

The Chapter on the Theory of the Elements (*'byung ba'i gnas*) in Klong chen pa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle (Theg mchog mdzod)*

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This paper explores an account of the theory of the primary elements (*'byung ba*) particular to the Great Perfection Heart Essence (Rdzogs chen snying thig) tradition of the 14th century, as presented within the *Theg mchog mdzod* (*Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*) by Klong chen pa (1308–1364). The longest text in Klong chen pa's *Mdzod bdun* (*Seven Treasuries*) collection, the *Theg mchog mdzod* covers an extraordinary range of topics within the Great Perfection Heart Essence universe of ideas. Functionally an interpretive commentary on the *Man ngag sde'i rgyud bcu bdun* (*Seventeen Tantras of the Instruction Series*), Klong chen pa's text systematically reorganizes and recasts these earlier texts. While many 14th century texts discuss the elements, most often within the context of cosmology or human anatomy, the *Theg mchog mdzod* is distinctive in its concentration of elemental ideas within a single chapter. This essay offers translation and analysis of key aspects of the chapter – its theoretical and philosophical content regarding elemental theory, as well as its structural role within the project of the *Theg mchog mdzod*. It also interrogates the role of elemental theory in this text, exploring the ways that Klong chen pa's interpretation of the elemental theories of the *Seventeen Tantras* materials differs from the presentation of elemental theory within the 12th century commentaries to those texts attributed to Vimalamitra, raising questions about the implications of those patterns of dissonance.

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1. Introduction

The theorization of matter in terms of the primary elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and space is among the most enduring philosophical and cosmological schemes in Buddhist history. Yet there has been little discussion in contemporary Buddhist studies of the variety of elemental theories belonging to diverse Buddhist traditions. This may be a result of the prevailing belief that elemental discourses are mainly the purview of the Buddhist materialist philosophies associated with the *Abhidharma* traditions. A counter example to this assumption, however, is found among the literatures of the *Rdzogs chen snying thig* ("Great Perfection Heart Essence") tradition, which has a rich history of thematizing elemental ideas in its own distinctive philosophical idiom, with the nature of elemental discourse evolving meaningfully within the tradition over time.

Rdzogs chen snying thig is an esoteric transmission consisting of proprietary philosophies, doctrines, and contemplative practices associated with the *Man ngag sde*, or Instruction Series of *Rdzogs chen* literature in the *Rnying ma* school of Tibetan Buddhism. Klong chen rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, or Klong chen pa (1308–1364), is perhaps the most widely recognized scholar of this tradition in its long history. The fifteenth chapter of Klong chen pa's *Theg mchog mdzod* (*Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*) is a particularly noteworthy example of Buddhist philosophical engagement with elemental theories: While it is common for texts of all Buddhist denominations authored during Tibet's 14th century "classical era" to discuss the elements to some extent, most often within the context of cosmology, human anatomy, embryology, or funerary practices, the *Theg mchog mdzod* is unusual in that it contains a chapter that is entirely dedicated to the philosophy of the elements. Though this is not the only place in the text where the elements are discussed, the presence of a chapter devoted to the elements indicates that, for Klong chen pa, elemental ideas were simultaneously prevalent enough within the broader *Rdzogs chen snying thig* universe of ideas to require their own space of analysis, and homogenous enough that they could be sequestered from their embedded role in other kinds of knowledge systems, for instance in embryology, and still remain a coherent philosophy.

This article offers an account of this chapter, including a summary and analysis of its theoretical and philosophical content regarding elemental theories. In particular, the essay brings attention to the ways that Klong chen pa interprets elemental ideas inherited from earlier *Rdzogs chen snying thig* literature, namely, the text collection known

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as the *Man ngag sde'i rgyud bcu bdun*, the *Seventeen Tantras of the Instruction Series*, colloquially known as *Rdzogs chen rgyud bcu bdun* (*Seventeen Great Perfection Tantras*) or simply the *Rgyud bcu bdun* (*Seventeen Tantras*). The chapter on the elements draws most frequently from three texts in this collection: the *Rig pa rang shar* (the *Naturally Arisen Awareness Tantra*), the *Mu tig phreng ba* (the *Pearl Necklace Tantra*), and the *Sgra thal 'gyur* (the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra*). Focusing on a set of prominent elemental motifs that emerge in Klong chen pa's writing, the essay examines how Klong chen pa integrates the elemental ideas of these earlier works, blending distinctive Snying thig concepts with classical Buddhist philosophies into a novel synthesis.

In this regard, the major questions underlying this essay concern the drivers of change in elemental ideas over time, and how we might account for patterns of dissonance expressed within a series of related texts particular to a single contemplative-philosophical tradition. The degree to which elemental ideas and their significance to the Rdzogs chen snying thig tradition changed over the centuries is attested to in the 18th century writings of 'Jigs med gling pa who, in the early pages of his *Ye shes bla ma*, quotes a passage from the *Sgra thal 'gyur* describing the critical role of the *Sgra bzhi rnal 'byor* or "Yoga of the Four Sounds [of the Elements]" to the wider Rdzogs chen snying thig rubric for contemplative practice. He writes:

Even though this quotation indicates that one should do the practice on the four sounds [of the elements], since these days there are few who are established in this practice, it is acceptable to omit it.²

This is to say, in effect, "no one does these practices anymore." The extent to which this statement speaks for the tradition broadly at this time or previously is of course not entirely clear from this brief quotation alone. But it does seem to point to an idea that's represented elsewhere in the literature, if only by absence. Namely, that at some point in the centuries that elapsed between the era in which the *Rgyud bcu bdun* were first popularized (11th century, tentatively), and the time that 'Jigs med gling pa set out to write the *Ye shes bla ma*, practices of meditation and of scholarship involving the elements which appear to be so important to the early Rdzogs chen snying thig tradition, evidenced by their prevalence in the *Sgra thal 'gyur* in particular, ceased to be upheld in a significant way. Why that seems to be the case

² *ces sgra bzhi rnal 'byor du bya bar gsungs kyang / deng sang lag len la 'debs pa nyung bas ma byas kyang rung ngo*. Kun mkhyen 'Jigs med gling pa n.d.: 3. See also Kun mkhyen 'Jigs med gling pa 2008: 20–21.

is a driving question that underlies this essay, and the larger body of research of which it is a small part. And while I do not expect to provide definitive answers to that question here, a natural starting place is with the work of Klong chen pa, whose *Mdzod bdun* have become the authoritative sources on the *Rgyud bcu bdun*, exceeding in popularity and common usage within Rnying ma monastic curricula both the tantras themselves and their early commentaries attributed to Vimalamitra, dated to the 12th century.³ This is, at any rate, the rationale for such a study of the *Theg mchog mdzod's* "Chapter on the Theory of the Elements."

2. *The Theg mchog mdzod, or Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*

The *Theg mchog mdzod*, formally the *Theg pa'i mchog rin po che'i mdzod*, is found among Klong chen pa's seven-volume masterwork, the *Mdzod bdun, or Seven Treasuries*, a massive interpretive and commentarial project composed of seven individual works on various topics that, together, seek to offer an exhaustive account of the Rdzogs chen snying thig path. The *Theg mchog mdzod* is the largest single work in the collection, with the A 'dzom edition of the text totaling 2,179 folia. Organized into twenty-five overarching topics or chapters, it is a systematic recasting and reinterpretation of earlier foundational Rdzogs chen snying thig texts, namely, and with few exceptions, the *Rgyud bcu bdun*.

There are numerous editions of the *Theg mchog mdzod* in circulation. It is commonly found along with the other texts in the *Mdzod bdun* collection in various editions of the *Klong chen gsung 'bum*, as well as in free-standing editions of the *Mdzod bdun*.⁴ The translations and analysis contained within this article are based upon versions of the *Theg mchog mdzod* found within the A 'dzom, *Sde dge*, and *Mang yul Gung thang* editions of the *Mdzod bdun*.⁵

³ These commentaries are found within the formulation of collected works known as the *Extensive Collection of the Spoken Transmission (Bka ma shin tu rgyas pa)*, in the edition compiled by Khenpo Munsel (1916–1993). See: Vimalamitra 1999a.

⁴ Five editions of the *Klong chen gsung 'bum* are available in the Buddhist Digital Resource Center's library, a ten volume edition; a six volume *dbu med* edition; a twenty-six volume "dpal brtseg" edition; a woodblock edition from Sde dge, and a facsimile of this edition, which is said to have been edited by Rdzogs chen Mi 'gyur nam kha'i rdo rje (1793–1870). There are also seven independent editions of the *Klong chen mdzod bdun* available.

⁵ My translations are based primarily upon a word-searchable copy of the A 'dzom edition of the *Mdzod bdun* that was created by Tsering Gyurme, and edited by David Germano, Khenpo Ngawang Dorje, and Christopher Hatchel. I've also consulted the Sde dge edition of the *Mdzod bdun*, and the *Mang yul Gung thang*

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As David Higgins has noted, the text is organized according to a certain “architectural metaphor.”⁶ In the colophon to the text, Klong chen pa describes the text as a “*mchod rten*,” a *stūpa* which “the author has assembled and reverentially offered for the sake of preserving the Snying thig teachings for posterity out of fear that they would otherwise disappear.”⁷ Its twenty-five chapters are, accordingly, described as “*rim khang*,” as stories or steps of the stupa, organized into five overarching parts that are further broken down into five subsidiary topics each.⁸

If we are to interpret Klong chen pa’s words in this way, clustering the chapters into five topical sets of five, the chapter on the elements is located at the conclusion of a section that deals with Rdzogs chen snying thig characterizations of human experience, including the creation of the physical body through karmic habituation, the creation and use of the contemplative technologies of the subtle body including the four wheels (*’khor lo bzhi*) and the four lamps (*sgron ma bzhi*), as well as important Rdzogs chen-specific characterizations of Buddhist categories such as mind (*sems*), primordial gnosis (*ye shes*), all-ground (*kun gzhi*), and reality body (*chos sku*). Thus, the chapters break down in the following order: the eleventh chapter deals with embryology and the creation of the body (*lus grub tshul*).⁹ The twelfth chapter describes the constitution of the energetic body in terms of the four wheels.¹⁰ The thirteenth chapter describes the “four lamps which depend upon primordial gnosis” (*ye shes kyi rten sgron ma bzhi*).¹¹ And the fourteenth chapter, the chapter on “distinctions,” describes the distinctions between the “all ground and reality body” (*kun gzhi dang*

facsimile edition published with an introduction by Franz-Karl Erhard under the title *The Oldest Block Print of Klong-chen Rab ’byams-pa’s Theg Mchog Mdzod* (2000). Very few variations are noted between these three witnesses. There is, however, meaningful variation between Klong chen pa’s quotations of the tantras and the tantras themselves. This is largely due to the fact that the A ’dzom edition of the tantras has been heavily edited. Where there are variations, I have included references in the footnotes to those translations, emphasized in **bold typeface**. A thorough account of the text-critical details of the *Theg mchog mdzod* relative to the tantras is included in my forthcoming dissertation.

⁶ Higgins 2012: 296.

⁷ *Gnas gzhan grub pa’i glang po gzims las de yi gzhung lugs mig zum la / gnas gzhan grub pa’i gom tshugs ’khyor zhing zab mo’i gnad rnams ’thor dogs nas*. Higgins 2012: 296 fn. 714; Klong chen pa 1999b: 593; 2000: 501a–501b; 1983 v. 4: 548:

⁸ *Theg mchog mnyam pa’i sa gzhi la’ ’od gsal rdo rje snying po’i rtse / rim khang lnga phrag lngas brgyan pa / zab cing rgya che’i bkod pas mdzes*. Klong chen pa 1999b: 593; 2000: 501b; 1983 v. 4: 548.

⁹ As described by the summary of the previous chapter located at the beginning of each chapter. Klong chen pa 1999b: 491.

¹⁰ See *Ibid.*: 491–554.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 555.

chos sku), and “mind and primordial gnosis” (*sems dang ye shes*).¹² The cluster of topics that follows the chapter on the elements, chapters sixteen through twenty, move into a discussion of distinctive Rdzogs chen snying thig contemplative practices, culminating with the nineteenth and twentieth chapters on breakthrough (*khregs chod*) and direct transcendence (*thod rgal*) practices respectively, widely considered to be the pinnacle contemplative practices of the Rdzogs chen snying thig path.

Thus, according to Klong chen pa's own description of the organizational structure of the text, the chapter on the elements is situated at the conclusion of a section on the body and embodied technologies for contemplative practice and transformation, and a section on the means of attaining that transformation. This is perhaps an indication of the importance of elemental ideas specifically to Rdzogs chen snying thig contemplative practices. To borrow another common Buddhist informational paradigm, the chapter on the elements forms a vital part of the “ground” relative to the “path” described in chapters sixteen through twenty.

3. *The Organization of the Chapter on the Elements*

A comparatively short chapter, the chapter on the elements is a total of 22 folio pages in the *A 'dzom* edition. The chapter is composed of numerous quotations from multiple texts among the *Rgyud bcu bdun* collection, with additional expository remarks by Klong chen pa of varying degrees of detail. By far the most frequently quoted text in the chapter is the *Rig pa rang shar* (*The Naturally Arisen Awareness Tantra*), which is quoted sixteen times. After that, the *Mu tig phreng ba* (*The Pearl Necklace Tantra*) is quoted a total of seven times, the *Sgra thal 'gyur* (*Unimpeded Sound Tantra*) is quoted three times, and the *Nor bu phra bkod* (*Inlaid Jewels Tantra*) is quoted once. In addition to these, the *Thig le kun gsal* (*Total Illumination of the Bindu*) is quoted twice in the chapter, and the *Gsang ba spyod ba sa bon kyi rgyud* (*Seed of Secret Conduct Tantra*) is quoted once. The *Thig le kun gsal* is, like the *Khros ma'i rgyud* and the *Klong gsal bar ba'i rgyud*, often closely associated with the *Rgyud bcu bdun* collection. The *Gsang ba spyod ba sa bon kyi rgyud* is the core tantra of the *Gser yig* division of the *Bi ma snying thig* (*Heart Essence of Vimalamitra*). It is regularly quoted in Klong chen pa's *Mdzod bdun* collection.

The chapter consists of a detailed topical outline (*sa bcad*), the primary division of which is between the “common” (*thun mong gi dbye*

¹² Ibid.: 597.

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ba) and the “specific” (*so so'i rang bzhin*) characteristics of the elements. Under the heading of the “common” are the qualities of the elements that are common to, or shared among, all five elements. The “specific,” by far the longer portion of the chapter, then deals with each of the elements individually. Both topics are further divided by a distinction between the “outer elements” (*phyi'i 'byung*) and the “inner elements” (*nang 'byung/nang gi 'byung*). Generally speaking, the category of outer elements refers to the material elements that comprise the structure of the surrounding environment, while the category of inner elements refers to the material elemental constituents of the human body. In addition to its role as an organizing motif in elemental thought broadly, this idea of outer and inner elements provides an important occasion for material-philosophical discourse. I return to this matter below.

Another notable informational paradigm within the *sa bcad* of the chapter involves the analysis of the elements according to ten distinctive analytical categories. These ten are a mix of intuitive and somewhat opaque categories, including the elements’ “essence” (*ngo bo*), “etymology” (*nges tshig*), “purpose” (*dgos ched*), “characteristics” (*mtshan nyid*), “process” (*las rim*), “reality” (*chos nyid*), “metaphors” (*don sbyar*), “the way in which they are free” (*grol tshul*), “distinctions” (*dbye ba*), and “the way in which they are complete” (*tshang tshul*). While nearly every chapter in the *Theg mchog mdzod* contains some version of this list as part of its approach to discursive analysis of a wide variety of topics, most commonly as a combination of the categories of essence (*ngo bo*), etymology (*nges tshig*), and distinctions (*dbye ba*), chapter fifteen’s list is unusually extensive and includes the unique categories of “process” (*las rim*), “correlations” (*don sbyar*), “the way in which they are free” (*grol tshul*), and “the way in which they are complete” (*tshang tshul*)—analytical categories which are not found elsewhere in the text.¹³ It appears to be the case that when these unusual analytical categories are employed in the informational paradigm, it’s because they are natural to discussions of the elements

¹³ In Chapter four we find a combination of *ngo bo*, *nges tshig*, *dbye ba*, *dgos pa*, *'bras bu*. Chapter five has *ngo bo*, *nges tshig*, *dbye ba*. Chapter six has *ngo bo*, *nges tshig*, *dbye ba*. Chapter seven has *ngo bo*, *nges tshig*, *dbye ba*, *rten*, *phan yon*, *nyes dmigs*, *bskang thabs*, *bsrung thabs*. Chapter twelve has *ngo bo* and *nges tshig*. Chapter thirteen has *ngo bo*, *nges tshig*, *dbye ba* (and *ngo bo*, *nges tshig*, *dbye ba*, *mtshan nyid*, *gnas*, *sgo*, *rang bzhin*, *yul snang*, *tshad*, *sgron ma dngos*, *de nyams su len thabs*, *mthun dpe*). Chapter fourteen uses *ngo bo*, *nges tshig*, *dbye ba*. Chapter sixteen uses various combinations of *ngo bo*, *nges tshig*, *rang lus*, *mtshon dpe*, *rtags*, *snang ba*, *gnas*, *mtshan nyid*, *yul*, and *dbye ba*. Chapter seventeen has *ngo bo*, *nges tshig*, *rang bzhin*, *chos nyid*. Chapter twenty-two uses a combination of *ngo bo*, *nges tshig*, *dbye ba*, *mtshan nyid*, *'bras bu*, and *ngo bo*, *rgyud*, *dbye ba*, and *'bras bu*. Chapter twenty-three has *ngo bo*, *nges tshig*, *dbye ba*. Chapter twenty-five has *ngo bo*, *nges tshig*, *dbye ba*.

in the tantras, rather than second-order generic categories created by Klong chen pa for the purpose of general exposition of diverse topics. In almost every case, these *sa bcad* are populated by quotations from the tantras with few to no expository comments from Klong chen pa himself. In every case, the term, i.e. “process” (*las rim*), or “the way in which they are free” (*grol tshul*), is in fact drawn from the quotation under consideration. For instance, the “process” (*las rim*) of the elements contains only the following quotation from the *Sgra thal 'gyur*:

The *process* (*las rim*) of the inner elements is as follows:
Earth creates the foundation of the body
and, through generation, is asserted to ripen as flesh.

Water draws the entire body together
and, through generation, is asserted to ripen as blood.

Fire ripens the entire body
and, through generation, is asserted to ripen as heat.

Wind suspends the entire body
and, through generation, ripens as breath.¹⁴

“Process,” as such, refers to the process or stages of development of the elemental body. Since the concept of “process” is not found elsewhere in the *Theg mchog mdzod* as an organizational category, we can conclude that it is being used as a term of art specific to elemental ideas arising from the *Sgra thal 'gyur*. Similarly, the category of *don sbyar*, translated here as “correlations,” has to do with the correlations between the elements and their corresponding “meanings” or “realities” (*don*) at the level of Rdzogs chen snying thig gnostic metaphysics. In other words, the elements’ divine or “ultimate” reality. This section includes two quotations from the tantras, the first from the *Rig pa rang shar*, and the second from the *Nor bu 'phra bkod*. The *Rig pa rang shar* quotation is as follows:

These are the correlations (*don sbyar*) of the elements: In the sense that the essence of its nature never changes, the originally pure Reality Body (*chos sku*) is the earth element. In the sense

¹⁴ *nang 'byung las kyi rim pa ni / sas ni lus kyi gzhi byas te / bskyed pas sha yi smin sor 'dod / chos ni lus kun bsdu nas ni / bskyed pas khrag tu smin par 'dod / mes ni lus kun smin byas te / bskyed pas drod di smin par 'dod / rlung gis lus kun 'degs pa la / bskyed pas dbugs su smin par byed*. Klong chen pa 1999b: 7; 2000: 272a; 1983 v. 4: 108. This quotation is found in the *Sgra thal 'gyur*, see Anonymous 2000b: 45–46.

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that it engages the meaning, awareness-gnosis (*rig pa'i ye shes*) is also the fire element. In the sense that it arrives in the expanse unperturbed, awareness-gnosis is also the wind element. In the sense that it draws together the three sheaths (*sbums gsum*), awareness-gnosis is also the water element. In the sense that it dissolves into a state that is non-dual, empty, and clear, gnosis is the element of space.¹⁵

The “correlations” of the elements thus involve the analogy of each of the elements to a corresponding meaning within an “ultimate” or divine dimension characterized in Rdzogs chen snying thig contemplative metaphysics: the earth element to the reality body (*chos sku*), and the remaining elements to properties of gnosis—specifically fire, wind, and water to the intrinsic, self-conscious quality of awareness-gnosis (*rig pa'i ye shes*), and space simply to gnosis (*ye shes*) itself. These comparisons, the quotation concludes “are the *don sbyar* of the elements.”¹⁶

The second quotation under the heading of “*don sbyar*” is from the *Nor bu 'phra bkod* which uses the related phrases “*dang sbyor*,” and “*dang sbyar*” meaning more literally to “connect with.” The implication however appears to be the same, namely, that each of the elements is “connected” metaphorically to an aspect of gnosis. The *Nor bu 'phra bkod* quotation is as follows:

¹⁵ *'byung ba'i don sbyar 'di lta ste / chos sku gdod nas dag pa'i rang bzhin la / ngo bo 'gyur ba med pas 'byung ba sa yang yin / rig pa'i ye shes don la spyod pas 'byung ba me yang yin / rig pa'i ye shes ma bskyod dbyings su gshegs pas 'byung ba lung yang yin / rig pa'i ye shes sbums gsum gcig tu 'dril bas 'byung ba chu yang yin / ye shes stong gsal gnyis med ngang du thim pas 'byung ba nam mkha' yin*. Klong chen pa 1999b: 7–8; 2000: 272a; 1983 v. 4: 109. There are some notable discrepancies between the version of this quotation that appears in the A 'dzom edition of the *Theg mchog mdzod* and the A 'dzom edition of the *Rig pa rang shar*, namely, in the line “*rig pa'i ye shes ma bskyod dbyings su gshegs pas 'byung ba lung yang yin*” the *Rig pa rang shar* has *shes pa* instead of *gshegs pa*; in the following line “*rig pa'i ye shes sbums gsum gcig tu 'dril bas 'byung ba chu yang yin*” the *Rig pa rang shar* has *sku gsum* rather than *sbums gsum*; and in the final line “*ye shes stong gsal gnyis med ngang du thim pas 'byung ba nam mkha' yin*” the *Rig pa rang shar* omits the initial *ye shes*. A translation of this quotation according to the *Rig pa rang shar* would thus read: “The metaphor of the elements is like this: In the sense that the essence of the nature of the originally pure Reality Body never changes, it is the earth element. In the sense that it engages the meaning, awareness-gnosis is also the fire element. In the sense that it apprehends the undisturbed expanse, awareness-gnosis is also the wind element. In the sense that awareness-gnosis draws together the three Enlightened bodies, it is also the water element. In the sense that emptiness-clarity dissolves into a state of non-duality, it is the space element. These are the metaphors of the elements.” See Anonymous 2000c: 465.

¹⁶ Klong chen pa 1999b: 8; 2000: 272b; 1983 v. 4: 110.

All the elements which appear externally are connected with (*dang sbyor*) awareness-gnosis, and are therefore ordinary phenomena (*thun mong gi chos*). To distinguish among them: since the main characteristic of earth is hardening, it's connected with the aspect of awareness-gnosis that is free from creation and destruction. Since the main characteristic of air is suspension, it's connected with the aspect of awareness-gnosis that is unobstructed. Since the main characteristic of fire is burning, it's connected with the aspect of awareness-gnosis that is not coming under the influence of the afflictions. Since the main characteristic of water is moisturizing, it's connected with the aspect of awareness-gnosis that is omnipresent. Since the main characteristic of space is vastness, it's connected with (*dang sbyar*, sic.) the aspect of awareness-gnosis that is expansiveness.¹⁷

As with the quotation from the *Rig pa rang shar*, the “*dang sbyor*” of the *Nor bu 'phra bkod* involves a series of comparisons between each of the “externally appearing” elements as material phenomena to the distinctly Rdzogs chen snying thig contemplative-philosophical concept of *intrinsic* gnosis, that is, awareness-gnosis (*rig pa'i ye shes*). Again, like the category of “process” (*las rim*), the concept of connections (“*don sbyar*,” or “*dang sbyor*”) between the elements and gnosis appears to be original to the tantras. Klong chen pa's creation of the analytical category “*don sbyar*” functions to piece together these related ideas.

The category of *grol tshul*, the “way in which [the elements] are free” includes a single quotation from the *Mu tig phreng ba*:

Because space is empty even within its pervasiveness,
It is freed as substantiality.

Because wind appears in the absence of any object of
apprehension,
It is freed as the activity of drawing entities together.

¹⁷ *phyi 'byung ba lnga nyid thun mong rang rgyud kyi chos yin te / phyir snang ba'i 'byung ba thams cad rang gi rig pa nyid dang sbyor bas na thun mong gi chos yin te / de yang dbye ba 'di lta ste / sa'i mtshan nyid sra bar byed pa nyid kyang / rig pa'i ye shes skye 'jig dang bral bar sbyor ro / rlung gi mtshan nyid 'degs par byed pa nyid kyang / rig pa'i ye shes thogs pa med pa dang sbyor ro / me'i mtshan nyid bsreg par byed pa nyid kyang / rig pa'i ye shes nyon mongs pa'i dbang du ma song ba nyid dang sbyor ro / chu'i mtshan nyid rlan par byed pa nyid kyang / rig pa'i ye shes yul kun la 'jug pa dang sbyor ro / nam mkha'i mtshan nyid yangs pa nyid kyang / rig pa'i mtshan nyid rgya ma chad pa dang sbyar bar bya'o. Klong chen pa 1999b: 8; 2000: 272a–272b; 1983 v. 4: 109–110.*

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Because fire consumes offerings in a ripening way,
It is freed as movement, separating the pure from the stale.¹⁸

Because earth generates and supports,
It is freed as a limitless voidness lacking substance.

Because water is wet in a way that draws things together
It is free as burning, as the activity of ripening.¹⁹

This quotation indicates that each of the elements becomes free into qualities and activities which represent the opposite of their standard qualities. Thus, space is free as substantiality (*ḍngos po*), earth is free as emptiness (*stong ba*), water is free as burning (*bsreg pa*), and wind is free as cohesion (*sdud pa*), a characteristic usually associated with water in elemental literature.²⁰ The theory at play in this example is that each material element becomes free in the inversion of its ordinary qualities. This quotation appears within the *Mu tig phreng ba*'s fourth chapter which deals broadly with the concept of "natural freedom" (*rang grol*), one of five kinds of ontological freedom that are classically discussed in Rdzogs chen snying thig literature, along with primordial freedom (*ye grol*); naked freedom (*cer grol*); unbounded freedom (*mtha'*

¹⁸ The A 'dzom, Sde dge and Mang yul editions of the *Theg mchog mdzod* have "bskyod cing dangs brnyings 'byed par grol." The A 'dzom edition of the *Mu tig phreng ba* has "bskyod cing dangs snyigs 'byed par grol" indicating, I suspect, a correction in the A 'dzom edition of the tantra. A fuller examination of the philological details of this line, with reference to additional variants of both the *Theg mchog mdzod* and the *Rgyud bcu bdun*, is included in my forthcoming dissertation. See the following footnote for the complete transliteration of this passage in both texts.

¹⁹ *nam mkha' nyid ni khyab stong pas / nam mkha' nyid ni ḍngos par grol / rlung ni gzung yul med snang bas / ḍngos po sdud pa'i las su grol / me ni smin byed byin za bas / bskyod cing dangs brnyings 'byed par grol / sa ni skyed byed 'degs pas na / ḍngos med mtha' yas stong par grol / chu ni sdud byed rlan pas na / sreg byed smin pa'i las so grol.* Klong chen pa 1999b: 8–9; 2000: 272b; 1983 v. 4: 110: See also Anonymous 2000a: 448–449, *nam mkha' nyid ni khyab stong pas / nam mkha' nyid ni ḍngos par grol / rlung ni gzung yul med snang bas / ḍngos po sdud pa'i las su grol / me ni smin byed byin za bas / bskyod cing dangs snyigs 'byed par grol / sa ni skyed byed bdegs pas na / ḍngos med mtha' yas stong par grol / chu ni sdud byed rlan pas na / sreg byed smin pa'i las so grol.* The primary difference between these two editions is found in the line "bskyod cing dangs brnyings 'byed par grol."

²⁰ A verse from the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* describes the dissolution of the material world in the context of the attainment of the mandalas, as such: "Space will emerge solid as indestructible reality. That will burn, and then the fire too will be incinerated. Turning into water, it will cascade in the appropriate way. This world-system will be dispersed – All will be emptied and will collapse." Klong chen pa's *Phyogs bcu mun sel* commentary to this verse offers a similar rationale to that which we find in the *Mug tig phreng ba*, in particular, that "space" will resolve as solid. See Dorje 1987: 608–609.

grol); and unique freedom (*gcig grol*).²¹ The *Mu tig phreng ba* devotes significant discussion to the natural freedom of the elements in this chapter which, in making the argument for the ontological freedom of both the material world of the container (*snod*) and its contents (*bcud*, i.e., sentient beings), postulates that the five elements, as the most fundamental constituents of that material reality, are themselves effortlessly and naturally free.²²

The final category in this section discusses “the way in which [the elements] are complete” (*tshang tshul*). It contains a somewhat more elaborate set of subsequent *sa bcad* and a greater amount of exposition compared with the other “unique” categories discussed above. All quotations in this section are derived from the *Mu tig phreng ba*’s seventh chapter which, according to the chapter’s colophon, deals with “the perfection of all phenomena of cyclic existence and transcendence in oneself” (*'khor 'das kyi chos thabs cad rang la rdzogs par bstan pa*).²³ Some of the quotations that Klong chen pa references in the chapter use the word “*tshang ba*” while others use the synonym “*rdzogs pa*” following the *Mu tig phreng ba* chapter seven colophon. Each of the quotations used by Klong chen pa refer to the idea that the apparent phenomena of both the relative and ultimate existential domains, construed as cyclic existence (*'khor*) and transcendence (*'das*), are present in ordinary aspects of human experience. This includes the physical realities of the body and environment, the mental realities of cognition and affect, and the contemplative reality of awareness (*rig pa*). The following quotation from this section is expressive of this idea:

Awareness is precisely as follows:
The sun and the moon are wisdom and method;
birth is the ground,
women, the path.

Planets are the pinnacle of realization, stars are phenomena,
clouds are all-pervasive compassion;
trees are phenomenality, the expansive path;
mountains are the view, unchanging;
crags are the reality body, created but free from degradation.

Roots are the common basis of all phenomena;
branches are the limbs of enlightenment;
the trunk is the single taste of emptiness.

²¹ This list is present in multiple tantras but can be found in the *The Pearl Garland Tantra (Mu tig phreng ba'i rgyud)*. See Anonymous 2000a: 445–446.

²² Ibid.: 436–454.

²³ Ibid.: 520.

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Petals are the pervasive expanse of reality;
flowers are the light of primordial gnosis;
fruits are the self-perfected three bodies.

Sound is the sensory domain of the nature of reality;
smell is Buddha's speech resounding;
taste is the taste of the bliss of experience;
touch is great meditative absorption.

Musical instruments are the perfect mandala of the five lights;
ribbons are creative luminosity manifesting as color;
canopies are protective wisdom;
parasols are the key points of instruction (*man ngag*);
victory banners are realization, manifest enlightenment.

To the nature of mind, all things
exist in a manner spontaneous and primordial.
So it follows that rational thought and all manifest phenomena
are merely symbols.²⁴

Additional quotations in this section continue the metaphor, drawing connections between the outer world and the physical and sensory features of the yogic body as it is implicated in religious experience. This idea is summarized at the conclusion of this section as follows:

The phenomena which display going beyond suffering
abide completely within the body and mind.

If you ask what is the essence of self-evident awareness,
it is the perfection of reality, however it appears.²⁵

Like the categories of "process" (*las rim*), "metaphors" (*don sbyar*), and

²⁴ *rig pa nyid la 'di lta ste/ nyi ma zla ba shes rab thabs/ skyes pa gzhi la bud med lam / gza' ni rtogs tshad skar ma chos / sprin ni thugs rje kun la khyab / shing ni chos nyid rgyas pa'i lam / ri ni lta ba 'gyur ba med / brag ni chos sku skye 'jig bral / rtsa ba chos kun rgyu gcig pa / yal ga byang chub yan lag nyid / stong pa stong par ro gcig ste / 'dab ma khyab byed chos kyi dbyings / me tog ye shes sgron ma nyid / 'bras bu sku gsum rang rdzogs so / sgra ni chos nyid yul gyi sgra / dri ni sangs rgyas gsungs du grags / ro ni nyams myong bde ba'i ro / reg ni bsam gtan chen po'o / rol mo 'od lnga'i dkyil 'khor rdzogs / 'phan ni kha dog gsal ba'i gdangs / gdugs ni skyob pa shes rab ste/ bla bre man ngag che ba'i gnad / rgyal mtshan rtogs pa mngon sangs rgyas / sems nyid ngo la chos rnam ni / ye nas lhun grub tshul du gnas/ de phyir blo dang dangos po yi / chos rnam thams cad btags pa tsam. Klong chen pa 1999b: 14–15; 2000: 274b–275a; 1983 v. 4: 114–115.*

²⁵ *myang 'das mtshon pa'i chos de rnam / lus dang sems la rdzogs par gnas. Klong chen pa 1999b: 14; 2000: 274b; 1983 v. 4: 114.*

“the way in which they are free” (*grol tshul*), the “way in which they are complete” (*tshang tshul*) also appears to be drawing on ideas that are distinctive of and original to the tantras. These become analytical categories in Klong chen pa’s list, less as a matter of second-order analysis of the philosophy of the elements, and more as a way of faithfully capturing and reproducing salient ideas as they appear in the tantras.

Thus, despite there being relatively few expository remarks from Klong chen pa in this chapter overall, a great deal of contextual meaning is borne out through its organizational structure. Indeed, through the *sa bcad* we can begin to see the kind of curatorial work that Klong chen pa is engaged in, including the systematic reorganization of ideas from the tantras, and the incorporation of elemental concepts and terms of art into the text’s elaborate *sa bcad*. While this kind of curatorial activity is rather characteristic of the *Theg mchog mdzod* and the *Mdzod bdun* broadly, it is also through these organizational categories that the unique aspects of the text’s elemental theory begin to emerge. The remainder of the essay examines two organizational motifs in the chapter and the philosophical propositions they entail.

4. Outer and Inner, Greater and Lesser Elements

Two dichotomies form the primary structural organization of the chapter. These are, firstly, the distinction between outer and inner elements, followed closely by the distinction between “greater” and “lesser” elements. The distinction between the outer and inner elements is as old and venerable a concept as the elements themselves in Buddhist thought. Some of the earliest references to this idea in Buddhist literatures are found among the oldest known texts of the Pāli *Suttapitaka*.²⁶ In these contexts, as well as that of the subsequent *Abhidharma* literatures, some of which had popular continuities in Tibet, the distinction between the inner and outer elements defines the domains of personal and environmental kinds of matter as they are experienced by a human subject: The “interior” and “exterior” forms of a given element are understood as dual manifestations of what is in fact a continuously experienceable material quality. Thus, earth’s solidity, water’s fluidity, fire’s temperature, and wind’s motility, manifest alternately as external material and meteorological phenomena in the surrounding environment, and internally as bodily

²⁶ The *Mahāhatthipadopamasutta* (MN28), *Mahārāhulovādasutta* (MN62), and *Dhātuvibhāṅgasutta* (MN140), describe the internal and external elements in virtually uniform detail. See Bhikkhu Nanamoly and Bhikkhu Bodhi 1995.

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tissues, fluids, metabolic and respiratory processes.²⁷

Klong chen pa elaborates on these conventions regarding the outer and inner elements paradigm by describing the distinction between the two in terms of support relations. Early in the chapter, he writes “The five outer *form* (*gzugs*) elements originate as the appearing of the enviroing world and the basis [for the existence of] sentient beings. The five *actual* (*dngos*) inner elements originate as the basis for mind and awareness.”²⁸ This quote introduces a series of symmetries which define the mode of relationship between the outer and inner elements to one between “form” (*gzugs*)—the outer material elements as the enviroing world in which sentient beings operate—and the “actual” (*dngos*) inner reality of the elements which are the basis for the operation of “mind” and “awareness,” in other words, the physical body. The “form elements,” Klong chen pa continues, “are the presently externally appearing earth, water, fire, wind, and space. The *actual* elements are the five bodily properties of ‘hardness’ and so forth, which create the support conditions for the five inner elements.”²⁹

Klong chen pa’s rearticulation of the outer and inner elements paradigm, which up until this point is consistent with earlier Buddhist renderings, is thereafter complicated by a second distinction made between “great” (*’byung ba chen po*) and “lesser” (*’byung chung*) elements. In the same passage as the above, Klong chen pa writes,

There is no such thing as the sentient being or Buddha who does not rely upon these two [inner and outer elements]. Sentient beings operate within the space (*dbyings*) of straying (*’khrul ba*) with respect to the elements, but they innately possess the Great Elements (*’byung ba chen po*). Buddhas reside in the space of the elements beginning with ‘earth lacking firmness’ and they experience the total exhaustion of that which shrouds the five Great Elements.³⁰

The term “Great Elements” (*mahābhūta* or *’byung ba chen po*) is of course

²⁷ See Vasubandhu 1982b: 31b–32a; Vasubandhu 1990: 68–70.

²⁸ *phyi ’byung gzugs lnga ni sems can gyi rten snod kyi snang bar chags pa / nang ’byung dngos lnga ni sems dang rig pa’i rten du chags pa ste*. Klong chen pa 1999b: 5; 2000: 271a; 1983 v. 4: 107.

²⁹ *’byung ba dngos ni lus kyi chos sra ba sa la sogs pa lnga ste nang ’byung gi rten di gyur pa lnga’o*. Klong chen pa 1999b: 3–4; 2000: 270b–271a; 1983 v. 4: 107.

³⁰ *’di gnyis la ma brten pa sems can dang sangs rgyas gang yang med de / sems can rnams ’byung lnga ’khrul pa’i dbyings la spyod cing / ’byung ba chen po rang chas su ldan / sangs rgyas rnam don dam dag po’i ’byung lnga sa sra ba med pa la sogs pa lnga’i dbyings la bzhugs shing / ’byung ba chen po lnga’i dri ma shin tu zad pa la spyod do / de’ang ’byung ba chen po ni ’od gsal ba’i ye shes kha dog lnga ldan yin la*. Klong chen pa 1999b: 3; 2000: 270b; 1983 v. 4: 106.

not original to Klong chen pa's oeuvre. Indeed, the definition of the elements as "great" is a matter of concern in Buddhist literatures as early as Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (*Chos mngon pa'i mdzod kyi bshad pa*) where the elements are defined as "great" because they are the primary matter out of which secondary forms of matter are derived.³¹ For Klong chen pa, instead, the Great Elements represent a distinct ontological category. He writes, "moreover, the Great Elements possess the five colors of wisdom illumination; the lesser elements are the quintet of earth, water, fire, wind, and space."³² Thus for Klong chen pa the Great Elements are also equivalent to the five lights (*'od gsal lnga*), which are both present in the "lighting up of the ground" and correspondingly implicated in the contemplative phenomenon known as "rainbow body," wherein the coarse bodily elements are resolved into their ultimate nature as light. This appears to be what is meant, in the earlier quote, by the phrase "earth lacking firmness," as well as the idea that Buddhas experience the exhaustion of "that which shrouds the Great Elements." Elaborating on this, Klong chen pa writes "having purified the five confused elements, you arrive at the space of the five lights and meet with the internal expanse. This is equivalent to the Great Elements, which are [in reality] the manifestation of the [Ground's] spontaneous presence (*lhun grub*)."³³

That Klong chen pa would proffer his own creative etymology of *'byung ba*, or *'byung ba chen po*, however, is not particularly unusual or innovative in the *Rdzogs chen snying thig* context. There are numerous instances among the *Rgyud bcu bdun* and their early commentaries of the creation of original definitions of *'byung ba*. The *Mu tig phreng ba* commentary, for instance, addresses the etymology of *'byung ba*, writing, "when we call them *emergent* elements (*'byung ba*), out of what do they emerge (*'byung*)? They emerge from the basic state of reality, thus they are 'emergent' elements." Here the etymology plays on the literal sense of *'byung ba*, an intransitive verb meaning "to come about," or "to be created," in a way that reappropriates its conventional usage in service of advancing a distinctive *Rdzogs chen*

³¹ See Vasubandhu 1982b: 31b: "The four great elements are so called because they are the support of all other form" (*'byung ba chen po bzhi rnam zhes bya ba ni 'di dag gzugs gzhan thams chad kyi rten nyid du rigs pa'i phyir na chen po nyid do*). See also Vasubandhu 1990: 68–69: *bhūtāni pṛthivīdhāturaptejovāyudhātavaḥ | ityete catvāraḥ svalakṣaṇopādāyarūpadhāranād dhātavaścatoṣṭāri mahābhūtāny ucyante | mahattoameṣāṃ sarvānyarūpāśrayatvenaudārikatoṣṭā*.

³² *de'ang 'byung ba chen po ni 'od gsal ba'i ye shes kha dog lnga ldan yin la / 'byung chung ni sa chu me rlung nam mkha' lnga'o*. Klong chen pa 1999b: 3; 2000: 270b; 1983 v. 4: 106.

³³ *khrul 'byung lnga dag nas 'od gsal lnga klong du phebs te nang dbyings la thug pa dang / lhun grub kyi snang ba'i 'byung chen dang pa bzhin no*. Klong chen pa 1999b: 3; 2000: 270b; 1983 v. 4: 106.

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philosophical idea.³⁴ Rather than being “emergent” in the sense of “that out of which secondary forms of matter emerge,” here the elements themselves *emerge* from the basic state (*gnas lugs*). A similar definition is found in the *Sgra thal 'gyur* commentary:

Why are they called [emergent] elements (*'byung ba*)? Because, on the basis of inert matter (*bem po*), the capacity for awareness (*rig bcas*) emerges. And on the basis of the outer elements, the internal bodily elements emerge. On the basis of the internal bodily elements, the direct experience of awareness-gnosis emerges. On the basis of the direct experience of awareness, the fruition of Buddhahood emerges. Thus, we call them emergent elements.³⁵

This definition, which also plays on the verbal sense of the term *'byung ba*, offers a rationale for how the materiality of the body becomes serviceable to the soteriological goals of contemplative practice: How, through a series of support-relations, even inert matter (*bem po*) is constitutive of Buddhahood. Klong chen pa's most important influence in this regard, however, appears to be the *Rig pa rang shar*. The following etymology is quoted directly by Klong chen pa:

The etymology of the elements (*'byung ba*) is as follows:
 They do not emerge (*ma byung*) through being formed—
 they are the spontaneously present (*lhun gyis grub*)
 elements.
 They create all—thus they are Great elements (*'byung ba chen po*).
 Thoroughly pervading sentient beings, they are Great Elements.
 Arising instantaneously, they are Great Elements.
 Existing unto themselves (*rang la yod pa*), they are Great Elements.
 Having no source (*'byung ba med pa*), they are Great Elements.
 Perceived collectively, they are Great Elements.

³⁴ The *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* has “‘*thob pa dang/ yong ba/ skye ba/ 'bab pa*” as synonyms. See Krang dbyi sun, ed. 1985.

³⁵ *'byung ba zhes pa ni gang 'byung bar byed na / bem po la rten nas rig bcas kyi mtshan nyid 'byung bar byed la / phyi rol gyi 'byung ba bzhi la brten nas / nang lus kyi 'byung ba bzhi 'byung bar byed na / 'byung ba zhes bya la / nang lus kyi 'byung ba bzhi la brten nas / rig pa'i ye shes mngon sum du 'byung bar byed pas na / 'byung ba zhes bya la / rig pa mngon gsum la brten nas sangs rgyas kyi 'bras bu thogs pa med par 'byung bas na 'byung ba zhes bya'o*. Vimalamitra 2009 v. 107: 144.

This is the etymology of the Great Elements.³⁶

This quotation contains both motifs that are present in Klong chen pa's etymology of the elements, namely, the play on the verbal sense of *'byung ba* which reverses the conventional definition of elements as productive of secondary forms of matter, as well as the use of the modifier "great" (*chen po*) to frame the elements according to proprietary Rdzogs chen snying thig ideas. In this regard, as we've already established, it is not particularly surprising that Klong chen pa draws upon a reservoir of previously established ideas and distinctive informational practices arising from the tantras, since the *Theg mchog mdzod* is functionally a commentary to those texts. The innovation on the part of Klong chen pa with respect to the "great elements" is rather the creation of a "lesser elements" category, which thereby establishes a theoretical hierarchy of matter corresponding to different registers of actualization: the Great elements being equivalent to clear light (*'od gsal*) itself, and the lesser elements—the material process of earth, water, fire, wind, and space that sentient beings interact with at the level of ordinary perception—merely that which "shrouds" them.

5. Elemental Contemplative Practices

By way of concluding, I would like to return momentarily to the issue of elemental contemplative practices—those that 'Jigs med gling pa described as "acceptable to omit." References to these practices known as "yogas of the four sounds [of the Elements]" (*sgra bzhi rnal sbyor*), which are discussed at length in the *Rgyud bcu bdun*, and particularly in the *Sgra thal 'gyur*, are conspicuously all but entirely absent from the fifteenth chapter of the *Theg mchog mdzod*. They are referred to only once by Klong chen pa in the chapter, who simply writes that "the *Sgra thal 'gyur* discusses attaining ordinary *siddhis* by training on the sounds and meanings of the elements," followed by brief quotations from the *Sgra thal 'gyur* and *Gsang ba spyod pa sa bon gyi rgyud*.³⁷

³⁶ *'byung ba'i nges tshig 'di lta ste / byas pas ma byung lhun gyis grub / skyed par byed pas 'byung ba yin / 'gro ba yongs la khyab pas 'byung ba chen po yin / cig car skye bas 'byung ba chen po yin / rang la yod pas 'byung ba chen po yin / 'gyur ba med pas 'byung ba chen po yin / mthun par snang bas 'byung ba chen po yin / 'byung ba chen po'i ches tshig de bzhi no.* Anonymous 2000c: 464.

³⁷ Klong chen pa 1999b: 10; 2000: 273a; 1983 v. 4: 111. Klong chen pa also includes two brief quotations on the *sgra bzhi rnal 'byor*, one from the *Sgra thal 'gyur* which reads: *de yi sgra don bye brag gis / spyi yi rnam pa nges bstan pa / gzugs la bslabs pas lus zad 'gyur / sgra yis skad rnam shes par 'gyur / dris ni bcud kyis len pa 'grub / ros ni dangos po bdud rtsir 'gyur*. A second quotation from the *Gsang ba spyod pa sa bon gyi*

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However, elemental contemplative practices are discussed at greater length elsewhere in the *Theg mchog mdzod*: The seventeenth chapter, which describes itself as the chapter on “the gradual path which involves taking an object of meditation” (*dmigs pa yul gyi blo rim can*), consists in a compendium of all the associated Rdzogs chen snying thig practices which make use of a referential object as the locus of meditation. Here the elemental practices are included as part of the repertoire of twenty-one practices which “focus the mind” (*sems 'dzin*).³⁸ There is also a discussion of a kind of “extracting the essence” (*bcud len*) practice that is described as “equalizing the tastes of the elements” (*'byung ba ro snyoms pa*).³⁹ They are also referenced in the eighteenth chapter which deals with the topic of direct transcendence (*thod rgal*) practices, where they are included as preliminary practices (*sngon 'gro*), preceding the practices for distinguishing cyclic existence and transcendence (*'khor 'das ru shan*).⁴⁰ There, the elemental practices are entitled “guidance to the three enlightened bodies” (*sku gsum gyi sna 'khrid*).

To readers who are sensitive to such elemental matters, or who are familiar with the tantras and their contents, it is odd that an entire chapter devoted to the elements should include so little information about these practices which appear so frequently in the very texts that Klong chen pa so expressly seeks to preserve. I think that there is a rationale for this: Klong chen pa's organizational strategies situate the practices of engaging with the elements, perhaps narrowly, within the topic of contemplative practices rather than the topic of human embodiment, which characterizes chapters eleven through fifteen of the *Theg mchog mdzod*. While such a strategy is consistent with Klong chen pa's general approach to organization and the synthesis of Rdzogs chen snying thig ideas broadly, it also functionally extracts and isolates the elemental contemplative practices from the broader domain of elemental ideas in which they appear to be so foundationally situated in the earlier tantras. While such a minor difference is, understandably, easily overlooked by modern readers of Rdzogs chen, it's nevertheless significant. In the context of the *Sgra thal 'gyur* and its accompanying commentary, where the elemental contemplative practices are most elaborately fleshed out in Rdzogs chen snying thig literature, the elements function as both material and informational categories governing knowledge of time, seasonal change, medicine, and physiology. In each of these contexts,

rgyud reads: *sa chu me rlung 'byung ba bzhi'i / sgra don rnams la goms pa yi / rigs drug rnams kyi rang skad kyi / mngon shes 'char ba 'dis 'grub bo*.

³⁸ Klong chen pa 1999b: 86; 2000: 302a; 1983 v. 4: 164.

³⁹ Klong chen pa 1999b: 90; 2000: 303b; 1983 v. 4: 167.

⁴⁰ Klong chen pa 1999b: 136–144; 2000: 321b–324a; 1983 v. 4: 200–205.

knowledge of the elements, and of elemental body typologies and elemental time-keeping practices which are thereby derived, are theorized as having direct implications for how practitioners approach contemplative practices involving the elements, and arguably the entire repertoire of practices included in the Rdzogs chen snying thig path. The elements, in this sense, comprise something like a total system. This is all to say that, while much of the elements and elemental theories from the earlier tradition ultimately found expression in the *Theg mchog mdzod*, a great deal more, evidently, did not.

In this regard, it is very possible that these vaster elemental knowledge systems, of which the “four sounds” practices were a key part, were already on the margins of Rdzogs chen snying thig scholarship by Klong chen pa’s time, at least one century after the *Sgra thal ’gyur* commentary is theorized to have begun circulating. Indeed, the trajectory of the declining popularity of these contemplative practices in Rdzogs chen snying thig thought over the course of multiple centuries remains, perhaps unsurprisingly, unclear. I think we can say, however, that the relative absence of the broader context of elemental knowledge systems—namely, knowledge of elemental physiology, elemental time, and the correspondences between the two—in the work of Klong chen pa is undoubtedly among the conditions of possibility for ’jigs med gling pa’s statement that “there are few at present who are established in these practices.” At the very least this raises an important question, best left to future studies, of the extent to which the four sounds of the elements practices could remain present in the tradition independent of the ambient cultures of elemental thought in which they appear to have first originated, like fire without air.

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