

KARMIC FORESHADOWING  
ON THE PATH OF FRUITION

NARRATIVE DEVICES IN THE BIOGRAPHIES OF  
NYANG RAL NYI MA 'OD ZER

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The earliest accounts of the first great treasure revealer, Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer (Nyang rel Nyima özer, 1124-1192), are contained within two early biographies. Though both texts contain numerous insertions by later contributors, the core data dealing with Nyi ma 'od zer's life was likely compiled by direct disciples in the early thirteenth century. Titled *The Stainless*<sup>1</sup> and *The Clear Mirror*,<sup>2</sup> these are the main sources consulted in constructing later portraits of the master. Yet in recognizing the many divergences between the two, it appears that little of Nyi ma 'od zer's positivistic past can be confirmed. Only the broad strokes of generalities and basic facts concur whereas the fine details that drive the narrative of his life vary between the biographies such that they compete rather than complement each other. Later biographers, both indigenous and not, selectively wove distinct episodes from each biography into a continuous narrative that, while rendering such issues in the record invisible, succeeded in presenting a coherent, compelling portrait. For a current assessment of Nyi ma 'od zer, however, a less exclusive method provides a more complete introduction to the available information.

For this article, the various historiographical issues in attempting to disentangle the historical from the hagiographical have deliberately been set aside. Instead, the objective is to present the available

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<sup>1</sup> "Sprul sku mnga' bdag chen po'i skyes rabs rnam thar dri ma med pa'i bka' rgya can la ldeb," in *Bka' brgyad bder gshegs 'dus pa'i chos skor*, Vol. 1 (Gangtok: Lama Sonam Tobgay Kazi, 1978), 1-163.

<sup>2</sup> References are to "Bka' brgyad bde shegs 'dus pa'i gter ston myang sprul sku Nyi ma 'od zer gyi rnam thar gsal ba'i me long," in *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa'i chos skor*, Vol. 2 (Paro: Lama Ngodrup, 1979), 199-381. There is a second rescension of this text that is referred to as *Gsal ba'i me long B* (see Bibliography for publication details).

information concerning the early life of Nyi ma 'od zer with an eye towards presentation rather than historical verification. Whereas a successful pursuit of the latter remains dubious due to a lack of corroborating evidence and a prevalence of contradictory data, the episodes themselves remain as vivid as ever. For this reason, it becomes more viable to focus on the narrative devices used by his biographers, which confirm his status as a buddha incarnate and legitimate his later activities as such.

Throughout the genre of Tibetan religious biography, one prominent device relies on the infallible machinations of karmic process which, enhanced by the multivalent potency of Tantric symbolism, legitimate their protagonist as an authentic adept. Past meditative accomplishments function as causal bases for the manifestation of extraordinary phenomena, which also serve as harbingers of the enlightened activities to come. Loaded with vivid imagery, the dreams and designations, signs and visions imbue mundane events with profound significance, thereby indicating the true nature of relative phenomena while confirming the attainment of those who recognize it. Using Tantric hermeneutics, the reader is empowered to extract the genuine significance of these events just as those who witnessed them. Likewise, proper interpretation allows the reader to discern the narrative's prophetic foreshadowing, thus karmic process manifested in Tantric symbols invites the reader to tread the narrative path to 'complete liberation' (*rnam thar*).

Like the biographies, the discussion below follows the chronological progression of Nyi ma 'od zer's final lifetime. Beginning with his parents' dreams at the time of conception, it progresses through his childhood training and concludes with the series of empowerments that precipitate his adult life. This article thus focuses on the episodes that function as karmic indicators of the life that is to come; his maturation as a prominent Nyingmapa and treasure revealer is reserved for a separate discussion.<sup>3</sup> Unlike later indigenous compilations, an episode from one early biography is not presented in exclusion of another. In order to present the full range of legitimately early information concerning Nyi ma 'od zer, redundant episodes with unique details, such as his birth, are presented contiguously, followed by an independent analysis of each. A discussion of the various

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<sup>3</sup> 'Treasure Revelation in the Tibetan Renaissance' is a distinct chapter in my dissertation.

elements of his extended name, Nyang ral pa can nyi ma 'od zer (Nyang Relpachen Nyima özer), is provided as well.

*Oneiric conception and the arrival of the nirmāṇakāya*

The identities of Nyi ma 'od zer's parents are confirmed in his biographical tradition where both their common and initiatory or secret names (*gsang mtshan*) are provided. His father was Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo (Nyangtön Chökyi Khorlo), 'The Nyang teacher, Wheel of Dharma', who continued to hold and transmit the Tantric transmissions of his clan in an unbroken succession. Far less is known of his mother, Jo mo ye shes gron (Jomo Yeshe Drön),<sup>4</sup> 'Lady Lamp of Primordial Gnosis', though *jo mo* is often a title referring to a woman of royal lineage.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps she also hailed from one of the imperial clans, received the title upon marrying into Nyang, or received it posthumously in recognition of her son's dharmic achievements. Little of the parents' own stories remains outside the biographies of their son, however, so it appears that their greatest impact was made in producing him.

The sexual relationship, chemistry and potency they share is somewhat tempered by symbolism and euphemism,<sup>6</sup> but can nevertheless be exposed quite explicitly through interpreting the terms provided. *The Clear Mirror* introduces his mother as 'the female *mudrā*' or consort, specifically referencing her vulva as the 'seal' for his father's phallus, thus passion and sexual intercourse in their relationship as husband and wife is a religious practice, a means to enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> This sets the basis for their invitation of a nirmāṇakāya (*sPrul sku*, the emanation or manifest form of a buddha) through conception. Their secret names detail this even more.

Given that Tantra relies on symbolism to link mundane appearances with their genuine, ultimate aspects, Tantric initiatory names point out the ultimate potential and true nature of the saṃsāric individuals they

<sup>4</sup> Her common name only appears in *Dri ma med pa*, 84.6, 85.2.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout Nyi ma 'od zer's treasures, Ye shes mtsho rgyal, the Princess of Kharchen, is often referred to simply as Jo mo mtsho rgyal, underscoring her royal pedigree. Within Nyi ma 'od zer's biographical literature, she is designated through a wide array of variants, the longest of which is Ye shes mkha' 'gro mtsho rgyal.

<sup>6</sup> See B.L. Phillips, *Consummation and Compassion in Medieval Tibet* (Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Virginia, 2004), 116.

For a detailed discussion of the mechanics of 'urethral suction' and the need for a 'seal' in sexual yoga, as well as an etymology of the term *mudrā*, see D.G. White, *Kiss of the Yoginī* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006), 82-3.

designate. Only *The Stainless* provides the secret name of Nyi ma 'od zer's father: rDo rje dbang phyug rtsal (Dorje Wangchuk Tsel), 'Dynamic Expression of the Powerful Lord Vajra'. Each of these terms needs to be considered individually. *rDo rje* (Skt: *vajra*) is one of the most ubiquitous symbols of Tantric Buddhism. Its symbology textually begins with Indra's lightning bolt in the *Rg Veda* which, when striking the earth, was said to produce diamonds, 'the lord of stones'. This is the most literal translation of the Tibetan *rdo'i rje*. In exoteric Buddhist interpretations, the vajra functions as a scepter where it is often paired with a bell. This dichotomy unites the vajra, skillful means, with its counterpart, wisdom, which are ultimately indifferentiable. These are also considered to be masculine and feminine aspects respectively, thus in Tantric applications such as this one the vajra and bell are sexualized. *rDo rje* is 'twilight language' (*dgons phi skad*; Skt: *saṃdhābhāṣā*), a euphemism for the male phallus. *dBang phyug* literally translates as 'having much power', and so nominalized is rendered 'Powerful Lord'. *rTsal*, 'dynamic expression', has the sense that the individual manifests impersonally, objectively, selflessly, as the play of luminosity; s/he is merely a refraction of enlightened awareness in human form. In sum then, for Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo or rDo rje dbang phyug rtsal, the 'Dynamic Expression of the Powerful Lord Vajra', sexual potency is a defining characteristic. His wife's secret name testifies that each is the ideal counterpart for the other.

The biographies nearly agree on his mother's initiatory name, with one variant dyad. Whereas *The Clear Mirror* names her Padma bde ba rtsal (Pema Dewa Tsel), 'Dynamic Expression of the Blissful Lotus', *The Stainless* reads Pad+ma dbang chen rtsal (Pema Wangchen Tsel), 'Dynamic Expression of the Great Powerful Lotus'. In addition to the literal translation, Padma dbang chen is also an epithet for Hayagriva, Nyi ma 'od zer's future tutelary deity. Here, his mother's initiatory name indicates that he literally is the son of Hayagriva. Thus there is an additional semantic shift in *The Stainless*, but the fundamental significance remains the same, which is demonstrated by a comparison of the parents' initiatory names. The first term is the key: lotus signifies vulva in Tantric symbolism, thus *pad+ma* is the female counterpart to *rdo rje*. In this way, *The Stainless* juxtaposes the two parents with gendered constructions of the same name: rDo rje (vajra, phallus) to Pad+ma (lotus, vulva); dBang phyug (powerful lord, masculine) to dBang chen (great powerful, gender neutral); rTsal (dynamic expression, gender neutral), which is often appended to secret initiatory

names and is identical in word and meaning here. Given that their Tantric names emphasize the ‘great power’ of their genitalia, Nyi ma ’od zer’s parents are defined by their reproductive potential; their primary purpose within the biographies is to conceive together their destined son.

As is typical when comparing these two biographies, whenever the most general elements of an event concur, their details diverge. Both accounts emphasize that his mother had an auspicious dream at the time of conception, yet the symbols and experiences described therein are distinct and even the exact place of conception differs. *The Clear Mirror* recounts that Nyi ma ’od zer was conceived when his parents copulated within the local monastery:

mNga’ bdag nyang nyi ma ’od zer (Ngadak Nyang Nyima özer) was conceived in the body of his mother... at ’Jod pa ser dgon pa in the earth male rabbit year.<sup>8</sup> Concerning the signs of the *nirmāṇakāya*, in his mother’s dream, countless white lions dissolved into her body and a five-pronged golden vajra, having arisen in the sky, was implanted in her womb. She swallowed an outer ocean in one gulp. By purging that out again, she was filled with the three-thousand-fold universe. She consumed a galaxy into her belly and, having mounted the sun and moon, she circled the four continents. A retinue of ladies tossed flowers, prostrated and circumambulated her. Many light rays radiated into her body. Her body was blissful and vibrating (*’gro ba mgyogs pa*). Her radiance spread and so forth – such were the signs that numerously arose. When she told her husband, they were very happy. The father said, “This is a sign that the one who is coming is the magical emanation of a bodhisattva who will benefit transmigrators.” Having said that, they paid homage and performed healing rituals.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This would be 1113, which is an error based on an incorrect rendering of the year’s element. Nyi ma ’od zer was born in 1124, so the year of conception was 1123, the water rabbit year of the second *rab ’byung*. The error is repeated in *Gsal ba ’i me long* B, 108.2.

<sup>9</sup> *mnga’ bdag myang nyi ma ’od zer ni/ sap ho yos kyi lo la/ ’jod pa ser gyi dgon par/ ... yum gyi lus sku la bltams/ sprul pa sku’i rtagsu/ yum gyi rmi lam na/ seng ge dkar po grangs med lus la thim pa dang / skar tshogs lto ru zos ba dang / nyi zla zhon nas gling bzhi skor ba dang / bud med tshogs kyis me tog ’thor ba dang / phyag ’tshal zhing skor ba byed pa dang / ’od zer mang po lus la ’phros ba [325] dang / lus bde ba dang ’gro ba mgyogs pa dang / skrag mdangs rgyas pa la sogs pa’i rtags mang du byung nas/ yab la zhus pas/ thugs shin tu mnyes te/ yab kyi zhal nas/ byang chub sems dpa’i sprul p ’gro ba la phan thogs pa cig ’ong pa’i rtags yin gsung nas/ bkur sti dang rim gro che bar mdzad do// Gsal ba ’i me long, 324.3-325.2.*

This account of conception is modeled on the hagiographies of Shakyamuni Buddha, several of which were translated during the dynastic period and thus whose lore, if not the texts themselves, were available to Nyi ma 'od zer and his biographers. One of them, Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacarita*, reads: "Before she conceived she saw in a dream/ a white elephant king/ entering her body, yet she did not/ thereby feel any pain."<sup>10</sup> The white lions above evoke a similar image and significance, thereby imbuing the conception of Nyi ma 'od zer with the arrival of a *nirmānakāya*, a buddha in cyclic existence, which serves as a basis for the legitimation of his later activity, as radical as it may seem (certainly the Buddha was viewed as radical in his time as well). The significance of the golden vajra here represents an oneiric revisioning of sexual intercourse and actual conception. Again referencing her husband's secret name and phallus, the golden vajra is also the sperm that impregnates her.<sup>11</sup> The experience that follows may be taken as a vivid description of her orgasm in both physiological and figurative detail. Tantric language thereby imbues a relatively ordinary event, in this case conception, with its ultimate significance, transfiguring the mundane elements of intercourse into dharmic symbols, rich with meaning that transcends ordinary conceptions of them. In this sense, these terms are not mere euphemisms; they are intended to accurately depict the true nature of these objects and events in symbolic form so as to transcend base preconceptions and present the event as it really is. The one conceived will be a buddha, thus the symbolic values attributed are more true than the mundane trivialities ascertained through ordinary perceptions.

In *The Stainless*, Nyi ma 'od zer's parents are practicing together in the local palace instead of the monastery. The intended symbolism of the mother's dream is more apparent, though the details of their practice are veiled by Tantric terminology as well.

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<sup>10</sup> Ashva-ghosha, *Life of the Buddha*, trans. P. Olivelle (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>11</sup> The golden vajra implanted in her womb, the male seed, is like a miniature representative of its source. It cannot signify the provenance of the Vajra Buddha Family and its deities because both biographies firmly place Nyi ma 'od zer under the auspices of Padmasambhava in the Lotus Buddha Family. Even here in *The Clear Mirror*, his primary tutelary deity is Hayagriva, the fierce aspect of Amitabha and Avalokiteshvara, the *dharmakāya* and *sambhogakāya* deities of the Lotus Family. Padmasambhava is the *nirmānakāya* who completes this ultimately inseparable emanational triad, which may date as early as Nyi ma 'od zer's time (a supplication to them begins his *Copper Temple Biography* of Padmasambhava). *Zangs gling ma*, 2.1-2.

The two, having opened the maṇḍala of Padma dbang chen, ‘the Great Powerful Lotus’, at the palace of mTshan spyod town, when they were abiding in approach and accomplishment, in the night on the tenth day of the fifth month of a rabbit year (1123), there arose four extraordinary women in the mother’s dream. By placing a red, thousand-petaled lotus-flower with anthers in the shape of a precious jewel on the crown of the mother’s head, it dissolved inside her. The ladies circumambulated her three times. Having strewn four handfuls of multicolored flowers, they declared “This is the dharma king, the last existence of the bodhisattva. Through this birth, he will not return. He will become buddhafied. There is no doubt that those transmigrators who see, hear or remember him will become liberated.” Then they dissolved like a rainbow in the sky and departed. When she awoke the next morning, she prostrated to the father.<sup>12</sup>

Compared to the more explicit imagery and risqué locale of conception in *The Clear Mirror*, on first glance this account is quite conservative and chaste. However, while *padma dbang chen* indicates a sādhana or Tantric liturgy of Hayagriva (‘approach and accomplishment’ are the two stages of deity yoga meditation),<sup>13</sup> there remains a veiled reading of the passage as well. As in the discussion of her name above, it is difficult to ignore that the mother is the ‘dynamic expression’ of the deity and maṇḍala they are practicing; it is a direct reference to her secret name, Padma dbang chen rtsal. Rather than euphemistic symbols conveyed through dream, the sex here is made quite explicit through the description of their ‘opening the maṇḍala of the great powerful lotus’. While the parents are practicing the sādhana of the fierce tutelary deity,<sup>14</sup> Hayagriva, they are also consummating their relationship as husband and wife in conceiving their prophesied son.

<sup>12</sup> *gnyis grong khyer mtshan spyod kyi pho brang du/ padma dbang chen gyi dkyil 'khor zhal phyas nas/ bsnyen sgrub la bzhugs pa'i dus su/ yos kyi lo spre'u zla ba'i tshes bcu'i nub mo/ yum gyi rmi lam du bud med mtshan dang ldan pa bzhi byung ste/ me tog padma dmar po 'dab ma stong dang ldan pa/ ze'u 'bru nor bur in po che'i dbyibs su 'dug pa zhid yum gyi spyi bor bzhag pas khong du thim ste/ bud med bzhis yum la bskor ba lan gsum byas nas/ me tog kha dog mi 'dra ba khyor ba bzhi gtor nas/ 'di ni chos kyi rgyal po ste/ /srid pa tha ma'i byang chub sems dpa' yin/ /skye ba 'di bas mi len mngon sangs rgyas/ /'di ni [86] mthong thos dran pa yis/ /'gro ba grol 'gyur the tshom med/ /ces gsungs te/ nam mkha' la 'ja' ltar yal cing gshegs pa rmis nas/ nang par sad pa dang / yab la phyag 'tshal te/ Dri ma med pa, 85.2-86.2.*

<sup>13</sup> In his *Precious Annals of the Origin of Treasure*, kLong chen rab 'byams lists Padma dbang chen among the six classes of sādhana that were concealed by Padmasambhava at Mon kha seng ge dzong. *Gter 'byung rin po che'i lo rgyus*, 82.6.

<sup>14</sup> There is a tendency, even in the relatively short time of translation from Tibetan to English, to reify a familiar translation without reconsidering the semantic

The imagery indicates that the one conceived within her will be like a wish-fulfilling jewel, satisfying the needs of beings, which is confirmed by the ethereal ladies. Furthermore, a lotus is the throne of all the buddhas, but a red lotus specifies the Padma Family of dhyāna or meditation buddhas, the fierce emanation of which, once again, is Hayagriva. References to red phenomena periodically appear as signs throughout *The Stainless*, reiterating Nyi ma 'od zer's association with Padmasambhava and the deities of that family.<sup>15</sup> In addition, since the father has an auspicious dream on the same night, *The Stainless* intensifies the time of conception:

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connotations of the selection. Already numerous terms are accepted as normative based on their consistent usage and ubiquity, but whose implications in English warrant further discussion. One such term is 'wrathful' (*khro bo*) for the deities that appear in monstrous aspects. Likely derived from Catholic notions of *irae caelestes*, 'divine wrath', it presents a certain onomatopoeic appeal. This term, however, connotes a sense of vengeance and emotional content, both of which contradict the nature of these buddhas according to the tradition. All buddhas, however they manifest, are free from the passions by definition; likewise, vengeance gained through wrath is furthest from their *modus operandi*, which is the selfless benefit of beings. The manifestation of buddha activity takes whatever form is necessary as determined by the context and the needs of beings. 'Wrath' as a translation of *khro bo* in the Tibetan Buddhist context is a misapplication of biblical notions of a God defined by emotive experience, from loving to vengeful, which is incongruent with Buddhist notions of identitylessness, the quelling of emotions, and thus the absence of emotional reactivity. As such, 'fierce' and 'ferocious' are more accurate than 'wrathful'.

These terms describe the appearance and activity of such deities without straying into emotional imputations, and certainly not into notions of anger-based revenge. Ferocity itself might be considered a neutral emotional state of intense potentiality, and one that does not preclude the imminent threat of violence. It is a state of severe provocation certainly, but in response to the needs of beings in this context as opposed to some kind of individual gain. It does suggest something animal in nature; the term is often used to describe animals, but in the case of these buddhas it is necessarily pervaded by the realization of emptiness, enlightened awareness, which transcends the cognitive state of animals and most humans as well. I also prefer 'pacifistic' to 'peaceful' for *zhi ba*: the former describes a state of being for a being, whereas the latter is commonly used as a quaint adjective to describe the scenery.

'Wrathful' is appropriate in some Tibetan Buddhist contexts, however – just not with regard to buddhas. In particular, *drags sngag*, 'wrathful mantra', describes the eighth of the *Eight Sādhana Instructions* accurately. Their purpose is to exact harsh effect in the relative world against specific individuals, human and otherwise. While the mind of the mantrin may not, ideally, be clouded by emotional content, those of the people who sponsor the rite very well may be, thus 'wrathful' is appropriate here.

<sup>15</sup> Red yogin (emanation of Padmasambhava) at *Dri ma med pa*, 93.6; red mass of light dissolves into his heart center at 105.6; vision of Ye shes mtsho rgyal with a red cloak at 106.2; red bird at 107.3...



After hearing her dream, he replied: “I also had a dream. Four extraordinary men arose. They had a white conch with 108 petals spiraling to the right, which they gave to me. They said, ‘This is the white conch of the doctrine. If it is blown, the doctrinal sound of the Great Vehicle will resound. Whoever hears it will become a liberator of transmigrators and a subjugator of wrong views’. Since they gave it to me, I was very pleased. By blowing that, from within the 108 petals of the conch, 108 melodious and beautiful languages arose. Because of that, this sound of my conch was heard in all the lands of Dzam bu gling. This I dreamed. It is a sign that the one to take birth to us will be a prince nirmāṇakāya. It is paramount to keep it very secret.” After saying that, they were very happy.<sup>16</sup>

Numerous adjectives are included to specify the significance of oneiric objects and the father distills the meaning of the dream for the reader, so the symbolic indications of this dream are apparent. One prevalent theme here and throughout the biographies is that Nyi ma ’od zer is a harbinger of the Great Vehicle, despite the fact that he exclusively practices the esoteric Supreme Vehicle (and no where demonstrates an affinity for nor knowledge of sūtra, though its importance is occasionally mentioned in passing). The Vajrayāna is presented as a set of soteric technologies located within the larger rubric of the Mahāyāna as opposed to a category of praxis that can be thoroughly isolated from it.<sup>17</sup> The father’s instinct to keep the pregnancy and Nyi ma ’od zer secret then leads to divergent childhoods within the biographies.

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<sup>16</sup> *rmi lam snyam du gsol bas/ yab kyi zhal nas/ bdag gis kyang ma dang gi rmi lam du/ skeyes bu mtshan dang ldan pa bzhi byung ste/ dung dkar g.yas su ’khyil pa zhid la ’dab ma brgya rtsa brgyad yod pa zhid bdag la gtad de/ ’di ni chos kyi dung chen yin/ ’bud na theg chen chos sgra sgrogs/ gang thos ’gro ba grol ’gyur zhing / /log par lta ba zil gyis gnon/ /zhes zer te/ bdag la gtad pas/ bdag shin tu dga’ ste dung de bus pas/ dung ’dab brgya rtsa brgyad kyi nang nas/ snyan cing yid du ’ong ba’i skad rigs mi ’dra ba brgya rtsa brgyad byung bas bdag gi dung skad ’di ’dzam bu’i gling thams cad du thos so byas rmis pas/ ’o skor la sras sprul pa’i sku zhid bltams pa’i rtags yin pas/ shin [87] tug sang ba gal che/ gsung ste shin tu mnyes so/ Dri ma med pa, 86.2-87.1.*

<sup>17</sup> There are numerous explanations for this, none of which necessarily exclude the others. One might highlight Tibetan sensitivities to the potential (and actual) abuse of special Vajrayāna technologies, which make their explicit inclusion within the broader spectrum of Mahāyāna prerequisite. Perhaps this is to counter a devolution of these practices to base self-gratification, in practice or in the view of critics, as they still require a striving for the Mahāyāna ideal to benefit all beings. Otherwise, these esoteric practices remain ordinary and there is nothing ‘supreme’ or soteriological about them at all.

According to *The Stainless*, that instinct will prove to be correct upon meeting the child born to them.

While *The Clear Mirror* specifies that Nyi ma 'od zer was born in the same month as Siddartha,<sup>18</sup> it provides little additional information aside from the specific date and a set of extraordinary environmental signs at the time of Nyi ma 'od zer's birth:<sup>19</sup>

When [she was completing] the ninth month [and starting] the tenth, he was born in the constellation pusya during a wood female dragon year (1124). Many wondrous signs such as rainbow-colored tents, lights, sounds, earth-tremors and so forth numerously occurred.<sup>20</sup>

The inclusion of the year's element and, to a lesser degree, the gender is critical given the controversy over the dates of Nyi ma 'od zer's birth and death. *The Clear Mirror* specifies 1124 as the year of his birth, whereas *The Stainless* only remarks that it was a dragon year, thereby failing to identify the twelve-year cycle of his birth and leading to some confusion later. The biographical tradition unanimously agrees that he lived to the age of 69, however, and *The Clear Mirror* details the year of his death as a wood male mouse year (1192).<sup>21</sup> Recent western scholarship concurs that Nyi ma 'od zer was born in 1124 and died in 1192,<sup>22</sup> though the Tibetan tradition remains unresolved.<sup>23</sup>

Despite such issues, what *The Stainless* lacks in date specificity it adds in style:

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<sup>18</sup> Ashva-ghosha, *Life of the Buddha*, trans. P. Olivelle (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>19</sup> These signs are standard in Buddhist biography, which again demonstrates an authorial awareness of the tradition. Their employment produces an equally legitimizing effect for their subject.

<sup>20</sup> *zla dgu ngo bcu na/ shing mo 'brug gi lo skar ma rgyal la sku 'khrungs te/ 'ja' tshon gyi gur phub shing / 'od dang sgra dang sa g.yo ba la sogs ngo mtshar che ba'i rtags mang du byung ste/ Gsal ba'i me long*, 325.3-4.

<sup>21</sup> *Gsal ba'i me long*, 377.1.

<sup>22</sup> L.W.J. van der Kuijp "Review: On the Lives of Śākyaśrībhadrā (?-?1225)," *JAOS* 114.4 (1994): 604; M. Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 261 n. 24; and B.L. Phillips, *Consummation and Compassion in Medieval Tibet* (Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Virginia, 2004), 114-5.

<sup>23</sup> dPa' bo gtsug lag 'phreng ba (1504-1566) revised Nyi ma 'od zer's dates to 1136-1204 based on an episode recorded in the biography of Nyi ma 'od zer's son, Nam mkha' dpal, who invited the Indian paṇḍita Śākyaśrībhadrā to consecrate the reliquary of his father in 1204. Dudjom Rinpoche (following Jamgön Kongtrul's *Precious History of Treasure Revealers*, his main source) favors this latter date. See G. Dorje and M. Kapstein, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism, Vol. 2* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991), 70-71 n. 995.

Then, in the following year, on the eighth day of the eighth month of a dragon year, just as the sun rose in the constellation *pusya*, a son was born. Furthermore, he was untainted by *samsāric* defects and, as for the marks of the Lotus family, his body was white with a ruddy complexion. As for the signs that he would not be born again in existence, there was a finger-tall crest at the crown of his head. As for the signs of having completed all the qualities of the Great Vehicle, the hairs of his head extended down in locks. As for the signs that he had perfected all the qualities of the exalted body of all the ones gone to bliss, his body had a white OM mole on his forehead. As for the signs that he had perfected the sixty melodies of a buddha's exalted speech, there was a red birthmark at his throat center in the form of  $\bar{A}H$ . As for the signs that he had mastered exalted mind, the meaning of birthlessness, there was a black birthmark in the shape of  $H\bar{U}M$  at his heart center. As for the signs that he had perfected the five paths and ten *bhūmis*, there were eight-pronged dharma wheels on his feet. As for the signs that he was victorious over all *māras* and obstacles, he had four fang-teeth. So he was born with these eight great marks on his body.<sup>24</sup>

Just like Siddhartha, *Nyi ma 'od zer* is born with an array of signs and marks that betray his status as a *nirmāṇakāya*. The conditions of their rebirths within their final lifetimes place them on the verge of enlightenment, with only the karmic residue to effect the vast benefit of beings binding them to *samsāra*, though even this statement is controversial. Indeed, the issue of whether the Buddha (and later, by extension, any buddha) is born enlightened or becomes so continues to provoke animated argumentation on the debate courtyards, with an array of positions detailed at length in the advanced textbooks of various monastic curriculums. Merely underscoring the paradox, the interpretations provided above specify that *Nyi ma 'od zer* has indeed completed the path and is perfected already, though later

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<sup>24</sup> *de nas phyir lo 'brug gi lo ston zla ra ba'i tshes brgyad la/ skar ma rgyal gyi nyin par/ nyi ma shark ha sras gcig sku bltams te/ de yang 'khor ba'i skyon ma gos shing / padma'i rigs yin pa'i rtags su/ sku sha dkar la dmar ba'i mdangs chags pa/ srid pa'i skye ba de las mi len ba'i rtags su/ spyi bor gtsug tor tshon gang yod pa/ theg pa chen po'i yon tan thams cad rdzogs pa'i rtags su/ dbu skra sil bus sog 'dab tu slebs pa/ bde bar gshegs pa thams cad kyi sku'i yon tan thams cad rdzogs pa'i rtags su/ skra mtshams su sha mtshan dkar po om gyi gzugs su yod pa/ gsung dbyangs drub cu gsung la rdzogs pa'i rtags su mgrin pa na sme bad mar po āh'i gzugs su yod pa/ skye ba med pa'i don thugs su chud pa'i rtags su/ snying ga na sme ba nag po hūm gi dbyibs su yod pa/ lam lnga sa bcu mthar phyin [88] pa'i rtags su/ zhabs la 'khor lo rtsi bas brgyad kyi ri mo yod pa/ bdud dang bar chad thams cad las rgyal ba'i rtags su/ tshems mche ba bzhi yod pa/ de ltar ya mtshan che ba'i rtags brgyad dang ldan pa zhig sku bltams te/ Dri ma med pa, 87.1-88.2.*

empowerments will provide further ‘maturation’. The various marks on his body have manifested as confirmation in physical form, resulting in a rather striking appearance that, according to his parents, requires that he be kept secret. Following his birth, they withdraw with their child into a closed retreat where he will spend the first six years of his life and complete the initial stages of his studies.<sup>25</sup>

Nyi ma ’od zer is the protagonist of his own biographies of course, so within the narratives it is appropriate and effective to reduce the roles of his parents in such a way. While his father also functions as his first guru, thereby fulfilling an additional role of primary importance throughout his youth, his mother is solely defined by bearing him and disappears from the narratives thereafter.

### *Early Training*

*The Stainless* attributes Nyi ma ’od zer’s extraordinary capacity for learning to the special environment created in the seclusion of retreat. There, free from the distractions that would inevitably come once people beheld his appearance, the boy could focus on his studies: “Since they were able to keep him secret, [he] learned how to read and so forth. Because of that, he became learned in everything without obstruction and came to know it as in an instant.”<sup>26</sup> They appear to have emerged from strict retreat in his seventh year (1131-2), but *The Stainless* maintains that the parents were able to keep their child hidden until the age of nine and so continued his education in private.<sup>27</sup> *The Clear Mirror* concurs that Nyi ma ’od zer was a gifted child, but attributes his aptitude to familiarity:

In dependence on having diligently studied many times [in former births], from the age of two or three he knew – without requiring any study – how to read and so forth. He also knew without studying the tantras and sādhanas of the three, Yang dag he ru ka, rDo rje phur pa and gShin rje gshed. There arose a zeal for meditation, accomplishment and general dharmic conduct. No one could decide whether he was a nirmāṇakāya or what.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Dri ma med pa*, 88.6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.1.

<sup>27</sup> *Dri ma med pa*, 89.2.

<sup>28</sup> *dang por sbyangs pa mang po mdzad pa’i stobs la brten nas/ lo gnyis gsum nas yi ge klog la sogs pa yang slob mi dgos par mkhyen pa dang / yang phur gshed gsum gyi rgyud dang sgrub thabs kyang ma slabs par mkhyen pa dang / sgom sgrub dang bya*

While *The Stainless* relies on physical signs to confirm Nyi ma 'od zer's sanctity as an actual *nirmāṇakāya*, *The Clear Mirror* introduces other evidence in their stead. His knowledge of various key tantras is particularly compelling as proof for prior lives of intensive practice. As may be expected, the selection of tantras recollected here are not random: Yang dag he ru ka (Skt: Viśuddha heruka), rDo rje phur pa (Skt: Vajrakīla), and gShin rje gshed (Skt: Yamāntaka) are three of the five fierce deities that Nyi ma 'od zer would propagate in his most extensive treasure collection, the *Eight Sādhana Instructions (sgrub pa bka' brgyad)*.<sup>29</sup> Nyi ma 'od zer's affinity and natural aptitude for dharma, particularly that of the esoteric Vajrayāna, are thus made evident in the account provided here. Within *The Clear Mirror*, they serve as preliminary corroboration of the mothers' dream: that the son born to them is indeed a *nirmāṇakāya*.

Further confirmation arrives at the age of seven when Nyi ma 'od zer has the first of many auspicious dreams and visions. Both biographies punctuate his life with the apparition of various divine and semi-divine beings who bestow instructions, encourage practice, and provide companionship and support in lonely times.

When he reached the age of seven, the people in the area danced and played a lot and so forth, but he was unhappy. Having thought compassionately towards transmigrators, he went on vacation in the snows of 'Jod rtse le. In a dream while staying there for one day, there arose four women, white, yellow, red and green. Joined in one melodious voice they said, "Son of the lineage arising from learning, we are your friends. You are the lord of the secret mantra, the oral transmissions (*bka' ma*) and treasures (*gter ma*): please open the treasure doors of the sacred doctrine. Care for those with karmic propensities, the fortunate students. We and you are beyond inclusion and exclusion." Having said that, they faded into the sky. At the time of waking up there were magical apparitions. Then, after returning inside himself, he practiced.<sup>30</sup>

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*cha chos spyod la brtson pa cig byung ste/ kun gyis sprul pa'i sku'am ci yin blos mi 'khyud pa cig byung ngo / Gsal ba'i me long, 325.4-6.*

<sup>29</sup> Corresponding to exalted mind, activity and body respectively, this list accords with the hierarchy based on the five buddha families. Yang dag he ru ka, the representation of the subtlest and purest aspect of reality, is foremost. Conversely, gShin rje gshed is a representation of the grossest aspect, exalted body or form, and so here is listed last. Nyi ma 'od zer's future yidam, rTa mgrin (Skt: Hayagriva), exalted speech, is not mentioned here, but his absence circumvents its requisite placement beneath gShin rje gshed in a hierarchy that descends in degrees of subtlety.

<sup>30</sup> *dgung lo bdun bzhes pa'i dus su [326] yul mi rnams kyi bro dang / rtsed mo la sogs pa mang po zhig byas pa la thugs skyo zhing / 'gro ba rnams snying rje bar dgongs*

This episode is the first mention of treasures in the text and the first indication of what his manifestation as a teacher will be, thus foreshadowing who he will become. Whether ostracized by his own predilections for dharma or concealed in retreat because of his appearance, the biographies present a childhood defined by isolation. There is no record of him having any siblings, thus the beings that make themselves apparent to him are his only companions, providing comfort through the consolation of a loaded future.

### *Empowerment and Experience*

While *The Stainless* provides few details of Nyi ma 'od zer's training in his later childhood and teenage years, *The Clear Mirror* presents a more continuous narrative that punctuates this period with several visionary episodes. These are presented as defining moments for the young yogin as they compelled his father to bestow key empowerments, thus maturing him on the path of Tantra as he developed both physically and soteriologically.<sup>31</sup> The first occurs in a dream not long after his encounter with the ladies above.

Yet again, when Nyi ma 'od zer had reached the age of eight (1132), one night he dreamed that the sky was filled with rainbows, and one of the rainbow strands descended and pierced the earth. In the center of that spot was the one called Bhagavan Shakyamuni. He had the guise of an ordained one and sat encircled by many sangha of monks. I went forward to meet him and, after strewing flowers, I requested teachings, at which point I dreamt that Shakyamuni taught the dharma through the door of symbolic language: "When things are thoroughly inverted, clarify them!" Then, when I awoke, the sun was already up. Since it had risen high there was perspiration on my body. My bedding had become damp and I was woozy and scatter-brained, as though I were drunk and on my way to bed. This state endured for a month. Since I told my father, Nyang ston chos

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*nas/ 'jod rtse le'i gangs la skyo sangs la byon te/ zhag gcig bzhugs pa'i rmi lam na/ bud med dkar ser dmar ljang bzhi byung nas/ dbyangs mgrin cig du sdebs nas 'di skad zer/ sbyangs las sad rigs kyi bu/ nged rnams khyed kyi grogs yin te/ /khyed nig sang sngags bka' getr bdag /dam pa chos kyi get sgo phye/ /las 'phro skal ldan slob mo skyong / /nged dang khyed la 'du 'bral med/ /zer nas namkhar yal/ de tshe gnyid sad snang ba sgyu mar 'dug /de nas rang gi nang du 'ongs nas sgrub pa mdzad do/ Gsal ba'i me long, 325.6-326.4.*

<sup>31</sup> Vajrayāna relies on empowerment and instruction, which correspond to 'maturation' and 'liberation' (*smin grol*), thus the bestowal of empowerment literally 'matures' the practitioner on the path.

kyi 'khor lo, he said, "It was a good dream, but there may be obstacles," so he bestowed the empowerment of the tutelary deity.<sup>32</sup>

This is one of exceedingly few, quite tenuous references to anything related to sūtra in the biographies. Nyi ma 'od zer remains focused on Tantra throughout, thus the mere mention of Shakyamuni, celibate monks, and exoteric Dharma warrants mention. The actual instruction severs the connection, however, as this cryptic phrase finds few referents in sūtra or even Abhidharma and again seems to point towards esoteric technologies. Likewise, the dream results in Nyi ma 'od zer's empowerment into the maṇḍala of his tutelary deity, so this sūtric-themed encounter is concluded by Tantric reinforcement.

A couple of years later, Nyi ma 'od zer has the first of a series of encounters with Padmasambhava that would occur throughout his life. In this dream, Nyi ma 'od zer receives the four empowerments and rests in the three experiences of bliss, clarity and non-thought – all at the age of ten.

Then, when I had reached the age of ten (1134), one night in a dream the sky, the earth and all the space between were filled by men, women and many riders. After raising aloft parasols, victory banners and flags, the sounds of music from damarus, small cymbals, drums, flutes, bells, large cymbals and so forth resounded in the mountains. At the center of that assembly was the one called Acharya Padmasambhava. The Acharya mounted a white horse, and four ladies lifted the four hooves of his horse. After supplicating him, I also wept. When devotion arose naturally, with a thunderous roar the four ladies lifted their hooves and Padmasambhava arrived before me, bearing a jeweled vase filled with amrita. By completely bestowing the four empowerments in an instant with one

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<sup>32</sup> *yang dgung lo brgyad lon pa'i tshe nub cig rmi lam na/ namkha'ja' yis khengs 'dug pa la/ 'ja'i rkang cig sa la zug nas 'dug ste/ de'i dkyil na bcom ldan 'das shakya thub pa yin zer ba cig sku rab tu byung pa'i cha byad can/ dge slong gi dge 'dun mang pos bskor nas bzhugs 'dug pas/ bdag gis kyang mjal du phyin te me tog gtor nas chos zhus pa'i tshe/ [327] brda'i sgo nas chos gsungs pa cig rmis te/ zhib par log na gsal/ de nas mnal sad pa'i dus na/ nyi ma zhar nas 'dug pa la/ yar bzhengs pas/ sku lus la rngul byung nas/ gzim mal nang chu ru song 'dug cing / de naszi zi bun bun nyal khar chang gis gzir ba lta bu/ zla bag cig tshun byang ngo / yab myang ston chos kyi 'khor lo la zhus pas zhal nas/ rmis bltas bzang te bar chad 'dra 'ong srid gsungs nas/ yi dam gyi dbang skur cig mdzado/ Gsal ba'i me long, 326.4-327.3.*

Based on Erik Pema Kunsang's translation of the same excerpt in Padmasambhava, *Dakini Teachings* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1990), xi. Also reproduced in B.L. Phillips, *Consummation and Compassion in Medieval Tibet* (Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Virginia, 2004), 119 n. 39; and Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, trans. and ed. Gyurme Dorje (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991), 755.

voice, the three experiences dawned in me. The sky tore, the earth shook, and the mountains trembled. Intrinsic awareness roared like fire, like water churning, like wind howling.<sup>33</sup> When I awoke, dawn had broken and my body was very blissful and light. The appearances of the three experiences were there as before.<sup>34</sup>

Energized by this dream and its subsequent attainment, “he ran to the summits of ’Jod gangs and all the Ri lung and performed for a few days the various accumulations of conduct. Everyone said he was insane or stupid.”<sup>35</sup> Nyi ma ’od zer met detractors and skeptics throughout his life. Despite such criticism, his father continued to train him in private. Various signs of accomplishment, such as clairvoyance, develop in the child. Continuing from above:

The higher perceptions dawned alone. He recognized his past and future lives. He also knew the lifespans of all the students and retinue, as well as their good and bad qualities. Since he asked his father, Nyang ston chos kyi ’khor lo, about those signs, his father said, “The signs and auspicious connections are good,” then the venerable father bestowed an empowerment of the singular [form] of heroic Hayagriva.<sup>36</sup>

Once again, the father bestows empowerment directly following an auspicious dream. The father’s selection of the empowerment is far

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<sup>33</sup> ’ur ’ur. The verb is a generic onomatopoeia. Intended for dramatic effect, it mimics the natural sound of various elements, hence ‘roared like fire’ and so forth.

<sup>34</sup> *de nas dgun lo bcu bzhes pa’i tshes/ nub cig rmi lam na/ namkha’dang / sa gzhi/ bar nas thams cad/ skyes pa dang / bud med dang / rta pa mang pos khengs ’dug cing / lag nag dugs dang / rgyal mishan dang / bad an dang / rol mo’i sgra brnyan/ da ma ru dang / ting shag dang / rda dang gling bu dang / dril bu dang / cha lang la sogs pa thogs nas/ sgra ’di ri ri bskor ba byed kyin ’dug pas/ de’i dkyil na slob dpon pad ma ’byung gnas yin zer ba/ [328] rta dkar po gcig la a tsar a cig zhon nas/ bud med bzhis rta’i rmig pa bzhi nas bteg ’dug pa la/ bdag gis gsol ba btab nas spyang chab kyang ston/ mos pa dung dung byas pa’i tshes/ sgra’i ’ur sgra dang bcas pas/ bud med bzhis rta’i rmig pa nas btegs te/ bdag gi mdun du byon nas/ rin po che’i bum pa bdud rtsis gang ba bsams shing / skad cig dus cig la dbang bzhi yongsu rdzogs par bskur bas/ bdag la nyams gsum shar te/ gnam ral ba ’am/ sa g.yos pa ’am/ ri ’bir ba ’am/ rig pa ’ur ’ur yod pa la mnal sad dus/ nam langs ’dug pa la/ sku lus shin tub de la yang ba/ nyams kyi snang ba yang gong bzhin du ’dug ste/ Gsal ba’i me long, 327.4-328.4.*

<sup>35</sup> *’jod gangs kyi rtse dang / ri lung thams cad la rgyag cing / spyod pa’i tshogs sna tshogs pa yang zhag ’ga’i bar du mdzad pas/ mi kun gyis smyon pa ’am lkug pa zhes pa yang byung ngo / Ibid., 328.5-6.*

<sup>36</sup> *mngon par shes pa ’ang ’ba’ zhig tu shar te/ [329] skye ba snga phyi shes pa dang / ’khor slob kun gyi tshes tshad dang / legs nyes shes pa yang byung ngo / rtags de rnams yab myang ston chos kyi ’khor lo la zhus pas/ tan kyi zhal nas rtags dang rten ’brel bzang gsung nas/ pha jos rta mgrin dpa’ bo gcig pa’i dbang bskur te/ Ibid., 328.6-329.2.*



from random; it precisely corresponds to the content of Nyi ma 'od zer's dream. As a narrative device, the dream and subsequent empowerment reinforces the connection between Nyi ma 'od zer and Padmasambhava and foreshadows his treasure activity as the reincarnation of Khri srong lde btsan (Trisong Detsen). Hayagriva then becomes the focus of Nyi ma 'od zer's practice.

The karmic theory implemented throughout is quite simple. The primary basis is that like-causes produce like-results: a grain of barley, when met with the proper conditions, produces a barley sprout. In these biographies, the activities of the former incarnation, emperor Khri srong lde btsan, ripen into the lifetime of the fully enlightened treasure revealer, Nyi ma 'od zer. The primary causes for that final life were thus planted in a former one, and the current life is merely their fruition. Such uncomplicated karmic theory is not especially striking given the pervasive emphasis on Tantric lineages and praxis. The enumerations and relationships of causes, conditions and effects, so thoroughly outlined in *Abhidharma* and debated in monastic curriculums, are absent here. Nyi ma 'od zer and his line were non-institutional, non-monastic Tantrikas; they appear to have little knowledge nor interest in the complexities of Buddhist dialectics. Nevertheless, a respect for them remains prerequisite and the fundamental progression of cause and effect drives the narrative.

Following several years of solitary retreat in a mountain hermitage, Nyi ma 'od zer displays various signs of accomplishment, which are observed by people throughout the area. Signs function as evidence, provided in narrative through the medium of public testimony, that an individual has attained the stages of realization attempted through a specific practice. They demonstrate that the practitioner has meditated correctly and succeeded in the objectives of that meditation. Since the meditator dissolves all notions of self and with them the fundamental separation maintained through dualistic thought, s/he recognizes their own 'identity' to be the deity, which is enlightened awareness itself. When all external phenomena are recognized as the apparent form aspects of the deity, the manifest display of enlightened awareness, and the false conception of self is so thoroughly undermined that there is nothing other than this awareness, the tradition asserts that a manipulation of phenomena deemed 'miraculous' by ordinary beings becomes possible. Such signs are dismissed within a conventional worldview founded on the fundamental laws of an external reality, which is merely the residual effect of ignorance according to Tibetan Buddhism. While these laws are mere constraints, artificial constructs

that confine one within the prison of *samsāra*, signs are *natural*: they demonstrate reality rather than the illusion of assumed limitations, so they fill the pages of Tibetan biographies as vivid evidence of genuine transcendence. An extended description of signs follows the conclusion of a six-year retreat in Nyi ma 'od zer's teenage years:

Between the ages of thirteen and nineteen (ca. 1137-1142), by making seven *bre* of mustard seeds through the practice of Hayagriva's fierce mantra at 'Jod phu ma in the snowy land, many signs of accomplishment also appeared. After water in the vase boiled and fire blazed on the torma, his home in the south was illuminated by firelight. The snows at rTse le melted and accumulated at 'Jod lungs as a lake... His copper *kīla*-dagger neighed three times. Having heard that all over his home area, since many merchants behind the snows had not heard it, they named the hill 'Deaf Pass'. Moreover, he had a vision that his tutelary deity, the singular [form] of heroic Hayagriva, really resided in the opening at the crown of his head. The retinue of deities started dancing and the sound of PHAṬ was heard. The local gods and nagas also prostrated and promised to do whatever he commanded. The steam of his breath shimmered into rainbows. When flames burned from the saliva he spit on the ground, it was also said that [people's] robes and so forth became scorched by touching it. Additionally, 'Jod phu rock has many body imprints and footprints.<sup>37</sup>

The Tibetan for Hayagriva, rTa mgrin, literally translates as 'horse neck'. Its iconography depicts this deity with a horse's head emerging from his crown, so some of the signs associated with the accomplishment of Hayagriva, such as neighing, correspond to this defining aspect. Likewise, since the practitioner realizes oneself as inseparable from this ferocious blazing deity, the resounding of the

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<sup>37</sup> *dgung lo bcu gsum nas bcu dgu'i bar du/ rta mgrin drag sngags kyi sgrub pa nyung dkar bre bdun la/ 'jod phu ma gangs kyi ra bar mdzad pas/ sgrub rtags kyang mang du byung ste/ bum chu khol ba dang / gtor ma la me 'bar nas/ me 'od kyis lho phyogs lung pa gsal ba dang / rtse le'i gangs zhu zhing 'jod lungs ma cho ru 'khyil ba dang / ... zangs kyi phur pas rta skad len gsum du ston/ yul khams thams cad du thos pa las/ gangs rgyab na tshong pa mang po yod pas/ des ma thos nas la'i ming yang 'on lung la kha zhes btags/ gzhan yang yi dam rta mgrin dpa' bo cig pa rta thod kyi khan a dngos su bzhugs pa zhal gzigs/ lha 'khor rnams kyi gar sgyur [330] zhing phaṭ kyi sgra sgrog pa gsan/ yul gyi lha klu rnams kyi kyang / phyag byed pa dang / cig sung gi bka' nyan par dam byas/ zhal gyi rlangs pa 'ja' ru khyugs khyugs 'gro ba dang / zhal chab sa la bor ba las me 'bar te/ gos la sogs pa la phog pas gzhob du song pa yang byung gsung / 'jod phu'i brag la sku rjes dang / zhabs rjes kyang mang du yod cing / Gsal ba'i me long, 329.2-330.3.*

fierce syllable PHAṬ, heat and flame are congruent products of accomplishment.

These signs and others demonstrate that the fixed characteristics of external phenomena have taken on a certain malleability, unbound by the qualities normally attributed to them. In some cases this is quite literal, as when Nyi ma 'od zer impresses his body or feet into solid rock. In others, the nature of an object is completely transformed, as when his spit scorches clothing. Important throughout is that these signs can be clearly witnessed by others, confirming Nyi ma 'od zer's accomplishment, spreading faith among the populace, and authenticating him as a realized teacher.

In addition to confirming the individual's legitimacy, signs also prove that the particular practice is ideally suited for that practitioner. That is, the tutelary deity harmonizes with the secret nature of the person; meditation on the deity actualizes the enlightened potential of the individual, which results in attainment. Signs prove that the empowerment previously bestowed was karmically potent and soteriologically effective, thereby serving as further evidence of the authenticity of the one who bestowed it as well.<sup>38</sup> Since this was none other than his father, it provides additional clout to the continuity and strength of his family lineage.

*The Stainless* offers few details concerning Nyi ma 'od zer's training in his teenage years. Rather than promoting a natural

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<sup>38</sup> There are many rich examples of Nyi ma 'od zer's extra-ordinary abilities throughout both biographies, but *The Stainless* in particular. Another occurs later in life when he has already matured as a teacher:

One day a dog arose in the dharma row. After it took off with an offering cake, one minister hurled a rock [at the dog]. Having struck it on the forehead, [the dog died.] Once [Nyi ma 'od zer] drew a liberation diagram on the corpse, it incinerated the body. Rainbows arose in the sky. Since many relics arose in the bones, the lama [Nyi ma 'od zer] said, "Concerning the end of the teachings in the *kali yuga*, lazy people, bewildered animals, and sentient beings with wrong views will have the oral instructions on the liberation diagram wheel, which buddhifies in an instant. In particular, it is an especially superior [way] to benefit transmigrators." By means of that, all the disciples gave rise to extraordinary devotion free from doubt.

*nyin gcig chos gral du khyi zhig byung nas lha bshos shig khyer nas blon po zhig gis rdo zhig 'phangs pas/ dpral bar phog nas shi ba'i ro la btags grol btags nas ro de bsregs pas/ nam mkha' la 'ja' byung / [108] rus pa la ring bsrel mang po 'byung bas/ bla ma'i zhal nas/ rtsod dus bstan pa'i tha ma la/ /le lo can gyi skyes bu dang / /gti mug can gyi byol song dang / /log lia can gyi sems can rnams/ /skad cig nyid la sangs rgyas pa'i/ /'khor lo btags grol gyi man ngag yod/ /'gro don khyad du 'phags pa yin/ /zhes gsungs pas/ gdul bya thams cad blo the tshom med pa'i mos gus khyad par can skyes so/ Dri ma med pa, 107.5-108.3.*

preponderance for Yang dak he ru ka, rDo rje phur pa and gShin rje gshed from the age of two or three as in *The Clear Mirror, The Stainless* states that he did not receive the empowerments and instructions for these until he was fifteen. In addition, he also received Great Perfection (*rDzogs chen*) transmission at that time, the fourth of ‘the four soul-doctrines of the forefathers’.<sup>39</sup>

*On the significance of the name, Nyang ral pa can nyi ma ’od zer*

As his name includes four distinct elements, a range of abbreviated variants have been used to refer to the master, with mNga’ bdag nyang and Nyang nyi ma ’od zer among the more common ones. Initially this caused some confusion among western scholars, leading one to even conclude that Nyang ral and Nyi ma ’od zer were distinct individuals, which is clearly not the case.<sup>40</sup> In contemporary common usage, one finds that ‘Nyang ral’ is often preferred in Western scholarship, but it is a somewhat artificial convention: it rarely appears alone in Tibetan texts. Colloquially, Tibetans often refer to him simply as Nyi ma ’od zer, hence my adoption of their convention.

*mNga’ bdag*, ‘the sovereign’, is a common epithet for the emperors of the Imperial Period. Here it functions as a recognition and reaffirmation of Nyi ma ’od zer’s status as the reincarnation of Khri srong lde btsan (r. 755-797) in particular, though Khri ral pa can (Tri Relpachen, r. 815-836), another of his prior incarnations, is referred to as *mnga’ bdag* as well. Since the series of Nyi ma ’od zer’s preincarnations was devised posthumously<sup>41</sup> and the treasures of Khri srong lde btsan’s reign pervade Nyi ma ’od zer’s legacy, the epithet in his lifetime referred exclusively to Khri srong lde btsan. Though his treasure colophons provide scant information, one of their most common lines simply describes the treasure as belonging to Khri srong lde btsan: “The sovereign’s scripture was concealed as a precious treasure.”<sup>42</sup> Nyi ma ’od zer’s appropriation of this epithet thus

<sup>39</sup> *bzhi ni yab mes kyi bla chos yin/ Dri ma med pa*, 90.4. For a discussion of *bla* or ‘soul’ documents, see R.M. Davidson, “Imperial Agency in the Gsar ma Treasure Texts during the Tibetan Renaissance,” in *Tibetan Buddhist Literature and Praxis, PIATS 2003*, ed. R.M. Davidson and C.K. Wedemeyer (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 133-7.

<sup>40</sup> A. MacDonald, “Une Lecture des Pelliot tibétain 1286, 1287, 1038, 1047, et 1290,” in *Études dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou*, ed. A. MacDonald (Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 1971), 203 n.59. Cited and refuted in P. Sørensen, *The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies* (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), 7 n. 17.

<sup>41</sup> Proof of this is provided in a separate chapter of my dissertation.

<sup>42</sup> *mnga’ bdag gi phyag dpe: gter rin po cher sbas so:*

reinforces his claim to the treasures as they are, quite literally, his. Likewise, *The Clear Mirror* explicitly states which emperor is designated: “it was determined that [he] was the magical emanation of sovereign Khri srong lde btsan,”<sup>43</sup> but *The Stainless* is ambiguous. Nyi ma ’od zer gains the epithet following the public confirmation of his status as well, but the prior incarnation is unspecified: “[He] came to be renowned as a nirmāṇakāya. [He] was also named mNga’ bdag nyang ral.”<sup>44</sup> The title has no correlation to any political status in his life (he had none), but refers back to the throne he once occupied as the emperor Khri srong lde btsan in a prior lifetime.

The second element of Nyi ma ’od zer’s extended name is spelled *Myang* in pre-classical Tibetan or *Nyang* in classical and contemporary orthography. Its function is congruent with a surname as it designates patrilineal descent from the Nyang clan. Like many Tibetan clan names, ‘Nyang’ was most likely derived as a regional signifier, borrowed from the locale over which these people presided, Nyang po.<sup>45</sup> This covers an area south/south-east of rGyal rtse through which the Nyang river runs.<sup>46</sup> The Nyang clan remained active in this, the ‘right horn’ of gTsang, throughout the Imperial period. Clan competition and peasant insurrections during the period of fragmentation forced some families from their areas of cognomen, but the Nyang clan had acquired other lands and ruled over sBrang mkhar sbre can as Tibet emerged from this era.<sup>47</sup> By Nyi ma ’od zer’s lifetime, his immediate family had settled over 200 kilometers to the south-east in Lho brag, literally and figuratively distanced from power yet with lingering prestige. Such diminished status was in stark contrast to their standing throughout the dynastic period when, as one of Tibet’s Buddhist aristocratic families (*bram ze*),<sup>48</sup> the Nyang clan populated the

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<sup>43</sup> *Gsal ba’i me long*, 325.4.

<sup>44</sup> *Dri ma med pa*, 90.3.

<sup>45</sup> See R.M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005), 80.

<sup>46</sup> In O rgyan gLing pa’s 14<sup>th</sup> century *Lha ’dre bka’i thang yig*, *nyang po* is included as one of three areas which, prior to Padmasambhava, had been dominated by particularly ‘noxious beings’ and were ‘lands of great mischief’. Haarh argues that *nyang po*, along with *dwags po* and *kong po*, form one of the earliest conceptions of ancient Tibet, predating the ascension of *Yar lung* in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It was not until this time that the latter was introduced as a fourth district to the original territorial paradigm. E. Haarh, *The Yar lun Dynasty* (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad, 1969), 272.

<sup>47</sup> R.M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005), 80-1.

<sup>48</sup> This term commonly indicates the Brahmin caste of the Hindu tradition, which is clearly not its meaning here. Yet *bram ze* retains some of its original significance

inner circles of the emperors for generations, rising to prominence and prosperity in lock-step with the Buddhist empire.

*The Stainless* counts Nyi ma 'od zer's father as the eighteenth generation of Nyang clan adepts, whereas *The Clear Mirror* lists him as the seventeenth. Despite this slight discrepancy, both emphasize that Nyang preserved an unbroken practice lineage that focused on the transmission of the ferocious tutelary deities, Yang dag he ru ka, rDo rje phur pa, and gShin rje gshed. *The Clear Mirror* adds Ma mo to the list of cycles preserved by Nyi ma 'od zer's father,<sup>49</sup> thus at least four of the *Eight Sādhana Instructions* (*sGrub pa bka' brgyad*), Nyi ma 'od zer's most extensive treasure collection, were directly transmitted down the family line. In sum, the Nyang in Nyi ma 'od zer's name invokes the past glory of the dynasties, the political legacy of his clan in their successes, and the uninterrupted religious legitimacy of his lineage.

The third element of his name, Ral or even Ral pa can, signifies 'having long hair', 'braids' or, most specifically in this case, the 'dread-locks' of a long-term retreatant.<sup>50</sup> While *The Clear Mirror* is devoid of any explicit explanation of the *ral* in his name, *The Stainless* recounts that Nyi ma 'od zer was born with long hair that extended down to his shoulders. Since *The Stainless* interprets these as confirmation of successful practice or accomplishment in past lives, 'dread-locks' is most likely the best translation; Nyi ma 'od zer was born into the Nyang clan as a baby bearing the matted dreads of a long-term meditator, hence the name 'Nyang ral'. The causal force of prior accomplishment has manifested as a physical feature at the time of birth, marking the boy as very special in the present while promising a loaded future. The sign functions as an intermediary form of karmic foreshadowing. It bridges the divide between primary cause and final result, between realization and complete liberation. With the other marks, his dread-locks are uncommon apparent expressions of karmic inevitability, quite successful in their dramatic effect.

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while stripped of its Hindu specifications. That is, it is a term designating the upper echelons of a social hierarchy, in this case the Tibetan aristocracy. Religiously it denotes a patron family, one who monetarily supports the Buddhist conversion project.

<sup>49</sup> *Gsal ba'i me long*, 348.4.

<sup>50</sup> Nyi ma 'od zer's *ral* may be assumed to reiterate the connection to one of his prior incarnations in particular, Khri ral pa can, but this would be in error. As the succession of Nyi ma 'od zer's past lives was devised posthumously, the link is merely coincidental. Both biographies remain silent on this connection despite the apparent relationship, and they only explain his dread-locks as the result of practice in former lives.

Neither biography recounts the moment he was named Nyi ma 'od zer, 'Light Rays of the Sun', or why, though perhaps it was bestowed as a birth or initiatory name by his father. Tibetans have long requested lamas to name their children and it is common to receive an additional name at the time of empowerment. Since Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo was, as his name states, 'The Nyang Teacher', he very well may have named the child himself in holding the roles of both father and guru. Regardless of its source, there is no mention or interpretation of 'Nyi ma 'od zer' at the time of his receiving it. Instead, various figures throughout his biographies come to hint at its significance for him.

In both biographies, there are allusions to the significance of his name. In particular, *The Clear Mirror* describes two individuals who, appearing under mysterious circumstances, bestow instructions and prophesize Nyi ma 'od zer's impending enlightened activity. While practicing in a remote area, certain that 'no one else was around', Nyi ma 'od zer awakes from a dream encounter with a *ḍākiṇī* of primordial gnosis, Rig pa 'khyams med, to find himself in the company of a yogin meditating atop a rock:

Although [Nyi ma 'od zer] did not recognize him, he said to the yogin, "Welcome! What is your name? Who is your family? Where do you live? What is the meaning of your coming here?" Since he questioned him like that, the yogin replied, "As for a name, I have none; I am equal to the extent of space. As for my family, it is the *bram ze* Myang. As for a place, I have none; I wander everywhere. Right now I am meditating on the inexpressible transcendence of mind. Omnipresent, the throne and canopy<sup>51</sup> sun dawns. Great Perfection clarifies the light rays of the sun (*nyi ma'i 'od zer*). Apparent objects and characteristics are liberated into their own ground. Meditate on the gnosis *ḍākiṇī*!"<sup>52</sup>

This is the first direct reference to his name, but the terse composition of the yogin's reply, exacerbated by the constriction of verse, presents a cryptic set of instructions more than an explicit indication of his name's significance. This yogin appears to be the perfected reflection of Nyi ma 'od zer himself, born of the same family, yet released from all fetters and transcendent of all conceptions. It is relevant that the one

<sup>51</sup> *Khri gdugs*, 'throne [and] canopy', is a metaphor for the sun.

<sup>52</sup> *ngo ma shes kyang rnal 'byor pa khyed kyi phebs pa legs/ khyed kyi ming la ci zer rus gang yin/ gnas gang du bzugs/ de lta don ci la byon dris pas/ rnal 'byor pa de'i zhal nas/ ming med namkha'i mtha' dang mnyam/ /rus ni bram ze myang gi rigs/ /gnas ni nges med kun du 'khyams/ /da lta blo 'das brjod med sgom/ /khyeb brdal khri gdugs nyi ma shar/ /rdzogs chen nyi ma'i zer la gsal/ /snang yul mtshan ma rang sar grol/ bsgom cig ye shes mkha'gro ma/ /gsungs pas/ Gsal ba'i me long, 332.4-6.*

identifying detail the yogin provides is that he too is of the Nyang clan, which vaunts the prestige of this ancestry. The rest eschews identification and location of any kind with expansive Great Perfection rhetoric.<sup>53</sup> The yogin thus recommends the Great Perfection as the final means to ‘clarify the light rays of the sun’, and directs Nyi ma ’od zer to its practice as his concluding imperative.<sup>54</sup> The refractions of relative phenomena (light rays) must be reconciled, recognized as indivisible from their source and ultimate nature (the sun).

Directly following this encounter with the yogin, Nyi ma ’od zer meets a *ma jo* or female lama, who provides more explicit commentary on his name:

E ma! Listen supreme being, yogin: Your venerable father’s lineage is the *bram ze* Nyang. The pure place of enlightenment is the dharmatā endowed with benefit. By means of various activities, you look compassionately upon transmigrators. I am meeting with the sun dawning in the darkness of ignorance. As for the person’s name, having been well-designated as ‘Light Rays of the Sun’, his name also will be renowned as Nyi ma ’od zer.<sup>55</sup>

The *ma jo* concurs that Nyang ral has reached the final stage of practice and predicts his inevitable enlightenment. Metaphorically, he is the rising sun of wisdom dispelling the long night of ignorance. *The Stainless* promotes a similar interpretation when sMyon pa don ldan,

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<sup>53</sup> My thanks to Joel Gruber for pointing this out while reviewing an earlier draft of the article.

<sup>54</sup> Lest we mistake this instruction to ‘meditate on the gnosis *dākiṇī*’ as a Mahāyoga creation stage practice (i.e. deity yoga), her name when translated is ‘Non-wandering Intrinsic Awareness.’ She thus signifies the very pinnacle of calm abiding (*zhi gnas*) and special insight (*lhag mthong*) meditation. The instruction then is to meditate without distraction on *rig pa*, the non-dual object of the Great Perfection.

<sup>55</sup> *e ma gsan dang skyes mchog rnal ’byor pa/ /khyed cho rigs bitsun pa bram ze myang gi rigs/ /dgongs yul dag pa chos nyid don dang ldan/ /nges med spyod pas ’gro ba snying rje gzigs/ /ma rig mun sel nyi ma shar dang mjal/ /skyes bu’i gtshan ni nyi ma ’od zer bzang zer nas/ mtshan yang nyi ma ’od zer du grags so. Gsal ba’i me long, 333.1-3.*

The last two verses have been taken to indicate that Nyi ma ’od zer received his name from the *ma jo*, but the Tibetan here clearly establishes a sequence, designated by the ablative *nas*, whereby the name was already granted and is now merely confirmed. Dudjom Rinpoche, following the first Jamgön Kongtrul, condenses the episode and attributes ‘Nyi ma ’od zer’ to the *dākiṇī* he had been dreaming of previously. Dudjom Rinpoche, *History of the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991), 755.



one of Nyi ma 'od zer's later gurus, predicts that he will benefit beings like the rising sun.<sup>56</sup>

*Claiming his karmic inheritance*

While Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo's death is not mentioned in either biography, it may be reasonable to deduce that he died when Nyi ma 'od zer was in his late teens. His final activities in the biographies are the transmissions just described. In *The Clear Mirror*, Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo is mentioned once more to introduce "the way in which the sovereign [Nyi ma 'od zer] trained his mind in the doctrines of the oral transmissions."<sup>57</sup> Here the father is eulogized as an accomplished practitioner of several Tantric cycles whose continuity survived unbroken from the Imperial period. The implication is that he transmitted all of these to his son, but still there remains no indication that he himself had passed.

The father may have been somewhat older or in poor health, even when Nyi ma 'od zer was born in 1124. *The Stainless* recounts that the locals, in attempt to interpret the various signs that appeared at that time, speculate that Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo had died and that these were the 'signs of his nirvāṇa' or death.<sup>58</sup> His father was by far the most significant figure in his life, yet he fades from both biographies after bestowing these transmissions. By the time Nyi ma 'od zer reaches the age of twenty-one (1145), he has sought out and received instructions from other teachers for the first time, which may have been precipitated and necessitated by the death of his father and root guru, Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo. It is from this point that Nyi ma 'od zer moves from preparing for his destiny to inheriting it, from establishing the karmic potential for his activity to manifesting it, from serving the treasures in a former life to recovering them. As Nyi ma 'od zer ventures out from the tutelage of his father to receive the instructions and aid of other teachers, including other early treasure

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<sup>56</sup> *Dri ma med pa*, 91.6.

<sup>57</sup> *Gsal ba'i me long*, 348.4.

<sup>58</sup> On the day of his birth, rainbow tents appeared on top of the palace, flowers rained, and the sound of music resounded. Some people in the area said, "The two, the father and mother accomplished Padma dbang chen: this is a sign of their meeting him face to face." Some said, "[These are] the signs of Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo's nirvāṇa." Some said, "[When] the three-year old son of Lha cig bsod nams rgyan [died], his corpse was taken to the charnel ground, [but] the wild animals would not eat it and just roamed around. That corpse was taken out and, by practicing *mkha' spyod*, [these] were the signs of [that] accomplishment." *Dri ma med pa*, 88.2-6.

revealers, he approaches the fulfillment of everything that his biographies have thus far foretold.

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