

Reconsidering the Contents and Function of the rDzogs chen Classifications of *Sems phyogs* and *Sems sde*

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The following paper seeks to revisit some of the key rubrics under which much of the received oral tradition literature, or *bKa' ma*, of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs pa chen po*) became subsumed. Specifically, I am concerned with the, so-called, Mind Series (*sems sde*) texts, which are traditionally believed to have been imported into Tibet by the monk-translator Pa gor Bai ro tsa na during the latter part of the rule of King Khri srong lde'u btsan.¹ However, as I shall discuss, this material seems to have only been referred to as such centuries later, in texts we can reasonably date to around the 11thth century, at the earliest. Furthermore, those very texts which delineate this classification belong to the literature of a competing trend of the Great Perfection, namely the Pith Instruction Series (*man ngag sde*). Which begs the question: what did those who practiced and propagated the Mind Series teachings call them before somebody else started calling them the Mind Series? And so, therein lies one of the major obstacles that we must face when attempting to come to terms with the Mind Series, in that much of the picture we get of it is colored by the hindsight of later authors.

A case in point, when the famed fourteenth century scholar Klong chen rab 'byams (1308–1364) wrote the *Seven Troves* (*mdzod bdun*), his

¹ The most commonly given dates for Khri srong lde'u btsan, 742-799/800, are fairly standardized at this point, and are based on the findings of Tibetologists, see Haahr, 1969, whom relied heavily on the related Chinese accounts of this period. Alternatively, in Dudjom, 1991, pp. 613-614, we see the dates for King Khri srong lde'u btsan as 790-858, though in the original Tibetan version of Dudjom's *Religious History* (bdud 'joms, chos 'byung, 1996, pp. 240-241) the correspondence of these dates to the Western calendar is not so readily apparent, as they are only given in relation to the Tibetan calendar. And so, this later date, likely, represents the reckoning of the translators, rather than the author himself. Nevertheless, in Dudjom's work, which is representative of the contemporary rNying ma perspective, Khri srong lde'u btsan's reign occurred roughly one sixty-year cycle later than what is currently accepted by modern academia. Hence, from their perspective much of the action of the dynastic period, especially the founding of bSam yas Monastery and the related events, would have occurred in the beginning of the 9th century, rather than at the end of 8th century, which modern academia is more inclined to support.

magnum opus on the Great Perfection teachings, he cataloged twenty-one major works of the Mind Series.² And, for better or worse, this categorization seems to have stuck among the ensuing generations of rNying ma pas, even though they seem to have been more inclined to pursue newly emergent trends of the Great Perfection, and, likely due to the perceived weight of Klong chen pa's assessment, the vast majority of the attention paid to the Mind Series by modern scholars and translators has focused on these particular works. Included within the set of twenty-one are the Eighteen Lower Mind [Series Scriptures] (*sems smad bco brgyad*),³ a series of fairly brief works that are undoubtedly some of the earliest Great Perfection works to have spread on Tibetan soil,⁴ along with the *Tantra of the All-ruling King* (*Kun*

² This list is found in Klong chen pa's auto-commentary to the *Precious Treasury of Dharmadhātu* (*Chos dbyings mdzod*). See *Kun mkhyen klong chen rab 'byams gsung 'bum*, 2009, Vol. 17, pp. 380-381

³ More commonly known as the *Eighteen Scriptural Statements of the Mind Series* (*sems sde bco brgyad*), or simply the *Eighteen Major Scriptural Statements* (*lung chen po bco brgyad*) as they were originally known, they are the earliest extant examples of not only Mind Series literature, but Great Perfection literature, in general. Contents wise, they are quite short, pithy and terse verses with a marked poetic feel to them, which gives the sense that they were probably sung during transmissions. In the biographical narratives recounted in the *Great Portrait* (*'dra 'bag chen mo*), as well as in the *Copper Temple Chronicles* (*bka' thang zangs gling ma*), these are listed along with the specific reasons given for why each of them was taught to Bai ro tsa na and his compatriot gTsang legs grub by their Indian teacher Śrī Singha, though these two diverge on the details. As such, this group of texts has seen its fair share of oscillation over the following centuries after they were supposedly smuggled into Tibet by Bai ro tsa na and the makeup of this group of eighteen varies considerably from source to source, so it would seem that the road to standardization of this group of texts took many centuries, though it never really seems to have been achieved at all. Generally, the eighteen are divided into two groups, based on the circumstances of their translation into Tibetan. Thus, the list is usually divided into the Five Early Translations (*snga 'gyur lnga*), which are considered to have been completed by Bai ro tsa na before his reported banishment, and the Thirteen Later Translations (*phyi 'gyur bcu gsum*), attributed to the trio of Vimalamitra, g.Yu sgra snying po, and gNyags Jñānakūmara. Alternatively, these divisions are referred to as the "mother and child" (*ma bu*), respectively. Regardless, based on this criterion, these categories are strictly a Tibetan convention, though their order does seem to mirror the accounts of how they were initially taught to Bai ro tsa na and Legs grub, with some slight variations depending on the source. For more on the makeup of the lists of the eighteen, as well as the identification of some of the more obscure texts, see Liljenberg 2009 and 2012, a scholar whom has effectively taken the lead in recent years on the research of these works.

⁴ Of these eighteen, the first, *Rig pa'i khu byug*, has received the most attention in modern scholarship by far, as it was first Great Perfection work to be located among the Dunhuang cache (IOL 647), giving it an undeniably ancient pedigree in the world of modern scholarship. For an extensive discussion on this text see Karmay, 1988, pp. 41-5.

byed rgyal po'i rgyud)⁵ and its related commentarial work the *Ten Discourses* (*mDo bcu*), as well as the *Tantra of the Marvelous King* (*rMad byung rgyal po*),⁶ neither of which seem to be mentioned in any extant literature until at least the 11th century. Of these, the *Tantra of the All-ruling King* came to be considered the root of the Mind Series, which gives the impression that the rest of the literature related to this series is an offshoot of this particular text. Nevertheless, the seeming late date of the emergence of this work, as well as the fact that many of the *Eighteen Scriptural Statements* appear as chapters within it, gives the impression that it is more of a collection of various scriptural discourses (*mdo lung*) that were later weaved together into the framework of the dialogue that occurs within the setting in which the *Tantra* unfolds. And so, again, we have these two competing images of the Mind Series. The first being a traditional perspective, though somewhat external or at least retrospective, in which the major works of this trend were, for the most part, imported from India by a single individual. The second being the way the propagation of these works seems to have unfolded from the modern perspective, a millennia removed, in which there clearly appears to be some developmental steps suggesting that many of these works were actually composed by anonymous Tibetan authors over the course of several centuries. However, there is a third perspective which has received little

⁵ *Chos thams cad rdzogs pa chen po byang chub kyi sems kun byed rgyal po'i rgyud* can be found as the first text in the first volume of both the gTing skyes and mTshams brag editions of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum*, as well as in various editions of the *bKa' 'gyur*, such as in the sDe dge edition in which it is found in Volume 97, pp. 1-171, as well as in the recent Chengdu Edition of the *bKa' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, where it can be found in Volume 31, pp. 1-276. As for English language works, until recently these have been limited to Neumaier-Dargyay, 1992 and Namkhai Norbu and Adriano Clemente, 1999. The former, *The Sovereign All-Creating Mind: The Motherly Buddha*, is a scholastic work that despite breaking ground on this important, but, up until then, overlooked text, seems to miss the mark in many regards. Nevertheless, despite the author's insistence on ascribing a feminine gender onto the orator of the text and some tenuous attempts to highlight theistic themes, as well as its, at times, incomprehensible translation, this work still must be regarded as somewhat pioneering, and certainly contains some useful research. The latter work, *The Supreme Source*, contains a much more accessible summary of the text, including many pertinent philological elements, as well as partial translations of various sections of the text. In addition to these, Jim Valby is currently in the process of translating and publishing an eight volume series on the two or three volume Tibetan commentary *Kun bzang dgongs rgyan* by mKhen po Zhan phan 'od zer (19th–20th century), as well as other related texts, such as Klong chen pa's *Kun byed rgyal po'i rgyud kyi bsodus don nyi zla'i drva ba*, which has only fairly recently come to light.

⁶ This has been recently published in translation by a group of Namkhai Norbu's students, namely Elio Guariscov, Adriano Clemente, and Jim Valby, as *The Marvelous Primordial State*.

attention from modern and traditional scholars alike, and that is the perspective of the Mind Series adherents themselves. Which brings us back to the question posed earlier: how did they refer to their own literary tradition?

The Mind Orientation

When examining early literature of this genre it often seems that the term Enlightened Mind (*byang chub sems*) was one of the initial designations used to refer to the Great Perfection teachings, as this often appears in the titles of early examples of this literature, as well as being perhaps the most salient theme detailed in the contents of those works. However, in the ensuing century or two after their introduction, this term gave way to the more widespread and enduring rubric of the Mind Orientation (*sems phyogs*), which remained in use long after it became standard to divide the Great Perfection into the Three Series (*sde gsum*), i.e. the Mind, Expanse, and Pith Instruction Series (*sems sde*, *klong sde*, and *man ngag sde*). Hence, the rubric of the Mind Orientation is most likely the first Tibetan attempt to categorize these teachings into an inclusive grouping, perhaps second only to the term Atiyoga or even the Great Perfection, itself, which even if it is indeed a translation of the Sanskrit term *mahāsāndhi*, certainly was not the initial signifier of the genre. On the other hand, the Mind Orientation definitely appears to be a Tibetan construct, but one that is often misunderstood in modern academic literature. In fact, the Mind Orientation is treated as a synonym for the Mind Series by modern scholars, and has consistently been translated as such.⁷ However, as we shall see, in this context this term actually refers to a specific group of cycles that intermingles certain literary works of what would eventually be termed the Mind and Expanse Series, and perhaps even some early representatives of the Pith Instructions Series, as well.⁸

It often seems that the distinction between the Mind and Expanse Series was not as pronounced prior to the emergence of the Three Series schema introduced through the literature of the Pith

⁷ This is likely due to Roerich's translation of this term, as such, throughout *The Blue Annals*.

⁸ The context I am referring to here is the group of teaching cycles that were subsumed under the rubric of the Mind Orientation. However, this same term is also used to describe the seven categories, or areas, of mind, which are successive stages of ever more profound realization of the enlightened mind, as it is understood in the Mind Series. For a description of these see Dudjom, 1991, pp. 323-325, as well as Klong chen rab 'byams, *Grub mtha' mdzod* in *gSung 'bum dri med 'od zer*, Vol. 15, pp. 274-277.

Instructions Series. However, that is not to say that these were not seen as distinct, but rather that while there were obvious differences between the works of these genres, as well as the transmission lineages through which they spread, they were not necessarily stratified into a hierarchical formula to the same extent as they are in the Three Series presentation. In other words, there was much more overlap between these categories that also extended to their lineages, which intersect significantly even from their early stages.⁹ However, in terms of the initial entry of the Great Perfection teachings into Tibet, the first inclusive development that subsumed these teachings seems to have been the Mind Orientation, which brought together teaching cycles from trends of the Great Perfection that had been introduced by the Tibetan monk-translator Bai ro tsa na.

As for the make-up the Mind Orientation, there are said to be seven cycles included within it. According to mKhen po Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan (1929–1999), a renowned contemporary scholar from Kaḥ thog rdo rje gdan Monastery in Eastern Tibet, these seven cycles are the Resolving King's Cycle (*la bzla rgyal po'i skor*), the Distinguishing Brahmin's Cycle (*shan 'byed bram ze'i skor*), the Cycle of the Pith Instructions that Demonstrates the Actual Manifestation of Self-Liberation (*rang grol mngon sum bstan pa'i man ngag gi skor*), the Outer, Inner, and Secret Cycles of the Expanse Series, and the Cycle of Ke'u tshang.¹⁰ Thus, as this author claims, "these are not only [made up of] the two [categories related to] the Mind Series and Expanse Series," but rather the set of seven extends beyond those categories, which suggests that the traditional assumptions are quite different than the modern academics' and translators' take on this.¹¹ Now, many of these should be familiar names to those that have studied the Mind Series, as they are often mentioned in early accounts of the spread of the Great Perfection teachings. For example, in the biography of Bai ro tsa na, the *Great Portrait* (*'Dra 'bag chen mo*), the Brahmin and King cycles are some of the last teachings that he received from Śrī Singha before he departed for Tibet.¹² However, the Brahmin Cycle is also the name of an important set of teachings related to the Pith Instruction Series known as the Ultra Pith (*yang ti*), to borrow Germano's rendering of

⁹ Perhaps the major exception is the line associated with the *Vajra Bridge* (*rDo rje zam pa*), which much like the *All-ruling King* rose to predominance once the genre had somewhat matured, and seems to have come to occupy the central position in, an almost, standalone transmission lineage.

¹⁰ 'Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan, *rGyal ba kaḥ thog pa'i grub mchog rnams kyi nyams bzhes khrid chen bcu gsum gyi lo rgyus mдор bsdus brjod pa zung 'jug grub pa'i lam bzang*, p. 40.

¹¹ *Ibid.* *sems klong gnyis kho na ma yin*.

¹² Palmo, 2004, p. 120.

this term, and surprisingly this seems to be what mKhen po 'Jam dbyangs is referring to in this regard. Unfortunately, since the propagation of this particular conglomeration of early Great Perfection cycles has long since been eclipsed by more dominant treasure cycles, as well as their associated doxographical categorizations, very little information remains other than lists of their contents. Though these lists do present a very different view of the Mind Orientation than it just being a synonym for the Mind Series, and thus they are of considerable interest.

In terms of these lists, they seem to be drawn from a common source, though exactly which particular source is, as of yet, unclear. mKhen po 'Jam dbyangs quotes Śākya rdo rje (c. 13th century) from his *Lamp of the Compendium of Knowledge* (*Kun 'dus rig pa'i sgron me*), which gives a sparse overview of the texts included in each of these cycles, though it is unfortunately incomplete in its presentation, leaving many texts unnamed.¹³ This same list also appears with only some slight variations in a commentary by Ye shes rgyal mtshan (b. 1395) on the *General Overview of the Nine Vehicles* (*Theg dgu spyi bcings*) by Kaḥ thog Monastery's founder, Dam pa bde gshegs (1122–1192), and while he doesn't explicitly state his source, it is likely that he is either quoting Śākya rdo rje or at least the same source upon which he relied.¹⁴ However, both presentations depart from the above seven cycle presentation related by mKhen po 'Jam dbyangs. In these texts, there are six cycles initially mentioned, including the cycles of the Mind Series, the Expanse Series, the Tantra Series, and the first three of the cycles in the above list, i.e. the Brahmin cycle, the King cycle and so on, making a total of six. Furthermore, the Ke'u tshang cycle, the A ro cycle, and several other cycles are added to this list, though these two accounts do actually differ slightly on these addendums. Nevertheless, we do get at least a cursory look at some of the texts included in these cycles, as well as the amount of root and branch texts associated with them. Hence, from these accounts we learn that the *All-ruling King* is one of the five root Tantras of the King's cycle.¹⁵ Moreover, based on the six texts mentioned in relation to the Brahmin's cycle it is quite clear that all of these titles can be found in the Ultra Pith Brahmin's cycle that is found in the modern editions of the *Collected Tantras of the Nyingma* (*rNying ma rgyud 'bum*). And, while there is a group of six texts included in this particular cycle that are said to have been

¹³ Śākya rdo rje, *Chos kyi gter mdzod chen po kun 'dus rig pa'i sgron me*, in *sNga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, 2009, Vol. 117, pp. 91-94.

¹⁴ Dam pa bde gshegs dang Ye shes rgyal mtshan, *Theg pa spyi bcings rtsa 'grel*, 1997, pp. 357-359.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 357, and Śākya Dorje, 2009, p. 93.

translated by Śrī Singha and gNubs chen sangs rgyas ye shes (c. 9-10th centuries) both of whom were instrumental in lineages later associated with the Mind Series,¹⁶ those are not the six texts we are currently concerned with, but rather all of the six mentioned are attributed to the translation activity of Vimalamitra and either Smṛti Jñānakīrti (Dran pa ye shes) or gNyags Jñānakūmāra.¹⁷ Of course, the correspondence of titles could be misleading, as at least a couple of these titles could also refer to Mind Series works of the same, or similar, names, and half of these titles can also be found in the *Collected Tantras of Vairocana (Bai ro'i rgyud 'bum)*, in which they are not grouped together under the rubric of the Ultra Pith.¹⁸ Thus, since we have no early collections of the Brahmin's cycle to compare with the texts included in the Ultra Pith versions, it is difficult to be certain of the identification and the nature of these particular works. However, since the Ultra Pith is essentially a compilation of works from disparate sources, including many treasure revelations, it could very well be that some of the works later classified as such actually predate the Ultra Pith classification, and perhaps once made up an earlier formulation of the Brahmin's cycle, which was propagated before the emergence of the more treasure orientated works that we are now familiar with. One possible support for this theory is Ye shes rgyal mtshan's mention of the successive practices of the four meditative absorptions (*ting nge 'dzin bzhi*), which are delineated at length in the Khams Tradition's (*khams lugs*) guidance literature (*pra khrid*), as belonging to the Brahmin's cycle.¹⁹ And, considering that the mention of these is followed by a brief overview of practice in the Expanse Series, it seems to suggest that these are Mind Series practices, as they are commonly considered by the later traditions. So, it seems likely that if an earlier version of the Brahmin's cycle existed, as the traditional accounts of the propagation of these cycles clearly state, then it would have been considered a Mind Series cycle, or at least categorized as such by later adherents to this tradition. The alternative seems to be that the Mind

¹⁶ These six texts are all related to the *Kun tu bzang po ye shes gsal bar ston pa'i rgyud*. Also, in this case it is Śrī Singhaprabhā that is credited in the colophons.

¹⁷ These six texts are the *Nam mkha' klong yangs kyi rgyud*, *Ye shes gting nas rdzogs pa*, *Kun tu bzang po ye shes klong*, *Rang byung bde ba'i 'khor lo*, *Nges don 'dus pa*, and the *'Khor rtsad nas gcod pa*, the titles of all of which correspond to texts found in volumes 7 and 8 of the gTing skyes edition of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum*.

¹⁸ In particular, the *Ye shes gting rdzogs* and the *'Khor rtsad nas gcod pa* could also refer to Mind Series Tantras translated by Śrī Singha and Bai ro tsa na, according to their colophons, which can be found in volumes 3 and 1, respectively, of the same edition of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum*. And, the *Rang byung bde ba'i 'khor lo*, *Nam mkha' klong yangs*, as well as the *Kun tu bzang po ye shes gsal bar ston pa'i rgyud*, can all be found in the *Bai ro'i rgyud 'bum*.

¹⁹ Dam pa bde gshegs dang Ye shes rgyal mtshan, 1997, p. 364.

Orientation would have included Pith Instruction Series works, though again, this classification would likely have occurred at a much later date.

In summary, though it is obvious that the Mind Orientation is not merely another term used to refer solely to the Mind Series, as has been commonly assumed by some modern scholars and translators, there are still many lingering questions as to its actual makeup. At its most basic level, it seems likely that this simply referred to the orally received *bKa' ma* teachings of the Great Perfection, but even in this sense the accounts of its makeup suggest that these were not merely the Mind and Expanse Series brought to Tibet by Bai ro tsa na, as the later tradition would have us believe. Rather, the Mind Orientation, and by extension the *bKa' ma* teachings of the Great Perfection, included texts that would actually represent, at least pieces of, all of the Three Series, as they would be later defined. And, considering that this rubric remained in use long after the emergence of the Three Series schema, it would seem that the Mind Series traditions, as they came to be known, were in fact much more inclusive than has been previously thought. However, since we lack any early collections of the Mind Orientation, or have any evidence to suggest that such a collection was ever attempted to be put together, it might be that the term is little more than a convention, which outlived its usefulness somewhere along the way. Nevertheless, the fact that it has been relatively overlooked, or even blatantly misconstrued, by some modern scholars, suggests that we have collectively missed an important piece of the puzzle of the early Great Perfection tradition. Of course, the rather nondescript nature of the term may very well be the reason it that it fell out of use in favor of the more standardized doxographies of the Great Perfection teachings, which we are now familiar. Regardless, the accounts of its contents should certainly remind us of how much has been lost of the early tradition, and how little information we are left with to try and reconstruct this once dominant trend. Therefore, unfortunately, due to the lack of literary collections of the cycles that were apparently subsumed under the Mind Orientation, even a cursory look into this term, seems to bring up more questions than can be readily answered by the available information. Though, the fact that early Great Perfection literature was initially divided into cycles, rather than doxographical categories seems quite clear in this regard. And so, the notion of the twenty-one major Mind Series works and so on, should therefore be considered a later rendition as well, which was likely based on surviving literature, rather than indicative of the entire corpus of Great Perfection *bKa' ma* literature that once found circulation in Tibet. Thus, once again, we are reminded of how little we have to work with in trying to reconstruct an accurate image of the

early stages of this tradition, in that even by the 14th century most of it seems to have already been lost.

The Mind Series

The division of the Great Perfection teachings into the groupings of the Three Series, i.e. the Mind, Expanse, and Pith Instruction Series, seem to have not gained any traction among the Nyingmapas until they began appearing in the literature of the burgeoning Seminal Heart (*snying thig*) genre, which belongs to the latter series. Prior to this, there is not much evidence to suggest that the teachings had been stratified into doxographical or even hierarchical categories. In fact, outside of the divergence of distinct lineages of transmission between what would later become known as the Mind and Expanse Series it is not certain that these two trends were truly considered opposing aspects of the Great Perfection until they were retrospectively classified as such by progenitors of the Seminal Heart. Furthermore, as I have already mentioned, the first attempt to categorize them into a single group was likely the Mind Orientation, which was apparently made of loosely related cycles or collections of texts. Moreover, it is obvious that the divisions between these categories are anything but self-explanatory, as, for instance, all Three Series are rife with teachings that are labeled as pith instructions and so on. This has led some to present the various series' as representing the developmental stages by which the Great Perfection matured into the tradition that has survived up until the present. Hence, the notion that the Mind Series came first, followed by the Expanse Series, which eventually morphed into the Pith Instruction Series as the Great Perfection began to encompass more and more of the Tantric milieu of the times in which these texts were anonymously composed.²⁰ However, as we shall see, this supposition is not in line with how the tradition views the Three Series.

One of the earliest references to the Three Series from a possibly datable author, that is if we are to believe Karmay's somewhat tenuous assessment,²¹ and therefore in a reasonably datable text, appears in *The Great Annals of the Seminal Heart of the Great Perfection* (*rDzogs pa chen po snying tig gi lo rgyus chen mo*). In it, the assumed author Zhang ston bKra shis rdo rje (1097–1167) states that Mañjuśrīmitra divided the Great Perfection into the Three Series based on the following criteria:

²⁰ See Germano 2005, for a much more nuanced example of this type of developmental model.

²¹ This assessment is apparently based on a single agentive "I" (*bdag gis*) that appears within this work. See Karmay 1988, p. 209 n. 16.

*For those that abide in mind, there is the series of mind,
For those that are free of mundane activities, there is the
series of the expanse,
For those that are primarily concerned with the key points,
there is the series of the pith instructions.*²²

The positioning of the above statement in relation to the flow of the narrative puts it directly subsequent to the passing of dGa' rab rdo rje, which is inexorably associated with the famous *Three Lines that Strike Upon the Key Points* (*Tshig gsum gnad brdegs*). The notion that the Three Series are divided along the lines of the three statements contained within the above teaching, which dGa' rab rdo rje granted to Mañjuśrīmitra as his parting advice, has certainly found voice in recent years. However, despite the intriguing nature of their concurrence, this is not explicitly mentioned in the related Tibetan material and is certainly not what is described in the passage above. But what is also not clear is whether these groups for whom the Three Series are devised refer to individual practitioners, as I have translated them in the above quote, or whether they refer to the subject matters of particular works. In other words, the Mind Series was for works that dealt with the mind and the Pith Instructions Series was mainly for the key points. However, the statement that the Expanse Series is for *bya bral* is somewhat problematic with this reading, as this is a common euphemism for yogis. And, while this could refer to works that contained material intended for those practicing in retreat, it does tend to weight the scales in favor of the former reading, in which it is for the recipients of the teachings that the Series are divided, rather than for the teachings themselves. Though there are other iterations of this schema that do seem to make it clear that the divisions are related to the inclinations of their intended audience.

In the *Tantra of the Great Array of Ati* (*A ti bkod pa chen po rgyud*), which, despite being the source of many often repeated citations, seems to be no longer extant,²³ it states that:

*For those inclined toward the mind, there is the series of
mind,*

²² *rDzogs chen snying tig gi lo rgyus*, p. 532: *sems gnas pa rnams la sems kyi sde/ bya bral rnams la klong gi sde/ gnad gtso bo rnams la man ngag gi sde/*.

²³ It is difficult to determine how long this seemingly important text has been out of circulation, as it is likely that the numerous references cited from it are citations of the citations used by authors such as Klong chen pa, rather than citations from the root text itself.

*For those inclined towards space, there is the series of
expanse,
For those free of gradual effort, there are the pith
instructions.²⁴*

Here it is much more likely that those referred to are actually groups of individuals with shared inclinations. It is also interesting to note that the above is presented as a prophecy, as it is preceded by the statement, “Though, after I have passed on, in this way it will become exceedingly apparent,”²⁵ which leaves these divisions open to being perceived as a convention that will become common place in future generations, or at least will become readily apparent to the audience of this statement, in particular, at a later date. Of course, without the root text we can’t be absolutely certain of the context of this statement, such as the orator and his audience, but within the milieu of Great Perfection literature it would be easily surmised that this would be dGa’ rab rdo rje speaking to Mañjuśrīmitra. However, this is certainly the case in another derivative of this quote that is found in a much more recent work on ‘Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse’i dbang po’s (1820–1892) *lCe btsun bi ma la’i zab tig* by the famed A ‘dzom ‘brug pa ‘Gro ‘dul dpa’ bo rdo rje (1842–1924), which states:

*Regarding that, dGa’ rab rdo rje said,
In accordance with the dispositions and capacities of those to
be trained, Mañjuśrīmitra should devise,
For those inclined to gradually engage, the series of mind,
For those inclined toward space, the series of the expanse,
For those free of gradual effort, the pith instruction series.²⁶*

Here, there is no doubt that these divisions are delineated in terms of the inclinations of disciples. It is also interesting to note that, despite some rather strong assertions to the contrary found in the root material, here the Mind Series is described as being for “those who are

²⁴ Bdud ‘joms ‘Jigs bral ye shes rdo rje, *The Collected Writing and Revelations of H.H. bDud ‘joms rin po che’jigs bral ye shes rdo rje*. New Delhi: Yashodhara Publications, 1999: Vol. 2, p. 385: *yiḍ can rnam la sems kyi sde/ nam mkha’ can la klong gi sde/ rim rtsol bral la man ngag gol.*

²⁵ Ibid. ‘on kyang nga ‘das ‘og dag tu/ ‘di ltar rnam par snang bar ‘gyur/.

²⁶ *lCe btsun chen po bi ma la’i zab tig gter gzhung dang yan lag gi chos sde’i skor*, 2006, p. 272: *de la dga’ rab rdo rjes gsungs/ slob dpon ‘jam dpal bshes gnyen gyis gdul bya’i khamis dbang dang mthun par/ rim ‘jug can la sems kyi sde/ nam mkha’ can la klong gi sde/ rim rtsol bral la man ngag sde/.*

inclined to gradually engage,” which is very much in line with some of the practice regimens outlined in the literature of the Mind Series Traditions (*sems sde lugs*). However, what we should take away from these statements is that, in the eyes of the tradition, the advent of the Three Series has very little to do with the historical development of the Tibetan Great Perfection tradition and everything to do with how these teachings were intended to be transmitted among a diverse groups of aspirants. Moreover, as the accounts of the advent of the Three Series progress, we see more and more of a sense that while they were admittedly applied retroactively to the corpus of Great Perfection literature, the divisions represent a natural order that reflects the underlying intent of these diverse works. Furthermore, if we take the references contained in the *Seminal Heart of Vimalamitra* (*Bi ma snying thig*) as our initial source for these divisions, then at least by the early 11th century the Three Series schema referenced groups of teachings that were being propagated simultaneously through, nevertheless, distinct lineages. And, this situation would continue for centuries to come, as it’s not at all the case that the appearance of the Pith Instructions Series entirely eclipsed the other two. Therefore, to take these divisions as representative of some sort of ongoing development is a misguided appropriation of traditional terms, which has little in common with the ways in which they were apparently intended. It seems to born out of ease of reference more than anything else, and is not particularly indicative of the views of the preeminent scholars working in this field, though, it is a convention that persists nonetheless.

Of course, as modern scholars, the major point of contention with the above statements has much less to do with what they say, than it does with who is saying it and when Tibetans started writing about it. Though the Mind Series accounts of the Indian progenitors of their tradition place most of these figures in what would ostensibly be considered the early 9th century, the *Great Annals of the Seminal Heart*, the source of our first quote on the advent of the Three Series, places them centuries earlier. So, while in the *Great Portrait* there is mention of Bai ro tsa na meeting dGa’ rab rdo rje, in the *Great Annals* he is born some three centuries after the Buddha, leaving a disparity of more than a thousand years between these two accounts. Furthermore, these accounts weren’t set into writing until at least the 11th century and as of yet we have no evidence of the Three Series appearing in Great Perfection *bKa’ ma* literature that could corroborate an Indian origin to this schema or even their usage in Tibet at an earlier age. Thus, these certainly appear to have been a Tibetan development. However, there also seems to have been little resistance from those whose teachings became retroactively classified as the Mind Series. In fact, they seem to

have embraced the characterization, as it certainly does lend some legitimacy to the authenticity of their tradition. And so, while the details of the above accounts related to the Three Series may have an obfuscating effect on modern attempts to map the development of the various strands of the Great Perfection that emerged in Tibet, for the traditions themselves it seems to have brought a greater sense of unity as much as it delineated their differences.

Though, from an evidence based perspective, we might not be able to accept the claims that the entire corpus of the Great Perfection literature was split into the Three Series long before any Tibetans ever encountered them, we do actually see a similar event occurring from the late 11th century onwards among the Tibetan adherents of this trend. Hence, we see a massive amount of literature already in circulation being newly categorized based on their audience. However, that is not to say that the Three Series represents a predetermined set of texts that were devoid of further expansion. Though it is obvious that the Pith Instruction Series, which emerged almost entirely within the milieu of treasure (*gter ma*) revelations, is a constantly expanding genre, the same can be said for much of the Mind Series, especially in terms of the instruction literature. But, rather that, for the most part, these divisions seem to have already been readily apparent due to the development of the traditions surrounding them. In other words, they seem to have naturally gravitated into their respective camps by the time the Three Series schema began to appear in writing. And the relative speed with which the longer established traditions began to use these terms self-referentially goes to show that the schema was deemed a useful representation. Of course, we have seen this notion of teachings being given based on the varying capacities of their audience used to undermine the historical development of Indian Buddhism, namely the Three Vehicle (*theg gsum*) schema. However, here, unlike the controversy surrounding terms like the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, the term Mind Series never seems to have to be taken as, or intended to be, pejorative. And, while it is understandably tempting to utilize the Three Series schema to explicate certain temporal periods in which the Great Perfection teachings had taken a particular form of exegesis, the fact is that during the period from the 11th to 14th century they seem to have coexisted on fairly equal footing. Thus, more accurately, they might be viewed as genres of methodologies that were tailored to reach specific audiences. Just as we use the expression, “the cream rises to the top,” knowing full well that cream does not emerge from somewhere other than the milk, these divisions and their respective recipients can, likewise, be viewed as the natural clarification of various methodologies that from a mutual source seemingly separate

overtime, gravitating, in this case, towards increased levels of profundity appealing to an ever more adept audience. And in this case, as with milk, we don't really notice the cream until it rises to the top.

Regardless of the initial emergence of the various texts and instruction lineages that make up the respective Three Series, it is clear that by at least the late 11th century onwards they were all in play. And, it is during this period that the convention of delineating them in this way begins to appear in Great Perfection literature. In the context of the traditional narratives, the division is described as being organized according to their respective audiences. Of course, all of these narratives are found in the literature of the Pith Instruction Series, which would come to revolutionize the Great Perfection in its own image. However, it is also at this time that there becomes more of a sense of a cohesive Great Perfection tradition, as a growing tree with deep roots and ever-widening branches, a process which, seemingly, reaches its culmination in the efforts of the *de facto* forefather of the modern Great Perfection, Klong chen pa. So, although, there has been a tendency in academic circles to perceive the Three Series schema as essentially artificial, in that such categorizations do not appear in the seemingly earliest forms of Great Perfection literature, it is in fact only in relation to each other that this schema has any real value. They portray the options open to guiding different types of practitioners that become clear only when viewed from a distance, as it is only once all of these three trends began to occupy the same time and place that such a distinction became possible, let alone useful. Therefore, rather than superimposing a developmental model onto them, or discounting them as a later invention, which they may very well be, it seems much more reasonable to appreciate their function and the insight they afford into the intentions of those that forged the various strands of the Great Perfection teachings into the inclusive tradition that followed in their wake.

And so, once more, we are plagued with a variety of perspectives on this issue, all of which highlight certain aspects each camp deems fundamental, to the detriment of other realities that clearly have some bearing. Thus, on the one hand, we see the tradition's insistence that these categories have been in place from the earliest stages of the Indian Great Perfection lineage, which undermines their own involvement with these developments. While, on the other hand, we see the views of the tradition being discarded in an attempt to isolate more observable facets of this development, which undermines our ability to come to terms with what these categories are meant to represent. And, though the first camp is concerned with legitimizing their tradition and the status of their position within and the second is primarily concerned with what we can possibly know for sure based

on the available evidence, the disconnect between these two agendas muddies the waters considerably. Therefore, while I'm certainly not advocating the wholesale acceptance of these traditional narratives, we must nevertheless accept the role that these narratives played in molding the tradition itself. For, without allowing the views of those we are researching to come to bear on our portrayal of them, we run the risk of veiling the topic of study by unduly inserting our own biases onto the information we encounter.

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In conclusion, it would seem that the terms the Mind Orientation and the Mind Series are not synonymous. They overlap considerably, but were never intended to refer to the exact same set of literature. The Mind Orientation was an inclusive term used to demarcate all of the works that followed a particular approach (*tshul*) that gained widespread recognition as the Great Perfection. However, once treasure revelations, such as the *Seminal Heart of Vimalamitra*, came to light outside of that category and introduced the Three Series schema, the Mind Orientation gradually fell out of use with most of the teaching cycles it consisted of being categorized as the Mind Series and the Expanse Series, though some fringe elements seem to have been drawn into the Pith Instruction Series. So when we use the term Mind Series we are really referencing a later development that rivaled the rise of the Pith Instruction Series treasure cycles, rather than one that gave way to it. Much like the term *rNying ma* came to be retroactively applied to the early progenitors of this tradition, though no 9th or 10th century figures would have ever identified as such, the Mind Series began to be imputed onto various teachings and traditions that actually predated its initial usage. However, once these terms became the norm, their embrace signaled the strengthening of the traditions they were meant to reference. And so, it is in the wake of the arrival of the Three Series schema that we start to see literary output associated with the Mind Series Traditions and the prominence of these particular strands in specific locals and communities that enshrined them as key facets of their unique spiritual heritage. Thus the Mind Series should not be viewed as merely a reference to the earliest forms of the Great Perfection to have circulated during the dynastic era, but rather as the well established literary and practice traditions that rose to prominence centuries down the road.

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