

Muddy Waters and Blurred Lines: A ro ye shes 'byung gnas and the Anomalous Origins of the rDzogs pa chen po Sems sde A ro lugs¹

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When it comes to the bKa' ma teachings of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*), most of the scholarly attention of the past three decades or so has thus far been focused on the more philological and scriptural aspects related to the theory upon which this genre is based, as opposed to the more pragmatic instructions through which such teachings are applied, which were enshrined within a handful of the practice traditions. Therefore, while some significant efforts have been made to chart the literary relics of the earliest available literature related to this genre, the traditions that they spawned have been for the most part overlooked or, at least, under studied to the point that many misconceptions have developed and been allowed to fester. Of course, the main reason for this is lack of available information, especially of accounts from within the tradition's themselves, and thus scholars have tended to rely on much later accounts of these traditions coming from somewhat external sources. The A ro Tradition of the Great Perfection Mind Series (*rDzogs pa chen po sems sde a ro lugs*), is an abject lesson in this regard, as we find not only a wide range of dates for its presumed founder A ro ye shes 'byung gnas, but also the common conflation of it with other Mind Series traditions, as well as the long persisting, yet unsubstantiated, claim that it incorporated elements of Chinese Chan teachings. Fortunately, as more literature related to this tradition has come to light via the recent publications of the *sNga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa* much of these misrepresentations can be easily dispelled. However, the A ro literature itself presents us with some rather unusual claims, specifically in regards to the Indian progenitors of the tradition, which raise many new questions as to the nature of the A ro

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Tradition, in particular, and the Mind Series, in general. Therefore, in the following paper I will be attempting to peel away the layers of ambiguity and blatant fallacy that has been allowed to collect onto the A ro Tradition, so that I may address the numerous peculiarities found in the A ro literature itself that have been thus obscured by decades, or perhaps even centuries, of glossing in later sources.

A ro ye shes 'byung gnas

Perhaps the best place to start is with the man himself, A ro ye shes 'byung gnas, whom was not only a major conduit of the Mind Series lineage that would come to bear his name, but also of the Khams Tradition, though as we shall see there are those that consider these to be one and the same. And, while, he did compose a renowned work on general Mahāyāna practices, entitled *Distinguishing the Specific Methods of Engaging in the Yoga of the Great Vehicle*,² he is more commonly associated with the above Mind Series transmission lineages. However, he is also the subject of the *History of Master A ro ye shes 'byung gnas*,³ which is not signed by its author, though it may very well be the work of rTa ston jo bo ye shes, a.k.a. dbus pa rta ye (1163-1230).⁴ Nevertheless, this relatively short biography provides an interesting overview of his life and works. It starts with a recap of A ro's former lives as a Buddhist, reportedly recounted from the master's own memories of these events, which begins with his initial entry onto the path as a Brahmin born in eastern India where he first was able to study the Mahāyāna teachings. This is followed by a life in the celestial God Realm of the Thirty-three, before once again being born as a Brahmin in India. The location of his birth in the subsequent fourth life is not specified, but it is stated that it was during the time in which Padmasambhava arrived at bSam yas Monastery and that he met and received Tantric teachings from this master, which combined with an apparent clan name affixed to his parent's name makes it fairly clear that it was in Tibet. However, it was in the following life that he was

² A ro ye shes 'byung gnas, *Theg pa chen po'i rnal 'byor la 'jug pa'i thabs bye brag tu 'byed pa*, in *sNga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, 2009, Vol. 121, pp. 1-36. This text seems to have only come to light fairly recently. For instance, Karmey refers to it as no longer being extant, while Davidson mentions in his 2008 publication that he is indebted to Germano for sharing with him this rare text. However, it is readily available these days in the recent printing of the rNying ma bKa' ma, as cited above.

³ *Slob dpon a ro ye shes 'byung gnas kyi lo rgyus*, in *sNga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, 2009, Vol. 99, pp. 403-422.

⁴ This assumption is based on the fact that the recent compilers of the rNying ma bKa' ma collections have affixed his name in the margins of this work.

born in eastern Tibet as the figure with which we are presently concerned, though, unfortunately, no dates are given for the year of his birth. Nevertheless, the account of this life states that the child exhibited signs of having gained realization of the nature of phenomena (*chos nyid*) in his former lives. It seems that the child would enter into meditative states and at one point while he was abiding in such a trance he is said to have intoned the sound of the syllable 'A' three times, which, along with other remarkable indications, convinced his mother and others to conclude that the child was an emanation (*sprul pa'i sku*). Alternatively, gZhon nu dpal, in his *Blue Annals* (*Deb ther sngon po*), recounts another version of this story, in which the boy is found by a nun lying motionless on the ground. He later makes the sound of 'A' and thus becomes known as A ro, i.e. the corpse (*ro*) [that intoned] 'A.' This account goes on to say that when he was but a small child he attempted to join the local monks in their daily prayer services, which amused the monks whom began to playfully tease the young boy. However, after one handed him a copy of the *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* and he was actually able to read it, the monks were taken aback. To this, the boy told them he knew many teachings that they had likely never heard before, and so the monks nicknamed him Ye shes 'byung gnas, i.e. "the source of wisdom."⁵ And, though this version of the story is certainly reminiscent of tales of dGa rab rdo rje's childhood, the *History of A ro* does actually mention both parents by name, as A ro nyag po and Sog mo dpal sgron,⁶ thus putting a damper on gZhon nu dpal's fantastic yarn. However, these inconsistencies concerning A ro's early life are actually addressed in a brief addendum tagged onto the end of the text.⁷ Thus, the story of him being found by a nun is discussed, though there is no mention of him uttering 'A.' Then again, several other scenarios are mentioned, including the famed Sāntideva and the son of King Ajatasatru being included in his succession of births, though the author seems to leave it up to the reader which of these accounts one might wish to believe.

In terms of teachers, the *History of A ro* states that from a very early age the child was brought before two teachers in order to assess the child's apparent gifts. It continues on to say that the child remained with these two teachers, referred to as the two dge bshes, and under their tutelage "gave rise to remarkable experiences of meditative absorption."⁸ And, once he is a bit older, he takes up residence at a monastery, or perhaps a hermitage considering this early stage of

⁵ Roerich, *The Blue Annals*. Delhi: 1976 Ed., pp. 999-1000.

⁶ *sNga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, 2009, Vol. 99, p. 406.

⁷ See *Ibid*, pp. 421-422.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 407. *ting nge 'dzin gyi nyams khyad par can skyes so*.

Tibetan Buddhist history, where he later develops these abilities to the utmost degree, to the point of leaving hand and footprints in solid rock, according to the narrative. Later he meets the famous dGongs pa rab gsal, whom is celebrated in Tibetan history for his influential role in the preservation of the ordination lineage that, according to traditional accounts, he received directly from the monks dMar, g.Yo, and gTsang. This master is amazed by A ro's abilities and encourages him to take full ordination, which he later grants him, giving him the ordination name dGe slong Ye shes 'byung gnas, an epithet reserved for monks holding the complete set of monastic vows. Furthermore, he persuades him to request empowerments, so that he may properly enter into the path of Secret Mantra, and to visit a variety of scholar-monks, so that he may receive more extensive teachings.⁹ This leads to his first meeting with gNyags Jñānakumāra, the renowned disciple of the eminent translator Bai ro tsa na, at which time A ro requests empowerments thus forging a master-disciple relationship of his own. gNyags, having acquiesced to his request, bestows upon A ro an extensive list of empowerments, after which, he is given the secret initiatory name rDo rje snon po.¹⁰ Furthermore, he goes on to study with many illustrious masters of the period, including Bai ro tsa na, the Kashmiri Ye shes rdo rje and sNyan chen dpal dbyangs. All of these masters are said to have been impressed with A ro and made various claims as to the reason for his exceptional capacity. Bai ro tsa na claims that he is an emanation, gNyags claims that he is a bodhisattva that has attained the eighth bodhisattva ground, or bhūmi, sNyan chen dpal dbyangs claims that he is a bodhisattva that has attained the first bhūmi and thus perceives the true nature of things, dGongs pa rab gsal claims that he is an emanation of the Noble Nāgārjuna, the Kashmiri Ye shes rdo rje claims that he is an emanation of Vajrasatva, while some claim that he is an emanation of Mañjuśrī.¹¹ Suffice to say, according to this account, he was held in quite high regard by some of the most prominent teachers of his time.

After an undetermined period of study with the above masters, A ro heads off into the mountains to live like a wild wandering yogi. It is there that he has a vision of Vajrasatva who grants him instructions and a prophecy, in which he is told not to remain where he is, but rather to go to a particular monastery, or more likely an isolated area, called 'Thebs skyu stag mo where he will come to understand the meaning of all the Sūtras and Tantras and thus be capable of benefiting

⁹ Ibid, pp. 410-412.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 412.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 412.

beings.¹² A ro heeds the injunction of Vajrasatva and the circumstances unfold just as predicted, in that the true meaning of all the scriptures dawns within his mind and thereafter he begins guiding students according to their individual capacities. It is explained that he taught his students whom were of the lesser capacity according to the outer Sūtra class, according to the inner Secret Mantra for those of mediocre capacity, and according to the secret aspect of their own meditative experiences (*nyams myong*) for those of the highest capacity, which corresponds to the outer, inner and secret cycles of his teachings.¹³ Among his foremost students, the first is Ya zi bon ston, followed by rNgog legs pa'i shes rab, Drum shing shes rab smon lam, and Cog ro zangs ka mdzod mkhur, according to the *History of A ro*.¹⁴ And, most of the rest of the *History* is devoted to extensive lists of the teachings that each of these disciples received from A ro, the texts of many of which have been preserved to this day among the literary corpus of the A ro Tradition.¹⁵ However, in addition to such lineage specific texts, several more general Mind Series works are also mentioned, such as the *Eighteen Scriptural Statements of the Mind Series (Sems sde bco brgyad)*, as well as some other notable inclusions, such as his teacher sNyan chen dpal dbyangs's *Six Lamps (sGron ma drug)*.¹⁶ Therefore, it would seem that the accounts contained in the *History of A ro* of teachings which the master passed onto his four principal students are not necessarily intended to represent the makeup of the instructional corpus of the A ro Tradition alone, but rather show the extent of A ro ye shes byung gnas's teaching capabilities across a variety of related, but somewhat distinct instruction lineages. Though, in terms of the A ro Tradition instructions in particular, Ya zi bon ston, is clearly the main recipient of this lineage, as it is primarily through him that the extended lineage passes, which is also attested to in another A ro

¹² Ibid, p. 413.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ gZhon nu dpal gives a slight variation of this list of four, which replaces rNgog Legs pa'i shes rab with one Kha rag gi bru sha rgyal bu. However this is a name that could very well be descriptive rather than given, as it reads as if he were the prince of a particular valley in an area in gTsang. He also gives a slightly different spelling of the place name that precedes Shes rab smon lam's name, as Grum shing, rather than Drum shing. See Roerich, *The Blue Annals*. Delhi: 1976 Ed., p. 1000, or gZhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po*. Chengdu, 1984, Vol. 2, p. 1163, for the Tibetan. Furthermore, Rin chen dpal, in his *Elucidation of the Hearing Lineage* also omits Legs pa'i Shes rab and includes the seemingly same replacement, though he refers to him as "the one called Bru sha or Khyung po mdo ston seng ge rgyal mtshan," see *sNga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, 2009, Vol. 100, p. 140.

¹⁵ Another list of A ro texts and teaching cycles can be found in *Klong chen chos 'byung*. Lhasa, 1991: pp. 393-394.

¹⁶ For more on this work and its author, see Van Schaik, 2004, pp. 190-195.

Tradition text, entitled the *Elucidation of the Hearing Lineage*,¹⁷ that states that from among the four, only Ya zi received all three cycles, while the other mainly received either the *Emanation Cycle* (*sprul skor*) or the *Cycle of the Nails* (*gZer ka*).¹⁸

Now that I've covered the basics of the traditional accounts of his life, it is possible to address some of the apparent misconceptions that have proliferated in modern literature in regards to A ro ye shes 'byung gnas and have thus muddied the waters preventing us from gaining a clear picture of this influential figure. Much of these issues can simply be chalked up to the dearth of information available to scholars before the recent publications of the extensive collections of the rNying ma bKa' ma put together by the late mKhan po Mun sel (1916-1993) and his students at Kaḥ thog Monastery.¹⁹ Therefore, it is entirely on the basis of these recent developments that any further clarification of the present topic is even possible. However, that is not to say that rampant misconceptions need not be actively rooted out, as with these new findings there is still much work to be done, or undone, as the case may be.

First of all, there is the issue of dating A ro ye shes 'byung gnas, as we find quite a bit of disagreement in this regard in academic literature, as well as in modern traditional perspectives that have recently found their way into publication. As for the former, Karmay suggests that A ro lived in the first half of the 11th century, which, if this statement is intended to place A ro's birth in this century, would make him at least a couple of decades, or so, the junior of the Bengali teacher Atiśa Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna who was born in the late 10th century and visited Tibet near the end of his life, passing away there in the mid 11th century.²⁰ The reason I mention this teacher is because of an account mentioned by gZhon nu dpal, and repeated often by contemporary authors, that Atiśa was quite enchanted with A ro's, aforementioned, *Yoga of the Great Vehicle*. As the story goes, Atiśa was not particularly impressed by the available Tibetan compositions of his

¹⁷ rTa rin chen dpal, *sNyan brgyud gsal byed*, in *sNga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, 2009, Vol. 100, pp. 137-166.

¹⁸ *sNgag 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, 2009, Vol. 100, pp 140-141.

¹⁹ Prior to these, only the Dudjom edition of the bKa' ma was readily available, which was only about half the size, coming in at fifty-eight volumes, and thus lacked many key works that have only become available in the last decade or so. In fact, all of the works I have discussed above in relation to the A ro Tradition are drawn from these recent collections. Moreover, without the triumphant efforts of the late E. Gene Smith and his brainchild, The Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center, such a massive corpus of literature would still be out of reach of those who aren't able to procure hardcopies of these works. Therefore, it is to these contemporary preservationists and their protégés that scholars of this field are eternally indebted.

²⁰ Karmay, 1988, p. 126. The most common dates given for Atiśa seem to be 982-1054.

time, but upon perusing A ro's work proclaimed, "Now, this has extremely beautifully poetic phrasing and the meaning is exceedingly excellent."²¹ However, this text was presented to Atiśa by one rBa sgom bsod nam rgyal mtshan, whom is four members away from A ro in the lineage presented by gZhon nu dpal, which was propagated only after Ya zi bon ston relocated from eastern to central Tibet.²² Therefore, by this account there seems to be quite a bit of distance temporally between A ro ye shes 'byung gnas and Atiśa, or at the very least suggests that the former would have been the senior of the two. On the other hand, gZhon nu dpal states elsewhere that A ro's students Ya zi bon ston and Cog ro zangs dkar mdzod khur taught Rong zom chos kyi bzang po (1042-1136), whom is also reported to have met Atiśa, though apparently when he was just a boy and the latter was nearing the end of his life.²³ Furthermore, in accounts related to Rong zom's transmission lineage of the practices related to the deity Vajrakīlaya (*rdo rje phur ba*), it is stated that he met and studied with mDo ston seng ge rgyal mtshan, another one of A ro's students, when he was thirteen years old, which if the above dates are accurate would have been around the time of Atiśa's death.²⁴ So, these relationships would suggest that A ro's direct disciples certainly outlived Atiśa, let alone their own teacher, A ro. Though, perhaps, even more compelling is the mention in the *History of A ro* that rNgog legs pa'i shes rab was one of the four principle students of A ro, as this certainly seems to refer to the same individual that was one of Atiśa's three principle disciples.²⁵ And, considering that this figure is most commonly known as a member of the bKa' gdams sect, which developed in the wake of Atiśa, and, in particular, for his founding of the bKa' gdams affiliated gSang phu ne'u thog Monastery in 1072, it would suggest that he became a student of Atiśa after he was a student of A ro. Thus we get the sense that though A ro may very well have lived in the first half of the 11th century, it seems more likely that this period would have witnessed his death, rather than his birth.

In light of the above, it seems that while A ro ye shes 'byung gnas might have lived into at least the beginning of the 11th century he was

²¹ gZhon nu rpal, *Deb ther sngon po*, Chengdu, 1984. Vol. 2, p. 1164. 'di tshig snyan ngag che don shin tu bzang.

²² Ibid, 1163-1164. Here, the lineage is described as passing from Ya zi to Gru gu klog 'byung and then to Glan sgom tshul 'khriims snying po and then to rBa sgom.

²³ Roerich, *The Blue Annals*. Delhi, 1976 Ed., p. 167, and gZhon nu rpal, *Deb ther sngon po*, Chengdu, 1984. Vol. 1, p. 211.

²⁴ *rDo rje phur pa'i chos 'byung dang rgyud 'grel phyogs bsgrigs*. Mi rigs dpe skrun khang: Beijing, 2006, p. 20.

²⁵ Legs pa'i shes rab was also the uncle of the translator rNgog blo ldan shes rab (1059-1109) whom is well known for his work on the *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*.

likely born sometime in the previous century, which somewhat coincides with Davidson's assessment that he lived in the late 10th century.²⁶ However, Davidson does find issue with the notion that he was a student of gNyags Jñānakumāra, apparently based on little more than his lack of mention in gNubs chen sangs rgyas ye shes's famous work the *Lamp for the Eyes of Meditative Concentration* (*bsam gtan mig sgron*).²⁷ However, this is not much of a problem in relation to what we now know of the lineage associated with A ro, as according to the *History of A ro* he doesn't actually begin teaching until after his hiatus in the wilds, which would have occurred after he departed from central Tibet. Furthermore, this teaching activity occurs in eastern Tibet and his major literary contribution is restricted to a single work on the Mahāyāna. Therefore, there is little reason to assume that he need be represented in gNubs chen's work, which, for better or worse, seems to have become the veritable litmus test for the existence of early Great Perfection literature. And so, while Davidson's assessment of A ro's dates may indeed be plausible his denial of the relationship with his purported teacher is not entirely warranted based on the criteria he provides.

Another, more traditionally oriented perspective on the dating of A ro can be found in the recent publication of the transcripts of a teaching given by the contemporary teacher Khenchen Palden Sherab on dPal sprul 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po's (1808-1887) *Clear Demonstration of the Natural State: Pith Instructions of the Supreme Vehicle of Ati* (*Theg mchog ati'i man ngag gnas lugs gsal ston*).²⁸ In it we find the assertion that A ro lived in the 10th century along with a recounting of the story found in the *Blue Annals* of how he received his name and so on. However, Khenchen takes the tale a bit further than gZhon nu dpal does, and includes another back and forth between the young A ro and the monks who have dubbed him Ye shes 'byung gnas. In this version, the monks ask him where he learned these teachings and the young boy says from Bai ro tsa na and Jñānakumāra, and Khenchen explains the surprising nature of this statement by asserting that these masters lived two centuries prior.²⁹ However, this is again a bit of a stretch as

²⁶ Davidson, 2005, p. 75.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 388, n.60.

²⁸ Khenchen Palden Sherab and Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal, *Pointing Out the Nature of Mind: Dzogchen Pith Instructions of A ro ye shes 'byung gnas*. New York: 2012. Though it is unclear why the teachings presented in this book are unequivocally attributed to A ro Yeshe Junge, as dPal sprul's text is obviously a redaction of Sog bzlog pa's *Nyang Tradition Mind Series Guidance Manual* (*Sems sde khrid yig: nyangs lugs so*), it does however provide a more contemporary, yet traditional, account of A ro's life.

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 2-3.

even by the commonly accepted royal accounts bSam yas was not founded until the end of the 8th century and thus these masters would have ostensibly lived well into the 9th century, with gNyags Jñānakumāra perhaps not even being born until then. Though if we consider Dudjom's date of 827 for the year that the, so-called, Seven Test Subjects were ordained, then Bai ro tsa na may very well have not been born until the 9th century, as traditional accounts claim he was but a young man at the time of his ordination. Besides, according to the *History of A ro*, it is claimed that it was in A ro's previous life that he had lived at the time of the founding of bSam yas, so rather it was in his life as A ro ye shes 'byung gnas that he studied with these masters, though the same text does admit to their being a variety of contradictory accounts of his early life. However, it is clear that even according to the perspective of those that suggest that A ro lived in the 10th century, there seems to be an unwillingness to connect him with those dynastic era teachers from whom he is reported to have received his lineage from.

Now that I have addressed the prevalent perspectives on the issue of dating A ro ye shes 'byung gnas, it is useful to once again return to the *History of A ro* to see if any useful information can be reasonably gleaned from its account of the events of his life. However, in order to attempt to date him from this source, it is inevitable that I must address his relationship with other figures around which there is considerable disagreement in terms of dates. Though it goes without saying that the lack of evidence we have concerning Bai ro tsa na and his immediate disciples lends little support to this endeavor, perhaps even more contentious is dGongs pa rab gsal whom is famously reported to have began his Buddhist career when he was the first to be ordained by the three monks fleeing from central Tibetan in the wake of Glang dar ma's assassination. In light of this association, the water-mouse year of dGongs pa rab gsal's birth has often been considered to be as early as 832, though sources are not exactly clear on this point and so some have placed his birth in the subsequent sixty year cycles of 892 or 952. Though it is certainly understandable why modern scholars might be more accepting of this earlier date, due to the relative consensus that Glang dar ma's assassination occurred in the 840's, it is actually the later of these dates that are most commonly suggested by traditional historians, which coincides with later dates for Glang dar ma's reign as well.³⁰ And, so based on the notion that Glang dar ma was

³⁰ One of the issues that arise from the earlier dates of Glang dar ma's reign is that it makes it basically impossible for dGongs pa rab gsal to form the link in the chain of ordinations that he is famously attributed with in Tibetan historical narratives. In particular it is his reception of vows from the trio of dMar, g.Yo, and gTsang, and his passing them on to the, so-called, Ten Men from dBus gtsang. Due to this

assassinated in 906, claimed by traditional historians like dPa' bo gtsug lag 'phreng wa (1504-1564/6) in his religious history and echoed by contemporary rNying ma authors such as Dudjom, we find dGongs pa rab gsal's birth associated with the middle of the three cycles in the year 892.³¹ Nevertheless, according to the *History of A ro* it was from this teacher that A ro received ordination and was encouraged to study and request empowerments from the likes of gNyags Jñānakumāra. Therefore, if one were to accept this affiliation, as well as the somewhat later dates for dGongs pa rab gsal and Glang dar ma, then A ro ye shes 'byung gnas would likely have been born in the first half of the 10thth century and perhaps living into the 11th century. And, in this regard, it might also be worth noting that gZhon nu dpal does insinuate that he lived a rather full life, in that "he remained for a long time (*yun ring bar bzhu*gs)." ³² Therefore, it is not entirely unlikely that he could have been born early enough to meet his reported teachers and still have his immediate students and the successive generations of his lineage interacting with prominent 11th century figures like Atiśa and Rong zom pa.³³ Though, as we shall see, the lack of reliable dates for A ro ye shes 'byung gnas are only the tip of iceberg when it comes to making sense of this important, yet rather nebulous figure, and the tradition he reportedly spawned.

Until the last decade or so, most of the information related to A ro ye shes 'byung gnas that has found its way into academic literature seems to derive, by and large, from a single source. Though long since outdated, Roerich's translation of *The Blue Annals* has been a widely influential reference work for Tibetologists for several generations. However, the vast breadth of gZhon nu dpal's voluminous 15th century work on the history of Tibetan Buddhist traditions inevitably lends itself to treating much of its subjects with such brevity that it can often obscure the intent of the author's inclusion of certain information. This seems to be the case with much of the discussion of A ro ye shes 'byung gnas and his subsequent treatment by modern academics. Moreover, since gZhon nu dpal doesn't mention the A ro Tradition by name, but only alludes to its lineage in passing,

dating issue, many modern scholars have attributed him with only the first of these, while suggesting that the latter group of the Ten Men actually received their vows from Rabsel's student.

³¹ See dPa'o gtsug lag 'phreng ba, *Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston*. Mi rigs dpe skrun khang: Beijing, 2006, and Dudjom, 1991, p. 905. This later date also allows for dGongs pa rab gsal to act as the preceptor to the Ten Men from Ütsang.

³² gZhon nu rpal, *Deb ther sngon po*, Chengdu, 1984. Vol. 2, p. 1163.

³³ Of course, this would also entail the acceptance that many of the figures and events we have come to associate with the 8th century, should likely be assigned to the 9th century.

academics have been under the impression that this figure was primarily the patriarch of the Khams tradition of the Mind Series.³⁴ And, thus, even though the guidance manual associated with the A ro Tradition has been widely available to modern scholars due to its inclusion in the *Treasury of Spiritual Instructions* (*gdams ngag mdzod*), the tradition itself has been overlooked based on the apparent assumption that the Khams Tradition was the sole recipient of his output, or rather that the names A ro and Khams refer to the same tradition. However, it is now clear, as recounted in the *History of A ro*, that actually many lines of transmission pass through this figure rather than simply one. Furthermore, the notion that he was somehow involved with intentionally developing a syncretic approach to the Mind Series is not attested to in any of these texts, which quite clearly represent him as a conduit rather than the source of these various lineages.

Perhaps the most egregious of the claims made about A ro is that he incorporated the Chan teachings into the Khams Tradition.³⁵ This idea seems to be based merely on the juxtaposition of gZhon nu dpal's mention that he "held the instructions of the line of seven Indians and the line of seven Chinese Hwashangs,"³⁶ which is followed by a statement regarding his propagation of the Khams Tradition, onto which Roerich has seemingly added his own commentary in an apparent attempt to contextualize the sparse original phrasing.³⁷ However, in the Tibetan it seems that gZhon nu dpal is merely introducing A ro ye shes 'byung gnas by mentioning where he was from and his credentials, before going on to say that he gave explanation to his students Cog ro zangs dkar mdzod khur and Ya zi bon ston, whom jointly passed it onto Rong zom pa, which gZhon nu dpal labels as the Khams Tradition. Nevertheless, the insinuation that the teachings he passed on to his students consisted of the above Indian and Chinese lines of seven is contradicted, or at least undermined, by the way this is presented in the *Elucidation of the Hearing Lineage*. In this text, A ro's possession of these instructions is obviously mentioned to demonstrate that he was "an expert in the entirety of the sacred Dharma,"³⁸ which is then followed by statements

³⁴ As discussed earlier, this claim is also made Klong chen pa in his *History of Dharma*. However, considering that he passed away some three decades before Nam mkha'i rdo rje wrote the Khams Tradition guidebook, it is likely that he had little familiarity with this tradition as we now understand it.

³⁵ Davidson, 2005, p. 75, is just one overt example of this, though many others seem to allude to this without properly citing their source.

³⁶ Ibid, Vol. 1, p. 211. *rgya khar bdun brgyud dang rgya'i hwa shang bdun brgyud kyi gdams pa mnga'*.

³⁷ See Roerich, *The Blue Annals*, p.167.

³⁸ *sNgag 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, 2009, Vol. 100, p. 140. *dam pa'i chos mtha' dag la mkhas pa*.

concerning his high level of attainment in regards to practice, in that he was “endowed with the thorough experience that arises from meditation and the five types of higher perceptions.”³⁹ And, therefore, in regards to the instructions of the two lines of seven, they seem to only be mentioned in order to bolster his reputation as an accomplished practitioner, which he had garnered prior to his meeting with dGongs pa rab gsal whom sent him to gNyags Jñānakumāra from whom he received the Great Perfections teachings that would come to bear his name.

Furthermore, we have little information on what these two lines of seven actually refer to, though based on the *History of A ro* these would likely have been received from A ro's two childhood teachers. Though, Karmay actually cites Sog bzlog pa whom states in his *The Roar of Definitive Meaning: Replies to Disputations (Dris lan nges don 'brug sgra)* that this Chinese line of seven refers to Great Perfection instructions, and not to Chan.⁴⁰ However, upon a closer look at the Tibetan it seems that Karmay may have somewhat misrepresented Sog bzlog pa's assertion, as the passage in question seemingly intends to differentiate the Chinese line of seven held by A ro from the Great Perfection teachings propagated by the Chinese students of Śrī Singha.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the lack of mention of the Chinese line of seven in any of the A ro Tradition's Mind Series literature that I have come across, with the exception of the *History of A ro* in which it is included for the above biographical reason, should be enough to dispel the notion that this lineage was ever considered to be an integral part of the A ro Tradition's Great Perfection transmission lineage. Therefore, it seems that modern assertions that Chan was incorporated into this or the Khams Tradition is based entirely on circumstantial evidence, rather than being attributed to any direct claim made by the lineage holders themselves. Of course, if one were to include A ro's *Yoga of the Great Vehicle*, as Klong chen pa does, into the fold of the Khams Tradition by way of the successive cycles of A ro, then perhaps one could make somewhat of an argument for this assumed syncretism.⁴² However, since these instructions are included in the so-called outer cycle, while those of the Great Perfection teachings stemming from Bai ro tsa na are included in the inner cycle, there is no reason to impute some intermingling of the two when there is no explicit evidence of it. In fact, Tibetan Buddhists have shown themselves to be quite adept at

³⁹ Ibid. *shin tu sgom nyams dang ldan pa dang mngon par shes pa lnga dang ldan pa'o.*

⁴⁰ See Karmay, 1988, p. 93, n. 42.

⁴¹ Sog bzlog pa blo gros rgyal mtshan, *Dris lan nges don 'brug sgra.* Chengdu: 1997, p. 235.

⁴² Klong chen rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, *Klong chen chos 'byung*, 1991, pp. 393-394.

compartmentalizing various strains of teachings and organizing them into the rungs and branches of doxographical frameworks. And so, while it is certainly the case that A ro ye shes 'byung gnas is credited with an important work on Mahāyana practice that may very well have been based on his interaction with teachings from Indian and Chinese lineages, there is no reason to assume that this knowledge should somehow impugn his ability to pass on teachings from other sources and traditions without mixing them into some sort of an amalgamation. Furthermore, the apparent source for these claims, if it is indeed gZhon nu dpal's *Blue Annals*, seems to be little more than a misinterpretation of the author's intent. Unfortunately, such misconceptions persist, despite the tenuous nature of the evidence that they seem to be based upon.

Origins of the rDzogs chen Sems sde A ro lugs

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, one of the more peculiar aspects of the A ro Tradition is the anomalous accounts of its origins, especially in terms of the Indian antecedents to the Tibetan lineage. A prime example of this can be found in an exceedingly brief text entitled *The History and Summary of the Great Perfection*,⁴³ which recounts a story of the Indian monk Maitripa (*me tri ba*) and his search for the Great Perfection teachings, which seemingly cites another text titled *The History of the Sacred Dharma (dam pa chos kyi lo rgyus)* that is apparently no longer extant.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, in this version, Maitripa having searched everywhere for the teachings, but to no avail, hears of an emanation of Śākyamuni living on a mountain in southern India. After travelling for more than a month under difficult conditions he meets a mendicant living in a hut in the forest, and not having been able to find sustenance, he asks the man if he has any food or water. This quickly turns into a discussion about eating meat, to which Maitripa asserts that as a monk he does not partake of slaughtered meat, i.e. the flesh of animals killed specifically for food. This seems to draw the ire of the mendicant who mildly scolds him, saying that if he wishes to practice

⁴³ *rDzogs chen gyi lo rgyus dang sdus don*, in *sNga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, 2009, Vol. 100, pp. 125-127.

⁴⁴ It is unclear whether this title should be translated as above or whether *dam pa* could refer to the author of the text, which could perhaps point to it being written by a certain Dam pa shag rgyal mentioned in the lineage presented in the text. Or it could even refer to Dam pa bde gshegs (1122-1192). However, though this latter figure was nearly a contemporary of the authors of many A ro Tradition texts, he is much more firmly associated with the Khams Tradition of Mind Series, which makes it perhaps less likely, though not entirely implausible, that he would be recounting histories of the A ro Tradition, with which he had less affiliation.

the Dharma he must first restore his health, upon which the man and his hut vanish without a trace. Realizing his mistake, the monk then makes confessions and pays homage causing the mendicant to reappear in the sky, from where he explains that due to lack of good fortune for the two of them to meet at the present time he should rather go to see his student in the south, from whom he should receive instructions. And so, Maitripa does as directed and receives instructions from the mendicant's student, about which nothing is explained other than that he is an ordained monk. The text then continues on to say that he passed the teachings onto Śrī Singha, who then passed them onto Bai ro tsa na, who then passed them to gNyags, who passed them onto A ro, and so on, down to the apparent author of the text, referring to himself as rTa ban, by way of his teacher rTa ston gzi brjid (c. 13th century). All in all, eighteen holders of the lineage are mentioned from Maitripa to rTa ban.

What is so perplexing about the above story is that the only Maitripa known to us is the circa 10th to 11th century Indian master associated with the Mahāmudra teachings that he passed onto his Tibetan students Mar pa lo tsā ba chos kyi blo gros (1012-1097) and Khyung po rnal 'byor (990-1127), both of whom were highly instrumental in the founding of their respective branches of the bKa' rgyud school. However, even if one were to accept the possibility of the same Maitripa's involvement with the early Great Perfection tradition, the notion that he would have lived prior to Bai ro tsa na goes against all the accounts we have of either of these individuals. Moreover, it suggests that there was another line of Great Perfection teachings passed through Śrī Singha that did not originate with either dGa' rab rdo rje or his student Mañjuśrīmitra. It is this last point that is perhaps the most remarkable, as the later tradition adopted such a standardized lineage in which this particular origin account seems to have been completely ignored, unless of course this work is merely referring to these teachers using different names. Though, if this account were only found in the above text of only a few folios, then such a lack of consideration may very well be warranted, but, alas, that is not the case with this particular story.

In the *Elucidation of the Hearing Lineage* we find a much more detailed account of the same story.⁴⁵ This text was written by rTa rin chen dpal (c. 12th to 13th century), who if not actually being the same individual as the aforementioned rTa ban would certainly have been a contemporary of his, as they definitely would have had one or more

⁴⁵ rTa rin chen dpal, *sNyan brgyud gsal byed*, in *sNga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, 2009, Vol. 100, pp. 138-140.

teachers in common.⁴⁶ Regardless, this text actually names the emanation of Śākyamuni as one Śrī Aparakīrti (dPal A pa ra ghir ti, or alternatively as A pa ra ghar ti) in whom the former has emanated apparently because the time had not yet been ripe to teach the Tantras during his lifetime. Information about this figure, whose name could perhaps be rendered as “boundless fame,” ironically, is nowhere to be found outside of the A ro Tradition, in which he does appear in connection with two brief works on an instruction entitled the *Jñānacakra* (*ye shes 'khor lo*).⁴⁷ Otherwise, the story follows along the same lines as the above in that Maitripa is unable to locate the teachings on the Great Perfection, with the slight variation of referring to him as mNga' bdag Maitripa (*me tri ba*), which, being a common epithet of the Maitripa we are otherwise familiar with, should remove all doubt that, at least to the Tibetan author of this particular text, this is intended to refer to the same person. And, as the story goes, Maitripa, although he was vastly learned and had studied under numerous scholars and yogis, could not come across the spiritual instructions of the Great Perfection, so he supplicated the dākinīs in the context of a feast offering who then granted him the following prophecy (*lung bstan*).

*In the southern direction in the place known as Śrī Parvata,
In the supreme sacred site that quells the subjective mind,
The one known as Ghir ti a pa ra,
The emanated form of dGa' rab rdo rje,
The great Saraha, dwells.
You, oh child, must go. Having gone there,
The meaning of “the buddha is immersed in one’s own mind,”
The spiritual instruction of the unmistakable truth,
You must remember to request.*⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Another reason that I believe these two names might refer to the same individual is because in the 1999 Chengdu edition of the *bKa' ma shin tu rgyas pa* the entire A ro Tradition section is subsumed under a heading which attributes all of the texts to three masters, the last of which is rTa rin chen dpal. And since, the other two, being his teacher and his teacher's teacher, are already mentioned in the lineage preceding rTa ban, it is likely that this is Rin chen dpal simply signing his name as the “venerable one from Ta,” i.e. rTa ban. “Venerable,” in this context, is an honorific title for monk, taken from the Sanskrit *vandya*, or *bande* as it would have been commonly written in areas closer to the Tibetan border such as Nepal.

⁴⁷ See *Khrid ye shes 'khor lo gtan la dbab pa'i man ngag* and *dpal a pa ra ghir ti'i ye shes 'khor lo gtan la dbab pa'i man ngag* in *sNga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, 2009, Vol. 100, pp. 119-124 and 166-168, respectively.

⁴⁸ *sNga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, 2009, Vol. 100, p. 139. *lho phyogs dang dpal gyi ri zhes pa/ yid 'pham byed pa'i gnas mchog na/ ghir ti a pa ra zhes pas/ dga' rab rdo rje'i sprul pa'i sku/ sa ra ha ni chen po bzhuks/ bu khyod song zhig der song la/ rang sems sangs rgyas snyug pa'i don/ ma nor bden pa'i gdams ngag ste/ zhus la yid la dran par gyis/.*

Now, as far as prophecies go, the above is fairly straight forward, but unfortunately the nature of the verses give us very little to go on in terms of grammar, especially in order to decipher the relationship between the fourth and fifth lines mentioning dGa' rab rdo rje and Saraha. Of course, Śrī Parvata, a mountain in south India, is well known as the former residence of the mahāsiddha Saraha, so his appearance in this verse is not entirely out of place. Furthermore, he is believed to have lived around the 8th century, so, by Mind Series standards, at least we are in the temporal ballpark in which the Great Perfection teachings would have been transmitted in India via figures like Śrī Singha and later Bai ro tsa na. However, it is not clear whom the verse is referring to as the emanation of dGa' rab rdo rje. The text has already referred to Aparakīrti as being an emanation of Śākyamuni, but it almost seems as if the prophecy is referring to him as being the emanation of dGa' rab rdo rje, as well, especially since I know of no tradition which considers Saraha as such. Nor does it seem that the text is referring to dGa' rab rdo rje as a separate member of a list, grammatically speaking, or by his association with Śrī Parvata, as there doesn't seem to be any accounts of him ever residing in the area. And, if all three individual names are somehow referring back to Aparakīrti, then it would be quite odd that the texts would use the least known of his names to refer to him, as there would be much more authority derived from either of the other two. However, since we have such little information to go on and no further explanation of the prophecy, it seems that it will remain mysterious until some further clarification comes to light. Otherwise, the rest of this section of the text, once more, cites the *History of Sublime Dharma* and gives a very concise account of the hardships Maitripa had to endure prior to arriving before the teacher and then his receiving four aspects of the teachings from Aparakīrti, namely, "the root [texts], the implements, the hearing lineage, and the mind generation, these four he was granted."⁴⁹ Thus ends the discussions of this figure in the text and, as of yet, I have not been able to locate any other mentions of him in literature related to the A ro Tradition, or otherwise, leaving the mystery thoroughly intact, for the time being. And though I can only assume that most modern scholars will scoff at the idea of Maitripa's involvement in the early Great Perfection lineage, let alone the appearance of another unsubstantiated Indian Great Perfection lineage holder, it is certainly of interest that there is obviously more

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 139. *rtsa ba/ phyag cha/ snyan brgyud/ sems bkyed bzhi gnang ngo/*

to the early traditional accounts of these lineages than the later, more streamlined, versions would have us believe.

Another interesting anomaly in the A ro Tradition corpus can be found in another brief text entitled *The Spiritual Instructions of the Four Masters*.⁵⁰ In this work, concise instructions from the following four masters are detailed: dGa' rab rdo rje, King Indrabhuti (or rather Indrabodhi in this particular text), Padmasambhava, and Tilopa (*te lo pa*). The first master is, certainly, no surprise and his contribution is a simple three-line instruction in which he uses the analogy of the clarity of undisturbed water to demonstrate how bliss occurs in the uncontrived mind. The next member of the list is a bit more out of place as King Indrabhuti is a name not commonly associated with the Great Perfection teachings. Of course, there are several Indian figures referred to by this name that play various roles in the Indian Tantric lineages, as they are envisioned by later Tibetan accounts, leading to various suffixes being applied to each of these individuals, such as the Great, the Middle, the Younger, and so on. However, in this text there is no indication which of these it is referring to, but, again, his contribution is exceedingly brief, consisting of only two lines, which might be rendered as,

*Just as the mind that has cast aside activities,
Abides exactly as it is, in just way one should rest.*⁵¹

Now, the third member of the list, Padmasambhava, is not necessarily out of place considering that we are still within the confines of the rNying ma tradition, though, in terms of the Mind Series, this is a rare appearance, indeed. It is also the longest of the four and involves a story of the master meeting three old ladies while passing through Mang yul, an area near the present day Tibetan border with Nepal.⁵² As the story goes, three old ladies ask Padmasambhava for instructions, but he tells them to first go seek out the mind (*sems tshol*) and after having done so, he promises to grant them instructions. The old ladies then go off by themselves and try to seek out the mind with each of them achieving varying degrees of success. The first old lady claims to have found it pervading the body, the second is filled with doubt and concludes it must be some kind of illusion, while the third finds nothing at all, not without or within the body, no color, no shape, and so forth. The three of them, then, return to the master and explain

⁵⁰ *Slob dpon bzh'i'i gdams ngag*, in *sNga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa*, 2009, Vol. 99, pp. 279-283.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 279. *bya ba gtang pa'i sems bzhin du/ ji ltar gnas pa de ltar gzhang/*

⁵² *Ibid*, pp. 279-281.

in detail their conclusions, to which Padma replies that the first is foolish, the second has come up with mediocre results, while the last is truly skilled. He then explains why this is so, imparting to them profound instructions on the way, and the whole story wraps up with a song. It's an interesting account, as we rarely see Padmasambhava portrayed in this light, stripped of all magical pomp and circumstance and helping out a few old ladies. Moreover, it's quite unusual to see this figure in Mind Series literature, as apart from his role as the instigator of Bai ro tsa na 's journey in the *Great Portrait* and in a similar capacity in the *Copper Temple Chronicles*, he is generally not so involved in this aspect of the Great Perfection teachings, being much more associated with the Pith Instruction Series and other treasure related developments. Nevertheless, it is the last member of the group of four that is by far the most surprising.

Tilopa was the famed teacher of Nāropa, who also was well known by way of his Tibetan student Marpa.⁵³ So, again, we have a famous Indian Mahāmudra master showing up in the literature of the A ro Tradition and teaching the Great Perfection. However, his extremely succinct instruction to, "remain undistracted while not deliberating, not thinking, not contemplating, not meditating, and not implementing,"⁵⁴ could surely be described as belonging to either of these traditions. However, it is in fact a derivative of the often repeated Mahāmudra instructions commonly known as the *Six Nails of the Key Points* (*gnad kyi gzer drug*), though it is also referred to by Zhang brtson 'grus grags pa (1123-1193) as the *Six Dharmas of Tilopa* (*Tai lo pa'i chos drug*).⁵⁵ Though, it is perhaps this very overlap in subject matter and instructional style that blurs the lines between the Mind Series and certain aspects of the Mahāmudra teachings. Nonetheless, besides dGa' rab rdo rje, everybody else in this list of four masters are certainly not commonplace in Mind Series literature and so, once more, we get a sense of the peculiarity of the A ro Tradition's inclusivity of what would otherwise be deemed as external influences.

Based on the above instances, it would seem that the hard

⁵³ It is perhaps of interest that Naropa was once an abbot at the monastic university of Nālandā, during which time he was known as Abhayakīrti. And though the somewhat similarity of the name with the mysterious Aparakīrti is little more than circumstantial, he was more or less a contemporary of the Maitripa we are familiar with and was at one point the monk disciple of the notoriously unorthodox mendicant Tilopa.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 281. *mi bsam mi mno mi sems mi sgom mi spyad ma yengs par zhog cig/.*

⁵⁵ Interestingly, Zhang's iteration of this instruction (*mi mno mi bsam mi sems mi sgom mi spyad sems rang bzhin du gnas*) has even more of Great Perfection flavor than the version found in the A ro literature, which follows the more common version found in Mahāmudra literature. See gSung 'bum brtson 'grus grags pa. Gampopa Library: Kathmandu, 2004, p. 356.

distinction between the Mind Series and Mahāmudra is significantly diminished within the literature of the A ro Tradition. And so, we not only see Mahāmudra masters, such as Maitripa, inserted into the early Great Perfection lineage, but also Mahāmudra teachings, such as Tilopa's famous advice mentioned above, being taken as, or at least placed on equal footing with, Mind Series instructions. And, while it may be tempting to see this as evidence of the concomitant relationship of these two traditions, which could be used as fuel for claims that one is the source from which the other is drawn, it might have more to do with time in which the accounts were recorded than anything else. Most of the A ro literature that has recently come to light seems to have been set down in the 13th century by disciples of dBus pa mtha' yas, mentioned previously as the potential author of the *History of A ro*, whom in turn received them from his own teacher Zhig po bdud rtsi (1149-1199).⁵⁶ Therefore, these accounts, themselves, represent an understanding of masters active in the Buddhist milieu 8th to 9th century India as it would have been viewed by Tibetan Buddhists in the late 12th to 13th century. Though, of course, these accounts could possibly extend back through oral transmission to earlier periods, it is perhaps more likely that they are a product of the times in which they were written down, as referencing masters such as Maitripa, and so on, could presumably lend them an air of authenticity in relation to the prominent traditions of the day, which held such Mahāmudra masters and their teachings in the highest regard. Furthermore, since the historical picture represented by these accounts seems to be restricted to merely a handful of A ro related works, we get the sense that it might not have been readily accepted by parties on either side of the rNying-gSar divide. Consequently, figures such as Aparakīrti all but vanished from the collective rNying ma memory as the various written and oral accounts of their tradition's history became more and more standardized with the passage of each century. Therefore, rather than assuming that accounts such as those found among the literary relics of the A ro Tradition necessarily represent some long lost information on early figures that the tradition has since forgotten, it's perhaps more useful to view them as a snapshot of a particular moment in this ongoing process of reimagining history. Because, while the chances of locating Aparakīrti and determining the true role of Maitripa in these events are exceedingly slim, examples such as this that draw our attention to this process can also act as a reminder to us that we too are engaging in the act of reimagining. And while our sources of authority are different, the picture we are collectively painting is equally a work in progress.

⁵⁶ In Dudjom, 1991, p. 653, it puts the date of his birth in 1143.

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