

The Ceremony for Imbibing the Siddhis, with particular reference to examples from Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer's *bKa' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa*¹

Cathy Cantwell

(Ruhr-Universität Bochum)

In Buddhist tantric practice, the attainment of siddhis (Tib. *dnagos grub*) is synonymous with spiritual accomplishment, classified into the two aspects of common siddhis, indicating the mastery of worldly phenomena—such as clairvoyance, the ability to walk at super-human pace, to fly, or to pass through solid barriers, etc.—and the supreme siddhi of enlightenment. Thus, a siddha (Tib. *grub thob*) is a realised tantric master. Accounts of hermit yogis may sometimes give the impression of the tantric path and the attainment of siddhis more or less purely as a matter of individual mental discipline, perhaps combined with some component of yogic exercises, even though at least the common attainments clearly suggest a physical as well as mental transformation. But when we examine Tibetan tantric practice, it can be seen that this perspective on siddhis tells us only part of the story. For Tibetan tantric practice requires outer physical transmission and bestowal of siddhis as well as inner cultivation. Moreover, the practice is not confined to virtuoso meditators, and tantric *sādhana*s are not only performed in retreat environments. They are also practised communally in elaborate ritual ceremonies involving a complex division of labour, such that all participants, including those who may know or understand little of the techniques of visualisation and meditation, are able to share in the spiritual accomplishments through a sensual

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engagement in the event—watching, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting, as may be appropriate at various points in the ritual. A central ritual performance in such events is always the ceremony for *Imbibing the Siddhis* (*dnegos grub blang ba*), in which the spiritual attainments are activated within the person through being transmitted by physical contact with and by ingesting siddhi substances (*dnegos grub kyi yo byad* or *dnegos grub kyi rdzas*). There are two main occasions for *Imbibing the Siddhis* in a typical tantric ritual performance in the rNying ma tradition, in which practice is based on the three inner tantras, with an emphasis on Mahāyoga.



Figs 1-3: Medicinal Cordial offering (*sman mchod*). Above: Offering to the tantric deities. Below: Imbibing the *Siddhis*. Major Practice Session (*sgrub chen*), Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelephu, Bhutan, 2013.

Firstly, siddhi substances may be ingested by the tantric practitioner—or by the principal lama in the case of a communal ritual—in the final section of the *Medicinal Cordial Offering* (*sman mchod*), in which consecrated elixir is offered to the tantric deities. Usually, the cordial is offered to the lineage masters and the various deities in turn, with verses of recitation and the flicking of a little liquid each time. Then at the end, the practitioner, visualised as the

deity, takes up some cordial between the thumb and third finger, and imbibes the siddhis by placing it on his/her forehead, throat and heart (respectively the body, speech, and mind centres), finally tasting some on the tongue and ingesting the elixir.

The second occasion which will be focused on here is at the climax of the whole ritual, when the *Imbibing* ceremony includes the consecrations of the various ritual articles, as well as siddhi foods and liquids to consume. On this occasion, the principal lama first imbibes the siddhis himself/herself, and then bestows them on the rest of the congregation. During a single day practice session, the siddhis ceremony will take place generally in the late afternoon, following all the main practice sections apart from the concluding dedications and aspirations and so forth. During a Major Practice Session (*sgrub chen*), and also an individual retreat, the siddhis ceremony is not performed in the same way as most of the other sections, which are repeated on a daily basis. Rather, it is scheduled only for the final day of the ritual, when the practice commences in the early hours of the morning and is performed in full, so that the auspicious imbibing of the siddhis can take place at the end of the practice, just as the sun is rising.

Those familiar with communal ritual gatherings in Tibetan communities will know that it is not only the tantric practitioners and others present throughout the whole practice session who will attend the siddhis ceremony. Many others may attend, both from the local community and beyond, and in the case of a Major Practice Session, the numbers can run into thousands, assembled often for hours, seated in the area outside the temple, awaiting the consecrations (*byin rlabs*). When there are large numbers, just as in the case of a tantric empowerment ceremony which involves a similar ritual bestowal upon everyone present, there may be too many items for the lama personally to bestow them all. He will therefore first bestow the siddhis upon a select group of senior lamas, and they will help in further bestowing the various articles and consumables on everyone else.



Figs 4-6. Final Day: Imbibing the *Siddhis* (tantric attainments), Gelegphu, Bhutan, 2013. Above: lamas in front of the Head Lama, holding the sacred maṇḍala items.

Above left: the young *sprul sku* (recognised reincarnation of the previous Head Lama) offering the Head Lama the flask, and below right, taking the flask consecration.

Either the congregation will file up to the front and receive the items in turn from the line of lamas, or the lamas will form a procession, and progress first around the rows in the temple, and then along the rows of those seated outside. It is not uncommon to witness a certain amount of excitement and chaos as people crowd around to receive their share—and often a further share of consecrated pills etc. which they can give to relatives and friends unable to attend. It is important to appreciate that this type of apparently superficial involvement is not a lay or folk distortion of some “higher” or more spiritual reality accessed only by the meditation masters. Nor does it merely represent a service by the lamas for the laity, in which blessings can be transmitted.² For these physical bestowals are a necessary and

² In these comments, I am not so much responding to previous scholarly analyses of the relations between monastics and laity in Buddhism, but rather to popular

integral part of the tantric practice, crucial for all those actively participating. It is not expected that the attendees on the fringes of the event will gain spiritual accomplishment as a result of the bestowals upon them, yet substantial benefits such as increased longevity may be anticipated for all. There is even the possibility that a person with faith, coupled with the appropriate karmic connections, could achieve some spiritual insight as a direct consequence of the blessings conferred.³



Figs 7 & 8. Imbibing the *Siddhis*: Procession for the distribution of the consecrations to everyone attending, Major Practice Session (*sgrub chen*), Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelegphu, Bhutan, 2013.

over-simplifications common amongst those studying Buddhism in Asia without the cultural immersion which engenders appreciation of its full context.

³ Here and below, in commenting on understandings of the practices, besides textual sources, I base myself on numerous discussions over many years with rNying ma practitioners, as well as fieldwork, especially with the Jangsa community in Kalimpong, India (2009) and Gelegphu, Bhutan (2013); see footnote 1. I am especially indebted to Lopon P. Ogyan Tenzin, who acted as lama consultant on a research project at the University of Cardiff, *Longevity Practices and Concepts in Tibet* (2006–2009); and on a research project based at the University of Oxford's Oriental Institute (2010–2015), *Authorship, originality and innovation in Tibetan Scriptural Revelations: A case study from the Dudjom Corpus*. Both of these projects were funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). During my Käte Hamburger Kolleg funded fellowship at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum, I had the opportunity to spend a further month with Lopon P. Ogyan Tenzin in Sarnath, where we read together the texts discussed in this article. Also crucial have been discussions with the Head Lama of the Jangsa community, Lama Kunzang Dorjee. My approach has therefore been specifically informed by rNying ma Mahāyoga perspectives, and I do not claim that it necessarily reflects Tibetan Buddhism as a whole. Nonetheless, I think that the points made here about the engagement of the senses in Tibetan tantric rituals are quite likely to be more broadly applicable.

The point is that the sensual dimension of the experience, and above all, the physical incorporation of the siddhi substances into the person, has a substantial impact on the body-mind complex. Indeed, the connotations of the Tibetan equivalent term for siddhis reflect this aspect of embodied attainment. The term *dnegos grub* means the accomplishment (*grub*) of actual reality (*dnegos*). This implies spiritual realisation, but *dnegos* can also be taken to mean substantial, concrete or material existence. It seems that both senses are combined or implicit in the concept. And this is not simply an etymological derivation of the word—on the contrary, the notion that to imbibe *dnegos grub* or siddhis it is necessary for the spiritual understanding to be reflected outwardly and fully actualised or sealed by a physical transmission is fundamental to the concept in Tibetan tantric understandings. There is a well-known account which demonstrates this, concerning the eighth century Indian master Buddhaguhya (Sangs rgyas gsang ba), who is said to have been a key lineage master for the Mahāyoga transmission in Tibet, especially for the *rGyud gsang ba snying po* (**Guhyagarbhatantra*). According to the version in Dudjom Rinpoche's Dharma history (*chos 'byung*, Dudjom Rinpoche *Collected Works*, vol. Ka: 88; 1991: 465), Buddhaguhya was performing practice on the deity Mañjuśrī when he saw signs on his altar: the painting of Mañjuśrī smiled, the siddhi liquid of ghee was boiling, and the old flowers began to bloom again. He understood that these were indications of his accomplishment of siddhi, but he hesitated, uncertain whether he should reach for the flowers or the ghee first. This hesitation acted as a hindrance; a *yakṣiṇī* (female spirit) slapped him and he momentarily fainted. When he recovered consciousness, the picture was covered in dust, the flowers had wilted, and the ghee had boiled over. Nonetheless, he still cleaned the dust from the painting, put the flowers on his head, and drank what was left of the ghee. Thus, his body became free from any disease, his intellect sharp, and he mastered supernormal powers. In the extended version frequently repeated by Lopon P. Ogyan Tanzin, his failure to imbibe the siddhis when they were fresh limited his spiritual accomplishment, and this was why he later had to perform further extensive practice.

In this tantric tradition then, what happens outwardly is important for the spiritual attainment, and not only symbolic or reflective of it. Thus, in the Major Practice Session, the siddhis should be taken when the sun is rising, and in the case of an individual retreatant, the siddhis should be imbibed when they have arisen in their symbolic supports, and are still fresh. In some tantric sādhanas, rather than placing the section on imbibing the siddhis near the end, where it would generally be performed, the section may be placed

earlier in the text, following the mantra recitation section. It was explained to me that this is because of the need to have the verses ready to hand in case the signs of the siddhis should arise when one is performing an individual practice or retreat. Then, the siddhis should be imbibed immediately, and the retreat is concluded, however much time may remain from the originally scheduled retreat, or however many mantras may be outstanding from the set number.

I have not explored the early history of Major Practice Sessions in any detail, but it is clear that the tradition was thoroughly developed by the thirteenth century, when Gu ru Chos dbang (Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, 1212–1270) composed or compiled an elaborate ritual manual for a Major Practice Session for his *Eightfold Buddha Word* (*bka' brgyad*) cycle, which has all the main components of the rites still performed today, and includes some recitations which are precisely the same in contemporary rNying ma practice. Less elaborated precedents of such manuals for Major Practice Sessions are found in the *Eightfold Buddha Word* (*bka' brgyad*) corpus of Gu ru Chos dbang's predecessor, the twelfth century Nyang ral (Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer, 1124–1192). Nyang ral's presentation of tantric ritual was seminal for the early rNying ma pa, and rituals based on his *Eightfold Buddha Word* revelation are still performed today. Although the manuals considered here do not quite fit the genre of "Ritual Practice Framework texts for the Major Practice Session" (*sgrub chen gyi khog dbub* or *sgrub khog* in short), there are some specifying extended practice sessions lasting many days, which contain key elements of the practice structure. I would like briefly to introduce two of these, and their rituals for imbibing siddhis.

First, it is worth raising the knotty problem of the extent to which the extant versions of these texts reflect their twelfth century counterparts. Indeed, in his study of Nyang ral, Daniel Hirshberg (2016: 100–101) points out that an early account of the *Eightfold Buddha Word* revelation speaks of seven small volumes, where now in the longer editions, we have thirteen large volumes. Clearly, the earlier texts have been expanded, although without a full-scale philological analysis of the sources, which is beyond the remit of this paper, it is hard to say where the elaborations have taken place.⁴ That

⁴ Some texts by later lineage masters have been added, and are clearly marked. In the root tantra sections, additions are also clear, since there are numerous annotations in small writing, not present in the versions of those tantras transmitted within the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* collections, and greatly expanding the length of those texts. These are clearly later elaborations which were established within the transmission of the corpus, and interesting in illustrating how these tantras have been understood by the tradition. But elsewhere in the

said, it is also clear that Nyang ral and Gu ru Chos dbang were seminal in the creation of the template for what became the system of rNying ma practice, and there is a distinction between the root revelatory texts and the later practice compilations of the materials, which often integrate many other sources.⁵ Here, I have restricted my analysis to the texts presented as root revelation, which surely in their essentials can be attributed to Nyang ral—and may in parts at least represent even older tantric materials.⁶ I have primarily used the versions within the thirteen volume mTshams brag edition, and give the pagination for that edition here, while consulting the parallel texts in other collections for comparison. A brief perusal of these specific texts would suggest that the main variants are minor spelling variations, and different punctuation, with occasional small differences (see, for instance, note 8 below), but nothing which would suggest variant readings of such magnitude as to differ from the meanings of the summarised content of the mTshams brag texts presented for the purpose of this article.

The first work under discussion is a commentarial text on the two sections of the Approach or Familiarisation practice, along with the following Accomplishment (*bsnyen bsgrub*). Some of the instructions could apply equally well for an individual retreat, although it is clear that the context for this text is communal ritual. The long list of ritual items (Volume 8: 258–260) might be challenging for a retreatant to gather, and there is a discussion on gathering the perfect circle of practitioners, each with different qualities and functions (253–257). There is also one section, found always in Major Practice Sessions, for allocating the different roles and installing the various practitioners in their seats (290–292), and a further section, also a feature of Major Practice Sessions, on integrating new students (300–303).

This text is especially interesting in relation to the ritual of imbibing the siddhis, since it dedicates about seventeen percent of the entire text to the subject of the siddhis.⁷ This discussion opens

current versions, additions and editorial amendments are not marked in any such fashion.

⁵ For example, the two volume 1971 New Delhi publication (TBRC W00KG09391) of manuscripts from the Kathok Ontrul Rimpoche represents practice texts used at Kah thog (Volume 1: Preface), and includes compilations from many later sources, such as works by the seventeenth century founder of sMin grol gling, gTer bdag gling pa (1646–1714).

⁶ In a current project at the University of Bochum focused on a different section of the *Eightfold Buddha Word* cycle, I am examining Nyang ral's re-presentation as part of his revelation of a tantric text on the *Phur pa* deity which is found amongst the Dunhuang materials.

⁷ Essentially, discussion of siddhis begins p.328, with the section on the signs of siddhi. Following this, the section on imbibing the siddhis begins on p.330 and

with an extended list of the signs of siddhis (328–330), classifying them into such categories as best, middling, and inferior; and outer, inner, and secret. This section concludes by instructing that if the signs arise, one should engage in the ritual of imbibing siddhis (*dngos grub blang ba'i las la 'jug par bya'o*). The section on imbibing siddhis is divided into three parts, the first on benefitting the practitioners themselves, the second on empowering others, and the third on the final rituals. Frequently, a Major Practice Session is concluded with an empowerment, but here, I consider only the first section.

In preparation for the ritual, the yogis are instructed to clean themselves and dress well, and to develop stable faith in the siddhis. The substances which support the siddhis (*dngos grub gyi rten rdzas*) are to be laid out. These include alcoholic elixir (*bdud rtsi 'dza gad*) filling a skull-cup which has appropriate positive characteristics, and various types of foods and drinks.⁸



Fig 9. Jewel tormas (*'brang rgyas*) for Siddhis, connected with the four ritual actions, Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelegphu, Bhutan, 2013.

runs to the end of the text, although not all of the content directly addresses the actual absorption of siddhis. The final part, for instance, details the closing rituals. Nonetheless, there is a substantial focus on the siddhis, to the extent even of including such apparently separate rituals within the remit of imbibing the siddhis.

⁸ The text lists: "Offer in vessels various types of foods and drinks, Jewel tormas (*'brang rgyas*) of the four ritual actions, *mamsa*, butter, sweet cream cheese, cooked rice, pastries, yoghurt, sweets, various fruits, alcoholic beverages. Place them on the maṇḍala." (*zhi rgyas dbang drag bzhi' 'brang rgyas dang: mamsa dang/ mar dang/ thud dang/ 'bras chan dang/ 'khur ba dang/ zho dang/ la du dang/ shing thog sna tshogs pa dang: su ra la sogs pa bza' btung gi bye brag sna tshogs snod du stsal te: dkyil 'khor la bgod do.*, 331) Here, instead of alcoholic beverages (*su ra*), the Kaḥ thog version of the text (1978 Text 1: 167.5) gives raw sugar (*bu ram*), and also 167.6 *dgod* rather than the probable misspelling, *bgod*.

The Jewel tormas (*'brang rgyas*) of the four ritual actions receive a prominent mention. Different torma type structures are known as *'brang rgyas* in Tibetan ritual. In rNying ma contexts, the main two types are a vase shaped metallic torma for longevity (*tshe 'brang*), and *'brang rgyas* for siddhis, as we have here. In contemporary practice, these tormas feature the three-fold jewel design. As well as the many dough tormas, which are the centrepiece of the plates of siddhi foods to be distributed, a clay version of five *tormas* may be installed within the three-dimensional *maṇḍala* for the duration of the Major Practice Session as one of the sacred *maṇḍala* items. The central one is surrounded by four smaller ones of appropriate colour, each associated with one of the four ritual actions.

Having expelled the obstacles which may hinder the arising of siddhis, there is a recitation for absorbing the siddhis, which details a visualisation of the substances offered, including conjuring up the image of the sounds of music and smoke of incense, as the offerings are consecrated as elixir. Through the union of the male and female wisdom deities, red light rays radiate, purifying all beings, penetrating the sugatas, such that buddha body, speech, mind, qualities, and actions return and are absorbed. The elixir substances are visualised pooling as the stainless elixir of immortality. There are further offerings and mantras, with requests for the bestowal of siddhis, and the rakta and medicinal cordial are offered. Here, with the thumb and third finger, the rakta is placed on the three bodily centres as the body, speech, and mind siddhis. After further recitations accompanied with similar visualisations, the male and female wisdom deities are visualised as uniting and disintegrating into light, which dissolves into the foods and elixir liquids.

With this, the yogis eat and drink a select portion of siddhi substances, meditating on non-dual bliss, and the accomplishment of the vajra nature of all the sugatas' bodies, speech, and mind. In this context, no mention is made of transmitting the blessings to the larger assembly, but it could be that the implication is that this would occur with the empowerment which follows, constituting the section on benefitting others through the imbibing of siddhis.⁹

⁹ A bestowal upon the students of the foods and kapala liquids is described (340-341).



Fig 10 Final Day: Imbibing the *Siddhis*: Prepared plates of siddhi foods beside the maṇḍala, Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelegphu, Bhutan, 2013. Note that each individual bowl has one of the Jewel tormas (*'brang rgyas*) for Siddhis, made out of an edible dough mix.

The second text I consider here is the second of a series of three apparently related texts (Volume 8: 347–507) relating to Medicinal Accomplishment (*smān sgrub*). The first gives meditation and visualisation instructions on this inner tantric tradition of the Elixir qualities (*bdud rtsi'i yon tan*) class, focusing on *Che mchog* heruka as the central deity. The second and third texts have somewhat overlapping content, both dealing with the ritual instructions for the practice, but the second text has a more sustained focus on how to arrange and deal with the substances. As in contemporary rNying ma practice, this Medicinal Accomplishment is to be integrated with or practised as an intensive communal practice lasting several days.¹⁰ It seems also to have the same structure as present day Medicinal Accomplishment rituals (379; 397–402), divided into the first days consecrating the unground medicinal pieces, which are ground and made into medicinal pills roughly half-way through the practice session, so that the remainder of the days concentrates on the compounded medicinal pills, installed within an “elixir palace” (*bdud rtsi pho brang*).¹¹

There is a long list of ingredients (381–388), which are classified in a complex manner, with groups of “kings” and “ministers” of the

¹⁰ For an illustrated description of such a Medicinal Accomplishment practice, see Cantwell 2015.

¹¹ A parallel notion in Dudjom Rinpoche's Medicinal Accomplishment (*smān sgrub*) text for the *Meteoric Iron Razor* is that of the Medicinal mansion (*smān khang*), Volume Tha: 313.

senses, medicines, smells, and incense; as well as many other substances, explained in detail, with each positioned in a specific part of the *maṇḍala* structure. The ritual practice is outlined, and this is followed by a section on the signs of success (414–416), which feature a number of “naturally arising” phenomena around the elixir substances, such as fragrances which should be deeply inhaled, smoke patterns in the form of the ritual implements, which should be absorbed by placing them upon the crown of the head with hand *mudrās*, and sounds caught in the *vajra* fist, transferred through the fingers to the elixir liquid, which is then tasted on the tongue. Once signs have arisen, there is a visualisation (416–417) for elixir streaming down from the deities in union, pooling in the skull-cup vessels on the *maṇḍala*. Mantras are to be recited and the *maṇḍala* circumambulated. The siddhis are then secured (*dingos grub dbang du bsdu ba*) through a further meditation on Hayagrīva above the medicinal palace, and other wisdom deities being invited and descending onto thrones (217–418). Then, with mantras and further visualisations, again, the *maṇḍala* is circumambulated, and the siddhis are imbibed (418).

The following text, which is the third of the set, gives various recitations for the imbibing siddhis and empowerment section (498–505), some of which seem to be complementary to the ritual instruction in the second text. The opening of the lid of the (medicinal) elixir container is mentioned (501), as well as the placement of a precious vessel with a mix of the elixir pills and other items either on top of the heads of the practitioners (*mched rnams*) or against their throats (505).



Fig 11 & 12. A medicinal container beneath the *siddhis* canopy, opened on the right, Major Practice Session (*sgrub chen*), incorporating a Medicinal Accomplishment (*sman sgrub*), Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelephu, Bhutan, 2013.

Later ritual texts are sometimes rather more detailed in their descriptions of the bodily and sensual aspects of the imbibing or bestowal of siddhis. They may also more explicitly include in the list of siddhi granting materials to be touched to the body, the practice supports (*sgrub rten*), or the various sacred items installed for the whole session within the three-dimensional *maṇḍala* (Dudjom Rinpoche Volume Tha, *sgrub khog*: 267). In the texts of Nyang ral's considered here, the edible and drinkable siddhi substances are highlighted, including the medicinal pills in the Medicinal Accomplishment texts, and the other ritual articles are referred to only within the Empowerment section rather than in the Siddhis sections. Having said that, contemporary texts do not always include explicit reference to all items which are in practice treated as siddhi bestowing materials. Moreover, it is clear that Nyang ral's corpus already contains manuals and commentarial texts which present versions of Major Practice Session and Medicinal Accomplishment rituals very much in line with today's monastic practice. There is enough here to be confident that the contemporary tradition's emphasis on the sensory experience of imbibing siddhis has a long heritage.

In conclusion, even the attainment of the highest spiritual goal in this religious system is integrally connected with and is expressed within an embodied sensual experience. As Dudjom Rinpoche explains in a discussion of how tantric longevity rituals work, "*outer and inner causal links are in step with each other, and outer appearances are the natural form of one's own mind*".¹²



Figs 13-16. Head Lama bestowing consecrations: Above and below left, the flask consecrations, and below right, consecration with the *phur bu* (ritual dagger, representing the tantric deity)

¹² *phyi nang rten 'brel gyi 'gros gcig cing snang ba sems kyi rang gzugs yin pa*, Dudjom Rinpoche Volume Pha: 459.

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- 2. *sgrub khog, rdo rje phur bu bdud 'joms gnam lcags spu gri'i stod las sgrub chen gyi khog dbub grub gnyis 'dod 'jo'i dga' ston, Volume Tha: 227–277.*
- 3. *sman sgrub, dpal rdo rje phur bu bdud 'joms gnam lcags spu gri'i mchog gi phrin las dam rdzas bdud rtsi'i sgrub thabs dngos grub rgya mtsho'i dga' ston, Volume Tha: 305–343.*
- 4. *tshe sgrub 'chi med srog thig gi man ngag go don bsnyen thabs zab khrid dang bcas pa'i yi ge 'chi ba med pa'i lam bzang, Volume Pha: 431–509.*

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