

Zhulen (*Zhus lan*) as Scripture: Authenticating Treasure in Medieval Tibet with Narratives¹

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From an early statement that “whatever is well said is the word of the Buddha,” to the famous teaching of *upāya* (*thabs shes*), or expedient means, the varying contexts Buddhism found itself in often inspire new (and renewed) forms of doctrine and practice. When the Buddha of our age, Śākyamuni, passed away into *parinirvāṇa* well over a thousand years ago, the question arose as to what counts as genuine Buddhist teaching, and who gets to decide. In Tibet, with an added interruption of transmission lineages (commonly called the “Dark Period” of Tibetan Buddhism), how does one determine the authenticity of any newly surfaced Buddhist teachings? In this article, I suggest that the literary genre of *zhulen* (*zhus lan*), or question-and-answer, in the context of Treasure (*gter ma*) literature, was created with a scriptural model in mind, and functioned to authenticate revealed Treasure teachings. Furthermore, this new method of scriptural creation allowed continued revelation over the next millennium.

After some three hundred years of economic, cultural, and religious renaissance, the 13th and 14th centuries in Tibet was a time for development and further creation.² It was also a time when things

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² The period of Tibetan renaissance, according to Davidson 2005: 2–3, is characterized by the following four themes: the weaving-together of a Tibetan religious system heavily influenced by late Indian Tantric Buddhist ideologies; textualization of Tibetan culture through translating the massive corpus of Indian (or Indic) materials—both religious and secular; central Tibet replacing India“ as the preferred source of international Buddhist ideology;” and the rise of monastics as a new form of aristocracy. In the 13th and 14th centuries, the first two themes

Tibetan gained currency: many of the religious sects and sub-sects that remain operative today were formed during this time period; efforts were made to create Tibetan canons, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike;³ not only were newly-introduced Indian philosophical, religious, and literary works interpreted and rearranged in Tibetan ways, but Tibetan writers also started to claim authorship for their own treatises and write about Tibetan concerns. For the Nyingma (*Rnying ma*) Buddhists, who claimed their scriptural authority to originate not from the new, post-imperial waves of imported Indian teachings, but rather from the so-called rediscovery of the old forms of Buddhism from the time of the Tibetan Empire, its priority lied in responding to new challenges: the impressive growth of literature in its rival New Translation (Gsar 'gyur) School; the burgeoning prestige of mass institutional monasticism; and the ongoing criticism of their own practice of scriptural revelation. An important way to reclaim this ancient imperial authority is through Treasure revelation. These revealed Treasures claimed authenticity and authority for Nyingma teachings and practices, connected their lineage back to the "Golden Era" of Tibetan history, and helped to cement a sense of shared identity in the otherwise decentralized Nyingma communities, which was heavily tantric in its practice.

Central to the Treasure identity was the legitimacy of these revealed teachings. Since their source of transmission comes from a time and space inaccessible in mundane means, Treasure revealers had to be creative in staking their claim to authenticity. In the context of Treasure revelations, *zhulen* imitated a canonical narrative frame, thus qualifying themselves (and by extension, texts within the same cycle) as authentic Buddhist teachings and identifying its author, usually Padmasambhava, as an enlightened buddha.⁴

With the exception of some brief discussion on dialogues in the

have subsided and shifted to indigenous Tibetan inspirations; while the third and fourth continued to feature prominently in the picture.

³ For a study on the compilation of two sets of authoritative translations of Indian Buddhist texts, the *Kangyur* (*Bka' 'gyur*) and the *Tengyur* (*Bstan 'gyur*), see Schaeffer and van der Kuijp 2009. *The Collected Teachings of Bon* (*Bon po bka' 'gyur*) also started to take its shape at the same time. Kværne 2013: 183–95. Also see Martin, Kværne, and Yasuhiko 2003.

⁴ Another way to authenticate otherwise questionable teachings by Nyingma apologists is to invoke a set of "three witnesses" (*dpang po gsum*) of prophecy (*lung bstan pa'i dpang po*), person (*gang zag gi dpang po*), and scriptural coherency (*lung 'brel ba'i dpang po*). As argued by Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo (Rong zom chos kyi bzang po, 1012–1088) in the case of the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*, if a teaching is prophesied by someone considered authoritative by the opponent, or is associated with such a person, or corresponds in key concepts with established authority accepted by the opponent, then it should be accepted as authentic. Dorji Wangchuk 2002: 278–282.

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Manifold Sayings of Dagpo (*Dwags po'i bka' 'bum*)⁵ or in association with other texts within the same corpus,⁶ *zhulen* or *drilen* (*dris lan*) as a literary genre has received less scholarly attention.⁷ As the name suggests, *zhulen* or *drilen* took the format of a series of questions and subsequent answers: *zhu* or *dri* means to request or to ask (*zhu* is the honorific form), while *len* is the answer. Sometimes it was also written as *zhus len*, literally “asking [a question] and receiving (*len*) [a reply].” These questions and answers covered a wide range of topics, including detailed explanations on doctrinal points, instructions for practice, or even refutations that form a part of an ongoing polemical debate. These texts closely align with the classic dialogical framework of Mahāyāna sūtras (and subsequent tantras). Further, their emergence as a literary genre should be considered in connection with the theological concern for authenticating sacred texts in this post-renaissance period of Tibetan Buddhism. This is especially true for the Treasure revelatory practices as a literary response to the influx of newly transmitted teachings and texts from India by the Nyingma School, representative of the older tradition.⁸

By highlighting the formal similarities between Treasure *zhulen* texts and early Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures/exoteric Buddhist scriptures in dialogue format, I examine the Treasure *zhulen*'s function of authenticating teachings. Through appropriating the canonical format, these dialogues acted as scriptures and authenticated revealed or newly transmitted teachings. For comparison, I also include another two collections of *zhulen* from the Zhije (*Zhi byed*) School that were compiled around the same time. The Zhije collections are comparable to the Treasure ones in their narrative framework as well as key features that inform their self-identification as canonical scriptures. However, the Zhije *zhulen* did not have as lasting an effect as their Nyingma counterpart; their discontinued production is worth probing. Lastly, by comparing standard *zhulen* in the 14th and 15th

⁵ Kragh 2015: 301. Kragh considers *zhulen* an emerging genre in the 12th century that takes its inspiration from two canonical texts bearing the word *zhulen* (**praśnottara*) in their titles. See below for a discussion on the content and format of these two texts: *Śri Saraha's Dialogue with King Maitripa* (Tib. *Dpal sa ra ha dang mnga' bdag mai tri pa'i zhu ba zhus lan*, Skt. **Śrisarahaprabhumaitripādapraśnottara*) and *The Dialogue concerning Vajrasattva* (Tib. *Rdo rje sems dpa'i zhus lan*, Skt. **Vajrasattvapraśnottara*), in *Bstan 'gyur dpe bsdur ma* 1994–2008, 48: 142–145, 407–421.

⁶ Rheingans 2011 presents a case study of a single *drilen* text by the Eighth Karma pa Mikyo Dorje (Mi bskyod rdo rje, 1507–1554) and argues that the genre provides the opportunity for authors to offer concise doctrinal points within a limited space.

⁷ The first systematic study of Tibetan literary genres, *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre* (Lhundup Sopa, Cabezón, and Jackson 1996), includes a chapter on the genre of *zhal gdams* or advice, but not a separate treatment of *zhulen*.

⁸ For a discussion on the rise of Treasure revelation and its historical developments, see Davidson 2005: 210–243.

century with earlier examples from Dunhuang,⁹ I argue for their distinct legitimizing function in the Nyingma and Zhije context.

1. *Texts and Genres in the Treasure Tradition*

Treasure is a uniquely Tibetan form of scriptural creation that locates its religious authority in Tibet's imperial past by revealing Buddhist teachings hidden in both material and immaterial forms. The practice of concealing sacred substances or texts in stūpas, caityas, or statues predates Buddhism and was adopted as Buddhism gained popularity in the subcontinent.¹⁰ The extraction of sacred objects from hidden places is also not a new phenomenon. Nāgārjuna is said to have received Treasures from the hand of the king of nāgas, hidden since the time of the Buddha. Tibetan Treasure is distinct because it represented a systematic effort to make revealed scriptures one of the main and preferred sources for canonical texts. It presented unique ways to encounter, extract, and decode these concealed teachings in a systematic manner. The personages and places involved in Treasure revelation were also included in this literary world.

In its early years, the sources for these revealed teachings were many. Treasures can be attributed to a number of imperial figures, including King Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po, r.617-650), King Tri Songdetsen (Khri srong sde btsan, 740–798), and two Indian teachers who visited Tibet during Tri Songdetsen's reign: the tantric master Padmasambhava and the monk Vimalamitra. One of the important early Treasure revealers, Nyangrel Nyima Özer (Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer, 1124–1192) helmed literary efforts to construct Padmasambhava as "the second Buddha" in the 12th century. In the culmination of his apotheosis in the 14th century, the Indian tantric master Padmasambhava gradually replaced the two kings and the monk Vimalamitra as the central figure for Treasure transmission.¹¹

⁹ In her work on possibly the earliest text with *zhulen* in its title, the *Dialogue concerning Vajrasattva* (*Rdo rje sems dpa'i zhus lan*) from Dunhuang, Takahashi only made brief comments on how this "catechistic literary form" also embodies the text's concern of bringing together the ritualistic and philosophical aspects of Mahāyoga. Takahashi 2010: 86. Van Schaik 2015: 19 lists six types of Tibetan and Chinese Zen texts, among which the second type are "treatises on Zen doctrines in the form of questions and answers." These texts also assumed the dialogue format but did not contain *zhulen* or *drilen* in their titles.

¹⁰ See, for example, Ramachandran 1953.

¹¹ There are three strands for early Treasure transmissions: those transmitted from the ancient Tibetan kings, Songtsen Gampo and Tri Songdetsen; from Padmasambhava; and from Vimalamitra. For a discussion on the association of Tibetan kings and their royal ideology with Treasure discovery, see Davidson 2005: 217–224, 231. Also see Germano, "Revealing Ḍākinīs in 14th Century Tibet,"

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The classical Treasure legend narrates the story of how Padmasambhava converted Tibet into a land of Buddhism. Upon leaving Tibet, he is said to have conferred numerous teachings to his disciples, foremost among them Yeshe Tsogyel (Ye shes mtsho rgyal).¹² She had assumed the responsibility of translating these teachings into a secret code language, concealing them all over Tibet, entrusting them to local guardian deities, and ensuring their rediscovery by future generations.

These narratives about how Treasures came about are usually preserved in the paratextual sections of Treasure texts, including Treasure certificates, colophons, and framing narratives of *zhulen* accounts. For example, in the epilogue of the *Copper Island Biography*, a *Life* of Padmasambhava discovered by Nyangrel Nyima Özer, Yeshe Tsogyel is said to be the disciple who is responsible for the transmission of Treasures:

The emanation of Sarasvatī, Queen Mother Tsogyel has attained the *siddhi* of infallible memory. For the sake of future generations, she has written down the mind transmission of the Master, the royal testament of King Tri Songdetsen, and the virtues of the Great Compassionate One. Having buried them as precious Treasures, she concealed them for the sake of [future] fortunate ones. [She] applied three layers of seals on them. Seal of Treasure. Seal of Concealment. Seal of Entrustment. This is a secret text.¹³

By the 14th century, the innovative practice of Treasure revelations had grown steadily over time. Treasure texts continued to grow in volume as well as variety. These texts usually centered around Padmasambhava, with the occasional addition of other Imperial personages. They can be roughly divided into three categories: instructional (instruction on practice, advice, or commentary), ritual (empowerment, evocation ritual, or supplication), and narrative (account of lineage masters, religious history, or hagiography). In the case of *zhulen*, it did not fit neatly into one of these three categories. *Zhulen* texts were named after their formal feature, viz., dialogues that happened between a master and a disciple, usually Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyel. However, Treasure dialogues also contained a

for a discussion on the convergence of Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava's tradition in the Treasure cycles of Tsultrim Dorje and Longchen Rabjam Drime Özer (Klong chen rab byams dri med 'od zer).

¹² Treasure *zhulen* texts also present Yeshe Tsogyel as the ideal intermediary for Treasure transmissions to take place.

¹³ *Padma bka' chems rgyas pa*: 122b–123a.

particular narrative framework that is more stylized than non-Treasure ones. They took on the dual task of establishing itself as a Buddhist scripture, and at the same time authenticating a transmission lineage that is Buddhist beyond doubt.

2. Early Treasure Zhulen

Pre-14th Century Zhulen

Some of the earliest Treasure *zhulen* texts are attributed to Nyangrel Nyima Özer. He was said to have revealed a collection of twenty-seven *zhulen* texts collectively titled *Dialogues with the Queens*, and a number of individual *zhulen* texts preserved in a cycle titled *Direct Teachings from the Guru: Instructions and Dialogues* (hereafter *Direct Teachings*).¹⁴

A *zhulen* usually began with a narrative of the time, location, and retinue for the occasion of the teaching. Sometimes this was prefaced by a brief account of how Padmasambhava came to Tibet, ranging from a few sentences to a long passage that listed his achievements. After introducing Padmasambhava as one “who was born miraculously from a lotus, untainted by a womb,” an untitled *zhulen* recorded a conversation that took place between him and seven female disciples. Having prepared flowers, a golden *maṇḍala*, and made a feast, each woman initiated a question to the master, starting with Yeshe Tsogyel:

The Great Master known by the name Padmasambhava, who was born miraculously from a lotus, untainted by a womb: when he was invited by the powerful king of Tibet, he tamed the ground of Samye. At this time, he was residing at the

¹⁴ For example, “Bla ma dmar khrid kyi zhal gdams zhus lan skor,” in ‘Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha’ yas 1976-1980, 92: 184-710. Since *Direct Teachings* first appeared as a whole in Jamgön Kongtrul Lodro Thaye’s (‘Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha’ yas, 1813-1899) 19th century *Treasury of Precious Revealed Teachings* (*Rin chen gter mdzod*), its attribution to Nyangrel as a 12th century revelation is not unproblematic, see Hirshberg 2016: 122 n. 229. However, a number of individual texts within *Direct Teachings* can be dated back to an earlier time. Some texts in the *Dialogues with the Queens* were also found in 14th century Treasure cycles revealed by Rigdzin Godem. Individual texts in *Direct Teachings* can also be located in literary sources from the 12th century onwards, either by title only or reproduced in full. For example, “Treasure from the Lotus Crystal Cave: Direct Instructions from Śrī Siṃha (*Padma shel phug gi gter ma śrī sing ha’i dmar khrid skor*)” (*Jo mo la gdams pa sogs* n.d.: 600-612) is also present in the 14th century Treasure cycle the *Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen Primordial Purity* by Rigdzin Godem, which will be discussed below shortly. In Godem’s revelation, this text is titled *Introduction to Natural Awareness and Natural Luminosity* (*Ngo sprod rang rig rang gsal*).

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Juniper Ridge of Crystal Pearls. These exceptionally noble women — Lady of Kharchen, Yeshe Tsogyel; Lady of Shelkar, Dorje Tso; Lady of Cokro, Pelgyi Chone; Lady of Dro, Matingma; Lady of Margong, Rinchen Tsuk; Lady of Chims, Sale Ö; and Lady of Ruyang, Mati —altogether seven, prepared turquoise flowers as the seven royal treasures¹⁵ in the middle of a cubit-sized golden *maṅḍala*. Having made a feast of thick rice wine and various food offerings, they made the following request:

“Great master! Pray confer on us your immaculate body, your pristine speech, and your mind which is free from conceptualization!”

Queen Tsogyel, Lady of Kharchen, made the following question to Master Padma:

“A disciple like me, who is a woman with little wisdom and a dull mind; I have limited understanding and am narrow-minded. May I request an oral instruction on enlightenment in this lifetime with a female body, a teaching that is easy to know, to grasp, to understand, and to realize!”¹⁶

Padmasambhava replied with instructions on the true nature of the Buddhist teachings.¹⁷ Then, each female disciple, in succession, beseeched him to give an oral instruction and received teachings from him. The text concluded with the conferral of teaching to Yeshe Tsogyel:

The seven ladies rejoiced in the master’s teachings, made prostrations to him, circumambulated him, and prepared extensive feast offerings. The queen, Lady of Kharchen, with the intention of benefitting future generations, recorded [the teaching] in writing at that very time, at the Juniper Ridge of Crystal Pearls.¹⁸

¹⁵ The seven royal treasures are the precious possessions of a universal monarch. They include: the precious wheel (*‘khor lo*), jewel (*nor bu*), queen (*btsun mo*), elephant (*glang po*), minister (*blon po*), horse (*rta mchog*), and general (*dmag dpon*).

¹⁶ “Untitled,” in ‘Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha’ yas 1976–1980, 92: 474–475. This text is also translated by Erik Pema Kunsang (Padmasambhava 2008: 111–120).

¹⁷ “Untitled,” in ‘Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha’ yas 1976–1980, 92: 475.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 493–494.

Other dialogues are also found in 13th and 14th century Treasure cycles. Guru Chöwang (Gu ru chos dbang, 1212-1270) included in his autobiography a visionary conversation between him and Padmasambhava, titled *Dialogue with the Retinue* (*Nye 'khor zhu [sic] len*).¹⁹ Here he inquired of the master about his fellow disciples in his previous birth as king Tri Songdetsen. Another influential Treasure collection for the prospering cult of Padmasambhava, the *Seminal Heart of the Khandromas* (*Mkha' 'gro snying thig*), discovered by Tsultrim Dorje (Tshul khriims rdo rje, 1291-1315/17), also contained a dialogue between Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyel, titled the *Golden Rosary of Nectar* (*Zhus lan bdud rtsi gser phreng*).²⁰ The opening passage shared a similar structure with the *zhulen* texts in *Direct Teachings*:

Homage to the great master Padmasambhava! Orgyen Padma Jungne, emanation of the Buddhas of Past, Present, and Future, the All-Knowing One, the Vajra-like Vidyādhāra, was invited to Tibet by the powerful king [Tri Songdetsen]. During his stay in Tibet, I, Tsogyel, served as his *karmamudrā* (*las rgya*) and attendant. While he was meditating in the cave of Zhodö Tidro, he introduced me to the meaning of the *Most Secret, Most Excellent Seminal Essence of Great Perfection*. I have gained certainty about the nature of existence by directly seeing it without any analytic thinking.

Struck by its wonder, I, Lady of Kharchen, asked:

“Ema! Great master, since all the key points in the *Seminal Essence of the Secret Tantra* are held within the three key aspects of essence, nature, and capacity, are there any deviations from these three or not?²¹

After receiving the answer from Padmasambhava, Yeshe Tsogyel continued with a series of eight more questions. They start with the three key points in the Seminal Essence teaching — the essence, nature, and compassion — and end with teachings on abandoning thoughts on food, clothing, and body. Similarly, this text concluded with Padmasambhava exhorting Yeshe Tsogyel to record and conceal these teachings for the benefit of future generations.²²

¹⁹ Gu ru chos dbang 1979, 2: 498.3–498.7. Also see Phillips 2004: 172–73.

²⁰ “Zhus lan bdud rtsi gser phreng,” in Dri med 'od zer 2009, 5: 349–368. This text is translated in full by Erik Pema Kunsang (Padmasambhava 1994: 44–60).

²¹ Dri med 'od zer 2009, 5: 349.

²² Dri med 'od zer 2009, 5: 367–368.

Zhulen Collections in Rigdzin Godem's Revelations

Perhaps the most dedicated use of *zhulen* as a vehicle for establishing textual authority is found in a later Great Perfection Treasure cycle. Entitled *the Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen, Primordially Pure Great Perfection* (*Rdzogs chen ka dag rang byung rang shar*). This Treasure cycle was discovered by the Treasure revealer Rigdzin Godem (Rig 'dzin rgod ldem, 1337–1409) and consists of primarily sacred conversations between various enlightened figures.²³ After a preliminary practice and a supplication to the Great Perfection transmission lineage, the majority of titles within this volume were framed as either dialogues between enlightened and/or soon-to-be-enlightened figures, or oral teachings from Padmasambhava:²⁴

- I. *Key Points in the Precious Preliminary Practice: The Five Nails: a preliminary practice*
- II. *Supplication to the Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen, Primordially Pure Great Perfection Lineage*
- III. *Notes on the Key Points of Dialogue Coming from the Eastern Conch Shell Treasury: a dialogue between Yeshe Tsogyel and Padmasambhava*
- IV. *The Precious Spike Testament: an oral instruction from Padmasambhava*
- V. *Stages of Guidance on the Points of the Path: Distilling the Quintessential Elixir, Light Dispelling Darkness: a dialogue between Yeshe Tsogyel and Padmasambhava*

²³ Rig 'dzin Rgod kyi ldem phru can 1979b. This is a reproduction of a manuscript originally housed at Tsamdrak (Mtshams brag) Monastery in Bhutan. The cycle is later included as the fifth and last volume of an anthology of Great Perfection teaching cycle, collectively titled the *Unimpeded Realization of Samantabhadra* (*Kun tu bzang po'i dgongs pa zang thal*). Two versions of *Unimpeded Realization* are available to us: (1) the Adzom (A 'dzom) version: *Dgongs pa zang thal gyi chos skor* (Rig 'dzin Rgod kyi ldem phru can 1973). This is a reproduction of block prints prepared by Adzom Drugpa Rinpoche (A 'dzoms 'brug pa rin po che, 1842–1924) in his own monastery in the early 1900s; (2) the Nechung (Gnas chung) version: *Dgongs pa zang thal gyi chos skor* (Rig 'dzin Rgod kyi ldem phru can 1979a). This is a reproduction of block prints prepared by the eleventh Nechung Tulku Śākya Yarpel (Gnas chung sku rten Shākya yar 'phel, 19th century). The Nechung version does not include this *Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen, Primordially Pure Great Perfection* volume. In the Adzom version, the text titled *Rdzogs pa chen po rang byung rang shar gyi rgyud las byung ba'i man ngan gsal ba'i sgron me* is not included. On the other hand, this version contains two extra texts: a *zhulen* between Padmasambhava and Namkhai Nyingpo (Nam mkha'i snying po), titled *Sku gsum gtan la dbab pa'i rgyud*, and an oral teaching by Padmasambhava, titled *O rgyan padmas mdzad pa'i zhal chems sgron ma rnam gsum*.

²⁴ Kapstein 1996 provides an overview of the *zhal gdams* or advice genre. Also see Schapiro 2012: 66–75.

- VI. *Distilling the Quintessential Elixir: Wisdom Empowerment*
- VII. *The Ten Steps of the Profound Key Points: a dialogue between Yeshe Tsogyel and Padmasambhava*²⁵
- VIII. *Introduction to Natural Awareness and Natural Luminosity: a dialogue between Padmasambhava and Śrī Simḥa*
- IX. *Treasury of Precious Gems that Remove Obstacles: a dialogue between Yeshe Tsogyel and Padmasambhava*
- X. *Illuminating Lamp: Oral Instructions from the Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen Great Perfection Tantra: an oral teaching from Padmasambhava*
- XI. *The All-Liberating Vajrasattva Tantra: a tantra in the form of a conversation between Vajrapāṇi and Vajrasattva*
- XII. *The Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen Great Perfection Root Tantra: a tantra in the form of a conversation between Vajrasattva and Samantabhadra*
- XIII. *Introduction to the Five Intermediate States: a dialogue between Tri Srongdetsen and Padmasambhava*

The arrangement of titles in this volume progressed in chronological order as one moves on with practice. It began with an introduction: *Key Points in the Precious Preliminary Practice: The Five Nails* is a preliminary practice text; while *Supplication to the Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen, Primordially Pure Great Perfection Lineage* was a supplication to the lineage masters. These were customarily placed at the beginning of a volume. Except for the first two texts, all other titles in the collection assumed the format of conversations or oral instructions. These conversations made up the majority in this volume. They took place between buddhas and bodhisattvas, teachers and disciples, with their locations ranging from mythical abodes to human realms, from India to Tibet. *Introduction to Natural Awareness and Natural Luminosity* was a dialogue between Padmasambhava and his teacher, Śrī Simḥa; while all other accounts were teachings from Padmasambhava, the cultural hero for Rigdzin Godem's Treasure activities. These were conversations between Padmasambhava and his two disciples (Tri Songdetsen and, most frequently, Yeshe Tsogyel²⁶) or oral teachings from him.²⁷ The location of sacred conversations then moved up to the

²⁵ Turpeinen 2018: 164–175, provides a detailed analysis of this text as a narrative of Yeshe Tsogyel's experiences and transformations when she undertook the Direct Transcendence (*thod rgal*) training with Padmasambhava.

²⁶ These two disciples (sometimes with the addition of Namkhai Nyingpo) were already considered the main disciples responsible for transmitting Padmasambhava's teachings in the earlier Treasures of Guru Chöwang. Turpeinen 2015: 33–34.

²⁷ For example, Text IV, *The Precious Spike Testament*, did not belong to the dialogue genre. Judging from the use of phrases like "Listen (*nyon cig*)!" and the scene-

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divine realm, represented by *The All-Liberating Vajrasattva Tantra* and *The Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen Great Perfection Root Tantra*, two tantras that formed the basis of the primordial purity teachings. The volume concluded with *Introduction to the Five Intermediate States*, a text on the five after-death intermediate states, or bardos.

Similar to those attributed to Nyangrel Nyima Özer and Tsultrim Dorje, these dialogues also started with a scene-setting narrative about the life of Padmasambhava, followed by a series of questions and answers. Consider the following opening passage from *Notes on the Key Points of the Dialogue Coming from the Eastern Conch Shell Treasury*:

While Master Padmasambhava was residing at Samye Chimphu, Lady of Kharchen, Tsogyel, was slightly distracted regarding worldly appearances during the day. One night, deeply immersed in her sleep, she dreamed that on the side of a massive rocky mountain, a boy [with a body] of light was sitting on a throne of precious jewels. He was surrounded on all sides by brilliant flower stalks of various colors. [Tsogyel] was very happy and set out to walk there. She went there and encountered a fearsome large snake: then she was scared and became unconscious.²⁸

Yeshe Tsogyel then descended into a crack that opened in the mountain, went through many types of sensory experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant, and finally arrived at a whirling lake with a sky-reaching tree trunk in the center, fire ablaze at the root, various flowers on the branches, and pure fruits hanging in the air. Having woken from the dream, she approached master Padmasambhava and asked him about the causes and conditions that gave rise to this dream. The master replied with a teaching on the emptiness of the external world and sentient beings inhabiting it (*phyi snod nang bcud*). He then went on to explain the practice of eradicating delusional appearance by upholding the fortification of natural awareness.²⁹ In the end, Yeshe Tsogyel received the full textual transmission of the Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen Primordial Purity from Padmasambhava:

The great master Padmasambhava, for the sake of Lady of Kharchen, Queen Tsogyel, according to the profound yet concise *Great Perfection Tantra of Self-Arising and Self-Appearing Awareness*, entrusted to her the following teachings: the eight

setting narrative in the beginning, they were still first-person voice teachings given by Padmasambhava to his disciples.

²⁸ Rig 'dzin Rgod kyi ldem phru can 1979b: 42–43.

²⁹ Ibid.: 48–53.

upadeśas, and the two tantras, being ten altogether. Among those are:

- *Notes on the Key Points of Dialogue*
- *The Precious Spike Testament*
- *Light Dispelling Darkness*
- *Distilling the Quintessential Elixir: The Wisdom Empowerment*
- *Quintessential Steps of the Profound Instruction*³⁰
- *Introduction to Natural Awareness and Natural Luminosity*
- *Treasury of Precious Gems that Remove Obstacles*
- *Illuminating Light of Instructions*³¹
- *The All-Liberating Vajrasattva Tantra*
- *The Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen Root Tantra*

These ten, along with proceedings of offering to the Treasure protectors, amount to eleven.

[He] bestowed them to the Lady of Kharchen, Queen Tsogyel. Tsogyel, having been liberated from delusory appearances on her own, for the sake of later generations, hid all the instructions in a white clockwise-turning conch treasure inside a dark maroon chest made of rhinoceros hide, on the waist of a rocky mountain like a pile of poisonous snakes, in the northern region of Thoyor Nakpo.³²

In this case, not only was a dialogue used as a vehicle in itself to transmit Padmasambhava's teachings, it also extended outward to other titles within the same collection and gave validation to these titles as well. By including titles of texts within the same cycles, this dialogue authenticated not just itself, but all the text mentioned within as genuine teaching transmissions from Padmasambhava. It also spelled out its place of concealment and subsequent revelation, which can be used to validate the retrieved texts from the same location.

3. *Zhulen as Scripture: Shared Stylistic Features with Mahāyāna Scriptures*

As seen above, the narratives framing these dialogical accounts share a common structure, which can be summarized as follows:

³⁰ This title refers to *Ten Steps of the Profound Key Points* in this cycle.

³¹ This title refers to *Illuminating Lamp: Oral Instructions from the Self-Emergent, Self-Arisen Great Perfection Tantra*.

³² Rig 'dzin rgod kyi ldem phru can, 1979b: 53–54.

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- Padmasambhava was residing at [place]
- Description of the time, location, and retinue
- A disciple (usually Yeshe Tsogyel) raises a question
- Padmasambhava answers that question
- (Another question is brought up and answered)
- End of the teaching: entrusting and concealing Treasures

For anyone familiar with the narrative structure of classical Buddhist scriptures, the resemblance is evident. A few more detailed observations can be made of this narrative structure. It contained the five elements or “perfect conditions” (*phun sum tshogs pa lnga*)³³ under which a Buddha-voiced teaching (Tib. *sangs rgyas kyi bka'*, Skt. *buddhavacana*) takes place: the teacher, the time, the location, the audience or retinue, and the teaching. The conversation format was adopted by the Buddha in his teaching career and became the literary convention for Buddhist canonical literature. These conversations took place between the Buddha and his disciples, between the Buddha and other deities, and among disciples themselves. They were used to address concerns for skeptics, to defend doctrinal positions, and to propagate new teachings and practices.

A sūtra usually started with the phrase “Thus have I heard, at one time, the Buddha was residing in [a certain place], accompanied by [a retinue of various classes of beings].” Then a disciple or a bodhisattva would stand up and raise a question, initiating the sequence of a sacred conversation. In the end, the retinue invariably rejoiced at this most excellent teaching and resolved to commit it to practice. For example, the *Mahāvaiṣṭya Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*, a Mahāyāna scripture, encased the content of the Buddha’s teaching (in this case on Tathāgatagarbha) in the narrative frame of a dialogue.³⁴ New teachings continued to be incorporated into the canon—the reinvention of Buddhist canon was perhaps as old as the Buddhist scriptures themselves—but with the same dialogical format. Modifications to the strict definition of

³³ In a specifically Mahāyoga generational stage ritual context, these five perfection conditions could also be: the place, the principal practitioner, the retinue, the requisite substances, and the time. See Mayer and Cantwell 2010: 8 n. 10. This fivefold trope continues in the Treasure tradition. For a Treasure revelation to successfully take place, five “auspicious connections” (*rten 'brel*) need to come together. According to the Third Dōdrupchen, Jigme Tenpai Nyima (Rdo grub chen 'Jigs med Bstan pa'i nyi ma, 1865–1926), these five are: the right person or Treasure revealer, the right place, the right time, meeting with the holder of these teachings (*chos bdag*), and encountering the right consort or ḍākinī. Jacoby 2014: 206–207.

³⁴ Grosnick 1995: 92–106.

Buddhist scripture as *buddhavacana* came as early as when the first collection of sūtras were settled and agreed upon. Even for sūtras from the first assembly after the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha, not all of them were considered to be preached by the Buddha – some teachings were given by his disciples. In this case of *pratibhāna* or inspired utterances, the Buddha invited his disciples to give a spontaneous sermon or to offer versified reflections on the spot, which he then affirmed, stamping the sermon with his authority.³⁵

Tantras also imitated the sūtric narrative style. The beginning chapter of *Compendium of Principles of All Tathāgatas* (*Sarvatathāgatattvaṣaṅgraha*) presented a reimagination of the enlightenment narrative of Prince Sarvārthasiddhi or Siddhārtha, the future Buddha. Here, instead of proceeding with his *samādhi* and attain enlightenment, he was instructed by all the Tathāgatas that the process of awakening includes self-visualization and the chanting of mantras, starting with “Om! I penetrate the mind! (*Om cittaprativedhaṃ karomi*).” It was only after doing so that he could attain perfect enlightenment and realize the true nature of all the Tathāgatas.³⁶ Here again, the narrative followed the established framework of a Buddhist *sūtra* (interestingly, the *Tattvaṣaṅgraha* also referred to itself as a *sūtra* rather than tantra), but recast in decidedly tantric terms.³⁷

With this long-standing and continuous tradition of canon expansion in mind, Treasure *zhulen* adopted a similar dialogical format and served to effectively elevate the status of Padmasambhava and Yeshe Tsogyel as part of the enlightened pantheon in Tibetan Buddhism. The beginning of these texts omitted the phrase “Thus have I heard,” which could be explained by the fact that these accounts replaced the Buddha with Padmasambhava, who was equal to the Buddha. Through Padmasambhava’s voice, the teachings transmitted in these dialogues were also recognized as authentic *buddhavacana*. Yeshe Tsogyel was responsible for memorizing and transmitting his teaching lineage, replacing Ānanda, the faithful disciple of the Buddha. The list of titles bestowed to her in the aforementioned *Notes on the Key Points of the Dialogue Coming from the Eastern Conch Shell Treasury* was one example.

³⁵ For a discussion on this canonical genre of spontaneous, inspired utterances that extends the authorship of Buddhist scriptures beyond the Buddha, see MacQueen 1981 and 1982.

³⁶ For a translation of the opening scene in *The Compendium of Principles of All Tathāgatas*, see Giebel 2001: 19–24.

³⁷ Weinberger 2003: 49ff. Note that Hindu tantras are also commonly formed as conversations between gods and goddesses.

Zhulen (*Zhus lan*) as Scripture4. *Dialogues Discontinued: The Zhije Zhulen Collections*

This appropriation of a scriptural format in Treasure *zhulens*, as well as their function of authenticating new teachings and expanding the Buddhist pantheon, were not a new phenomenon.³⁸ The true creativity of Treasure *zhulen* texts was its regenerative ability, which made continued revelation over the next millennium possible. This new feature in scriptural creation is better appreciated when we look at a parallel example, the Zhije School. This was a contemporaneous, and in many aspects comparable, Tibetan Buddhist school to the Nyingma tradition. Like Padmasambhava, the legendary founder of the Zhije School, Dampa Sanggye (Dam pa sangs rgyas, 11th century–1117),³⁹ was also said to have come from India. He was one of the central actors in the renaissance of Tibetan Buddhism, sharing the stage with early Nyingma Treasure revealers and their New Translation School contemporaries. His disciples also composed dialogues to record his teaching.

Zhulen accounts were found in at least two collections of Zhije teachings, respectively titled *The Early, Middle, and Late Pacification Corpus* (*Zhi byed snga phyi bar gsum gyi skor*, hereafter *The Corpus*)⁴⁰ and *The Collected Teachings of the Early, Middle, and Late Pacification School* (*Zhi byed snga phyi bar gsum gyi chos skor phyogs bsgrigs*, hereafter *The Collected Teachings*).⁴¹ *The Corpus* contained a bundle of dialogues with the collective title *Six Dialogues on the Truth with the Black Ācārya* (*A tsa ra nag po'i don gyi zhu lan drug*).⁴² *The Collected Teachings* included a total of five dialogues, three of them were by Dampa Sanggye and the other two by Dampa's foremost disciple, the female Buddhist master Machig

³⁸ The earliest Tibetan texts with *zhulen* in their titles include manuscripts from Dunhuang and several canonical texts. In the Dunhuang texts, there are three copies of the same work, all titled *Dialogues Concerning Vajrasattva*. They are IOL Tib J 470 and IOL Tib J 578/Pelliot tibétain 819, and Pelliot tibétain 837, see Dalton and van Schaik 2006: 214–216, 279–280. The same title is also included in the *Tengyur*, see “Dpal sa ra ha dang mnga’ bdag mai tri pa’i zhu ba zhus lan,” *Bstan ’gyur dpe bsdur ma* 1994–2008, 48: 142. For a critical edition and a complete translation of the text, see Takahashi 2010: 114–140, also see Schaeffer 2005: 28, 193–194 n. 46.

³⁹ For a brief sketch on Dampa Sanggye’s life, see Martin 2006: 111–114.

⁴⁰ Thugs sras kun dga’ and B. N. Aziz 1979. The manuscript basis for this collection can be dated back to the mid-13th century, see Martin 2015: 340 n. 8.

⁴¹ The last volume of this collection contained a discussion of the compilation process. Texts were gathered from old manuscripts in the main temple to Dampa Sanggye in Tingri (Ding ri), Gdams ngag mdzod, and collections of Chö (*gcod*) or Cutting teaching by Machig Ladron. However, no information was given with regard to specific texts within the collection. Dam pa sangs rgyas and Ma cig lab sgron 2012–2013, 13: 433–439.

⁴² “The Black Ācārya” refers to Dampa Sanggye.

Labdrön (Ma cig lab sgron, 1055–1149).⁴³

The Zhije *zhulen* collection also opened with a scene-setting narrative. Additionally, following the convention of translated canonical texts in the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur*, it began with listing both the Sanskrit and Tibetan titles of the text:

In Sanskrit, [the title] is *Paramabuddhoktānandabodhisatvānāga-takālavvyākaraṇāvāda*; in Tibetan, *The Instruction of Phadampa Sanggye to Bodhisattva Ānanda Regarding Prophecies for Future Times*.

Homage to the Guru! Homage to the Precious Excellent Buddha, Dampa Sanggye!

At that time, it is said that Dampa had been crying for a while. Kunga asked, “Excellent [Teacher]! Why are you crying?” ...⁴⁴

Another conversation between Dampa Sanggye and his twenty-four female disciples also listed its title in both Sanskrit and Tibetan:

In Sanskrit, [the title] is *Caturviṃśatyāryāpraśnottaraitihāsasahitaṃ*; in Tibetan, *The Account and Dialogue with the Twenty-Four Ladies*.⁴⁵

The Sanskrit title was absent in teachings by Machig Labdrön, perhaps because of her Tibetan, not Indian, identity. After a brief homage to her, without any of the scene-setting narrative, the text started directly with the first question, “Why is obtaining a human life precious?” and proceeds with Machig’s answers.⁴⁶

Since *zhulen* texts in the Zhije collections did not identify themselves as revealed teachings, they ended not with a narrative of Treasure concealment, but general concluding prayers. Their authenticity relied on the Indian identity of the teacher, Dampa Sanggye, and by extension the alleged Indian origin of his textual transmission, as

⁴³ The three attributed to Dampa Sanggye are: *The Instruction of Phadampa Sanggye to Bodhisattva Ānanda Regarding Prophecies for Future Times* (“*Pha dam pa sangs rgyas kyis byang chub sems dpa’ kun dga’ la ma ’ongs pa’i dus lung du bstan pa’i zhal gdams*,” *Dam pa sangs rgyas and Ma cig lab sgron* 2012–2013, 2: 573–582); *The Account and Dialogue with the Twenty-Four Ladies* (“*Jo mo nyi shu rtsa bzhis zhus lan dang lo rgyus*,” *ibid.*, 3: 663–688); and the *Hundred Thousand Explanations on the Mirror of Mind in Dialogue: A Garland of Perfect Views on the Profound Meaning* (“*Zhus lan thugs kyi me long gi bshad ’bum zab mo’i don rnam par gzigs pa’i ’phreng ba’*” *ibid.*, 4: 1–544).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2: 574–575, 577.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3: 664.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 7: 192.

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suggested by the Sanskrit titles. This kind of bilingual title was only occasionally found in Treasure cycles. Since they both came from India masters, one might expect Sanskrit titles to be carried in Dampa Sanggye and Padmasambhava's teachings. However, the apotheosis of Padmasambhava meant that his teachings were no longer brought from India, but as given directly in his identity as Second Buddha. As with the absence of "Thus have I heard," here, Dampa Sanggye was the transmitter of teachings, Padmasambhava the originator.

The following table (fig. 1) offers an overview of the narrative framework in *sūtra*, *tantra*, *Treasure zhulen*, and *Zhije zhulen*:

NARRATIVE ELEMENTS			
	<i>Setting the Scene</i>	<i>First Four of the Five Perfection Conditions</i>	<i>The Fifth Condition: The Teaching</i>
SŪTRA	"Thus have I heard," ...	Description of the teacher, time, location, and retinue	A disciple or a bodhisattva asking a question
TANTRA (SARVATA-THĀGATA-TATTVA-SAMGRAHA SŪTRA)	"Thus have I heard," ... ⁴⁷	Description of the teacher, time, location, and retinue	Aroused by All the Tathāgatas, the future Buddha asking them how he should practice
TREASURE ZHULEN	Brief narrative about Padmasambhava	Description of the teacher, time, location, and retinue	A disciple (usually Yeshe Tsogyel) asking a question
ZHIJE ZHULEN TAUGHT BY DAMPA SANGGYE	Sanskrit and Tibetan titles of the text; homage to the teacher	Description of the teacher, time, location, and retinue	A disciple of Dampa Sanggye asking a question
ZHIJE ZHULEN TAUGHT BY MACHIG LABDRÖN	Homage to the teacher	Description of the teacher, time, location, and retinue	A disciple of Machig Labdrön asking a question

⁴⁷ This is found in the *Sarvatathāgatattvaśaṅgraha Sūtra*, but not necessarily other tantras. For example, the later *Cakrasamvara Tantra* begins simply with an homage to Śrī Cakrasamvara; while the *Hevajra tantra* begins with "Thus have I heard ...". See Gray 2007: 155; Snellgrove 1959: 47.

	<i>The Fifth Condition: The Teaching (continued)</i>	<i>End of the Teaching</i>
SŪTRA	The Buddha, a bodhisattva, or a senior disciple answering the question	(Another question being brought up and answered) Rejoicing at the teaching and resolution for practice
TANTRA (SARVATA-THAGATA-TATTVA-SAMGRAHA SŪTRA)	All the Tathāgatas answering his question	(Another question being brought up and answered) Binding the teaching with seals of secrecy and verses of praise
TREASURE ZHULEN	Padmasambhava answering that question	(Another question being brought up and answered) Binding the teaching with seals of secrecy and verses of praise
ZHIJE ZHULEN TAUGHT BY DAMPA SANGGYE	Dampa Sanggye answering that question	(Another question being brought up and answered) Concluding prayers
ZHIJE ZHULEN TAUGHT BY MACHIG LABDRÖN	Machig Labdrön answering that question	(Another question being brought up and answered) Concluding prayers

Fig. 1 — Comparison of Narrative Frameworks in Sūtra, Tantra, Treasure and Zhije zhulen

As seen above, except for the scene-setting narratives and endings (these two elements vary in different contexts but are nonetheless indispensable components of the genre), exoteric sūtras, esoteric tantras, and *zhulen* texts in the Treasure and Zhije traditions all provided the required five perfect conditions to frame the transmitted teachings. Unlike the buddhas or bodhisattvas, who resided on a timeless plane of enlightened activities, the identity of Padmasambhava and Dampa Sanggye required clarification. In carving out a space for its doctrinal and historical authenticity, both Treasure and Zhije traditions employed the formal features of canonical dialogue with some modifications to fit their own contexts. They identified the founders of their respective lineages as masters from India—the origin site of Buddhism—and further declared them to be enlightened buddhas. Like Padmasambhava, whose epithet “the

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second Buddha" (*sangs rgyas gnyis pa*) emerged at this time,⁴⁸ Dampa Sanggye was also referred to as "the second Buddha."⁴⁹

The unrealized potential for the Zhije *zhulen* genre compared to the prosperous Treasure dialogue literature reveals further innovations on the Treasure tradition's part. Both traditions apotheosized an Indian master and canonized his teaching through the hand of a Tibetan female disciple.⁵⁰ The process of canonization, in both cases, involved emulating the well-established sūtra format and elevating the status of the speaker to an enlightened Buddha. Compared to the continued revelation of many more dialogical accounts after the 14th century, the composition of Zhije *zhulen* came to a halt after the time of Dampa Sanggye and Machig Labdrön. One explanation for the thriving scriptural production in Treasure could be the logic of its revelation. Without the ongoing discovery of previously concealed texts through reincarnations of enlightened personalities, it would be difficult to continue engaging in scriptural creation after the departure of their founding father. On the other hand, the Zhije tradition lacked the innovative mechanism and leadership to build and maintain a separate tradition.

5. Dialogue Reinvented: What Is New with Treasure Dialogues?

The comparison between Zhije and Treasure *zhulen* texts is instrumental for understanding how the Treasure *zhulen* composed themselves as authentic *buddhavacana*. In its inception, and especially prior to its adoption into Treasure cycles, *zhulen* as a literary genre may not have the expressed ambition of self-identifying as scripture. In the Nyingma Treasure and Zhije traditions, the addition of a canonical narrative framing the dialogues and the identification of the teachers as buddhas enabled this transformation to Buddha-voiced teachings.

⁴⁸ Gyatso 1993: 114 discusses the role of Padmasambhava in Treasure transmissions not as a buddha, but as "part of the authoritative pantheon that confers legitimacy on the discoverer's revelation." The epithet "second Buddha" alone may not offer sufficient ground to celebrate Padmasambhava's prestige; however, when combined with his elevation of status in these dialogical narratives as the single source of authentic teachings, effectively substituting the Buddha, his apotheosis has reached its peak. The role of a "middle woman" or "codifier" is assumed by his disciple, Yeshe Tsogyel, who was responsible for ensuring that Treasures were ciphered, concealed, and, in later times, rediscovered.

⁴⁹ For example in, "Zhus lan thugs kyi me long gi bshad 'bum zab mo'i don rnam par gzigs pa'i 'phreng ba," Dam pa sangs rgyas and Ma cig lab sgron 2012–2013, 4: 3.

⁵⁰ Teachings attributed to Dampa Sanggye straddled the line between canonical and extra-canonical, for some of them (for example, his tantric verses) were included in the *Tengyur* section of the Tibetan Buddhist canon as well. Schaeffer 2007: 7–9.

The narrative framework of conversation between teacher and disciples is the default canonical format in both exoteric and esoteric Buddhist literature. As a literary genre, the Tibetan *zhulen* was first identified in short texts within the *Tengyur* and in Dunhuang manuscripts.⁵¹ In the later spread of Tibetan Buddhism, extra-canonical *zhulen* proliferated, especially in the Nyingma Treasure tradition. This scriptural genre was used by Treasure revealers to elevate their revelations as *buddhavacana*. In these sacred conversations, Padmasambhava replaced the Buddha as the originator of teachings, Yeshe Tsogyel replaced Ānanda as the transmitter. These instructions left behind by Padmasambhava were not only identified as authentic Buddhist teachings of its time, through the mechanism of concealment and revelation at a later time, Padmasambhava's teachings continued to resurface and renew themselves as an authentic source of scriptural production. The creativity of Treasure revelation ensured that Treasure texts can regenerate themselves throughout generations, and that Treasure teachings continue to proliferate.

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⁵¹ See note 38 above.

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