

Different Sets of Light-Channels in the Instruction Series of Rdzogs chen

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As is well known, one of the most distinguished contribution of Rdzogs chen to Tibetan Buddhism consists of its theory of light-channels (*'od rtsa*). Needless to say, It is out of the scope of this article to treat in detail the many different sets of these channels (*rtsa*) as they are presented in the relevant texts. Moreover, there is no intention to describe here their relationship to other kinds of channels, i.e., material channels such as veins and nerves or subtle channels such as the ones which are elucidated in various systems of Tantric physiology. Not only that, as far as the presentation of the intricate interconnectedness between them and the other two main components of Tantric expositions of the subtle body (*rdo rje lus*)¹ is concerned, i.e., the winds (*rlung*) and drops (*thig le*), this will be the theme of another work. Nevertheless, it is hoped for that this article sheds some further light on the most salient aspects of some of these light-channels. In doing so, the specific locations and functions of some of them will be brought into focus and some preliminary remarks about the frequency of occurrence of them in texts of the Instruction Series (*man ngag sde*)² of Rdzogs chen will be given.

To begin with, one of the different sets of channels to be found in these texts is the Palace of the Channels Initiating Movement (*'gyu byed rtsa yi gzhal yas*).

A short description of this set is available in the TCZ³ where the names of its four channels - all of them seem to consist of more than one channel - are mentioned. Looking at this text makes it clear that the Channel Which is White, Smooth, and Empty (*dkar 'jam stong pa'i rtsa*), the Precious, Emanating Channel (*rin chen 'phro ba'i rtsa*), the Completely Liberating Channel (*rnam par grol byed rtsa*), and the Moving White Crystal Channel (*shel dkar rgyu ba'i rtsa*) must be light-channels (*'od rtsa*). This is so on account of their explicit association with appearances initiated by Pristine Cognition (*ye shes kyi snang ba*). However, the course of these four channels is explained neither in the TCZ nor in the Tantra *Rig pa rang shar*⁴ which Klong chen rab

¹ About the three components of the subtle body (*rdo rje lus*), i.e., channels (*rtsa*), winds (*rlung*) and drops (*thig le*), see Guenther, Herbert V. 1975, vol. 2, pp. 13ff. and Germano 1992, pp. 821ff.

² The Instruction Series (*man ngag sde*) is supposed to comprise the final formulation of Rdzogs chen, which can be subsumed under the so called Three Series (*sde gsum*), i.e., the Mind Series (*sems sde*), the Space Series (*klong sde*) and the Instruction Series (*man ngag sde*). Overviews of them are presented in Thondup, 1989, pp. 47-88; Karmay 1988, pp. 206-216; Dudjom 1991, pp. 319-345; Reynolds 1996, pp. 31-35 and Achard 1999, pp. 25ff.

³ See TCZ II, p. 66 : */rtsa bzhi ni rang shar las /dkar 'jam stong pa'i rtsa dag dang //rin chen 'phro ba'i rtsa rnam dang /rnam par grol byed rtsa chen dang //shel dkar rgyu ba'i rtsa dag nas //rnam shes rlung la zhon ne ni //bhri gu ta yi sgo chen nas //lam byung stong pa'i ngang du thim //thim byed med par sa le gsal //tshom bu lnga ldan ye shes rdzogs //zhes so /*.

⁴ See the Tantra *Rig pa rang shar chen po*, TTT 56, p. 71: */rang byung 'gag med dkyil 'khor chen po ni //rang rang tsitta'i dkyil na kha dog 'bar //dkar 'jam stong pa'i rtsa dag dang //rin chen 'phro ba'i rtsa rnam dang //rnam par grol byed rtsa chen dang //shel dkar rgyu ba'i rtsa dag gnas*

'byams takes as his source. In the TCZ it is merely said that the place of Pristine Cognition is the heart (*tsitta*) which could be the starting point of the channels of the Palace of the Channels Initiating Movement ('*gyu byed rtsa yi gzhal yas*).

A concise description of another fourfold set of channels - the Four Principal Channels (*rtsa'i gtso bo bzhi*) - can be found in the KDNYT⁵:

« — Concerning the Four Principal Channels the Tantra *Sgra thal 'gyur* says:

(These are the channels) *ro ma, rkyang ma, kun dhar ma,*
And *ka ti shel gyi sbu gu can.*

Concerning the (first of) the three principal channels (the Tantra) *Klong gsal* says:

The channels *ro ma, rkyang ma, kun dhar ma*⁶,
(Dwelling in) the middle of the five energy-centres⁷,
Are penetrating the doors of the sense organs.

Moreover, these three channels take their course from the secret place (*gsang gnas*) up to the throat-(centre), and from there up to the heart-(centre).

Onwards from the throat, the principal (middle) channel proceeds to the crown of the head like a stake.

The two (other) ones branch into seven (additional) channels.

Two of them penetrate the two ears, two pierce the two nostrils, two go into the two eyes, and the last one plants itself into the tongue.

At the lower end, the three channels stick into "the secret place" (*gsang gnas*) and into the anus.

The secondary channels are pervading collectively the whole of the body.

In the middle one of the three (main channels) flows the Ultimate

//rnam shes rlung la zhon nas ni //bri ku ta yi sgo phye nas //lam byung stong pa'i ngang du thim //thim byed med par sal le gsal //tshom bu lngar ldan ye shes rdzogs //dus med rang sar grol lo |.

5 See KDNYT I, p. 503, or the almost identical passage on p. 365 of the same volume: */de las rtsa'i gtso bo bzhi ni //thal 'gyur las /ro ma rkyang ma kun dhar ma//ka ti shel gyi sbu gu can //ces so //de las snying por gyur ba'i rtsa gsum ni //klong gsal las //khor lo lnga yi dbus dag na /ro ma rkyang ma kun dhar ma //dbang po'i sgo la zug par gnas //zhes so //de yang rtsa gsum po gsang gnas nas lte bar 'brel //lte ba nas snying khar 'brel //snying kha nas mgrin par 'brel //mgrin pa nas rtsa yi gtso bo srog shing gi tshul du tshang bug tu 'brel //rtsa'i 'khor lo gnyis las yal ga bdun du gyes nas //rtsa gnyis ma ba gnyis la zug //rtsa gnyis sna gnyis la zug //rtsa gnyis mig gnyis la zug //rtsa gcig lce la zug pa'o //mar gyi rtsa gsum ni mtshan ma dang gshang lam la zug pa'o //rtsa bran thams cad lus spyi la khyab par gnas yod do //rtsa gsum dbus ma na don dam pa'i thig le rgyu'o //rtsa rlung thig le gsum po des //gzugs dang //sgra dang //dri dang //ro dang //reg bya dang //bde ba dang //sdug bsngal dang //btang snyoms dang ye shes kyi snang ba 'char ba'i lam byed do //de las kyang khyad par du ye shes 'char ba'i lam ni //rtsa dar dkar gyi skud pa tsam la khrag dang chu ser med pa ste //mgrin pa'i dra ba la thon nas //klad pa'i nang nas tshur byung ste //rtsa de yang rtsa ba phra la rtse mo che ba //ba men gyi rwa lta bu gnyis mig gnyis la zug pa'o //de la ye shes kyi snang ba rgya mthongs kyi nyi zhur ltar 'char ba'o |.*

6 These three channels pass along the four energy-centres of navel (*lte ba'i 'khor lo*), heart (*snying gi 'khor lo*), throat (*mgrin pa'i 'khor lo*), and crown of the head (*spyi gtsug gi 'khor lo*).

7 Here, the energy-centre of the secret place (*gsang gnas*), i.e., the genitals, is added to the usual four energy-centres.

Drop (*don dam gyi thig le*).

Channels, winds, and drops constitute the way by means of which forms, sounds, odours, flavours, textures, bliss, suffering, equanimity, and appearances of Pristine Cognition (*ye shes kyi snang ba*) are arising.

In particular, with regard to the way of arising Pristine Cognition: The (fourth) channel has the size of about a white silk thread (*rtsa dar dkar gyi skud pa tsam*) and contains no blood and lymph.

Departing from the network (energy-centre) of the throat, it (finally) comes down (to the eyes) by leaving the brain.

Moreover, this channel is fine at its root and ample at its top (and) penetrates the two eyes like two buffalo-horns.

The appearances of Pristine Cognition are arising there like sun rays becoming visible through an open gallery. »

This fourfold set of four channels - only the fourth one is a light-channel - is presented in Tantras such as the *Sgra thal 'gyur* and the *Sgron ma 'bar ba*⁸. However, it is worth mentioning, that this kind of set is much more frequently met with in the collection Four Branches of the Heart Essence (*Snying thig ya bzhi*) than in the Rdzogs chen Tantras of the *Rnying ma rgyud 'bum*.

In the second chapter of the Tantra *Sgron ma 'bar ba* an explanation of the clearly discerning Awareness (*rig pa gsal gsal rig rig po*) dwelling in the channels *ro ma*, *rkyang ma*, *kun dhar ma* and *shel sbub khog pa stong pa* is given. On the other hand, in the third chapter one is told that the Lamp of Empty Drops of Light (*thig le stong pa'i sgron ma*)⁹ is predominately present in the

8 The Tantra *Gser gyi me tog mdzes pa rin po che'i sgron ma 'bar ba'i rgyud* (= *Sgron ma 'bar ba*) is to be found in TTT 56.

9 Still, there are only few works written in Western languages which give an account of what is meant by lamps (*sgron ma*). In Tucci 1980, p. 264, no. 31, there is a short reference to a set of Four Lamps (*sgron ma bzhi*) and a set of Six Lamps (*sgron ma drug*). Another short account of a set of Six Lamps is presented in Chagmé, 1988, pp. 180-189. Certainly, the main characteristic of what is named "lamp" (*sgron ma*) can be circumscribed as "inseparability of clarity and emptiness" (*gsal stong dbyer med*). Thus, it is that which makes itself clear (*gsal ba*) — i.e., that which actualizes itself in and as visionary experience of form, colour, sound, etc., — without losing its quality of being empty of any concreteness. In other words, it is the inseparability of the empty essence (*ngo bo stong pa*) and the clear nature (*rang bzhin gsal ba*) of the ground (*gzhi*) in and as all-pervading compassion (*thugs rje kun khyab*) as it manifests outwardly in visionary experience. Of course, the term "manifest outwardly" (*phyi snang*) should not be taken too literally, rather, it should be understood as a projection of the "inner" luminosity (*nang gsal*) of the ground which forms the innermost part or "heart" (*tsitta*) of man into a seemingly Outer Space (*phyi'i dbyings*). Useful in this context is the picture of the Youthful-Vase-Body (*gzhon nu bum pa'i sku*). When the outer wall of this body which symbolizes the ground in its "inner" potentiality, is broken through, its "inner" light is seen in the "Outer Space". Obviously, the term "Outer Space" (*phyi'i dbyings*) does not refer to some kind of "science-fiction like outer space", but means that the ground is making room for itself in and as experienceable plenum. Moreover, the term "lamp" (*sgron ma*) also implies a bodily presence. It is the ground present in the concrete givenness of an individual being and thus, it is similar to the tathāgatagarbha of the general Mahāyāna Buddhism. In the Rdzogs chen literature one finds a wide variety of different sets of lamps (*sgron ma*), because of the multivalence of this term. Basically it refers to the projection of the inner light of man in an as outer visionary manifestations. The most common set consists of four lamps (*sgron ma bzhi*): The Lamp of the Water that Lassos Everything At a Distance (*rgyang zhags chu'i sgron ma*), the Lamp of Utterly Pure Space (*dbyings rnam par dag pa'i*

Four Especially Great Channels (*khyad par gyi rtsa chen bzhi*) — see below — all of which exclusively are light-channels.

Nevertheless, both of these two sets of four channels have in common that they assume a light-channel serving as a medium for the outward manifestation of Pristine Cognition (*ye shes*). Therefore, they should not be considered as two sets excluding each other. About the function of the Four Principal Channels (*rtsa'i gtso bo bzhi*) there is a concise explanation in the KDYT¹⁰:

« — Moreover, it is at the time of relative truth, that — on account of ignorance (*ma rig pa*) — from among the three channels the left one provides the support for desire, the right one for hatred and the middle one for stupidity.

The Channel Having A Crystal-Cavity (*shel sbug can*) provides no support for anything being impure.

At the time of Ultimate Truth, everything is accomplished on account of Pristine Cognition, but in particular, the right (channel) is accomplished through method (*thabs kyi rang bzhin*), the left one through discriminative awareness (*shes rab kyi rang bzhin*), and the middle one through non-duality (*gnyis su med pa'i rang bzhin*)¹¹.

(At the time of) the way, the left one supports bliss (*bde ba*), the right one clarity (*gsal ba*), and the middle one non-conceptuality (*mi rtog pa*).

(At the time of) the result, the middle one supports the dharmakāya (*chos sku*), the right one the sambhogakāya (*longs sku*) and nirmanakāya (*sprul sku*), and the left one the Clear Light of great bliss which is encompassing the sky (*bde ba chen po 'od gsal nam mkha' mtha' khyab pa'i rten*). »

Interestingly, the left channel is not related to one of the Three Buddha-Bodies (*sku gsum*), but to the Clear Light of great bliss. This points to the fact that in Rdzogs chen thinking the Buddha-Bodies rather are looked at as appearances of the way (*lam gyi snang ba*) than as result¹². Moreover, in a

sgron ma), the Lamp of Empty Drops of Light (*thig le stong pa'i sgron ma*) and the Lamp of Self-Arisen Discriminative Awareness (*shes rab rang byung gi sgron ma*).

10 See KDYT II, p. 154: */de'ang kun rdzob tu rtsa de gsum ma rig pa las gyon 'dod chags /gyas zhe sdang /dbus gti mug rten byed la /shel sbug can ni gang gi yang ma dag pa'i rten du med do //don dam pa'i dus su spyir thams cad ye shes las grub kyang /khyad par du gyas thabs kyi rang bzhin /gyon shes rab kyi rang bzhin dbus gnyis su med pa'i rang bzhin las grub cing /lam du gyon bde ba /gyas gsal ba /dbus mi rtog pa gsum gyi rten byas pas /'bras bur dbus chos sku /gyas longs sku dang sprul sku /gyon bde ba chen po 'od gsal nam mkha' mtha' khyab pa'i rten byed do /*.

11 How “method” (*thabs*) and “discriminative awareness” (*shes rab*) have to be understood is explained in the ZMYT I, p. 85: */di ltar snang srid snod bcud 'khor 'das thams cad rig pa'i rang snang du shar ba la /thabs ma 'gags par snang ba yab la /shes rab mi 'dzin par stong pa yum dang gnyis med du sbyar bas /gang snang rig pa'i grogs su rang shar te /*: “Thus, method, i.e., unimpeded appearance which is male and discriminative awareness, i.e., non-clinging emptiness which is female, are in non-dual union when all of what is appearance and existence (*snang srid*), the worlds and their inhabitants (*snod bcud*), and saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, have arisen as self-appearance of Awareness. Whatever appears (at this time), it naturally arises (*rang shar*) as friend of Awareness.”

12 See for instance the Tantra *Sgra thal 'gyur chen po*, TTT 56, p. 139: */chos nyid zad cing mthar phyin pas //sku gsum lam gyi snang ba'o /*.

passage of the YTMDZ which consists mainly of a lengthy quotation of the TCZ, one finds a distinction between the Three Buddha-Bodies as Three Bodies of the inner clarity (*nang gsal gyi sku gsum*) which are considered to be aspects of the dharmakāya (*chos sku*) and the Three Buddha-Bodies as appearances of the way (*lam snang*). Klong chen rab 'byams mentions that ancient teachers confirm that they only are not accounted for as result in order to avoid the danger of clinging to them as something ultimate (*sku gsum du zhen pa'i mthar 'dzin*). Nevertheless, it is wrong to establish them ultimately as result, because by doing so the essence of the Inner Space of primordial purity (*ka dag gi nang dbyings kyi ngo bo*) would not be taken into account¹³.

Below, after having described the course of the first three channels, Klong chen rab 'byams emphasizes the point that one has to discern well the top part of the *rkyang ma* and the light-channel. Both of them penetrate the eyes, but the *rkyang ma* supports the eye-consciousness which is aware of forms, whereas the Golden Channel Which Possesses a Crystal Cavity (*ka ti shel gyi sbu gu can*) facilitates the arising of the radiation of the Clear Light ('*od gsal gyi gdangs*)¹⁴. The origin of these four channels is elucidated in the KDNYS¹⁵. Unfortunately, the Elementary Force which corresponds to the the middle channel — the *kun dhar ma* — is not mentioned in this text. Thus, at the time of relative reality, the potential of Pristine Cognition solidifies itself as Elementary Forces on account of ignorance, thereby initiating the formation of a physical body. During this formation the *ro ma* is generated by the essence of water (*chu'i dangs ma*), the *rkyang ma* by the essence of earth (*sa'i dangs ma*), and the *shel sbug can* by the essence of fire (*me'i dangs ma*).

In the Tantra *Rgyud chen dri med zla shel*¹⁶ is an explanation of the highly energetic and less energetic aspects of the Elementary Forces ('*byung lnga dangs snyigs dbye ba dang gnas tshul zur tsam bshad pa*). Here the *ka ti* light-channel, which seems in this context to be identical with the *shel sbug can* is not related to fire, but stands for the highly energetic aspect of earth as it manifests itself in the human body. The less energetic aspect of the earth is said to be the bodily constituents of flesh, bones, hairs, and skin.

In the TDZ¹⁷ one finds an interesting passage describing the the first four

13 See YTMDZ III, p. 733: */des nas dbyings nang gsal gyi sku gsum po de gcig tu byas nas chos sku dang /longs sprul gnyis te sku gsum po rdzogs pa chen po'i lugs la lam snang yang yin la /'bras bu yin pa yang mi 'gal ba'i tshul ni /theg mchog mdzod las /sku gsum lam snang du bshad pa dang 'gal lo zhe na /bla ma snga rabs pa dag na re /'bras bu ma yin zer ba ni /'bras bu sku gsum du zhen pa'i mthar 'dzin dang bral bar byed pa la dgongs pa'am /sgo gsum las sbubs gsum mthar thug tu 'dod pa de dgag pa la dgongs pa'o zhes 'gal spong mdzad nas don la 'bras bur 'jog pa'ang ka dag gi nang dbyings kyi ngo bo ma dgongs pa'i rnam 'gyur yin pas shin tu nor te ma legs so /*.

14 See KDYT II, p. 158: */o na mig la rtsa ba men gyi rwa 'dra ba gnyis yod dam zhe na //yod de ka ti shel gyi sbu gyu can ni dbang po dang shes pa las 'das pa 'od gsal 'char ba'i lam yin la //rkyang ma'i rtse gnyis ni gzugs la 'dzin pa mig gi rnam shes kyi rten yin te //od gsal gyi gdangs la lta byed du byung ba'o //dra 'dra la 'di gnyis ma phyed pa shin tu mang ngo /*.

15 See KDNYS I, p. 425: */rtsa de bzhi gang las skyes na ro ma kun rdzob dus na chu'i dangs ma las skye'o /rkyang ma sas bskyed /shel sbug can ni mes bskyed do /*.

16 See TTT 55, p. 281: */da nang gi 'byung ba dangs snyigs dbye //sha rus spu spags snyigs ma yin //de yi dangs ma ka ti tsa //shel dkar skud pa snying la gnas /*.

17 See TDZ, p. 201: */de la brten pa don dam pa'i 'byung ba bzhi ni //kha dog dkar po rab tu mched pa las rgyang zhags chu'i sgron ma'i rgyu byas /chu'i rlung gi rtsa las byung /dmar po rab tu dmar ba las thig le stong pa'i sgron ma'i rgyu byas /me'i rtsa las byung /ser ba rab tu ser ba las dbyings*

days of the formation of the body. During this time the following four channels are formed one after the other in the left, in the right, in the back and in the front of the womb in order to provide a physical support of the Four Lamps (*sgron ma bzhi*) :

1. Out of the channel of the wind of the water (*chu'i rlung gi rtsa*) spreads the non-substantial white colour which lays the foundation of the Lamp of the Water that Lassos Everything At a Distance (*rgyang zhags chu'i sgron ma*). This lamp is said to be responsible for the arisal of light and of the Vision of the Immediate Perception of Reality Itself (*chos nyid mngon sum gyi snang ba*)¹⁸.

rnam par dag pa'i sgron ma'i rgyu byas /sa'i rtsa las byung /kha dog rab tu ljang ba las shes rab rang byung gi sgron ma'i rgyu byas /lam rlung gi rtsa las 'byung ngo /lde yang shes rab rang byung gis rig pa bskyed /rgyang zhags kyis 'od bskyed //thig les sku bskyed /dbyings kyis ye shes bskyed do //rgyang zhags chu'i sgron mas ni chos nyid mngon sum gyi snang ba mthong la /thig le stong pa'i sgron mas nyams gong 'phel gyi snang ba mthong /dbyings rnam par dag pa'i sgron mas rig pa tshad phebs kyis snang ba mthong /shes rab rang byung gi sgron mas chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba mthong ba'i rten byed do /.

- 18 The Vision of the Immediate Perception of Reality Itself (*chos nyid mngon sum gyi snang ba*) forms part of the Four Visions (*snang ba bzhi*) of the Leaping Over (*thod rgal*). The term "vision" (*snang ba*) denotes both, how the ground (*gzhi*) arises as well as how it dissolves back into itself, and even though it is explained that it consists of four gradual levels, it should not be assumed that these levels arise necessarily in the order described below. Moreover, they do not arise out of the ground on account of intentional imagining, but manifest spontaneously in the Outer Space (*phyi'i dbyings*) in the same way as a face naturally reflects itself in a mirror.

1. The Vision of the Immediate Perception of Reality Itself (*chos nyid mngon sum gyi snang ba*) : The term "immediate perception" (*mngon sum*) indicates in the context of the Leaping Over that one perceives what is meant with the reality of awareness (*rig pa*) by applying specific meditative techniques. It is emphatically denied that these visions have any similarity with common appearances because it is assumed that unlike the latter ones they are not something that can be reduced to the material-physical. These uncommon visions (*snang ba*) appear by means of the lamps (*sgron ma*). As door or gate for the outward arisal of awareness serves the Lamp of the Water that Lassos Everything At a Distance (*rgyang zhags chu'i sgron ma*), i.e., a kind of light-channel (*od rtsa*) dwelling in the middle of the eyes, and by means of the Lamp of Utterly Pure Space (*dbyings rnam par dag pa'i sgron ma*) the first of these Four Visions (*snang ba bzhi*) initially lights up like a dark-blue space with a circumference of rainbow-light. Subsequently, the Vajra-Chains (*rdo rje lu gu rgyud*) which resemble strings of pearls or diamonds come forth inside the Lamp of Empty Drops of Light (*thig le stong pa'i sgron ma*) which arises in the form of five-coloured light-drops (*thig le*) in the middle of the dark-blue appearance of space. The Lamp of Self-Arisen Discriminative Awareness (*shes rab rang byung gi sgron ma*), finally, makes itself felt after the stabilization of the visions of the Vajra-Chains as an awareness which takes hold of these visions in a non-conceptual way.

2. The Vision of Increasing Experiences (*nyams gong 'phel gyi snang ba*) : During the second vision the light-drops (*thig le*) increase in seize and number, and the Vajra-Chains (*rdo rje lu gu rgyud*) inside them multiply. Not only that, this vision is also characterised by the coming forth of multifarious kinds of luminous forms such as shooting stars, checkered designs or lotus flowers with thousand petals. In the most advanced stage of this vision the rainbow-like light pervades the Outer Space (*phyi'i dbyings*) completely and inside countless light-drops manifest the partly developed Buddha-Bodies of the Five Families (*rigs lnga*). What is translated in this context as "experiences" (*nyams*) refers to both, mental (*shes nyams*) and visual experiences (*snang nyams*). The former ones are understood as meditative signs such as bliss, clarity or non-discursiveness (*bde gsal mi rtog gsum*) corresponding to the feeling-tone experienced during the unfolding of the Four Visions (*snang ba bzhi*). Being transitional they are said to be imperfect. However, it is the quality of making the ground

2. The colour red is emerging from the channel of the fire (*me'i rtsa*) and brings forth the Lamp of Empty Drops of Light (*thig le stong pa'i sgron ma*) which again initiates the constitution of Buddha-Bodies and the Vision of Increasing Experiences (*nyams gong 'phel gyi snang ba*).

3. The colour yellow, having its source in the channel of the earth (*sa'i rtsa*), produces the Lamp of Utterly Pure Space (*dbyings rnam par dag pa'i sgron ma*) out of which Pristine Cognition associated here with the Vision of the Awareness Reaching Its Peak (*rig pa tshad phebs kyi snang ba*), makes itself felt.

4. Coming out of the channel of the wind (*rlung gi rtsa*), the colour green initiates the Lamp of Self-Arisen Discriminative Awareness (*shes rab rang byung gi sgron ma*). This lamp again makes possible the arising of Awareness (*rig pa*) and of the Vision of Exhaustion of Reality Itself (*chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba*).

The most important source of the set of Four Especially Great Channels (*khyad par gyi rtsa chen bzhi*)¹⁹ which at least since the time of Klong chen rab 'byams is propagated widely seems to be the Tantra *Sgron ma 'bar ba*. In its third chapter these four channels are related to four kinds of light-drops (*thig le*)²⁰:

1. The Good Drop of the Ground (*gzhi yi thig le bzang po*) flowing inside the Great Golden Channel (*ka ti gser gyi rtsa chen*),

2. the Good Drop of the Way (*lam gyi thig le bzang po*) flowing inside the Channel Which Is Like a White Silk Thread (*dar dkar snal ma lta bu'i*

experienceable in visionary perception which represents the hall mark of the Leaping Over (*thod rgal*). Thus, the visual experiences (*snang nyams*) are much more appreciated and even looked upon as perfect, because one is supposed to see the reality of awareness (*rig pa*) in all its immediacy by means of them.

3. The Vision of the Awareness Reaching Its Peak (*rig pa tshad phebs kyi snang ba*) : It is in the penultimate vision that awareness (*rig pa*) reaches its peak in its outward projection. The Buddha-Bodies (*sku*) of the Five Buddha-Families (*rigs lnga*) manifest here in their fully perfected form. Concrete things such as earth or stones cease to appear and the material body begins to dissolve into light.

4. The Vision of Exhaustion of Reality Itself (*chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba*) : This vision does not imply some kind of nihilism in the sense of becoming nothing. Rather both, the arising of visions culminating in the third vision as well as their final exhaustion or dissolution are prerequisite to gain access to perfect Buddhahood which should not be looked at as a kind of static perfection, but as the beginning of a new dynamic regime.

Quite detailed explanations of the Four Visions (*snang ba bzhi*) can be found in Padmasambhava 1998, pp. 244-255; Achard 1999, pp. 121-127; Chagmé 2000, pp. 160-175. Furthermore, in Guenther 1992 the whole sixth chapter — see pp. 73-91 — is dedicated to the subject of lamps (*sgron ma*) and visions (*snang ba*).

19 This is the set consisting of the Great Golden Channel (*ka ti gser gyi rtsa chen*), the Channel of White Silk Thread (*dar dkar snal ma lta bu'i rtsa*), the One Rolled Up In Subtlety (*'phra la 'drii*), and the One Having a Crystal Cavity (*shel sbug can*).

20 About the wide range of connotations of the term "drop" (*thig le*) in the context of the instruction series (*man ngag*) of Rdzogs chen see Germano 1992, pp. 270-275.

rtsa),

3.the Top of the Good Ones (*bzang po rnams kyi rtse mo*) flowing inside the One Rolled Up In Subtlety (*'phra la 'dril*), and

4.the One Possessing Good Ornaments (*bzang po'i rgyan dang ldan pa*) flowing inside the One Having A Crystal Cavity (*shel sbug can*).

This standard set of four light-channels is also presented in the fifth chapter of the Tantra *Theg pa kun gyi spyi phud klong chen rab 'byam*²¹ where it is emphasized that these channels are naturally present (*rang gnas*) in the body, not being created by anything.

Moreover, in the Tantra *Mu tig rin po che 'phreng ba'i rgyud*²² one of the channels of the Four Especially Great Channels, i.e., the One Rolled Up In Subtlety is replaced by the Channel Which Causes the Arisal of the Sense Objects (*dbang po yul la 'char byed pa'i rtsa*). In the Tantra *Rig pa rang shar chen po* one finds two fourfold sets. The first one²³ consists of :

1. the Great Golden Channel (*ka ti gser gyi rtsa chen*),
2. the One Being an Empty Crystal-Cavity (*shel gyi sbug gu khongs pa stong*),
3. the White Silk Thread Rolled Up In Subtlety (*dar dkar snal ma 'phra la 'khyil*), and
4. the Great Channel of Empty Self-Liberation (*stong pa rang grol rtsa chen po*).

The second set²⁴ is the set called "Palace of the Channels Initiating Movement" (*'gyu byed rtsa yi gzhal yas*) :

1. 1.The Channels Being White, Smooth and Empty (*dkar 'jam stong pa'i rtsa dag*),
2. the Precious Emanating Channels (*rin chen 'phro ba'i rtsa rnams*),
3. 3.the Completely Liberating Great Channels (*rnam par grol byed rtsa chen*), and
4. 4.the Moving White Crystal Channels (*shel dkar rgyu ba'i rtsa dag*).

As to the collection Four Branches of the Heart Essence (*Snying thig ya bzhi*), the most common set of four light-channels, i.e., the set of Four Especially Great Channels (*khyad par gyi rtsa chen bzhi*), is only met with in the ZMYT²⁵,

21 See TTT 55, p. 310 : /ka ti ser gyi rtsa chen de //dar dkar rnal ltar 'phra la 'dril //shel sbug can bzhi'i nang na ni //rang gnas sus kyang byes med par //ye nas mnyam pa chen por gnas /.

22 See TTT 56, p. 173 : //lam ni rtsa bzhika ti gser gyi rtsa chen dang shel gyi sbu gu can dbang po yul la 'char byed rtsa dar dkar snal ma lta bu'i nang na yang... /.

23 See the Tantra *Rig pa rang shar chen po*, TTT 56, p. 62 : /de yang mtshan brjod 'di lta ste //ka ti gser gyi rtsa chen dang //shel gyi sbug gu khongs pa stong //dar dkar snal ma 'phra la 'khyil //stong pa rang grol rtsa chen po /.

24 See the Tantra *Rig pa rang shar chen po*, TTT 56, p. 71 : /rang byung 'gag med dkyil 'khor chen po ni //rang rang tsitta'i dkyil na kha dog 'bar //dkar 'jam stong pa'i rtsa dag dang //rin chen 'phro ba'i rtsa rnams dang //rnam par grol byed rtsa chen dang //shel dkar rgyu ba'i rtsa dag gnas /.

25 See ZMYT I, p. 302 : /khyad par ka ti shel sbugs can //dar kar snal ma phra la 'khril //di bzi'i nang na 'od dang zer //thig le thig phran ye shes lung //rgyu bas ye shes snang ba ston //od rtsa'i rang

where they serve as usual as carriers of light-drops and of the wind of Pristine Cognition (*ye shes kyi rlung*). In the other texts of this collection, the usual three channels found in many Buddhist tantric texts — *ro ma*, *rkyang ma* and *kun dhar ma* — are presented, adding in the context of the practice of Leaping Over (*thod rgal*)²⁶ as fourth one the Golden One Which Posseses a Crystal Cavity (*ka ti shel gyi sbu gu can*).

In order to know more about the Four Especially Great Channels (*khyad par gyi rtsa chen bzhi*), one has to examine the relevant passages found in the GTHZ, the TDZ and the TCZ. Thus, the following is written in the GTHZ²⁷ about their function and the course taken by them inside the body:

« — Moreover, among the Four Channels Which Are Especially Great (*khyad par chen po'i rtsa bzhi*) on account of the Clear Light dwelling in them, there is the Great Golden Channel (*ka ti gser gyi rtsa chen*) which resides in the centre of the middle channel and which connects this (channel) with the middle of the heart. It is filled up with the Drop of Samantabhadra (*kun tu bzang po'i thig le*).

gdangs lu gu rgyud thig les bryan pa de yin no /.

26 The main practice of the Instruction Series (*man ngag sde*) is usually subsumed under the topics of Cutting Through (*khregs chod*) and Leaping Over (*thod rgal*) by means of which the fundamental awareness (*rig pa*) of the ground (*gzhi*) is laid open. The former one aims at cutting through the whole of conceptual thought. This is done by relying on a meditative procedure featuring self-liberation (*rang grol*). Thus, in the practice of the Cutting Through (*khregs chod*), “self-liberation” means that no intentional effort is involved to undo ignorance (*ma rig pa*) and the ensuing duality of concepts such as *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* or subject and object. Duality is looked upon as illusory, and illusion itself is not understood as something having a kind of enduring substance, which implies that illusion itself is illusory. In this context, the term “look upon” (*lta ba*) is to be taken quite literally, because the self-liberation of illusion actually is realized by looking at whatever one is aware of in a non-interfering manner - the German word *Gelassenheit* fits well here -, thereby releasing the dualistic tension inherent in any moment of consciousness governed by a rigidly fixed subject-object structure. In this process the primordial purity (*ka dag*) of the ground of awareness is laid open, but its spontaneous perfection (*lhun grub*) as witnessed in immediate perception is not thematized. The aspect of spontaneous perfection is, however, dealt with in the Leaping Over (*thod rgal*). In this practice awareness (*rig pa*) is caused to project itself in and as outer appearances, thus facilitating a visionary experience of it; and it is primarily this facility of the Leaping Over which is said to mark it as being superior to the Cutting Through. Another superiority of the Leaping Over concerns the result (*bras bu*) as understood in *Rdzogs chen* thinking. Even though both practices are said to be identical in having the potential to cause final liberation or Buddhahood by means of giving access to the primordial purity of the ground, nevertheless, it still is only by means of the Leaping Over that one realizes the body of light (*'od lus*) which implies the dissolution of one's material body into light. For concise explanations of the Cutting Through (*khregs chod*) and the Leaping Over (*thod rgal*) see Thondup 1989, pp. 68-73; Gyatso 1998, pp. 198-200. For an excellent summary of these two practices see Erhard 1990, pp. 66-81. Especially interesting is his discussion about the alleged superiority of the Leaping Over when compared with the Cutting Through. A clear presentation of the body of light (*'od lus*) can be found in Achard 1999, pp. 152-155.

27 See GTHZ, p. 377 : */de'ang 'od gsal gnas pas khyad par chen po'i rtsa bzhi la /ka ti gser gyi rtsa chen dbu ma'i dbus dang /de las snying gi dbus na 'brel bas kun tu bzang po gzhi'i thig las gang bar gnas so //dar dkar snal ma lta bu ni 'od rtsa las tshangs bug la yar bstan pa'i cha nas btags te /chos nyid skye med kyi lam du 'jug pa'i thig le /rig pa rtog med kyi sku 'char zhing rten la nram shes 'pho ba sbyong ba'i lam ste steng rol yin pa'i phyir ro //phra la 'dril ba ni 'khor lo bzhi'i dbus nas 'od gsal gyi rten byed de bzang po rtse mo'i thig le 'od lnga zer dang thig phran du gnas pa'o //shel sbug can ni snying nas mig tu 'brel te bzang po'i rgyan dang ldan pa'i thig le rdo rje lu gu rgyud kyi snang ba grangs med pa 'char ba'i rten byed pa'o /.*

The label “Channel Which Resembles a White Silk Thread” (*dar dkar snal ma lta bu'i rtsa*) is given to the light-channel which is directed upwards to the aperture of Brahmā (*tshangs bug*)²⁸. (Inside it is) the Drop Which Lets Enter Into the Way Of the Unborn Reality Itself (*chos nyid skye med kyi lam du 'jug pa'i thig le*), (and) the Non-Conceptual Buddha-Body of Awareness (*rig pa rtog med kyi sku*) is dependent on it for its arising. (In addition to that, it provides) the way for the training of the transference of consciousness (*rnam shes 'pho ba*).

As to the One Rolled Up In Subtlety” (*'phra la 'dril*) : (Passing) through the middle of the four energy-centres, it serves as support of the Clear Light. (Inside it) dwell the Drop of the Top of the Good Ones (*bzang po rnams kyi rtse mo*), five-coloured light-rays and small drops (*thig phran*).

The One Having a Crystal-Cavity (*shel sbug can*) connects the heart with the eyes. (Inside it dwells the Drop) Possessing Good Ornaments (*bzang po'i rgyan dang ldan pa*) and it supports innumerable appearances of Vajra-Chains (*rdo rje lu gu rgyud*). »

There are four drops (*thig le*) mentioned in GTHZ :

1. the Drop of Samantabhadra (*kun tu bzang po'i thig le*),
2. the Drop Which Lets Enter Into the Way Of the Unborn Reality Itself (*chos nyid skye med kyi lam du 'jug pa'i thig le*),
3. the Drop of the Top of the Good Ones (*bzang po rnams kyi rtse mo*), and
4. the Drop Possessing Good Ornaments (*bzang po'i rgyan dang ldan pa*).

It should be noted that these drops are not completely identical with the ones presented in the Tantra *Sgron ma 'bar ba*. However, according to the TDZ²⁹ the same four channels, i.e., the Four Especially Great Channels locate the four kinds of drops (*thig le*) mentioned in this Tantra. Moreover, the nature of these four drops is here clearly elucidated:

1. The Good Drop of the Ground (*gzhi'i thig le bzang po*) represents essence (*ngo bo*), nature (*rang bzhin*), and compassion (*thugs rje*) and is inside the Great Golden Channel (*ka ti gser gyi rtsa chen*).
2. The Good Drop of the Way (*lam gyi thig le bzang po*) dwells together with the Four Lamps inside the Channel of White Silk Thread (*dar*

28 The Brahmā-aperture (*tshangs bug*) is located eight fingers above the hairline and plays an important function in the transference of consciousness (*rnam shes 'pho ba*).

29 See TDZ, p. 257 : */gsum pa 'od gsal dag pa'i thig les mjug bsdu ba ni // 'od rtsa bzhi nas rgyu ba'i thig le ste ka ti gser gyi rtsa chen na gzhi'i thig le bzang po ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje gsum gyi bdag nyid snying ga la brten nas gnas so // dar dkar snal ma na lam gyi thig le bzang po sgron ma bzhi dang bcas pa chu'i sgron ma ste gyas na'o // phra la 'khril na bzang po'i rtse mo'i thig le nyams gong 'phel gyi snang ba sna tsogs pa gyon na'o // shel bug can na tshad phebs kyi snang ba'i rten nang gsal ye shes kyi 'char gzhiir gnas so // stong pa rang grol na rdo rje lu gu rgyud kyi sku gnas pa ste /sgron ma 'bar ba las //gzhi yi thig le bzang po dang //lam gyi thig le de bzhin bzang //bzang po rnams kyi rtse mo dang //bzang po'i rgyan dang ldan par yang //rtsa rnams kyi ni nang gnas //zhes so /.*

dkar snal ma lta bu'i rtsa) which is especially related to the right side of the water-lamp (*chu'i sgron ma*).

3. The Top of the Good Ones (*bzang po rnam kyī rtse mo*) is to be found in the Channel Rolled Up In Subtlety" (*'phra la 'dril*) connecting the heart with the left side of the water-lamp and being responsible for the various aspects of the Vision of Increasing Experiences (*nyams gong 'phel gyi snang ba*).
4. Even though not explicitly mentioned, the One Possessing Good Ornaments (*bzang po'i rgyan dang ldan pa*) is located in the Channel Having A Crystal-Cavity (*shel sbug can*) which supports the Vision of the Awareness Reaching Its Peak (*rig pa tshad phebs kyī snang ba*).

In the BMNYT³⁰, the following relationship between drops and a sixfold set of light-channels — all of them are located in the heart (*tsitta*) — is as follows :

1. In the Channel of the Precious Threaded White Crystal (*rin po che shel dkar rgyus pa'i rtsa*) which is located in the uppermost part of the heart, the Drop of Utterly Pure Space (*dbyings rnam par dag pa'i thig le*) moves. Being as big as a bean it is five-coloured, emanates light and accommodates Buddha-Bodies.
2. The Channel of the Precious Crystal Tube (*rin po che shel gyi sbu gu can*) is situated in the right part of the heart and contains the Drop of Space (*dbyings kyī thig le*). Again, this drop has the size of a small bean, but it is exclusively white and lacks Buddha-Bodies.
3. The Channel of the Precious Gathered Web (*rin po che dra ba 'dus pa*) has its position in the middle of the heart, and there, the Drop of Samantabhadra (*kun tu bzang po'i thig le*) flows. This drop is not bigger than a mustard-seed and of red colour. Enclosing heaps of five-coloured light, it expands and contracts light.
4. In the Channel of the Precious Inherently Pure Emptiness (*rin po che stong pa rang sang*) which is also to be found in the middle of the heart, the Drop of Reality Itself (*chos nyid kyī thig le*) is contained. Being yellow and having the size of a tip of a hair, it neither expands

30 See BMNYT III, p. 19 : *da ni thig le'i gnas lugs bstan te /rin po che shel dkar rgyus pa'i rtsa nang na dbyings rnam par dag pa'i thig le gnas te /che chung gi tshad ni sran ma tsam du gnas te /de yang kha dog lnga'o /'od zer du 'phro /sku dang bcas so /tsitta'i rtse mo na gnas so /rin po che shel gyi sbu gu can na dbyings kyī thig le gnas te /de yang che chung gi tshad sran chung tsam du gnas so /kha dog dkar po 'od zer cha tsam du gnas so /tsitta'i gyas nas 'byung ngo /rin po che dra ba 'dus pa'i nang na kun tu bzang po'i thig le gnas te /che chung ni yungs 'bru tsam du gnas so /kha dog dmar por gnas so /'gro 'ong dang bcas pa'o /tsitta'i sked pa nas 'byung ba'o /thig le lnga'i tshom bu dang bcas pa'o /rin po che stong pa rang sang gi nang na chos nyid kyī thig le gnas te /che chung skra'i rtse mo tsam /kha dog ser po /spro bsdu med pa tsitta'i sked pa nas 'byung /rin po che las rab rdzogs pa'i rtsa na ye shes kyī thig le gnas te /che chung til 'bru tsam du kha dog dmar ser /'gro 'ong med cing tsitta'i rtsa ba nas 'byung /rin po che dar dkar snal ma lta bu'i rtsa la /ye shes chen po'i thig le gnas te /che chung rta lnga bcur gshags pa tsam /kha dog sngon por gnas /'gro 'ong ltar snang ba'o /tsitta'i 'dabs nas 'byung ngo /de rnam kyī lam mig nas 'char ro /.*

nor contracts (light).

5. In the Channel of the Precious Perfection of Highest Action (*rin po che las rab rdzogs pa'i rtsa*), in the lower part of the heart, the reddish-yellow Drop of Pristine Cognition (*ye shes kyi thig le*) stays in the form of asesame-seed without moving.
6. The Channel of the Precious White Silk Thread (*rin po che dar dkar snal ma lta bu'i rtsa*) is located in the lateral part of the heart and accomodates the Drop of Great Pristine Cognition. This drop is blue, it moves (inside this channel) and has the size of the tenth part of a hair of a horse's tail.

A fifth light- channel, called "Empty Self-Liberation" (*stong pa rang grol*) is sometimes added to the set of the Four Especially Great Channels. Thus, in the following quotation from the TDZ³¹ it is explained why one is talking sometimes rather about five than four light-channels. According to Klong chen rab 'byams, one is emphasizing the connection between them and the Four Lamps (*sgron ma bzhi*) when talking about four channels. On the other hand, with a set of five channels one is stressing their relation to the five aspects of Pristine Cognition (*ye shes lnga*). Unfortunately, it is neither elucidated which one of the four channels is related to which of the Four Lamps, nor is it said which one of the five channels refers to which aspect of Pristine Cognition :

« — Moreover, the Great Golden Channel (*ka ti gser gyi rtsa chen*) which (takes its course) from the heart is (in its) essence self-existing (*rang byung*) (and) displays the radiation of light (*'od gdangs*).

The Channel having A Crystal-Cavity (*shel sbug can*) lights up the radiation of Pristine Cognition inside the life-channel (*srog rtsa*), and although the Channel of White Silk Thread and the One Which Is Rolled Up In Subtlety (*dar dkar snal ma 'phra la 'dril*) are said to be a single bunch on account of being identical in letting arise outer appearances, the White Silk Thread and the One Which Is Rolled Up In Subtlety have to be accounted for as two.

The light-channel which penetrates the right eye is the White Silk Thread and the one penetrating the left one is the One Which Is Rolled Up In Subtlety.

Not only that, the upright inner channel Which Is Rolled Up In Subtlety branches itself into four (channels), thus facilitating the permeation of each of the middle of the four energy-centres through the radiation of (this) light-channel.

31 See TDZ, p. 250 : */de yang ka ti gser gyi rtsa chen ni snying ga nas rang byung ngo bo rtsa'i 'od gdangs mtshon la /shel sbug can ni srog rtsar ye shes kyi gdangs gsal zhing //dar dkar snal ma phra la 'khril ba ni chun gcig tu bshad pa phyir snang ba'i byed pa gcig pas gcig tu bshad kyang dar dkar snal ma dang phra la 'khril zhes ming gnyis su bgrangs so //mig gyas su 'od rtsa zug pa dar dkar snal ma /gyon du zug pa de phra la 'khril lo //der ma zad phra la 'khril gyi nang rtsa 'greng bu gcig la bzhir gyes pas 'khor lo bzhi'i dbus su 'od rtsa'i gdangs so sor khyab pas la lar stong pa rang grol med pas 'di bshad do //stong pa rang grol ni dbu ma'i nang nas tshangs bug la zug pas rig pa rtog med kyi sku dbyings su thim rung 'char ba'i lam byed pa'o //de ltar na 'od rtsa lnga ni ye shes lnga dang sbyar ba yin la bzhir byas dus sgron ma bzhi dang sbyor te /.*

That is why in some (texts) it is said that there is no channel (called) "Empty Self-Liberation" (*stong pa rang grol*).

As for (the channel) Empty Self-Liberation, it (takes its course) inside the middle channel, (finally) penetrates the Aperture of Brahmā and provides in this manner the way for the absorption of the Non-Conceptual Buddha-Body of Awareness (*rig pa rtog med kyi sku*) into (Outer) Space.

Thus, the five light-channels (*'od rtsa lnga*) are connected with the five aspects of Pristine Cognition. However, when one is taking four into account, they are related to the Four Lamps. »

Further research is needed in order to give an exhaustive account of all the different sets of light-channels as presented in the Instruction Series (*man ngag sde*) of Rdzogs chen. Nevertheless, one can safely conclude that all of these sets have in common that they are intended to show how the inner light present in the heart (*tsitta*) is supposed to be projected outwardly. It is in this exteriorization that the light which is said to lie dormant in the innermost part of man and which stands for the ever given possibility of Buddhahood (*sangs rgyas*) starts to display its full potential in and as the visionary manifestations which are described in great detail in texts treating the Four Visions (*snang ba bzhi*) of the Leap Over (*thod rgal*).

ABBREVIATIONS

TDZ — *Tshig don rin po che'i mdzod*. By Klong chen rab 'byam. In *Klong chen mdzod bdun*, Sde-dge edition. 6 vol. Gangtok: Sherab Gyaltzen and Khyentse Labrang, 1983.

TCZ I / II — *Theg pa'i mchog rin po che'i mdzod*. By Klong chen rab 'byams. In *Klong chen mdzod bdun*, Sde-dge edition. 6 vols. Gangtok: Sherab Gyaltzen and Khyentse Labrang, 1983.

GTHZ — *Grub pa'i mtha' rin po che'i mdzod*. By Klong chen rab 'byams. In *Klong chen mdzod bdun*, Sde-dge edition. 6 vols. Gangtok: Sherab Gyaltzen and Khyentse Labrang, 1983.

KDNYT I / II — *Mkha' 'gro snying thig*. In *Snying thig ya bzhi*. 11 vols. New Delhi: Trulku Tsewang, Jamyang and L. Tashi, 1970.

KDYT I / II / III — *Mkha' 'gro yang thig*. In *Snying thig ya bzhi*. 11 vols. New Delhi: Trulku Tsewang, Jamyang and L. Tashi, 1970.

ZMYT I / II — *Zab mo yang thig*. In *Snying thig ya bzhi*. 11 vols. New Delhi: Trulku Tsewang, Jamyang and L. Tashi, 1970.

TTT 54 / 55 / 56 — *The Tibetan Tripitaka*, vols. 54, 55, 56. Editor-in-Chief: A W. Barber. SMC Publishing Inc., Taipei, 1991.

YTMDZ I / II / III — *Yon tan rin po che'i mdzod kyi 'grel pa*. By Yon tan rgya mtsho. (3 vols.). Gangtok, 1969-71. Published by Sonam T. Kazi.

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