

bDe chen gling pa (1833–1893) and the cycle of the dGongs pa zang thal — A case of transmission of a *Byang gter* teaching in the New Bon tradition*

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In the present paper, I would like to introduce a very limited and actually sideward topic involving bDe chen gling pa, a later proponent of the New Bon (*bon gsar*) system,¹ and his connection to the core cycle of the Northern Treasures (*Byang gter*) teachings, namely the *Transparent Contemplation of Samantabhadra* (*Kun tu bzang po dgongs pa zang thal*).²

Such a connection of Bon with the Northern Treasures is not really a surprising issue since Bon has its own *Byang gter* system which predates its rnying ma counterpart by a few centuries. The presence of these two similarly named tradition has brought some authors into thinking that the founder of the Bon po *Byang gter* system, i.e., dPon gsas khyung rgod rtsal (b. 1175)³ is the same person as Rig 'dzin rgod ldem (1337–1408), the founder of what one can define as the Buddhist

* I would like to thank Marianne Ginalska for her kind suggestions and corrections on earlier drafts of this paper and for a repeated help on the mp4 film presented during the conference on the Northern Treasures (Paris, October 19, 2024).

¹ On bDe chen gling pa and New Bon, see Achard, *Bonpo Hidden Treasures*, *passim*. For more historical data on New Bon, see *id.*, “Kun grol grags pa and the revelation of the *Secret Treasury of the Sky Dancers*”; “Erroneous Conceptions Frequently Shared about New Bon (*Bon gsar*)”; and more specifically “A Fourfold Set of Emanations, Variegated Currents and Alien Elements : Contribution to the Origins and Early Development of New Bön and its Revelations”.

² For a complete annotated and descriptive catalogue of the *Kun bzang dgongs pa zang thal*, see in particular P. Schwieger, *Die Werksammlungen Kun-tu bzang-po'i dgoñs pa zañ-thal, Ka-dag rañ-byuñ rañ-sar und mkha' 'gro gsañ-ba ye-sés kyi rgyud*, *passim*. See also K. Turpeinen, *Vision of Samantabhadra*, *passim*. See also the list of contents of the 2015 *sNga 'gyur byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgrigs* in Achard, “The Table of Contents of the *Kun bzang dgongs pa zang thal*”.

³ On Khyung rgod rtsal, see the fascinating and impressive paper by R. Vitali, “Feats of an eclectic Bon po master: dByil ston Khyung rgod rtsal's 'das log journey and *gter ma* rediscoveries,” *Revue d'Études Tibétaines*, no. 68, Janvier 2024, pp. 36-68. See also Achard, “A Brief Note on the Northern Treasures of the Bon Tradition”, in *ib.*, pp. 29-31.

side of the Northern Treasures.⁴ This identification is actually wrong since these founders have diverging birth-places, dates of birth, parents' names, and so forth.

1. Exchanges between Bon pos and rNying ma pas

Starting with the late 11th century in Tibet, the literary scene of Tibet has seen quite a few exchanges between Bon pos and other Buddhist adepts. This is in particular visible through borrowings of texts, often in the form of plagiarism, with sometimes decisive changes in the lexicon that is being used, either due to doctrinal necessities—such as transforming *chos sku* into *bon sku* and *vice versa*—or with the intent of evidently hiding the borrowing itself with alterations of specific terms. It has long been thought that Bonpos were responsible for these borrowings—and this is true in many cases—but, as far as Dzogchen teachings are concerned, borrowings by rNying ma authors from Bon texts are, to say the least, far from scarce.

In the context of academic studies focusing on Dzogchen, I should stress here that several cases of borrowings or exchanges between the Bon and the rNying ma traditions have already been demonstrated, starting with the work of Samten Karmay in his PhD thesis entitled *The Great Perfection*.⁵ In this work, S. Karmay has brilliantly demonstrated that a rnying ma tantra included in the *Collection of Ancient Tantras* (*rNying ma rgyud 'bum*)⁶ is actually a slightly disguised copy of a Bon work included in the bon collection known as the *Triple Proclamation of the Great Perfection* (*rDzogs chen bsgrags pa skor gsum*).⁷ The demonstration of the borrowing has been proven due to the presence of

⁴ On rGod ldem's biography see Herweg, *The Hagiography of Rig 'dzin Rgod ldem 'phru can*, as well as the forthcoming translation of his biography by Jay Valentine.

⁵ S.G. Karmay, *The Great Perfection, A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism*, pp. 216-223.

⁶ This is a collection of Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga Tantras that exists in several versions in Tibet and in Bhutan. One of these was first collected by Ratna gling pa (1403–1478) but, to my knowledge, we do not have any copy of it. The most famous are those of mTshams brag and sDe dge, although representing two different “families” of texts. On catalogues of the *rNying ma 'i rgyud 'bum*, see Achar, “La liste des Tantras du *rNying ma 'i rgyud 'bum*”; and *id.*, “Rig 'dzin Tshe dbang mchog grub (1761–1829) et la constitution du *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* de sDe dge”. On the *rNying ma 'i rgyud 'bum* see also, D. Martin, “NGB Historical Notes” and R. Mayer, *A Scripture of the Ancient Tantra Collection*, *passim*.

⁷ The *rDzogs chen bsgrags pa skor gsum* is a large corpus of treasures revealed by bZhod ston dngos grub (12th c.) in 1180 CE in Lho brag mkho mthing. See its structure in Karmay, *A Catalogue of Bon po publications*, pp. 100-103. As its title indicates, the collection is divided into three proclamations (*bsgrags pa*) that were made in the lands of the God (*lha*), of the Nāgas, and humans, respectively in extensive, intermediate and abridged forms.

doxographical elements that do not exist in the rNying ma tradition but are actually present in Bon Dzogchen texts.⁸

I have also shown some examples of these borrowings in my own thesis,⁹ as well as in a paper specifically dedicated to that topic.¹⁰ Thus, the discussion of these exchanges is not really a novelty but it should not come as a surprise since both the Bon and the rNying ma traditions recognize Dzogchen as the “supreme peak” (*yang rtse*) of their system in Nine Vehicles. The commonality of themes discussed in the texts of the Great Perfection in both systems would naturally entail literary exchanges expressed through direct borrowings of entire texts or sections of these.

In the instance I am intending to highlight in this paper, this will be less a case of borrowing than a case of actual transmission of a rnying ma cycle of teachings into a particular tradition known as New Bon (*bon gsar*). In other words, I shall be briefly discussing here how a complex system such as the *Kun bzang dgongs pa zang thal* or *Transparent Contemplation of Samantabhadra*, has been transmitted to a Bon po lineage holder and how it has supposedly been handed over for at least a generation after this transmission. The terrible havocs of the Cultural Revolution (文革) have probably put a definitive end to it.

2. The three kinds of Bon

It is quite well-known that the Bon tradition itself recognizes several categories of Bon, such as Old Bon (*bon rnying*), Eternal Bon (*g.yung drung bon*), and New Bon (*bon gsar*). This classification is the one currently accepted by modern-day Bon pos, even though it has been criticized by some in modern academia. In my opinion, this nevertheless certainly remains the best scheme enabling one to attest of the various kinds of Bon that one may have to differentiate from one another. Indeed, a proponent of Eternal Bon would most evidently not recognize himself in the ritual activities of local priests involved in peculiar rites pertaining to Old Bon, nor would he overtly accept the doctrinal and liturgical bridges elaborated by some masters belonging to the New Bon tradition. The distinction between the three categories remains consequently pertinent. This does not mean that one has to accept the

⁸ The doxographical elements that do not exist in rNying ma text is the reference to the “five categories known as *Bon sgo bzhi mdzod lnga*” and the corpus of the *rGyud bu chung bcu gnyis*. Karmay notes also that the cosmological description of “gShenrab’s former life in four heavens” does not appear in Buddhist texts.

⁹ *L’Essence Perlée du Secret*, p. 215-247. All the “exchanges” I am referring to in this book and here have been made in the context of Dzogchen teachings.

¹⁰ See Achard, “Le Tantra des Vingt-Deux Perles de l’Esprit de Parfaite Pureté — un exemple d’intertextualité entre les traditions Bon po et rNying ma pa”.

traditional chronology that accompanies this threefold classification in Bon work but that one may use it—be it in a simplistic manner—to assess the various categories of Bon one may encounter.

Furthermore, no matter if academia is right or wrong on the issue of these three kinds of Bon, *de facto* evidences show that there was indeed an ancient Bon religious tradition prior to the coming of Buddhism during the imperial period. Its existence is proven by a few Dunhuang manuscripts, as well as ancient texts such as those discovered in the *dGa' thang bum pa stūpa*.¹¹ It is difficult to describe it as a perfectly organized system with specific doctrinal representations since the picture one may elaborate about it, based on these documents, is rather that of a set of loosely connected spiritual beliefs and apotropaic rituals involving sacrifices that would certainly repulse post-dynastic Bonpos. Be it as it may, Old Bon is still existing today, mostly in the marches of Tibet, in the Himalayas and in Eastern Tibet. It is quite distinct from Eternal Bon and New Bon, in both their lay and monastic versions.

Regarding the second category of Bon—Eternal Bon—, there is very little—if any—evidence of the existence of such a highly developed doctrinal tradition of Bon prior to the late 10th-early 11th century, but what is certain is that it obviously did not spring out of nowhere. Traditional histories of Eternal Bon trace the origins of this system back to *sTon pa gshen rab mi bo*, a Bon Buddha said to have been born in an extraordinary remote past in 'Ol mo lung-ring, the capital of *sTag gzig* country. Some of his disciples or later heirs in the lineage were said to have introduced Eternal Bon in Tibet although there is apparently not a single trace of this tradition during the imperial period: no ruins of monasteries, temples, libraries, etc. This issue remains quite obscure and difficult to understand since, to my knowledge, we still have no clear idea who was concretely involved in the development that led to its appearance as a comprehensive tradition with vast corpuses of texts already available by the 11th century.

For instance, the sole revelations of *gter ston gShen chen Klu dga'* (996–1035),¹² with their complete sets of Sūtras, Tantras, and Dzogchen teachings, already places Eternal Bon on a par with other burgeoning traditions. At that time, there was probably not much difference between a so-called Bon po and a practitioner of what was to soon become the *rNying ma* tradition.

Despite the darkness that obscures its origins, Eternal Bon appears on the religious scene of Tibet around the late 10th century, soon

¹¹ See Bellezza, "Straddling the Millennial Divide", as well as Karmay, "A New Discovery of Ancient Bon Manuscripts", *passim*.

¹² On this early and extremely important treasure revealer, see D. Martin, *Unearthing Bon Treasures*.

developing under the impetus of various treasure revealers and lay masters. The origins of its monastic tradition raises also complex historical issues involving quasi-legendary figures who played a role in both the bon po and the post-dynastic vinaya lineages. The part taken by an individual such as Bla chen dGongs pa rab gsal in both traditions still remains to be correctly evaluated.¹³

3. *The spread of New Bon (Bon gsar)*

Owing to its important development in Eastern Tibet in the 18th century, some have felt compelled to date the origins of New Bon from that late period. This is actually a mistake. New Bon claims to come from sets of works that Dran pa nam mkha' and Vairocana elaborated together in a spirit of ecumenism, bridging Eternal Bon and Buddhist teachings together.¹⁴ However, according to the later tradition, emperor Khri srong lde btsan (r. 755–797) was not pleased with the results and ordered that these texts should in no way be spread but rather hidden as treasures.

Some of these treasures started to be rediscovered in the 14th century by sPrul sku Blo ldan snying po (b. 1360) who regarded himself as an emanation of Padmasambhava. For instance, one of his secret names was Pad 'byung Nam mkha' rin chen, Pad 'byung being the abbreviated form of Padma 'byung gnas, i.e., Padmasambhava (or rather Padmākara). However, if the role played by Padmasambhava in New Bon is certainly recurrent, one should avoid generalizations on this topic since, in some specific lineages of New Bon, it has been clearly overestimated. The problem of New Bon's origins is complex because they stand beyond clear historical limits. Furthermore, many of New Bon's lineage holders consider themselves as "pure bon pos" whereas the official heads of Bon, namely of Eternal Bon, regard New Bon as an altered, not to say degenerated form of Bon, essentially contaminated by rnying ma teachings.

Thus, starting with the 14th century, New Bon has been gradually

¹³ On dGongs pa rab gsal, see Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang Chos kyi nyi ma, *Bla chen byang chub sems dpa'i dgongs pa rab gsal gyi rnam par thar pa*, and 'Jigs med Rigs pa'i blo gros, *Bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal gyi rnam thar thub bstan khang bzang*. See also Willock, "Thu'u bkwan's Literary Adaptations of the Life of Dgongs pa rab gsal" which discusses Thu'u bkwan's sources and the date of dGongs pa rab gsal's death. Furthermore, see bSod nams dbang rgyal, *Bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal dang 'brel ba'i dpyad gleng phran bu* who briefly investigates dGongs pa rab gsal and his being a Bon po monk prior to convert to Buddhism. On the bon po version of the story, see Karmay, *The Treasury of Good Sayings*, pp. 107-109.

¹⁴ This is how the proto-history of New Bon is depicted in gSang sngags gling pa's *Dran pa bka' thang*, although the expression "New Bon" (*bon gsar*) does not appear in this text.

expanding, mostly in Eastern Tibet, and by the 18th century, it boomed to an unprecedented level with the large diffusions of the discoveries and compositions made by Sangs rgyas gling pa (1705–1735) and the first Kun grol grags pa (1700–1769?).

The diffusion of Sangs rgyas gling pa and Kun grol grags pa teachings paved the way for other treasure revealers, and this tradition soon reached its peak with bDe chen gling pa. bDe chen gling pa himself was a lineage holder of both Eternal Bon and New Bon, even though masters associated with the hierarchy of Eternal Bon do not recognize him as a member of their lineage. This is their official position, despite the fact that he himself acknowledge being a direct disciple of the 22nd sMan ri Abbot, Nyi ma bstan 'dzin (b. 1813), one of the main Eternal Bon authority of the period. Be it as it may, in Eastern Tibet, his teachings have been widely spread down to the present day, in particular his own meditation system based on the tradition of *A khrid*, an ancient cycle of Dzogchen instructions dating back to the late 10th century.

4. *bDe chen gling pa,*
a Bon po sprul sku of Rig 'dzin rgod ldem

In his own tradition, bDe chen gling pa is a kind of unusual representative of Bon in general since he recognizes that he has incarnated several times as Buddhist masters of the past. He describes his previous lives as being dispatched into four categories: outer births, inner births, secret births, and innermost secret births, all counting seven incarnations. The seventh in each are those of bDe chen gling pa himself.

1. *Table of bDe chen gling pa's rebirths*

I. Outer births	II. Inner births
1. Drang srong dri med snying po 2. gShen po don ldan Ye shes 'byung gnas 3. Kun dga' bo (Ānanda) 4. Bru ston 'Dul ba rgyal mtshan 5. mTha' bzhi rang grol Mu la ratna (Nam mkha' rin chen) 6. Mi pham mgon po 7. bDe chen gling pa	1. g.Yung drung dbang ldan 2. Khri thog par tswa 3. lCe tsha mkhar bu 4. Vairocana (Bee ro tsa na) 5. Nyi ma'i rgyal po 6. g.Yu thog Yon tan mgon po 7. Mi 'gyur Tshe dbang gSang sngags grags pa

III. Secret births	IV. Innermost secret births
<p>1. gZhod ston dNgos grub grags pa 2. rGod kyid ldem 'phru can 3. rMa lha thog pa (rMa ston lcam me) 4. rDo rje gling pa 5. Khod po Blo gros thogs med 6. Sangs rgyas gling pa (Byang chub rdo rje) 7. Rig 'dzin kun grol gsang ba rtsal</p>	<p>1. g.Yung drung bdud 'dul thog med rtsal 2. dGa' rab snying po 3. Padma rdo rje rtsal 4. rDo rje thog khros 5. Grub thob Tsā ri ba Gling ras 6. Mi shigs rdo rje 7. g.Yung drung bDud 'dul thogs med rtsal</p>

On the above table, his Buddhist rebirths are highlighted in bold. We can see that, out of the forty-nine names listed there, ten of these rebirths are those of Buddhist masters. The one that should retain our attention is his second incarnation among his secret births, namely his manifesting as the famed rnying ma *gter ston* Rig 'dzin rgod ldem, or according to a longer version of his name given in the table, Rig 'dzin rgod kyid ldem 'phru can, the historical founder of the Northern Treasures.

As we shall now see, in his *Innermost Secret Autobiography* entitled *the Crown Jewel of the Lord of Nāgas* (*Yang gsang rnam thar klu dbang gtsug gi nor bu*),¹⁵ bDe chen gling pa had his own manner of telling the story of his rebirth as Rig 'dzin rgod ldem. The account is very short and anecdotal but unfortunately not to the point of providing convincing or reasonable details about the revelation of the main cycle of the Northern Treasures, the *Kun bzang dgongs pa zang thal*.

First of all bDe chen gling pa quotes from a text entitled *The Prophetic Treasure of Amoghapāśa* (*Don yod zhags pa'i gter lung*). This text does not actually exist under such a title but it corresponds to a work known as *The Red Copper Lasso, the Mirror Clarifying the Auspicious Periods* (*Dus tshod rten 'brel gsal ba'i me long zangs zhags dmar po*)¹⁶ which was discovered by Sangs rgyas gling pa. Actually, the prophecy given

¹⁵ This innermost secret (*yang gsang*) autobiography is not dated. However, it is mentioned by title in the abridged biography entitled *sKal ldan dgyes pa'i dga' ston* which was written sometime after 1873 (see Achard, *Bonpo Hidden Treasures*, p. 174). It is also mentioned in bDe chen gling pa's *rNam thar chen mo* (p. 179) but it is unclear if this is the result of a later editorial addition (Achard, *op. cit.*, p. 173).

¹⁶ Sangs rgyas gling pa, *Sangs rgyas don yod zhags pa'i bsgrub pa las: Dus tshod rten 'brel gsal ba'i me long zangs zhags dmar po*, *Bon gyi brten 'gyur chen mo*, vol. 24, pp. 665-718.

in the text is put in the mouth of Padmasambhava and addressed to the 8th century translator Vairocana but, as an incarnation of Vairocana himself, bDe chen gling pa considers that it also naturally applies to him.

In the prophecy that introduces the actual narration, it is said:

*Furthermore, when two hundred years had elapsed after that,
In the vicinity of Mount bKra bzang in the eastern direction,
The fortunate being rGod kyi ldem 'phru can
Will extract profound Treasures and protect the tibetan subjects.¹⁷*

The first verse—"Furthermore, when two hundred years had elapsed after that"—refers to the incarnations immediately preceding that of rGod ldem. They are not explicitly listed in Sangs rgyas gling pa's text, except for unnamed groups of treasure revealers, paṇḍits and siddhas that preceded him by two hundred years.

The second verse says:

In the vicinity of Mount Trazang in the eastern direction,

Mount Ri bo bkra bzang is generally thought to be located in the northern direction. It is actually localized in western Tibet in the county of Byang, and the fact that it is described here as being in the eastern direction logically shows that the original speaker enunciating the prophecy was himself abiding in an even more western location than the actual localization of the mountain. It is in the vicinity of that place that rGod ldem was born in 1337.¹⁸

The third verse of the prophecy says:

The fortunate being rGod kyi ldem 'phru can

rGod ldem is described here as a fortunate being (*las can*) in the sense that he is regarded as the incarnation of one of Padmasambhava's twenty-five disciples, known as sNa nam rDo rje bdud 'joms. rGod

¹⁷ *Klu dbang gtsug gi nor bu*, p. 44 : *de yang 'di nas gnyis brgya 'das pa'i dus/ shar phyogs ri bo bkra bzang nye 'dabs su/ las ldan skyes bu rgod kyi ldem 'phru can/ zab mo'i gter 'don bod 'bangs skyobs par byed/*. The text of the *Red Copper Lasso* (*Zangs zhags dmar po*) is nearly identical (p. 704-705, variants in bold): *de yang 'di nas gnyis brgya* (p. 705) '*das pa'i dus/ shar phyogs ri bo bkrag bzangs nye 'dabs na: las can skyes bu rgod kyis ldem 'phru can: zab mo gter ston bod 'bangs skyo* (sic!) *bar byed*..

¹⁸ Mount Ri bo bkra bzang is precisely located in the Tho yor nag po district in Byang. There are caves there where Padmasambhava is said to have stayed (voir Rig 'dzin rgod ldem, *Ri bo bkra bzang gi gnas bshad*, p. 147). For its early association with "the Hor of pre-imperial period", see Bellezza, *Spirit-Mediums*, p. 282. On Tho yor nag po, see also Hazod, "Imperial Central Tibet," p. 172.

Idem actual name was dNgos grub rgyal mtshan. His nickname rGod kyi ldem 'phru can refers to the incredible growing of vulture feathers that started to appear in his hair when he was twelve (in 1348 according to our comput), and that eventually turned into a tuft of white hair when he was twenty-one (in 1357).¹⁹

Finally, the last verse of the prophecy says:

Will extract profound Treasures and protect the tibetan subjects.

This verse makes references to rGod ldem's spiritual activities, starting with his excavation of numerous treasures that will eventually constitute the core of the Northern Treasures corpus. Among these is the famed cycle of the *Transparent Contemplation of Samantabhadra* (*Kun bzang dgongs pa zang thal*) which will remain the central collection of Dzogchen teachings within the Jangter tradition down to the present day.

The mention of the protection of the Tibetan people refers to the connection rGod ldem was supposed to develop with the Gung thang kings, even though his destiny was actually elsewhere. These Gung thang kings failed to support the treasure system initiated by rGod ldem²⁰ who eventually traveled south, towards Sikkim, intensively spreading the teachings he had recovered as treasures.

We are now coming to the main account of bDe chen gling pa's previous birth as Rig 'dzin rgod ldem. As he starts his narration, bDe chen gling pa explains that when he, as Rig 'dzin rgod ldem, went to retrieve the Treasures at Mount bKra bzang, he experienced an incredible sense of elation when he met with O rgyan Padmasambhava on the top of the mountain. This meeting is not included in the original story written in the first person by rGod ldem himself in the *dGongs pa zang*

¹⁹ It is very unlikely that actual vulture feathers grew into rGod ldem's hair, despite their being the cause of his famous nickname. It is more probable that a kind of *canities subita* syndrome affected him at this stage of his life, although this condition generally impacts the entire hair, not a few tufts looking like vulture feathers. It is also said in traditional medicine that tarantula bites (or other similar spiders) can cause a sudden whitening of hair (if bitten on the head) but, to my knowledge, this is not sufficiently documented to explain the phenomena. On *canities subita*, see the reference *in fine* in the bibliography under M. Nahm. This may also be a case of poliosis.

²⁰ "(There were) numerous voices that raised concern about these texts and considered them as forgeries. Some Sa skya advisers in the following of the Gung thang kings were clearly against the revealed literature. (...) there were groups or individuals hostile to the *terma* tradition, their main reason for casting doubt upon the revelatory literature as a whole being that they regarded it as entirely made up by the *gter stons* and as being devoid of an uninterrupted line of transmission" (Achar, "The History of the *Transparent Contemplation of Samantabhadra* as Portrayed in Jamyang Sönam Gyeltsen's *Garland of Jewels*" (forthcoming)).

thal.²¹ This is therefore an anecdotal detail that was added by bDe chen gling pa.

In the original story narrated by rGod ldem,²² some atmospheric events are described and they are synthesized by bDe chen gling pa, reporting that turquoise mists filled the area and that there was a gentle rain of nectar that fell on the treasure site. In the original story, rGod ldem explains that a heavy rain fell all around and that numerous other atmospheric events accompanied him and his assistants on their way back, after the revelation of the treasure.

bDe chen gling pa adds another detail, referring to the appearance of black birds and their melodious songs gathering around them while they were descending the slopes of the mountain. He also mentions herds of deer running around the mountain, as if they were circum-ambulating it. He then adds that he has persistent memories of these pleasant events but one should note that rGod ldem does not provide such details despite his quite comprehensive account of the revelation itself.

bDe chen gling pa also recalls his visit to the temple of Gram pa lha khang where he witnessed several atmospheric wonders. This temple is one of the twelve edifices known as “border-taming temples” (*mtha’ ’dul lha khang*) that were built by king Srong btsan sgam po in order to both control the demoness that embodies the landscape of Tibet, and to protect the frontiers of the kingdom.²³ This temple built in southern Tibet is the one that is located on the left buttock of the demoness in the traditional depiction of the temples constructed on the various regions of Tibet corresponding to specific body parts of the demoness.²⁴

Seeing the miraculous atmospheric events that occurred when he arrived there, rGod ldem felt compelled to offer a golden libation. He then entered the temple and saw a wrathful leonine figure having the form of Vaiśravaṇa. In bDe chen gling pa’s narration of the event, it is unclear if rGod ldem had a vision or if he saw a statue that looked unusual to him.

Without apparently any link with the visit to the Gram pa temple, he reports that by merely looking at the yellow scrolls (*shog ser*) of the

²¹ See the translation of this first-hand account in Achar, “Revisiting the Revelation of the Gongpa Zangthel”, and a its analytical summary in *id.*, “Notes on the History of the Revelation of the Treasure (*gTer bton pa’i lo rgyus*), *passim*.”

²² *Id.*

²³ It is located east of modern Lha rtse township.

²⁴ In Sangs rgyas gling pa’s celebrated *Ma ’ongs lung bstan*, it is described as being associated with the left hip of the demoness. See Vitali, “The narrative of Srong btsan sgam po’i subjugation of the demoness”, p. 103 and p. 174.

treasures,²⁵ their meaning would appear clear to him and that the scrolls themselves were quite numerous. rGod ldem's biography by Nyi ma bzang po gives a slightly different picture: rGod ldem appears to have difficulties transcribing the symbolic scripts written on these scrolls and it even seems that all the scrolls were not translated during his lifetime.

The reference to the large number of these scrolls seems however to fit with the classic narration associated with this discovery. What sounds rather odd to me is that bDe chen gling pa seems to say that he had these yellow scrolls in his own hands, something that is most certainly doubtful: even if these have survived the passage of time, there are great chances that they have been kept among the family descendants of rGod ldem or by his official later incarnations, either in Ri bo bkra bzang, Zang zang lha brag, or in rDo rje brag, the main monastery of the Northern Treasures.

The prophetic account closes on a quick iconographic description in which bDe chen gling pa depicts Rig 'dzin rGod ldem as wearing a secret attire (*gsang ba'i chas ldan*) and as holding a book and a trident (*khatvāṅga*). This hardly fits with most depictions of rGod ldem, in which he generally holds a casket, or a vajra and a phurpa, etc.

Despite all these contradictions with earlier narrations and descriptions originally made by rGod ldem, bDe chen gling pa sees a convergence between his previous rebirth as rGod ldem and the fact that he eventually received the complete transmission of the *Transparent Contemplation of Samantabhadra*.

The convergence occurred in the year 1859, an interesting period for bDe chen gling pa which he started by engaging in a retreat in Brag gsum g.yu mtsho where he stayed the time necessary to transcribe some yellow scrolls that he had discovered the year before. Among these, were the original scrolls containing the cycle known as the *sKu gsum dgongs 'dus*.²⁶ After departing from his retreat, bDe chen gling pa journeyed to the southern shores of the Brag gsum turquoise lake,

²⁵ Very often, original *gter ma* texts are written on yellow scrolls of various size and length. See Thondup, *Hidden Teachings of Tibet*, pp. 68-70 (and illustrations 12-19 in the pictures insert of the book).

²⁶ This is bDe chen gling pa's unique discovery of a Dzogchen cycle of teachings, included in vol. 2 of his *Collected Revelations*. See Achard, *Bon po Hidden Treasures*, pp. 19-24 (covering texts #31-41). It is interesting to note that he discovered this cycle the same year that he received the transmission of the *dGongs pa zang thal*, although he presents the discovery as having happened before this transmission. Also, given the place dedicated to the *bKa' brgyad* teachings in the Northern Treasures, it is noteworthy to add that this *sKu gsum dgongs 'dus* cycle is included within the larger corpus of the *bDe gshegs spyi spungs gsang ba thugs kyi brnag pa bka' brgyad yi dam sde dgu'i bsgrub skor* (see Achard, *op. cit.*, p. 19). Note also that the nickname of the *sKu gsum dgongs 'dus* is the *Rig 'dzin gsang sgrub*.

where he came across a casket containing peculiar substances as well as a wide series of assorted artifacts.

Subsequently, he ventured down to Zangs brag rin chen 'bar ba,²⁷ where he unlocked another treasure trove, from which he took out the original yellow scrolls containing the *Bon skyong dgongs 'dus*.²⁸

During that same year, while in Shel brag tshal,²⁹ he fell seriously ill and thought he was actually nearing death. At that time, he had a vision of a red *thig le* entering his central channel (*rtsa dbu ma*) and dissolving within his heart. Upon the completion of this dissolution, he experienced a profound sense of total inner clarity. This miraculous event was followed by an apparition of Sangs rgyas gling pa, manifesting clearly as his former incarnation (he indeed reports in one of his autobiographies that he considered himself as an emanation of Sangs rgyas gling pa). As we have seen above, Sangs rgyas gling pa is counted as the sixth incarnation among his seven secret rebirths.

5. *The meeting with Kun bzang nges don klong yangs*

Later that year, after his recovery, he met Kun bzang Nges don klong yangs (b. 1814) in Chos 'khor gling and gave him the transmission of several of his new Treasures (*gter gsar*), as well as some of his profound Buddhist teachings which he had previously discovered.³⁰

Kun bzang Nges don klong yangs, also known as Rig 'dzin rDo rje gsang ba rtsal, was an important rnying ma master who lived in Kong po and Padma bkod. He wrote an interesting short history of the rNying ma tradition³¹ and authored about twelve volumes of works which have not yet been reprinted, except for two of his autobiographical

²⁷ This is an important mountain and *gter gnas* from the Gyim shod district in Khyung po. bDe chen gling pa found the famed *Ma mo yang snying 'dus pa* there (Achard, *op. cit.*, p. 149). It is said that the place was converted to the Buddha's teachings by Dran pa nam mkha', his wife and sons (*id.*, p. 119). Vairocana, who had accompanied them to this sanctuary, wrote a *dkar chag* and hid it as *gter ma*. The text, entitled *Zangs brag rin chen 'bar ba'i dkar chag rdo rje 'bar ba'i phreng ba zhes bya ba*, was retrieved earlier by bDe chen gling pa, in 1858 (*sa rta*); see *id.*, p. 119, text no. 257.

²⁸ So far, I haven't been able to locate this collection in the sources available to me. It may be the case that the yellow scrolls were not simply transcribed at all.

²⁹ Located in Gyim shod district. It was one of bDe chen gling pa's favorite place where he discovered several of his treasures, including the central work of his Dzogchen cycle, *The Transparency of Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa, Kuntuzangpo's Contemplation according to the Great Perfection's Definitive Meaning* (Nges don rDzogs pa chen po kun bzang dgongs pa 'khor 'das zang thal); see Achard, *op. cit.*, p. 20 (text no. 34).

³⁰ I may be wrong but to my knowledge not a single of bDe chen gling pa's Buddhist *gter ma* has surfaced so far.

³¹ Its title is *Bod du byuñ ba'i gsañ sñags sñā 'gyur gyi bstan 'dzin skyes mchog rim byon gyi rnam thar nor bu'i do śal*. See the bibliography *in fine* for full references.

compositions which have been published by Gene Smith in 1974.³²

From Kun bzang Nges don klong yangs, which he himself called Kun bzang Rin po che, bDe chen gling pa received all the initiations, reading transmissions and instructions of the *rDzogs chen zang thal ma*, namely the *Transparent Contemplation of Samantabhadra* revealed by rGod ldem in 1366. It is owing to this transmission that bDe chen gling pa later diffused these teachings to a small number of his disciples within the New Bon movement.³³

On the same occasion, Kun bzang Nges don klong yangs gave him the transmissions of several other important texts from the rGod ldem revelations, including the *Prayer in Seven Chapters* (*gSol 'debs le'u bdun ma*),³⁴ the *Prayer that Spontaneously Fulfils All wishes* (*bSam pa lhun grub ma*),³⁵ as well as the biographies of the masters of what bDe chen gling pa designates as the "Northern lineage" (*byang brgyud*), namely the Northern Treasures.³⁶ The *Prayer in Seven Chapters* and the *Prayer that Spontaneously Fulfils All Wishes* have become some of the most famous works of this tradition. They were actually found by sPrul sku bZang po grags pa who handed over the original scrolls written in ḍākinī scripts to Rig 'dzin rgod ldem who then transcribed them into Tibetan language.

6. Connections with other Buddhist hierarchs

Some years later, bDe chen gling pa's connections with other Buddhist masters and treasure revealers intensified after he met *gter chen* mChog gyur gling pa (1829–1870), one of the founding members of the Ris

³² These are: 1. *Rig 'dzin rdo rje gsang ba rtsal gyi gsang ba'i rtog brjod ngo mtshar dpyid kyi rgyal mo'i rang sgra*, and 2. *Rig pa 'dzin pa rdo rje gsang ba rtsal gyi rtogs pa brjod pa sgra dbyangs lha mo'i gling bu*. See in the bibliography under Kun bzang Nges don klong yangs.

³³ The meeting between the two masters is recorded as follows by Nges don klong yangs in his long autobiography entitled *The Reed Pipe of the Melodious Goddess* (*sGra dbyangs lha mo'i gling bu* p. 475): "The sDe dge Treasure Revealer, Tshe dbang grags pa [i.e., bDe chen gling pa] came (for a visit) and (on that occasion) I requested the complete empowerments and transmissions of his New Treasures. In return, I gave him the entire transmission, from beginning to end, of the *rDzogs chen zang thal*, as well as the longevity empowerment for the *Iron stalk* of the Northern Treasures (*sde dge gter ston bla ma tshé dbang grags pa phebs par nyid kyi gter gsar yongs su 'dus pa'i dbang lung zhus shingl phar la rdzogs chen zang thal thog mtha' bar gyi lung dangl byang gter lcags sdong tshé dbang phul*).

³⁴ See the complete translation of this text in, *inter alia*, Pearcey, "The Prayer in Seven Chapters", <https://www.lotsawahouse.org/topics/leu-dunma/>.

³⁵ This prayer actually corresponds to the seventh chapter of the *Le'u bdun ma*. See *id.*, "Sampa Lhundrupma", <https://www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/tulku-zangpo-drakpa/leu-dunma-chapter-7>.

³⁶ Achard, *Bon po Hidden Treasures*, p. xxi.

med movement. It was mChog gyur gling pa who gave him one of his favorite secret name: Rig 'dzin Kun grol gsang ba rtsal. He also developed a profound friendship with 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po (1820–1892), and Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899) with whom he exchanged teachings and rare treasure substances (*gter rdzas*), including powerful garuḍa-pills which he gave to Kong sprul and which completely cured the latter from his smallpox.

As far as the Northern Treasures tradition is concerned, there is no mention in his autobiographies of other transmissions received by bDe chen gling pa on this matter. What we know from the same sources is that he gave the full transmission of initiations, reading transmissions, and instructions-guidance to his own son rGyal sras Tshe dbang 'gyur med.³⁷ The latter was born to Karma dPal sgron, one of bDe chen gling pa's consorts who also gave him a daughter named Phrin las lha mo.

Tshe dbang 'gyur med played a decisive role in the spread of his father's Revelations, especially regarding the Dzogchen teachings bDe chen gling pa had himself received from his various masters, including the *Kun bzang dgongs pa zang thal*. He was deeply attracted to Dzogchen teachings and practiced them with great zeal throughout his life. Both father and son were definitely important figures in the further development of Bon and New Bon in Eastern Tibet during the late 19th century. Tshe dbang 'gyur med resumed his father's activities throughout the early decades of the 20th century.

7. Further, modern exchanges between Bon and Buddhists masters

In conclusion, and beyond the sole Northern Treasures, I would like to highlight the fact that exchanges of Dzogchen teachings from Bon pos to Buddhist masters or from Buddhist masters to Bon pos are not really unusual. For instance, we can refer here to several Buddhist lamas who, in the past decades, received teachings on the *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud* — the most important Dzogchen cycle of the entire Bon tradition. Among them are Namkhai Norbu Rinpoché (of Sa skya upbringing), His Holiness the Dalai Lama (of the dGe lugs pa school), as well as others from the bKa' rgyud tradition, and so forth.

As far as the Northern Treasures are concerned, several contemporaneous bon po masters have shown a growing interest in the *dGongs pa zang thal*, although not with the motivation of receiving its

³⁷ His exact dates are still to be clarified. Provided he is identical to Bya btang Tshe dbang 'gyur med, he was still alive in 1912 when he received a transmission from Shar rdza bKra shis rgyal mtshan (1859–1934); see Achard, *Enlightened Rainbows*, p. 77. See also *id.*, *Les Instructions sur le A Primordial*, pp. 106–108 for his abridged biography.

transmission but rather with the intent of reading and studying it outside their own traditional corpuses. This is in particular the case of Yongs 'dzin bsTan 'dzin rnam dag rin po che whose understanding and penetration of Dzogchen teachings are certainly unmatched among living masters of both lineages of the Great Perfection, those of the Bon and rNying ma traditions.

Within the sole *Byang gter* tradition, the recent publication of 63 volumes making up *The Collection of the Cycles of Teachings of the Northern Treasures belonging to the Early Translations* (sNga 'gyur byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgrigs), as shown by the present ANR research project, has rekindled the interest for these works and will certainly encourage further literary explorations delving into the profound richness of this lineage.

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