

A Sketch of the Life of the Bāḥ gnas sPrul sku Thub bstan mdo sngags bshad sgrub rgyal mtshan (1888–1964)*

Dylan Esler

(84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha;
Institut Orientaliste de Louvain, CIOL)

Introduction

he Bāḥ gnas monastery was founded in Khams in 1728 by Bāḥ gnas Rig 'dzin rgya mtsho, the first Bāḥ gnas hierarch, and *Bya bral* Padma rgyal mtshan. The monastery is a stronghold of the Byang gter lineage in Eastern Tibet, with close links to 'Khor gdong monastery. The present article will present a sketch of the life of an important throne-holder of modern times, the sixth Bāḥ gnas incarnation, Thub bstan mdo sngags bshad sgrub rgyal mtshan (1888–1964).

The article is divided into six parts, which deal, respectively, with our protagonist's incarnational background, his studies, spiritual practice, teaching career and religious activities, students, and death. The material presented here is mainly drawn from the biography compiled in Chos dbyings' *Byang gter thub bstan rdo rje brag gi chos 'byung rig 'dzin brgyud pa'i rtogs brjod ngo mtshar gnam gyi phreng ba*,¹ given that one of the principal tasks of the FCHNT project is to assess and translate the biographies of the lineage masters found in this work.

1. Incarnational Background

The name of Tshul khriims bzang po (aka sPrul sku Tshul lo, 1884–ca. 1957) is well known to all those engaged in the study of the Northern

* I am grateful to Tenpa Tsering Batsang for his help in clarifying a passage in the biography studied in this article, and to the other members of the FCHNT project, particularly Stéphane Arguillère, Jean-Luc Achard, Cécile Ducher, and Jay Valentine, for inviting me to the Paris conference where this paper was first presented. Both Stéphane Arguillère and Martin Boord offered helpful comments regarding specific ritual details alluded to in the biography.

¹ Chos dbyings 2015, pp. 825–832. Reference has also been made to the next biography in the volume (*Ibid.*, pp. 833–840), devoted to Ye shes bdud 'dul, bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan's successor.

Treasures tradition.² He was a disciple of *gTer ston* bSod rgyal las rab gling pa (1856–1926), wrote his biography,³ and was the root teacher of 'Chi med rig 'dzin Rinpoche (aka C.R. Lama, 1922–2002), who can be considered the 'godfather' of Byang gter studies in the West.⁴ One of Tshul khrim bzang po's main disciples was the sixth Bāḥ gnas⁵ Rig 'dzin, Thub bstan mdo sngags bshad sgrub rgyal mtshan, the subject of this article. If we turn backwards to the previous Bāḥ gnas hierarchs, the founder of Bāḥ gnas monastery was the first Bāḥ gnas Guru Rig 'dzin (rgya mtsho), who was the teacher of Khams sprul Shes rab me 'bar (1752–1815), the uncle of Nus ldan rdo rje.⁶ Rig 'dzin rgya mtsho had been renowned as an incarnation of Hūṃkara, one of the eight awareness-holders of India,⁷ of gNyags Jñānakumāra,⁸ of Ra Lotsāwa (1016–ca. 1128),⁹ and of Vairocana,¹⁰ among others. It is said that he established Bāḥ gnas monastery, the full name of which is Bāḥ gnas bsam gtan o rgyan chos gling, in a solitary place where a *bāḥ* syllable had dissolved—hence the name Bāḥ gnas ('the abode of *bāḥ*'). He himself is held to have displayed numerous indications of accomplishment, such as leaving footprints in solid rock, and so forth.

The second incarnation was sKal bzang padma 'od 'bar; the third was O rgyan bstan 'dzin; the fourth was Rig 'dzin chos dbyings rdo rje; and the fifth was Chos grags 'jigs bral rgya mtsho, a monk

² Among Tshul khrim bzang po's important works, we are fortunate that Stéphane Arguillère has published a full French translation of his *Manual of the Transparent Intent of Samantabhadra*: Tülku Tsullo 2016. An English translation is under preparation (Arguillère forthcoming 2026). For the historical context of such practice manuals in the Northern Treasures tradition, see Arguillère 2022.

³ Matteo Pistono's popular account of *gTer ston* bSod rgyal's life (Pistono 2014) is mainly based on *sPrul sku* Tshul lo's biography.

⁴ On whom, see Das 2021, https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Chime-Rigdzin/TBRC_P1KG9680 (accessed 22 February 2025).

⁵ In Chos dbyings' account, the word is spelt 'Bāḥ gnas' (rather than Baḥ gnas) throughout.

⁶ Arguillère 2021, <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/khamtrul-sherab-mebar/13688> (accessed 22 February 2025).

⁷ Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, vol. 1, pp. 475–477.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 601–605. On gNyags Jñānakumāra's role in the process of codifying the rDzogs chen approach, see Esler 2023, pp. 24f; on his function as an early transmitter of tantric instructions, including those related to Vajrakīlaya, see Cantwell 2022, p. 144.

⁹ Gardner 2009, https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Ra-Lotsawa/TBRC_P3143 (accessed 22 February 2025).

¹⁰ On the great translator Vairocana, see Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, vol. 1, pp. 538–540. The *'Dra 'bag chen mo*, Vairocana's extensive biography, is ascribed to his direct disciple, g.Yu sgra snying po (for an English translation, see Jinba Palmo 2004), but historically speaking can be dated no earlier than the 12th century, possibly even to the 14th century and to figures from the Zur lineage. See Kapstein 2008, p. 280, 283.

upholding the Vinaya. The sixth incarnation, Thub bstan mdo sngags bshad sgrub rgyal mtshan (aka *sPrul sku rGyal lo*), was born in rTa'u county in 1888 as the son of one Grags pa tshe ring of the sTo clan and his wife Cog 'e mgon po mtsho; it is held that the child's mother had the marks of a sky-farer (Skt. *dākinī*) and that her son was born amidst numerous wondrous signs. Basing himself on various prophecies, *gSang 'dzin mGon po dbang rgyal* (1845–1915),¹¹ the nephew and successor of 'Khor gdong *gTer chen Nus ldan rdo rje* (1802–1864),¹² identified him as the incarnation of the previous throne-holder of Bāḥ gnas. When he was three years old¹³ in 1891, the year of the female iron hare, he was enthroned in Bāḥ gnas monastery.

2. Studies

The following year marked the beginning of his formal studies. He is said to have learnt to read and write with great ease. mGon po dbang rgyal bestowed on him empowerments (*dbang*) and directives (*khrid*), and the accomplished master (*grub brnyes*) of Bāḥ gnas, Ye shes bstan 'dzin, gave him the doctrinal injunctions related to the Northern Treasures tradition. Tshul khriṃs bzang po supervised his full education in the sūtras, tantras, and traditional sciences, with a particular emphasis on the Northern Treasures tradition, and declared that their master-disciple relationship went back many lifetimes. He was ordained as a monk by the third rDo grub chen Rinpoche, 'Jigs med bstan pa'i nyi ma (1865–1926),¹⁴ who also gave him appropriate teachings.

The ninth rDo rje brag *Rig 'dzin*, Thub bstan chos dbang mnyam nyid rdo rje (1886–1933), was invited to Bāḥ gnas monastery (probably in 1921),¹⁵ and bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan received from him teachings related to the treasures of lHa brag.¹⁶ From *Rig 'dzin gar gyi dbang*

¹¹ Arguillère 2023, <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Gonpo-Wanggyel/13817> (accessed 22 February 2025).

¹² Arguillère 2018, https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Khordong-Terchen-Nuden-Dorje/TBRC_P1KG9679 (accessed 22 February 2025).

¹³ Four years old by Tibetan reckoning. Throughout this article I use the common European system, even though Chos dbyings' account uses the Tibetan system instead.

¹⁴ Nyoshul Khenpo 2005, pp. 323–326.

¹⁵ Chhosphel 2013, https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Ninth-Rigdzin-Chenpo-Nyamnyi-Dorje/TBRC_P728 (accessed 22 February 2025).

¹⁶ According to Khenpo Ju Tenkyong's keynote lecture, "The bKa' brgyad in the Byang gter Tradition," delivered at the First International Conference on the Northern Treasures (Paris, 18 October 2024), the term *lHa brag* is used when referring specifically to the Five Treasures (*mdzod lnga*) of *Rig 'dzin rgod ldem*'s core revelations, designating as it does the place of their revelation, Zang zang lha

phyug (1858–1930) he received the complete two volumes of the *sNying thig*¹⁷ and other associated teachings. When in dKar mdzes monastery the venerable Tshe mchog gling pa (?),¹⁸ the head dGe lugs master, bestowed upon numerous masters and incarnations of the gSar ma monasteries the empowerments relating to the Guhyasamāja, Cakrasamvara, and Vajrabhairava tantras, he received them at the same time. Interestingly, when bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan bestowed the empowerments and scriptural authorizations (*lung*) of the *sNying thig ya bzhi*, the dGe lugs master received these transmissions from him, so that each of them was in turn master and disciple of the other. Given the highly esoteric nature of this particular cycle of rDzogs chen teachings,¹⁹ this episode shows a remarkable degree of religious exchange between masters belonging to different schools, which incidentally may have been more frequent than we think in the eastern regions of Tibet in the 19th and 20th centuries.²⁰

3. *Spiritual Practice and Signs of Accomplishment*

bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan was not only assiduous in his studies but also in his spiritual practice, and the signs of accomplishment²¹ were quick to manifest. For instance, while he was in a retreat focused on the Byang gter Vajrakīlaya,²² the sound of the *kīlaya* mantra resounded day and night inside the maṇḍala for the duration of the retreat. Similarly, when he was in retreat performing the propitiation (*bsnyen*

brag. On the five treasures discovered by Rig 'dzin rgod ldem, see Boord 1993, pp. 25f. For more on this topic, see Achard 2024, <https://fchnt.hypotheses.org/2433> (accessed 21 February 2025).

¹⁷ There are many rNying ma lineages bearing this name, but it is likely that this refers more specifically to the *Klong chen snying thig*. In most editions, however, the collection is comprised of three volumes. Cf. van Schaik 2004, p. 379.

¹⁸ This probably refers to dPal ldan bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (b. 19th century), the fifth incarnation of Tshe mchog gling yongs 'dzin Ye shes rgyal mtshan (1713–1793), the tutor to the eighth Dalai Lama, 'Jam dpal rgya mtsho (1758–1804).

¹⁹ On this collection and its overarching structure, see Germano 1992, pp. 26–37.

²⁰ See in particular three chapters in Mathes and Coura's 2021 *Nonsectarianism (ris med) in 19th- and 20th-Century Eastern Tibet*: Duckworth 2021, pp. 66–80; Pearcey 2021, pp. 81–92; and Pang 2021, pp. 93–116.

²¹ For a systematic study of such signs of accomplishment and their significance, based on some of the early sources of the rNying ma tradition, see Esler forthcoming.

²² Although it has been suggested that Vajrakīlaya is an incorrect spelling of the dative (Vajrakīlāya) form of Vajrakīla (Boord 1993, p. 5), it cannot be excluded that the traditional form Vajrakīlaya (*not* Vajrakīlāya) is in fact correct and represents the second person singular of the active causative imperative of the verb \sqrt{kil} ('to stake' or 'to bind', thus meaning 'bind!'). See Mayer 1997, p. 620, n. 5. It should be mentioned that Boord recognizes the legitimacy of the *verbal* form *kīlaya*, which as he notes occurs widely in Sanskrit texts and mantras.

pa; Skt. *sevā*) for the Byang gter Thugs sgrub (that is, the secret Guruyoga practice according to the Northern Treasures system, which is focused on the wrathful form of Padmasambhava),²³ he beheld the face of Padmasambhava himself. While he was engaged in the meditations related to the *Transparent Intent of Samantabhadra* (*Kun bzang dGongs pa zang thal*),²⁴ sPrul sku Tshul lo praised him and declared that the Bāḥ gnas incarnation had reached the criterion of realization that consists in remaining undistractedly at all times in the state of the view without grasping, thus confirming bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan's experiential mastery of the highest teachings of rDzogs chen.

On another occasion, when he was on his way to 'Ba' grub pa monastery (aka O rgyan theg mchog gling) to bestow the empowerments and scriptural authorizations of the Northern Treasures tradition, his mule fainted and fell over, yet the master remained sitting in the sky unsupported. Since he was the head master of the local ruler of Hor brag, he would regularly perform religious rituals on his behalf. Once, while he was presiding over a Vajrakīlaya ceremony to suppress negative forces for this ruler, at the very point in the ritual when the signs of success were supposed to manifest, those present saw the footprint of an ogress (Skt. *rākṣasī*), which was an indication that the devils summoned had indeed appeared in the ritual enclosure²⁵ and were waiting to be liberated.

On yet another occasion, again while travelling to 'Ba' grub pa monastery, he told his party that they should stop for the night, although they had not yet reached the resting station. His servants asked whether they might not go on a little further, as there was a valley with abundant grass and a stream, which would provide a more congenial resting spot. bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan would not listen, however, and was adamant that they should not go on. As it turned out, it became apparent the next day that a group of brigands had been lying in ambush in the valley that night. If bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan and his party had continued on their route, they would most certainly have been assaulted. Later, when the whole story was related to his hosts in 'Ba' grub pa monastery, sGa rje sPrul sku declared that the Bāḥ gnas sPrul sku's perceptivity of all that is invisible to ordinary mortals

²³ Extensive translations of these and other Byang gter ritual texts have been provided by C.R. Lama in the *Byang-gter Teaching and Practice According to the Tradition of Khordong Monastery*, a series in twenty volumes translated with James Low and others between 1975 and 1985.

²⁴ On this collection, see Turpeinen 2015 and 2018.

²⁵ The text (Chos dbyings 2015, p. 828) reads *sri khang* ('house for the devils'), referring to a ritual structure used to capture the negative forces that are to be tamed and suppressed in the course of the ritual. This is usually a skull which is buried in the ground once the devils have been trapped inside it.

was truly unhindered.

Some of his closest disciples saw him as Padmasambhava in person. For example, one morning, as his faithful attendant dGe rtse a yang opened the door to his bedroom, instead of seeing his master asleep in his bed, he beheld a swirling lake with a blossoming lotus stem at its centre and Padmasambhava seated upon it.²⁶ He immediately closed his eyes and prayed with one-pointed devotion, and when he reopened them, he saw that his master had resumed his ordinary form.

4. Religious Activities and Teaching Career

One of bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan's important activities was to reintroduce the 'correct' ritual procedures of rDo rje brag monastery in Central Tibet to his seat of Bāḥ gnas monastery. This is itself an interesting phenomenon, for it shows that even at times when the Northern Treasures tradition was successfully flourishing in Eastern Tibet, where, after all, it had inspired the rise of the fully fledged lineage of the New Treasures of 'Khor gdong (*'Khor gdong gter gсар*), this cycle of treasures having been revealed in close dependence on, and as a continuation of, the original Northern Treasures,²⁷ the masters of the tradition in Eastern Tibet continued to look upon the mother monastery of rDo rje brag as the original and authoritative source of their ritual and spiritual knowledge, which it behoved them to regularly reconnect to. Thus, when bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan was in rDo rje brag in Central Tibet, he spent a lot of time observing and studying the ritual procedures of the monastery, which he subsequently introduced to Bāḥ gnas monastery. In particular, he took pains to establish in Bāḥ gnas the tradition of the oblation of the twenty-ninth day of the twelfth month (*dgu gtor*), a ritual where the negativities of the previous year are repelled, alternating every year between the eight injunctions (*bka' brgyad*) and Yamāntaka.²⁸ It is

²⁶ Traditionally, viewing the master as identical to Padmasambhava, the fountainhead of the rNying ma tradition, is a sign of having perfected the qualities associated with pure vision and devotion, which are considered crucial to realizing the state of the Great Completeness. See Patrul Rinpoche 2011, p. 310; Dilgo Khyentse 1988, p. 83; and (with direct reference to the Northern Treasures tradition) Tülku Tsullo 2016, p. 171. For some psychologically astute observations on this topic, see Low 2013, p. 109.

²⁷ On the ways in which more recent treasure revelations serve to refresh the blessings of the lineage, representing and 'repackaging' older treasure models in a manner that fits new circumstances, see Cantwell 2020, pp. 12f.

²⁸ On the need to consider the Yamāntaka cycle, at least in its earlier instantiations, separately from the framework of the eight injunctions under which it is often subsumed, see Arguillère 2024, pp. 305–307. The tradition of alternating yearly the oblation of the twenty-ninth day (*dgu gtor*) between the eight injunctions and

important to mention that these are very extensive rituals, which necessitate the presence of scores of well-trained monks and ritual specialists, let alone considerable resources for their performance.²⁹ bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan also erected supports of the buddhas' body, speech, and mind and established a new seminary (*bshad grwa*) at Bāḥ gnas.

In terms of his teaching activity at the seminary, he would regularly provide explanations on the *Guhyaḡarbhā-tantra*,³⁰ 'Jigs med gling pa's (1729–1798) *Treasury of Qualities* (*Yon tan mdzod*),³¹ the *Thirty-Seven Procedures of the Heirs of the Victorious Ones* (*rGyal sras lag len*) by Thogs med bzang po (1295–1369), the *Five Nails of the Northern Treasures* preliminary practices, the *Three Sets of Vows*,³² and the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* of Śāntideva (8th century).³³

He also spread the empowerments and scriptural authorizations of the Northern Treasures in 'Ba' grub pa monastery, as well as at the monastery of Dar rtse mdo (a town in East Tibet, aka Kangding). His fame as a Byang gter master was such that several prominent masters and incarnations from Central Tibet, including the rDo rje brag rGyal sras sPrul sku, the Chu bzang sPrul sku, and sKal ldan nram dag rdo rje, came to him in order to receive his teachings and instructions, and he took them on as disciples. Even the tenth rDo rje brag Rig 'dzin, Thub bstan 'jigs med nram grol rgya mtsho (1936–2024), repeatedly requested that he come to Central Tibet so that he could receive his teachings, but this had to be put off due to the political upheavals that occurred in Tibet at the time.

5. Principal Students

bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan's principal disciple was the Bāḥ gnas sPrul sku Ye shes bdud 'dul (1935–2017). It will be recalled that one of bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan's teachers was the accomplished master of Bāḥ gnas, Ye shes bstan 'dzin, and it was bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan himself

Yamāntaka is also observed at the Dorje Drak monastery in Shimla (Stéphane Arguillère: personal communication).

²⁹ On the annual cycle of rituals as performed in 'Khor gdong monastery, see Low 2013, pp. 151–166.

³⁰ See Dorje 1987.

³¹ On which, see van Schaik 2004, p. 25.

³² This refers to *Ascertaining the Three Sets of Vows* by mNga' ris Pañchen Padma dbang rgyal (1487–1542), a foundational text on the three sets of vows. For an English translation that also contains a commentary by the late Dudjom Rinpoche (1904–1987), see Dudjom Rinpoche 1996.

³³ Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, translated by Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton (Śāntideva 1998). For background to this text's popularity in the 19th century Tibetan context, see Viehbeck 2016.

who recognized Ye shes bdud 'dul as Ye shes bstan 'dzin's incarnation, performing the hair-cutting ceremony and giving him his religious name. bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan carefully supervised Ye shes bdud 'dul's education and declared that Ye shes bdud 'dul would be the holder of his lineage.³⁴ Later, after bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan's death, Ye shes bdud 'dul would go on to study with *mKhan po* 'Jigs med phun tshogs (1933–2004),³⁵ and when he orchestrated the reconstruction of Bāḥ gnas monastery in the wake of the destruction wreaked by the Cultural Revolution, *mKhan po* 'Jigs med phun tshogs was invited as guest of honour for the consecration (*rab gnas*) of the new temple and the simultaneous enthronement of bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan's own incarnation, an event which was held in 1991.³⁶

Apart from Ye shes bdud 'dul, bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan's biographer Chos dbyings lists the following figures as his important disciples:³⁷ *mChog sprul* Chos kyi nyi ma,³⁸ the rDo rje brag rGyal sras *sPrul sku*, the Chu bzang *sPrul sku*, sKal ldan rnam dag rdo rje, rGya nag *mChog sprul* of 'Ba' grub pa monastery, A myes sngags tsha Rinpoche, rGya gar *sPrul sku* of 'Ba' grub pa monastery, gZhi chen dBon *sprul*, mGo tsha *mChog sprul*, Rag khros ma 'das *sPrul sku*, sTag rtse kun bzang nyi ma, *mKhan po* Ku bod, La thang *mChog sprul* dGra gcan, the Shungs 'byung *Yang sprul*, the 'Khor gdong *sPrul sku* Vajra,³⁹ rGyal sras *sPrul sku*, Rag shul *sPrul sku* rTogs ldan, lCags mdud *sPrul sku* A snyan, Gong thal *sPrul sku* Byang chub rdo rje, and Lama sKal bzang sbyin pa of the Upper Six Dākinī (*dāki drug stod*) monastery.

6. Death

In 1964 at the age of seventy-six, the Bāḥ gnas *sPrul sku* bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan passed away amidst wondrous signs that included earthquakes and rainbow-hued clouds billowing in the sky; it is said that he went straight to the palace of Lotus Light on the Copper-Coloured Mountain, the pure field of Padmasambhava. *sPrul sku* Chos kyi nyi ma performed the clarifying instructions (*gsal 'debs*) for the heart pledge (*thugs dam*). The latter refers to the profound meditative state attained by advanced practitioners at the moment of death, which

³⁴ Chos dbyings 2015, pp. 833f.

³⁵ On this famous master and his activity, see Germano 1998, pp. 53–94.

³⁶ Chos dbyings 2015, p. 838.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 831.

³⁸ Along with *sPrul sku* Lung rtogs, one of the two main reincarnations of *sPrul sku* Tshul lo.

³⁹ This could be a reference to sKal ldan gling pa (aka bDe chen rol ba'i **rdo rje** and Padma dbang gi rgyal po **rdo rje** rgyal mtshan, ca. 1886–ca. 1922), the third incarnation of Nus ldan rdo rje.

manifests outwardly as a forestalling of the usual signs of physical decay, with the body retaining a life-like appearance for several days or weeks after ‘clinical death’.⁴⁰ In this context, the clarifying instructions are intended to refresh the memory of the practitioner by pointing out the nature of mind on the verge of the moment of death.

bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan’s incarnation was given the name O rgyan chos grags; he studied both with Ye shes bdud ’dul, bShad sgrub rgyal mtshan’s main disciple and successor, and with *mKhan po* ’Jigs med phun tshogs, and has been pursuing their activities and carrying forth their legacy.

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⁴⁰ Cornu 2024, p. 25; Langouët 2024, p. 180.

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