gang zag la/ sku dang dkyil 'khor rdzogs par 'char/*.

<sup>72</sup> *The Twenty-One Nails, Commentary*, p. 572: *gdams pa 'di la goms shing 'dris pa rnam ni/ de tshe rig pa'i rgyal po tshon gang las/ rang lus 'od lus 'doms gang du snang ngo/ de yang da lta'i sgyu lus 'di lta bu ma yin tel' 'od kyi sku la mdun dang rgyab med/ phyogs dang mtshams med par snang ngo/*.

**The *tshon gang*, the Six Lamps,  
and the Practice of Crossing Over**

One of the distinctive features of Dzogchen is its employment of a subtle physiological system that differs in a number of ways from the systems of channels (*rtsa*), winds (*rlung*), and drops (*thig le*) used in the practice of completion-stage yogas of the various tantric systems of both Old and New schools. This unique subtle physiology is actively engaged during the practice of *crossing over* (*thod rgal*). Significant elements of this system are a series of lamps (*sgron ma*) and channels (*rtsa*).

In Chapter Six of *Meditation Differently* (Guenther, 1992), Guenther broke new ground with his comparative description of these subtle physiological systems as described in the great Nyingma master Longchen Rabjam's *Bla ma yang tig* and *Zab mo yang tig*. This line of investigation was further advanced by Scheidegger in his dissertation (Scheidegger, 2003) and later articles (Scheidegger, 2005, 2007) where he went into more detail on sources from Longchen Rabjam's *snying thig yab bzhi*, as well as the earlier Seventeen Tantras of the Quintessential Instruction class. A detailed discussion of one Bon system of the subtle physiology, as it is described in the Aural Transmission of Zhang Zhung, is given by Blezer (Blezer, 2009).

While the works referenced above do not indicate a single monolithic system, but rather a variety of systems, there are common elements. To demonstrate their relationship, we compare the system of the *Six Lamps* of the *Aural Transmission* with that of the *Zab Mo Yang Tig* of the Nyingma.

Bon system of the Six Lamps from the Four Cycles of Scriptural Transmission, pp. 356-422.	Nyingma system of the Zab mo Yang tik (Guenther,1992) Chapter 6, Figure 7	Function
1. Lamp of the abiding base ( <i>gnas pa gzhi'i sgron ma</i> )	1. Lamp of the abiding base ( <i>gnas pa gzhi'i sgron ma</i> )	The lamp of the fundamental base.
2. Lamp of the fleshy heart ( <i>tsi ta sha'i sgron ma</i> )	2. Lamp of the fleshy heart ( <i>tsitta sha'i sgron ma</i> )	The lamp of the fundamental base in the human heart.
3. Lamp of the soft white channel ( <i>dkar 'jam rtsa sgron ma</i> )	3. Lamp of the soft white channel ( <i>dkar 'jam rtsa sgron ma</i> )	The lamp of the light channel conducting light from the heart to the eyes.

4. Water-lamp of the far-casting lasso ( <i>rgyang zhags chu'i sgron ma</i> )	4. Water-lamp of the far-casting lasso ( <i>rgyang zhags chu'i sgron ma</i> )	The lamp of the physical eyes that expresses apparent reality as the dynamic display of awareness.
5. Lamp of direct introduction to the pure realms ( <i>zhing khams ngo sprod kyi sgron ma</i> )	6. Lamp of the result ( <i>'bras bu'i sgron ma</i> )	The lamp illuminating the manifestation of the pure realms.
6. Lamp of the time of the <i>bardo</i> ( <i>bar do dus kyi sgron ma</i> )	5. Lamp of the time of the <i>bardo</i> ( <i>bar do dus kyi sgron ma</i> )	The lamp illuminating the appearances of the intermediate state.

While the similarities between these two particular systems is striking, this is not what we want to accentuate in this article. We have chosen the system of the *Six Lamps* because it is the principal system for describing the subtle physiology of Dzogchen in Yungdrung Bon. The *Six Lamps* is also the principal text of the second (inner) cycle of the Aural Transmission of Zhang Zhung, and benefits from two commentaries: one by Drugyelwa Yungdrung (1242-1290) and the other by Uri Sönam Gyeltsen<sup>73</sup> (13th century).<sup>74</sup>

However hard it may be to fully comprehend the six lamps as presented in these works, the “electro-dynamics” of the system is easy to describe. 1) There is a fundamental base. 2) This fundamental base has a seat in the physical heart of the human body, the *tsi ta*. 3) The “light” from the *tsi ta* is conducted via a light channel to the eyes. This light is not the ordinary light of *photons* but the “light of manifestation (*'od kyi snang ba*).” 4) This light is further conducted from the eyes to apparent realities.

Perhaps it is a concern only naturally occurring to someone with an Electrical Engineering background, such as the present author, but the question naturally occurs: what precisely is the point of origin of the light of the *tsi ta* that is then conducted through the channels and on through the eyes? In other words, what is the precise point of origin of the light within the lamp of the fleshy *tsi ta*?

As we have seen, the *tshon gang* plays a significant role in the Aural

<sup>73</sup> U-rib bSod-nams rGyal-mtshan.

<sup>74</sup> The *Six Lamps* have also been the focus of several scholars. In particular, Jean-Luc Achard has published a translation of the root verses, as well as an overview and synthetic commentary (Achard, 2017). Chris Hatchell includes a translation of the root verses as well as Drugyelwa Yungdrung’s commentary in his book *Naked Seeing* (Hatchell, 2015). Shekerjian and Keutzer have also privately circulated their own translation of both the root verses and Drugyelwa Yungdrung’s commentary (Shekerjian, 2011) at private teachings by a number of masters of the Bon tradition.

Transmission of Zhang Zhung, and its location, as described in that system, is precisely the *tsi ta*. Moreover, the *tshon gang*, as we have seen, is described as a lamp inside the vase of the fleshy *tsi ta*. So, one might naturally look to the *Six Lamps* for a clear description of the relationship between the lamp of the fleshy *tsi ta* and the *tshon gang*. While a careful reading of the *Six Lamps* themselves does not fulfill this expectation, an examination of Drugyelwa Yungdrung's commentary, *The Contemplative Meaning of the Six Lamps*, does yield some of what we are looking for. The following describes how the central channel is opened by the dynamic energy of the *tshon gang*:<sup>75</sup>

From the middle of the *tsi ta*, from the dynamic energy (*rtsal*) of the light *tshon gang* and the wisdom *tshon gang*, the wind of space arises; the central channel is opened.

However, the role of the *tshon gang* in the system of the lamps, and its relationship to the four (or five) visions that form the structure of crossing-over practice, is still a bit abstract. Shardza describes the situation more clearly in his comprehensive manual of Dzogchen practice, *The Natural Arising of the Three Enlightened Bodies*. Here, in his section entitled *The Practice of the Four Visions of Thogal*, in his discussion of the first of the four visions,<sup>76</sup> known as the *Appearance of the Actual Manifestation of Reality (bon nyid)*, he discusses the arising of the visions. There Shardza states:<sup>77</sup>

Their location is the *tsi ta*. Their path projects into the soft white channel. The door arises from the liquid lamp of the far-casting lasso. For example, it arises like the light of a butter lamp within a vase.

Then, immediately following, Shardza quotes *Nail 9* of the *Twenty-One Nails*, as in the Introduction of this paper:<sup>78</sup>

The physical heart of flesh  
Is like a jeweled vase of alloyed metals.  
The luminous wisdom *tshon gang*

<sup>75</sup> *The Contemplative Meaning of the Six Lamps*, page 381: *tsi ta'i dbus nas 'od dang ye shes tshon gang ba'i rtsal las/ nam mkha'i rlung shar te dbu ma'i rtsa sbubs phye ba'o/*.

<sup>76</sup> In this work Shardza follows the system of four visions (*snang ba bzhi*) rather than the five visions (*snang ba lnga*) that is described in the *Practice Manual* associated with the Aural Transmission of Zhang Zhung.

<sup>77</sup> *The Practice of the Four Visions of Thogal*, p. 16a, (11-259): */gnas pa tsit+ta'i dkyil/ /lam dkar 'jam rtsa la dod/ /sgo rgyang zhags chu'i sgron ma las 'char ba ste/ dper na bum nang gi mar me'i 'od kha la byung ba lta bu'o/*.

<sup>78</sup> *The Twenty-One Nails*, pp. 509ff: *gdos pa sha'i tsi ta ni/ 'phra men rin chen bum pa 'dra/ gsal ba'i ye shes tshon gang ni/ bum pa nang gi mar me 'dra/*.

Is like a lamp inside that vase.

With this brief but important connection between the *tshon gang* and the subtle physiology of Bon Dzogchen, we are now ready to summarize our discoveries regarding the semantic field of the *tshon gang* in the Dzogchen of Yungdrung Bon.

### Summary of the *tshon gang* within Bon Dzogchen

The word *tshon gang*/*mtshon gang* is relatively unusual in Tibetan writings. Its meaning, “the first phalanx of the thumb” is nearly identical to the Sanskrit *aṅguṣṭhamātra*. Nevertheless, while we can find many instances of the term *tshon gang* in Bon and Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist texts, we cannot produce a text in which we can demonstrate that *tshon gang* was ever used to translate the Sanskrit *aṅguṣṭhamātra*. In fact, we have yet to find a text, in which the word *tshon gang* appears as a compound, for which we have a Sanskrit original.<sup>79</sup>

Drawing on our references from the five primary volumes relating to Dzogchen in the *Bon Kanjur*, the exemplars of each of the Mind, Vast Expanse, and Quintessential instruction classes of Bon Dzogchen, we will organize our summary around the following elements: 1) the wisdom-being *tshon gang*; 2) the essence and nature of the wisdom and light *tshon gang*; 3) the physical location of the wisdom *tshon gang*; and 4) the function of the wisdom *tshon gang*.

### The *tshon gang* form of the wisdom-being: the wisdom-being *tshon gang*

Our brief example of Ati Muwer from the *sādhana* of Zhang Zhung Me Ri provides a typical example of the *tshon gang* as used to describe the form for the wisdom-being. Using *tshon gang* to define the size and shape of the wisdom being is very common in Bon and Nyingma tantra, and we find it in volume 2 of the *Cycles of the Three Proclamations* as well. This wisdom-being *tshon gang* then commonly serves as the central focal point for mantra recitation, as well as for the emanation and collection of light.

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<sup>79</sup> Electronic searching has produced many blind alleys such as in the *'Phags pa 'jam dpal gyi rtsa rgyud* in volume 88 of the *Pedurma Kanjur*, p. 643. Here we read: *mtshon gang dag yid la bsam pa tsam gyi de 'byung bar 'gyur rol*. On closer examination *mtshon* is used here as *mtshon cha*, “weapon,” followed by the compound *gang dag* or “some.”

### The *tshon gang* as the form of ejected consciousness

As we saw in the passage from the *Cycles of the Nine Hidden*, in the practice of ejection (*'pho ba*) the *tshon gang* may define the particular form imagined for the ejected consciousness.

### The essence and nature of the wisdom *tshon gang* and light *tshon gang*

The most numerous references to the wisdom-being *tshon gang* are in tantra; however, the majority of references to the wisdom *tshon gang* are in Bon Dzogchen, where the emphasis is on its essence and nature. The latter references indicate that awareness (*rig pa*), the self-originated (*rang 'byung*), the natural state, *bodhicitta*, and the Reality Body, all fit within the semantic field of the wisdom *tshon gang*. We do find subtle distinctions made, somewhat inconsistently, between the wisdom *tshon gang* and the base-of-all (*kun gzhi*). For example, in *Nail 5* of *The Twenty-One Nails*, the commentary indicates that the following describes the wisdom *tshon gang*:

The clear, self-originated, king of awareness,  
Abides as self-originated wisdom, the-root and base-of-all.

Whereas, *Nail 6* suggests that the wisdom *tshon gang* arises from the base-of-all:

From the vast expanse of the base-of-all, selfless, clear, and empty,  
Arises the naturally clear, non-conceptual, wisdom *tshon gang*.

The entire text of *Nail 5*, translated in the Appendix, is devoted to the essence and nature of the the two *tshon gang*, the wisdom *tshon gang* and light *tshon gang*. Therefore, we will not add more here, except to reiterate that these two abide together like the core of the sun and its rays of light.

### The size and physical location of the wisdom *tshon gang*

The size of the *tshon gang*, the first phalanx of the thumb, is implicit in its name. The physical location of the *tshon gang* has variously been described as:

- The *tsi ta*
  - The material flesh *tsi ta* (*gdos pa'i sha tsi ta*) (*Twenty-One Nails, Nail 9*)
  - The *tsi ta* of flesh (*tsi ta'i sha*) (*The Six Lamps*)
  - The middle of the *tsi ta* (*tsi ta rin po che'i dbus su*) (*The Cycles of the Nine Hidden*)
- The citadel of the heart (Zhang Zhung: *she thun mang wer*) (*Three Proclamations, Vol 2*)

Thus, our sources are unanimous in locating the wisdom *tshon gang* within the physical human heart.

### The functions of the *tshon gang*

We have found a variety of functions of the *tshon gang*. In *Nail 10* of the *Twenty-One Nails*, we learned that the wisdom *tshon gang* gives rise to the five lights of appearances.

In *Nail 19* of the *Twenty-One Nails*, we learned that the wisdom *tshon gang* and light *tshon gang* serve as the base of experience (*'char gzhi*) of the body of light in the intermediate state.

In *The Six Lamps* we learned of the particular function of the *tshon gang* and light *tshon gang* in the creation of the human body and its system of channels. In particular:

- Wisdom *tshon gang*: The source of the wind (*rlung*) of the space [element]; the opener of the central channel  
(*The Six Lamps, The Lamp of the Soft White Channel*)
- Wisdom *tshon gang* and light *tshon gang*: The source of the essential body organs as well as the root and branch winds  
(*The Six Lamps, The Lamp of the Soft White Channel*)

Finally, at least with regard to the practice of crossing-over (*thod rgal*), we saw the unique function of the wisdom *tshon gang* as serving as the source of light within the *tsi ta*. This was indicated in *Nail 9* and further confirmed by Shardza in volume 1 of his *Treasury of Space and Awareness*.

While our research has elaborated the essence and nature of the wisdom *tshon gang*, and confirmed in multiple sources its location in the physical human heart, all of this was forecasted in the very two first quotes of the Introduction of this paper. While much of what we have discovered reinforces the view of contemporary Bon masters that the *tshon gang* is principally a symbol for the natural state, awareness, Reality Body, and so forth, by bringing to light the tantric roots of the *tshon gang*, as well as demonstrating its unique functions, we hope to

have shed new light on the topic.

### A Brief Look at the *tshon gang* in the Nyingma Tradition:

Before concluding we would like to take a brief look at how the *tshon gang* appears in Dzogchen cycles of the Nyingma tradition. First, let us observe that the wisdom *tshon gang* appears as early as Dunhuang. There in the midst of an early *mahāyoga sādhana*, during the stages of dissolution.<sup>80</sup>

The male deity also completely dissolves into the wisdom *mtshon pa* deity. That wisdom *mtshon gang* also completely dissolves into a *vajra* the size of a barley seed.

As for the appearance of the *tshon gang* in Nyingma Dzogchen: in a manner similar to Bon, the Dzogchen tradition of the Nyingma is broadly organized, in order of increasing superiority, into the Mind Class, (*sems sde*), the Vast Expanse Class (*klong sde*), and the Quintessential Instruction Class (*man ngag sde*). The core canonical literature of the Quintessential Instruction Class is the collection of Seventeen Tantras. Probably the best overview of these works in a western language is due to Achard in *L'Essence Perlée du Secret* (Achard, 1997). Our text under consideration, *The Tantra Arrayed with Jewels*, is one of those Seventeen Tantras.

In the *Tantra Arrayed with Jewels*, we find the following reference to the *tshon gang*:<sup>81</sup>

In the jeweled *tsitta* of each individual,  
Is the *tshon gang*, like a blazing light inside a vase,  
Within that, a firelight of wisdom blazes.

Here the wisdom *tshon gang*, freed of any direct association with a deity or a commitment being, shows an obvious similarity to the wisdom *tshon gang* in the *Twenty-One Nails* of the Aural Transmission of Zhang Zhung. While Nyingma Dzogchen literature is not a focus of this article, nor has time permitted a careful survey of the role of the *tshon gang* in it, this reference to the *tshon gang* as a source of light in the *tsitta/tsi ta* seems fairly isolated within that corpus. For example,

<sup>80</sup> Poussin, 1962, IOL 552, p. 170. Also, Dalton, 2006, IOL Tib J 552, p. 258ff. *yab kyang lha 'i ye shes mtshon pa la tim gyi thim/ ye shes mtshon gang pa de yang rdo rje nas tsam pa de la tim kyis thim/*. Thanks to Jacob Dalton for sharing this reference.

<sup>81</sup> *Nyingma Gyud Bum*, volume 6, page 20: */rang rang tsitti rin chen nal /tshon gang 'od 'bar bum pa 'i tshul/ /nang na ye shes me 'od 'bar/*.

we find these lines quoted only once by Longchen Rabjam,<sup>82</sup> in his *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*,<sup>83</sup> and even there it is misattributed to another one of the Seventeen Tantras, *The Perfect Dynamic Energy of the Lion* (*Seng ge rtsal rdzogs*). While we do find many other references to the *tshon gang* in Longchen Rabjam's writings, as well as in other Nyingma exegetical writings, in every instance we have examined it seems to be used as a unit of measure for guiding meditative and imaginal practices. While it would be unwise to generalize about a literature as voluminous as that of the Nyingma Dzogchen Tradition, or even Longchen Rabjam's writings, it does seem safe to say that the *tshon gang* plays a lesser role and occupies a smaller semantic field in Nyingma, than in the Dzogchen of Yungdrung Bon.

Another term that is related by language, location, and function, is *tshon sna lnga'i gru gu*, or five-colored ball of yarn; this term may also be found in the Seventeen Dzogchen Tantras. In particular, in the *Union of Sun and Moon*, we find the following:

"In the heart of embodied beings there is a radiant drop (*thig le*) of light, that is like a ball of five-colored yarn."<sup>84</sup>

### Speculative Conclusions

This research has spurred our imagination toward a number of speculative conclusions.

#### Speculations on the Evolution of the *tshon gang* Concept Over Time

We have identified three significant expressions of the *tshon gang*:

- The wisdom-being *tshon gang* (*ye shes sems dpa' tshon gang*) as a companion to the commitment being (*dam tshig sems dpa'*) in the imaginal practices of deity practice in Buddhist tantra generally, and Bon is no exception.

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<sup>82</sup> Klong-chen Rab-'byams; 1308-1364.

<sup>83</sup> Volume 18 of *The Collected Works of Dri Med 'Od Zer*.

<sup>84</sup> *Nyingma Gyud Bum*, volume 5, page 523. Note that here the meaning of *tshon* is color: *lus can rnam ky'i snying na 'od ky'i dang ma 'dus pa'i tshon (dbyings) sna lnga'i gru gu bsdogs pa lta bu 'am/*. Note also that here *tshon* is glossed with *dbyings*. Compare with the *gzha' tshon sna lnga'i gur phub 'dra* of Nail 9 of the *The Twenty-One Nails* p. 509.

- The wisdom-being *tshon gang* still associated with a deity, such as Shenlha Ökar, but free of any association with the commitment being and free of any need for ritual generation.
- The wisdom *tshon gang* standing alone as a symbol of the Reality Body (*bon sku*), the natural state, and other equivalent terms. It is coemergent with the light *tshon gang* just as the core of the sun is coemergent with its sun rays.

If the wisdom-being *tshon gang* paired with the commitment being clearly belongs to the conceptual practices of the generation stage, and the wisdom *tshon gang* paired with the light *tshon gang* is deeply rooted in the non-conceptual practice of Dzogchen, then where in this scheme does the wisdom-being *tshon gang*, freed of the ritual of generation, belong? We first saw this phase in the brief portion of the *sādhana* devoted to Ati Muwer. Geshe Namgyal Dangsong was quite firm in stating that even when freed of the generation ritual these practices still belong to the generation stage of tantra. This seems to imply that the classification of the practice depends on the context of the practice. Let us consider the quote from the *Three Proclamations*, that we presented earlier:

In my heart is the wisdom-being *tshon gang*,  
His eyes see everything in the ten directions.  
Clearly meditate on this enlightened body that is without  
front or back.

Our understanding of the tradition is that if a practitioner reads or recites these words in a liturgical context then it is a generation stage practice; however, if a master uses these or similar words in a direct introduction then it is a Dzogchen practice. More to our sensibilities is the notion that there's no real classifying the practice other than by the result. In other words, whether the practice is generation stage or Dzogchen depends on whether the practitioner is directly recognizing the nature of mind or engaged in conceptual practice.

Parallel to these nuances of Bon practice is the question of the historical development of these practices. Did the entirely unelaborated wisdom *tshon gang* appear first in history and gradually get elaborated by associations with deity and ritual in tantra? Or did the wisdom-being *tshon gang* appear first, historically, but gradually undergo a kind of essentialization in Dzogchen practice: first being freed of ritual generation and finally being freed, as in *Nail 5* of the *Twenty-One Nails*, from any association with deity? Arguing in favor of the former is that if we follow the analogy of non-Buddhist Indian literature, the particular form of the *aṅguṣṭhamātra puruṣa* first

appeared completely unelaborated in ancient Upaniṣadic literature, and only after many centuries became associated with Rudra, Śiva, and so forth. Arguing in favor of the latter is that wherever we find the *tshon gang* in Dzogchen, tantra is not far away. Moreover, in our investigation of two major Bon Dzogchen cycles, *The Cycles of the Nine Hidden* and *The Three Proclamation*, we found that tantric practices and Dzogchen practices are feely mixed in those cycles. As a final support to this position, the Bon (and Nyingma) traditions themselves place Dzogchen as a culmination of tantric practice.

### Philosophical Speculations on the Nature of the *tson gang*

The wisdom *tshon gang* is paradoxical. What sense does it make for something to be simultaneously immeasurable and yet given a particular size and location in the physical heart? The Bon tradition has its own ways of dealing with this paradox. Principally there is the position that the *tshon gang* is merely a symbol for the natural state, Reality Body and other equivalents. However, it is not just a passive symbol, like the symbol of the *g.yung drung* or *svastika* is a symbol for the everlasting. As we saw, the wisdom and the light *tshon gang* can perform a particular function in the evolution of the human body such as being the source of the wind of space.

In his *Brahma-Sūtra Bhāṣya*, Śāṅkarācārya's commentaries on sūtras 1.3.24 and 1.3.25 argue that just as the space (*ākāśa*) within a cubit long section of bamboo is spoken of as a cubit of space, in this same way, although the supreme Self (*ātman*) is all pervasive, it can be spoken of as having the size of a thumb in the location of the heart. Alternatively, for any contemporary individual familiar with modern physics, it is much less paradoxical that the all-pervasive and immeasurable might also be more readily locatable in some locations than others. Since the work of Schrödinger and other revelations of quantum mechanics, we have learned that even the grossest matter has a dual nature of wave and particle; in its wave nature matter may be considered to be truly all pervasive, yet statistically it is more likely to be in particular locations.<sup>85</sup> Unfortunately, neither of these explanations are sufficient to resolve the paradox of the wisdom *tshon gang* for the Bon tradition. While the wisdom *tshon gang* is said to be *like* space and, in other quotations, pervade space, the wisdom *tshon gang* is a fusion (*zung 'jug*) of clarity (*gsal*) and emptiness (*stong*); its empty aspect (*stong cha*)

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<sup>85</sup> Cf. *The Undivided Universe*, Chapter 7, Bohm, 1995.

is not commensurable to space in any way. Perhaps this paradox has its greatest instructional power when simply left as it is, without further analysis.

### **Bon is a fertile but neglected field of study**

A final implicit observation of this work is that due to Bon's reverence for antiquity, and its tolerance of paradoxical and controversial topics which might meet with censure in other traditions, we find in Bon the juxtaposition of unique religious ideas that we cannot find elsewhere. We believe that this makes Bon a very fertile, yet relatively neglected field, for the investigation of the history and evolution of Tibetan Buddhism. Further, whatever Indic precedents or impenetrable paradoxes the *tshon gang* has, none of this should obscure our appreciation of the uniqueness and natural beauty of Bon works such as *Nail 5*.

### **Deficiencies of this Work and Future Directions for Research**

There are many deficiencies to this work. First, we cannot claim to have comprehensively surveyed Bon Dzogchen literature, as we have only investigated the three principles cycles of Yungdrung Bon. Even within this relatively modest scope, in broadly surveying the *tshon gang* across five different volumes of the *Bon Kanjur*, we have failed to fully contextualize these cited passages within these works. This is particularly true of the *Cycles of the Nine Hidden* and *Three Proclamations*. Thus, an investigation of the *tshon gang* within Bon Dzogchen that is both broader and deeper is warranted.

Second, while we have found obvious comparisons to the *aṅguṣṭhamātra puruṣa* of the Upaniṣadic literature, we haven't offered any kind of explanation of how these Upaniṣadic works might have come to influence Bon. More generally we have not given a hypothesis as to how Bon could have encountered the concept of the *aṅguṣṭhamātra puruṣa* at all, other than through critiques of Vedānta found in translations of works tenets, such as Bodhibhadra's *Jñānasārasamuccaya nāma nibandhana* discussed earlier. Another interesting direction of research is to trace the connection of the *aṅguṣṭhamātra puruṣa* of the Upaniṣads to the *liṅga śarīra* of the later Sāṃkhya system and then on to later tantric works, such as the *Svacchanda Tantra* and Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka*. While the *aṅguṣṭhamātra puruṣa* is not very evident in these later tantric works, it seems that the concept of the *liṅga*, particularly at the heart, may have

taken over its function. A better foundation in these later Indian works would put us in a better position to hypothesize about direct historical connections between these Indian traditions and Bon.

Perhaps the most promising and fruitful direction of research is to carefully explore the role of the *tshon gang* and related concepts in Dzogchen systems of the Nyingma school and compare those with Bon. Given the significant role of the wisdom *tshon gang* in at least the Aural Transmission of Zhang Zhung tradition of Bon Dzogchen, and its relative absence in the Nyingma traditions of Longchen Rabjam's Nyingthik, the Longchen Nyingthik, and the Dudjom Tersar, this difference gives us an interesting lens for looking at the relationship between Bon Dzogchen and Nyingma Dzogchen. Each tradition is too large to be considered a monolith, so let us consider the Aural Transmission of Zhang Zhung. Logic would imply that there are only a limited number of alternatives for the relationship between this tradition and that of the Nyingma. Principally:

- The Aural Transmission originated independently and continued largely independently from the Nyingma.
- The Aural Transmission developed independently, but shares common sources with the Nyingma.
- The Aural Transmission is principally derived from the Nyingma tradition.
- At least some traditions of the Nyingma are principally derived from the Aural Transmission.

For example, if, as is popularly supposed by many contemporary Nyingma masters, the Aural Transmission is highly derivative of Nyingma Dzogchen, then how is it that the *tshon gang* came to be such a focus of the Aural Transmission of Zhang Zhung? Does the wisdom *tshon gang* represent a Bon addition or innovation? Alternatively, has the Nyingma tradition systematically censored the role of the wisdom *tshon gang* over time?

With each of the principal alternatives considered above, there are an attendant series of related questions that merit further investigation.

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Finding references to the *tshon gang* in such a vast amount of literature was like finding a needle in a haystack; however, the presence of e-texts in Unicode served as a magnet that greatly facilitated this effort. These e-texts were, in turn, largely made possible through the optical character recognition (OCR) technology for Tibetan that was created by Zach Rowinski (Rowinski, 2016). Most of this OCR'd material is available to be searched at the Buddhist Digital Resource Center ([www.tbrc.org](http://www.tbrc.org)). Navigation of Sanskrit texts was facilitated by the resources at Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages (<http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/>) and the collection of e-texts offered by the Muktabodha Indological Research Institute (<http://www.muktabodha.org/>).

## Appendix - Translation

### Nail 5, The Nail of the *tshon gang*, the Reality Body

*The meaning of the fifth nail, the nail of the tshon gang, the Reality Body, also has three parts:*

- 1) *The prostration*
- 2) *Unraveling the text*
- 3) *The summary*

*As for the first (1) of those:*

**Homage to Kuntu Zangpo, primordially pure, natural awareness.**

This demonstrates the homage. This teaches the meaning of not reaching the extremes of anything whatsoever in *bodhicitta*, the king of

knowledge (*shes rig*).

The second (2), unraveling the text has four parts:

2a) Teaching the essence of the wisdom *tshon gang*

2b) Teaching the natural state of the wisdom *tshon gang*

2c) Teaching the greatness of the wisdom *tshon gang*

2d) Teaching the reasoning regarding the wisdom *tshon gang*

The first (2a) has two parts:

2a1) The wisdom *tshon gang*

2a2) The light *tshon gang*

As for the first (2a1):

**The clear, self-originated, king of awareness,**

Clear means not covered by obscuration. Self-originated means without conditions or creator. Awareness means the ground of arising of all recollections (*dran*). King means nothing higher and abiding in the culmination (*mthar thug*) of all knowledge (*shes rig*). It is the wisdom *tshon gang* because prior to it there was no wisdom of realization or delusion of ignorance. That [*tshon gang*] is not subject to arising in *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* [in any way] whatsoever.

Then, if you ask, "How does it abide?"

**Abides as self-originated wisdom, the root and base-of-all.**

Not made by any kind of causes or conditions, it abides primordially as self-originated.

**Because it is formless, this wisdom is beyond form, shape, and color.**

**Because it is inexpressible, it is beyond letters, words, and names.**

**Because it is non-conceptual, it is beyond the concepts and thoughts, of the intellect.**

As for these three verses: Because the natural state of the wisdom and natural awareness is formless, it is not created through color and shape. Because it is inexpressible, it transcends words and names. Because it is non-conceptual wisdom transcending the intellect, it transcends the objects of the intellect: thoughts and analysis.

To that

**The wisdom *tshon gang*, free of appearances, Reality Body,**

the name:

**Shenlha Karpo, the base-of-all that cannot be named,**

is applied. And, also:

**Awareness of essence-itself.**

*Second (2a2), teaching the essence of the light tshon gang:*

**From the *tshon gang* of the great luminous wisdom,  
Naturally arises the *tshon gang* of the great manifested light.**

In<sup>86</sup> the ground of experience of the wisdom *tshon gang*, abides the primordial, naturally-arising, *tshon gang* of the great manifested light. For example, it is like light, which naturally arises from the core of the sun.

**Neither gathered, nor separated; light arising in itself (*nyid la nyid*),**

It is not that the wisdom *tshon gang* and the light *tshon gang* abide as two things that are collected into one. It is not that abiding as one they are separated into individuals. They abide primordially as naturally arising in themselves.

**Clear and insubstantial, its appearances are devoid of self-nature (*rang bzhin med*).**

This teaches that the light *tshon gang* is not produced with attributes or as a substantial entity, but as clarity in light.

**It does not incline toward any shape or color,**

That light *tshon gang* is the base of arising of all forms: the enlightened bodies of Buddhas and the bodies of sentient beings and so forth. Like that, also, there is no partiality with regard to form or essence. The

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<sup>86</sup> Reading the Tibetan's *las* as *la*.

white light, green, red, blue, and so forth, the arising of all colors are in the base. Like that, in the essence, also, there is no partiality whatsoever with regard to color.

**It transcends any size or measurement.**

That light *tshon gang* is immeasurably large. It abides without center or nadir in the nature of the sky. It is immeasurably small. It is able to enter the body of even the smallest insect.<sup>87</sup> As for that light *tshon gang*:

**It is known as the Reality Body with immense appearances,**

And also,

**[and as] the root deity, named Shenlha Karpo,**

And also,

**[and as] the awareness of the appearances of superior insight.**

Second (2b), teaching the natural state (*gnas lugs*) of the wisdom *tshon gang*:

**Because natural awareness arises as an eye in the enlightened body *tshon gang*,<sup>88</sup>**

Because the light *tshon gong* is changeless, it is known as an enlightened body. Because the wisdom *tshon gang* is free of obscurations it arises as an eye. Because those two are inseparable, it is known as the non-duality of an enlightened body and wisdom.

**An enlightened body without front or back that sees everything in the ten directions,**

That enlightened body and wisdom *tshon gong*, it is a face of wisdom without front or back. Like an egg of crystal, it is luminous to the ten directions.

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<sup>87</sup> The phrase '*jag mig gyi srin bu*' is often used in Tibetan works to indicate the smaller limit of pervasiveness. The precise insect indicated here is unclear.

<sup>88</sup> The first line as quoted in the commentary differs from root text. In the root we find: *tshon gang sku la ye shes spyan shar na!* When the eye of wisdom arises in the enlightened body of the *tshon gang*.

**An unobscured eye that sees all without looking.**

Because it is an unobscured eye of awareness, like a polished mirror, it clearly [reflects] without looking.

**It appears (*shar*) as an immense translucence (*zang thal*) without inner and outer,**

As for that wisdom *tshon gong*, it is not that when abiding outside it does not abide inside, or when abiding inside, it does not abide outside. It abides universally (*spyi blugs*) without inner or outer.

**And abides as the great pervasion (*khyab bdal*) without center or perimeter,**

That wisdom *tshon gang* is not partial to limits and directions. It abides without being restricted to cardinal or intermediate directions, center or perimeter.

**The base-of-all-that arises, undefiled by anything whatsoever.**

That wisdom *tshon gang* is the base of arising of all: *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*, Buddhas and sentient beings, mental afflictions and compassion, concepts and wisdom, virtues and negative actions, comfort and misery, animate and inanimate, body and mind, subject and object, cause and result, superior and inferior birth. Even as it is like that, it abides without reaching any extreme.

*Third (2c), teaching the greatness of the wisdom tshon gang:*

**Prior to this awareness, the primordially existing king,  
There was no *nirvāṇa* nor *samsāra*, no aeons, no world, no elements**

As for that wisdom *tshon gong*, the king of awareness, it primordially abides as naturally-arising. Before it, there were no bon of *nirvāṇa* or bon of *samsāra*, no nine aeons, no three worlds, no five elements and so forth; nothing whatsoever existed.

**The king of awareness emerged at the beginning of everything.**

Before it, nothing whatsoever had emerged; the king of awareness

abides primordially.

**Buddhas did not exist; therefore, it did not arise from their teachings.**

**[Sentient beings did not exist; therefore, it did not emerge from their actions.**

**Individual persons did not exist; therefore, it was not accomplished by their efforts.]<sup>89</sup>**

Before the wisdom *tshon gong*, the king of awareness, “Buddhas” did not exist, therefore, that wisdom *tshon gong* did not emerge from the teachings of the Shenrab. The wisdom *tshon gong* was not created by the actions of sentient beings because before it, “sentient beings” did not exist. It was also not created through the effort of individual persons, because before it, because individual actors had not been created,

**[Free of causes and conditions, it is naturally uncompounded.**

**It is not formed as an inanimate object (*snod*) from atoms.**

**It is not made (*grub pa med*) into a body through the cause of the elements (*'byung ba'i rgyu*).**

**It is not produced by penis (*sta*<sup>90</sup>) or born from a womb.]<sup>91</sup>**

That wisdom *tshon gang* is also not a phenomenon that is compounded through the assembling of causes and conditions because, before it, substantial causes and co-emergent conditions did not yet exist. That wisdom *tshon gang* is not subject to being formed in the world as an inanimate object because, before it, atoms, the cause of inanimate objects, did not yet exist. That wisdom *tshon gang* is not subject to being produced as a body made of elements because, before it, the causal five elements did not exist. The wisdom *tshon gang* is not born from the causes of the white and red [drops] because, before it, the penis of the father and the womb of the mother did not exist.

**[It transcends the causes for realization and delusion and is free from *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.]<sup>92</sup>**

<sup>89</sup> These two lines from the root text are not explicitly repeated in the commentary.

<sup>90</sup> Jean-Luc Achard and Geshe Namgyal Dangsang agreed on “penis” (or *pho mtshan*) as the meaning of *sta*. Note that *sta* carries associations with “weapon” (e.g. *sta re*, axe) in both Tibetan and Zhang Zhung.

<sup>91</sup> These lines from the root text are not explicitly repeated in the commentary.

<sup>92</sup> This line from the root text is not explicitly repeated in the commentary.

The wisdom *tshon gang* is not even subject to being produced in *saṃsāra* or *nirvāṇa*, because, before it, neither the ignorance of delusion nor the wisdom of realization existed. Well then, how does it abide?

**Self-originated wisdom abides as the root of the base-of-all.**

It is not made by any causes and causal conditions whatsoever. As it abides primordially as self-originated and naturally arising, it abides as the root of arising and as the base of appearances of everything: all those, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, aeons and existence, and so forth.

Fourth, (2d), teaching the reasoning regarding the wisdom *tshon gang*:

Why is it called: "the *tshon gang* in the wisdom of natural awareness?"

**Primordially naturally-arising, clear, and luminous,  
[The *tshon gang*] is neither fabricated nor contaminated,  
decreased nor increased, harmed nor benefited, slain  
nor revived.**

**It is free of the opposing pairs of comfort and misery, youth  
and aging, birth and death.**

That wisdom *tshon gang*, from the beginning, radiates lights in its natural arising. It is the *tshon gang* because it cannot be killed by demons. It is the *tshon gang* because it is not cured by gods. It is the *tshon gang* because it is not benefited by harmonious conditions. It is the *tshon gang* because it is not harmed by adverse conditions. It is the *tshon gang* because it does not become abundant through expansion. It is the *tshon gang* because it does not become meager by reduction. It is the *tshon gang* because it is not fabricated by the intellect (*blo*). It is the *tshon gang* because it is not contaminated (*slad*) through effort. It is the *tshon gang* because it is not born from causes. It is the *tshon gang* because it does not die due to conditions. It is the *tshon gang* because it does not blossom (*dar*) due to youth. It is the *tshon gang* because it does not decline due to old age. It is the *tshon gang* because it is without comfort or misery due to sensation. It is the *tshon gang* because it is neither broken nor destroyed by enemies. Due to that:

**It is known as "arising as light" without beginning or end.**

Third (3), teaching the brief summary:

**[This completes the nail of the *tshon gang*, the Reality Body.  
*Samaya*!]**

This completes the commentary of the fifth nail.

### Appendix - Tibetan

{@533} /Inga pa tshon gang bon sku'i gzer bu la yang / don gsum  
 las/  
 dang po ni/  
     kun tu bzang po rang rig ka nas dag la phyag 'tshal lo/ zhes  
     pas/  
 phyag 'tshal ba bstan te/ shes rig rgyal po byang chub sems la gang  
 gi yang mthas ma reg pa'i don bstan pa'o/  
 gnyis pa gzhung bkrol ba la bzhi ste/  
     ye shes tshon gang gi ngo bo bstan pa dang {@534}  
     ye shes tshon gang gi gnas lugs bstan pa dang /  
     ye shes tshon gang gi che ba bstan pa dang /  
     ye shes tshon gang gi gtan tshigs bstan pa'o/  
 dang po gnyis te/  
     ye shes tshon gang dang  
     'od tshon gang bstan pa'o/  
 dang po ni  
     gsal ba rang 'byung rig pa'i rgyal po ni/ zhes pas/  
 gsal ba ni sgrib g.yogs med pa/ rang 'byung ni rgyu rkyen dang  
 byed pa po med pa'o/ / rig pa ni dran thams cad kyi 'char  
 gzhir gyur pa'o/ rgyal po ni gong na med cing / shes rig  
 thams cad kyi mthar thug par gnas pa'o/ de'i snga rol du rtogs pa'i  
 ye shes dang /\_'khrul pa'i ma rig pa ma grub pas ye shes tshon gang  
 / de 'khor ba dang myang 'das su shar yang ma myong /  
 'o na ji ltar gnas zhe na/  
     rang 'byung ye shes kun gyi gzhi rtsar gnas/ zhes pas/  
 rgyu rkyen de rnams gang gis kyang ma byas par rang 'byung du ye  
 nas gnas pa'o/  
     gzugs med ye shes kha dog dbyibs gzugs bral/  
     brjod med ye shes ming tshig yi ger bral/  
     rtog med ye shes rtog dpyod blo dang bral/  
 zhes pa'i tshig gsum ni/\_rang rig pa'i ye shes kyi gnas lugs de/  
     gzugs med pas dbyibs dang kha dog ma grub/ brjod du  
 med pas ming tshig yi ge'i spyod\_yul las 'das/ rtog med ye shes  
 blo las 'das pas/ rtog dpyod blo'i yul las 'das ba'o/  
 de la  
     ye shes tshon gang snang med bon gyi sku bya bar  
 yang ming du gdags/  
     gshen lha dkar po gdags med kun gyi gzhi/

zhes kyang bya/  
     ngo bo nyid kyi rig pa zhes kyang bya'o/  
 gnyis pa 'od tshon gang gi ngo bo bstan pa ni/  
     gsal ba'i ye shes chen po tshon gang las/  
     snang ba'i 'od chen tshon gang rang {@535} bzhin shar/  
     zhes pas/  
 gang gi ye shes tshon gang gi 'char gzhi las (la)/      snang ba'i 'od  
 chen tshon gang ye nas rang shar du gnas te/      dper na nyi ma'i  
 snying po las/ 'od rang shar du shar ba lta bu'o/  
     ma 'dus mi 'bral nyid la nyid shar 'od/      ces pas/  
 ye shes tshon gang dang 'od tshon gang gnyis so sor gnas pa gcig tu  
 'dus pa ma yin/      gcig tu gnas pa so sor bral ba ma yin te/  
     rang la rang shar du ye nas gnas pa'o/  
     gsal la dngos med snang la rang bzhin med/      ces pas  
 'od tshon gang de 'od du gsal yang dngos po dang mtshan mar ma  
 grub par bstan pa'o/  
     gzugs dang kha dog ris su chad pa med/      ces pas/  
 'od tshon gang de sangs rgyas kyi sku dang sems can gyi lus las  
 sogs/      gzugs thams cad kyi 'char gzhi yin la/      de ltar yin yang  
 ngo bo gzugs gang du'ang ris su ma chad pa'o/      dkar ljang dmar  
 sngo'i 'od las sogs te/      kha dog thams cad kyi 'char gzhi yin la/      de  
 ltar yin yang ngo bo kha dog tu yang ris su ma chad pa'o/  
     che chung chags tshad gzhal ba'i tshad las 'das/      zhes pas/

'od tshon gang de che ba'i tshad bzung du med de/ nam mkha'i rang  
 bzhin du mtha' dbus med par gnas so/      chung ba'i tshad gzhal  
 du med de/      'jag mig gi srin bu'i lus la 'jug tu rung ba'o/  
     'od tshon gang ba de la snang ba chen po bon gyi sku zhes  
     kyang bya/  
     gshen lha dkar po gdags yod rtsa ba'i lha zhes kyang bya/  
     lhag mthong gi rig pa zhes kyang bya'o/  
 gnyis pa ye shes tshon gang gi gnas lugs ni/  
     tshon gang sku la rang rig spyen shar bas/      zhes pas/  
 'od {@536} tshon gang la 'gyur ba med pas sku zhes bya/      ye shes  
 tshon gang la sgrib g.yogs med pas spyen shar zhes bya/      de gnyis  
 dbye ru med pas sku dang ye shes gnyis med ces bya/  
     phyogs bcu yongs gzigs mdun rgyab med pa'i sku/      zhes pas/

sku dang ye shes tshon gang de/ ye shes kyi zhal la mdun rgyab  
 med de/      shel sgong bzhin du phyogs bcur gsal ba'o/

    ma ltas kun mthong sgrib g.yogs med pa'i spyen/      zhes pas/

rig pa'i spyen la sgrib pa med pas/      me long g.ya' dag bzhin du ltas

pa med bar gsal ba'o/  
     phyi dang nang med zang thal chen por shar/      zhes pas/  
  
 ye shes tshon gang de phyi na gnas la nang na mi gnas pa'am/  
     nang na gnas la phyi na mi gnas pa ma yin te/      phyi nang  
 med par spyi blugs su gnas pa'o/  
     mtha' dang dbus med khyab bdal chen por gnas/      zhes pas/  
  
 ye shes tshon gang de/      rgya chad phyogs ris can ma yin te/  
     mtha' dbus phyogs mtshams rgya ma chad par gnas pa'o/  
     kun gyi 'char gzhi gang gi dri ma med/      ces pas/  
 ye shes tshon gang de 'khor ba dang myang 'das/      sangs rgyas dang  
 sems can nyon mongs dang thugs rje/      rnam rtog dang ye shes/  
     dge ba dang sdig pa/      bde ba dang sdug bsngal/      phyi snod  
 dang nang bcud/      lus dang sems/      yul dang shes pa/  
     rgyu dang 'bral bu/      mtho ris dang ngan song kun gyi 'char  
 gzhi yin la/      de ltar yin yang de rnams gang gi yang mthas ma reg  
 par gnas pa'o/  
 gsum pa ye shes tshon gang gi che ba bstan pa ni/  
     ye gnas rgyal po rig pa'i snga rol du/  
     'khor dang myang 'das bskal srid 'byung ba med/      ces pas/  
  
 {@537} rig pa'i rgyal po ye shes tshon gang de/      ye nas rang shar  
 du gnas la/      de'i snga rol du 'khor ba'i bon dang mya ngan las 'das  
 pa'i bon dang bskal pa dgu dang /      srid pa gsum dang /      'byung ba  
 lnga las sogs gang yang grub pa med pa'o/  
     kun gyi thog mar rig pa'i rgyal po byung /      zhes pas/  
 de rnams gang yang ma byung ba'i gong nas/      rig pa'i rgyal po  
 ye nas gnas pa'o/  
     sangs rgyas ma grub bka' las shar ba med/      ces pas/  
     [ / sems can ma grub las la byung ba med/  
     / gang zag ma grub rtsol bas bsgrub pa med /]<sup>93</sup>  
 rig pa'i rgyal po ye shes tshon gang gi snga rol du/      sangs rgyas bya  
 ba ma grub pas ye shes tshon gang de gshen rab kyi bka' las byung  
 ba ma yin/      de'i snga rol du sems can zhes bya ba ma grub pas/      ye  
 shes tshon gang de sems can gyi las la grub pa yang ma yin/  
     de'i snga rol du byed pa po'i gang zag ma grub pas skyes bu'i  
 rtsol bas bsgrub pa yang ma yin/  
     [rgyu dang rkyen med rang bzhin 'dus ma byas/  
     / phra rab rdul las snod du chags pa med/  
     / 'byung ba'i rgyu las lus su grub pa med/

<sup>93</sup> These lines from the root are not explicitly repeated in the commentary.

/sta las ma chad mngal las 'khrungs pa med /]<sup>94</sup>  
 de'i snga rol du nye bar len pa'i rgyu dang / lhan cig skyes pa'i rkyen  
 zhes bya ba grub ma myong pas/ ye shes tshon gang de rgyu rkyen  
 'dus nas byas pa'i 'dus byas kyang ma yin/ de'i snga rol du phyi  
 snod kyi rgyu/ phra rab kyi rdul zhes bya bar grub ma myong  
 pas/\_ye shes tshon gang de phyi snod kyi 'jig rten tu chags ma  
 myong / de'i snga rol du rgyu 'byung ba lnga zhes bya ba ma  
 grub pas/ye shes tshon gang de 'byung ba'i lus su grub ma myong  
 /de'i snga rol du yab kyi sta dang yum gyi mngal zhes bya bar grub  
 ma myong pas/ ye shes tshon gang de dkar dmar gyi rgyu las  
 skye ma myong /

[rtogs 'khrul rgyu las 'das dang 'khor ba med /]<sup>95</sup>  
 de'i snga rol du rtogs pa'i ye shes dang 'khrul ba'i ma rig pa ma grub  
 pas/ ye shes \_ de 'khor ba dang myang {@538}'das su grub kyang  
 ma myong / 'o na ji ltar gnas zhe na/  
 rang 'byung ye shes kun gyi gzhi rtsar gnas zhes pas/  
 rgyu rgyen de rnams gang gis kyang ma byas par/ rang 'byung rang  
 shar du ye nas gnas la/ 'khor ba dang myang 'das bskal pa  
 dang srid pa las sogs te/ de dag thams cad kun gyi snang ba'i  
 gzhi dang shar ba'i rtsa bar gnas pa'o/  
 bzhi pa ye shes tshon gang gi gtan tshigs bstan pa ni/  
 rang rig pa'i ye shes la tshon gang zhes ci'i phyr gdags she na/  
 gdod nas rang shar 'od du gsal ba la/  
 bsad gso phan gnod 'phel 'grib bcos slad med/  
 skye shi dar rgud bde sdug gnyen po med/ ces pas/

ye shes tshon gang de gdod nas rang shar 'od du gsal ba la/  
 'dre yis bsad du med pas tshon gang / lha yis gso ru med pas  
 tshon gang / mthun rkyen gyis phan gdags su med pas tshon gang  
 / 'gal rkyen gyis gnod du med pas tshon gang / mang por  
 'phel du med pas tshon gang / nyung ngu 'grib tu med pas  
 tshon gang / blos bcos su med pas tshon gang / rtsol bas slad du  
 med pas tshon gang / rgyu las skye ru med pas tshon gang /  
 rkyen gyis 'chi ru med pas tshon gang / gzhon pas dar ru  
 med pas tshon gang / rgas pas rgud du med pas tshon gang /  
 byung tshor gyis bde sdug med pas tshon gang / gnyen pos  
 bshig cing gzhom du med pas tshon gang / des na thog mtha' med  
 bar 'od du shar zhes bya'o/  
 gsum pa mdor bsdu dkyus gsal/  
 [tshon gang bon sku'i gzer bu rdzogs so/] gzer bu lnga pa'i 'grel pa

<sup>94</sup> These lines from the root are not explicitly repeated in the commentary.

<sup>95</sup> This line from the root are not explicitly repeated in the commentary.

rdzogs so/

*Abstract*

The *tshon gang*, literally a unit of measure equal to the first phalanx of your thumb, is used in Bon Dzogchen traditions as a synonym for, variously, the natural state, the Reality Body, the king of awareness, *bodhicitta*, and other equivalents. Its location is routinely and exclusively defined as within the human heart. There is an inherent paradox in the juxtaposition of that which is immeasurable, such as the natural state, with a defined measure and location. Moreover, the *tshon gang* shows a similarity in its literal meaning, physical location, and philosophical usage, to the concept of the *aṅguṣṭhamātra* in the early literature of the Upaniṣads. We will not resolve any deep paradoxes regarding the *tshon gang*, nor will we speculate on any direct connections to early Indian literature. Instead, in this work we will work to establish the semantic field of the term *tshon gang* using the core literature of the Yungdrung Bon Dzogchen tradition, and we will argue that Bon's willingness to tolerate both paradox and ambiguity within its tradition makes it an invaluable lens through which to understand the development of Buddhism in Tibet.

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#### *Bon Katen*

We will reference individual Bon Tengyur/Bon Katen works using the numbering system of *A Catalogue of the New Collection of Bonpo Katen Texts*. This edition of the Tengyur is also available in the electronic (pdf) format due to the efforts of the Bon Foundation.

#### *Pedurma Kanjur*

*bka'gyur (dpe sdur ma), krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, pec in, 109 volumes, 2006-2009.*

#### *Pedurma Tengyur*

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### *Individual Works from the Bon Kanjur*

#### *The Commentary on the Hidden*

*byang chub sems kyis gab pa'i 'grel ba*, pp. volume 173 of the *Bon Kanjur*, pp. 17-354. This work is known by a number of more elaborate titles: *sems lung gab pa dgu skor gyi 'grel ba rgya cher bshad pa*. (e-text version previously published on-line by HimalayaBon).

#### *The Contemplative Meaning of the Six Lamps*

*rdzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud las sgron ma drug gi dgongs don 'grel ba bzhugs so*, pp. 355-422. in *The Four Cycles of the Scriptural Transmission* below.

#### *The Cycles of the Nine Hidden*

*gShen Chen Klu dGa'*, *rdzogs pa chen po byang chub sems kyi smyu gu gab pa dgu skor*. Kangyur volume 172 as cataloged in *A Handlist of the Bon Kanjur and Tengyur*. A related, though not identical, volume that contains the root text as well as other texts related to the *gab pa dgu skor* is also cataloged as running text 99 in *A Catalog of the Bon Kanjur*.

*The Cycle of the Three Proclamations*

bZhod sTon dNgos Grub, *rdzogs pa chen po sgrags pa skor gsum*. *Bon Kanjur* volumes 174 and 175 in *A Handlist of the Bon Kanjur and Tengyur*.

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*The Four Cycles of the Scriptural Transmission*

*rdzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud bka' rgyud skor bzhi*, pages 131 -644 in *History and Doctrine of Bon-po Nispanna-yoga: original Tibetan texts on the transmission, teaching, rites, and deities of the Rdzogs chen Zhan Zhun school of the Bon-po's*, Collected by Tenzin Namdak and Lokesh Chandra, Sata-pitaka series; Volume 73, International Academy of Indian Culture, New Delhi 1968.

Also, similar contents are included in *Bon Kanjur* volume 171.

*The Practice Cycle of Zhang Zhung Me Ri*

*Zhang zhung me ri bka' ma sgrub skor gyi gsung pod*, dpar bskrun rogs gngang mkhan, di li, 1169 pages.

This work contains all the content of volume 22 of the *Bon Kanjur*, and augments that text with approximately 100 pages of additional material.

*The Twenty-One Nails (Root and Commentary)*

Root: *rdzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud las gzer bu nyi shu rtsa gcig gi gzhungs*, pp. 503-519. in *The Four Cycles of the Scriptural Transmission* above.

Commentary: *rdzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud las gzer bu nyi shu rtsa gcig gi 'grel ba bzhugs*, pp. 521-581. in *The Four Cycles of the Scriptural Transmission* above.

Works by or related to Shardza Tashi Gyaltzen  
(Shar dza bKra shis rGyal mtshan)

*Enlightened Rainbows*

Jean-Luc Achard, *Enlightened Rainbows*, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2008. 496 pages.

This work gives a useful numbering of every text in Shardza's writings. These numbers will be applied below with the usage "ER number(s) X-Y" indicates texts X through Y of *Enlightened*

*Rainbows.*

We had two editions of Shardza Tashi Gyaltsen's collected works at our disposal. One is an edition printed from blocks carved at *sde dge rdza steng chen dgon*. The second is a modern typeset edition that follows page for page this woodblock edition but with different page numbers (e.g. 001 rather than 301). These both correspond to the edition cataloged and outlined in *Enlightened Rainbows* above. We use the page numbers as indicated in *Enlightened Rainbows*.

*The Natural Arising of the Three Enlightened Bodies*

Shar-rdza bKra-shis rGyal-mthan, *rDzogs pa chen po sku gsum rang shar*. volume 11 of Shardza's collected works.

Enlightened Rainbows Works: 173 – 202.

Also, Tengyur volume 282 as cataloged in *A Handlist of the Bon Kanjur and Tengyur*.

*The Practice of the Four Visions of Thogal*

Shar-rdza bKra-shis rGyal-mthan, *rDzogs pa chen po sku gsum rang shar las thod rgal snang bzhi'I nyams len ngo mtshar snang ba'i ltas mo*. 53 pages. (pp. 11-229-11-282).

Enlightened Rainbows Work: 180

In volume 11 of Shardza's collected works, *The Natural Arising of the Three Enlightened Bodies*. (see above).

*The Precious Treasury of Space and Awareness, volume 1*

Shar-rdza bKra-shis rGyal-mthan, *dbyings rig rin po che'i mdzod (stod cha)*, Precious Treasury of Space and Awareness, volume 1 of Shardza's collected works.

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Also, Tengyur volume 278 as cataloged in *A Handlist of the Bon Kanjur and Tengyur*.

*The Precious Treasury of Space and Awareness, volume 2*

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Also, Tengyur volume 279 as cataloged in *A Handlist of the Bon Kanjur and Tengyur*.

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