


On some *rDzogs chen* aspects in a *gCod* Text from the *Bla ma dgongs 'dus*, a *gTer ma* collection discovered by Sangs rgyas gling pa (1341-1396)

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1. *gCod* and *rDzogs chen*

he doctrine of recision (*gcod*) started its successful circulation in Tibet during the eleventh century in the context of the Second Diffusion of Buddhism, mainly through the effort of Ma gcig lab sgron (1055-1149), the Tibetan yoginī who is considered its formulator or even its founder. Being mainly a practice-oriented meditational process, it takes a rather synthetic approach, drawing its origin both from *sūtra* and *tantra* traditions received from India.¹ The *gcod* practice spread among all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, each time taking on features peculiar to the context to which it was adapted. This process also took place in the *rnying ma* and *rdzogs chen* contexts. A line from the introduction to one of the most famous *gcod* practice text in the *rnying ma* school, 'The Resounding Laughter of the *Dākinīs*' (*mkha' 'gro gad rgyangs*), aptly shows how the *rdzogs chen* point of view is considered in relation to practices belonging to other classes of teachings:

As for the self-nature [of all], the Great Perfection, in order to get to the root of this unique state, although it transcends the [object/subject concept of] cutting and cutter, for those who [are fettered] to having concepts and [need] a path of engaging in [elaborate] yogic practice, I will expose the instructions for discarding the aggregates [as] food [offering].²

¹ Edou, Jérôme, *Machig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chöd*, pp. 25-38.

² *rang bzhin rdzogs pa chen po ni: nyag gcig rtsad nas gcod pa'i phyir: gcod bya gcod byed las 'das kyang: spros pa can gyi gang zag dang: brtul zhugs spyod pa lam slong phyir: phung po gzan bskyur man ngag:* ('Jigs med gling pa mkhyen brtse 'od zer, *gCod yul mkha' 'gro'i gad rgyangs*, p. 338). 'The Resounding Laughter of the *dākinīs*' (*mkha' 'gro gad rgyangs*), part of the *Klong chen sning thig* cycle and a mind treasure discovered by 'Jigs med gling pa (1730-1798), is among the better known writings

The earliest textual traces of an amalgamation of the *rdzogs chen* point of view (*lta ba*) with the *gcod* practice may be traced back to the fourteenth century.³ In the *bka' ma* lineage, there is a *gcod* cycle by Kun dga' 'bum pa (1332-1381), the throne holder of the Kaḥ thog monastery, himself a *gcod* and *zhi byed* specialist.⁴ Among *gter mas*, there are some *gcod* texts contained in the *Bla ma dgongs 'dus*, the famous collection rediscovered by Sangs rgyas gling pa (1341⁵-1396) and, other than these, are a *gcod* cycle by rDo rje gling pa (1346-1405)⁶ and some texts contained in the *dGongs pa zang thal* by rGod ldem can (1337-1409).⁷

The *gcod* texts contained in the *Bla ma dgongs 'dus* constitute a very interesting example of this process of integration of *rnying ma* and *rdzogs chen* aspects with the practice of Recision. In 'The Single Seat of the Central Practice: Clear Light, Essence of the Sky' (*dnagos gzhi'i nyams len gdan thog gcig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po*) in particular, the contrast between the *rdzogs chen* approach and the *tantric* practice of *gcod*, which is based on the *sūtra*-style principles affirmed in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, is less obvious than in the quote from 'Jigs

on *gcod*. The *rdzogs chen* appreciation of *gcod* as a somewhat accessory practice is made remarkably clear in this text; it is held to be a useful, albeit not indispensable *tantric* method. The initial verses state that this is a teaching for those who need a formal and elaborate style of practice, not being able to settle in the dimension beyond subject, object and action. In this respect, Tony Duff, for example, says: 'The teaching of view in Pacifier Chod [*gcod*] starts with the concept of a problem that needs to be cut and ends up with the fact of the direct experience of Prajnaparamita, whereas the teaching of view in Great Completion [*rdzogs chen*] bypasses concept all together and goes directly to the overarching expanse of that view' (Duff, Tony, *Longchen Nyingthig Chod, Sound of Dakini Laughter: Text by Jigmey Lingpa, Instructions by Dza Patrul, and Commentary by the Author*, p. xvi).

³ From the doctrinal perspective some concepts expressed in earlier texts, like the *bKa' tshoms chen mo* attributed to Ma gcig (see 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas (ed.), *gDams ngag mdzod*, vol. 14 (pha), pp. 7-17.), contain elements that can be assimilated, or at least read, in a *rdzogs chen* fashion. Here we make reference to texts by authors or *gter stons* belonging to the *rnying ma* school and containing various elements peculiar to the *gcod* practice. As of yet we have not found any definitive evidence of reputed *gcod* texts written or discovered by Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer (1124-1192). We are currently undertaking a study on *rnying ma gcod*, some results of which have been presented at IATS XIII (Pansa, Margherita, and Sanders, Fabian, *A Trifling Anachronism, on gcod in the rnying ma Tradition*).

⁴ 'Jam dbyangs, ed., *Kaḥ thog kun dga' 'bum gyi bka' srol bka' ma'i gcod skor*.

⁵ The year 1340 is sometimes mentioned (Mei, Ching Hsuan, *The Development of 'Pho ba Liturgy in Medieval Tibet*, p. 113).

⁶ rDo rje gling pa, *gCod skor gter chen rdo rje rdzang pa'i gter chos*.

⁷ rGod kyi ldem 'phru chen, *dGongs pa zang thal*, vol. 4, pp. 515-588, and vol. 5, pp. 271-279. Many thanks to Katarina Turpeinen for pointing this out.

med gling pa and the term *rdzogs chen* does not appear at all, but its terminology and key-points are clearly distinguishable. The high level of integration between the three different points of view (*sūtra*, *tantra* and *rdzogs chen*) makes it difficult to categorize the text as a prevalent expression of the one or the other. All three aspects are intermingled, and a given perspective is emphasized as required to support the explanation and practice of a particular point.

2. The *gTer ston*

The *gter ston* Sangs rgyas gling pa lived and taught across the *rnying ma* and *bka' brgyud* schools and was among the first masters to incorporate some of the practices belonging to the new schools (*gsar ma*) in the ancient school via *gter ma* texts. He was an extremely important *gter ston* considered to be a *sprul sku* of Lha sras dam 'dzin rol pa ye shes rtsal, the son of king Khri srong lde'u btsan (ca. 742-800).⁸ Nevertheless, in his biographies⁹ we read that he was ordained in a *bka' brgyud* monastery and came into close contact with the highest hierarchies of this school, including personages like the Fourth Karma pa, Rol pa'i rdo rje (1340-1383), the Second Zhwa dmar pa, mKha' spyod dbang po (1350-1405) and Ta'i si tu Byang chub rgyal mtshan (1302-1373).¹⁰ He actually spent his life in Kong po, where the *bka' brgyud* was the prevalent school at that time, both in spiritual and temporal terms. In this school some of the most important commentators of the *gcod* practice had already appeared, in particular the Third Karma pa, Rang byung rdo rje (1284-1339).¹¹ It

⁸ The dharma king who invited the abbot to Tibet in order to spread the Buddhist teachings and later, on Śāntarakṣita's advice, Padmasambhava.

⁹ An interesting study on the two biographies contained in the *Bla ma dgongs 'dus* cycle (the *sPrul sku sangs rgyas gling pa'i gter 'byung chen mo* and the *gTer 'byung tshigs bcad ma*) and several more recent ones has been undertaken by Ching Hsuan Mei (Mei, Ching Hsuan, *The Development of 'Pho ba Liturgy in Medieval Tibet*, pp. 111-123).

¹⁰ *karma pa*, *zhwa dmar pa*, and *ta'i si tu* are the three highest authorities of the *karma bka' brgyud* school.

¹¹ Rang byung rdo rje, one of the first commentators of *gcod*, integrated teachings on *mahāmudrā* with *rdzogs chen*. Dharma seng ge, in his 'Ornament of Liberation: The Precious Garland of the Origin of Pacification and Recision' (*zhi byed dang gcod yul gyi chos 'byung rin po che'i phreng ba thar pa'i rgyan*), writes that the doctrine of Ma gcig combining *sūtra* and *tantra* was very widespread and was transmitted by her in particular to Khu bsgom chos kyi seng ge. He also says that the Second Karma pa, Karma pakṣi, transmitted it to gNam mtsho ba and to the Third Karma pa, Rang byung rdo rje (Dharma seng ge, *Zhi byed dang gcod yul gyi*

was a time of fertile doctrinal exchange and propagation when the influence of politically-based sectarian factions was relatively minor, at least from a doctrinal point of view. Rather than confining themselves to rigid systems, great masters strived to find analogies in various doctrines and similarities in methods, making a conscious effort to integrate various traditions. The doctrinal exchange between *rdzogs chen*, the summit of the *rnying ma* teachings, and *mahāmudrā*, the peak of the *bka' brgyud* school, was particularly fertile as the two approaches shared some core doctrinal points and terminology. According to his biographies, Sangs rgyas gling pa was definitely one of those masters. Accounts tell us that he left home when he was still a child due to the hostility of his step-father and, inspired by a prophecy, set out in search of the Fourth Karma pa, Rol pa'i rdo rje. When he reached Byang chub gling monastery, not far from Tsa ri,¹² he was ordained as a novice, and when Rol pa'i rdo rje returned from a pilgrimage to central Tibet he proclaimed that Sangs rgyas gling pa would become a guide for numberless beings and chose him as his spiritual heir. As it happens, the envious monks in the monastery harassed him so much that he had to leave as soon as Rol pa'i rdo rje left Tsa ri. He thus led a wandering life, meeting many masters and receiving many teachings. With regard to our present topic, his biography states that he received various cycles of *gcod* instructions, among which was the initiation ritual known as 'The Opening of the Door of the Sky' (*nam mkha' sgo byed*) at the mKha' gdong hermitage in Lang po. He then began roaming the charnel grounds practicing *thod rgal*.¹³ Later, in the outskirts of the village of Bu lung, after he set up his small tent in the centre of a meadow, a master passed by with his disciples, known as *gcod* madmen (*gcod smyon*). Sangs rgyas gling pa decided to join them, requesting some teachings on the practice of recision.¹⁴ After Sangs rgyas gling pa moved to the Lhun grub steng mountain valley in order to complete a retreat, one night bTsan rgo

chos 'byung rin po che'i phreng ba thar pa'i rgyan, pp. 545, 559-560 and Edou, Jérôme, *Machig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chöd*, pp. 89-92).

¹² An area southwest of Kong po. It draws its name from a homonymous sacred mountain of tremendous importance for the *bka' brgyud* tradition.

¹³ *sPrul sku sangs rgyas gling pa'i gter 'byung chen mo*, p. 33. It is interesting to note that Sangs rgyas gling pa received one of the most widespread *gcod* initiations and then, as is advisable for that practice, set out to live in cemeteries. Even in this setting, he concentrated on the highest and most secret practice of the *rdzogs chen* school. It occurs to us that this biographical fact emphasises the need for him to establish a solid experience of the state of *rdzogs chen* before embarking on more ritually articulated practices in view of being able to always maintain that state or point of view as the underpinning of any other practice.

¹⁴ *sPrul sku sangs rgyas gling pa'i gter 'byung chen mo*, pp. 35-36.

chen po, the *gter ma* guardian deity, appeared in front of him and gave him three rolls containing a list of concealed treasures, along with the prophecies and instructions necessary to unearth them. On 23 August 1364, Sangs rgyas gling pa extracted from the sPu ri cave the texts and esoteric instructions of the *Bla ma dgongs 'dus*, the most important *gter ma* cycle he ever discovered. He then studied, practiced and drew it into his own experience before bestowing it upon masters of various schools, including the Fourth Karma pa, Rol pa'i rdo rje, the Second Zhwa dmar pa, mKha' spyod dbang po, the Ta'i si tu Byang chub rgyal mtshan, and the great preceptor of Jo bstan, mKhan chen bsod nams bzang po¹⁵ of the *bka' brgyud* school, the *sa skya* master bSod nams rgyal mtshan (1312-1375), g.Yag sde paṅ chen (1299-1378) and the abbot of 'Bri gung mthil Chos kyi rgyal po (1335-1407), thus becoming the fountainhead of their transmission.¹⁶

3. The *Bla ma dgongs 'dus* Collection

The internal organisation of extensive collections of *gter mas* such as the *Bla ma dgongs 'dus*, which in different editions counts thirteen or more volumes, is not immediately clear. However, since it is possible to identify a rough categorisation, it may be interesting to give a short summary here.

The first volumes, except for two versions of the extensive biography of Sangs rgyas gling pa, concentrate on the practice of the three roots in their *rnying ma* formulation (*bla ma*, *yi dam* and *mkha' 'gro*). This is followed by instructions on the *vajra* body (*rdo rje lus*); a commentary on the root *mantra* of the collection and various practices related to the realisation of mundane goals; some visualisation practices of the peculiar deities of the cycle, particularly Hayagrīva, and texts on *tantric* ritual. Further volumes include some texts on the

¹⁵ A master in whose presence the Fifth Karma pa, bDe bzhin bshegs pa (1384-1415), was ordained (Roerich, George N., and Gedun Choepel, *The Blue Annals by Gö Lotsawa*, pp. 507-508).

¹⁶ bDud 'joms rin po che also states that when the Ming emperor 永樂 (Yongle, reign 1403-1424) invited the Fifth Karma pa, bDe bzhin bshegs pa, to Beijing, he asked him to take along, together with other extraordinary objects, an immaculate teaching of Padmasambhava, the realised one from O rgyan, and the Karma pa presented him with the *Bla ma dgongs 'dus* (Dudjom Rinpoche and Gyurme Dorje, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*, p. 787). See Mei, Ching Hsuan, *The Development of 'Pho ba Liturgy in Medieval Tibet*, pp. 121-122, for different accounts of the transmission lineages.

application of the teachings to specific crafts such as maṇḍala painting, sacred dances (*'cham*) and cooking. Then there is the exposition of the root *tantra* and of the *tantras* of mind, body, speech,¹⁷ qualities and activities; then the secret *tantra* of *bla ma*, *yi dam* and *mkha' 'gro*; the exposition of vehicles and the instructions on the conceptual and non-conceptual generation phases. After that there is a section containing the initiations to specific practices like *gcod* and *gtum mo*; then prophecies on the future; an almanac and rituals with practical purposes like summoning rain and protection from various negative events. Another section centres around the deity Hayagrīva and various methods to realize the *ḍākinī*. Next are some texts devoted to the completion phase (*rdzogs rim*), broken down into more extensive textual groups. The first series is included in 'The Essential Instructions, Refinement of Gold' (*man ngag snying po gser gyi yang zhun*), followed by works like 'Mahāmudrā: The Secret Casket, Precious Treasure of the Mind, the Great Seal of Boundless Extension' (*phyag rgya chen po klong yangs mtha' bral thugs gter rin po che gsang ba'i sgrom bu*) and works on *gcod* collected in 'The Completion Phase: The Profound Recision of Demons, Principle of *Prajñāpāramitā*' (*rdzogs rim bdud kyi gcod yul zab mo shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i dgongs pa*). This latter section clearly expresses the common standpoint that *gcod* is a *tantric* method to realize the doctrinal viewpoint of *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. Next are a few texts on practices synthesising the generation and completion stages (*bksyed rdzogs zung brel*), grouped in 'The Net of Channels and Vajra Winds' (*rtsa rlung rdo rje'i drwa mig*) and in 'The Doctrine of the Path with the Fruit' (*lam 'bras bu dang bcas pa'i chos*); then various teachings on how to apply practice in the dream state, on joy and suffering, on the power and use of the syllables PHAṬ and HŪM, and on the transference of consciousness. Finally, the collection includes some practices considered to be particularly secret discussing the use of vital energy and the subtle body.

The *Bla ma dgongs 'dus*, then, contains a large section concerning *gcod*, consisting of thirteen texts in all plus the initiation, collectively grouped under the title 'The Completion Phase: The Profound Recision of Demons, Principle of *Prajñāpāramitā*' (*rdzogs rim bdud kyi gcod yul zab mo shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i dgongs pa*).¹⁸ These writings are one of the most ancient examples of *gcod* texts in the

¹⁷ The order in which these three fundamental aspects of beings' existence are enumerated in this text is rather unusual. In general an ascending order is used: body (*lus*), speech (*ngag*) and mind (*yiid*). The sequence here also reflects the way in which the offerings are extended to the higher, lower and intermediate guests.

¹⁸ These texts constitute part of the vols. 11 and 12 in the Gangtok edition.

rnying ma school of Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁹ Each section has an individual title, half of which explains the content and the other half containing a metaphor involving some aspect of ether or sky.²⁰

¹⁹ In the *rnying ma* school the introduction of the *gcod* doctrine and practice is mainly accredited to the teachings of Padmasambhava, who is considered to have authored and concealed them. For this reason in the *rnying ma* or ancient school, the most widespread *gcod* practices belong to the *gter ma* tradition. At times Ma gcig lab sgron is herself considered to be an emanation of Padmasambhava's consort Ye shes mtsho rgyal (Ye shes mtsho rgyal, Nus ldan rdo rje, *Ye shes shes mtsho rgyal gyi rnam thar* pp. 125-126).

²⁰ The term *nam mkha'* is a widely used in Tibetan literature, but can be problematic to translate due to its polysemy. First of all, in *mahāyāna* and *tantrayāna* Buddhism, it is the fifth element alongside earth, water, air and fire. As such, it is the container, the principle of extension and space wherein the possibility of manifestation of any phenomenon is contained. It is perennially immutable, equally pervading everything, it does not have a centre or a periphery and so on. Due to its pervasiveness, homogeneity and immutability it is often used as a symbol of emptiness, or of the ultimate condition, the state of Buddha, the nature of mind, the principle underlying any manifestation. When it has these meanings connected with elemental qualities, we believe it might be better translated as ether. The term also refers to space and sky, which should be considered its hypostases of sorts: they symbolise extension, indefinite profundity and height, but remain empirical and concrete. In space and in the sky no place is equal to another, all having their intrinsic qualities and qualifications. For example, rDo rje gdan (Vajrāsana) is understood to be very different from any other place, and from this descends the traditional science of geomancy, the practice of pilgrimage and so many aspects of the tantric lore. Here, on account of the other titles in the collection, we have translated the term as 'sky' to reflect the metaphoric aspects involved in this context. Nevertheless, it might be useful to keep the other alternatives in mind. In the *gcod* framework, one of the more commonly used initiations, of which the *Bla ma dgongs 'dus* contains a version, is called 'Opening of the Door of the Sky' (*nam mkha' sgo 'byed*). The two texts preceding and following our text bear the titles 'Preliminaries: Light on the Distinction [of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa], the Treasure of the Sky' (*sngon 'gro shan 'byed bye brag rnam gsal nam mkha'i dkor mdzod*) and 'The Instructions on the Final Phase: The Nails Which Overcome the Mistake, the Flowers of the Sky' (*rjes kyi man ngag log non gzer bu nam mkha'i me tog*). It is worth noting in this context that the practice of distinguishing saṃsāra and nirvāṇa (*'khor 'das ru shan*) referred to in the title of the preceding text is typically *rdzogs chen*. The texts dealing with the four demons of *gcod* are called 'Instructions on How to Completely Subdue Enemies: Self-Liberating the Four Demons upon Recognition, the Wind of the Sky' (*bdud bzhi'i dgra las rnam par rgyal bar byed pa'i man ngag bdud bzhi ngos 'dzin thugs phrad rang grol nam mkha'i rlung*), 'Recognising, Meeting and Self-Liberating the Four Demons: Rays of Light of the Sky' (*bdud bzhi ngos 'dzin thug 'phrad rang grol nam mkha'i 'od zer*) and 'The Meteoric Iron Which Dispels Obstacles [Caused by] the Demon Which Leads to the Wrong Path of Self-Complacency: The Lightning of the Sky' (*dga' brod gol sa bdud khyer gegs sel gnam lcags nam mkha'i thog chen*). See Sangs rgyas gling pa, *rDzogs rim bdud kyi gcod yul zab mo shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i dgongs pa las...*

4. A note on terminology

While examining the various aspects of the practice of *gcod*, particularly looking at how they appear and are discussed in 'The Single Seat of the Central Practice: Clear Light, Essence of the Sky' (*gdan thog gcig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po*) we will adopt the classical categorization of the Buddhist teachings common in the *rnying ma* school. In extreme synthesis, we define as *sūtra* class those exoteric teachings that are considered to have been expounded personally by Buddha Śākyamuni. In the context of the text surveyed, the elements we consider part of the *sūtra* class are related to the *mahāyāna* teachings in which emptiness is doctrinally central and the *pāramitās*, compassion and renunciation are prescribed as the path. *Tantra*, in turn, the internal teaching, is understood as the esoteric class of teachings, entered through the ritual of initiation; these teachings are considered by the tradition to have reached the present day through an unbroken transmission from master to disciple, after having been initially thought by a Buddha or other enlightened being to a human. They follow the path of transformation (*sgyur lam*) of confused vision or perception (*'khrul snang*) into a pure one (*dag snang*). Thus, the initiations, the offering of the *maṇḍala*, all the visualized processes of transformation and so on are defining elements which we will ascribe to the *tantra* class. Finally, *rdzogs chen* or *atiyoga* is taken as the rather metaphysical set of teachings, entered through direct introduction (*ngo sprod pa*) into the experience of the condition of *rdzogs chen*. Its path, aimed at stabilizing and perpetuating abidance in that state, is mostly that of self-liberation (*rang grol*), beyond the realm of effort and the attitudes of inclination towards or rejection of the objects of the dualistic mind. We will thus be prone to acknowledge as peculiar to the *rdzogs chen* view all those instructions in which it is crucial to recognize a state which is already perfect as it is, does not prescribe antidotes or amendments and in which the world of perceived phenomena is understood as the mere expression of one's own potentiality.

Although using a different terminology, the above classification seems congruent with a tripartition described in various *gcod* texts. One of the most ancient among them, in the *rnying ma* school, is contained in 'The Pearl Garland: The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel, Severance of Demons' (*bDud kyi gcod yul dgos 'dod kun 'byung rin po che mu tig gi phreng ba*) by the historiographer and *gcod* expert Kun dga' 'bum pa (1332-1381), who writes the following comment:

[... *gcod*], externally is similar to the *Prajñāpāramitā* teachings, since it contains the principles of the six *pāramitās*, emptiness and

compassion and has its origin in Yum chen mo. Internally it has the properties that distinguish *tantra* from the vehicle of characteristics (*mahāyāna*, *Prajñāpāramitā*), that is to say the deity practice, initiation, and the practice of the five *amṛtas* and the five kinds of meat. Secretly, *gcod* is similar to the supreme teaching (*bla med kyi dgongs*), since it certainly puts practitioners in a condition beyond effort and duality, acceptance and rejection and so on, whereas in the *Prajñāpāramitā* tradition absolute and conventional, renunciation and antidote are conceived of as alternative.²¹

Sangs rgyas gling pa, in another text on *gcod* belonging to the *Bla ma gdongs 'dus*, attributes to Padmasambhava²² himself another very similar and unmistakable explanation of how the *gcod* practice should to be understood:

[The *gcod* teaching] is explained externally as *Prajñāpāramitā*; internally it is applied as a method of the secret *mantra* and secretly, certain of the absence of dualism, it is given as introduction (*ngo sprod*).²³

5. The Text

'The Single Seat'²⁴ of the Central Practice: Clear Light, Essence of the

²¹ 'Jam dbyangs, ed., *Kah thog kun dga' 'bum gyi bka' srol bka' ma'i gcod skor*, pp. 109-111.

²² See note 19.

²³ Sangs rgyas gling pa, *rDzogs rim bdud kyi gcod yul zab mo shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i dgongs pa las: sngon 'gro shan 'byed bye brag rnam gsal nam mkha'i dkor mdzod*, p. 494.

²⁴ The formula *gdan* or *stan thog gcig ma* appears several times in *gcod* text titles. It indicates mainly that the practice contained is intended for a single session, yet it can refer to the efficacy and swiftness of the method itself which can bring about liberation—at least theoretically—in this single session. Examples of the use of this formula can be found in the titles of the most ancient *gcod* texts of the *rnying ma* school, both *bka' ma* and *gter ma*, mainly within extended doctrinal cycles. The *bka' ma* lineage includes a work by Kun dga' 'bum pa (see above) bearing the title 'Extending the Offering of the Aggregates According to the Deep Meaning Recision: The Stage of the Practice of the Single Seat' ('Jam dbyangs, ed., *Kah thog kun dga' 'bum gyi bka' srol bka' ma'i gcod skor*, pp. 611-692). Among the more ancient *gter mas*, other than the one discovered by Sangs rgyas gling pa under discussion here, is a text contained in the cycle on *gcod* by rDo rje gling pa (1346-1405) called 'The Single Seat of the Four Empowerments' (rDo rje gling pa, *gCod skor gter chen rdo rje gling pa'i gter chos*, pp. 169-190). Later works include a cycle of teachings belonging to the tradition of sMin grol gling, the *rnying ma* monastery founded by gTer bdag gling pa 'gyur med rdo rje (1646-1714), known under the short title 'The Single Seat of Recision' (*gcod yul stan thog gcig ma*),

Sky' (*dnegos gzhi'i nyams len gdan thog gcig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po*) is the largest among the works on *gcod* contained in the *Bla ma dgongs 'dus*. This text contains the description of initiations, both ritual and explicative, necessary for the attainment of its aims; a large section in which the master leads the disciple through the correct application of the practice, with explanations of the various doctrinal and experiential implications; and finally a short practice which the yogin should apply by himself with various instructions for progressing.

Far from simply describing a *sādhana*, this text is a wonderful example of the way in which, at the higher level of the *nying ma* school, the *rdzogs chen* point of view constitutes the marrow, or the essence, the innermost spiritual experience in which practitioners should find themselves at all times. It is the underlying universal principle; though never mentioned here, it is always present. This principle may not necessarily be easily applied, and thus, while maintaining that point of view, a practitioner may apply teachings, instructions and practices belonging to the *sūtra* or *tantra* classes with the purpose of stabilising the *rdzogs chen* state. When this happens the formal structure of practices is not affected. In 'The Central Practice', for example, nearly all the distinctive ingredients peculiar to *gcod* are present:

- the 'savage lands' (*gnyan sa*), the correct locations for the practice, fearful places like cemeteries or water springs inhabited by demons and other wicked creatures or any

contained in 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, ed., *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*, vol. 58, pp. 309-397. In the collection of *gter mas* by Klong gsal snying po (1625-1692), a *nying ma* teacher who mainly lived at Kaḥ thog, is a text titled 'The Teachings of the Profound Recision Called the Centre of the Single Seat' (*Zab mo gcod kyi gdams pa gdan thog gcig ma'i dbu phyogs*). One of the better known collections of *sādhana*s on *gcod*, 'The Precious Garland from the Collection of Recision' (*gCod tshogs las rin po che'i phreng ba*), contains a *sādhana* text written by Karma chags med (1613-1678) entitled 'Instructions on Recision, in Addition to the *sādhana* of the Single Seat' (Rang byung rdo rje et al., *gCod tshogs rin chen phreng ba*, pp. 241-254) focuses on the visualisation of oneself as Ma gcig in the form of Khros ma nag mo. Even more recent are two practice texts contained in the cycle rediscovered as mind treasure (*dgongs gter*) by mDo mkhyen brtse ye shes rdo rje (1800-1866), 'The Self-Liberation from Concepts' (*'Dzin pa rang grol*), titled 'The Single Seat of Recision' (Ye shes rdo rje, *Pod gnyis pa: 'Dzin pa rang grol*, pp. 289-207) and 'The Intent of Ma gcig: The Practice Method on a Single Seat, Teaching on *gCod*' (Ye shes rdo rje, *Pod gnyis pa: 'Dzin pa rang grol*, pp. 135-182). Less frequent instances of this terminology can be found in *gcod* texts of the *dge lugs* and *bka' brgyud* schools. A study of this terminology is in progress and will soon be published.

- other places common people avoid and deem frightening;
- the god-demons (*lha 'dre*), unstable beings to which the ego attributes godly or demonic status depending on the relationship it has with them;
 - the ritual instruments, the *rkang gling* to summon the god-demons and the *damaru* with which they are tamed;
 - the practice of transference (*'pho ba*), which expels the consciousness, the basic support of the concept of individuality, so that it does not inhabit the body which is about to be offered to the various guests;
 - the maṇḍala offering to the *bla ma* and the deities of the merit field performed in the manner of the *gcod* tradition, i.e. with the various transformed parts of one's own body;
 - the offering of the body as food²⁵ after transforming it into abundant substances suitable to be offered and appreciated by the various guests, buddhas, bodhisattvas, lineage *bla mas*, *yi dams*, *ḍakas* and *ḍakiṅis* and other high-ranking guests, then to the various beings of the six realms and, finally, to the various classes of demons and hostile spirits;
 - the doctrine of the four demons particular to *gcod*, explained together with other four more ancient demons (Skt. *catvāro mārāḥi*) referred to as 'outer demons' in *gcod*.²⁶

In comparison with the more frequent patterns of *gcod* practices, the elements missing in this text are the 'gift of *dharma*', in which the teachings are exposed to lower beings, and the figure of Ma gcig lab sgron, the Tibetan yoginī who formulated the practice.²⁷ In lieu of the 'gift of *dharma*', we find the so-called three aspects of 'recognition and certainty' (*ngo shes shing thag bcad*), which, as we shall see later, denote a *rdzogs chen* approach in terms of content and terminology. As for Ma gcig, her figure is totally absent as she is neither visualized in the context of the practice of *'pho ba* nor on the occasion of the offering of the body; she is not even mentioned in the merit field or in the lineage invocation. The colophon of this text, as is usual for *gter mas*, attributes the teaching to Padmasambhava himself, who is said to have taught it to Khri srong lde btsan (742-ca. 800) and to his

²⁵ In *gcod* texts this phase is known as *phung po gzan du bsgyur*, 'transforming the aggregates into food' or as *phung po gzan du bskyur*, 'getting rid of the aggregates as food'.

²⁶ The order in which they are explained is rather uncommon; it follows the order in which they arise rather than the outer/inner dichotomy.

²⁷ An interesting study of the role of Ma gcig in different *gcod* texts can be found in Gyatso, Janet, *Historical Development of the gCod Tradition*, pp. 338-339.

son, while Ye shes mtsho rgyal (eighth century), is said to have set it in writing and consequently hidden it in the sPu ri cave, a practice place in the area of mount Rin chen 'bar ba, in sPu bo, east of Kong po, from where the *gter ston* Sangs rgyas gling pa extracted it five or six centuries later. So the text is supposed to have been lying hidden in a cave since long before Ma gcig's life and her formulation of the *gcod* practice. The apparent anachronism of *gcod* in the *rnying ma*²⁸ context is a vast topic beyond the scope of this article. It might be interesting to note that the classical *gter ma* narrative seems to be one of the possible elements that allow for a teaching otherwise more likely to be considered *gsar ma* to be included in the *rnying ma* repertory, thus solving this rather substantial anachronism.

The text is divided into three parts. The first two focus on the master and the disciples who engage in the initiation rite and then perform a guided practice. The various components of the *gcod* practice are disseminated in the context of more extensive doctrinal instructions, which range across *sūtra*, *tantra* and *rdzogs chen* domains. The third part is addressed to the yogin who, after having mastered the instructions of his master, ventures alone into the realm of practice. Although this section contains a shorter *gcod* practice with the instructions to perform it, it also addresses solutions for problems the practitioner might encounter, providing a number of antidotes which were not necessary earlier, when the master was available. The more relevant parts for this paper are thus the first two.

5.1 The Initiations

The first part contains a general description of the qualities that the master granting the initiation and the disciple receiving it should possess, as well as of the time and place for receiving it and the number of participants.²⁹ The initiation begins with a description of preliminaries, where a *tantric* flavour can be clearly seen. For example, the master is meant to place the ritual implements in a maṇḍala pattern and then visualize the hosts of deities which are generated and absorbed (*bskyed bstim*) into the objects so as to

²⁸ Having been originated in the eleventh century by Ma gcig lab sgron, the *gcod* practice should logically be understood to be a *gsar ma* tradition. Nevertheless, it has been widely practiced in the *rnying ma* school for a remarkable number of centuries (Pansa, Margherita, and Sanders, Fabian, *A Trifling Anachronism, on gcod in the rnying ma Tradition*).

²⁹ Sangs rgyas gling pa, *dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po*, Gangtok edition pp. 537-543, Paro edition pp. 385-390).

consecrate them. As for the *gcod* elements appearing in this section, the main implements related to this practice, the *damaru* and the *rkang gling*, are consecrated by generating the deities Hayagrīva and Vajravārāhī and absorbing them into the ritual objects. Among the preliminaries the disciple should perform is the offering to the *bla ma* of his own body transformed into a maṇḍala.³⁰

The doctrine and language of *rdzogs chen* surfaces for the first time when the master, after a more ritual section, exhorts the disciples to maintain at all times the experience to which they have been introduced. The instructions he imparts are dense with *rdzogs chen* doctrine and terminology:

E Ma! Sons of noble family! Look! Look at your mind! Your mind, freed from constructs is *dharmakāya*, *dharmakāya* free from the limits of origination and cessation. Look! Look at your mind! Your luminous mind is the perfected *sambhogakāya*, non-composite *sambhogakāya*, spontaneously realised. Look! Look at your mind! Your conscious and empty mind is *nirmāṇakāya*, self-arisen and self-liberated *nirmāṇakāya*. Find yourself in your own condition, abandoned and relaxed, in a state free from adulteration and artifice, the three bodies of the Buddha! [...] [all] is that great *rtsal* energy of unceasing *rig pa* which manifests spontaneously in the vast expanse of the three bodies of the Buddha; it is to soar in the joyful dance [...]. In the condition in which there is no support for the mind,³¹ let go [of everything] in its own flow! When this is done, meet the true face [of reality];³² play the instruments, maintain that experience, abandon all phenomena unreservedly and do not indulge in any kind of thought: [thus] the sharpness (*ngar*) of *rig pa* is generated,³³ the senses are exalted. Trample upon uncertainty!³⁴

³⁰ Sangs rgyas gling pa, *dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po*, Gangtok edition pp. 544-549, Paro edition pp. 390-394.

³¹ The discursive mind is perceived in the same manner as other phenomena; it is as devoid of concreteness as the flow of thought it produces. The practitioner thus does not accord any base of concretisation to the movement of thought, he does not try to stop it or to repress it, allowing it to unravel spontaneously.

³² In this case we have chosen to translate literally the term *ngo sprad* as 'meeting the face'; nevertheless it should be kept in mind that this expression denotes the so-called 'direct introduction' in *rdzogs chen* language. The term refers to the act by which the master leads the disciple into the concrete inner experience of the state of *rig pa*.

³³ In the context of instant presence (*rig pa*), the word *ngar* literally refers to the capacity of *rig pa* to easily penetrate the essence of anything and delve into ultimate reality with no need of a conceptual intermediary.

³⁴ *e ma skal ldan rigs kyi bu: ltos shig rang gi sems la ltos: rang sems spros bral chos kyi sku: chos sku skye 'gags mtha' dang bral: ltos shig rang gi sems la ltos: rang sems 'od gsal longs spyod rdzogs: longs sku lhun grub 'dus ma byas: ltos shig rang gi sems la ltos:*

The real condition of the practitioner, if well examined, is in reality indistinguishable from the three dimensions of the Buddha. In a completely different fashion from the *tantric* or *sūtric* approach, it is stated here that this is already actual reality: there is nothing that needs to be changed. From the *rdzogs chen* point of view, among other factors, it is the very concept that there is something to modify that distances the *yogi* from the possibility of experiencing that state. This is a central concept that differentiates the *rdzogs chen* approach from others.

Another key *rdzogs chen* term appearing in this quote and elsewhere is the text is *rtsal*, often in combination with *rig pa*, denoting the potential energy of the essence of mind (*sems kyi ngo bo nus pa*) which manifests in a seemingly external way and produces all apparent perceptions by which the ordinary mind and its objects become manifest. The term *rig pa* designates a state of contemplative presence in which the *rdzogs chen* practitioner should constantly abide. Thus the *rtsal* energy of *rig pa* points to the spontaneous capacity of this presence to manifest any phenomenon as an apparent object of perception. If one finds oneself in the state of *rig pa*, anything that manifests is no longer perceived as external, but rather is experienced as a projection of this potentiality of the perceiver himself.³⁵

Among the many occurrences of the term, we find another similar example of *rtsal* further on in the text. The master guides the disciples through the practice of the 'pho ba of *gcod*³⁶ and then confers the symbolic initiation (*brda sprad*) in which no visualisation has to be carried out and the *rdzogs chen* terminology surfaces once again. The master says:

E MA! Sons of noble family, that essence of your mind, devoid of form or colour, does not come or go. [It] illuminates the ability to understand ornaments and aspects; [it] does not abide inwardly or

rang sems rig stong sprul pa'i sku: sprul sku rang shar rang la grol: sku gsum bcos slad bral ba'i ngang: 'bol le shigs se rang bab zhog: [...] sku gsum klong las rang shar ba'i: ma 'gag rig pa rtsal chen de: gar dga'i phyogs su 'phyo ru chug: [...] sems gtad med kyi ngang du phyad kyis thongs shig byas pas ngo sprad: rol mo bsgrags: nyams skyong : suang ba thams cad rgya yan du btang zhing rtog pa'i sna mi bskiyil: rig pa ngar bskyed: dbang po la gzing bstod: mi phod pa la thog rdzis btang bar bya'o: (Sangs rgyas gling pa, dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition pp. 558-559, Paro edition pp. 400-401).

³⁵ See Namkhai Norbu, *The Crystal and the Way of Light: Sutra, Tantra and Dzogchen*.

³⁶ Sangs rgyas gling pa, *dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po*, Gangtok edition pp. 561-565, Paro edition pp. 402-405.

outwardly, it is that unique manifesting energy (*rtsal*) which is pure from the beginning: just leave it as it is in that motionless state! Leave it in the unconstructed state, free from adulterations and change! E MA! This is the precious essence of the mind (*sems nyid*); understand its characteristics in that way!³⁷

Thus *rtsal* flows unceasingly and there is nothing to be done aside from recognising its play as the show of one's own mind's potentiality. In these instructions another key topic of *rdzogs chen* is discussed: the essence of the mind (*sems nyid*). This is the absolute, empty and in itself luminous reality from which any cognitive, discursive and rational activity of the ordinary mind (*sems*) descends. This aspect is experienced in its very absence of modifications and adulterations (*bcos bslad bzo med*), in its original state which is already perfect since the beginning and does not need any transformation.

This first part of the text ends with a description of the entrance into the practice and a lengthy discussion of the ways to identify suitable places for the *gcod* practice.³⁸

The second part contains a description of the practice guided by the master and has a preliminary part, a central part and a concluding phase.

5.2. Preliminaries

Here, the three doors³⁹ of the practitioner are made suitable for the practice explained in the central part.⁴⁰ In general, some terms often used in *gcod* context appear (e.g. *lha 'dre* or *zil gyis gnon*), but some of the exercises, three each for body and mind, progress in a way that seems to reflect the tripartite pattern in which the teachings are divided in the old school of Tibetan Buddhism: *sūtra*, *tantra* and *rdzogs chen*. Thus, for example, the mind is put in three different meditative states (*ting nge 'dzin*) in which one visualizes that god-

³⁷ *e ma skal ldan rigs kyi bu: khyod kyi sems kyi ngo bo de: dbyibs dang kha dog 'gro 'ong bral: rgyan dang rnam pa rig byed gsal: phyi dang nang gzhan gar mi gnas: gdod nas dag pa'i rtsal gcig po: g.yo med de ka'i ngang la zhog: bcas bslad bzo med ngang la zhog: e ma sems nyid rin po che: de ltar mtshan nyid shes par gyis: (Sangs rgyas gling pa, dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition pp. 566-567 Paro edition pp. 405-406).*

³⁸ *Sangs rgyas gling pa, dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition pp. 568-577, Paro edition pp. 407-413.*

³⁹ They are body (*lus*), speech (*ngag*) and mind (*nyid*).

⁴⁰ *Sangs rgyas gling pa, dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition pp. 578-599, Paro edition pp. 413-427.*

demons, the place and oneself are all 'overcome with splendour' (*zil gyis mnon*). God-demons are reduced to harmlessness by meditating on loving kindness, compassion and *bodhicitta*, which evokes a *sūtra* kind of approach. The place is neutralised imagining that it is pervaded with light up to the point in which nothing ordinary remains, where the more *tantric* approach of visualisation, transformation and sublimation can be observed. Finally, one dominates one's own self (*bdag nyid*), bringing the mind back to its own nature (*sems kyi rang bzhin*) which is reminiscent of a rather *rdzogs chen* approach.

5.3. Central Part

The first three topics of the central part consist of the so-called 'letting go into the crucial' (*gnad la bor*)⁴¹ and focus on the comprehension of one's own emptiness (in the aspects of one's own levels of existence of body speech and mind), the emptiness of god-demons and the emptiness of the creator of this dualism. The process by which the intrinsic emptiness of the first two is established consists in the analysis of their place of origin, the way of abiding and the places of cessation. Once the vacuity of these two is realised, the illusory nature of their creator follows automatically. Aside from the figures of speech in which the god-demons, a typical *gcod* term, become the epitome of the externally perceived world, the field of acceptance and rejection, or attachment and hatred, the method used to unmask the illusory nature of body, speech and mind is somewhat reminiscent of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. For example, this is the section relating to mind:

[Mind] does not abide where it is placed and thus rushes to all objects [of the senses], like form and the others, and when it rushes it is left free to do so wherever it goes, and thus, when it withdraws from it, it remains fluctuating [and] stupefied, thoughtless. In this way one pursues it, internally or externally, and carefully analyses first where it springs from, then where it abides and what it does, and finally where it goes and where it reaches. First of all it is not possible to establish inner outer, above or below, a cardinal or intermediate direction and say: 'it comes from here'. Secondly one cannot find a reliable base to affirm: 'it is here, it is like this, it is male, female or neutral, [it has this] form or colour', and it cannot be defined by saying: 'these are the aspects of its *modus operandi*, it has [such and

⁴¹ Sangs rgyas gling pa, *dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po*, Gangtok edition pp. 600-608, Paro edition pp. 427-433.

such] cognitive characteristics'. Finally, a stable base to establish 'it gets here' or 'here it ends' cannot be found. As soon as this analysis has been carried forth, its origin fades away more and more; it becomes more and more empty and one asks oneself: 'Does it not exist at all?' [The answer is that] it exists articulating a variety [of states ranging from] oblivion [to] complete reminiscence and [produces] insubstantial, random thoughts; having searched its origin in depth, as before one does not find [it], certain [of its inexistence], one is freed from taking the mind as concrete.⁴²

The second group of three aspects of the central part focuses on the accumulations of merit and wisdom (*bsod nam*s *dang ye shes kyi tshogs bsags pa*).⁴³ This section contains mainly *sūtra* and *gcod* terminology and contents: in this milieu the accumulation of merit is considered to be the cause of the realisation of the fruit–wisdom–and the deed which brings forth the most merit is doubtlessly the gift of what one cherishes the most: one's body. Thus the theoretical cause for the ritual offering of one's own body, characteristic of *gcod*, is put forward. The introductory section presents the purposes of doing so from a *sūtra* perspective and proves its point with a great variety of quotes from the *Prajñāpāramitāsamcayagāthā* with a view to link the *mahāyāna* doctrinal source to the *tantric* practice of *gcod*. The actual offering of the body, which is divided according to its beneficiaries and is tripartite, follows this introduction. One starts from above with buddhas, bodhisattvas, and so on, then below, offering to the beings residing on the earth's surface and possessing a material body. Finally, one summons the intermediate beings, the demons that roam

⁴² *de nas rang gi sems zhes bya ba mi sems dgu sems 'phro 'du zang zing mang po byed pa: mig rna ba sna lce lus kyis dbang po'i yul yul can rnam la rgyug cing: sems kyi 'dzin pa bcad nas dgag sgrub la sogs pa'i cho 'phrul du ma byed mkhan de: legs par brtag par bya ste: brtags thabs su ci yang yid la mi byed par rang babs su thed la bor nas bzhas pas: kho bzhas sar mi sdod cing gzugs sogs yul kun la rgyug par byed: de ltar rgyug pa'i dus gar rgyug rgyug du yan par btang bas: tshur 'khor nas ci yang mi sems par ha phyad de lding nge gnas: de bzhin du phyi ded nang ded byed cing: dang po gang nas byung: bar du gar sdod ci byed: mthar gar 'gro gang du song legs par brtags pas: dang po 'di nas byung zhes phyi nang steng 'og phyogs mtshams kyi ris ma chod: bar du 'dir gnas sa dbyibs kha dog pho mo ma ning 'di 'dra'o zhes gtad khung ma rnyed cing: kho'i byed tshul gyi rnam pa rig byed mtshan ma can 'di'o shes bstan du med: mthar 'dir song zhe'am: 'dir 'gags zhes khungs ma rnyed: ji ltar brtags pa tsam gyis: kho'i khungs je med je stong du song: ye mi 'dug gam zhe na: yang ni gya gyu bsam sems srang srang dang: mi dran dgu dran du ma byed 'dug: de'i khungs rtsad bcad pas gong bzhin ma rnyed pas: kho thag chod cing yid kyi mngon zhen dang bral bar 'gyur ro: (Sangs rgyas gling pa, dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition pp. 602-603, Paro edition pp. 429-430).*

⁴³ *Sangs rgyas gling pa, dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition pp. 608-636, Paro edition pp. 434-451.*

in a subtle atmospheric dimension. This part of the practice does not differ from standard *gcod sadhānā* procedures.

The last three aspects of the central part are collectively called 'recognition and certainty' (*ngo shes shing thag bcad*) and have a markedly *rdzogs chen* approach. Here some reflections culminating in the awareness of three key points are exposed, reflecting the tripartition of the aspect of the path in the *rdzogs chen* teachings: view, meditation and behaviour (*lta ba sgoms pa spyod pa*).⁴⁴ First of all, it is said that one's own real condition, described here as *rig pa* or mind of awakening (*byang chub kyi sems*), is buddhahood in its stainless aspect. It might seem to be wandering in *samsāra*, but this is nothing but an expression of it (*lta ba*). Then, secondly, external objects, inner thoughts and intermediate visions are all recognised as expressions of one's own *rtsal* energy and thus no antidote whatsoever needs to be applied to them (*sgom pa*). Finally, one becomes aware that all phenomena of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* can be traced back to the very essence of one's own mind; one transcends all concepts concerning a behaviour to be adopted and everything is then done without any effort, opening the mind to a blissful state (*spyod pa*). The last section clarifies these points with various explanations and further quotes from the *Prajñāpāramitā*, interpreting it from a *rdzogs chen* perspective. The following excerpts are particularly good examples:

For one's own condition to recognise itself by itself, one's own *rig pa*, the mind of enlightenment, need only look at what it is itself and nothing else. It does not exist as a circle, as a square [...] and so on; it is beyond all going, staying and coming, arising, abiding and ceasing. [Its] empty essence⁴⁵ therefore cannot be defined in any way; its own nature is luminous and limpid; the comprehension which produces aspects and variety is unobstructed. If one recognises it in this way, one's own essence is revealed by itself and thus adorns the meaning⁴⁶ of true reality which underlies [all] (*gnas lugs*) [...]. In this way one

⁴⁴ As is often seen throughout Tibetan Buddhism, the *rdzogs chen* corpus of teachings is categorised in a number of tripartitions, such as is base (*gzhi*), path (*lam*) and fruit ('*bras*), where the base further comprises essence (*ngo bo*), nature (*rang bzhin*) and energy (*thugs rje*), while the path can be divided into view (*lta ba*), meditation (*sgom pa*) and behaviour (*spyod pa*).

⁴⁵ In the technical language of *rdzogs chen*, the essence (*ngo bo*) mentioned here denotes the empty aspect of the base (*gzhi*) and is part of a triad of terms which describe it, together with nature (*rang bzhin*) and potentiality (*thugs rje*). For an explanation of the *rdzogs chen* concept of base and the problems it entails see various passages in Karmay, Samten Gyaltzen, *The Great Perfection (rdzogs chen): A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching in Tibetan Buddhism*.

⁴⁶ If we read, as in Paro, *rten* instead of *brgyan* one can translate this phrase as 'one is certain of the meaning'.

grasps the meaning of the essence of the mind and does not attribute any reality to a conceived object and a conceiving subject, transcending the limits of permanence and impermanence, and one is certain that all, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, really are within oneself. Therefore, above, buddhahood does not have signs or causes, it really is the immaculate limpidity of one's own self-arising *rig pa*; below, there is no reason to wander in saṃsāra since [it] is precisely one's own pure *rig pa*. [...]

With regards to the method to stabilise the meaning of this certainty, whatever manifestations arise externally, all visions, [are] one's own vision, and emptiness [is] one's own emptiness; thus one should remain free from all limits of mental elaboration. By relaxing in this way, all manifestations arise as supports and thus phenomena are purified in their own condition. This being the case, whatever arises in one's vision is brought on the path without producing attachment or aversion, acceptance or refutation, and is integrated into experience as [explained] earlier. Thus, whatever thought or memory is produced or arises in one's own mind, it arises by itself and by itself is liberated as its own *rtsal* energy, so that mind and *rig pa*, mother and son indivisibly united, are liberated in the expanse of emptiness.

All discursive thoughts are purified in their own condition and are clearly established in the essence of the mind. Thus, once arisen, they are taken onto the path and whatever conduct of body, speech and mind one adopts, one proceeds utterly blissful. In the same way, whatever obscured thought emerges, be it desire, aversion, ignorance, arrogance or jealousy and so on, one looks at its essence and thus, self-liberated and pacified, one goes with a sense of immensity into the expanse of the essence of the mind and is purified by itself without leaving any trace.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ rang ngo rang gis shes par bya ba ni: rang gi rig pa byang chub kyi sems de kho na nyid la kho rang gis b'tas pas: zlum po gru bzhi [...] la sogs par ma grub cing: byung gnas 'gro 'ong rtag chad thams cad las 'das pas: ngo bo stong pa cir yang ma grub pa: rang bzhin gsäl la dngas pa: rnam pa rigs byed kyi go ma 'gags pa ste: de ltar ngo shes pa ni rang ngo rang gis shes nas: gnas lugs kyi don brgyan la phebs pa'o: [...] de ltar sems nyid kyi don la bzung ba dang: 'dzin pa'i yul dang yul can du ma grub cing rtag pa dang chad pa'i mtha' las 'das: 'khor 'das thams cad rang thog tu thag chod pas: yar sangs la rgya rgyu med de sangs rgyas kyang rang gi rig pa rang shar dngas sang nge ba 'di ka: mar 'khor ba 'khyam rgyu med de: rang gi rig pa rang dag 'di ka: [...] de ltar thag chod pa'i don de brtan par byed pa'i thabs su: phyi snang ba la ci shar yang: snang ba thams cad rang snang: stong pa rang stong yin pas: spros pa'i mtha' thams cad dang bral bar bzhag: de ltar bzhag pas: snang ba thams cad grogs su shar nas snang ba rang sar dag: de ltar na snang ba la ci shar yang spang blang dgag sgrub med par thams cad lam du khyer zhing nyams su sngar ltar blangs pas: rang gi sems la dran yid ci shar ci grub kyang kho'i rang rtsal du rang shar rang la grol bas: sems rig ma bu dbyer med du 'dris shing stong nyid kyi klong du grol: 'gyu dran thams cad rang sar dag cing sems nyid la gsäl thebs pas: 'gyu dran gang shar lam du bsangs nas lus ngag yid gsum rnam spyod gang byas kyang

And further:

Recognising the external objective appearances as one's own spontaneous *rtsal* energy and ascertaining that one can separate from the antidote [...]: The method to purify the externally perceived object is to vividly put one's mind in the state of *rig pa*, *bodhicitta*, which appears in one's own clarity without being contaminated or adulterated by discursive thought; [the mind] does not enter into conceiving forms, sounds, flavours, smells, tactile sensations and other manifested objects. So, whatever appears is not taken for real; [...] the ego conceiving mind does not enter into in whatever appears or exists; whatever appears is not given any meaning and there is no attachment to it whatsoever. By this, the externally perceived objects are purified. In such a state, free from attachment, [whatever appears] manifests as a reflection in a mirror, the union of clarity and emptiness, and is recognised as an expression (*rtsal*) of the manifesting power (*rol*) of spontaneous primordial knowledge (*ye shes*). So one is certain that one can part from the antidote to accepting and rejecting concepts.

The method to purify the internally conceiving mind: Whatever concept, agitating memory or affliction arises in the mind, without reason grasping to it, is a flash that self-purifies and the conditions causing its movement do not interfere: *rig pa* is free from the stains of concepts. It is just as the essence of the sun cannot be cloaked by the darkest darkness; darkness does not even exist in the sun. When all memories and cognitions liberate in the expanse of total primordial knowledge, due to the insubstantiality of discursive thought, needless to say they are like the externally visible objects, [i.e.] the manifesting energy (*rtsal*) of *rig pa*, spontaneous primordial knowledge, and one is sure to be free from accepting or rejecting them.

Recognising the essence of the visions of clear light intermediate between internal and external and then liberating from the concepts of subject and object: In the moment in which certainty is obtained through habitual practice, one's own stainless *rig pa* is pure, unflickering; it is brilliant, without the veil of obscurations, limpid; it exerts in the continuum that knowledge of the self-arisen total manifesting potentiality of the essence of phenomena. Thus, in bliss there are no obstacles, in clarity there are no discursive thoughts, non-conceptuality does not become torpor, one does not latch on to anything. When in the continuum the extraordinary experience free

bde phyam kyis 'gro: de bzhin du 'dod chags zhe sdang gti mug nga rgyal phrag dog la sogs pa'i nyon mongs pa'i rtog pa ci langgs kyang: de'i ngo bo la bltas pas: sems nyid kyi klong du rang grol rang zhir phyam gyis song nas rjes med rang sar dag pa'o: (Sangs rgyas gling pa. dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition pp. 637-639, Paro edition pp. 451-452, Kathmandu edition pp. 637-639).

from adulterations emerges, one recognises that all that manifests externally is an expression of the internal, one understands and has certainty that all phenomena of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are internally devoid of self-essence.[...] The outwardly manifesting objects and the recognition of the manifesting energy (*rtsal*) of inner self-risen primordial knowledge are non-dual, they are multiplicity in a single taste; therefore one is certain to transcend the support and the act of supporting on the antidote to accepting and rejecting.⁴⁸

And then:

All phenomena of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are contained in the very condition of the essence of one's own mind, the nucleus of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, the teaching [of the Buddha]; once understood without effort, one is certain to go beyond the concepts of accepting and refusing in the state that surpasses the rational mind. One understands all outer manifestations as illusory portents of the internal mind and is certain that the imaginary emanations of the internal mind, all the gatherings of concepts, arise by themselves and by themselves liberate. The binomial internal/external is non-dual

⁴⁸ *phyi rol gyi yul snang rang byung rang rtsal du ngo shes pas: gnyen po dang bral bar thag bcad pa ni: [...] phyi bzung ba'i yul dag tshul ni: rig pa byang chub kyi sems 'di rnam par rtog pas ma bsalad ma bcas par rang gsal du snang ba kho rang gi steng du lam mer bzhaq pas: gzugs sgra dri ro reg bya la sogs yul snang la 'dzin pa ma zhugs pas: cir snang yang bden par mi 'dzin te: [...] snang zhing srid pa gang la yang: bdag 'dzin gyi blo ma zhugs par: ci ltar snang yang don ched du mi 'dzin cing: gang la'ang zhen pa med pas: phyi bzung ba'i yul dag pa ste: de ltar zhen pa med pa'i ngang nas gsal stong me long gi gzugs brnyan ltar snang zhing: rang 'byung ye shes rol pa'i rtsal du ngo shes pas na: rtog pa spang blang gi gnyen po dang bral bar thag chod pa'o: nang 'dzin pa'i sems dag tshul ni: sems la rnam par rtog pa dang: 'gyu byed kyi dran pa dang: nyon mongs pa gang skyes kyang: de rnam blos ma bzung bar: 'gyu ba rang sang du 'gro zhing: 'gyu byed kyi rkyen gyis mi gnod de: rig pa la rtog pa'i dri ma dang bral ba nyi ma'i snying po dang 'dra ba la mun pa'i smag gis ma gos pa ltar: nyi ma la mun pa'i ming med: dran rig thams cad ye shes chen po'i klong du grol tsa na: rnam rtog gi gdos med pa'i phyir: phyi rol du yul snang du gyur pa: rang byung ye shes rig pa'i rang rtsal yin pa ltar ci smos shing: spang blang dang bral bar thag chod pa'o: bar 'od gsal gyi snang ba rang ngo shes pas gzung 'dzin las grol ba ni: dkyus ltar nyams len gyis gtan la phebs pa'i dus ni: rang gi rig pa dri ma med par sa le: g.yo 'gul med par sang nge: sgrib g.yogs med par hrig ge ba: chos nyid rang byung rang rtsal chen po'i ye shes de rgyud la byas pas: bde ba la chags pa med pa: gsal ba la rtog pa med pa: mi rtog pa ha phyad du ma song zhing: gang la'ang zhen 'dzin dang bral ba'o: bcas ma dang bral ba'i nyams thun mong ma yin pa rgyud la 'char ba na: phyi'i snang ba thams cad nang gi gdangs yin par ngo shes te: nang du 'khor 'das kyi chos thams cad rang bzhin med par ngo shes pas gtan la phebs shing: [...] phyi rol gyi yul snang du gyur pa dang: nang rang byung ye shes kyi rang rtsal du ngo shes pa gnyis med du ma ro gcig tu gyur pas: spang blang gi gnyen po brtan bya rten byed las 'das par thag chod do: (Sangs rgyas gling pa, dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition pp. 639-642, Paro edition pp. 452-455, Kathmandu edition pp. 639-642).*

and by not making it dual one is certain that it is not separated. The *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayasūtra* says: 'form is emptiness, emptiness is form, emptiness is none other than form, form is none other than emptiness'. Further, the *Prajñāpāramitāsaṃcayagāthā* says: 'The ether element is unlimited towards the east, towards the south, as well as towards the north and towards the west; although it exists everywhere, above, below, in the ten directions, it does not produce distinctions or multiplicity. The *tathatā* of the past, the *tathatā* of the future, the *tathatā* of the present, the *tathatā* of the *arhat*, the *tathatā* of all phenomena, the *tathatā* of all victorious ones: all these *tathatās* are phenomenal and there is no difference between them; the awakening of the Sugata, where no distinction exists among phenomena, is what any bodhisattva strives to obtain. [Therefore,] possessing skilful means, the bodhisattva applies the perfection of wisdom.⁴⁹ [...] Things being like that, external and internal, world and beings, *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* and all other dualistic phenomena are contained in the very essence of one's own mind and, although they might fade into alterity, they transcend [the idea of] someone applying effort and an object of effort. In the [*Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*], the Mother of the Victorious Ones, it is said: 'As for the mind, it is clear light' ([34], p. 5). So one obtains the full awareness that transcends effort, the true reality that underlies (*gshis kyi gnas lugs*) the essence of the mind and objects, limitless emptiness devoid of a self. From what has just been explained [it is clear that] there is no action that leads to the positive and no non-action that leads to the negative, [all] that is completely pure since the beginning and all concepts of accepting and rejecting, positive or negative behaviour, are transcended.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ The reference edition of the *sdud pa* (*Shes rab sna tshogs pa - sde dge par phud*, p. 18-19) reads: *shes rab pha 'dren pa'i shes rab med na thob bar 'gyur ma yin* instead of *shes rab pha rol phyin la sbyor*. Nevertheless we chose to read as in Sangs rgyas gling pa. *dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po*, since they conform to other editions of the text we consulted (*sDud pa tshigs su bcad pa – lha sa, snar thang, stag pho brang bris ma*).

⁵⁰ 'khor 'das kyi chos thams cad bka' shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i ngo bo rang gi sems nyid kyi steng du tshang zhing rtsol bral du shes shing blo 'das kyi ngang du spang blang gi 'dzin pa las 'das par thag bcad pa ni: phyi rol kyi snang ba thams cad: nang sems kyi cho 'phrul yin par ngo shes: nang sems kyi cho 'phrul rtoḡ tshogs thams cad rang las shar zhing grol bar thag chod: phyi nang gnyis po gnyis su med: gnyis su byar med so so ma yin par thag chod pa ste: shes rab snying po las: gzugs stong pa'o: stong pa nyid gzugs so: gzugs las kyang stong pa nyid gzhan ma yin no: stong pa nyid las kyang gzugs gzhan ma yin no: zhes byung zhiḡḡ: sdud pa las kyang: nam mkha'i kham na'ang yod: tha dad gyur pa med cing dang 'og dang phyogs bcu ji snyed rnam na'ang yod: tha dad gyur pa med cing bye brag gyur pa med: 'das pa'i de bzhin nyid gang ma byon de bzhin nyid: da lta de bzhin nyid gang dgra bcom de bzhin nyid: chos kun de bzhin nyid gang rgyal ba'i de bzhin nyid: chos kyi de bzhin nyid 'di thams cad bye brag med: bde gshegs byang chub tha dad chos dang bral gyur pa: 'di ni byang chub sems dpa' gang zhiḡḡ thob 'dod pa: thabs dang ldan pas shes rab pha rol phyin la sbyor: [...] de ltar na phyi nang snod bcad

5.4. Concluding Phase

The first three aspects of the concluding phase concern the ways to get rid (*bskyur tshul*) of body, speech and mind, leaving behind any interest whatsoever in their activities. This is made possible by the experience of the states described above, the empty essence of oneself, of god-demons and the creator of the dualism self-other, from having accumulated merit through the offering of one's most cherished thing, the body, and from having understood that everything is nothing else than a mere expression of one's own *rtsal* energy. Thus any antidote to deluded states of mind, a typical element in other forms of practice, is not necessary anymore; no specific behaviour has to be applied and voice and mind are abandoned.

In the state in which the body, empty appearance, is [understood to be] similar to the reflection of the moon in water, whatever activity is accomplished is undertaken in the expanse [in which it is seen] as a dreamlike illusion. Even though thoughts like acceptance and refutation, positive and negative and others are emanated from the expression (*rtsal*) of the manifesting power (*rol*) free of obstacles, in order not to follow them, without establishing them as concrete, one has the sentinel of awareness and watchfulness and, understanding them as self-arisen and self-liberated, settles equanimously in the transcending state.⁵¹

Next are the so-called 'three methods to set aside' (*bzhag thabs gsum*).⁵² The first concerns the disassociation from wrong conduct in

'khor 'das la sogs pa'i gnyis chos thams cad rang gi sems nyid kyi steng du tshang zhing: gzhan gud na'ang rtsal bya rtsal byed las 'das shing: sems de ni sems ma mchis pa ste/ sems kyi rang bzhin ni 'od gsal ba lags sol zhes rgyal ba'i yum las gsungs pas: sems dngos po gshis kyi gnas lugs stong pa mtha' bral bdag med: bya rtsol las 'das par thag chod gding thob: da bskyar nas byas pas bzang du 'gro 'gyu'am: ma byas pas ngan du 'gro rgyu med de: gdod nas rnam par dag cing dge sdig gi byed spyod spang blang gi 'dzin pa thams cad las 'das pa'o: (Sangs rgyas gling pa, dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition pp. 642-645, Paro edition pp. 455-456).

⁵¹ *lus snang stong chu zla lta bu'i ngang nas spyod lam gang byed rmi lam sgyu ma lta bu'i klong nas spyod: ma 'gags rol pa'i rtsal las bzang ngan blang dor la sogs pa'i rtogs pa 'phro yang: de'i rjes phyir mi 'brang phyir a 'thas su mi bzhag par: dran shes bzhin gyi bya ra dang ldan pas rang shar rang grol du shes par bya ste: pha rol tu phyin pa'i ngang la mnyam par bzhag go: (Sangs rgyas gling pa, dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition p. 646, Paro edition p. 457).*

⁵² *Sangs rgyas gling pa, dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition pp. 645-655, Paro edition pp. 457-463.*

past lives and the adoption of a conduct and perseverance which motivates one to undertake the practice and turn one's back on mundane activities, useless chatter and distractions. In the same way, when carrying out the practice, it is necessary for the disciple to not focalise on the idea of a positive conduct and to leave aside all positive propositions, since this would drive him back to those fetters which he was trying to cut:

If you are tied up, whether it is a golden rope or a grass one, both are ropes...⁵³

Any thought or behaviour whatsoever, even if positive or concerning practice, only produces fetters like any other conduct or conceptualisation, like anything which in its nature is linked to the dualistic mind. Furthermore, these concepts and concerns frustrate progress in the practice, and the worn-out practitioner could fall into the danger of denigrating the master or the teaching, violating *samaya* and risking lowly rebirths. The third thing to set aside is the idea of effort and pride for overcoming difficulties: the practitioner need only *be* in the experience of the essence, which is identical regardless what conduct he might undertake. He must be extremely firm in realising the inexistence of an agent, an action and a recipient of the action, focusing on the only goal: enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Finally, as a last triad of the conclusive parts of this section, are the so-called 'three practices'.⁵⁴ These consist in the integration, or taking onto the path,⁵⁵ of the three roots (*rtsa ba gsum*) of the *rnying ma tantras*—*bla ma*, *yi dam* and *ḍākinī*—then all beings in general and finally the god-demons. Here the god-demons are important participants, which is typical for the *gcod* symbolic imagery, yet the underlying view of integration, that is the dismissal of any concept of duality, is yet again a *rdzogs chen* topos.

As for the three roots, the text sets forward that the essential point is to not limit their presence and integration to the practice sessions. If this were the case, and the sessions were followed by intervals of

⁵³ *gal te bcings na: gser gyi thag pas bcings pa dang: dres ma'i thag pas bcings pa gnyis* (Sangs rgyas gling pa, *dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po*, Gangtok edition pp. 652, Paro edition p. 461).

⁵⁴ Sangs rgyas gling pa, *dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po*, Gangtok edition pp. 655-694, Paro edition pp. 463-488.

⁵⁵ *lam du khyer*, 'take onto the path', in this context denotes the practice of integration in all aspects of life of the state that ensues from the realisation of a wide variety of meditative techniques.

separation or absence, some discontinuities would arise in which one might easily fall prey to doubts, uncertainties, hope and fear. If they are completely integrated in a state that transcends union or separation and this condition continues in the intervals between the sessions as well, the practice of the *bla ma* will yield the blessing, the practice of the *yi dam* will yield *siddhis* and the practice of the *dākinī* will yield the enlightened activity. In order for this to happen it is necessary to understand that the *bla ma* is no different from the empty essence of one's own mind, the *yi dam* is none else than its luminous aspect and the *dākinī* is its dynamic dimension, free from any conceptual structure. With regards to the integration of the *bla ma*, the text explains:

Thus the *bla ma* [inasmuch as he is the] Buddha, *dharmakāya*, abides from the beginning in the expanse of the empty essence of the mind; the *bla ma* [inasmuch as he is] great bliss, perfect *sambhogakāya*, abides luminous from the beginning, free from obscurations, in the expanse of the clear nature of the mind; the *bla ma*, [inasmuch as he is] the body which emanates (*nirmāṇakāya*) all things, stays from beginningless time free from birth and cessation in the expanse of the unobstructed *rtsal* energy which makes the aspects of the mind known.

In this way one reaches the awareness which recognises with certainty that the *bla ma* [inasmuch as he is] the Lord of the three bodies, resides from the beginning in the expanse of the essence of one's own mind and thus, since there is no [alternation between states of] union and separation with regards to the *bla ma*, not even the sign of any hesitation; a simultaneous encounter takes place between the comprehension of the mind and the lord of the three bodies, the *bla ma*.⁵⁶

And then on the *yi dam*:

Even if in the vision of the yogin the aspects of the deities appear multifarious, [the *yi dam*] resides in the inseparability of *samaya* and primordial knowledge and is not at all realised in the external aspects

⁵⁶ *de ltar bla ma sangs rgyas chos kyi sku sems ngo bo stong pa'i klong na: ye gdod ma nas bzhugs shing: bla ma bde chen longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku sems kyi rang bzhin gsal ba'i klong du ye nas gsal 'gri ba mi mnga' bar bzhugs: bla ma cir yang sprul pa'i sku: sems kyi rnam pa rig byed kyi rtsal: 'gag pa med pa'i klong du thog ma med pa nas skye 'gag med par bzhugs: de ltar bla ma sku gsum gyi bdag nyid rang gi sems nyid kyi klong du ye nas bzhugs par ngo shes thag chod gding thob nas: bla ma dang skad cig gi suga log phyi log tsam yang 'du 'bral med pas sems rtogs pa dang: bla ma sku gsum gyi bdag nyid dang mjal ba dang dus mnyam: (Sangs rgyas gling pa, dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition p. 658, Paro edition p. 465).*

which are attributed to it; thus, he who realizes the *yi dam* beyond all limits [which could be conceived in his regard], is [united] with that [deity] as the shadow to the body and therefore need not base himself on practices which alternate [presence and absence of the *yi dam*], constructing the *yi dam* mentally [so that the *yi dam* is only present during the practice]; the two kinds of *siddhis* are granted to that yogin in an uninterrupted flow, and therefore he recognises its meaning and beholds the countenance of all *yi dam* deities in a single instant.⁵⁷

Finally on the *ḍākinī*:

The *ḍākinī* is the messenger of the dance (*rol pa*) of the illusory manifestations of the *bla ma* and the *yi dam*, she does not arise from anything other than the manifesting dance of both, and the enlightened activity she accomplishes is produced in their sphere. Even if she goes, she goes right into that [sphere], therefore one reaches the awareness to recognize with certainty the coexistence of the yogin and the *ḍākinī* in a state free from separation and union.⁵⁸

The way to take all beings onto the path, i.e., to integrate them into one's own experience, is essentially based on classical *sūtra* style considerations: one generates compassion for the suffering of beings who in some past life have been one's loving parents, one ponders the value and rarity of human life and the need not to waste it and so on. In this way one's mind is tamed and well trained in compassion and loving kindness, it is devoted to enlightenment alone and engages only in beneficial actions.

As a final thought in this section it is said that to take the god-demons onto the path means to be able to recognise that they are no different from the *bla ma*, the *yi dam*, the *ḍākinī*, from one's own parents and from oneself, not different from any other transitory appearance.

⁵⁷ rnal 'byor pa'i snang ngo la lha'i rnam pa du mar snang yang dam tshig ye shes dbyer med du bzhugs shing: 'dzin ngos la cir yang ma grub pas: mtha' thams cad las 'das pa'i yi dam sgrub pa po rang nyid dang lus dang grib ma ltar bzhugs pas: blos byas res 'jag gi sgrub pa la ltos mi 'tshal zhing: dngos grub rnam gnyis rnal 'byor pa la rgyun chad med par stsol bar byed pas: de lta bu'i don ngos zin pas: yi dam kyi lha thams cad dus gcig la zhal mjal: (Sangs rgyas gling pa, dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition pp. 662-663 Paro edition p. 467).

⁵⁸ mkha' 'gro de ni: bla ma yi dam gyi cho 'phrul rol pa'i pho nya yin cing: gzhan yang gang nas kyang ma byung ste de gnyis kyi rol pa las byung: mādā pa'i phrin las kyang khong gnyis kyi klong du byed: gshegs kyang de ltar gshegs pa'i phyir na: rnal 'byor pa dang mkha' 'gro lhan cig tu 'du bral med par bzhugs pa ngo shes: (Sangs rgyas gling pa, dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition p. 665, Paro edition p. 470).

In this context particular emphasis is given to the need to extend the condition of integration, or the condition in which one abides in the same state as the three roots — *bla ma*, *yi dam* and *dākinī* — beyond the particular form the discursive mind might attribute them, keeping this in the foreground throughout one's entire existence in the three states of wakefulness, deep sleep and dream.

There is no limit whatsoever; the god-demons of the *gcod* practice and their illusory displays share with *bla ma*, *yi dam* and *dākinī* the very same essence; they appear before the perceptive screen of the yogin according to similar processes (the *rtsal* energy for example) and nothing can ever be different from that playful manifestation. All appearances, all phenomena, never exceed being a circumstantial form of the potentiality of the base (*gzhi*), particularly in the form perceived by the individual (*rtsal*). As proposed earlier on, the typical *gcod* term *lha 'dre*, god-demons, is used as a figure of speech and becomes an epitome of the externally perceived world.

In truth the so-called gods and the so-called demons, the so called 'I' and the so called 'other' and so on, do not exist as dual phenomena and are primordially unborn and unceasing, inexpressible, unexplainable and unconceivable; nevertheless, when this is not understood and when one is not certain of that, [they] conventionally appear as I and other, gods and demons and so forth; they are impermanent, unstable and perishable, they appear to transform and be transforming according to circumstances, no less than the illusory images of dreams. For example, to take a fire steel and a flint with tinder and then strike [them] together is the condition from which fire emerges, and when this happens the possibility to burn occurs. In the same way the coincidence of the conditions [which are] the soaring of the *rtsal* energy of unceasing appearances with the six objects of the senses, the emergence of the forms and other fields [of perception], the lived experiences and *karmic* latencies, past and future, which are conformant with the causes [which have produced them] and the confusion of shared visions,⁵⁹ leads to the arising of many disordered mental activities, originating from the power of ignorance, like god-demons and other [dualities], I and other, subject and object. Being this way it follows that however great the powers and portents of god-demons may be, one is certain that they do not exceed the *rtsal* energy of the dance of essence (*ngo bo*), nature (*rang bzhin*) and potentiality (*thugs rje*). In the same way, since the *bla ma* as well abides in essence, nature and potentiality, which are the three dimensions *dharmakāya*, *saṃbhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya*, *bla ma* and god-demons

⁵⁹ Meaning the so-called 'karmic vision' (*las kyi snang*) which is shared with the beings existing in the same mode.

are non-dual.⁶⁰

And further:

Even though the god-demons display astonishing manifestations, they do not exceed the dimension in which there is no⁶¹ dualism between conventional truth and absolute truth. Even the *yi dam* deity in its apparent form, conventionally, appears vivid and beautiful, endowed with ornaments, emblems, complexion and knowable attributes, [while] in the aspect of graspability, at the absolute level, it exceeds the conception of characteristics and none [of its attributes] really exist; therefore the *yi dam* and god-demons are non-dual. No

⁶⁰ *de yang yang dag gi don la: lha zhes bya ba dang: 'dre zhes bya ba dang: bdag ces bya ba dang: gzhan zhes bya ba la sogs gnyis chos su grub pa med cing: ye gdod ma nas ma skyes mi 'gag smra bsam brjod med yin kyang: de ltar ma rtogs shing gtan la ma phebs pa'i tshé: kun rdzob tu bdag gzhan lha 'dre la sogs par snang zhing: rtag brtan ther du zug pa med cing: rmi lam sgyu ma gzugs brnyan tsam las: rkyen gyis bsgyur bya sgyur byed du snang ba ni: dper na: me cha dang spra ba me rdo gsum sprad nas brdab rkyen las me byung na bsreg byed kyi nus pa 'byung ba bzhin: snang cha ma 'gag pa'i rtsal yul drug la 'phyo ba dang: gzugs sogs kyi yul shar ba dang: myong ba rgyu mthun byed pa rgyu mthun gyi bag chags snga phyi dang: gzhan snang gi 'khrul rkyen rnams 'dzom pas ma rig pa'i shugs las lha 'dre la sogs pa bdag gzhan yul yul can gyi 'du 'phro zang zing du ma 'byung ba'i phyir: lha 'dre ji ltar stobs dang rdzu 'phrul che yang: ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje rol pa'i rtsal las ma 'das par thag chod: de bzhin du bla ma yang chos sku longs sku sprul sku gsum ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje nyid du bzhugs pas: bla ma dang lha 'dre gnyis su med: lha 'dres ji ltar cho 'phrul ston par byed kyang kun rdzob don dam gnyis med kyi klong las ma 'das: yi dam gyi lha yang snang ngor kun rdzob kyi char sku mdog phyag mtshan rgyan cha lugs rnam pa rig byed dang bcas pa bkra lam mer snang zhing: 'dzin ngor don dam pa'i char gang yang grub pa med cing: mtshan 'dzin las 'das pa'i phyir lha 'dre dang yi dam gnyis su med: lha 'dre ji ltar 'gyur ldog skyen yang: ma 'gag rnam par rol pa'i rtsal las ma 'das par thag chod: mkha' 'gro yang bla ma yi dam gyi thugs rje'i rtsal las ma 'gag pa'i rnam par rol pa las byung ba'i phyir: bla ma yi dam mkha' 'gro dang lha 'dre gnyis su med: lha 'dre ji ltar rang tshugs bzang ngan snang yang 'gro ba rigs drug: lam rgyud lnga: skyes gnas rnam pa bzhi'i sems can las ma 'das par thag chod: pha ma sems can rnams kyang 'gro ba rigs drug lam rgyud lnga skye gnas bzhi'i khong du gtogs pa'i phyir: pha ma 'gro drug dang lha 'dre gnyis su med: bdag dang lha 'dre gnyis ji ltar phan tshun du snang yang: bdag ma grub na lha 'dre ma grub: lha 'dre ma grub na bdag ma grub: der yang ma zad: bdag nyid dang lhan cig skyes pa'i lha zhes pa dang: mnyam por 'ong ba'i bdud gsum lus dang grib ma'am: sgog pa dang dri'i tshul du gnas pa'i phyir: bdag dang lha 'dre gnyis su med pa'o: (Sangs rgyas gling pa, dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition pp. 681-683, Paro edition pp. 480-481)*

⁶¹ It is interesting to note that here the Paro edition has *yod* in lieu of *med*; the readings are not mutually exclusive since what has been discussed in these pages may be considered both from the point of view in which conventional and absolute truth are distinct and from the point of view in which they are not. In this sense god-demons and the *yi dam* are identical as they possess an apparent form and an empty essence, a fact that does not change, regardless whether the dualism is considered conventionally existent. Obviously the conventional/absolute distinction can be posited only at the conventional level.

matter how fast the god-demons transform, one can be certain that they will not exceed the *rtsal* energy of the total, unobstructed dance (*rol pa*); also the *ḍākinī*, the *rtsal* energy of the potentiality of *bla ma* and *yi dam*, arises from the unobstructed manifesting dance; the *ḍākinī* and the god-demons are therefore non-dual.

Even though god-demons may appear as positive or negative on their own account, it is certain that they do not transcend the beings of the six realms, the five continuous paths⁶² and the four places of birth.⁶³ Since one's own parents and [all] beings are among the inhabitants of the six realms, those born in the four modes of birth and those who [traverse one of] the five paths, both our parents and the six [kinds of] beings are non-dual with god-demons.

Although the ego and god-demons appear to each other [as separate entities], if the ego does not exist the god-demons do not exist, and if the god-demons do not exist the ego does not exist. And that's not all: the ego itself, the so-called congenital deities and the individual demons stay [reciprocally] like the shadow with the body or like the smell with the garlic, therefore the ego and the god-demons are non-dual.⁶⁴

⁶² The five continuous paths (*lam rgyud lnga*) are the five domains in which sentient beings move. This classification corresponds to that of the 'six classes' but assigns some of the *asuras* or titans to the god realm and part to the human realm.

⁶³ The four places of birth (*skye gnas bzhi*) are uterine birth (*mngal nas skyes pa*) of humans, some animals and some *pretas*; birth from egg (*sgo nga las skyes pa*); birth from heat and moisture (*drod gsher las skyes pa*) of some animals, especially insects and supernatural birth (*rdzus te skye pa*) of gods, hell beings and some *pretas* and humans.

⁶⁴ *de yang yang dag gi don la: lha zhes bya ba dang: 'dre zhes bya ba dang: bdag ces bya ba dang: gzhan zhes bya ba la sogs gnyis chos su grub pa med cing: ye gdod ma nas ma skyes mi 'gag smra bsam brjoa med yin kyang: de ltar ma rtogs shing gtan la ma phebs pa'i tshé: kun rdzob tu bdag gzhan lha 'dre la sogs par snang zhing: rtag brtan ther du zug pa med cing: rmi lam rgyu ma gzugs brnyan tsam las: rkyen gyis bsgyur bya sgyur byed du snang ba ni: dper na: me cha dang spra ba me rdo gsum sprad nas brdab rkyen las me byung na sred byed kyi nus pa 'byung ba bzhin: snang cha ma 'gag pa'i rtsal yul drug la 'phyo ba dang: gzugs sogs kyi yul shar ba dang: myong ba rgyu mthun byed pa rgyu mthun gyi bag chags snga phyi dang: gzhan snang gi 'khrul rkyen rnam 'dzom pas ma rig pa'i shugs las lha 'dre la sogs pa bdag gzhan yul yul can gyi 'du 'phro zang zing du ma 'byung ba'i phyir: lha 'dre ji ltar stobs dang rdzu 'phrul che yang: ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje rol pa'i rtsal las ma 'das par thag chod: de bzhin du bla ma yang chos sku longs sku sprul sku gsum ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje nyid du bzhugs pas: bla ma dang lha 'dre gnyis su med: lha 'dres ji ltar cho 'phrul ston par byed kyang kun rdzob don dam gnyis med kyi klong las ma 'das: yi dam gyi lha yang snang ngor kun rdzob kyi char sku mdog phyag mtshan rgyan cha lugs rnam pa rig byed dang bcas pa bkra lam mer snang zhing: 'dzin ngor don dam pa'i char gang yang grub pa med cing: mtshan 'dzin las 'das pa'i phyir lha 'dre dang yi dam gnyis su med: lha 'dre ji ltar 'gyur ldog skyen yang: ma 'gag rnam par rol pa'i rtsal las ma 'das par thag chod: mkha' 'gro yang bla ma yi dam gyi thugs rje'i rtsal ma 'gags pa'i rnam rol las byung ba'i phyir: mkha' 'gro dang lha 'dre gnyis su med: lha 'dre ji ltar rang tshugs bzang ngan snang yang 'gro ba rigs drug: lam*

5.5 *The Single Seat Practice*

The third part of the text endeavours to lead the yogin into a practice no longer composed by a series of limited sessions (*thun*) with a beginning and an end and interspersed with other daily activities; instead, the practice must become a continuous condition. The practice must be integrated in the yogin's experience to the point that it is present and spontaneously experienced in each instant of his life, regardless what activity he may be carrying out. This is called continuous yoga (*rgyun chags kyi rnal 'byor*): the text says that the yogin should practice the visualisations and the other parts of this section according to the instructions and become familiar with and assimilate them to the point that he will be able to apply its crucial points even outside of the individual sessions. One of the editions of this text uses the denomination 'Single Seat' (*gdan thog gcig ma*) to refer to this continuous yoga.

In this third part, the customary remarks on *samaya* — commitment — are elucidated. It is divided in three kinds, each related to one of the three aspects of the path according to *rdzogs chen*:⁶⁵ the view (*lta ba*), in which one has to avoid hope and fear; meditation (*sgom pa*), which consists in remaining unmovable whatever might happen or appear; and conduct (*spyod pa*), which prescribes to follow the disciplinary rules of the *śrāvakas* in general as well as the bodhisattva vows and the *samaya* of the *tantric* practitioner, in particular to abstain from performing practices aimed at pleasing the gods or damaging the demons, to maintain secrecy with regard to the time when the practice of *gcod* is performed and to remove one's traces.⁶⁶

rgyud lnga: skyes gnas rnam pa bzhi'i sems can las ma 'das par thag chod: pha ma sems can rnam kyang 'gro ba rigs drug lam rgyud lnga skye gnas bzhi'i khong du gtogs pa'i phyir: pha ma 'gro drug dang lha 'dre gnyis su med: bdag dang lha 'dre gnyis ji ltar phan tshun du snang yang: bdag ma grub na lha 'dre ma grub: lha 'dre ma grub na bdag ma grub: der yang ma zad: bdag nyid dang lhan cig skyes pa'i lha zhes pa dang: mnyam por 'ong ba'i bdud gsum lus dang grib ma'am: sgog pa dang dri'i tshul du gnas pa'i phyir: bdag dang lha 'dre gnyis su med pa'o: (Sangs rgyas gling pa, dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po, Gangtok edition pp. 681-683, Paro edition pp. 480-481).

⁶⁵ See note 44.

⁶⁶ Sangs rgyas gling pa, *dNgos gzhi nyams len gdan thog cig ma 'od gsal nam mkha'i snying po*, Gangtok edition pp. 726-730, Paro edition pp. 509-513.

6. Conclusion

The rich heritage of *gcod* literature in the *rnying ma* school is certainly remarkable and relatively little researched. It does seem clear, however, that the vast majority of this literature strikingly reflects at least some of the patterns seen in Sangs rgyas gling pa's text 'The Single Seat of the Central Practice: Clear Light, Essence of the Sky'. It would be extremely interesting to thoroughly examine the various strategies that each of those corpora adopts in order to assimilate the *gcod* practice in the *rnying ma* context, both from a doctrinal and a historical point of view, comparing it to other similar processes that took place in Tibet during the early centuries of the second diffusion of Buddhism in that country. In the 'The Single Seat of the Central Practice: Clear Light, Essence of the Sky', we find an implementation of the strategy of proposing *gcod* as a *gter ma* teaching, thus asserting it as a practice transmitted by Padmasambhava himself and consequently establishing its status as a prominent *rnying ma* teaching. Nevertheless, as we have hinted at, there are other ways in which this problem has been tackled. On the other hand, from a doctrinal perspective, we have found that although never explicitly qualified as such, the *rdzogs chen* point of view and terminology imbue the entire text and underlie most of its doctrinal perspective. This suggests that the processes at work here had already reached a remarkable level of maturation in the fourteenth century.

The uncommon openness and ease that seems to characterize the adoption by the proponents of the ancient school of an apparently alien⁶⁷ doctrinal and practical corpus is certainly fostered by three main considerations. Firstly, it is understood that all Tibetan spiritual standpoints, including those examined here, are deeply rooted in the universally accepted common base of the *Prajñāparamitā* doctrines. Secondly, the tantric method, of which *gcod* is a paradigmatic example, is held in great esteem, being deemed to possess extraordinary power, efficacy and swiftness. Lastly, it is always possible to keep a clear and firm *rdzogs chen* outlook and presence in whatever practice or conduct one undertakes. A practitioner of *rdzogs chen* is thus ready to jump onboard the fastest and most direct vehicle available heading in the direction he/she wants to go.

We would go as far as to assert that the actual idea of integrating a variety of doctrines and practices apparently foreign to its history and transmission lineages into its own formula, which is designed to

⁶⁷ See note 28.

establish beings in the direct experience of enlightenment, really seems to be a natural implication of the very core of the *rdzogs chen* outlook. Whatever is useful is thus effortlessly applied in practice⁶⁸ without clinging to the rigid categorizations and prejudices that characterize the dualistic or ignorant mind, the creator of illusion.

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⁶⁸ The adoption of various practices from various heterogeneous teachings in the *rdzogs chen* curriculum entails that the traditional requirements of transmission, initiation, and commitments of each practice be strictly observed.

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