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## Secrets of the Vajra Body: Dngos po'i gnas lugs and the Apotheosis of the Body in the Work of Rgyal ba Yang dgon pa

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**Secrets of the Vajra Body:**

***Dngos po'i gnas lugs* and the Apotheosis of the Body in the work of Rgyal ba Yang dgon pa**

A dissertation presented by

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to

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Secrets of the Vajra Body: *Dngos po'i gnas lugs* and the Apotheosis of the Body in the work of  
Rgyal ba Yang dgon pa

**Abstract:**

This dissertation looks at an attempt in Buddhist history to theorize the role and status of the body as the prime focus of soteriological discourse. It studies a text titled *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body (Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad)*, composed by Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal (1213-1258). This work, drawing on a wide range of canonical tantric Buddhist scriptures and Indic and Tibetan commentaries, lays out in detail a Buddhist theory of embodiment that brings together the worldly realities of the body with their enlightened transformation. This dissertation analyzes the ways Yang dgon pa theorizes the body as the essential ground of the salvific path, and endeavors to provide a thematic guide to his rich and complex discussion of what the body is and does, from a tantric perspective. The thesis parses a key term, *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, that Yang dgon pa uses as an organizing principle in *Explanation of the Hidden*. If taken literally, the term means something like "the nature of things" or "the nature of material substance," but Yang dgon pa deployed the term specifically to refer to the nature of the human psychophysical organism, in its ordinary state. By way of this term, Yang dgon pa argues that the body itself makes enlightenment possible. In the course of this thesis, I consider the prior history of this category as it was gradually developed by a series of Bka' brgyud writers until it reached Yang dgon pa. Then, in light of this category, I explore Yang dgon pa's own vision of embodiment.



This vision, I argue, reflects an attempt to refocus soteriological attention on the power of the body, over and above the mind, as the salient basis for non-dual knowing. Finally, I reflect upon the lasting contributions of Yang dgon pa's conception of the body to the ongoing exploration of such topics in the history of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist soteriology, as well as upon why some of the more radical elements of his thinking seem to have been eliminated in subsequent generations of his lineage.

## Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	v
Acknowledgements	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal: His Life and Work	18
Chapter Two: The History of the Notion of <i>Dngos po'i gnas lugs</i>	59
Chapter Three: <i>Dngos po'i gnas lugs</i> according to Yang dgon pa	104
Chapter Four: The <i>Dngos po'i gnas lugs</i> of Body, Speech, and Mind	160
Chapter Five: Yang dgon pa's Doctrine of Radical Integration and the Implications of an Embodied Buddhahood	271
Conclusion	318
Appendix I: Outline of <i>Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body</i>	326
Appendix II: Classifications of Body, Speech, and Mind in <i>Explanation of the Hidden</i>	330
Appendix III: The Five <i>Cakras</i> and their Constituents	331
Appendix IV: Works Cited by Yang dgon pa in <i>Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body</i>	334
Bibliography	337

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## Introduction

This thesis looks at an outstanding attempt in Buddhist history to theorize the role and status of the body as the prime focus of soteriological discourse. It studies a text titled *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body (Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad)*, composed by Rgyal ba Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal (1213-1258), better known by his short name Yang dgon pa,<sup>1</sup> along with its four commentaries.<sup>2</sup> This exceptional work, drawing on a wide range of canonical tantric Buddhist scriptures and Indic and Tibetan commentaries, lays out in detail a Buddhist theory of embodiment that brings together the worldly realities of the body with their imagined enlightened transformation.

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<sup>1</sup> Pronounced “Yang-gön-pa.” Throughout the thesis, I will be using standard Wiley transliteration to render Tibetan words. I will supply a pronunciation in the footnotes for a few key terms and names in the thesis, in order to make the reading smoother for readers unfamiliar with Tibetan.

<sup>2</sup> The short name *Sbas bshad* is used frequently by Yang dgon pa and his closest disciple Sphyan snga Rin chen ldan (born 1202) to refer to the work. I am following their lead in the thesis, and generally refer to the work in English as the *Explanation of the Hidden*. Four commentaries on this work, composed by Sphyan snga ba, are discussed in Chapter One: (1) *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad gyi bsdu don*, (2) *Sbas bshad kyi dka' 'grel*, (3) *Sbas bshad kyi zhal gdams sbas pa gnad kyi gter mdzod*, and (4) *Sbas bshad kyi gnad thun mong ma yin pa*.

In the time period in question, the Buddhist lineages (Bka' brgyud and Sa skya)<sup>3</sup> with which Yang dgon pa was most closely affiliated adhered to a scriptural canon in which many passages denigrate the body as ephemeral, defiled, and untrustworthy, and emphasize instead the primary role of intentionality, mindfulness, and enlightened consciousness in the moral formation of the virtuoso practitioner. Alongside such works, however, another strand of thought within these lineages, based in tantric theorization of the Buddhist path, recognized the importance of the body's physical existence as integral to soteriological self-transformation. Yang dgon pa's contribution falls within this latter strand of thought, but pushed it considerably further. In the *Explanation of the Hidden* and its commentaries, the body is not only valued as a vehicle for Buddhist practice, but it also—in some respects—rises to a status of preeminence over and above the role of the mind.

This dissertation analyzes the ways Yang dgon pa theorizes the body as the essential ground of the salvific path, and endeavors to provide a thematic guide to his rich and complex discussion of what the body is and does, from a tantric perspective. I also wish to parse a key term, *dnegos po'i gnas lugs*<sup>4</sup>, that Yang dgon pa uses as an organizing principle in *Explanation of the Hidden*. At stake in this discussion is why and how the body itself makes possible salvific self-transformation. In the course of this thesis, I consider the prior history of the category *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* as it was gradually developed by a series of Bka' brgyud writers until it reached Yang dgon pa. Then, in light of this category, I will attempt to explore Yang dgon pa's own vision of embodiment. Finally, I reflect in the Conclusion upon the lasting contributions of Yang dgon pa's conception of the body to the ongoing exploration of such topics in the history of

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<sup>3</sup> Pronounced “ka-gyu” and “sa-kya.”

<sup>4</sup> Pronounced “ngö-po nay-lük.”

Indo-Tibetan Buddhist soteriology, as well as upon why some of the more radical elements of his thinking seem to have been eliminated in subsequent generations of his lineage.

In addition, the dissertation will explore the category of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as a door into understanding Yang dgon pa's distinctive and original theory of human embodiment. If taken literally, the term means something like "the nature of things" or "the nature of material substance," but Yang dgon pa deployed the term specifically to refer to the nature of the human psychophysical organism, in its ordinary state. As we will discover in this thesis, the meaning of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* changed over time. An in-depth study of the history and varying contexts in which the term was used demonstrates that we cannot assume that it had a single enduring definition or connotation. Because the intent of the thesis is to explore how the term was deployed by Yang dgon pa and to appreciate the legacy of usage that he inherited, I will leave it untranslated (although my discussion will indicate its connotations at each stage of its development in Yang dgon pa's own work). Some suggestions for what Yang dgon pa ultimately understood it to mean will be offered in the Conclusion of the thesis. My research has revealed, at the very least, that this term changed and evolved, over time, into a highly specific meaning within certain Bka' brgyud lineage teachings, such as those expounded by Yang dgon pa. At the same time, another meaning of the term continued to co-exist in epistemological writings of the very same lineage and time period. The unusual adaptation of this term within Yang dgon pa's writings, and the necessity of exploring the nuances of its usage, has compelled me to confront the evolution of its referent, and the critical importance of considering context in each of the cases in which we find it employed. This also means that we cannot rely solely on technical etymologies or glosses found in the commentarial literature, or those found in lexicons such as the *Mahāvvyutpatti*. These discussions and definitions can be useful, but they also can be

misleading if they are taken to point to an enduring sense of the term, especially since such passages are often themselves in the process of reconfiguring its connotations. Even the polymaths, such as Padma dkar po (1527-1592), who offered specific definitions for this term, actually break with their own definition virtually the moment they are using the term in context.<sup>5</sup>

In providing a history of the notion of *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* I will look at discursive context and intertextuality in order to establish the range of its parameters. While it will not be possible in any kind of comprehensive way to connect all the dots in a web of contingencies extending back a thousand years, I will endeavor to sketch some of the main threads of context and connection that fed into Yang dgon pa's lineage and his own appropriation and modification of this key notion. While the thesis stays focused principally on the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, and my main project is to follow the argument and theory as it unfolds sequentially in this specific work, I also have made an effort to summarize how the term was used in key Tibetan works, both translated from Indic originals and as adopted in original essays and syntheses written in Tibetan by Yang dgon pa's forebears.

This thesis consists of five chapters. In Chapter One, I introduce the life and work of Yang dgon pa, who has not been the main subject of substantial work to date,<sup>6</sup> although he was

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<sup>5</sup> Michael M. Broido, whose scholarship grappled with the same challenging term *dnegos po'i gnas lugs*, found himself drawn in a similar direction: "Our choice of words reflects our view of the author's intention, evidence for which must be supplied. Thus translation may be less important than comment or exegesis. Contextual factors must be taken seriously, and interpretation accepted as necessary" [Michael M. Broido, "The Term *Dnegos po'i gnas lugs* as used in Padma dkar po's *Gzhung 'grel*," in *Tibetan Studies in Honor of Hugh Richardson: Proceedings of the International Seminar on Tibetan Studies*, ed. Michael Aris and Aung San Suu Kyi (Warminster, England: Aris and Phillips LTD, 1979), 60].

<sup>6</sup> The most extensive work on Yang dgon pa's life in English print comes from Cyrus Stearns, who researched his life for a study of Ko brag pa (1182-1261), Yang dgon pa's teacher. See



an important and exegetically creative figure whose work on some topics has had impact in Tibetan religious and medical circles for centuries. Among other compositions, his *Retreat Teachings, the Source of All Qualities* (*Ri chos yon tan kun 'byung*) became a very important early template of the retreat teaching (*ri chos*) genre. Certainly his *Explanation of the Hidden* impacted both Sa skya and Bka' brgyud transmissions on the nature of the tantric vajra body extensively. I discuss the impact of his work generally in Chapter One. I also discuss there his literary output and life, relying principally on an early biography written by Spyang snga ba. This biography offers important clues about the nature of Yang dgon pa's religious education and the influences that affected the writing of the *Explanation of the Hidden*. In this chapter, I also discuss the various extant versions of Yang dgon pa's *Collected Works*, the various versions of the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, and the variations among these. Finally, I also look briefly at the colophon of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, which provides more specific clues about the circumstances of its composition.

In Chapter Two, I trace the history of the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* before Yang dgon pa's time. What is presented here is but a summary of examples of the kinds of usages that we can find in the archive of Buddhist writings that were likely available to Yang dgon pa himself at the time he wrote the *Explanation of the Hidden*. It turns out the term has ample precedent in the Buddhist canon, in works that were translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan. We find the term in both Mahāyāna and tantric materials, along with a related term *dngos po'i rang bzhin*. I examine the semantic sense of the term in these various discursive contexts, relying primarily on the Tibetan translation, which would have been the form of the term to which Yang dgon pa himself

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Cyrus Stearns, *Hermit of Go Cliffs: Timeless Instructions from a Tibetan Mystic* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 6-25.

was exposed as he drew on and adapted passages from some of these very sources. In the canonical materials we find that the term's meaning ranges from an ontological nature of things to an epistemic nature of subjective experience. By the time it appears in the work of Nāropa, however, it has come to refer to a valorized nature of human embodiment. This is the sense of the term that Yang dgon pa's predecessors in the Bka' brgyud lineage adopted and elaborated, writing original Tibetan treatises on critical elements of the path of tantric practice. It is also this sense of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* that Yang dgon pa himself took up in the *Explanation of the Hidden*, adding new subtypes and greatly expanding its importance as an analytic category.

Chapter Three looks at how Yang dgon pa himself defines and introduces the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. In this chapter, I also explore the style and structure of the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, and how he introduces this work to the reader. I consider the title of the work and its key terms “vajra body” and “explanation of the hidden,” and bring in some interesting passages on the title from a commentary on Yang dgon pa's work by Spyan snga ba. Chapter Three also looks at Yang dgon pa's introductory statements to the *Explanation of the Hidden*. In short, Chapter Three looks at the introduction and framing of the text itself, as it is constructed by the author and elaborated by his close disciple. That introduction and framing turn out to reveal a great deal about the overall thrust of Yang dgon pa's project, the parameters of a somatic theory of enlightenment, and his key term *dngos po'i gnas lugs*.

Chapter Four is concerned with the main body of Yang dgon pa's work, in which he introduces the reader to the first three of his four varieties of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, which he classifies as the basis (*gzhi*) of enlightenment. In this chapter, I look at how Yang dgon pa frames the notions of body, speech, and mind as channels, winds, and vital essences. It is in looking at these details that the extent of Yang dgon pa's embodied vision of enlightenment really begins to

unfold. In this vision, he explores the relationship between body, speech, and mind in a way that is innovative, but firmly rooted in a range of Indic tantric sources as well as in Tibetan exegesis. Here the extent of his synthetic impulse becomes apparent, as does his genius in weaving together authoritative sources in order to support an eclectic somatic theory. The extent to which Yang dgon pa chooses to draw on a broad variety of scriptures and commentarial writings is apparent by looking at the number and variety of tantras and other works from which he quotes. His list of sources, found in Appendix IV, makes this clear at a glance.

Chapter Five looks at Yang dgon pa's fourth kind of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, as well as his discussion of an embodied path and fruition. In this chapter, I explore how Yang dgon pa grapples with the doctrinal and pragmatic implications of a vision of enlightenment that is radically embodied. Here we see Yang dgon pa argue for a vision of inherent integration, in which body, speech, and mind are not in reality divisible. In arguing for this vision, Yang dgon pa proposes that there is not one body, speech, and mind, but rather many that morph into one another as a human cycles through birth, life, death, and rebirth. He proposes in this chapter the existence of a fully-ripened body, speech, and mind, an ultimate body, speech, and mind, a habitual body, speech, and mind, and a mental body, speech, and mind. He also grapples with the problem of death, perhaps the biggest challenge to a doctrine of embodied enlightenment, for what happens to the body, speech, and mind when the body no longer survives? In discussing his distinctive sense of the salvific path and its fruition, he introduces us to a remarkable vision of the body as innately a path and, simultaneously, just as innately, a fruition.

Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body* is not a widely known work, at least not in the sense of widely read by a popular audience in Tibet; nevertheless, it remains a text that has endured in some circles in which its unique contribution is recognized, such as the

medical tradition and strands of study that emphasize somatic practices. But that is not the main reason to study it. Rather, bringing its unique contribution to light at this time in the history of Tibetan Buddhist Studies scholarship could shed considerable light on what we—as a field—define as the parameters of “Tibetan Buddhism.” This text leads us in a direction that has managed, with some notable exceptions, to elude the attention of scholars in the field of Tibetan Studies. That direction is towards the importance of the physical body itself in the theorization of the nature of the Buddhist path to enlightenment. The *Explanation of the Hidden* draws our attention—in a very direct and explicit way—towards the body as a locus of concern: its physicality, its unequivocal relationship to the mind, and its unique potential to occupy a privileged place of soteriological interest within the system of Tibetan Buddhism.

Moreover, Yang dgon pa’s work helps us think more three-dimensionally about the status of the “real” in Buddhism. Despite the growing work on the topic of material culture in Buddhist institutional and social history,<sup>7</sup> there is still an assumption that Buddhist doctrine is not much interested in the status of the ordinary material world, but rather is concerned with transcendence. Yang dgon pa’s composition shows us that, at least in some contexts, there was a recognition of the importance of the material aspects of human existence in the Buddhist path to enlightenment, particularly the workings of the everyday body. His work emphasizes the intricate and close relationship between the body and transcendence to the degree that, for Buddhist soteriology, the body is actually fundamental to achieving the highest goals of his tradition. Therefore, uncovering the secrets and truths of the body is fundamental to knowing what Tibetan Buddhism is about.

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<sup>7</sup> One outstanding example would be John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*, Buddhisms Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

Since the turn to the nature of embodiment in critical theory in the humanities more generally, the body has begun to receive due attention from some Buddhist Studies scholars, especially since the 1990s. A collection of essays on the body and Buddhism, compiled and edited by Thomas Kasulis, broke ground in this area and served to carve out a place for the body as a critical term in Buddhist studies.<sup>8</sup> Kasulis furthered the conversation by helping to translate from Japanese the theoretical work of Yasuo Yuasa titled *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*, a philosophically original work that brought forth a Japanese scholar's perspective on the body's role in Buddhist practice.<sup>9</sup> Since that time, a number of articles and chapters appearing in edited volumes have served to augment a growing body of scholarship taking Buddhism and the body as a subject from a number of diverse perspectives.<sup>10</sup>

In the years since Kasulis' volume, three notable books centered on Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist perspectives on the body have appeared that are worth considering briefly here, as they represent contrasting examples of treatments of the significance of the body found in Buddhist Studies. The first is *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in*

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas P. Kasulis, Roger T. Ames, and Wimal Dissanayake, *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice*, The Body in Culture, History, and Religion Series (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Yasuo Yuasa and Thomas P. Kasulis, *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-body Theory*, SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> Some notable short pieces in edited volumes on the body in Buddhism (outside of Tibetan studies) in the last twenty years include the work of Bernard Faure, Steven Collins, Paul Williams and William LaFleur. See Bernard Faure, "Substitute Bodies in Chan/Zen Buddhism," in *Religious Reflections on the Human Body*, ed. Jane Marie Law (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), Steven Collins, "The Body in Theravāda Buddhist monasticism," in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Paul Williams, "Some Mahāyāna Buddhist Perspectives on the Body" *ibid.* (Cambridge, University Press), and William R. LaFleur, "Body," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

*Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* by Liz Wilson, which looks at the descriptions of the female body found in post-Aśokan hagiographic literature.<sup>11</sup> The second is *Virtuous Bodies: The Physical Dimensions of Morality in Buddhist Ethics* by Susanne Mrozik, which looks at the language of the body in Mahāyāna literature, specifically the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* attributed to Śāntideva.<sup>12</sup> The third book is John Makransky's *Buddhahood Embodied*, which looks at how the exalted Buddha bodies (*kāyas*) are framed in Mahāyāna sutras and their Tibetan commentaries.<sup>13</sup> Wilson's work explores hagiographic literature from a period in Indian Buddhist history in which the body—and especially the female body—was depicted as distorted, unclean, disgusting, and untrustworthy. Mrozik and Makransky's works, on the other hand, look at later Indian Buddhist materials, and show a valorization and uplifting of a notion of the body as the basis for virtue and enlightened activity. The distinct sources that these scholars draw upon yield very different ideas of the body's value and potential, and demonstrate that conflicting attitudes towards the body have existed side by side in the Buddhist tradition for thousands of years.

All three of these last-mentioned studies of the status of the body in Buddhist history discern and weigh attitudes towards embodiment through an analysis of text and practice. However, scant work is available that examines explicit theories of the ordinary human body as such in Buddhist literature, especially regarding how the ordinary human body undergirds the

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<sup>11</sup> Liz Wilson, *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature*, Women in Culture and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Susanne Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies: The Physical Dimensions of Morality in Buddhist Ethics*, Religion, Culture, and History Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> John J. Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*, SUNY series in Buddhist studies (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997).

experience of enlightenment. This is largely because so little is said directly in most primary sources themselves, other than to denigrate the body's impurities and its tendency to draw us into attachment and delusion, or to valorize the body as the vessel that enacts virtuous practices or embodies (but only in an exalted Buddha's state) enlightenment itself. Prolix exegesis on Buddha bodies, for example, is available. Also, while discourses on the mind's theoretical mode of existence and ways of functioning are rife in Buddhist writing, very little is said theoretically about the way the body exists and functions in an ordinary way, apart from the discourses of early Buddhist thought found in the *Abhidharma*, where matter is classified as part of the five *skandhas* and is foundational to sense perception.<sup>14</sup> Very little is said, too, about how the ordinary body might theoretically serve as a bridge to a Buddha's enlightened form. Even the *vinaya* literature, which depends in fundamental ways on bodily discipline, has little to say overtly about how the body itself exists or how it acts as an instrument for spiritual or ethical transformation.

An exception to these generalizations is found in the Tantric Buddhist tradition, which broadly assumes that the body's cultivation is at the heart of the process of reaching enlightenment, and it is in this tradition that Yang dgon pa's work is grounded. While much of tantric writing is focused upon ritual and meditative instruction, we do also find second-order theoretical considerations of the body's ingrediency on the path to enlightenment, especially in the late Buddhist tantric traditions around the Kālacakra. Therefore, it is not surprising that when

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<sup>14</sup> The first and second chapters of the *Abhidharmakośa* concern the relationship between matter, the human body and sense perception. See Vasubandhu and Louis de la Vallée Poussin, *The Abhidharmakośa of Vasubandhu with the Commentary*, trans. Leo M. Pruden, vol. 23, Tibetan Sanskrit Works Series (Patna: K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1983), 55-75. This extensive discussion is central to Buddhist thought concerning the body, but little is said about how this material basis acts as an instrument for enlightenment itself.

we turn to scholarship on the tantric materials of Tibetan Buddhism, we discover that the body has received a fair amount of attention in this field. Most scholars closely involved with the study of Indian Buddhist tantric materials and exegesis, such as Alexis Sanderson, Ronald Davidson, and Christian Wedemeyer, have made socio-historical questions and intertextuality a focus of their work, but their scholarship has sometimes treated the body as a mode of theoretical attention. Christian Wedemeyer's work on the *Caryāmelāpakapradīpa* considers the categories of body, speech, and mind as foundational for Buddhist practice.<sup>15</sup> Vesna Wallace, who has translated portions of the *Kālacakra* tantra and its commentary, the *Vimalaprabhā*, has focused on materials that especially concern tantric notions of framing and understanding the human body.<sup>16</sup> Her work has been helpful to think with for this thesis.

The scholarship that most manifestly considers the body's way of being and functioning, as presented in Tibetan sources, is the work that considers Tibetan medical writings. In this area, Janet Gyatso and Frances Garrett, both of whom take Tibetan medical works as their primary subject, are currently doing groundbreaking work. Frances Garrett's recent book is a detailed comparative study of Tibetan versions of embryology, looking at both medical and religious works.<sup>17</sup> Janet Gyatso's work has considered issues of embodiment and the body for over a

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<sup>15</sup> Christian K. Wedemeyer, *Āryadeva's Lamp that Integrates the Practices (Caryāmelāpakapradīpa): The Gradual Path of Vajrayāna Buddhism According to the Esoteric Community Noble Tradition*, Treasury of the Buddhist sciences series (New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Vesna A. Wallace, *The Inner Kālacakratāntra: A Buddhist Tantric View of the Individual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), and *The Kālacakratāntra: The Chapter on the Individual Together with the Vimalaprabhā*, Treasury of the Buddhist sciences (New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Frances Mary Garrett, *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*, Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism (London; New York: Routledge, 2008).



decade, including work on gender theory.<sup>18</sup> Her most recent research concerns medical debates in 17th century Tibet. In a recent article, she looks at how Tibetan commentators on the *Four Tantras* became concerned about the truth claims of tantric versions of subtle anatomy.<sup>19</sup> She demonstrates that there was an abiding interest, in the medical community of 17th century Tibet, in how the ordinary body actually exists and how empirical observations were reconciled with religious doctrine. While Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden* seems to have drawn only on a tantric model—at least explicitly—for understanding the body, there are similarities in his work with the impulse of Tibetan medical works such as the ones described by Gyatso. Both Gyatso and Garrett's explorations show that Tibetan medical works sought to understand human anatomy and physiology as it is, for the sake of healing illness, but also for the sake of verifying the claims of religious tradition. In a parallel way, Yang dgon pa sought to understand and describe the anatomy of the tantric vajra body in some detail, and to explore a tantric physiology that mirrors the process of the path to enlightenment itself.

However, while a parallel interest is at work, there is a difference between Yang dgon pa's work, informed by a tantric education, and that of the medical writers: the difference lies both in his impulse and his method. According to his own statements, Yang dgon pa's method for attaining knowledge and his claim to authority are not primarily empirical observation of the body's behavior (although there are elements of this in his work), but rather a dual approach of

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<sup>18</sup> See Janet Gyatso, "One Plus One Makes Three: Buddhist Gender, Monasticism, and the Law of the Non-excluded Middle," *History of Religions* 43, no. 2 (2003), 89-115, and *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary: A Translation and Study of Jigme Lingpa's Dancing Moon in the Water and Dākki's Grand Secret-talk* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), Chapter 6.

<sup>19</sup> "The Authority of Empiricism and the Empiricism of Authority: Medicine and Buddhism in Tibet on the Eve of Modernity," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 2 (2004), 83-96.

education in tantric theory and direct inner visionary experience of the subtle body as catalyzed by meditative practice. In Yang dgon pa's work, this method is backed by an impulse to understand the body not primarily in order to cure illness, or in order to know the body for its own sake, but rather in order to thoroughly understand the body as the basis for enlightenment and the embodiment of buddhahood. Nevertheless, his work is keenly interested in how the body's material realities, such as digestion, physical growth and decay, and waste products, for example, fit into this schema. This impulse was in line with the tantric tradition that Yang dgon pa inherited, a tradition that already assumes that the body's cultivation is at the heart of the process of reaching enlightenment, and that the body itself holds the key to wisdom. In fact, in the very sources on which some of Yang dgon pa's thought is based, we find second-order theoretical consideration of the body's way of being, although in these contexts theoretical considerations are couched in the language and context of ritual and meditation instruction.

What makes Yang dgon pa's work stand out from these Indian Buddhist tantric sources and even from immediate Tibetan precedents is that the *Explanation of the Hidden* represents one of the very few attempts in Indo-Tibetan history to provide a full and extended essay devoted to a theoretical and descriptive study of the role of the body in enlightenment. The work abstracts, develops, and redeploys ideas already evident in the *niruttarayoga tantra* tradition, but does so with an innovative voice and unique organization. As mentioned above, Buddhist studies on the body to date have tended to discern Buddhist attitudes towards embodiment through an analysis of attitudes in practice, and this may be partially due simply to the paucity of overt theoretical attention to the somatic basis for liberation in Buddhist history. Yang dgon pa's clarity of focus in this exceptional work makes it possible to do a different kind of scholarship than is usually attempted in the field. Yang dgon pa's work presents us with a rare opportunity to

meet the perspective of a Buddhist author who tells us what he thinks about the body, in theoretical terms, as his main topic of discussion. We meet in these pages an author unafraid to explore the interior world of corporeal existence, because, we might say, he has decided that perishable does not necessarily mean untrustworthy. Here, therefore, it is possible to discern and consider a Buddhist attitude towards embodiment through direct engagement with an articulated theory, instead of through deduction.

Even within Yang dgon pa's own lineage, in which bodily practices play a significant role, his work is unique in its conscious articulation of an ontological theory of the body and its role in a human being's quest for freedom. While there are many practical handbooks that describe bodily disciplines, Yang dgon pa wishes to explore the theory underlying such practice. Most of Yang dgon pa's immediate predecessors were interested in the body primarily for what the body *does*: the body is viewed through the lens, within Tibetan tantric exegesis, of religious practice. But Yang dgon pa took a particular interest, in this text, in what the body *is*. That is not to say that Yang dgon pa was interested solely in the body's ontological being. His focus is clearly articulated as a basis for practice. We can see from the overall outline of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, as well as other writings, such as his *Retreat Teachings which are the Source of All Qualities (Ri chos yon tan kun 'byung)*,<sup>20</sup> that Yang dgon pa was interested in the pragmatic role of the body in the religious path, too. He was adept at describing somatic yogas, for example. His *Retreat Teachings*, in line with practical yogic manuals of its day, compiles rich descriptions of bodily movements intended to heal and balance karmic energy, while bringing

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<sup>20</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Ri chos yon dan kun 'byung ba rin po che 'bar ba*, in *The Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Yang-dgon-pa Rgyal-mtshan-dpal: Reproduced from the manuscript set preserved at Pha-jo-ldings Monastery* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunsang Topgey, 1976).

the yogi closer to a moment of recognition of non-conceptual wisdom. In the sections of the *Retreat Teachings* where the body is a locus of attention, it is an instrument of liberation, activated by the proper recipe of meditation, movements, and breathing. In this context, Yang dgon pa's writing reveals a concern with how to properly align the instrument of the body to result in moments of profound spiritual release. However, we also see in the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body* an abiding curiosity about what the body is, innately, from its birth to its demise. It is a book about what a human life looks like, developmentally, but also about what this means for Buddhist enlightenment.

In this thesis, I will show that while Yang dgon pa's lineage historically had an interest in bodily practice, Yang dgon pa takes the discussion of the tantric body's ontological way of being to a more detailed and sophisticated level than had (in his day) heretofore been reached in any source of Tibetan origin. His unique contribution was to isolate and examine the human body as a subject of detailed discussion and research, not from a medical perspective, but from a religious, tantric perspective. In this thesis, I will not thoroughly explore the details of the technical map of the tantric body Yang dgon pa provides, except to the extent that these details help us understand his overall project. Rather, my intent is to explore Yang dgon pa's exegetical strategies in *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, especially as these strategies relate to the key term *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. These strategies include modes of textual organization and structuring, ways of defining key terms, and ways of selecting and interpreting orthodox tantric scriptures. Through close readings of key passages of his work, I will explore the ways Yang dgon pa isolates and examines the human body as his subject, and will consider how he endeavors to position the body as a central term in Buddhist discourse. But before delving into the pages of Yang dgon pa's own work, I will first establish a sense of the world in which Yang

dgon pa lived and was educated, to the extent that we have evidence about that time and place, and a sense of the scriptural corpus that he inherited. In service of this goal, Chapters One and Two will attempt to situate Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden*, at least generally, in the context in which it was composed.

## Chapter One

### Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal: His Life and Work

In order to appreciate the significance of Yang dgon pa and his vision in the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, we ought to begin by considering the author and composition of this text in its historical context, as much as we know of it. Tibet in the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries was witness to a proliferation of major new school (*gsar ma*) sects that would become the basis for lineages that have continued up until the present day. The thirteenth century, especially in the cultural ferment of Central and Western Tibet, was a time of rapid consolidation of these lineages into monastic institutions headed by hierarchs and lineages of reincarnation.<sup>21</sup> To support this rapid consolidation, textual forms were becoming standardized, and organized literary collections were being assembled. Into this hotbed of institutional growth, prolific

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<sup>21</sup> For a historical reconstruction of this time period, see Ronald M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance : Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) where Davidson calls the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> Century in Central/Western Tibet the “Tibetan Renaissance”. He borrows from the thought of Stephan Jay Gould arguing that a theory from biological system’s analysis called “punctuated equilibrium” can be applied to Tibetan culture. Davidson, citing Gould, argues that “civilizations appear to compress phenomenal development into an incredibly short span of time, a veritable burst of sociopolitical, economic, artistic, intellectual, literary and spiritual activity”. He argues that the later diffusion (*phyi dar*) period in Tibet, especially the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, was just such a time, a “rebirth of sociocultural life in Central Tibet, and if not *the* Renaissance, it constituted *a* renaissance of Tibetan society attempting to recapture the dynamism of the empire” (ibid., 20-21).

literary production, intense cross-fertilization of ideas, and competition between lineages, Yang dgon pa was born.

The socio-political climate in Central Tibet during Yang dgon pa's lifetime was intermittently unstable. Yang dgon pa's life spanned the first half of the thirteenth century, the time of the first Mongol incursions into Tibetan territory. The first invasion of Tibet occurred in 1240, when Yang dgon pa would have been 27 years old. The Prince Koden—a ruler of the Kokonor region in the Chenggis Khan bloodline— sent his army on what may have been a reconnaissance mission turned violent. The army torched two Kadampa establishments in Central Tibet, Rwa sgreng and Rgyal lha khang, killing some 500 people in the process.<sup>22</sup> As recorded by his student Spyian snga rin chen ldan (b. 1202?), Yang dgon pa remembered this invasion as a traumatic and impactful event in Central Tibet.<sup>23</sup> One year later, after apparently reaching a détente, the Mongol armies left. Then in 1244, Prince Koden sent an “invitation” (but more likely a threat) to the great scholar Sa skya Paṇḍita (Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan, 1182-1251), requesting that he bring Buddhism to Kokonor. This may have been because he was the most learned monk to be found in Central Tibet at the time, and there were

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<sup>22</sup> Leonard van der Kuijp, personal communication, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> There are a number of passages in Spyian snga ba's biography of Yang dgon pa that paint vivid snapshots of the Mongol invasions. For example in his biography of Yang dgon pa, Spyian snga ba recalls, “By the power of the common karma of beings, the terrifying chaos of the Mongol and Beri [invasion] occurred. The Mongols arrived at ‘Dam, and killed all the people in their path. They took all the wealth they could find. They burned every house. They destroyed every temple. In particular, they hated the monks. Among them, there were very few translators, or people who knew Tibetan, perhaps just one in a hundred. Even though verbal communication was sometimes possible, the Tibetan people did not understand the Mongolian's laws, or their culture. When they merely heard the name of the Mongols or Tartars, they trembled with fear so fiercely, they could not stand up. All the people a felt the terror and trepidation as if they had been delivered into the hands of the karmic lord of death” [Spyian snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Rin po che lha gdong pa'i rnam thar me long chen mo bstod pa ma*, in *The Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Yang-dgon-pa Rgyal-mtshan-dpal* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunsang Topgey, 1976), 65-66].

no centralized secular governmental officials to invite. In 1244, Sa skya Paṇḍita traveled to China with two nephews, where he died in 1251. There was yet another Mongol invasion in 1252,<sup>24</sup> when Yang dgon pa was 39 years old. In short, Yang dgon pa lived during a time that was a veritable literary and religious renaissance. But the period was also colored by fear of a neighboring power that threatened force against the militarily unprepared clan-based society of Central Tibet. Such conditions were certain to have provided both fodder and challenge for his literary career.

### Sources for the Life of Yang dgon pa

The earliest and most complete source of biographical material on Yang dgon pa's life is *The Great Mirror: A Praise-Biography of the Precious One of Lha gdong* (*Rin po che lha gdong pa'i rnam thar me long chen mo bstod pa ma*), a biography written by Yang dgon pa's aforementioned chief disciple Spyan snga Rin chen ldan.<sup>25</sup> It is a 42-folio manuscript<sup>26</sup> written in an informal style, and is an early example of a subgenre of biography called "praise-biography"

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<sup>24</sup> Leonard van der Kuijp, personal communication, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Spyan snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Rin po che lha gdong pa'i rnam thar me long chen mo bstod pa ma*, in *The Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Yang-dgon-pa Rgyal-mtshan-dpal: Reproduced from the manuscript set preserved at Pha-jo-ldings Monastery* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunsang Topgey, 1976), Volume 1, pp. 21-104. *The Mirror* also exists in the Rta mgo and He mis versions of Yang dgon pa's Collected Works, and in several other larger collections such as the *'Ba' ra dkar brgyud gser 'phreng*. A new version of this biography was published in Nepal in 2002, that was given to me by Slob dpon 'Chi med rdo rje of Pha jo ldings Monastery, in the Thimphu Valley of Bhutan, which I also consulted. This new version includes a catalogue of Yang dgon pa's works, and his *Last Testament (Zhal chems bka' shog ma)*: Spyan snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Rgyal ba yang dgon pa'i rnam thar bstod pa ma'am me long chen mo* (Swayambhu, Kathmandu: Gam-po-pa Library, 2002), henceforth called *Me long ma (2002)*.

<sup>26</sup> That is, in the Pha jo ldings version.



(*rnam thar bstod pa*).<sup>27</sup> *The Great Mirror* (henceforth referred to as *The Mirror*<sup>28</sup>) consists of a versified set of praises that highlight sequentially the key points of Yang dgon pa's life, accompanied by a prose commentary that unpacks the biographical details. It recounts the major events in Yang dgon pa's life, including narratives that were told to Spyān snga ba by Yang dgon pa, and descriptions of events witnessed by Spyān snga ba himself. Spyān snga ba eulogizes his protagonist considerably in *The Mirror*, emphasizing the religious purity of his bloodline, his prodigious qualities, and his meditative achievements. However, the biography also has a clear interest in preserving the order and details of events, including many quotations from Yang dgon pa, and some information of historical interest.

Other sources for Yang dgon pa's life draw heavily on this early praise-biography, but occasionally provide supplemental information. These sources include Padma dkar po's history of the 'Brug pa lineage, *The Sun that Causes the Lotus of the Teaching to Bloom: A Religious History* (*Chos 'byung bstan pa'i padma rgyas pa'i nyin byed*),<sup>29</sup> *The Blue Annals* (*Deb ther sngon po*) by 'Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal (1392-1481),<sup>30</sup> *A Feast for Scholars: A Religious*

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<sup>27</sup> Gene Smith called this work a "particularly well-crafted example of this genre" (E. Gene Smith, personal communication, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> Seng 'brag Rin po che refers to Spyān snga ba's biography by the short name *Me long ma* in his recent biographical treatment of Yang dgon pa (see below). I follow his lead here.

<sup>29</sup> The entry on Yang dgon pa may be found in Padma dkar po, *Chos 'byung bstan pa'i pad ma rgyas pa'i nyin byed* (Lhasa: Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang, 1992), 444.

<sup>30</sup> For the entry on Yang dgon pa, see 'Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po*, vol. II (Varanasi: Vajra Vidya, 2002), 806-09. The entry appears in English translation in 'Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal and George Roerich, *The Blue Annals*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1976), 688-91.

*History (Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston)* by Dpa' bo Gtsug lag phreng ba (1504-1564),<sup>31</sup> and *History of the White Crystal (Zhal dkar chos 'byung)* by Ngag dbang skal ldan rgya mtsho (1921-2003). There is also a *Secret Biography* of Yang dgon pa written by “the old woman Yulo” (Ma rgan g.yu lo), one of his close female students, and his attendant Spyang snga ba, recording the events that occurred after his death, and the apparitions of Yang dgon pa that appeared spontaneously in various locations.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, a recent praise-biography of Yang dgon pa composed by the fifth Seng 'brag Rin po che (Seng 'brag Rin po che Ngag dbang 'gyur med Chos kyi rgyal mtshan, 1947-2005), and his student Mkhan po Shes rab chos 'phel was published in 2011 in Nepal.<sup>33</sup> This new biography draws heavily on *The Mirror* to retell Yang dgon pa's story, but also includes useful supplementary information about his legacy in the Upper Dragon (*Stod 'Brug*) lineage, and short histories of Yang dgon pa's home monastery of Lha gdong and his main practice hermitage Gnam sdings, where he composed the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*. The book includes recent photos of a famous statue of Yang dgon pa, a life-sized figure that was saved from the ravages of the Cultural Revolution, and a smaller statue of his mother as well, both residing in the temple at Lha gdong. It also includes photos of Lha gdong's exterior, and of Gnam sdings. *The Mirror* by Spyang snga ba is my main source for summarizing Yang dgon pa's life here, but I

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<sup>31</sup> For the entry on Yang dgon pa, see Dpa' bo Gtsug lag phreng ba *Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston*, 2 vols., vol. I (Varanasi: Vajra Vidya Library, 2003), 852.

<sup>32</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Mnyam med rgyal ba yang dgon pa'i gsang ba'i rnam thar*; *ibid.*, 121-139.

<sup>33</sup> Seng 'brag Rin po che Ngag dbang 'gyur med chos kyi rgyal mtshan and Mkhan po Shes rab chos 'phel, *Stod 'Brug bstan pa'i mnga' bdag dpal rgyal ba yang dgon pa'i rnam thar gsol 'debs 'gyur med rdo rje'i sgra dbyangs kyi 'grel ba skal bzang rna ba'i bdud rtsi* (Kathmandu: Nub lung bkra shis phun tshogs, 2011).

also occasionally considered passages from these other sources where information differs or enriches the understanding of his life.

Yang dgon pa himself composed two collections of episodes that record the inner experiences that arose while he was meditating in retreat. These are his *Inner Autobiographical Accounts* (*Nang gi rnam thar*), and his *Secret Autobiographical Accounts* (*Gsang ba'i rnam thar*).<sup>34</sup> The *Inner Autobiographical Accounts* is a four-folio text describing inner experiences, dreams, and visions that arose while Yang dgon pa was in retreat at Śrī Mountain completing the “approach practice” (*bsnyen pa*) of Vajrayoginī, his main meditation deity. The seven-folio *Secret Autobiographical Accounts* records Yang dgon pa’s experiences and dreams that arose while he was in retreat performing the practices of the six doctrines of Nāropa (*Nā ro chos drug*). Yang dgon pa’s personal accounts suggest a personal disposition powerfully drawn to the life of a yogi and to cultivation of the inner life, including the practices of the subtle body, the very practices undergirding his composition of the *Explanation of the Hidden*.<sup>35</sup> In his autobiographical writing, he values the self as the slate on which meditation experiences are inscribed. He offers few details of the historical context or other events, except to talk with fondness of specific caves where he meditated, especially Gnam sdings and Lha sdings. The details of his outer life may principally be gleaned from the observations of his student Spyan snga ba in *The Mirror*.

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<sup>34</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Nang gi rnam thar*, 41-53.

<sup>35</sup> According to Spyan snga ba, Yang dgon pa was in the habit of spending four months of every summer in strict retreat at Nam sdng hermitage, and four months of every winter in strict retreat at Lha gdong. The other four months of the year, he was in partial retreat as much as possible (Seng ‘brag rin po che Ngag dbang ‘gyur med chos kyi rgyal mtshan and Mkhan po Shes rab chos ‘phel, *Stod ‘brug bstan pa’i mnga’ bdag dpal rgyal ba yang dgon pa’i rnam thar gsol ‘debs ‘gyur med rdo rje’i sgra dbyangs kyi ‘grel ba skal bzang rna ba’i bdud rtsi* (Kathmandu: Nub lung bkra shis phun tshogs, 2011), 52.

## The Life of Yang dgon pa

Spyan snga ba's account tells us that Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, otherwise known as Lha gdong pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, was born in the La stod region of Gtsang, between central and western Tibet, in 1213.<sup>36</sup> The village of his birth was Chu bya, a lay settlement associated with the small monastic complex of Lha gdong dgon pa, in the principality of Gung thang, not far from the Tibet-Nepal border. This small monastic complex of Lha gdong was the place of Yang dgon pa's early religious education, and he did not stray far from the area of Gung thang during his lifetime. It is this monastery, very near his birthplace, that yielded one of the principal names his lineage would know him by (besides Yang dgon pa): Lha gdong pa, "the one from Lha gdong."<sup>37</sup> His other principal name, Yang dgon pa, derives from the name of a retreat hermitage, Yang dgon, where he engaged in his first Vajravārāhī retreat.<sup>38</sup>

He was born into the Stong clan,<sup>39</sup> into a Rnying ma family,<sup>40</sup> as the youngest boy. He had two older brothers and one older sister. He was given the name Regent of Blazing Splendor

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<sup>36</sup> His birthplace falls in an area in Gtsang that was known as the *ru lag* region (western part). There is considerable evidence to suggest that Gtsang and Dbu were the areas of Tibet at the center of the most vibrant literary and cultural developments during the Tibetan renaissance period (Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 3).

<sup>37</sup> Spyian snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma chen mo*, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Yang dgon is identified as his first retreat place in Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Nang gi rnam thar kyi dbu lags*, 2-3.

<sup>39</sup> 'Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po*, II, 688. For more on the Stong clan, see Yeshe De Project and Dharma Publishing, *Ancient Tibet: Research Materials from the Yeshe De Project*, vol. 1, Tibetan history series (Berkeley, CA, USA: Dharma Publishing, 1986), 131.

<sup>40</sup> Dpa' bo Gtsug lag phreng ba *Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston*, I, 852.

(Gdung sob dpal ‘bar) by his father, a lay lama associated with Lha gdong, who passed away before his birth. He began his religious training at about age five and entered Lha gdong monastery at age nine.<sup>41</sup> In Yang dgon pa’s life, he would serve as an apprentice to four main teachers, to whom he referred affectionately in many of his writings as "the four precious ones" (*rin chen bzhi*). The first of these teachers was Ko brag pa Bsod nams rgyal mtshan (1170-1249),<sup>42</sup> whom Yang dgon pa attended from approximately 1223 to 1234 (from the time he was eleven, until he was 22). Ko brag pa was a mountain yogi and poet who practiced the Path and Fruit (*lam ‘bras*) tradition of Ma gcig Zha ma, and his life is the focus of a recent scholarly treatment by Cyrus Stearns.<sup>43</sup> Yang dgon pa became Ko brag pa’s personal attendant and eventually his foremost disciple.<sup>44</sup> At age 22, he took full ordination as a monk in the presence

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<sup>41</sup> Spyana snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma chen mo*, 27-28. According to *Shel dkar chos ‘byung*, Yang dgon pa’s home monastery supported a monastic college called *Gling stod lha gdong*, where Yang dgon pa studied [Ngag dbang skal ldan rgya mtsho et al., *Shel dkar chos ‘byung, History of the “White Crystal”: Religion and Politics of Southern La stod*, vol. 252, Veröffentlichungen zur Sozialanthropologie ; Bd. 1 (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), 57].

<sup>42</sup> ‘Gos lo tsā ba (‘Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal and Roerich, *The Blue Annals*, 726-27) gives Ko brag pa’s dates as 1182-1261, but Mang thos klu sgrub rgya mtsho, in his *Bstan rtsis gsal ba’i nyin byed lhad bsam rab dkar*, questions this and provides the dates 1170-1249. Stearns explains that the latter dates are preferable, because Yang dgon pa (who died in 1258) presided over Ko brag pa’s funeral service (Stearns, *Hermit of Go Cliffs*, 21-22, f.n. 4).

<sup>43</sup> Ko brag pa was founder of the Ko brag Monastery in the Upper myang area of the Gtsang province in Central Tibet. He dedicated his life principally to the practice of the *Lam ‘bras* tradition of the eleventh century female teacher Ma gcig Zha ma, and was instrumental in bringing the Six Branch Yoga of the *Kālacakra Tantra* to Tibet. His lineage affiliations are uncertain [*Hermit of Go Cliffs*, 7-9].

<sup>44</sup> *The Mirror* states: “Although the precious Dharma Lord [Ko brag pa] had many eminent students who held him as their main teacher, such as Khro phu Lo tsa ba and Bla ma Snyal pa, he considered [Yang dgon pa] Rinpoche to be his heart-son, and—while he was alive—he entrusted his religious seat to [Yang dgon pa] Rinpoche alone” (Spyana snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma chen mo*, 41). Yang dgon pa’s close relationship to his teacher Ko brag pa is corroborated in Cyrus Stearn’s study.

of Ko brag pa, from whom he received the name Rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po.<sup>45</sup> In Yang dgon pa's *Inner Autobiographical Accounts*, he mentions Ko brag pa as the lama who empowered him to practice Vajravārāhī, his main meditational deity<sup>46</sup> and *The Mirror* indicates that Ko brag pa also transmitted to Yang dgon pa the lineage of teachings on the intermediate state (*bar do*) of Ma gcig Zha ma (1062-1149), which he practiced extensively.<sup>47</sup> This is of special interest since Lady Zha ma's bardo texts are no longer extant, and Yang dgon pa wrote a set of important bardo texts, reflecting his training in Lady Zha ma's lineage.<sup>48</sup>

Yang dgon pa's second main teacher was Rgod tshang pa Mgon po rdo rje, 1189-1258,<sup>49</sup> a prolific early founder of the "Upper Dragon" (*Stod 'Brug*) branch of the 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud lineage, a lineage that would eventually claim Yang dgon pa as a main figure in their ancestral

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 43/3.

<sup>46</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Nang gi rnam thar*, 2/1.

<sup>47</sup> See Spyan snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma chen mo*, 42, and Stearns, *Hermit of Go Cliffs*, 25. Ma gcig zha ma was an important female disciple of Pha dam pa sang rgyas, and the founder of the Zhama method of the *lam 'bras* transmission. For more on Ma gcig zha ma, see Dan Martin, "The Woman Illusion? Research into the Lives of Spiritually Accomplished Women Leaders of the 11th and 12th Centuries," in *Women in Tibet*, ed. Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 53-55; Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 291-293; and Cyrus Stearns, *Luminous Lives: The Story of the Early Masters of the Lam 'bras in Tibet* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1996), 125-131.

<sup>48</sup> According to Stearns, the close connection to Ma gcig Zha ma's bardo teachings is one reason that Yang dgon pa continues to be a valued literary figure in the Sa skyia lineage. Another reason is Yang dgon pa's connection to Sa skyia Paṇḍita, with whom Yang dgon pa studied (*Hermit of Go Cliffs*, p. 25).

<sup>49</sup> Rgod tshang pa's life story is preserved in several autobiographies, and he is also the subject of a well-known biography by Sangs rgyas dar po, written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (currently being translated by Ani Jinpa, a nun at Don rgyud dga' tshal gling in India).

line.<sup>50</sup> Yang dgon pa met Rgod tshang pa when he was making a traditional begging round near Śrī Mountain (*Śrī ri*)<sup>51</sup> as a novice monk,<sup>52</sup> and they remained close for the rest of Yang dgon pa's life. From Rgod tshang pa, according to *The Mirror*, Yang dgon pa received the transmission of Nāropa's "five points for clearing away obstacles and many other oral instructions" (*gegs sel gzer lnga la sogs pa'i gdams ngag mang po*).<sup>53</sup> Nāropa's five points for clearing away obstacles provide instructions related directly to Nāropa's six doctrines, so it is likely that Rgod tshang pa was Yang dgon pa's first instructor in the Bka' brgyud lineage

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<sup>50</sup> Gtsang pa rgya ras Ye shes rdo rje, 1161-1211, the founder of the 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud lineage, had two main disciples: Rgod tshang pa Mgon po rdo rje (1189-1258) and Lo ras pa Dbang phyug brtson 'grus) 1187-1250, who became the founders of two major offshoots of the 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud: the lineage of the Upper Dragon (*Stod 'Brug*) and the lineage of the Lower Dragon (*Smad 'Brug*), respectively. The lineage of the Upper Dragon gave rise to a number of important sub-sects, including the Yang dgon Bka' brgyud that extended from Yang dgon pa himself. The Lower Dragon flourished primarily in Bhutan, imported there by Ngawang Namgyal (Ngag dbang rnam rgyal, 1594-1651) in 1616. The sub-sect extending from Yang dgon pa's teachings, the Yang dgon Bka' brgyud, would eventually be known as the 'Ba' ra Bka' brgyud, named after 'Ba' ra ba Rgyal mtshan dpal bzang, 1310-1391, who was considered to be an incarnation of Yang dgon pa and who propagated Yang dgon pa's *Retreat Teachings* teachings widely, spreading them as far as Bhutan [E. Gene Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature of the Himalayan Plateau*, Studies in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 44].

<sup>51</sup> Śrī ri is an ancient name for Rtsib ri, an important pilgrimage mountain range in the vicinity of Ding ri in the La stod region of Gtsang [Andrew Quintman, "Toward a Geographic Biography: Milarepa's Life in the Tibetan Landscape," *Numen* 55, no. 4 (2008), 378]. The location figures prominently in the early biographical tradition of Mi la ras pa (*ibid.*, 392). This mountain is home to several important monasteries and meditation caves, including Rtsib ri dgon (which also goes by Śrī ri dgon), an important 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud monastery. The mountain Yang dgon pa's main meditation caves were on the side of Śrī Mountain, including Gnam sdings, where he composed the *Explanation of the Hidden*, and Lha sdings, another of his favorite retreat places. According to Ko brag pa's biography, Lha gdong, Yang dgon pa's home monastery, is very near this mountain (Stearns, *Hermit of Go Cliffs*, p. 11).

<sup>52</sup> This would indicate that Yang dgon pa met Rgod tshang pa before he reached age 22.

<sup>53</sup> Spyan snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma chen mo*, 47/3. The *Gegs sel gzer lnga* discusses specific techniques for dispelling obstacles such as illness and emotional imbalance [Nāropa, *Gegs sel gzer lnga'i man ngag*, in *Gdams ngag mdzod*, ed. 'Jam mgon kong sprul (Paro, Bhutan: Lama Ngodrup and Sherab Drimey, 1979-81), 259-280].

teachings that inspired the outline of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, and that informed Yang dgon pa's somatic exegesis of the term *dnegos po'i gnas lugs*.

Having apprenticed with both of these teachers in his twenties, Yang dgon pa entered an intensive retreat to complete the “approach practice” (*bsnyen pa*) of Vajravārāhī and the Six Doctrines of Nāropa. During this period of intensive, rigorous, and solitary retreat on Śrī Mountain, in a cave called Gnam sdings,<sup>54</sup> Yang dgon pa first took up the practice of the somatic meditations and the subtle body visualizations that would become the basis for his *Explanation of the Hidden*. *The Mirror* quotes Yang dgon pa as saying that, after meditating for eleven months without breaking his vajra posture,<sup>55</sup> he experienced a breakthrough: “After meditating on many paths of energetic means, the winds became workable” (*ngas thabs lam mang po bsgoms pas rlung las su rung mo yod*).<sup>56</sup> Sometime after this intense retreat experience, Yang dgon pa returned to his home monastery of Lha gdong to practice the stages of vows (*sdom rim*).

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<sup>54</sup> The spelling Gnam bsdings is found in both the Rta mgo and Pha jo ldings versions of “The Mirror”, but Seng ‘brag Rin po che’s recent biography of Yang dgon pa corrects the spelling to *sdings*. The Gnam sdings hermitage was Yang dgon pa’s favorite and principal retreat location. About this retreat place, he said, “All my good qualities were perfected in Gnam sdings. Those who practice my teachings and follow me should stay there until they become stable. Cakrasaṃvara lives there. Vajrabhairava also lives there. No obstacles will arise there.” (Seng ‘brag rin po che Ngag dbang ‘gyur med chos kyi rgyal mtshan and Mkhan po Shes rab chos ‘phel, *Skal bzang rna ba’i bdud rtsi*, 82-83). In his *Secret Autobiographical Accounts*, Yang dgon pa says, “Followers, spend your lives practicing diligently at Gnam sding and Lha sding. Obstacles will not arise in those places. The requisite conditions will arise naturally because of the auspicious connection with me. Your virtuous practice will increase there.” (ibid., 78-79). Seng brag Rin po che reports that the Gnam sdings on Śrī Mountain is a pilgrimage site still associated with Yang dgon pa, and it can be visited.

<sup>55</sup> *Zla ba bcu gcig rdo rje dkyil krung ma bshig par bzhugs pa lags*. Spyan snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma chen mo*, 51/5.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 51/6.



At that time, Yang dgon pa reports having the visionary experience of the subtle body that would directly inspire the *Explanation of the Hidden*:

*rin po che nyid kyi zhal nas ngas dang po stong ra mang po bsgoms/ dag pa'i sgyu lus sbyangs pa'i stobs kyis/ rdo rje lus kyi gnas lugs la/ gnas pa rtsa/ g.yo ba rlung/ bkod pa byang chub sems gsum gyi gnas lugs ji lta bar mngon sum<sup>57</sup> du gzigs pas<sup>58</sup>/ de'i don rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad<sup>59</sup> du yi ger bkod pa yin gsung/<sup>60</sup>*

Rinpoche said: "First, I meditated a great deal on the empty enclosure.<sup>61</sup> By the force of training in the pure illusory body, I actually saw the nature of the stationary channels, the moving winds, and the arranged *bodhicitta* just as they are. On account of that, I composed the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*."

This description of the visionary origin of the text is an important authenticating factor, also mentioned by Yang dgon pa himself in the *Explanation of the Hidden*,<sup>62</sup> and it may explain why Yang dgon pa felt at liberty to synthesize a tantric vision of the body from several competing sources. In *The Mirror*, Spyan snga ba describes his teacher's confidence in this visionary experience of the vajra body and its workings, and Yang dgon pa's subsequent reliance on this vision:

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 55/4: *dngos gsum*. Corrected to *mngon sum* in *Me long ma* (2002), 58.

<sup>58</sup> Spyan snga ba uses the honorific for the verb "to see" (*gzigs pa*) in this passage, but Yang dgon pa would have used the non-honorific *mthong ba* for himself.

<sup>59</sup> Spyan snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma chen mo*, 55/4: *rbad bshad*. Corrected to *Sbas bshad* in *Me long ma* (2002), 58.

<sup>60</sup> *Me long ma chen mo*, 55/3-4.

<sup>61</sup> The "empty enclosure" is a technical term found in the literature of the Six Doctrines of Nāropa. It refers to one's body visualized as form and emptiness, like a rainbow (Bla ma Nor lha, personal communication, 2011).

<sup>62</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, in *The Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Yang-dgon-pa Rgyal-mtshan-dpal: Reproduced from the manuscript set preserved at Pha-jo-ldings Monastery* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunsang Topgey, 1976), 465/3.

*'byung ba lnga'i rlung gi kha dog gzigs nas rlung rtsis mdzad pas/ nyi ma nam bzlog pa*<sup>63</sup>  
*la sogs pa mkhyen/ de yang dus 'khor rtsis shes pa gcig gis rtsis pas ma dag pa/ rin po*  
*che pas mkhyen/ dag pa dang gcig tu khrig byung gsung*<sup>64</sup>

Having seen the colors of the winds of the five elements, he became capable of [inner] wind astrology, and knew things such as when the summer solstice would begin. For example, once an astrologer who was adept at Kālacakra astrology did some calculations, and Rinpoche knew he was incorrect [on the basis of his observation of the inner winds], so he corrected him.

Here, we glimpse a Yang dgon pa who considered his mastery of subtle body yoga and the power of his inner perception of the vajra body to be so accurate as to override even the calculations of a trained astrologer. In this description, we see a certain confidence that would have made the composition of the *Explanation of the Hidden* possible, and would help explain a project that attempted to synthesize differing and competing traditions of somatic mapping into a single vision. It is clear from statements in the *Explanation of the Hidden* that Yang dgon pa was well aware that the tantric sources he was drawing from did not agree on many points, or even did not agree with his own vision.<sup>65</sup> But this did not stop him from referencing these tantras selectively, as they served to support aspects of the somatic theory and the bodily map that he wished to put forward. The numerous quotations from the tantras were perhaps intended to lend

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<sup>63</sup> Spyan snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma* (2002), 59: *zlog pa*.

<sup>64</sup> *Me long ma chen mo*, 55/4-5.

<sup>65</sup> In the *Explanation of the Hidden*, Yang dgon pa occasionally mentions the discrepancies found in the tantric sources he draws on for his somatic theory. For example, Yang dgon pa points out that there are many competing version of the colors of the winds in various tantras. Yang dgon pa claims, in the *Explanation of the Hidden*, to have resolved these discrepancies by looking into his own subtle body, to see which colors were accurate [Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 465/3]. Yang dgon pa's work may present an early attempt to point out the problem of inconsistencies in the tantras, but other Tibetan theorists followed this lead. For another exploration of the inconsistencies found in tantric presentations of the vajra body, see remarks in Mkhas grub Nor bzang rgya mtsho, *Ornament of Stainless Light: An Exposition of the Kālacakra Tantra*, trans. Gavin Kilty, vol. 14, The Library of Tibetan Classics (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), 195-210.

credence to his somatic theory, in essence situating the inner experience within the accepted parameters of religious authority.

Sometime around 1243, when Yang dgon pa was 30 years old, he met and studied with his third main teacher Sa skya Paṇḍita (Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan, 1182-1251), the eminent scholar and abbot of Sa skya monastery in Gtsang. Yang dgon pa first met him briefly in Gung thang and, feeling a strong attraction, traveled to Sa skya the following year to receive teachings from him. We find a fairly detailed description of this first meeting and subsequent interactions at Sa skya monastery in *The Mirror*. During Yang dgon pa's stay at Sa skya, according to Spyan snga ba's account, he received a collection of rare instructions on the Path and Fruit (*lam 'bras*) system from Sa skya Paṇḍita. Describing Yang dgon pa's stay at Sa skya, Spyan snga ba says:

*de'i dus phyis dpal sa skyar byon/ bcom ldan 'das 'khor lo be mchog dang/ dgyes pa rdo rje la sogs pa'i dbang ka mang po dang/ mdo rgyud mang po'i lung dang/ gdams pa khyad par 'phags pa mang po dang/ rje sa skya chen po la dpal 'bir ba pas dngos su snang ba'i lam sbas bshad kyi zhal gdams gzhan la ma grags pa mang po dang/ gzhan yang chos rnam par dag pa'i rnam dbye mang po gsungs<sup>66</sup>*

Later, [Yang dgon pa] went to glorious Sa skya, where [Sa skya Paṇḍita] gave him the empowerments of the conqueror Cakrasaṃvara, and Hevajra, the reading transmissions for many sūtras and tantras, and many exalted special instructions. [Yang dgon pa] also received many oral instructions on the *Explanation of the Hidden Path* which had been entrusted to the great Sa skya pa by glorious Virūpa, and which were not well known to others. Furthermore, he taught Yang dgon pa many classifications of the completely pure dharma.

The *Explanation of the Hidden Path* (*lam sbas bshad*) in this passage would appear to refer to Virūpa's oral instructions by this same name (*Lam sbas bshad*) given to “the great Sa skya pa,”

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<sup>66</sup> Spyan snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma chen mo*, 76/6-77/2.

Sa chen Kun dga' snying po (1092-1158), in a vision.<sup>67</sup> Sa skya Paṇḍita elaborated on this thread of transmission himself in a commentary with an identical name, *Explanation of the Hidden Path (Lam sbas bshad)*, discussed in Chapter Three of the present dissertation, that concerns the process of self-transformation via the control of winds. The fact that Sphyan snga ba names this exchange as a transmission of an explanation of the hidden path gestures to a connection with Yang dgon pa's own *Explanation of the Hidden*, linking this work with a Virūpa transmission that Sa skya Paṇḍita entrusted to Yang dgon pa. Because Virūpa, one of the eighty-four mahāsiddhas, was considered the Indian progenitor of the Path and Fruit (*Lam 'bras*) teachings that became the backbone of Sa skya esoteric doctrine, this would have been considered a very precious teaching, given its Indian pedigree and the seminal status of Virūpa to the Sa skya lineage.<sup>68</sup> Although the degree to which Yang dgon pa may have incorporated rare oral teachings from Sa skya Paṇḍita into the *Explanation of the Hidden* is not certain, the connection with his lineage of somatic teachings is borne out in general, as we find that Yang dgon pa quotes Sa skya Paṇḍita and Virūpa's *Vajra Lines* several times in the *Explanation of the Hidden*.

It is perhaps partly this narrative account, in conjunction with the manifest inclusion of Sa skya Paṇḍita's words in the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, that brought Yang dgon pa's work to the attention of later Sa skya scholars. According to Sde gzhung Rin po che (1906-

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<sup>67</sup> Stearns, *Luminous Lives: The Story of the Early Masters of the Lam 'bras in Tibet*, 63. Stearns confirmed that the reference in this passage refers to Virūpa's oral transmission of the *Lam 'bras* (Stearns, personal communication, 2013).

<sup>68</sup> For the significance of the eighty-four mahāsiddhas in Indian and Tibetan culture, see David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 80-89. For hagiographical accounts of Virūpa and his significance in the Sa skya lineage, see Deshung Rinpoche, *The Three Levels of Spiritual Perception: An Oral Commentary on The Three Visions of Ngorchen Konchog Lhundrub*, trans. Jared Rhoton (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 1995), 20-29, and Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 183-189.

1987), the great Sa skya scholar of the last century, the transmission of the Path and Fruit teachings from Sa skya Paṇḍita to Yang dgon pa was quite significant, as the Sa skya master Tshar chen Blo gsal rgya mtsho (1502-1566) later incorporated large portions of Yang dgon pa's text *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body* into his own explanation of the subtle body, which became the definitive resource on this topic for the Sa skya lineage. Therefore, some of the teachings of Sa skya Paṇḍita were channeled into the mainstream Sa skya Path and Fruit tradition through the writings of Yang dgon pa.<sup>69</sup> In this way, Yang dgon pa's eclectic education resulted in a synthetic approach to exegesis that later enlivened the somatic literature of both the Sa skya and Bka' brgyud lineages.

The relationship between Yang dgon pa and Sa skya Paṇḍita, recorded by Sphyan snga ba close to the time of the actual events, also calls into question the nature of the rivalries between Sa skya and Bka' brgyud lineages during the early thirteenth century. We find in Davidson an assessment that "tensions between the Bka' brgyud pa and the neoconservatives (Sa skya) flared in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century," laying the groundwork for the dethronement in 1358 of Sa skya pa hegemony by Byang chub rgyal mtshan (1302-1364).<sup>70</sup> Davidson observes that "precisely because of their similarities, these Sarma systems came to occupy the same religious niche, making the various Bka' brgyud pa and Sa skya pa lineages competitors rather than partners."<sup>71</sup> He notes that there were literary attempts, such as the "single

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<sup>69</sup> Stearns, *Hermit of Go Cliffs*, 25, n. 36.

<sup>70</sup> Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 334-35. Ta-i si tu Byang chub rgyal mtshan was the first in the line of Phag mo gru kings, a dynasty that ruled central Tibet from 1358-1435 [Leonard van der Kuijp, "Fourteenth Century Tibetan Culture III: The Oeuvre of Bla ma dam pa Bsod nams rgyal mtshan (1312-1375)", *Berliner Indologische Studien* 7(1993), 109-147].

<sup>71</sup> Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 335.

intention” (*dgongs gcig*), to harmonize and reconcile these tensions through doctrinal means.<sup>72</sup>

This raises a question as to whether Yang dgon pa’s *Explanation of the Hidden*, which synthesizes Sa skya and Bka’ brgyud teachings on the Buddhist path with relation to the subtle body, was also written with an impulse to reconcile tensions between competing lineages, along with other motivations for its composition.

Yang dgon pa’s relationship with Sa skya Paṇḍita, coming as it did sometime in the early 1240’s, would have fallen in a time period in which Sa skya-Bka’ brgyud relations were, according to current scholarly assessment, in tension. Yet perhaps the picture was more complex than scholars such as Davidson have recognized. There is no indication in the biography or Yang dgon pa’s work that either Sa skya Paṇḍita or Yang dgon pa held one another’s lineage influences in contempt, although Sa skya Paṇḍita nevertheless labeled some Bka’ brgyud doctrines apocryphal in *The Three Codes (Sdom gsum rab byed)*.<sup>73</sup> Rather, Yang dgon pa revered Sa skya Paṇḍita as one of his root teachers, and apparently was the recipient of Sa skya Paṇḍita’s prized and secret teachings on the subtle body, ones that “he did not give to others.” In polemical literature, there is evidence of a thirteenth-century situation of sectarian rivalries, fed by clan affiliations, as Davidson and others have noted. But, existing simultaneously, there was the threat of the incursion of a foreign power on Tibetan soil. At the same time, we observe, during the early “later diffusion” period, an environment of intense cross-fertilization of lineage doctrines

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, Sa skya Paṇḍita’s comments on the spuriousness of the Vajravārāhī initiation of the Bka’ brgyud lineage in Kun dga’ rgyal mtshan Sa skya Paṇḍita, *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes: Essential Distinctions Among the Individual Liberation, Great Vehicle, and Tantric Systems*, trans. Jared Rhoton, SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 100, and Rhoton’s comments on this controversy on 184, fn. 5.

through networks of functional relationships that yielded remarkable synthetic literary productions, such as the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*. I am drawn to wonder if this cross-fertilization, at least in the early thirteenth century, attests to an impulse to build alliances in the face of forces threatening to overwhelm Tibetan areas. It may also be the product of a society in which the new school (*gsar ma*) religious institutions and identities were still in a quite formative stage, and not yet solidified, leaving open a greater possibility for intersectarian influences.

Yang dgon pa, while he may have been drawn to the charisma of Sa skya Paṇḍita, was certainly politically adroit to ally his legacy with the most powerful political figure in Central Tibet in the face of a very real military imposition that had placed both Yang dgon pa and Sa skya Paṇḍita in diplomatic roles.<sup>74</sup> In the case of the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, it would seem naïve to assume that the connection to the teachings of Sa skya Paṇḍita could be divorced from Yang dgon pa's awareness of the power such an affiliation would imply, and the clout that incorporating Sa skya Paṇḍita's teachings into his text would bestow. Yang dgon pa's relationship with Sa skya Paṇḍita gestures to alliances (made all the more urgent by looming Mongolian incursions) existing in the thirteenth century between these neighboring new school lineages, which perhaps predate or coexisted with the political tension that would come to a head in the next century. The synthetic productions of the thirteenth century may also have been projects to understand and reconcile divergent doctrines for soteriological reasons. In the case of

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<sup>74</sup> There are a number of references to Yang dgon pa's acts of diplomacy and offerings of ritual protection to the populace in *The Mirror*. For example, at one point in the conflict, Yang dgon pa is reported to have stepped in and convinced the prince of La stod to agree to Mongol demands (Spyan snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma chen mo*, 71-72). On another occasion, he engaged local villagers in creating an enormous offering cake to help ritually avert the approaching army (*ibid.*, 72/2).

Yang dgon pa, he was the repository of several systems of somatic yogas, the products of multiple lineages, and his vision indirectly explores how these maps might correspond to each other. The *Explanation of the Hidden* represents a record of how he, as an individual yogi, superimposed these maps to yield his own unique vision of a somatic enlightenment. Whatever the reasons for the interweaving may have been, we can at least see that Yang dgon pa's work stands as an extraordinary example of a doctrinal synthesis indicative of the intensity of cross-fertilization between lineages occurring in Central and Western Tibet in the thirteenth century.

Yang dgon pa's fourth major teacher was 'Bri gung Spyan snga Grags pa 'byung gnas (1175-1255), the fourth 'Bri gung abbot. 'Bri gung Spyan snga was—at the time—the first abbot of 'Bri gung mthil monastery near Lhasa, a seat bestowed on him by his own guru and founder of the 'Bri gung lineage, 'Jig rten gsum mgon (1143-1217). According to *The Mirror*, Yang dgon pa studied with 'Bri gung Spyan snga for one year at 'Bri gung Thil, during which time he received the entire 'Bri gung Bka' brgyud transmission, with special emphasis on the physical yogic exercises (*'phrul 'khor*), along with the accompanying oral instructions.<sup>75</sup> While at 'Bri gung, he also received from Gcung rdo rje grags pa (1210-1278), 'Bri gung Spyan snga's abbatial successor, the entire cycle of Phag mo gru pa's teachings,<sup>76</sup> a transmission that would have included several of the works that seem to have most inspired the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body* (to be discussed in Chapter Two). Corroborating the description of a close relationship between master and disciple that we find in the *The Mirror*, in 'Bri gung Spyan snga's collected works, we find a short text written specifically for Yang dgon pa, titled

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 81-82.

<sup>76</sup> Seng 'brag rin po che Ngag dbang 'gyur med chos kyi rgyal mtshan and Mkhan po Shes rab chos 'phel, *Skal bzang rna ba'i bdud rtsi*, 41.



*Instructions for Master Yang dgon pa*, in which ‘Bri gung Spyan snga offers his student general instructions on the path, rejoices in the transmission of the ‘Bri gung teachings to Yang dgon pa in their entirety, and affirms his confidence in Yang dgon pa’s practice.<sup>77</sup>

In addition to his four main teachers, Yang dgon pa had quite a few other teachers from whom he received instruction and tantric transmissions during his lifetime: Mi bskyod rdo rje<sup>78</sup>, Rdzing bu pa, Drod chung pa, Sangs rgyas ras chen, Jo bo lha btsun, and Bar ‘brog man lung pa. Furthermore, both his father’s older brother, Grub thob dar ma, who was a religious hermit, and his mother, Chos mthong ma, who was also a locally respected Buddhist practitioner, transmitted teachings to him as a boy.<sup>79</sup> Finally, Yang dgon pa considered himself a disciple of Bla ma Zhang Brtson 'grus grags pa (1123-1193), even though the famous Tshal pa Bka’ brgyud founder died twenty years before Yang dgon pa’s birth. At one point in his twenties, Yang dgon pa had a series of dreams about Bla ma Zhang in which he received teachings, empowerments, and prophecies. On the heels of these dreams, he made a pilgrimage to the Tshal Gung thang temple to offer prayers and practice in front of a statue of Bla ma Zhang. This visit yielded further confirmation of his connection to Bla ma Zhang, including an incident in which a dream-message from the lama allows him to warn the residents of Tshal gung thang about the

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<sup>77</sup> ‘Bri gung spyan snga, *Slob dpon yang dgon pa la gdams pa*, in ‘*Bri gung bda’ brgyud chos mdzod chen mo* (Lhasa: A mgon rin po che).

<sup>78</sup> This is possibly La stod Mi bskyod rdo rje, a well known Rnying ma master in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and student of Nyi ma 'od zer (1138-1204), known for his transmission of the Avalokiteśvara teachings from the Ma ni bka' 'bum [See Matthew Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism : Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 146]. *The Mirror* mentions that Yang dgon pa received *Rdzogs chen* teachings from a Mi bskyod rdo rje as a boy.

<sup>79</sup> See Seng ‘brag rin po che Ngag dbang ‘gyur med chos kyi rgyal mtshan and Mkhan po Shes rab chos ‘phel, *Skal bzang rna ba’i bdud rtsi*, 42, for a list of Yang dgon pa’s teachers.

approaching Mongolian Army.<sup>80</sup> This incident established Yang dgon pa in local lore, and in the memories of Bla ma Zhang's disciples. For this reason, even though Bla ma Zhang died before Yang dgon pa was born, Yang dgon pa is listed (in some Tshal pa sources) as one of Bla ma Zhang's "minor disciples" (*bu phran*), and in some sources is viewed as Bla ma Zhang's incarnation.<sup>81</sup> His education was influenced by the Rnying ma, Bka' brgyud and Sa skya lineages, and his writings later influenced all of these lineages. The diverse and numerous sources contributing to his religious upbringing point to the rich, eclectic education that we see manifest in the synthetic vision of the *Explanation of the Hidden*.

Yang dgon pa's illness and death are recorded with remarkable detail in *The Mirror*. Early in the year of 1258, when Yang dgon pa was 45 years old, he left Lha gdong for Bar 'brog saying that he would not return to his home monastery, a statement that was interpreted by his disciples as an indication of temporary disillusionment.<sup>82</sup> On the road, Yang dgon pa fell ill. At Bar 'brog,<sup>83</sup> he met Rgod tshang pa, whose health was also deteriorating, and they stayed together for some time. They discussed the possibility of their imminent demise, and helped each other get their affairs in order.<sup>84</sup> After this, Yang dgon pa traveled to Lcags nur, where it became

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<sup>80</sup> Spyian snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma chen mo*, 75.

<sup>81</sup> Per K. Sørensen and Guntram Hazod, *Rulers on the Celestial Plain : Ecclesiastic and Secular Hegemony in Medieval Tibet: A Study of Tshal Gung-thang*, vol. 361, Veröffentlichungen zur Sozialanthropologie (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007) Vol. II, 651.

<sup>82</sup> Spyian snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma chen mo*, 95/2-3.

<sup>83</sup> Bar 'brog is a district in La stod. This is where Rgod tshang pa eventually died [Franz-Karl Ehrhard, *Life and Travels of Lo-chen Bsod-nams Rgya-mtsho*, vol. 3, Monograph series / Lumbini International Research Institute (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2002), 65].

<sup>84</sup> Spyian snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma chen mo*, 95/6-96/2.

clear that his illness was serious. Many of his students gathered around him, nursing him and reciting liturgies for his benefit. He finally passed away on the 19th day of the fourth Tibetan month in 1258.<sup>85</sup> Yang dgon pa's illness was long enough for him to compose in writing specific instructions to his disciples regarding his last wishes, a document that survives in Yang dgon pa's collected works as his "last testament" (*zhal chems*).<sup>86</sup> The colophon of the testament says the clothes Yang dgon pa died in were given to his teacher Rgod tshang pa. According to Spyan snga ba, when Rgod tshang pa—who was 69 years old at the time—received them, he expressed grief at losing his close disciple and friend and declared, "He was a man who lived to benefit beings." Rgod tshang pa himself died a mere 13 days later.<sup>87</sup>

While Yang dgon pa had many students,<sup>88</sup> his chief religious heir and the main recipient of his teachings was Spyan snga ba (b. 1202?). He was called by the nickname Spyan snga ba (meaning "the Attendant") because of his long apprenticeship to Yang dgon pa, whom he served for decades, until his master's death.<sup>89</sup> Spyan snga ba did much to further Yang dgon pa's legacy, composing *The Mirror*, the richest source of information we have on Yang dgon pa's

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 101/2.

<sup>86</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Lha gdong pa'i zhal chems bka' shog ma*, in *The Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Yang-dgon-pa Rgyal-mtshan-dpal: Reproduced from the manuscript set preserved at Pha-jo-ldings Monastery* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunsang Topgey, 1976).

<sup>87</sup> Seng 'brag rin po che Ngag dbang 'gyur med chos kyi rgyal mtshan and Mkhan po Shes rab chos 'phel, *Skal bzang rna ba'i bdud rtsi*, 65.

<sup>88</sup> Mkhan po Shes rab chos 'phel mentions 33 disciples of Yang dgon pa by name in *Bskal bzang rna ba'i bdud rtsi*, three of them women. He mentions precisely the holders of Yang dgon pa's specific transmissions. According to this source, one Zhang ban de ba was the chief recipient of Yang dgon pa's teachings on the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body* (ibid., 70).

<sup>89</sup> Padma dkar po, *Brug pa'i chos 'byung*, 594-95. According to Padma dkar po, Spyan snga ba became Yang dgon pa's attendant when he was just 11 years old.

life, and compiling, cataloguing and preserving Yang dgon pa's collected works for future generations. He wrote outlines and commentaries on Yang dgon pa's key texts, including the commentaries to the *Explanation of the Hidden* found in Yang dgon pa's collected works.<sup>90</sup> Spyian snga ba's chief disciple was Zur phug pa rin chen dpal bzang (b. 1263), teacher of the prolific scholar-practitioner 'Ba' ra ba Rgyal mtshan dpal bzang (1310-1391), who was considered widely to be Yang dgon pa's reincarnation. 'Ba' ra ba founded the 'Ba' ra Bka' brgyud lineage (which survived in Tibet until 1959), and spread Yang dgon pa's legacy widely, bringing his teachings as far as Bhutan.<sup>91</sup> Two important temples, founded by 'Ba' ra ba, are still standing in Bhutan: 'Brang rgyas dgon pa, in the Paro Valley, and Steng chen kha dgon pa in Lam gong, in the Paro District. The former houses an imprint of 'Ba' ra ba's foot in stone, and is believed to be the location of his cremation.<sup>92</sup> It also houses a rare statue of 'Ba' ra ba, and a statue of the patron saint of the Paro Valley, Bkra shis Tshe ring ma.<sup>93</sup> These temples and other sites associated with 'Ba' ra ba indicate that Yang dgon pa's legacy was once active there, but the traces of that legacy are now quite faint. Yang dgon pa's legacy is most active in the

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<sup>90</sup> Spyian snga ba also wrote the *History of Retreat Teachings (Ri chos brgyud tshul gyi lo rgyus)*, a history of and conditions leading up to the composition of Yang dgon pa's *Retreat Teachings* [Spyian snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Ri chos brgyud tshul gyi lo rgyus*, in *The Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Yang-dgon-pa Rgyal-mtshan-dpal* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunsang Topgey, 1976), 1-10. This history is listed in Dan Martin and Yael Bentor, *Tibetan Histories : A Bibliography of Tibetan-language Historical Works* (London: Serindia, 1997), 40.

<sup>91</sup> For an account of 'Ba' ra ba's activities in Bhutan see Michael Aris, *Bhutan, the Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom*, Aris & Phillips Central Asian studies (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, 1979), 181-84.

<sup>92</sup> For more on these temples and other sites in Bhutan associated with 'Ba' ra ba, see Pema Wangdi and M. Ling, *Seeds of Faith: A Comprehensive Guide to the Sacred Places of Bhutan*, vol. I (Thimphu: KMT Publishers, 2008), 56-57 and 105.

<sup>93</sup> I visited this temple in 2012, on the recommendation of Slob dpon Dbang phyug rdo rje, advisor to the current Rje mkhan po of Bhutan, to inquire into whether Yang dgon pa's collected works might be housed there. They were not.

monastery of Lha gdong in Gtsang, and in the Upper Dragon establishments in exile, in Northern India, Nepal, and Ladakh.<sup>94</sup>

### **The Literary Output of Yang dgon pa**

The works that Yang dgon pa wrote over the course of his lifetime principally focus on retreat practice (“retreat teachings,” the *ri chos* genre), instruction on *bardo* practice (for navigating the intermediate state between death and rebirth), *mahāmudrā* (instructions on how to rest the mind in meditation), and commentary on the Six Yogas of Nāropa. Spyan snga ba collected and organized Yang dgon pa’s works into “Four Profound Dharmas with Ornaments,” systematizing his teachings for future generations. This framework, still referred to in subsequent referencing of Yang dgon pa’s works, is structured as follows:

(1)The Three Cycles of Retreat teachings, with the ornament of advice;<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> While two complete versions of Yang dgon pa’s collected works were published in Bhutan in 1976 and 1982, his works are not widely used there. An inquiry of the current abbot of Rta mgo Monastery into the regular use of Yang dgon pa’s works in the monastic college systems of Bhutan yielded the response that his works are not part of the regular curriculum of study generally. Personal inquiries of other key individuals (such as the head Slob dpon in charge of research in Bhutan) about the Bka’ brgyud monastic colleges in the country yielded that same response. I conclude that, despite the fact that one of the most widely available versions of his collected works comes from Thimphu (the Rta mgo version), Yang dgon pa’s works are not well known in Bhutan in the present day. The largest Bka’ brgyud monastic complex in Bhutan, Rta mgo Monastery preserves a copy of their 1982 production of Yang dgon pa’s works in their monastic college library, but do not actually use any of Yang dgon pa’s works in their study curriculum, at least not at present. Further research into the living legacy of Yang dgon pa’s works, in reading and practice, has pointed in the direction of the monasteries of the Upper Dragon lineage, which are scattered throughout Tibet, India, Nepal, and Ladakh. Even so, because of its synthetic roots, Yang dgon pa’s *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body* appears to have had an eclectic appeal, making its way into libraries and literary productions of the ‘Brug pa, ‘Bri gung and Sa skya lineages.

(2) The Path of Heart Instructions, with the ornament of dispelling hindrances;<sup>96</sup>

(3) Miscellaneous topics, with the ornament of fragments;<sup>97</sup>

(4) The Collection of Songs, with the ornament of a table of contents.<sup>98</sup>

The *Three Cycles of Retreat Teachings* refers to his most famous texts and their associated commentaries. The three cycles are (1) *Retreat Teachings, the Source of All Qualities* (*Ri chos yon tan kun 'byung*), (2) *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body* (*rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*), and (3) *Liberation from the Impasse of the Intermediate State* (*Bar do gnad kyi 'phrang sgrol*). Included as the accompanying “advice” ornament to the *Three Cycles of Retreat Teachings* were his famous “Six Mothers” (*Ma drug*): (1) the Five Points of Fierce Breathing (*Drag rlung gnad lnga ma*), (2) the Secret Conduct of Dreams (*Gsang spyod rmang lam ma*), (3) the Six Words of Emptiness (*Stong nyid tshig drug ma*), (4) the Transference of the Red *Hung* (*Pho ba hung dmar ma*), (5) Healing Sickness and Neurosis with *Hung* (*Nad 'don hung bcos ma*), and (6) the Sealed Teaching on Retaining Vitality (*'Dzag srung bka' rgya ma*).<sup>99</sup>

Hence, according to Spyan snga ba's classification, the bulk of Yang dgon pa's literary efforts fall under the broad heading of “retreat teachings,” although a survey of his works shows diverse content. The classification reflects Yang dgon pa's clear impulse: his literary efforts were

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<sup>95</sup> *Ri chos skor gsum zhal gdams kyis brgyan pa*

<sup>96</sup> *Lam dmar khrid gegs sel gyis brgyan pa*

<sup>97</sup> *Sna tshogs kyi sde tshan sil bus kyis brgyan pa*

<sup>98</sup> *Mgur 'bum dkar chag gis brgyan pa*

<sup>99</sup> Seng 'brag rin po che Ngag dbang 'gyur med chos kyi rgyal mtshan and Mkhan po Shes rab chos 'phel, *Skal bzang rna ba'i bdud rtsi*, 55.

intended to support the inner work of meditators cultivating complex visualization and yogic practices in sealed mountain retreats. His body of work, taken as a collection, in fact indicates that Yang dgon pa was deeply interested in and skilled in the esoteric practices of his tradition. *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, as we see, was classified under retreat teachings (*ris chos*) as an exegesis on practices intended to be undertaken in the seclusion of a mountain retreat. However, the *Explanation of the Hidden* and his literary achievements had a much broader appeal, and were incorporated into mainstream monastic contexts after his death. One of the key aspects of his legacy, in addition to the *Explanation of the Hidden*, that received subsequent attention over the centuries concerned his unique *mahāmudrā* hermeneutics. He was the first theorist to synthesize the mind-only (Tib. *sems tsam*, Skt. *cittamātra*) model of consciousness with a Siddha interpretation of non-mentation (Tib. *yi la mi byed pa*, Skt. *amanasikāra*), inventing—in the process—the “true nature” (*gnas lugs*) vs. “confused nature” (*'khrul lugs*) hermeneutic relied on by future generations of *mahāmudrā* exegetes.<sup>100</sup>

Yang dgon pa’s works have been widely read and quoted throughout Tibetan literary history. His *Seven Pointing Out Instructions* (*Ngo sprod bdun ma*) was the topic of an important *mahāmudrā* commentary by the Karmapa Mi bskyod rdo rje, the eighth in the Karmapa line of incarnations.<sup>101</sup> Yang dgon pa was read and quoted by the likes of Tsong kha pa (1357-1419),<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Specifically, Yang dgon pa examined the interpretations of this term found in the mystical songs of the siddha Saraha. For a complete discussion of Yang dgon pa’s key *mahāmudrā* innovation, see David Higgins, “On the Development of the Non-mentation (Amanasikāra) Doctrine in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 29, no. 2 (2009), 289-295. This innovation would lay the basis for Pad ma dkar po’s extensive commentary on the topic, a subject covered in Michael M. Broido, “Padma dKar-po on the Two *Satyas*,” *ibid.* 8(1985).

<sup>101</sup> Seng ‘brag rin po che Ngag dbang ‘gyur med chos kyi rgyal mtshan and Mkhan po Shes rab chos ‘phel, *Skal bzang rna ba’i bdud rtsi*, 54. For a discussion of this commentary by the 8th Karmapa, see Jim Rheingans, “Communicating the Innate: Observations on Teacher-Student

the founder of the Gelugpa school; Rtse le sna tshogs rang ‘grol (b. 1608),<sup>103</sup> author of some of the most widely-read *mahāmudrā* handbooks in the Bka’ brgyud lineage; Karma chags med (1613-1678),<sup>104</sup> the great founder of the Gnas mdo bka’ brgyud; ‘Jigs med gling pa (1730-98),<sup>105</sup> the famous promulgator of the *Heart Drop of the Great Expanse* (*Klong chen snying thig*); and ‘Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha’ yas (1813-1899),<sup>106</sup> one of the greatest scholars in Tibetan history; he appears in some of their most seminal works. Some small monasteries in Tibet are now known for their associations with Yang dgon pa. Spo rong padma chos sdings, between La stod and Gung thang, preserves a hat that belonged to Yang dgon pa, saved from the Cultural Revolution.<sup>107</sup> In addition, a life-sized statue of Yang dgon pa dating from the year of his death, and a smaller statue of his mother (mentioned previously) exist at Lha gdong Monastery, near the

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Interaction in Tibetan Mahāmudrā Instructions,” in *Buddhist Philosophy and Meditation Practice: Academic Papers presented at the 2nd IABU Conference*, ed. Khammai Dhammasami (Thailand: International Association of Buddhist Universities, 2012).

<sup>102</sup> Tsong kha pa mentions Yang dgon pa’s legacy to the exegetical tradition of the Six Doctrines of Nāropa in *Zab lam na ro’i chos drug gi sgo nas ‘khrid pa’i rim pa yid ches gsum ldan*. See Glenn H. Mullin, *The Six Yogas of Naropa: Tsongkhapa’s Commentary Entitled a Book of Three Inspirations* (Ithaca; Boulder: Snow Lion Publications, 2005), 113.

<sup>103</sup> Rtse le Sna tshogs rang grol, *Heart Lamp: Lamp of Mahamudra and the Heart of the Matter*, trans. Eric Pema Kunsang (Boudhanath, Nepal: Ranjung Yeshe Publications, 2009), 144-46.

<sup>104</sup> Karma Chagme, *A Spacious Path to Freedom: Practical Instructions on the Union of Mahamudra and Atiyoga* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2010)233-257.

<sup>105</sup> ‘Jig med gling pa quotes from Yang dgon pa’s bardo instructions in his secret autobiography. See Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self*, 20.

<sup>106</sup> ‘Jam mgon kong sprul, in *Lam zhugs kyi gang zag las dang po pa la phan pa’i bskyed rdzogs kyi gnas bsodus*, describes a unique method of taking disturbing emotions as a path, that he attributes to Yang dgon pa. See Kong sprul Blo gros mtha’ yas, *Creation & Completion: Essential Points of Tantric Meditation*, trans. Sarah Harding (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1996), 39. Kongtrul’s frequent references to Yang dgon pa indicate he took a unique interest in his thought (Seng ‘brag rin po che Ngag dbang ‘gyur med chos kyi rgyal mtshan and Mkhan po Shes rab chos ‘phel, *Skal bzang rna ba’i bdud rtsi*, 54).

<sup>107</sup> Ngag dbang skal ldan rgya mtsho et al., *Shel dkar chos ‘byung*, 252, 17.



village of Nub lung. Furthermore, Yang dgon pa's principal retreat, the Gnam sdings, is still revered as a sacred pilgrimage spot associated with him.<sup>108</sup>

### **Versions of Yang dgon pa's Collected Works and the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body***

Several versions of Yang dgon pa's collected works survive at present. According to Mkhan po Shes rab chos 'phel, of Tatopani, Nepal, a three-volume set of Yang dgon pa's collected works is preserved in the stupa at Yang dgon pa's home monastery of Lha gdong in the present day.<sup>109</sup> According to the *Catalogue of the Tucci Tibetan Fund*, a set of blockprints of Yang dgon pa's collected works exists in Rome in the Library of the Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, printed at the hermitage Kun gsal sgang po che, near Gung thang, in a wood-monkey year.<sup>110</sup> I have not seen these versions, and further research inside the Tibetan Autonomous Region and in Rome is needed to verify the provenance of these works. As for those versions that are currently more widely available, two complete handwritten three-volume versions of his collected works were published in the Thimphu valley of Bhutan, one at Pha jo ldings monastery (1976) and one at Rta mgo Monastery (1982). These versions are almost identical, except that the collected songs (*mgur 'bum*) of Yang dgon pa in the Pha jo ldings version is longer. An incomplete version of Yang dgon pa's collected works exists at He mis Monastery in Ladakh; it was copied into cursive (*dbu med*) script and published in Darjeeling in 1973.

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<sup>108</sup> Seng 'brag rin po che Ngag dbang 'gyur med chos kyi rgyal mtshan and Mkhan po Shes rab chos 'phel, *Skal bzang rna ba 'i bdud rtsi*, 78-107.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>110</sup> Elena de Rossi Filibeck, *Catalogue of the Tucci Tibetan Fund in the Library of IsIAO*, 3 vols., vol. 2 (Rome: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 2003), 2.

For this thesis, I have relied on and compared four versions of the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body (Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad)*. Three out of four of these versions are found in sets of Yang dgon pa's collected works mentioned above, and all of them are currently available in libraries outside of Tibet. They vary in length from 39 to 50 folios (or two-sided pages). A fourth version of this work was published in a modern format in China.

The versions are as follows:

(1) A handwritten manuscript of 39 folios, in *dbu chen* script, found inside *The Collected Works (gsung 'bum)* of Yang-dgon-pa Rgal-mtshan-dpal, published in 1976 in Thimphu, Bhutan, by Kunsang Topgey [this version of the Collected Works is abbreviated in this thesis as *Explanation of the Hidden (Pha jo ldings)*].<sup>111</sup> This publication claims that the manuscript was reproduced from an original rare manuscript set preserved at Pha jo ldings Monastery. A catalogue of books found in the temples and monasteries of Bhutan compiled in 2006 lists many titles by Yang dgon pa (which are listed as un-attributed in the catalogue), and states that these are preserved in the 'Og min khang bzang lha khang at Pha jo ldings.<sup>112</sup> Complete copies of the Pha jo ldings publication may be found in the National Library of Bhutan in Thimphu and in the Library of the University of Chicago, in the United States, but it is not currently available through the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center website or the Library of Congress.

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<sup>111</sup> Yang dgon pa rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, in *The Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Yang-dgon-pa Rgyal-mtshan-dpal: Reproduced from the manuscript set preserved at Pha-jo-ldings Monastery* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunsang Topgey, 1976), 2, 421-497. The monastery of Pha jo ldings was founded in 1224 by the 9<sup>th</sup> Rje mkhan po Pha jo 'Brug sgom zhig po, 1184-1251. He was important to the spread of the 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud teachings in Bhutan. For more on his life and legacy, see Rdo rje gdan pa Mi-pham tshe dbang btsan 'dzin, *The Biography of Pha 'Brug-sgom-zhig-po called the Current of Compassion*, trans. Yonten Dargye and P.K. Sørensen (Thimphu: National Library, 2001).

<sup>112</sup> The National Library of Bhutan, "List of Books in the Temples and Monastery of Seven Dzongkhags Collected through a Literary Survey by the National Library of Bhutan," 1 (2006), 258, and 275-76. I visited Pha jo ldings to look for this collection, and the abbot there did not know of any of Yang dgon pa's works currently held at the monastery.

(2) A handwritten manuscript of 33 folios, in formal script (*dbu chen*), found inside of *The Collected Writings of Yang dgon pa rgyal mtshan dpal* (*Yang dgon gsung 'bum*), published in 1982 at Rta mgo Monastery in Thimphu, Bhutan [this version of the Collected Writings is abbreviated in this thesis as *Explanation of the Hidden* (Rta mgo)].<sup>113</sup> This version of the *Explanation of the Hidden* is identical to the Pha jo ldings version, and was presumably copied from the same rare manuscript. However, there is a difference in the overall collection: Yang dgon pa's songs (*gsung 'bum*) in the Rta mgo version of Yang dgon pa's Collected Writings is much shorter than what we find in the Pha jo ldings version. The Rta mgo publication may be found in the library of Rta mgo Monastic College in the Thimphu Valley of Bhutan, the Library of Congress, and the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center website.

(3) A handwritten cursive (*dbu med*) manuscript of 86 folios, found inside *The Collected Works of Yang dgon pa* (*Yang dgon gsung 'bum*), an incomplete collection of Yang dgon pa's works published in 1973 in Darjeeling [this version of the Collected Works is abbreviated *Explanation of the Hidden* (He mis)].<sup>114</sup> It was reproduced from several rare manuscripts, a compilation of texts collected from several lamas, preserved at He mis Monastery in Ladakh. The Darjeeling version may be found through the Library of Congress and the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center website.

(4) A computer-transcribed version found in the collection *Gsang chen thabs lam nyer mkho rnal 'byor snying nor*, typeset and published in Beijing by the People's Publishing House (*Mi rigs dpe skrun khang*) in 1991 [referred to in this thesis by the abbreviation *Explanation of the Hidden* (Beijing)].<sup>115</sup> In this publication, Yang dgon pa's text is mis-attributed to Sa skya rgyal mtshan dpal bzang. The interlinear notes in this version differ from the notes found in the versions

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<sup>113</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, in *Collected Writing of Rgyal ba yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal: Reproduction of Three Volumes of the Writings of the Stod 'Brug pa Dkar brgyud pa Master* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Rta mgo Monastery, 1982), III, 399-465.

<sup>114</sup> *Zab don rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad kyi gzhung*, in *The Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Yang-dgon-pa rgyal-mtshan-dpal* (Darjeeling: Kargyud Sungrab Nyamso Khang, 1973), 113-276.

<sup>115</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, in *Gsang chen thabs lam nyer mkho rnal 'byor snying nor* (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1991), 1-109.

mentioned above. This book may be found through the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center website.

For this dissertation, I compared three of these four versions of the *Explanation of the Hidden* (the Rta mgo version and the Pha jo sdings version are identical). My readings primarily follow the Pha jo ldings version, because it appears to be the most likely of all of the versions to reflect an early and unedited rendering of Yang dgon pa's writing. Old spellings of words in this version have not been changed or modernized, and the spellings are often consistent. Some examples of variant spellings in the Pha jo ldings version include fairly consistent spellings of *thig le* (vital essence) as *thi le*, and *dwangs ma* (quintessence) as *dangs ma*.<sup>116</sup> In addition, *rim* (stage) is frequently spelled *rims*.<sup>117</sup> The disorganized aspects of the work, such as the title page, have not been organized or changed. The title page of the three-volume Pha jo ldings set, from which this version of the *Explanation of the Hidden* comes, claims that the text was reproduced from a rare Tibetan manuscript preserved at Pha jo ldings Monastery. This Pha jo ldings version is now out of print and can be found in only a few library collections. These two versions were probably copied from the same manuscript, since these texts were produced in the same valley within a ten-year span, and are identical in content. Where versions differ, I footnote the variation. Comparing the Pha jo ldings version to the 1991 Beijing version, it appears that grammar mistakes and old spellings have been updated in the modern computerized version.

All the versions of Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden* have interlinear notes.

The interlinear notes in the Pha jo ldings and Rta mgo versions are identical, and are fairly

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<sup>116</sup> Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 512 notes that *dangs ma* is an ancient spelling of *dwangs ma*.

<sup>117</sup> Carola Roloff, *Red mda' ba, Buddhist Yogi-scholar of the Fourteenth Century: The Forgotten Reviver of Madhyamaka Philosophy in Tibet*, vol. 7, Contributions to Tibetan Studies (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2009), 65 notes that *rims* is frequently an old spelling of *rim*.

numerous, with notes on virtually every folio. The Beijing version also has fairly extensive interlinear notes, but many of the notes differ from the previous two versions. The He mis version has fewer notes: some of these are different from the other three versions mentioned above, and some are identical. About half of the interlinear notes are identical in all three versions, indicating that there may have been an early original version with interlinear notes that each of these versions descends from. The notes are very helpful in some cases, indicating synonyms for the words that Yang dgon pa uses, or clarifying the more recondite expressions, especially when codified tantric language is used. When numbered classifications are mentioned, the interlinear notes sometimes offer an unpacking of numbered lists. Where these notes have been helpful to understanding the content of Yang dgon pa's text, I have included reference to them. The authorship of the interlinear notes is uncertain, but it is not impossible that Yang dgon pa or Spyan snga ba may have written some of them.

Four important commentaries on *The Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body* survive in the Pha jo ldings and Rta mgo versions of Yang dgon pa's Collected Works. These were all written by Spyan snga ba.<sup>118</sup> Spyan snga ba's commentaries outline the text, explain some abstruse points, lay out a concise map of the *cakras* and channels, and comment on some key concepts found in the root text. These commentaries are as follows:

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<sup>118</sup> While three out of four of these commentaries have no colophon, Spyan snga ba claims authorship of each of them in his "outline text" of the Three Cycles of Retreat Teachings. There, he says that he wrote the commentaries based on oral clarifications received from Yang dgon pa. See Spyan snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Ri chos (b)skor gsum du grags pa zab chos (b)rgyan bzhi'i dkar chag* in *The Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Yang-dgon-pa Rgyal-mtshan-dpal: Reproduced from the manuscript set preserved at Pha-jo-ldings Monastery* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunsang Topgey, 1976), 160.

(1) *Summary of the Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body (Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad kyi bsdus don)*:<sup>119</sup> Abbreviated *Sbas bshad kyi bsdus don* in the dissertation, this is a three-folio outline text that lays out the structure of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, staying quite close to the text.

Because the text itself has scant explicit structure, the outline text is very helpful as a tool to better parse the topics found in the *Explanation of the Hidden*. Consequently, I have included a translation of the *Summary* in the Appendix, because it is such a useful guide to understanding the structure of the root text.

(2) *Explanation of the Difficult Points of the Explanation of the Hidden (Sbas bshad kyi dka' 'grel)*:<sup>120</sup> Abbreviated *Sbas bshad kyi dka' 'grel*, this seven-folio text appears to be an unfinished manuscript. It starts out as a “word commentary (*tshig 'grel*), with a pattern of detailed exegesis on each word of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, beginning with the title, the homage, and the first few lines of prose of the root text. Then it abruptly concludes. Nevertheless, this text is of interest to understanding the ethos of the text. Spyan snga ba quotes Yang dgon pa verbatim in several places in this commentary.

(3) *Extraordinary Essential Points of the Explanation of the Hidden (Sbas bshad kyi gnad thun mong ma yin pa)*:<sup>121</sup> This eight-folio text, abbreviated *Sbas bshad kyi gnad*, purports to be

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<sup>119</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad gyi bsdus don*, in *The Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Yang-dgon-pa Rgyal-mtshan-dpal: Reproduced from the manuscript set preserved at Pha-jo-ldings Monastery* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunsang Topgey, 1976).

<sup>120</sup> *Sbas bshad kyi dka' 'grel*, in *The Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Yang-dgon-pa Rgyal-mtshan-dpal: Reproduced from the manuscript set preserved at Pha-jo-ldings Monastery* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunsang Topgey, 1976).

<sup>121</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad kyi gnad thun mong ma yin pa* in *The Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Yang-dgon-pa Rgyal-mtshan-dpal: Reproduced from the manuscript set preserved at Pha-jo-ldings Monastery* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunsang Topgey, 1976).

recorded by Spyan snga ba from Yang dgon pa's verbal explanation: "This short verbal teaching, given at the time of an explanation about the root cycle of *The Explanation of the Hidden*, was spoken by the glorious lama. I heard it and wrote it down." This text consists of elaborations on some selected points of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, especially concerning the recondite details of the somatic map of channels.

(4) *Treasury of the Essential Points of the Hidden Oral Instructions of the Explanation of the Hidden (Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad kyi zhal gdams sbas pa gnad kyi gter mdzod)*:<sup>122</sup> This five-folio text, abbreviated *Sbas bshad kyi zhal gdams*, contains Spyan snga ba's record of Yang dgon pa's oral explanations of some recondite points of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, such as the location of the central channel.

Given Spyan snga ba's close and decades-long relationship to his teacher Yang dgon pa, these commentaries provide valuable clues about the reception of Yang dgon pa's work in the closely proximate yogic culture of his day. These commentarial materials also provide points of contrast with Yang dgon pa's work. While some statements seek to underscore Yang dgon pa's points, other passages seek to clarify abstruse or cryptic statements, and yet others seek to temper or downplay views that may have been perceived as controversial. Therefore, I have looked at and sometimes draw from all of these commentaries for this dissertation as they help us understand the reception of Yang dgon pa's somatic theory in his day, reading primarily from the Pha jo ldings versions, which proved to be a clear and reliable text to work from.

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<sup>122</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad kyi zhal gdams sbas pa gnad kyi gter mdzod* in *The Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Yang-dgon-pa Rgyal-mtshan-dpal: Reproduced from the manuscript set preserved at Pha-jo-ldings Monastery* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunsang Topgey, 1976).

## Time, Place, and Credits of the Composition: The Colophon

The intent of this chapter has been to briefly introduce the author of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, and to situate this work in a historical and literary context. To conclude the chapter, we will now look at how Yang dgon pa himself discusses the influences that contributed to his writing of this unique work, and how he depicts the context. His most specific summary of these influences can be found in the colophon of the work itself. In verse, he explains the influences and sources of authority that contributed to the writing:

*dam pa'i zhabs rdul spyi bo'i gtsug blangs shing//  
bla med theg pa'i dgongs pa nges rtogs pa'i//  
thugs kyi rdo rje zhes bya'i rnal 'byor pas//  
thabs mchog lam la yun du goms pa'i mthus//  
rdo rje lus kyi rtsa gnas rlung gzugs mthong//  
mngon du gyur ba myong ba'i nges pa thob//  
de don bla med rgyud rnams kun don dang//  
'gal ba med pa lung gi tshad mas grub//  
de gsung dri med brgyud rim<sup>123</sup> legs 'ongs pa'i//  
dus gsum mkhyen pa 'bri gung rin chen dang//  
dbang gyur skyes bu lnga rig<sup>124</sup> pañ chen dang//  
rnal 'byor dbang phyug rdo rje'i mtshan can dang//  
bsod nams rdzogs pa mi nub rgyal mtshan gyi<sup>125</sup>//  
slu ba med pa zhal gyi bdud rtsi las//  
bcud kyi snying po deng 'dir rab bsdu te//  
zab cing rgya che gnad kyi gter chen 'di//  
he ru ka dpal bla ma'i drin<sup>126</sup> las byung//  
'di bkod dge bas mkha' mnyam 'gro ba kun//  
tshogs gnyis mkha' la bde chen zla rgyas te//  
chags pa'i gdung sel rmongs pa'i yul gsal nas//*

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<sup>123</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), and *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 273/5: rims. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 107: rim

<sup>124</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings): rigs. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 107 and *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 273/5: rig.

<sup>125</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 273/6: dang. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings): gyis (seems to be an error).

<sup>126</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 107; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Hemis), 274/2: byin.



*bdud bzhi'i mtha' bral chos ki dbang phyug shog*//<sup>127</sup>

Having accepted the dust at the feet of the holy ones onto the crown of my head,  
And realized the definite intention of the unsurpassable vehicle,  
This yogi who is called Cittavajra,<sup>128</sup>  
By the power of meditating for a long time on the supreme path of methods,  
Saw the locations of the channels and form of the winds,  
And obtained the certainty of experiencing the manifestation [of those].  
Having confirmed the meaning through all the *niruttarayoga* tantras  
And unerring scriptural authority,  
I have fully summarized here the heart-essence distilled  
From the infallable nectar coming from the mouths of<sup>129</sup>  
The knower of the three times, 'Bri gung Rin chen,<sup>130</sup>  
The powerful master Maha Paṇḍita,<sup>131</sup> versed in the five sciences,  
The lord of yogis named Vajra,<sup>132</sup>  
And the undecending Victory Banner,<sup>133</sup> who perfected merit.  
This great treasure of profound and vast essential points  
Comes from the glorious *heruka* and the kindness of the lama.<sup>134</sup>  
May limitless beings, by the merit of this composition,  
Grow the moon of great bliss in the sky of the two accumulations,  
Clear away the pain of attachment, and illuminate the darkness of ignorance.  
May they be free of the extremes of the four *māras*, and become lords of dharma.

In this versified section of the colophon, Yang dgon pa is specific about who and what influenced the composition of the *Explanation of the Hidden*. These influences will be discussed

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<sup>127</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 495/5-496/4.

<sup>128</sup> One of the names that Yang dgon pa occasionally used is *Thugs kyi rdo rje* (Cittavajra).

<sup>129</sup> He mis variant: "From the infallable verbal nectar and."

<sup>130</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), interlinear note, 107, identifies 'Bri gung Rin chen as 'Bri gung Gcung Rin po che, the fifth abbot of 'Bri gung, from whom Yang dgon pa received the cycle of teachings of Phag mo gru pa.

<sup>131</sup> Sa skya Paṇḍita.

<sup>132</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), interlinear note, 107 identifies this as Rgod tshang pa mgon po rdo rje.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 107, interlinear note identifies this as Ko brag pa.

<sup>134</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: comes from the unsurpassable blessing of the glorious *heruka*.

more in Chapter Three, but this part of the colophon is mentioned here because it helps us situate Yang dgon pa's work in connection with particular lineages of transmission. It connects his project in the *Explanation of the Hidden* to the transmissions received from Gcung Rin chen, Sa skya Paṇḍita, Rgod tshang pa, and Ko brag pa, in particular. In looking at what we find in the content of the work itself, it is striking that Yang dgon pa credits Gcung Rinpoche and Sa skya Paṇḍita first, before the other teachers, and this order does not seem random, but appears to point to a hierarchy of influence. As stated earlier, it was Gcung Rin chen who bestowed on Yang dgon pa the transmission of Phag mo gru pa's teachings, a core collection of the 'Bri gung Bka' brgyud lineage. As we will see in Chapter Two, the two ancestor works that most resemble Yang dgon pa's own *Explanation of the Hidden* in structure, ideation, and content are two works that extend from the 'Bri gung lines of transmission: Phag mo gru pa's *Nature of the Vajra Body (Rdo rje lus kyi gnas lugs)* and 'Jig rten gsum mgon's *Instruction on the Bindu of Impeccable Conduct (Tshangs par spyod pa thig le'i khrid)*.<sup>135</sup> The fact that Yang dgon pa mentions Gcung Rinpoche first, before the other teachers, appears to reflect the influence of his transmissions on this work in particular. Sa skya Paṇḍita, who is mentioned second, also has a clear influence on this work. *The Mirror* states that Yang dgon pa received from Sa skya Paṇḍita the Hevajra and Cakrasaṃvara transmissions, tantras that have a significant impact on Yang dgon pa's vision for

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<sup>135</sup> It appears that Yang dgon pa received this latter transmission of *A Commentary on the Bindu of Impeccable Conduct* from Gcung Rin po che's teacher 'Bri gung Spyān snga, one of his four main teachers. In the *Mirror*, we find 'Bri gung Spyān snga commenting on Yang dgon pa's prodigious grasp of a teaching on *bindu*: "For you, master [Yang dgon pa], this instruction on *bindu* can be imparted in a single sitting. In general, you can absorb a teaching in just one sitting. You, master, accomplish more in a day of meditation than others accomplish in a year of meditating. From any point of view, you are just like the precious 'Jig rten gsum mgon was when he was young" (Spyān snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma chen mo*, 83/3-4). This "instruction on *bindu*" may be referring to 'Jig rten gsum mgon's *A Commentary on the Bindu of Impeccable Conduct*, which resembles Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden* in structure more than any other Bka' brgyud commentary before his time.

the *Explanation of the Hidden*. Yang dgon pa also includes several direct quotations from Sa skya Paṇḍita in the *Explanation of the Hidden*, as well as quotations from Virūpa.

The influence of these aforementioned two teachers on the *Explanation of the Hidden* is also corroborated by the date of composition, which is in the last decade of Yang dgon pa's life, the time when he met these two teachers. Yang dgon pa remarks in the colophon of the *Explanation of the Hidden* that he composed the work in “the early summer of the bird year” at his meditation cave at Gnam sdings.<sup>136</sup> Given the short span of Yang dgon pa's life, this statement would place the year of composition in either the fire-bird year of 1237, when Yang dgon pa was only 24 years old, or the earth-bird year of 1249, when he was 36, nine years before his death. Even though the initial revelation, the visionary experience that inspired the composition of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, took place when Yang dgon pa was in his twenties while he was meditating at Gnam sdings, he did not meet the teachers who most influenced the *Explanation of the Hidden* until several years after this retreat, according to the timeline in *The Mirror*. Hence, it seems safe to presume that Yang dgon pa's colophon sets the date of composition as 1249, when the author was 36.

Given this date of composition, it is possible that the civil unrest in Central Tibet in the 1240's may have affected the circumstances and conditions of this composition to some extent. I am led to wonder if the style of writing in the *Explanation of the Hidden* may reflect the realities of interrupted retreats. The *Explanation of the Hidden* does not read like a polished opus but rather like a rough manuscript. It appears there may have been no title page. The Pha jo

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<sup>136</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 496/5.

ldings and Rta mgo versions have the following passage (in its entirety) on the title page in place of a conventional title:

*rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad lags lha gdings*<sup>137</sup> *su sbas bshad 'di thugs la 'khrungs phyag yig la 'debs par mdzad pas gnyug kha 'thor nas brir ma btub pa la brgyud pa'i bla ma la gsol ba drag du btab pas gda' nyen bshad kyi dus na gsol 'debs re mdzad cing gda' bas/ de phyis kyang rjes su 'brang nas gsol 'debs re cis kyang mdzad par zhu lags*<sup>138</sup>

This *Explanation of the Hidden* arose in his mind at Lha sdings and he intended to write it down. Then, his naturalness was lost<sup>139</sup> and he was unable to write, so he prayed fervently to the lineage lamas, and he was finally able to write it down. So when he taught it, he always said a prayer first. His followers should therefore also precede each [teaching] with a prayer.<sup>140</sup>

These introductory remarks read more like a personal note than a formal title, and perhaps more polished versions of the title page—found in the He mis and Beijing versions—were the result of later editing. Another piece of evidence that the *Explanation of the Hidden* is a rough draft is the fact that the outline (*sa bcad*) is remarkably unclear in the text itself. It can be figured out, but only with effort. This difficulty was recognized and remedied by an accompanying “outline

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<sup>137</sup> The spelling in *The Mirror* is Lha sdings. Sørensen thinks it likely that this is the same Lha sdings founded by Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1228-1290), the 8th in the bla rabs of Tshal Gung thang. For a discussion of the place name Lha sdings, see Sørensen and Hazod, *Rulers on the Celestial Plain*, 361,105, n. 133.

<sup>138</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 421.

<sup>139</sup> Slob dpon Mchod rten (personal communication, 2012) speculated that *gnyug*, found in the Pha jo ldings and Rta mgo versions of the *Explanation of the Hidden* might be a misspelling for *snyug* (pen), in which case the phrase would be "Then, his pen splintered". But Cyrus Stearns (personal communication 2013) thinks the phrase *gnyug* is not a misspelling, but rather is referring to the meditative state, in which case *gnyug kha 'thor* means to fall out of that state. I find the latter reading more plausible, so have translated accordingly.

<sup>140</sup> The preamble exists on the title page of *Explanation of the Hidden* (Pha jo ldings), and *Explanation of the Hidden* (Rta mgo). It is absent from *Explanation of the Hidden* (He mis), and *Explanation of the Hidden* (Beijing).

text,” written by Spyan snga ba, perhaps after Yang dgon pa’s death.<sup>141</sup> Whether the rough style of the *Explanation of the Hidden* is due to unrest during the time of its composition, or the short life of its author, is lost to history, but perhaps it was a little of both. There is considerable evidence in Spyan snga ba’s first-person account of Yang dgon pa’s life that his retreats and travel were disrupted by the invasions, and by direct requests—by local townspeople— of Yang dgon pa himself to intervene in the conflict, and this becomes a theme for a sizeable portion of the *The Mirror*.<sup>142</sup>

It seems important to at least acknowledge that during the key years that Yang dgon pa was studying with his main teachers, and working on his manuscript of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, he was also acting (at least part-time) as a political diplomat and chaplain to a local population. This work would certainly have involved an immersion in the affairs of lay life, politics, and diplomacy. Yang dgon pa, despite his inclinations to live many months a year in retreat hermitages, did not have the liberty to fully withdraw into mountain solitude during his adult life. Rather, he spent his life bridging the activities of a scholar hermit with the life of a chaplain and diplomat. Considering this situation sheds light on two key impulses of the *Explanation of the Hidden*. First, Yang dgon pa’s work attempts to bridge the quotidian realities of ordinary human life with the enlightened realities of a buddha. It is possible to imagine that this impulse may have been fed by an interest in finding spiritual stability and order directly

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<sup>141</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad kyi bsdus don*, discussed above. A translation of Spyan snga ba's outline can be found in Appendix I of the dissertation.

<sup>142</sup> Spyan snga ba reflects on his teacher's role as local chaplain, during the Mongol invasions: “He was like the people’s refuge-protector, and their only source of hope. With immeasurable great compassion, he tirelessly took up the suffering of sentient beings as his burden, and— without regard to day or night— went to every place in every surrounding area, giving advice and encouragement” (Spyan snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma chen mo*, 65/6-66/1).

within a human life shaken by civil unrest. Second, his work attempts to posit a vision in which body, speech, and mind exist in a state of existential integration. This impulse may have been even more keenly felt in a world in which the body of society was experiencing fragmentation. While I am cautious about drawing any conclusions about the relationship between the socio-historical conditions of his life and the themes in his work, I think that there is no harm in considering these possibilities here, as a segue into a reflection on how Yang dgon pa's work encapsulates the spirit of bridging the quotidian with the divine.

## Chapter Two

### A History of the Notion of *Dngos po'i gnas lugs*

One of the principal ways that Yang dgon pa bridges the distinct realms of body, speech, and mind, as well as linking the disparate domains of quotidian samsaric existence with the enlightened realities of a Buddha, is by his deployment of an intriguing key term that serves as the main organizing principle of *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body: dngos po'i gnas lugs*. The main purpose of the thesis is to investigate this term and demonstrate how Yang dgon pa uses it to construct a unique tantric synthesis that explores the nature of the body. But in seeking to understand how Yang dgon pa deploys *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, we are assisted by reviewing the historical semantic range of the term, which would have informed the way it was used in the sources that Yang dgon pa himself was reading. A rough philological history can be sketched by looking at the term's use in the Tibetan Buddhist canon, a repository of works that had wide readership in Tibet in the 13th century (and had a specific readership in Yang dgon pa),<sup>143</sup> and by looking at its deployment in writings of the Bka' brgyud lineage in the direct line of literary descent that influenced Yang dgon pa's own religious formation.

In this chapter, I will be looking only at Tibetan versions of the canon, because these are the source materials that Yang dgon pa himself had access to. However, in the process of researching the term in the Tibetan canon, I found one instance of the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs*

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<sup>143</sup> The influence of tantric works found in the Tibetan Buddhist canon on Yang dgon pa's education is evident by looking at the range of canonical sources he cites in *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body* itself. This can be seen at a glance in Appendix IV.

appearing in a canonical book title where a Sanskrit equivalent of our key term is given, transliterated into Tibetan script. While Yang dgon pa did not know Sanskrit, he might well have been aware of this work and its Sanskrit rendering in this particular case, so I will briefly consider its title. To go further with this exploration by researching the Sanskrit versions of the Buddhist canon in search of possible equivalents of *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* would take me afield of the main concern of the chapter, which is to explore sources that Yang dgon pa himself might have accessed. However, this would make a very interesting project for future research.

In order to sufficiently respect its multivalent character, I will retain the term *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* in its original Tibetan throughout the thesis. The history and gradual evolution of the use and sense of *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* suggests that it cannot be rendered by a single phrase, for that would fail to capture its evolution and variation over time and across scriptural contexts. However, the consideration of an evolving set of meanings provides an opportunity to explore that very range. Occasionally I will supply a translation for the term, followed by the Tibetan in parentheses, to specify a particular sense or connotation. I will provide these translations as they arise in relation to the specific context, to help the reader keep track of the evolving meaning of this term over time, and to help orient the reader to the range of meanings possible for this single term, sometimes even within the same time period.

The term *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* was first brought to scholarly attention by Michael M. Broido in two articles published in 1979 and 1984. In the first article, published in *Tibetan Studies in Honor of Hugh Richardson*,<sup>144</sup> Broido explores Padma dkar po's use of the term *dnegos*

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<sup>144</sup> Broido, "The Term Dnegos po'i gnas lugs as used in Padma dkar po's Gzhung 'grel," in *Tibetan Studies in Honor of Hugh Richardson: Proceedings of the International Seminar on Tibetan Studies*, edited by Michael Aris and Aung San Suu Kyi (Warminster, England: Aris and Phillips LTD, 1979), 59-66.



*po'i gnas lugs* in his *Commentary on the Scripture (Gzhung 'grel)* on the six doctrines of Nāropa.<sup>145</sup> After examining Padma dkar po's definitions of *dnegos po'i gnas lugs*, and analyzing the use of the term as an organizing category in the *Commentary on the Scripture*, Broido concludes that he believes "Dnegos po'i gnas lugs is an experience in which one is aware of subjective and objective factors."<sup>146</sup> The author admits to the tentative nature of this initial research, and he continues to explore the topic with more confidence in the 1984 article.<sup>147</sup> There, Broido provides a more thorough and subtle analysis of his understanding of Padma dkar po's use of the term. He finds that Padma dkar po, in his exploration of the meaning of the term, continually aligns *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* with "the standard of what is to count as proper knowledge."<sup>148</sup> He concludes that, Padma dkar po, at least as far as his definitive commentary goes, sees *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* as a continuity, an "unchanging awareness...having the nature of the radiant light and remaining the same throughout all the stages of progress from that of a sentient being to that of a Buddha."<sup>149</sup> He derives this conclusion principally from several passages in the *Commentary on the Scripture* that define *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* as a non-dual awareness. He does not explore Padma dkar po's use of the term as a category in various

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<sup>145</sup> Padma dkar po is one of the most famous patriarchs in 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud history. His *Gzhung 'grel* is a 600-folio commentary on Nāropa's *Bka' yang dag pa'i tshad ma* (discussed later in this chapter): Padma dkar po, *Jo bo nā ro pa'i khyad chos bsre 'pho'i gzhung 'grel rdo rje 'chang gi dgongs pa gsal bar byed pa*, in *Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Kun-mkhyen Padma-dkar-po* (Darjeeling: Kargyud Sungrab Nyamso Khang, 1973-74).

<sup>146</sup> Broido, "The Term Dnegos po'i gnas lugs as used in Padma dkar po's *Gzhung 'grel*," 63.

<sup>147</sup> "Padma dkar po on Tantra as Ground, Path and Goal," *Journal of the Tibet Society* IV(1984), 5-46.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. This alignment is consistent with how *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* is used in some early Mahāyāna sources, and in the work of Sgam po pa.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

contexts in the *Commentary on the Scripture*. In short, Broido privileges Padma dkar po's formal definition over its sense determined in its contextual usage.

However, an examination of Padma dkar po's use of the term as an outline heading reveals that it covers much more than a state of mind: it is intimately connected to the subtle body and to the trajectory of human physical development. As in Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden*, it is used as a heading for the full description of the vajra body's components. Broido is compelled to acknowledge the use of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* to encompass human physicality within the outline, but dismisses the significance of this sense for the meaning of the term: "The division of the ground section into *lus dngos po'i gnas lugs* and *sems dngos po'i gnas lugs* (and their various subdivisions) are very important but need not occupy us here."<sup>150</sup> Given that the division into two types of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* is indeed significant and suggestive, we can only speculate as to why it was not of concern in Broido's treatment of the term. It might be that Broido refrained from discussing the category of the body's *dngos po'i gnas lugs* because of the recondite nature of the content of the *lus dngos po'i gnas lugs* (the entity which is the body) section of Padma dkar po's discussion. In addition, the placing of the body under the umbrella of the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* becomes difficult to reconcile with Pad ma dkar po's formal definition of the term as an "unchanging awareness...having the nature of the radiant light and remaining the same throughout all the stages of progress from that of a sentient being to that of a Buddha."<sup>151</sup> A further factor in Broido's overlooking of the significance of the body to Padma dkar po's notion of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* here may also have been a predisposition in the field of Buddhist Studies to assume that Buddhist enlightenment is ultimately more about the mind than

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 14.

the vagaries of the flesh. Such an assumption, in conjunction with Pad ma dkar po's formal definitions of *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* in the *Commentary on the Scripture*, might have contributed to Broido's marginalization of a highly salient category (body) in this case, and may have influenced the choice to interpret *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* by definition, rather than by its use in context. In any case, my intention is not to quarrel with Broido's study, which lays important groundwork for understanding the term *dnegos po'i gnas lugs*, but rather to underscore a valuable issue it brings up for this thesis: the tenuous relationship between definitions of terms and their meanings. I am taking the perspective that to appreciate the significance of this key term in Tibetan yogic doctrine, it is necessary to pay some attention to the term's historical semantic range and the way it has shifted over time. Such a study includes distinguishing the way the term is used as a primary heading and the way it is deployed in other discursive contexts. Some formal definitions, as in Yang dgon pa's case, also yield powerful clues, but other dimensions of contextual usage round out the range of meaning considerably, and may even occasionally challenge the meaning found in a formal definition.

As it turns out, the term *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* was not coined by Pad ma dkar po, by Yang dgon pa, or by Nāropa, but rather has a history extending as far back as the Mahāyāna sutras and tantras, and their translations into the Tibetan canon. We find the term in the Tengyur, and a related term, *dnegos po'i rang bzhin*, with a synonymous meaning, in both the Kangyur and Tengyur. The term appears in translations of some key Indian Buddhist works, principally commentaries on Mahāyāna *sūtras*, commentaries on tantras, and works on the topic of Buddhist epistemology. These sources reveal that *dnegos po'i gnas lugs*, as it was deployed in a variety of philosophical contexts in the Buddhist canon, took on shades of meaning extending from a valorized object of knowledge to a subject that realizes knowledge, and from an epistemological

truth to a metaphysical truth beyond subject and object. In these contexts, possible translations for *dngos po'i gnas lugs* include “the nature of things,” “the nature of mind,” and “the nature of reality.” To analyze the use of the term in every instance where it occurs in the Tibetan Buddhist canon would take us afield of the focus of this study. However, in this chapter, in the following few pages, I have selected some passages demonstrating the use of the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* in a cross-section of materials that show its range of uses in the Tibetan canon. Indeed this range may indicate an evolution of the term’s meaning over time.

Before looking at instances of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* in passages of writing in the Tibetan canon, we will look at the single case where the term appears in the title of a canonical work for which we also have the Sanskrit original term. This is *Dngos po'i gnas lugs bsgom pa* (*Mūlaprakṛtiṣṭha-bhāvanā*),<sup>152</sup> by the Indian Paṇḍita Sukhavajra (Nor bu gling pa bde ba'i rdo rje).<sup>153</sup> This is the only work of Indian origin in the Tibetan canon to bear the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* in its title. The term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* does not appear at all in the text itself, nor is there any gloss of its meaning there. The eleven-folio commentary treats the topic of the four mudrās of tantric provenance: *karmamudrā*, *dharmamudrā*, *samayamudrā* and *mahāmudrā*. Here meditation on *dngos po'i gnas lugs* seems to align with meditation on the mudrās, by implication, but the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* here may also simply mean “the nature of things” in the sense

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<sup>152</sup> Pe cin Bstan ‘gyur variant title: *Phyag rgya bzhi dngos po'i gnas lugs bsgom pa*.

<sup>153</sup> Nor bu gling pa bde ba'i rdo rje, *Dngos po'i gnas lugs bsgom pa* (*Mūlaprakṛtiṣṭha-bhāvanā*), in *Bstan ‘gyur Dpe bsdur ma*, Toh 2294, Rgyud, zhi (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 1994-2008), 412-422. The website of the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center identifies the author, Sukhavajra, as the teacher of Śradhakaravarma, a contemporary of Nāropa (see [http://tbrc.org/#library\\_person\\_Object-P3401](http://tbrc.org/#library_person_Object-P3401), accessed Jan 2013). According to Thakur, Śradhakaravarma was a main teacher of the Tibetan translator Rin chen bzang po [Laxman S. Thakur, “*Words of Melodious Voice: Representations of Rin-chen Bzang-po (AD 958-1055) in Folklore of Indo-Tibetan Interface*,” in *Popular Literature And Pre-Modern Societies In South Asia*, ed. Surinder Singh and I. D. Gaur (Delhi: Dorling Kindersley, 2008), 152].

of a valorized object of knowledge. What is of significance, however, is that the accompanying Sanskrit title, found in the work itself, suggests a possible conceptual/linguistic precedent for *dn̄gos po'i gn̄as lugs*. The Sanskrit title, *Mūlaprakṛtistha-bhāvanā* indicates that *dn̄gos po'i gn̄as lugs* was employed as a translation for the term *mūlaprakṛtistha*. *Mūlaprakṛti*, the first part of this compound, is a key term found in early Sāṃkhya philosophy, a school of thought with intimate ties to Indic tantric traditions.<sup>154</sup> In Sāṃkhya sources, *mūlaprakṛti* means an undifferentiated essence, or nature, that underlies *prakṛti*.<sup>155</sup> The meaning of *prakṛti*, in Sāṃkhya philosophy, is specific to its context, but includes a dimension of meaning related to nature or essence (similar to the word *gn̄as lugs*, in some Tibetan contexts) and also a meaning related to the material, or substantial<sup>156</sup> (similar to the word *dn̄gos po*, which in Buddhist canonical sources tends to be aligned with the substantial or material aspects of existence). The meaning of *mūla* in Sāṃkhya literature is “root,” “base,” or “bottom.” In the compound *mūlaprakṛti*, the *mūla* implies an underlying essence or basis to *prakṛti*.<sup>157</sup> It is puzzling that the term *dn̄gos po'i gn̄as lugs* was chosen to translate *mūlaprakṛtistha* in this case, because *dn̄gos po* is usually the Tibetan translation for *vāstu*, or for *bhāva*, neither of which appear in this compound. Furthermore, a common Tibetan translation for *prakṛti* is *rang bzhin*. While the historical connections between the term *mūlaprakṛti* in Sāṃkhya and its use in Buddhist Indic works would distract from the main project of the dissertation, it is important to note that the term that was translated as *dn̄gos po'i gn̄as lugs* in the Tibetan canon, as well as the philosophical concept accompanying the term,

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<sup>154</sup> Gerald James Larson, *Classical Sāṃkhya: An Interpretation of its History and Meaning* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998), 64.

<sup>155</sup> For an explanation of the term *mūlaprakṛti* in Sāṃkhya philosophy, see *ibid.*, 152-182.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 256, fn. 3.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 167, fn. 34.

may have a pre-Buddhist history. This topic would require further research beyond the scope of this dissertation, which seeks only to sketch the precedents to Yang dgon pa's use of the term in sources that he could have had access to.<sup>158</sup> What is striking here, however, and worth noting, is that the Sāṃkhya concept of a *mūlaprakṛti* that underlies the substantial world, as distant as it is historically and geographically from Yang dgon pa's own time and place, has a powerful analogue in Yang dgon pa's own concept of a *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, an essential nature that underlies the physical human body.

Turning to the use of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* in early Buddhist sources, it appears occasionally in the Kangyur and Tengyur sections of the Tibetan Buddhist canon: specifically, in Mahāyāna commentaries, in commentaries on tantras, and in tantric songs. In the canonical context, as we see in Yang dgon pa's writings, the valence on the term is positive. The meaning is generally aligned with ultimate truth and the fruits of the path of meditation. In early Buddhist sources, however, we discover an ambivalence regarding the sphere to which the term refers. The meaning toggles between denoting a metaphysical reality—that which is to be realized—and an epistemic reality—that which does the realizing. It strays from meaning an object, the nature of things, to a subject, the nature of mind that realizes how things are, and this transition may be related to a gradual change in meaning over time. In this chapter, I will look at several examples that demonstrate these shifts, in order to provide a basis for comparison with how the Bka' brgyud lineage and Yang dgon pa appropriated the term as the basis of a uniquely somatic vision of enlightenment.

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<sup>158</sup> It should be noted here that J. S. Negi cites *vastuvṛtam* is yet another Sanskrit precedent for *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. More research on this is needed. See J. S. Negi, *Tibetan-Sanskrit Dictionary*, 18 vols., vol. 3 (Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1995), 1001.

The term *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* is found in several early commentaries on Mahāyāna *sūtras*, where it sometimes means the nature of things, or the nature of phenomena, and sometimes means a valorized non-dual awareness. When the term indicates the nature of things, it is generally associated—implicitly or explicitly—with a mind or awareness that should or can recognize that nature. We find the term *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* used in just such a way in an unusual tantric commentary<sup>159</sup> on the *Mañjuśrī-nāma-saṃgīti* by Dga' rab rdo rje<sup>160</sup> called *Clarifying the Meaning of Mañjuśrī-nāma-saṃgīti*, which explains the famous root text in terms of the view of the great perfection (*rdzogs chen*).<sup>161</sup> Here, the term is aligned with an object of knowledge, an ontological reality that is perceived by the highest gnosis. The reference comes in the context of Dga' rab rdo rje's comments on Verse 155 of the *Mañjuśrī-nāma-saṃgīti* (root verses are in quotes):

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<sup>159</sup> This commentary is one of six commentaries on the *Mañjuśrī-nāma-saṃgīti* in the Tengyur that belong to the first propagation (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century) of Buddhism in Tibet [Giacomella Orofino, "From Archeological Discovery to Text Analysis: The Khor Chags Monastery Findings and the Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti Fragments," in *Discoveries in Western Tibet and the Western Himalayas: Essays on History, Literature, Archaeology and Art : PIATS 2003, Tibetan Studies, Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Oxford, 2003*, ed. Amy Heller and Giacomella Orofino (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007), 89]. Orofino refers to it as "unusual" because of its rdzog chen perspective on the *Mañjuśrī-nāma-saṃgīti*.

<sup>160</sup> Dga' rab rdo rje is seen by the Rnying ma lineage as the first human teacher of the great perfection teachings (*rdzogs chen*). A translation of Zhang ston bkra shis rdo rje (1097-1167)'s hagiography of Dga' rab rdo rje may be found in Dorje Garab and John Myrdhin Reynolds, *The Golden Letters : The Three Statements of Garab Dorje, the First Teacher of Dzogchen*, 1st ed. (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996), Part II. The author of this work may be the same Dga' rab rdo rje of Rnying ma fame, as the time period, and the perspective of the commentary synchronize.

<sup>161</sup> Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, *The Treasury of Knowledge: Book Eight, Part Three: The Elements of Tantric Practice: a general exposition of the process of meditation in the indestructible way of secret mantra*, trans. Elio Guarisco and Ingrid McLeod (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2008), 335, fn. 91.

*bdag rig gzhan rig thams cad pa*<sup>162</sup>//  
*kun la phan pa'i gang zag mchog*//

*ces pa ston pa sprul pa'i sku des bdag gi don kyang rig*<sup>163</sup> *shes grol lo/ gzhan gyi don*  
*stobs kyang rig shes grol te/ thams cad mkhyen te kun la phan 'dogs pa'i sku'o/*

*dper bya kun las 'das pa ste*//  
*zhes pa 'gran pa'i zla med pa'o*<sup>164</sup>//  
*shes dang shes bya'i bdag po mchog*//<sup>165</sup>

*ces pa shes par bya ba'i dngos po'i gnas lugs dang/ shes par byed pa rnam*<sup>166</sup> *'byor ba*  
*ste/ blo rnam pa gnyis su med par 'gyur bas bdag po'o/ de'i gong na gzhan med pas*  
*mchog go*<sup>167</sup>

“Knowing self, and knowing others, the supreme one who benefits everyone.”<sup>168</sup> That teacher’s *nirmāṇakāya* knows his own aim, to liberate his mind. He also knows the powerful aim of others, to liberate their minds. Because he is omniscient, his body benefits all.

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<sup>162</sup> Pe cin and Snar thang *Bstan 'gyur* (*Dpe bsdur ma* notations): *la*

<sup>163</sup> Pe cin *Bstan 'gyur*: *rigs*.

<sup>164</sup> Pe cin and Snar thang *Bstan 'gyur*: *pa'i*.

<sup>165</sup> Alex Wayman, in his critical translation of the root work, notes that Chandragomin glosses the word *shes bya* here as *gzhal ba yul* (the object being evaluated). This adds further credence to an interpretation of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as an object of knowledge, as contrasted with the knower of said object [Alex Wayman, *Chanting the Names of Mañuśrī* (Boston: Shambhala, 1985), 111].

<sup>166</sup> Pe cin and Snar thang *Bstan 'gyur*: *rnal*.

<sup>167</sup> Dga' rab rdo rje, *'Phags pa 'jam dpal gyi mtshan yang dag par brjod pa'i don gsal bar byed pa* (*Āryamañjuśrīnāma-saṃgītyarthā-lokakara*), in *Bstan 'gyur Dpe bsdur ma*, Toh 2093, Rgyud, tshi (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 1994-2008; *Sde dge 'i Bstan 'gyur*, (Delhi: Delhi Karmapae Choedhey, Gyalwae Sungrab Partun Khang, 1982-85), 154.

<sup>168</sup> Davidson: “Knowing himself and knowing others, being all for all, indeed he is the highest type of person” [Ronald M. Davidson, “The Litany of the Names of Mañjuśrī,” in *Tantric and Taoist Studies in Honour of R. A. Stein*, ed. Michel Strickmann (Bruxelles: Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1981), 37]. Wayman: “Who has self-knowledge and knowledge of others, the best person helpful to everyone” (Wayman, *Chanting the Names of Mañuśrī*, 111).



“Surpassing all exemplars, unrivaled, supreme master of knowledge and objects of knowledge.”<sup>169</sup> He joins the nature of things (*dnegos po'i gnas lugs*)—that which is to be known—with the conditions that cause knowledge.<sup>170</sup> Because he transforms aspects of the intellect into non-duality, he is “the master.” Because there is no one above him, he is “supreme.”

Here is an example of *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* meaning the nature of things, a valorized object of knowledge to be realized by a master (*bdag po*). This example is particularly useful in that Dga' rab rdo rje unambiguously contrasts *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* with a subjective knowledge (this contrast is underscored in the Pe cin and Snar thang versions of the *Bstan 'gyur* which aligns *shes par byed pa* with the yogi). He makes clear that *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* acts as a definite object of gnosis, but not as the gnosis itself. The meaning of *dnegos po'i gnas lugs*, in this case, falls squarely within the realm of a nature of things that is knowable. It is not knowledge itself, but it is closely linked to the epistemic: a mind that realizes that very nature of things.

The above example represents an instance from tantric materials, but we find examples of the term *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* appearing in a similar sense in Mahāyāna sources in the canon as well. For example, a commentary on Dignāga's *Prajñāpāramitā-piṇḍārtha*<sup>171</sup> by the Indian scholar Triratnadāsa<sup>172</sup> introduces *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* as a metaphysical reality, a

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<sup>169</sup> Wayman: “who surpasses all examples, best master of knowing and the knowable” (*Chanting the Names of Mañuśrī*, 111). Pe cin and Snar thang variant: “Surpassing all exemplars, unrivaled supreme master of knowledge and objects of knowledge.”

<sup>170</sup> Pe cin and Snar thang variant: “with the yogi who enacts knowledge.”

<sup>171</sup> Phyogs kyi glang po (Dignāga), *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin ma bsodus pa'i tshig le'ur byas pa* (*Prajñāpāramitā-saṃgraha-vivaraṇa*), in *Sde dge'i bstan 'gyur*, Toh 3806, Shes phyin, Mdo, pha (Delhi: Delhi Karmapae Choedhey, Gyalwae Sungrab Partun Khang, 1982-85), 586-590. Dignāga does not use the term *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* in this book, but he does consider the meaning of *dnegos po* which he defines as “that which has a name”.

<sup>172</sup> Makransky, who quotes from this same text in his book *Buddhahood Embodied* dates Triratnadāsa to the fifth or sixth century, but Gene Smith, on TBRC, dates him to the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

valorized nature of things, in the context of a syllogistic argument. Here Triratnadāsa is commenting on Dignāga’s phrase “[form] is merely a name”:

*gzugs ‘di ming tsam zhes bya ba la sogs pa brjod do/ gang gi phyir bcom ldan ‘das kyis shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa ‘dir gzugs ni<sup>173</sup> ming tsam yin par gsungs te/ de’i phyir de nyid du ste/ don dam par dngos po’i gnas lugs su ni phung po’i mtshan nyid kyi gzugs ni rang gi ngo bor yod pa<sup>174</sup> min pas stong pa yin pas so/ ming tsam zhes bya ba ni ming du btags pa tsam yin no/<sup>175</sup>*

“This [form] is merely a name,” and so forth. Why? Because the Bhagavān, in this Prajñāpāramitā, said that form is that which merely has a name. For that reason, it is just like this: Ultimately, in the nature of things (*dngos po’i gnas lugs su*), because form, which has the characteristic of the aggregates, does not have a self-essence, it is empty. “Merely having a name” means that [form] is merely imputed by name.

Here, form (*gzugs*) is merely a name or imputation, because in essence, or in reality, it is empty. By associating form with the *skandha* of form, Triratnadāsa aligns form with the body and the realm of human physicality subsumed by the category form-aggregate. Ultimately, he tells us, “form which has the characteristic of the aggregates” (in other words, the body),<sup>176</sup> in the nature of things (*dngos po’i gnas lugs su*), does not have a self-essence and is therefore empty. Here,

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Makransky notes that this text only survives in the Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist canons. See Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*, 232.

<sup>173</sup> Pe cin and Snar thang *Bstan ‘gyur*: ‘*di gzugs*.

<sup>174</sup> Pe cin and Snar thang *Bstan ‘gyur*: *pa* elided.

<sup>175</sup> Dkon mchog gsum gyi dbangs (Triratnadāsa), ‘*Phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin ma bsdu pa’i tshig le’ur byas pa’i rnam par ‘grel pa (Ārya-prajñāpāramitā-saṃgraha-kārikā-vivaraṇa)*, in *Bstan ‘gyur Dpe bsdur ma*, Toh 3810, Shes phyin, Mdo, pha (Beijing: Krung go’i bod rig pa’i dpe skrun khang, 19994-2008), 1427.

<sup>176</sup> Slob dpon Mchod rten states that the term *phung po’i mtshan nyid* is common in Mādhyamaka materials, where it refers to the characteristics of the (five) aggregates, understood as the body and mind (Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication, 2012). This term dates back to Chandrakīrti. See Elizabeth Napper, *Dependent-Arising and Emptiness: Tibetan Buddhist Interpretations of Mādhyamika Philosophy* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 171.

one might read *dn̄gos po gn̄as lugs* in one of two ways. One possibility is that Triratnadāsa is aligning the term with a general understanding of the ultimate, with the nature of things in a general sense. Given that the clause *dn̄gos po 'i gn̄as lugs su* (here translated “in the nature of things”) immediately follows the clause “ultimately” (*don dam par*), it is possible that these two clauses are in apposition. In that case, *dn̄gos po 'i gn̄as lugs* would refer to the nature of things in the sense of an ultimate nature of phenomena or reality, which here is glossed as emptiness. However, a compelling case can also be made to read *dn̄gos po 'i gn̄as lugs* in relationship to the form-*skandha*, and to the body. In that case, *dn̄gos po* aligns with the body, and the *dn̄gos po 'i gn̄as lugs* would be the nature of that body, which is devoid of self-nature and empty.<sup>177</sup> In such a case, *dn̄gos po 'i gn̄as lugs* might be translated as “the nature of the body-entity,” given that the topic of discussion is the realm of corporeal human existence.

Now this latter possibility might seem far-fetched if there were no other evidence for the relationship between the term *dn̄gos po 'i gn̄as lugs* and the body in the Buddhist canon. But, on the contrary, the evidence for an inferential relationship to embodiment mounts as we look at other instances of use of this term in the Tengyur. A later example of the use of *dn̄gos po 'i gn̄as lugs* in a Mahāyāna commentary<sup>178</sup> provides further evidence of a connection. This example is found in a commentary on the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, written in Sanskrit allegedly by Atiśa<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Slob dpon Mchod rten suggested that the phrase *dn̄gos po 'i gn̄as lugs su* here is acting as a unit that is synonymous with *don dam par*, but he thought that the use of the phrase might represent an oblique reference to the body as *dn̄gos po* (Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication, 2012).

<sup>178</sup> While this work is categorized in the Tibetan canon as a Mahāyāna commentary, specifically a commentary on the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra (*Shes phyin mdo 'grel*), the author Atiśa had significant tantric influence in his background.

<sup>179</sup> Atiśa was famous for bringing the Bka' gdams pa teachings from India to Tibet, and for his commentaries on the Mahāyāna sūtras and practices.

(Mar me mdzad ye shes, born 972/982), and then later translated into Tibetan by Atiśa, with the help of his well-known disciple Nag tsho tshul khriṃs Rgyal wa (b. 1011).<sup>180</sup> This work, which survives only in Tibetan, is titled *Lamp of the Concise Meaning of the Prajñāpāramitā* (*Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa 'i don bsdus sgron ma*) and is a summary of the famous work *Abhisamayālamkāra*, one of the five Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures said to have been revealed to Asaṅga by the Buddha Maitreya in Northwest India in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. Its pithy contents summarize, in verse, the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāparamitā-sūtra* (25,000-line *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*). The commentary, also in verse, mentions *dn̄gos po 'i gn̄as lugs* in a long section discussing the various enumerations of *kāyas* (bodies), the dimensions of embodiment of a Buddha.<sup>181</sup>

*sku ni gcig gnyis gsum bzhi lnga// grangs med 'dod pa dag tu'o//  
rang dang gzhan gyi don gyis su// sku gsum<sup>182</sup> zhes ni byams pas gsungs<sup>183</sup>//  
rang don chos sku gnyis po ni// rgyud dag ma dag rnam gnyis kyi<sup>184</sup>//  
don du gzugs sku rnam gnyis zer// mdo sde pa ni chen po nas//  
ngo bo nyid sku gsungs pa dang// don dam gyi ni bden pa dang//  
gsum po dag tu ma 'dus pas// sku bzhi shes<sup>185</sup> ni seng bzang gsung//  
sprul pa yi ni sprul la sogs// yod pas sku lnga gzhan dag zer//  
bdag gzhan longs spyod rdzogs pas su// sku lngar 'dod pa don gsang yin//*

<sup>180</sup> The authorship and translation history is clearly stated in the colophon. For more on the history of this work and its relevance to the *Abhisamayālamkāra* literature of Tibet, see James B. Apple, “Contributions to the Development and Classification of *Abhisamayālamkāra* Literature in Tibet from the Ninth to Fourteenth Centuries,” *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies*, no. 5 (Dec. 2009): 15-16.

<sup>181</sup> This passage comments on the first line of the eighth chapter of the *Abhisamayālamkāra*. This chapter became a nexus for polemical debate among Buddhist scholars, a topic treated in Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*.

<sup>182</sup> Pe cin and Snar thang *Bstan 'gyur*: *gsung* (from notations in the *Bstan 'gyur Dpe bsdur ma*).

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.: *gsung*.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.: *gyis*.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.: *zhes*.

*ngo bo nyid sku'i ngo bo ni// dngos po'i gnas lugs yin pa ste//  
chos sku gnas lugs rtogs pa yi<sup>186</sup>// ye shes yin no sku gnyis ni//  
gzugs la 'jog ste gzugs de yang// 'khor gyi<sup>187</sup> snang ba 'ba' zhig la//  
'jog<sup>188</sup> pa thogs med ched kyi gzhung// gnyis ka'i snang ba la 'jog pa//  
phyogs kyi glang po la sog pa// gnyis ka'i snang ba ma in par// 'dod pa....<sup>189</sup>*

The bodies are asserted as one, two, three, four, five, or innumerable. For the sake of the benefit of self and others, three bodies were taught by Maitreya.<sup>190</sup> The dharma body, with two aspects, is for one's own sake. The “two form bodies” are for the sake of the pure and impure continuums. The *Sūtra of the Great Liberation* says: “The essence body and the ultimate truth are included in those three; therefore the Svātantrikas say four [bodies] are known.”<sup>191</sup> Because there are emanations of emanations and so forth, others assert five bodies. A secret meaning is that five bodies are asserted because there is an enjoyment [body] of oneself and others. The essence of the essence body is the nature of things (*dngos po'i gnas lugs*). It is the gnosis that realizes the nature of the dharma body.<sup>192</sup> [In this classification] there are two bodies. If one enters into form, that form would become the cause of only engaging the appearances of saṃsāra endlessly. Asaṅga's treatise posits the appearance of both [bodies], but Dignāga and others assert that there is no appearance of both [bodies]...

In this passage, the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* comes up in the context of expressing Asaṅga's argument for the existence of only two *kāyas*: the *svābhāvikakāya* (essence body, *ngo bo nyid sku*) and the *dharmakāya* (dharma body, *chos sku*). Here *dngos po'i gnas lugs* turns out to be the essence (*ngo bo*) of the essence body—and that very essence of the essence body is the gnosis that realizes the nature (*gnas lugs*) of *dharmakāya*. In this presentation, *dngos po'i gnas lugs*

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.: *yin*.

<sup>187</sup> Snar thang *Bstan 'gyur*: *gyis*.

<sup>188</sup> Pe cin *Bstan 'gyur*: *ljog*.

<sup>189</sup> Mar me mdzad ye shes (Atiśa), *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i don bsdus sgron ma* (*Prajñāpāramitā-piṇḍārtha-pradīpa*), in *Bstan 'gyur Dpe bsdur ma*, Toh 3804, Shes phyin, Mdo, tha (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 1994-2008), 1338-9.

<sup>190</sup> Pe cin and Snar thang variant: “body and speech were taught by Maitreya.”

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., variant: “Therefore Svātantrikas assert four [bodies].”

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., variant: “It is the realization of the nature of the dharma body. It is gnosis.”

appears to be aligned—in contrast with our two previous examples—not primarily with an objective reality, but rather with a subjective gnosis, a knower or an epistemic perception that realizes the status of *dharmakāya*. Then follows an argument that the presence of a form body in the system of classifying *kāya* would sully the concept of a transcendent *kāya*, dragging it into the complications of *samsāra*. According to this use of the term, *dngos po'i gnas lugs* remains, because of its association with the transcendent *kāyas*, untouched by these complications. It is a Buddha's gnosis that is presented in opposition to form, but is nevertheless embodied, in terms of an essence body. The *gnas lugs* (nature) of *dngos po* (things) here really implies the nature of a knower, an epistemic reality that transcends the quotidian aspects of all things. However, despite the epistemic association, the subject here is a Buddha's gnosis, and therefore this *dngos po'i gnas lugs*—while subjective—seems far outside the realm of experience of an ordinary person. And yet, the close association of the term with the *kāyas* indicates something that is not outside the realm of embodiment. On the contrary, it is closely aligned with a Buddha's distinct embodiment.

Thus, there was an important sense of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as subjective or epistemic, in addition to its objective, metaphysical dimension. The epistemic sense is echoed in other tantric sources in the Buddhist canon, and nowhere does it become more personal and subjective than in tantric songs (*dohā*) found in the Tengyur. We find it in Saraha's *Treasure of the Body: Song of the Immortal Vajra* (*Skū'i mdzod 'chi med rdo rje'i glu*), where *dngos po'i gnas lugs* is a synonym for *mahāmudrā* and appears to be referring to a state of being:

*sna tshogs snang yang blo 'das yul mi g.yo/ bdag nyid rnal 'byor de nyid rtag tu blta/ spyod lam thams cad phyag rgya che la gnas/ dngos po'i gnas lugs skye med dang du*<sup>193</sup>  
*gzhas*<sup>194</sup>

Although many things appear, objects are beyond the intellect, unmoving. I, the yogi, constantly see reality. Through all activities, I abide in *mahāmudrā*, easily resting in the unborn nature of things (*dngos po'i gnas lugs*).

Here, for the first time, we see *dngos po'i gnas lugs* aligned with *mahāmudrā* and the highly subjective, first-person voice of a tantric poet. As in the previous examples, *dngos po'i gnas lugs* remains an expression of the ultimate, but unlike in the previous examples, its sense is intimately linked with immediate first-person experience. Saraha's wording here indicates that *dngos po'i gnas lugs* does not refer to the nature of things, but rather to a state of being. As a state of being, it seems as if Saraha, as with the usage of the term by Atiśa, is clearly employing the term in an epistemic mode, rather than an ontological mode. However, we have to ask why Saraha chooses to use the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* in his *Treasure of Body* collection of verses (not in his *Treasure of Speech* song or his *Treasure of Mind* verses). Could it be that the term, even in these early sources, already indicated a way of being connected to the body; not a disembodied mind, but one that is related to the way of being (*gnas lugs*) of its real human form (*dngos po*)?

At this point in our review of its prior uses we begin to suspect that the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* was already associated with embodiment in some contexts. It might be that in some of these canonical sources this term gestures toward corporeality, toward the matrix underlying

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<sup>193</sup> Pe cin and Snar thang *Bstan 'gyur: la*.

<sup>194</sup> Saraha, *Sku'i mdzod 'chi med rdo rje'i glu (Kāyakośa Amṛtavajra Gītā)*, in *Bstan 'gyur Dpe bsdur ma*, Toh 2268, Rgyud, zhi (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 1996-2008) 1229. Yang dgon pa quotes from this collection in the *Explanation of the Hidden* and other works, so he was likely aware of this very passage.

physical existence. One reason for thinking so is that some of these examples of the term's usage appear in contexts in their respective texts when the body is being explicitly discussed. For Triratnadāsa, it is used when the form-*skandha* is his subject of discussion. Atiśa is considering the *kāyas* of a Buddha when the term surfaces. Saraha communicates from the embodied perspective of a poet, speaking to his reader in the first person about his inner experience in *Treasure of the Body*. In his case, he is resting in *dngos po'i gnas lugs* “during all activities,” which indicates more than still and silent meditation. It indicates bodily activities. The fact that he places “unborn” right after the term could possibly be a conscious attempt to juxtapose the “born” body with the “unborn” *dngos po'i gnas lugs* and the more reliable aspects of human existence such as the vajra body. This reading is further supported by the view of Roger Jackson that in the case of Saraha's *dohās* in particular, there are pervasive double entendres that reference somatic yogas and the body in particular.<sup>195</sup>

Up to this point, we have noted sources in the Buddhist canon that reveal gradations of meaning for *dngos po'i gnas lugs* ranging from the metaphysical to the epistemic, with implicit connections to embodiment. Before proceeding to explore the meaning in Yang dgon pa's own lineage, to see how he and his immediate predecessors inherited the term, we will turn to yet one more source that provides insight into the concept of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* in tantric sources. In this case, we will look at a close cousin to our critical term *dngos po'i rang bzhin*. This term, common in the Tibetan Buddhist canon but especially ubiquitous in tantric works, is a close

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<sup>195</sup> Roger Jackson argues that Saraha's poetry expresses subversive themes related to bodily yogic practices. Among other remarks along these lines, he observes, “That we possess a subtle body is...a common assumption in many yogic systems and, though never named as such, an implicit context for many instructions in the *dohās* of Saraha.” This impulse may be behind Saraha's deployment of the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* in this poem. [Roger R. Jackson, *Tantric Treasures: Three Collections of Mystical Verse from Buddhist India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 33].



analogue to *dnegos po'i gnas lug*, as far as its semantic range. However, this term occurs much more commonly in the Buddhist canon than its cousin *dnegos po'i gnas lugs*. Even so, *dnegos po'i rang bzhin* was not appropriated as a key term by Nāropa and the Bka' brgyud lineage, which came to favor *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* as the heading of choice for the highest goals of the tradition. Nevertheless, *dnegos po'i rang bzhin* is present in many of the tantric sources that informed and helped shape Yang dgon pa's somatic theory, and therefore worthy of some consideration.

One such source on the topic of *dnegos po'i rang bzhin* is a work that informed Yang dgon pa's own thinking, titled *Vajra Glory, The King of Tantras of Non-dual Sameness Called The Great Victorious Yoga which is the Secret of All the Glorious Tathāgatas* (*Dpal de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi gsang ba rnal 'byor chen po rnam par rgyal ba zhes bya ba mnyam pa nyid gnyis su med pa'i rgyud kyi rgyal po rdo rje dpal mchog*), henceforth referred to in the dissertation as the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*.<sup>196</sup> Bu ston Rin chen grub (1290-1364), a great fourteenth-century scholar, refers to this work as an explanatory tantra (*bshad rgyud*) of the *Guhyasamāja*.<sup>197</sup> The colophon declares that it was translated from the Sanskrit in the 11th century by Nāropa's religious heir, Mar pa (Mar pa Chos kyi blo gros), in conjunction with

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<sup>196</sup> *Dpal de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi gsang ba rnal 'byor chen po rnam par rgyal ba zhes bya ba mnyam pa nyid gnyis su med pa'i rgyud kyi rgyal po rdo rje dpal mchog chen po brtag pa dang po* (*Śrī-sarvatathāgataguhyatantrayogamahārāja-advayasamatā-vijaya-nāma-vajrasrīparamamahākālpa-ādi*), in *Bstan 'gyur Dpe bsdur ma*, Toh 453, Rgyud 'bum, cha (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 1982-85). This tantra is referred to in many sources as the *Gnyis med rnam rgyal*. Tsongkhapa, for example, refers to it in his writings on the Six Yogas of Nāropa as the *Gnyis med rnam rgyal brdzus mo* [Mullin, *The Six Yogas of Naropa: Tsongkhapa's Commentary Entitled a Book of Three Inspirations*, 275], due to its potentially spurious origins. A collection of 'Bri gung works recently discovered in Lhasa refers to this tantra as *Gnyis med rnam rgyal gyi rgyud* [Per K. Sørensen and Sonam Drolma, *Rare Texts from Tibet: Seven Sources for the Ecclesiastical History of Medieval Tibet* (Bhairahawa, Rupandehi, Nepal: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2007), 394]. I will follow the lead of the latter source, and abbreviate the name *Non-dual Victory Tantra*.

<sup>197</sup> 'Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal and Roerich, *The Blue Annals*, 417, fn. 4.

another of his Indian gurus, Śrī Jñānagarbha. However translator Chag lo tsā ba chos rje dpal (1197-1263), the Sa skya scholar Go rams pa Bsod nams seng ge (1429–89), and others claim the work was composed or altered by Tibetans.<sup>198</sup> Verses in this source provide the outline structure for a large section of the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, and may well have shaped Yang dgon pa’s theoretical presentation of *dnegos po’i gnas lugs* and his notion of how the embodied state should be understood.<sup>199</sup>

As in some of the previous examples, this tantra glosses *dnegos po’i rang bzhin* to mean a valorized nature of things, but as we will see from the passage below, it is closely aligned with first-person experience. However, when it comes to the word *dnegos po* (thing/entity), the first word in the compound *dnegos po’i gnas lugs*, this tantra glosses it as a category covering the material aspects of existence (including the body), and that word by itself is contrasted to a

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<sup>198</sup> Rhoton notes that Go rams pa (1429-1489) claims that the work was “composed by Tibetans” [Sa skya Paṇḍita, *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes: Essential Distinctions Among the Individual Liberation, Great Vehicle, and Tantric Systems*, 196, fn. 103]. Roerich records the claims of Chag lo tsā ba (1197-1263) and others that the work was altered or partially composed by Tibetans. According to Bu ston, there are two *Gnyis med rnam rgyal* texts in the Buddhist canon, one spurious and one authentic. Bu ston claims that the work Yang dgon pa quotes, *Gnyis med rnam rgyal chen po* in 77 chapters, has spurious origins. Bu ston says the real author is one Rgya pho ba lung pa (12th Century), a student of the first Karmapa, although ‘Gos lo tsā ba disputes that claim due to problems with the dates. The other *Gnyis med rnam rgyal*, which Bu ston claims is authentic, is called the *Gnyis med rnam rgyal chung ba*. This shorter work of 22 chapters is also found in the canon: *Gnyis su med pa mnyam pa nyid rnam par rgyal ba’i rtog pa’i rgyal po* (*Advayasamatāvijayākhyā-kalpa-mahārāja*), in *Sde dge’i Bstan ‘gyur*, Toh 452, Rgyud ‘bum, cha (Delhi: Delhi Karmapae Choedhey, Gyalwae Sungrab Partun Khang, 1982-85), 118-206. See ‘Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal and Roerich, *The Blue Annals*, 417, fn. 4.

<sup>199</sup> Verses from this tantra directly inspire the subsections of Yang dgon pa’s presentation of *dnegos po’i gnas lugs*, but there is some possibility that these same verses were extracted from elsewhere, or appeared in more than one tantra. More on this tantra and its specific use by Yang dgon pa will be considered in Chapter 3.

valorized non-dual awareness.<sup>200</sup> The term *dnegos po'i rang bzhin* (which I will translate in this context as “the self-nature of entities”), in this tantra, seems to mean an underlying valorized substrate of *dnegos po* (entities). The sense of the term is a metaphysical nature of all things, much in the sense that we see in the previous tantric sources. However, in this tantra, we see an attempt to explain how the term can be both metaphysical and epistemological at the same time. In this case, the Buddhas in the tantra are explaining to the Bodhisattvas how the stages of "appearance, increase, and attainment" relate to perception.<sup>201</sup>

*gang du yang 'di ltar lhan cig g.yo ba dang ldan pas dbang po sgo lnga'i rjes su mngon par 'gro la snang ba dbang po don dang phrad par gyur ba mched<sup>202</sup> pa gsal ba las dbang pos dnegos por dmigs pa thob pa dang ldan pa'o/ gal te sems de nyid dnegos po'i rang bzhin du ma gyur na de lta na'ang 'di dag sems nyid yin pas rnam pa thams cad du phyi rol gyi don skye ba yod pa ma yin te/ 'di ltar ma lus pa'i 'de dag brtags pas stong pa'i sems nyid de/ skye ba dang 'gag pa dang bral zhing rang bzhin gyis dag pa gnyis su med pa'i ye shes kyi rnam par yongs su gsal ba'o'<sup>203</sup>*

Whenever there is a spontaneous stirring, and one follows after the doors of the five senses, there is appearance. When the senses meet their object, increase<sup>204</sup> occurs. When the senses focus on an entity (*dnegos po*), there is attainment. If that very mind were not the nature of entities (*dnegos po'i rang bzhin*), because all this is the mind itself, outer

<sup>200</sup> The term *dnegos po* is sometimes aligned specifically with the body in this work, along with entities in the world in general. For example (from the page cited here): *dnegos po'i kun gyi bdag nyid gang// stong gsum 'jig rten rang gi lus// phyi nang gnyis med ye she che//* (Whatever is the embodiment of all things, the entire universe and your own body, is non-dual gnosis without and within) [*Gnyis med rnam rgyal gyi rgyud*, 392].

<sup>201</sup> These three stages (*snang ba*, *mched pa*, *thob pa*) are found in the commentarial literature of the Six Doctrines of Nāropa. The three stages are sometimes applied to the process of perception (as above) but are also sometimes applied to the process of losing and regaining consciousness, such as in sleeping and waking (Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication, 2013). For more on the appearance, increase, and attainment (also known as *snang ba gsum*), see Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, *The Treasury of Knowledge: Esoteric Instructions*, trans. Sarah Harding (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2007), 394, en. 9.

<sup>202</sup> G.yung lo, Pe cin and Co ne *Bstan 'gyur: mchod*.

<sup>203</sup> *Gnyis med rnam rgyal gyi rgyud*, 428.

<sup>204</sup> G.ying lo, Pe cin and Co ne variant: “offering.”

objects would not ever arise in all these forms. The nature of the way everything is without exception, which is imputed to be those [things], is the empty mind itself. It completely appears in the aspect of naturally pure non-dual gnosis, free from arising and ceasing.

This passage, more than any other we have encountered so far, unpacks a relationship between mind, outer appearances, and *dnegos po'i rang bzhin*, as the self-nature of things or entities. Here, the tantra makes a logical case that the mind is *dnegos po'i rang bzhin*, the self-nature of entities, but—unlike in other sources—we are afforded a clearer definition of what entities are, in the compound “the self-nature of entities.” The entities here are all the things that are perceived by the five sense doors, the totality of subjective experience. All these entities that our subjective consciousness locks onto are actually an extension of the mind itself. The mind is the nature of entities (*dnegos po*), in that it partakes in the “situation of entities” (*dnegos po'i rang bzhin*), and interpenetrates with entities (*dnegos po*) via a non-duality with the perceived world. Another way to read this passage is that the mind is the self-nature of entities (*dnegos po'i rang bzhin*), in that it is a substrate or deeper nature of entities (*dnegos po*), rather than the *situation* of entities, which would align this very term with the more elevated status of non-dual gnosis (*gnyis su med pa'i ye shes*) that we find in this tantra. In either case, however, the implication in this passage is that the real situation of entities that are perceived by the senses (*dnegos po*) is that things in the external world are continuous with the non-dual space of the “empty mind itself” (*stong pa'i sems de nyid*). There is no entity (*dnegos po*) perceived by the senses without its nature of entities (*dnegos po'i rang bzhin*), which is described here as the mind, which is ultimately a non-dual awareness that includes both perceived and perceiver in a single continuum. This passage turns our attention to the possibility that the nature of entities (*dnegos po'i rang bzhin*) does not stand in

opposition to *dngos po* (entities) but rather is continuous with it, at least in this case, and in this way it succeeds in being both epistemic and metaphysical at the same time.

### ***Dngos po'i gnas lugs* in the Bka' brgyud Lineage**

The above discussion helps us to understand the range of meanings for *dngos po'i gnas lugs* inherited by the Bka' brgyud lineage at its inception in the 10th-11th centuries. In these sources, we have seen some sample cases of the term referring to a nature of reality, the nature of things/entities, and a valorized non-dual awareness. There are also leanings toward a relationship between embodiment and *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, but the connections are still implicit.

We see evidence in the Bka' brgyud lineage writings predating Yang dgon pa that the combination of metaphysical and epistemological meanings continued to hold sway, but now the term began to branch off in two directions in this lineage, in the 10th-11th centuries. On the one hand, we find a small set of religious writings in the early Bka' brgyud lineage, beginning with works by Sgam po pa, that explore *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as a topic and interpret the term as either a non-dual awareness that interpenetrates with *dngos po*, similar to the perspective we find in the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*, or as a valorized nature of reality in general. On the other hand, simultaneously, by the time Nāropa's lineage begins to catch on in Tibet in the 11th century, the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* has come to refer to the situation of human body and mind taken together as a single totality. This sense is evident in a second set of writings related directly to the Six Doctrines of Nāropa. The former set of writings will be discussed later in this chapter, and the latter will be discussed first, as these are of greatest concern to our study of Yang dgon pa.

In the latter set of writings related to the Six Doctrines of Nāropa, the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* retains the sense of being something significant to be realized on the religious path, but now gestures more explicitly to the matrix of a subtle body underlying physical existence, along with the gnosis underlying a complex mind. In this sense, the term began to explicitly refer to a subtle substrate of human physical and mental existence that must be uncovered, or realized, through specific practices. While the previously discussed canonical sources might have gestured in this direction, the connection was not made explicit until the earliest sources of the Bka' brgyud tradition. As a jumping-off point for an exploration of these early sources, we can begin by looking at how Yang dgon pa himself introduces the historical precedent for his work:

*rnal 'byor gyi dbang phyug chen po te<sup>205</sup> lo pa'i spyang sngar/ rje btsun<sup>206</sup> mkhas pa chen po nā ro pas lo bcu gnyid su 'brangs nas<sup>207</sup>/ lam zab mo mos gus kyi rten 'brel bsgrigs/ dka' ba chen po shi la thug<sup>208</sup> pa bcu gnyid spyad nas/ srid pa'i sdug bsngal khyad du bsad<sup>209</sup>/ de'i mthar<sup>210</sup> khrag gi maṅdal phul/ snyan mchog gi tshom bu phul<sup>211</sup> ba'i dus su gnang ba'i chos ni/ dngos po'i gnas lugs lam dang ni/ 'bras bu skye ba'i rim pa'o/ zhes gsung pas/ mngon du byas pa'i lus<sup>212</sup> dngos po'i gnas lugs dang/ mngon du byed pa'i thabs lam nyams su len<sup>213</sup> pa'i tshul lugs dang/ mngon du byas pas<sup>214</sup> yon tan bskyed pa'i*

<sup>205</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 115/4: *ti*.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 115/4: *rje btsun* elided.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 115/5: *lo bcu gnyis phyag phyir 'brens nas. Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 2: *lo bcu gnyis phyag phyir 'brangs nas*.

<sup>208</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 116/1; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 2: *khad*.

<sup>209</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 116/1: *gsad*.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 116/1; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 2: *de'i tha ma la*.

<sup>211</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis) 116/1; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 2: *snyan mchog bcad nas phul*.

<sup>212</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis): *yul. Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 2: *mngon du bya ba'i yul*.

<sup>213</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 116/3: *blang*.

*rim pa'o/ bla ma dam pa'i zhal nas rnam par dkar ba'i chos thams cad de*<sup>215</sup> *gsum du ma 'dus pa gang yang med gsung*<sup>216</sup>

The great scholar lord Nāropa, by following<sup>217</sup> the great master of yoga Tilopa, arranged the auspicious interconnection of the profound path of devotion. Having engaged in twelve nearly fatal great difficult acts, he disregarded the suffering of existence. At the end of that [time], he offered a *maṇḍala* of blood and his severed ear, and in return received this teaching: “*Dngos po'i gnas lugs*, the path and the emerging stages of the fruition.”<sup>218</sup> To comment, there is the body’s *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, which is to be actualized,<sup>219</sup> the way of practicing the path, which is the method that actualizes, and the stage of generating qualities, which is the actualization.<sup>220</sup> The holy lama said: “All completely white doctrines are included in those three.”

This is how Yang dgon pa introduces *dngos po'i gnas lugs* for the first time in *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, embedding the term in its inherited historical context. The seminal couplet that Yang dgon pa repeats here appears in two works closely associated with Nāropa, *The Truth*

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 116/3-4; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 2: *mngon du byas pa'i 'bras bus*.

<sup>215</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis) 116/4: *de* elided.

<sup>216</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 422/5-23/3. The identity of the “holy lama” is not specified, but it may refer to ‘Bri gung Spyang snga ba, Gcung Rin chen or Rgod tshang pa. Any of these teachers could have transmitted this particular hermeneutic to Yang dgon pa via the works of previous Bka’ brgyud masters (see Chapter 1 of this dissertation).

<sup>217</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: by following and serving.

<sup>218</sup> In the hagiography of Nāropa, by Lha btsun pa rin chen rnam rgyal (1473-1557), the transmission of this teaching on *dngos po gnas lugs* is described following Nāropa’s fourth trial. However, Yang dgon pa’s timeline for the transmission of this teaching from Tilopa to Nāropa here seems to resemble Nāropa’s final trail in which he sprinkles the ground with blood, and cuts off his ear as an offering. In return, Tilopa throws his sandal at Nāropa, causing him to become enlightened. This timeline is echoed in Sgam po pa’s work that comments on the two *dngos po'i gnas lugs* (discussed below). See Lha btsun Rin chen rnam rgyal, *The Life and Teaching of Nāropa*, trans. Herbert V. Guenther, UNESCO Collection of Representative Works: Tibetan Series (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 54-55.

<sup>219</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: To comment, there is the object to be actualized, *dngos po'i gnas lugs*...

<sup>220</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: and the fruition—the stage of generating qualities—which is the actualization.

of the *Pure Mandate, the Heart of the Path of Mixing and Transference: The Special Instructions of the Dākinīs* (*Bsre 'pho'i lam gyi snying po bka' yang dag pa'i tshad ma zhes bya ba mkha' 'gro ma'i man ngag*)<sup>221</sup> and the *Later Mandate Book* (*Bka' dpe phyi ma*),<sup>222</sup> which act as the earliest source manuals for Bka' brgyud presentations of the Six Doctrines of Nāropa.<sup>223</sup> The first of these, *The Truth of the Pure Mandate*, claims to be recorded from oral teachings of Tilopa by Nāropa, translated by Mar pa, and the second is of uncertain provenance. These two key works, the first discernible ancestors of the “mixing and transference” genre,<sup>224</sup> lay out the trajectory of the path to enlightenment, provide the doctrinal framing of the teachings of the ‘Brug pa Bka’

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<sup>221</sup> Nāropa, *Bsre 'pho'i lam gyi snying po bka' yang dag pa'i tshad ma zhes bya ba mkha' 'gro ma'i man ngag* (*Ajñāsaṃyakpramāṇa-nāma-dākinī-upadeśa*), in *Rtsib-ri spar-ma: The Collected Instructional Material on the Practice of the Teachings of the Dkar-brgyud-pa and Rdzogs-chen Traditions* (Darjeeling, India: Kargyu Sungrab Nyamso Khang, 1978-85).

<sup>222</sup> *Bka' dpe phyi ma*, in *Bstan 'gyur Dpe bsdur ma*, Toh 2332, Rgyud, zhi (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 1994-2008). For more on the contents of this work, see Fabrizio Torricelli, “A Tanjur Text on Gtummo: Tohoku no 2332-I,” *The Tibet Journal* XXI, no. 1 (1996), 30-46.

<sup>223</sup> Ulrich Kragh calls these two texts “semi-canonical” because they are found only in the *Sde dge bstan 'gyur* published in 1737-1744 by the Sde dge king Bstan pa tshe ring (1678-1738), and the *Co ne Bstan 'gyur* published in 1753-1773 by the Co ne prince 'Jam dbyangs nor bu (1703-1751) and his wife princess Rin chen dpal 'dzom. Background information on these two texts, and possible reasons for their semi-canonical status are explored in the article: Ulrich Timme Kragh, “The Prolegomenon of the Six Doctrines of Nā ro pa: Authority and Tradition,” in *Proceedings of the International Association of Tibetan Studies 2006: Mahāmūrā and the Bka' brgyud Tradition*, ed. Matthew Kapstein and Roger R. Jackson (Halle: Institute of Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 2011), 131-78.

<sup>224</sup> Whether “mixing and transference” (*bsre 'pho*) can be considered a genre or a topical term is perhaps a point of debate. The *bsre 'pho* writings are commentaries on the application and integration of the Six Doctrines of Nāropa. Many examples of early *bsre 'pho* writings can be found in a collection compiled by Padma dkar po: See *Bsre 'pho yig rnying: A Collection of Texts Explaining the Six Practices of Nāropa According to the Exegesis of the 'Brug-pa Dkar-brgyud-pa*, ed. Padma dkar po (Palampur, Dist. Kangra, H. P.: Khampa Gar Monastery, 1985). According to Gene Smith, although Padma dkar po himself provides some of the longest works on the subject, the Rngog lineage was uniquely prolific in this tradition as well. A short summary of the Rngog treatment of *bsre 'pho* may be found in *Gdams ngag mdzod*, vol. tsha, p. 90-91 (Smith, email communication, 2010).



brgyud lineage, and are foundational for understanding the roots of Yang dgon pa's somatic vision. In both works, we find the identical couplet “*Dngos po'i gnas lugs*, the path and the emerging stages of the fruition,”<sup>225</sup> a short verse that provided a basic frame on which key doctrines of the ‘Brug pa Bka’ brgyud lineage would eventually be constructed.<sup>226</sup> The importance of the seminal verse, found in identical form in each work, as a source of authority for the “mixing and transference” (*bsre 'pho*) genre and the structure of somatic manuals in the Bka’ brgyud lineage cannot be overstated. This seminal couplet appears in every work of the “mixing and transference” genre from Nāropa’s time forward, in the Bka’ brgyud lineages that comment on *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. We find it in key writings of Mar pa, Sgam po pa, Phag mo gru pa, ‘Jig rten mgon po, Yang dgon pa, the third Karmapa Rang ‘byung rdo rje, Padma dkar po and onwards. It became the basis for the broad outline of the religious path as transmitted by the ‘Brug pa Bka’ brgyud lineage.

The presence of the seminal couplet and accompanying outline in the works leading up to Yang dgon pa's composition helps a reader identify how these works are related in a genealogical fashion, as a series of ancestor and descendant works. The ancestor works provide the initial vocabulary and the skeleton outline for Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden*. The descendant works carry the legacy of the earlier works in this line of transmission. A direct precedent can be found in almost every generation in the Bka’ brgyud lineage leading up to Yang

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<sup>225</sup> The couplet is found in Nāropa, *Bka' yang dag pa'i tshad ma*, 3/2, and *Bka' dpe phyi ma*, 1737. The versions of *Bka' yang dag pa'i tshad ma* found in the Tibetan Buddhist canon are missing the couplet.

<sup>226</sup> While the verse provides the outline for the future lineage exegesis on the Six Doctrines of Nāropa, Pad ma dkar po went to far as to declare that *The Truth of the Pure Mandate* specifically acts as the root text of the doctrines of the entire ‘Brug pa Bka’ brgyud lineage (Kragh, “Six Doctrines,” 14-15).

dgon pa. In the remaining part of this chapter, I will briefly track *dngos po'i gnas lug* in this line of descent from Nāropa through Yang dgon pa. In looking at such a genealogy, we are able to see an evolution in thinking about the relationship between body and mind, and an evolution of the sense of the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* itself. Looking at such a genealogy helps us understand also in what ways Yang dgon pa's text is derivative and to what extent original.

It is difficult to date many of the works in the Buddhist Canon associated with Nāropa and/or Tilopa, and even difficult to determine authorship, so piecing together a chronology of the two aforementioned source texts by Nāropa—*The Truth of the Pure Mandate* and *The Later Mandate Book*—may not be possible. However, Ulrich Kragh notes that “in Zhu chen tsul khirms rin chen's 18<sup>th</sup> century Sde dge bstan 'gyur catalogue *Bka' yang dag pa'i tshad ma*<sup>227</sup> is called the ‘first instruction text’ (Dka' dpe dang po),”<sup>228</sup> so it is possible that there was a Tibetan tradition of ranking these two works as earlier and later, whether or not this ranking was founded on historical grounds. In any event, the two works present similar material, and both are significant in that they appear to be source texts of the seminal couplet quoted by the lineage of descendant texts, including Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden*.

While Yang dgon pa's work cannot be considered a direct commentary on either of these two works by Nāropa, the mark of their inspiration on Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden* is evident. We will look here at the first, Nāropa's seminal *The Truth of the Pure Mandate, the Heart of the Path of Mixing and Transference: The Special Instructions of the Dākinīs*, because it represents the earliest presentation of the hermeneutic of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*

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<sup>227</sup> This is the work I am translating as the *The Truth of the Pure Mandate*.

<sup>228</sup> Kragh, “Six Doctrines,” 12.

found in the Bka' brgyud lineage. This work was later touted by Padma dkar po as the key source text for the "mixing and transference" literature of the 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud. It is an explanatory work on the six doctrines (inner heat, illusory body, dream, luminosity, the intermediate state, and transference) written on the basis of Tilopa's oral transmission. It is abbreviated, but extremely helpful for understanding the origins of Yang dgon pa's thought, and the trajectory of the meaning of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. Here we see the origins of the broad outline on which the "mixing and transference" works are styled, including Yang dgon pa's own work, which divides the Buddhist process of religious cultivation into three stages: (1) *dngos po'i gnas lugs*,<sup>229</sup> (2) the path (*lam*), and (3) the fruition (*'bras bu*).

While it would be interesting to translate the entire work here, it will be sufficient to examine the passage that introduces the outline, on which Yang dgon pa's own outline is loosely based, and to look at the concise description of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, which takes up but one folio.<sup>230</sup>

*dngos po'i gnas lugs lam dang ni//  
'bras bu skye ba'i rim pa'o//  
dngos po'i gnas lugs gnyis yin te//*

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<sup>229</sup> There are many early examples in the writings of Nāropa and Mar pa in which this first stage, *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, is also referred to as the basis (*gzhi*).

<sup>230</sup> Before presenting this outline, the work begins with an homage, and an injunction that these instructions are for "sudden realizers" (*cig char ba*). Following Nāropa's lead, Padma dkar po later elaborates considerably on the exclusive nature of this teaching, and that it is destined for the few who fall into this elite category of "sudden realizers," as contrasted with the more common "gradualists" (*rim gyis pa*) [Broido, "Padma dkar po on Tantra," 11]. Yang dgon pa's work, however, contains no such injunction, a striking omission, given that many other exegetes in his lineage included it. However, Yang dgon pa's omission of this injunction makes a great deal of sense considering that a main theme of his work is to emphasize that *everyone* possesses *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, and that the qualities of an enlightened Buddha exist inherently in the ordinary human body, despite one's capacities for religious practice.

*lus dang sems kyi gnas lugs so/*<sup>231</sup>

*Dngos po'i gnas lugs*, the path and the emerging stages of the fruition.

*Dngos po'i gnas lugs* is twofold: The nature of body, and that of mind.

Nāropa here introduces the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, not as a single category or idea, but rather as two categories or types: the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body, and the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the mind. Already, we see a substantial departure from prior meanings of the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* found in the Buddhist Canon. For Nāropa, *dngos po'i gnas lugs* is not monovalent but multivalent, which in itself opens the possibility for a more complex exegesis for future generations, a possibility that Yang dgon pa would later seize on. The second of Nāropa's two valences, *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as the nature of the mind, is not distant from the epistemic meanings found in the Buddhist canon. But the first valence, that which is aligned with the situation of the body, extends *dngos po'i gnas lugs* in a new direction, one previously hinted at in canonical sources but not developed. In this one line, Nāropa introduced his lineage to the human body as a subject of critical reflection as a precedent for enlightenment, a topic he proceeds to unpack, albeit briefly. Simply affording the body this position of semantic power seems to have been sufficient to open the door for his descendants to expand on this category and develop it, a task that Yang dgon pa, more than anyone else in his line of religious descent, took seriously.

It is important to note that in the second part of the couplet, Nāropa situates the words body and mind before the word nature (*gnas lugs*), displacing *dngos po* and implicitly glossing it. In this passage, Nāropa indicates that *dngos po'i gnas lugs* is twofold: the nature (*gnas lugs*) of body and the nature (*gnas lugs*) of mind. By presenting *dngos po'i gnas lugs* to us in this way,

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<sup>231</sup> Nāropa, *Bka' yang dag pa'i tshad ma*, 2/2-3.

Nāropa indirectly glosses the meaning of *dngos po*. The *dngos po* (thing or entity) that the yogi needs to know the *gnas lugs* (nature) of is not the potentially infinite *dngos po* (things) of the world, but the *dngos po* (thing) of human embodiment, its cognitive and physical aspects. In this context, the text is clear that *dngos po* does not mean things or entities in general. It does not mean the objects of the senses. *Dngos po* here refers to the human body and the human mind. The compound *dngos po'i gnas lugs* refers to the situation or nature of that human body and mind. If we understand *dngos po'i gnas lugs* through this lens, it means something akin to the situation of human embodiment, which includes the psychological and physical aspects of being.

The next few lines of text describe Nāropa's unique bifurcation of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* into the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body and that of mind. He begins with the body. In a few lines, he describes the human body as an entity that is stratified (a body of layers) rather than monolithic, and dynamic (emergent) rather than static:

*lus kyi gnas lugs bstan pa ni//*  
*rags dang phra dang shin tu phra//*  
*thun mong dbyer med rim shes bya//*  
*'od gsal ba las stong pa che//*  
*de las thabs shes sna tshogs 'byung//*  
*mngon par byang chub rnam lnga dang//*  
*rtsa dang rlung dang byang chub sems//<sup>232</sup>*

To present the nature of the body, there is coarse, subtle, and very subtle. These are inseparable from the ordinary, and one should know the stages: From luminosity comes the great emptiness. From that come the varieties of method and knowledge, the five manifest awakenings, and channels, winds, and *bodhicitta*.

First, it is important to note here that these few lines comprise the entire section on the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body (*lus kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*) in this particular work, and they take up a

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 2/3-2b/1.

mere 1/40 of the text, a fairly small portion of the overall content. Despite the brevity of the presentation, however, we can see in these lines that the body is not dismissed as a simple, one-dimensional entity. The body is stratified. Just as there is not one *dnegos po'i gnas lugs*, there is not one body, either. Rather, there are three: a coarse body, a subtle body, and a very subtle body, coexisting in one person.<sup>233</sup> Nāropa does not elaborate on the layers of the body here, perhaps indicating he meant these points to act as the basis for pedagogical elaboration. But he also may not have felt that extensive elucidation was needed, given that the concept of a subtle body (*sūkṣma śarīra*)—which dates back in Indian literary culture to the Upanishads—was pervasive in India at the time that Nāropa lived.<sup>234</sup>

In the third stanza, Nāropa states that the layers of the body are “inseparable from the ordinary.” This perspective echoes a theme found in many tantras: the subtle underpinnings of the body, sometime labeled by Nāropa and the exegetes of his lineage as the *vajra body* (*rdo rje lus*) are simultaneously both divine—because of their potential to liberate a person from *saṃsāra*—and ordinary. Statements that align exalted bodies with ordinary bodies are common in the tantras, reinforcing the notion that the exalted subtle body has always been inseparable from the ordinary body. We find this viewpoint in the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*, for example,

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<sup>233</sup> It is perhaps worth noting here that while Yang dgon pa takes up the division of a “coarse body” and “subtle body,” he only mentions a “very subtle body” once in the *Explanation of the Hidden*. He does, however, posit an “ultimate body, speech, and mind” later (discussed in Chapter Five of the dissertation) that may be a correlate to the very subtle.

<sup>234</sup> David White traces the origins of the concept of a subtle body (*sūkṣma śarīra*) in Indian tantric works to the late classical Upanishads. He also presents the 7th-11th centuries in Northern and Western India as the origin of the alchemical traditions that utilized the notion of a subtle body for spiritual transformation (White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India*, 48-77 and 185).

which states that the enlightened three *kāyas* are, in reality, ordinary body, speech, and mind.<sup>235</sup> The tantric scholar Shinichi Tsuda notes that this theme is pervasive in the *Samvarodaya-tantra* in which “this idea of the human body as an aggregate is unconditionally identified with an aspect of the ultimate reality.”<sup>236</sup> With this culture of tantric theory as a background, we can understand Nāropa’s statement—that the various levels of existence are “inseparable from the ordinary”—to mean that the subtle and very subtle, held as manifestations of the ultimate, are present in the ordinary human body. The statement implies that the body’s ultimate reality is not—in the final assessment—earned or acquired. Nor is it so exalted that it exists outside the realm of the quotidian. Rather, the ultimate exists at some level as innate, inseparable from the ordinary body, existing naturally as its underlying reality. We see in this single phrase the thread of a theme that would be expanded upon greatly by Yang dgon pa. The articulation here by Nāropa gives us some idea of the seeds of Yang dgon pa’s vision within the early works of his lineage.

The next verses provide the first inchoate sketch of the tantric process of human embryology and birth: “...one should know the stages: From luminosity comes the great emptiness. From that come the varieties of method and knowledge, the five manifest awakenings, and channels, winds, and *bodhicitta*.” Slob dpon Mchod rten comments that these lines, because of the context, the terminology, and their proximity to the five manifest awakenings (Tib. *mngon par byang chub*, Skt. *abhisambodhiḥ*), reference the process of coitus,

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<sup>235</sup> *Sku gsum lus ngag yid yin te/ de nyid mngon par byang chub brjod/ (Non-dual Victory Tantra, 347).*

<sup>236</sup> Shin’ichi Tsuda, *The Samvarodaya-tantra: Selected Chapters* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1974), 60.

conception, birth, and growth to maturity.<sup>237</sup> In this reading, “the stages” refers to the process of human development beginning with conception.<sup>238</sup> The five manifest awakenings, which have their origins in the *yogatantras*, were originally a classification of five stages of tantric visualization practice (*bškyed rim*) that eventually came to refer (in commentarial literature on the tantras) to five stages of development of a human body from intercourse through conception, fetal development, and birth.<sup>239</sup> This topic will be treated in more detail in Chapter Four. Finally, Nāropa concludes his developmental vision of the human body with the fully formed body of channels, winds, and *bodhicitta*. The way this final stage in the body’s evolution is presented suggests that Nāropa wished to orient his reader primarily not to the locus of the coarse body, but to that of the subtle body of tantric theory. With these first comments, as terse as they were, Nāropa oriented his descendants to the idea that the knowledge of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body (*lus kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*), but especially the subtle body, is a critical foundation for following the Buddhist path. His posited dimensions of the body, while brief, were also dense, leaving open the possibility for an elaboration into sub-points unpacking the levels of embodiment (coarse, subtle, very subtle), and the stages of the body’s evolution.

Returning to the next portion of *The Truth of the Pure Mandate*, after this discussion of the nature of the physicality of the body, we find a brief summary of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the mind (*sems kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*). This section, somewhat longer than the section devoted

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<sup>237</sup> Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication, 2012.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., personal communication, 2012.

<sup>239</sup> For more on the development of the *abhisambodhiḥ* hermeneutic and its division into five *abhisambodhiḥ* in the tantras, see Elizabeth English, *Vajrayoginī: Her Visualizations, Rituals & Forms, a Study of the Cult of Vajrayoginī in India*, 1st Wisdom ed., Studies in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002), 150.



to the body, consists of a short passage with oblique but recognizable reference to yogic practice, followed by *mahāmudrā* instruction:

*sems kyi gnas lugs bstan pa ni//  
 thabs dang shes rab bdag nyid can//  
 e wam lus kyi lte bar gnas//  
 de nyid lus gnas ye shes che//  
 rnam rtog kun spang de nyid 'grub//  
 dkyil 'khor 'khor lo las dang ni//  
 ye shes phyag rgya'i rnam rtog bral//  
 mi mno mi bsam mi dbyad cing//  
 mi bsgom mi sems rang babs gzhag//  
 ji ltar sa bon de bzhin shing//  
 shing ji lta ba de bzhin 'bras//  
 'jig rten kun la 'di mthong bas//  
 'di nyid rten cing 'brel 'byung ngo//<sup>240</sup>*

The presentation of the nature of mind: It is the nature of method and knowledge. *Ewam*, it rests at the body's navel. That essential point of body gives rise to great gnosis. Giving up all thought, accomplish only that. Free from the *maṇḍala cakras*, activities, and the thoughts that stifle gnosis, do not reflect, do not think, do not analyze, do not meditate, and do not ruminate. Instead, rest at ease. As is the seed, so is the tree. As is the tree, so is the fruit. Seeing the whole world like this, auspicious connections will unfold.

Nāropa's presentation of the nature of the mind here refers to (1) the mind as method and knowledge, (2) the mind as “*ewam*,” an essential point of body (*lus gnad*),<sup>241</sup> and (3) the mind as the potential sphere of non-thought. The section reads like a short, didactic explanation of an embodied *mahāmudrā* practice, with a tantric basis in inner heat practice (*gtum mo*). Now it is possible to see how later commentators could differ from one another in their interpretation of Nāropa's early exegesis on the term *dnagos po'i gnas lugs*. The section contains reference to

<sup>240</sup> Nāropa, *Bka' yang dag pa'i tshad ma*, 2b/1-5.

<sup>241</sup> The “essential point of body” (*lus gnad*) refers to the fire of inner heat (*gtum mo*) at the navel, which is symbolized by *e wam* (Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication, 2012). Elizabeth English explains *e wam* is also used in tantra to symbolize the union between male and female, with the *e* representing the female genitalia, and the *wam* representing the male genitalia (English, *Vajrayoginī*, 150). It is therefore possible the text intends a double entendre.

somatic practice, but the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the mind (*sems kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*) is understood primarily in terms of the mind's lack of conceptuality—a common Buddhist characterization of enlightened mind. As such, it is significantly different from what we find in the analogous section in Yang dgon pa's text 300 years later, where the mind is discussed in terms of vital essences (briefly alluded to by Nāropa as *ewam*), bliss (briefly alluded to by Nāropa as method and knowledge) and non-conceptuality. The precedent for Yang dgon pa's move to discuss the mind in material terms is certainly here, but it is inchoate. While Yang dgon pa does replicate the lines on non-conceptuality found here in his *Explanation of the Hidden*, the mention is extremely brief.

In all, Nāropa provides a two-folio versified discussion of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. As Yang dgon pa will go on to do in far more detail, Nāropa divides the discussion into the foundation, path, and fruition of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. But beyond being far shorter, Nāropa's discussion lacks many of the innovations provided by Yang dgon pa, such as the creation of a third kind of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* for speech. We can also note that the bulk of Nāropa's discussion has to do with the relevance of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* to the path, rather than providing much attention to a foundational *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, which is unpacked by Yang dgon pa as a detailed embryology and enlightened physiology. In the case of Nāropa's work, we can certainly see the outline of the descendant works. We see a set of yogic visualizations involving the inner workings of tantric energies and their accompanying experiences. Even in the earliest context, we see the outline of a *dngos po'i gnas lugs* aligned with the psycho-physical stuff of human existence, a matrix concealed within embodied personhood that serves as the basis for tantric practice and realization.

After Nāropa, exegesis on *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* gained some traction with most of the major early figures of the Bka' brgyud school. That Nāropa's term *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* had immediate resonance with the patriarchs of this lineage can be seen in the fact that Mar pa chos kyi blo gros (1012-1097), who introduces Nāropa's text to Tibet, goes on to refer to it in his own "mixing and transference" writing. Mar pa puts a seminal couplet in Nāropa's mouth, and then quotes him as saying: "At the time of the causal *samaya*, one should know the *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of body and mind" (*rgyu'i dam tshig skabs su lus sems dnegos 'po'i gnas lugs shes par gyis*).<sup>242</sup> He goes on to describe the phase of the "causal *samaya*" as the first foundational phase of tantric practice. In the phase of the causal *samaya*, which seems to correspond directly to Yang dgon pa's foundation (*gzhi*) phase, the student is instructed "to guard channels, energy winds, and *bodhicitta*" (*rtsa rlung byang sems gsum bsrung ba*).<sup>243</sup> While this is a modest statement, we can note that it places this notion of *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* within the foundational phase—the "causal *samaya*"—of the tantric path in a way that heralds its place in Yang dgon pa's work. Mar pa's aligns *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* with somatic practice.

In contrast, Mar pa's closest disciple, Mi la ras pa (1052-1135) aligns the term with the nature of the mind, over and above that of the body. He provides a short exegesis of *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* that echoes the *mahāmudrā* terminology found in Nāropa's section on the *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of the mind (*sems kyi dnegos po'i gnas lugs*). His pithy instruction text titled *The Root*

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<sup>242</sup> The seminal couplet we find here is the same one in the *Rtsib ri spar ma* version of Nāropa's *Truth of the Pure Mandate: Dnegos po'i gnas lugs lam dang ni/ 'bras bu skye ba'i rim pa'o/ (Dnegos po'i gnas lugs, the path and the emerging stages of the fruition)* [Mar pa Chos kyi blo gros, *Dam tshig yid bzhin nor bu bsre ba skor*, in *Mkha' 'gro snyan brgyud kyi yig rning: The Ancient Cycle of Practice Focussing upon the Cakrasaṃvara Tantra According to an Oral Transmission from Vajravārāhī by Ras-chung rdo-rje-grags* (Darjeeling: Kargyud Sungrab Nyamso Khang, 1982), 435/3-5].

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 432/1-2.

[Verses] that Clarify the Gnosis of Mahāmudrā (*Phyag rgya chen po ye shes gsal byed kyi rtsa ba*) is a commentary on the famous Nāropa saying, “*Dngos po'i gnas lugs*, the path and the emerging stages of the fruition.” Here, however, Mi la ras pa makes no concessions to the body as a gloss for *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. Rather, he begins with the assertion that “the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of mind itself is *mahāmudrā*,”<sup>244</sup> and then proceeds with an exegesis on ground *mahāmudrā*, path *mahāmudrā*, and fruition *mahāmudrā*.<sup>245</sup> This instance, taken with Mar pa’s commentary on the same lines, demonstrate the degree of variation that very early Bka’ brgyud exegetes exhibited when interpreting the meaning of the seminal couplet.

After Mi la ras pa, from the 11th to the 13th centuries, commentaries citing the seminal couplet produced by exegetes of the emerging branches of the Bka’ brgyud lineage exhibited increasing clarity of structure and intertextual consistency. Third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation commentaries began to unpack Nāropa’s notion of the ground (including the two *dngos po'i gnas lugs*), path, and fruition with considerably more organization and detail. Sgam po pa (1079–1153), Mi la ras pa’s “sun-like disciple,” who was one of the most prolific early scholars of the Bka’ brgyud lineage and one of its greatest systematizers, wrote at least two short works commenting on portions of Nāropa’s *Later Mandate Book*, including the topic of the two *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body and mind. These works are *Advice on the Two Natures and Advice on the Two Armors* (*Gnas lugs gnyis kyi man ngag dang go cha gnyis kyi man ngag*)<sup>246</sup> and an

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<sup>244</sup> *sems nyid dngos po'i gnas lugs ni phyag rgya chen po yin te/* [Mi la ras pa, *Zab lam phyag rgya chen po dang nā ro chos drug gzhung gces pa rab btus pa nges don rin po che'i mdzod*, in *Gdams ngag mdzod*, ed. ‘Jam mgon kong sprul (Paro, Bhutan: Lama Ngodrup and Sherab Drimey, 1979-1981), 33b/7].

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 33b/7-34/5.

<sup>246</sup> Sgam po pa Bsod nams rin chen, *Gnas lugs gnyis kyi man ngag dang go cha gnyis kyi man ngag*, in *Dwags po'i bka' 'bum* (Kathmandu: Khenpo S. Tenzin & Lama T. Namgyal, 2000).

untitled instruction text inside a collection titled *A Religious Commentary Titled A String of Pearls* (*Khrid chos mu tig tshar la brgyus pa*).<sup>247</sup> In the former work, Sgam po pa discusses the *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of body and of mind. In discussing the *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of body, Sgam po pa briefly outlines the five manifest awakenings as these correspond to embryology, and describes the subtle body of channels, winds, and vital essences. In the latter work, he emphasizes the importance of the body's posture (*lus gnad*) in the context of tantric practice. We begin to see in the work of Sgam po pa a growing interest in the role of the body's *dnegos po'i gnas lugs*.

Another invocation of the notion of *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* among the early Bka' brgyud writers is to be found in the writings of Phag mo gru pa rdo rje rgyal po (1110-1170).<sup>248</sup> Phag mo gru pa composed a work, *Nature of the Vajra Body* (*Rdo rje lus kyi gnas lugs*), which provided inspiration for Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*.<sup>249</sup> In this work, Phag mo gru pa cites the key couplet of Nāropa, and provides a brief discussion of his own which understands *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* as the basis for the path. The text has 13 folios, the first five of which are devoted to the body. He begins his discussion of the body by describing *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* in terms of a creative and imagistic embryology that is structured in terms of the aforementioned five awakenings (*byang chub lnga*). He then provides a basic map of the channels and *cakras*, along with a brief description of the winds. He then devotes a mere two

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., and [untitled] in *Khrid chos mu tig tshar la brgyus pa*, in *Collected works (Gsung 'bum) of Sgam-po-pa bsod-nams-rin-chen* (Delhi: Shashin, 1976), 8-10.

<sup>248</sup> Rdo rje rgyal po Phag mo gru pa, *Rdo rje lus kyi gnas lugs*, in *The Collected Works of Phag-mo Dru-pa* (Kathmandu: Khenpo Shedrub Tenzin and Lama Thinley Namgyal, 2003).

<sup>249</sup> Yang dgon pa directly quotes from this work once in *Explanation of the Hidden*, but the influence can also be seen in the similarities in structure and the content. See Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 452/1-2.

lines to the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the mind before he goes on to describe the path of somatic yogas and the fruition. While this striking juxtaposition of the embryology with classic categories for enlightenment lays the initial ground for Yang dgon pa's own, which is a far more detailed account of the nine months of gestation, we find that here, too, when Phag mo gru pa turns to discuss the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the mind, he addresses kinds of apperceptive experiences described in mentalistic terms, much as we find in the work of Mi la ras pa. Still, Phag mo gru pa spends half the text on the body, a departure from what we find in Nāropa's work. And he stays with the body, to some degree throughout the text, as the basis of practice.

A final invocation of the two natures (*gnas lugs*) of body and mind, preceding Yang dgon pa and within his line of transmission, is found in the writings of the founder of the 'Bri gung Bka' brgyud lineage, 'Jig rten mgon po. Given the content and organization of this short work, titled *A Commentary on the Bindu of Impeccable Conduct (Tshangs par spyod pa thig le'i khrid)*, it may well have provided inspiration for Yang dgon pa's mode of presentation in the *Explanation of the Hidden*. Here, 'Jig rten mgon po introduces the seminal couplet, as well as the aforementioned verses from *The Later Mandate Book* that also appear in the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*, and then unpacks the dimensions of body. Like his predecessors, 'Jig rten mgon po discusses embryology and the elements of the subtle body. However, unlike his predecessors (but like Yang dgon pa), 'Jig rten mgon po organizes his work around an outline that divides the human life into (1) the body's formation (*chags pa*) and (2) the body's abiding or living (*gnas pa*). Yang dgon pa would follow this lead of structuring his work around the body's life stages, but he would add to this list the body's demise (*jig pa*), as we will see a key complication for the entire notion of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. This work also represents a departure from previous exegesis in that 'Jig rten mgon po makes some independent theoretical observations about the

body’s status. For example, regarding the formation of the body, ‘Jig rten mgon po comments, “this body has, from the beginning, existed as a perfect buddha” (*lus 'di dang po nas yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sang rgyas su grub pa lags te*).<sup>250</sup> In support of his assertions, unlike previous exegetes on this topic, ‘Jig rten mgon po attempts to show parallel ideas in the Hevajra and Cakrasaṃvara tantras, a style of citing scriptural authority that Yang dgon pa also favors, but that we do not see at all in earlier works on the topic. In a number of ways, ‘Jig rten mgon po's treatment of this topic—while quite brief—heralds Yang dgon pa’s work.

Simultaneous with this growing exegetical tradition on the topic of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as the essence of embodiment in the context of the Six Doctrines of Nāropa, there was a brief interest in the Bka' brgyud lineage in writing works specifically on the topic of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, especially among Sgam po pa’s direct disciples. In these writings, the meaning of the term is aligned more with the metaphysical and epistemological meanings found in the Buddhist canon than with the vagaries of the body. Phag mo gru pa, who, we will recall, had an interest in the embodied meanings of the term, also wrote a work of this kind titled *Recognizing the Dngos po'i gnas lugs of the mind, Citing the Sūtras and Tantras* (*Sems dngos po'i gnas lugs ngo sprod mdo rgyud nas lung drangs pa*), in which he explores the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the mind as an ultimate truth, the pinnacle of the Buddhist path, pulling passages from sutras and tantras to support his perspective.<sup>251</sup> Another student of Sgam po pa, Rgyal ba ten ne (1127-1217), devoted a chapter of his *Garland of Questions and Answers that Clearly See the Profound Meaning of the*

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<sup>250</sup> ‘Jig rten mgon po, *Tshangs par spyod pa thig le'i khrid*, in ‘*Bri gung bka' brgyud chos mdzod chen mo* (Lhasa: A mgon rin po che, 2004), 346/4.

<sup>251</sup> Rdo rje rgyal po Phag mo gru pa, *Sems dngos po'i gnas lugs ngo sprod mdo rgyud nas lung drangs pa*, in *Phag mo gru pa rdo rje rgyal po'i gsung 'bum* (Lhun grub steng: Sde dge par khang, 2010).

*Vital Essence in the Heart's Mirror* (*Zhu lan thugs kyi me long tig ka zab mo'i don rnam par gzig pa'i 'phreng ba*) to the topic of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, a chapter in which he explores the reality of things (*dngos po*) as appearance and emptiness.<sup>252</sup>

Finally, Bla ma Zhang composed a short oral text (*gsung sgros*) called *Resolving the Nature of Things* (*Dngos po'i gnas lugs gtan la 'bebs par byed pa*) that gives us perhaps the most explicit definition of the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* in the Bka' brgyud lineage prior to Yang dgon pa's lifetime. In this work, the term is interpreted within a metaphysical framework. As Bla ma Zhang defines it:

*spyir dngos po'i gnas lugs zhes kyang bya/ gnas lugs kyi don zhes kyang bya/ chos nyid ces kyang bya/ stong pa nyid ces kyang bya/ phyag rgya chen po zhes kyang bya/ don dam pa zhes kyang bya ba 'di la/ theg pa'i bye brag gam/ gang zag gi blo'i bye brag gis 'dod lugs mi 'dra ba mang po zhig yod de/ thams cad dngos po'i gnas lugs gcig yin pas/ nga'i 'di kho na yin gyis gzhan gyi de min zhes chos la tha dad du mi bzung ngo'<sup>253</sup>*

Generally, the so-called real nature (*dngos po'i gnas lugs*) is also called the “true nature.” It is also called *dharmatā*. It is also called emptiness. It is also called *mahāmudrā*. It is also called the ultimate. Depending on the various vehicles and the various intellects of individuals, there are many various ways of asserting it, but—because everything is of one real nature (*dngos po'i gnas lugs*)—phenomena should not be ascertained as different, saying “Because of my ‘it is this,’ others’ ‘it is that’ is not true.”

This particular definition is remarkable in its clarity. It is quite striking that Bla ma Zhang here equates *dngos po'i gnas lugs* with *gnas lugs kyi don* (see the first line above), essentially glossing *dngos po* as *don*, a word that, when converted to an adjective, often means “ultimate” (as

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<sup>252</sup> Rgyal ba Ten ne, *Dngos po'i gnas lugs gtan la dbab pa'i le'u*, in *Zhu lan thugs kyi me long tig ka zab mo'i don rnam par gzig pa'i 'phreng ba*, in *Grub thob rgyal ba rten ne'i bshad 'bum chen mo*, in *Zhi byed snga bar phyi gsum gyi skor* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Druk Sherik Parkhang, 1979).

<sup>253</sup> Brtson 'grus brag pa Bla ma Zhang, *Dngos po'i gnas lugs gtan la 'bebs par byed pa*, in *'Gro mgon g.yu brag pa'i gsung nyams len sgom khrid kyi skor*, in *Zhang gi bka' 'bum*, 439/1-3.



opposed to relative) or “true.” This reading is confirmed as Bla ma Zhang goes on, later in the text, to equate *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* with ultimate *bodhicitta*. This passage is provided as an example of how, in Yang dgon pa's time, there was a tendency in the writings of Sgam po pa's direct disciples to align *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* with the a non-dual realization of emptiness, or with the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path. However, it is also clear—by looking at the writings of Sgam po pa himself—that he was familiar with the two *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* (body and mind) and taught this to his disciples.<sup>254</sup> So, although the term *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* was applied to embodied meanings in some contexts, it also by itself—in other contexts—enjoyed a general definition aligned with the ultimate truth of emptiness.

It should also be noted here that the pre-eminent Tibetan philosopher and scholar Sa skya Paṇḍita, who, as already mentioned, was an important teacher for Yang dgon pa, used the term *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* occasionally in his writings. For example, in *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes (Sdom gsum rab dbye)*, he takes *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* to mean “factual” or “an actual condition” of something, contrasting it with a poetically exaggerated description (*skyon yon bsngags pa*) of that very same thing.<sup>255</sup> This comes up in the context of Sa skya Paṇḍita's discussion of the tradition of poetic eulogy, and helps him to contrast that with the tradition of defining things as they actually are. He uses the example of the way poets exaggerate when describing holy sites such as Vulture's Peak. In actuality, he notes, these places are often not as described. In this section, he uses the term *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* in connection with the way things actually are or appear, in contrast to how they are exaggerated to be. Sa skya Paṇḍita's

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<sup>254</sup> See Bsod nams rin chen, *Gnas lugs gnyis kyi man ngag*.

<sup>255</sup> Sa skya Paṇḍita, *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes: Essential Distinctions Among the Individual Liberation, Great Vehicle, and Tantric Systems*, 312, verses 330-338.

usage aligns with the meaning of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as the “nature of things,” implying a real or true mode of existence of things, which we find in the Buddhist canon. This example provides some insight into how the term may have been used casually, in Yang dgon pa’s day, to refer to the real mode of existence of something. Indeed, when we see how the term is explicated in Yang dgon pa, there is a sense of the unmasking of the way the body appears versus the way it actually exists.

We have seen in this chapter that the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* has a long history, extending back as far as the translated materials of the Tibetan Buddhist canon. In those early materials, the term ranged in meaning from a metaphysical nature of things to an epistemic nature of mind. In some of those early materials, there are shades of inclination towards a meaning related to the nature of human embodiment. The early instances of the phrase in the Bka’ brgyud lineage position the term in what is clearly a central and foundational position with respect to conceptions of Buddhist soteriology. At this point it is now clear, from looking at the evolution of the term in Bka’ brgyud writings, that at least two valences on this term existed simultaneously in these lineage writings over time. First, the term continued to carry a relationship to the ultimate goals of the tradition. As in the early Mahāyāna sources, the Bka’ brgyud sources continued to view *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as synonymous with the ultimate truth, a verity to be realized as the fruition of the path to enlightenment, but in Bka’ brgyud sources, this verity was understood specifically to indicate the nature of mind revealed through meditation practice. On the other hand, the term adapted to the somatic interests of the literature of the Six Doctrines of Nāropa by taking on a valence connected to embodiment. Here, as the explicit field of embodied being, *dngos po'i gnas lugs* takes the human body and mind as the nexus of focus. As we have seen, that valence may well have been there from an early time. However, in the

Bka' brgyud literature preceding Yang dgon pa, we see the beginnings of explicit application of this term to ordinary human embodiment, with all of its material messiness and complexity, as well as all of its subtlety and potential. For example, we see Nāropa assert that *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* is “inseparable from the ordinary” and that it includes the ordinary process of fetal development in a womb. In Phag mo gru pa, we see a work that begins to write the body more explicitly as a complex network of channels and *cakras*. Yang dgon pa, as we will see in the following chapters, takes these laconic beginnings as the starting point for his construction in *Explanation of the Hidden* of an entire metaphysics of the substance of enlightenment in terms of the ordinary body, and the means for getting there.

## Chapter Three

### *Dngos po'i gnas lugs* according to Yang dgon pa

Now that we have reviewed the history of the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, we are in a better position to appreciate Yang dgon pa's contributions and innovations with respect to the understanding of the grounds and path to enlightenment. Yang dgon pa, like his predecessors in Nāropa's line of descent, considered *dngos po'i gnas lugs* to be the foundation of Buddhist practice, which is to say that *dngos po'i gnas lugs* is that which needs to be known and understood before a religious path can be traveled. However, as we will see in the following chapters, Yang dgon pa's presentation of the topic of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* diverges from that of his predecessors in many important ways. Most notably, Yang dgon pa decided to make the foundation, *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, his main topic. He composed this lengthy work not primarily as exegesis on the methods of the tantric Buddhist path (what one *does* with the body), but rather as an exegesis on the body itself (what the body *is*), with the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as a critical concept, and the path and fruition as supports to this main topic. That he shifts the weight of attention of his exegesis from a path-centric paradigm, inherited from his lineage predecessors, to *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, elevating the basis (*gzhi*) over and above the topics of path (*lam*) and fruition (*'bras bu*), may not appear to be a significant departure, because the author still remains in the confines of the structure validated by his line of transmission. However, examination of this work reveals that the devil is in the details. Yang dgon pa's departures and shifts in emphasis

are the very warp and weave that reveal the fabric of an overall project to construct a uniquely somatic vision of enlightenment that contrasts sharply with the mind-centered vision of enlightenment emphasized by most of his predecessors, contemporaries, and even those who followed him later. In this chapter I will explore Yang dgon pa's overall project, as expressed in the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, as it emerges in these very details: the structure of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, Yang dgon pa's definition of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, the title of his work, and his framing of the project as whole. In looking at the foundation of Yang dgon pa's vision in this chapter, I will also turn to some passages in the commentaries on the *Explanation of the Hidden* written by his direct religious heir Spyan snga ba, who studied under him for twenty years, and devoted his own literary career entirely to organizing, clarifying and commenting on Yang dgon pa's work. Spyan snga ba's perspective, while it does not precisely mirror Yang dgon pa's own understanding, does provide us with a voice on the topic that is closer to Yang dgon pa's own context, time-period, and line of transmission than any other secondary source available.

### **Style and Structure of the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body***

The outline embedded in Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden* is rough compared to later exegetical compositions of his lineage, and even compared to Yang dgon pa's other works, to the degree that it seems possible that the *Explanation of the Hidden* was a rough draft that never reached full completion. This seems like a real possibility given that Yang dgon pa's *Retreat Teachings* is organized and polished in comparison, and given Yang dgon pa's early death at the age of 46. Because the text's internal outline is so

inchoate, an “outline text” titled *Summary Points of the Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body* (*Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad kyi bsdus don*), written by Spyan snga ba, is of enormous help when paired with the root text. I refer the reader to a translation of this outline in the Appendix, and a simplified version of the outline has been provided below as well.

To introduce the structure of his *Explanation of the Hidden*, Yang dgon pa explains that everything an adept in his tradition needs to know to enact his own full enlightenment can be summarized under three topics. Those three topics, in the Bka’ brgyud system of salvation in Nāropa’s line of transmission, refer to three phases of Buddhist practice: the basis, path, and fruition. Yang dgon pa underscores this perspective at the beginning of the *Explanation of the Hidden* by citing one of his gurus: “The holy lama said: ‘There are no completely white teachings not included in those three’” (*bla ma dam pa'i zhal nas/ rnam par dkar ba'i chos thams cad de gsum du ma 'dus pa gang yang med gsungs/*).<sup>256</sup> Following the precedent of works of the Bka’ brgyud lineage covered in the previous chapter, Yang dgon pa organizes the contents of the *Explanation of the Hidden* around these very phases: (1) The basis, which he defines (in keeping with the ‘Brug pa Bka’ brgyud tradition generally) as *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, (2) the path, and (3) the fruition. However, he does not devote attention to these three phases in equal measure. Unlike previous exegetes of his lineage, Yang dgon pa heavily privileges the role of the basis, *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, over the other two phases—certainly in terms of the sheer amount of attention and textual space that he devotes to this topic. This structure, and the weight of his

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<sup>256</sup> It is not possible to know definitively who “the holy lama” is here. Slob dpon Mchod rten’s educated guess is that it may refer his guru ‘Bri gung Gcung rin chen, because he is listed first in the colophon as a source of inspiration for the work (see Chapter One) [Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication, 2012], but it is not certain. It appears that it is not Sa skya Paṇḍita, because later in the work, Yang dgon pa quotes the scholar several times and introduces him by name, rather than by a generic moniker.

attention, is evident in the outline of the *Explanation of the Hidden* provided below.

Approximately three-quarters of the work concerns *dnegos po'i gnas lugs*, with the final quarter of the work covering the other two topics.

The three main topics, along with their subdivisions, are the centerpiece of the outline of the *Explanation of the Hidden*. A simplified outline below can help us begin to get a grasp of Yang dgon pa's main topics, overall structure, and terminology of his work.<sup>257</sup>

### Outline of the *Explanation of the Hidden of the Vajra Body*

Homage and introductory remarks

I. [The Basis:] How all the phenomena of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa abide in the *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of body, speech, and mind (33 folios)<sup>258</sup>

A. **The *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of the body** (18 folios)

1. How the body is formed from the five manifest awakenings (embryology)

1. The outer five manifest awakenings
2. The inner five manifest awakenings

2. The Channels

1. Introductory remarks

- a. The central channel
- b. The attributes and situation of the *rasanā* and *lalanā* together with their measurements.
- c. An explanation of the types of channel incidentally not asserted [previously]

2. An extensive presentation of the *cakras*

- a. The *mahāsukhacakra* at the crown
- b. The *sambhogacakra* at the throat
- c. The *dharmacakra* at the heart

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<sup>257</sup> A complete outline of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, based on Spyān snga ba's organizing document, *Summary of the Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body (Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad gyi bsdus don)*, can be found in the Appendix I of this thesis.

<sup>258</sup> Folio counts are based on the Pha jo ldings version of the *Explanation of the Hidden*.

- d. The *nirmāṇacakra* at the navel
- 3. A conclusion by way of combined classes
- 3. *Bodhicitta*
- 4. Unclean substances
- 5. Thought

**B. The *ḍngos po'i gnas lugs of speech* (8 folios)**

- 1. The winds of the five elements
  - a. Coarse winds
  - b. Subtle winds
- 2. Syllables
- 3. Vowels
- 4. Integration
- 5. Words

**C. The *ḍngos po'i gnas lugs of mind* (6 folios)**

- 1. *Bodhicitta* vital essences
  - a. The five nectars
  - b. The nature of the white and red elements
  - c. The waxing and waning of the sun and moon
- 2. Great bliss
- 3. The five gnoses
- 4. Non-conceptuality
- 5. Meditative Concentration

**D. The *ḍngos po'i gnas lugs of body, speech, and mind as inseparable* (1 folio)**

II. [**The Path:**] How the dharmas of the path are complete in the ascertainment that body, speech, and mind inseparable are method and knowledge (2 folios)

- 1. When forming, forming as method and knowledge
- 2. When alive, living as method and knowledge
- 3. When dying, dying as method and knowledge
- 4. The path of liberation as the generation phase
- 5. The completion phase as intrinsic

III. [**The Fruition:**] How the dharmas of the fruition are completed by ascertaining perfect buddhahood (3 folios)

- 1. When forming, forming as a perfect Buddha
- 2. When living, living as a perfect Buddha
- 3. When dying, dying as a perfect Buddha

The Conclusion: Concluding verses and colophon



This outline of the *Explanation of the Hidden* serves to provide a sketch of Yang dgon pa's overall project. The number of folios in each category makes clear that the bulk of this work is devoted to the basis, *dngos po'i gnas lugs* and its varieties. Each major section of the text (ground, path, and fruition) loosely follows the temporal progression of a human body's lifespan: formation of the body, life of the body, and death of the body.

In this outline, we begin to glimpse one of the major doctrinal innovations of Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden*, regarding exegesis on *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. It is an innovation of classification, by virtue of expansion of the category of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* itself, as well as an expansion of the contents of each category. Whereas previous lineage exegetes had posited **two** *dngos po'i gnas lugs* —a *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body and a *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of mind— Yang dgon pa proliferates the natures into **four** kinds, which he proceeds to unpack throughout the *Explanation of the Hidden*: (1) a *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body, (2) a *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of speech, (3) a *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of mind, and (4) a *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body, speech, and mind as inseparable. With the creation of two new categories, Yang dgon pa recalibrates the model outline (*sa bcad*) of previous works, expanding the scope of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* to include every aspect of Buddhist embodiment, and, at the same time, repositioning the body in particular as the critical term of consideration for a tantric vision of enlightenment. The way he repositions the body is both subtle and embedded in the nature of this outline. Let us consider how Yang dgon pa's structure makes way for the aims of a somatic theory.

First, Yang dgon pa invokes a new category that he calls the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of speech (*ngag gi dngos po'i gnas lugs*). As we saw in the previous chapter, exegetes beginning with Nāropa had heretofore identified the body, especially the elements of the subtle body (channels, *cakras*, syllables, winds, and vital essences), as the *dngos po'i gnas*

*lugs* of the body (*lus kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*), and identified *mahāmudrā* realization and emptiness with the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the mind (*sems kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*). In doing so, their presentations relegated the body to a subsection of the discussion of the basis for Buddhist enlightenment, and often the lesser of the two subsections, with attention skewing towards the mentalistic terms of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of mind (*sems kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*). As we will recall from Chapter Two, the direct disciples of Sgam po pa devoted entire works to a *dngos po'i gnas lugs* discussed in mentalistic or metaphysical terms. In prior models parsing the term, in short, there was a built-in dualism that cast body and mind in quite divergent, and decidedly unequal, terms. Body was aligned with the subtle body of tantric theory, and mind was aligned with emptiness and non-dual gnosis, and/or experiences of clarity, bliss, and non-conceptuality. Nāropa, Phag mo gru pa, and Sgam po pa are examples of early Bka' brgyud exegetes who, in their commentarial literature on *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, reinforce a body-mind dualism, by virtue of classification and description.

Yang dgon pa, in contrast, chooses instead to align body and mind with their correlates in the subtle (or vajra) body—channels (*rtsa*) and vital essences (*thig le*). Now, this correlation of body and mind with channels and vital essences was not an original concept: it has ample precedent in Buddhist tantras, the very tantras that Yang dgon pa cites as sources of authority. However, Yang dgon pa's predecessors had never aligned their own primary categories of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* with the primary tantric classifications of the subtle body as direct correlates. To do so would involve shifting salvific authority away from the mind and towards the body, a move that would have had a number of possibly unsettling implications. Nonetheless, this is precisely the path Yang dgon pa

forges through realigning his categories, and in doing so invites the implications of a somatic theory that posits the body as the primary tool for salvific release.

But, in order to achieve this end, the primary categories of discussion needed to be adapted because, in tantric ethos, the components of vajra body are not two, but three: channels, winds (*rlung*), and vital essences. Therefore, achieving the end of aligning *dngos po'i gnas lugs* squarely with the subtle body left a need to posit a third category, a new dimension of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* to correspond to winds (*rlung*), the third dimension of subtle body. That third category Yang dgon pa called the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of speech (*ngag gi dngos po'i gnas lugs*), and—with its creation—Yang dgon pa was able to align body, speech, and mind with channels, winds, and vital essences, without relegating the vajra body to a mere subsection of his outline. With this new categorical structure, the vajra body becomes the basis on which all of Yang dgon pa's theory of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* can be constructed. As will be discussed below, this exegetical move allowed Yang dgon pa to bring into sharper focus an emphasis on the subtle body, over and above the mind, as the basis for Buddhist liberation. This move, however, required him to deploy an in-between category of the nature of physicality of speech (*ngag gi dngos po'i gnas lugs*) to carry out his project to subsume the entire basis of liberation as channels, winds, and vital essences, while aligning these categories with the more exoteric categories of body, speech, and mind.

The realignment of the categories of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* to favor an exegesis on the vajra body has many implications, and these will be explored as the thesis unfolds. But one of the most profound of these implications concerns subsuming the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of mind (*sems kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*) within a broader category of the vajra body.

As can be seen in the outline of the work, with the realignment of the categories of body, speech, and mind with channels, winds, and vital essences, the mind now correlates with vital essences, a component of the subtle body. The mind, which once enjoyed a status that was separate from the body, categorically, in the work of Yang dgon pa's predecessors, and was once discussed primarily in mentalistic terms in this genre of literature, is now subsumed under the critical concept of body and therefore can be discussed primarily in physical terms.

This brings us to another important implication of Yang dgon pa's categorical shifts. With the subtle body as the overarching category subsuming body and mind, the lines between these three categories blur. They are separate as terminology, not as actuality, because they are united explicitly in a single body. The *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body and mind, held separate in prior considerations, are much harder to hold as utterly separate entities within a somatic theory. This issue is addressed explicitly by Yang dgon pa's creation and unpacking of a fourth category of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*: the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body, speech, and mind as inseparable. This category recognizes, acknowledges, and celebrates the interconnectedness of the three components of human embodiment: body, speech, and mind. This doctrine of inseparability also critiques a dualism in which the subtle body is categorically separated from the mind, a dualism that was *de rigueur* before, during, and after Yang dgon pa's lifetime. He finds, through his exploration of the subtle body, that this body is the natural expression of a radical interpenetration of physicality and mind, of thought and matter, of energy and flesh, and of all manner of physical and non-physical dyads. In fact, for Yang dgon pa, the subtle body is the solution to a dualism that separates physical from non-physical, mind from matter.

The “subtle” is the intersection of these two worlds. Hence, Yang dgon pa’s first theoretical move is to realign and redefine the categories of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* in order to squarely align the basis with the critical term of the body, especially the notion of a vajra body.

### **Body, Speech, and Mind, and the *Non-dual Victory Tantra***

As can be seen in the outline of the *Explanation of the Hidden* provided above, each of the major categories of body, speech, and mind has five subcategories. For body, these subcategories are (1) the five manifest awakenings, (2) the channels, (3) *bodhicitta*, (4) unclean substances, and (5) thought. For speech, the subcategories are (1) winds, (2) syllables, (3) vowels, (4) integration, and (5) words. For mind, the subcategories are (1) *bodhicitta* vital essences, (2) great bliss, (3) the five gnoses, (4) non-conceptuality, and (5) meditative concentration. Yang dgon pa derives these subsections, and his subsections on the topics of body and speech, from a set of verses appearing in a work he refers to as “the *mahāyoga tantra* called *Vajra Rosary*” (*Rdo rje phreng ba zhes bya ba rnal 'byor chen po'i rgyud*). The verses are:

*lus ni byang chub lnga rnam dang//  
rtsa dang byang chub sems dang ni//  
mi gtsang rdzas dang rnam rtog gis//  
lus kyi chos ni gnas pa yin//*

*ngag ni 'byung ba lnga rnams dang//  
yi ge dang ni dbyangs rnams dang//  
sbyor ba dang ni tshig dag gis//  
ngag gi chos ni gnas pa yin//*

*sems ni ye shes lnga rnams dang//  
bde ba thig le nyid dang ni//  
mi rtog pa yi ting 'dzin gyis//*

*sems kyi chos ni gnas pa yin//*<sup>259</sup>

The body: The five-fold awakening,  
Channels, *bodhicitta*,  
Unclean substances, and thought.  
By virtue of these, the phenomenon of body exists.

Speech: The five elements,  
Syllables, vowels,  
Integration and words.  
By virtue of these, the phenomenon of speech exists.

Mind: The five gnoses,  
Bliss, vital essence, and  
Non-conceptual meditative concentration.  
By virtue of these, the phenomenon of mind exists.<sup>260</sup>

Surprisingly, a survey of the tantras in extant versions of the Tibetan Buddhist canon reveals that these verses are *not* found in any of the versions of the tantra most commonly referred to by the name *Vajra Rosary*, one of six canonical commentaries (*bshad rgyud*) on the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*.<sup>261</sup> However, these verses are found, in their entirety, in another tantra with ties to Yang dgon pa's line of religious transmission, the *Non-dual Victory Tantra* (*Rnam rgyal gnyis med rgyud*), which the reader may remember was briefly mentioned in Chapter Two as a source of exegesis on the self-nature of things (*dngos po'i rang bzhin*). This tantra was translated by

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<sup>259</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 471/2. *Gnyis med rnam rgyal gyi rgyud*, 429.

<sup>260</sup> These verses will be repeated in Chapter Four, as they come up in the context of Yang dgon pa's exegesis on body, speech, and mind.

<sup>261</sup> This tantra is the subject of a recent dissertation: David R. Kittay, "Interpreting the Vajra Rosary: Truth and Method Meets Wisdom and Method" (Columbia University Doctoral Dissertation, 2011). See 'Rnal 'byor chen po'i rgyud dpal rdo rje phreng ba mngon par brjod pa rgyud thams cad kyi snying po gsang la rnam par phye ba (*Vajramālābhīdhānamahāyogatantra-sarvatantraḥṛdayarahasyavibhaṅga*), in *Sde dge 'i Bstan 'gyur*, Toh 445, Rgyud 'bum, ca (Delhi: Delhi Karmapae Choedhey, Gyalwae Sungrab Partun Khang, 1982-85).

Nāropa's student Mar pa Chos kyi Blo gros, and another of Mar pa's Indian gurus Śrī Jñānagarbha. As was discussed in Chapter Two, this tantra may be one of the key Indian sources predating Nāropa that informed and fed into Nāropa's own discussion of this topic. A clue that this may be the case can be found in Nāropa's seminal *Later Mandate Book*. There, in a section introducing the nature of the body's materiality as the basis for the Buddhist path, we find the very same four-lined stanza that Yang dgon pa attributes to the *Vajra Rosary*. In Nāropa's manual, however, the root verses are integrated seamlessly into the versified body of the text, with no clear attribution.

The intertextual connection between the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*, Nāropa's *Later Mandate Book*, and Yang dgon pa's work is striking and brings up a number of questions. Was Nāropa's gloss on *dngos po'i gnas lugs* inspired by the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*? Was the *Later Mandate Book* perhaps compiled by Śrī Jñānagarbha or Mar pa, contemporaries with connections to Nāropa? Was Yang dgon pa aware of this intertextuality? It seems likely that he could not have avoided it, because other exegetes in his lineage cite the overlapping verses in their works on *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, attributing these to Nāropa's transmission. Yang dgon pa, however, does not attribute these verses to Nāropa's *Later Mandate Book*, even as a secondary source, but rather—having seemingly discovered that these verses existed elsewhere—decided to credit the original. Now, it is possible that this *Vajra Rosary* that Yang dgon pa refers to was, in Yang dgon pa's time, another name for the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*. Alternately, it is possible these verses appeared in an older, and now non-existent, version of the extant *Vajra Rosary*.<sup>262</sup> But there are several compelling arguments that support the former possibility over the latter, the

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<sup>262</sup> According to Kittay, citing Tsong kha pa and others, there were several translations of the *Rdo rje phreng ba* circulating in Tibet, at least as late as the 15th century ("Interpreting the Vajra Rosary," 166).

possibility that the *Vajra Rosary* Yang dgon pa mentions is, in fact, the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*. First, there is the provenance of the Tibetan translation of the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*, which came through Mar pa. That provenance means that Yang dgon pa would likely have had access to this tantra in the collections of his lineage. Second, there is some evidence that this tantra was prized by some Bka' brgyud lineages due to this provenance. For example, all 77 chapters of this tantra can be found in a collection of works published in Lhasa, the catalogue of which was translated by Per K. Sørensen in 2007 in *Grand Dharma Trove of the Glorious 'Bri-gung bKa'-brgyud Tradition (Dpal 'Bri gung bka' brgyud kyi chos mdzod chen mo)*. This collection contains an unusual and rare set of works deemed important to the Bka' brgyud transmissions, and the *Non-dual Victory Tantra* is the only tantra appearing in this collection.<sup>263</sup> As was already noted in Chapter One, the heaviest influences on the structure of Yang dgon pa's work seem to have come via 'Bri gung transmissions, especially those that Yang dgon pa received from Gcung Rin chen. It appears that this tantra was especially prized by the 'Bri gung lineage, so it would stand as a likely source for Yang dgon pa's work. Finally, the context in which these verses appear in the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*, and the fact that the verses are identical and contiguous in Yang dgon pa's work, in the same order, make a case that Yang dgon pa pulled these lines from the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*, or some version of it, perhaps known then by another name, in order to support his somatic vision of awakening with an authoritative voice harkening back to the Indian tantras.

It is notable that Yang dgon pa credited only this tantra, and not *The Later Mandate Book*, for the first stanza, having discovered or been shown the verses in this other source

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<sup>263</sup> Sørensen and Drolma, *Rare Texts from Tibet: Seven Sources for the Ecclesiastical History of Medieval Tibet*, 394-97.



(perhaps by Gcung Rin chen). In this tantra, additional verses (the second and third stanza)—not cited in the *Later Mandate Book*, but cited by Yang dgon pa—explicate the body, speech, and mind in decidedly tantric terms. These verses were selected by Yang dgon pa probably due to their content that supported his own somatic vision of enlightenment. Perhaps Yang dgon pa and/or his contemporaries viewed the *Non-dual Victory Tantra* as Nāropa’s source for these lines of verse, if not also for his broader inspiration to use *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* (which appears in this tantra as *dnegos po'i rang bzhin*) as a key term. The fact that the *Non-dual Victory Tantra* was viewed as an earlier source work for Nāropa himself may be the reason that Yang dgon pa did not feel the need to credit Nāropa for these particular verses. In all, Yang dgon pa extracts three blocks of verse from Chapter 32 of the *Non-dual Victory Tantra* to structure his discussion of the *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of body, speech, and mind. These blocks appear in the context of a discussion on the topic of the mind as *dnegos po'i rang bzhin*, which expands into a theoretical meditation on the nature of a vajra body, speech, and mind.

It is not difficult to see why Yang dgon pa might have been interested in these verses. Not only did they have some precedent in Nāropa’s transmission, but these blocks of verse are well suited for use as an outline, because of their content and topic, as well as their symmetry, conciseness, and organization. The first block summarizes the term of “body” in five points. The second block summarizes the term “speech” in five points. The third block summarizes the term “mind” in five points. Only the first block consists of verses that overlap with the *Later Mandate Book*. In the fact of this overlap, we can see that Yang dgon pa’s reasons for extracting this outline may have been more than organizational convenience. By taking this block as a starting point, Yang dgon pa leans on the authority of Nāropa and the Buddhist tantras simultaneously. The passages will be provided verbatim and explored in the next chapter, but the foregoing

reflection on their source helps us see that Yang dgon pa's project was to map the subtle body of tantric understanding much more fully onto the hermeneutic of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* than his lineage predecessors, as well as onto the more conventional Mahāyāna categories of body, speech, and mind.

### Yang dgon pa's Understanding of *Dngos po'i gnas lugs*

Now we will turn our attention to Yang dgon pa's own understanding of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. After some verses of homage, and a statement about the history of the transmission (quoted in Chapter Two of the dissertation), but still prior to entering the formal section of the outline devoted to the basis as *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, Yang dgon pa offers some general introductory remarks laying out his main topic of discussion. Here he identifies his main topic not as the path or the fruition, but rather *dngos po'i gnas lugs* itself. While this is a long passage, it is worth quoting in its entirety, as it provides an initial overview of Yang dgon pa's emphasis and his theoretical perspective. He begins by making a case, at least rhetorically, that knowing *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, specifically a *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body, is necessary to succeed on a religious path:

*de la dang po dngos po'i gnas lugs*<sup>264</sup> *ma shes na lam dang 'bras bu mi shes/ don spyi gtan la ma phebs par rang mtshan mngon du mi byed/ shes pa*<sup>265</sup> *shes bya dang ma mthun na lam du mi 'gro te*<sup>266</sup> */ dper na rna ba la mig yin snyam du bskal par bsgoms kyang mig du mi 'gro ba bzhin no/ de 'ang lus dngos po'i gnas lugs ma shes na sgoms pa*

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<sup>264</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 116/6: *gzhi dngos po'i gnas lugs*.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 117/2: *shes pa* is missing.

<sup>266</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 3: *ste*.

*don gyi gnad mi shes/ de ma shes na sems mi zin/ sems dngos po'i gnas lugs ma shes na  
sgom mkhan gnad kyi 'tshang<sup>267</sup> mi thon/ de ma thon na dmigs pa dang mtshan mar  
'chor<sup>268</sup>/ lus sems dbyer med dngos po'i gnas lugs ma shes na/ sgom bya don gyi ye shes  
ngo mi shes<sup>269</sup>/ de shes na sku lnga rang chas su gnas so<sup>270</sup>/ pha rol tu phyin pa'i theg pa  
bas sems dngos po'i gnas lugs shes kyang/ lus dngos po'i gnas lugs ma shes pas/ she rab  
zab mo yod kyang<sup>271</sup> mngon du byed pa'i thabs la rmongs nas/ yun ring por<sup>272</sup> 'bras bu  
mngon du mi byed do<sup>273</sup>/ kha sbyor gyi rgyud las<sup>274</sup>/*

*chos kyi phung po brgyad khrid dang//  
bzhi stong dag gi cho gas ni/<sup>275</sup>  
lus kyi de nyid mi shes pas//  
de dag thams cad 'bras bu med/<sup>276</sup>*

*ces so/ de las 'dir dngos po'i gnas lugs bla ma brgyud pa'i rim pa las 'ongs shing/ rang gi  
nyams myong gi grub pa cung zad bri bar byas ste/<sup>277</sup>*

If you do not understand *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, you will not understand the path and fruition.<sup>278</sup> If you do not become certain about an abstract notion, the intrinsic characteristics will not become manifest. If understanding and the object of

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 3: *mtshang*.

<sup>268</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 117/5: *'chor ro*.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 117/5-6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 3: *bsgom bya don gyi ngo bo mi shes*.

<sup>270</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 3: *de shes na sku lnga rang chas su gnas yod*.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 3: *de* inserted here.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 3: *mor*.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 3: *pa'o*.

<sup>274</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 118/3: *sambuṭi'i rgyud phyi ma las*; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 3: *sambuṭi'i rgyud las* [read "samputa"].

<sup>275</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 3: *bzhi stong gi ni cho ga dag*.

<sup>276</sup> *Yang dag par sbyor ba zhes bya ba'i rgyud (Samputa-tantra)*, in *Bka' 'gyur Dpe bsdur ma* (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 1996-2008), 430.

<sup>277</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 423/4-424/4.

<sup>278</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis) variant: If you do not understand the basis, *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, you will not understand the path and the fruition.

understanding are out of accord, the path will not be traversed.<sup>279</sup> For example, even if you meditate for an eon thinking that the ear is the eye, the ear will not actually become an eye.

Furthermore, if you do not understand the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body, you will not understand the ultimate point of meditation. If you do not understand that, the mind is not recognized.<sup>280</sup> If you do not understand the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the mind, the meditator's flaws will not be rooted out. If those are not rooted out, you will get lost in foci and characteristics. If you do not understand the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body and mind inseparable, you will not recognize the object of meditation, the ultimate wisdom essence.<sup>281</sup> If you understand that, however, the five *kāyas* are intrinsically present.

If a person who follows the Paramitayāna understands the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the mind but does not know the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body, although his knowledge might be profound, he will be in the dark as to the method for actualizing [that knowledge]. Therefore, the fruit will not be actualized for a long time. The *Samputa Tantra* says:

If you do not know the reality of the body  
Through the rituals of the 84,000 collections of teaching,  
All those are fruitless.

For those reasons, I will here write a little about *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as it comes from the lamas in the succession of transmission and as it has been gleaned through my own experience.

The degree to which Yang dgon pa holds the concept of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* in a place of esteem can be seen in the way he defends its indispensability on the salvific path. But this does not necessarily set Yang dgon pa's theoretical stance apart from his predecessors. As we saw in Chapter Two, the valorization of the term and concept of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* dates as far back

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid., variant: If [*dngos po'i gnas lugs*] is out of accord with the object of understanding, the path will not be traversed.

<sup>280</sup> We find a very similar statement in the context of Sgam po pa' discussion of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body (*lus kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*): *lus kyi gnad ma shes na/ sgom pa'i gnad mi shes/ de ma shes na/ sems mi zin pas/* (If you do not know the essential point of body, you will not know the essential point of meditation. If you do not know that, the mind will not be stabilized.) [Bsod nams rin chen, *Gnas lugs gnyis kyi man ngag*, 416].

<sup>281</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis and Beijing) variant: If you do not understand the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body and mind inseparable, you will not recognize the object of meditation, the ultimate essence.

as the Mahāyāna sūtras. What makes Yang dgon pa's introductory remarks unique is not that he valorizes *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, but rather what he thinks this term means, and how he unpacks it. We discover first that—unlike some previous works with similar doctrinal structure and heritage—Yang dgon pa favors an embodied understanding of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. That embodied understanding is at the center, rather than at the periphery, of his discussion. Now, as we also saw in Chapter Two, some short works on the sole topic of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* existed, but these were not works structured around an outline of ground, path, and fruition, and these works did not interpret *dngos po'i gnas lugs* in embodied terms, but rather as a metaphysical nature of reality. Furthermore, the works structured around Nāropa's triad of basis, path, and fruition all emphasized the path, not the basis. Yang dgon pa, on the other hand, makes clear right at the beginning that he will not only emphasize the basis; he makes the case here that the basis, his main topic, supersedes the importance of the path. That is the first departure from previous models evident in this passage. The second departure evident here is that Yang dgon pa's particular gloss on the basis is not exactly the same one he inherited. While it is not immediately obvious at the beginning of this passage, by the end of the passage it is more evident: By *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, Yang dgon pa primarily means the situation of the human body itself, a body that includes all aspects of lived experience.

In this introduction to the basis as *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, we are also introduced to one of the pervading themes in the *Explanation of the Hidden*: a concern with the particular relationship between the mind and the body. Regarding this relationship, Yang dgon pa tells us that stabilization of mind cannot be achieved without knowing the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body. Furthermore, he reasons, faults cannot be purified without knowing the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the mind. However, while these two understandings of body and mind individually form a

critical basis for successful and stable meditative practice, they do not form the basis for the pinnacle of realization. That, Yang dgon pa maintains (here echoing a common tantric sentiment), is achieved through understanding the non-duality of body and mind, or as he puts it, “the *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of body and mind inseparable” (*lus sems dbyer med dnegos po'i gnas lugs*). Thus, we are afforded a first glimpse of Yang dgon pa’s own brand of soteriological monism, a kind of monism that is unpacked when Yang dgon pa discusses the fourth *dnegos po'i gnas lugs*, much later in the book, but is hinted at throughout. In Yang dgon pa’s monism, body and mind (and speech as well) are inherently inseparable, and this must eventually be seen and experienced as true for any of the fruits of the Buddhist path to manifest. However, while their inseparability is inherent, the understanding of that inseparability is not. For this unity to be realized, the nature of body and mind must first be understood distinctly and individually, on a subtle level. In the process of understanding distinctions, the interpenetration of body and mind is observed. Finally, through the observation of that interpenetration, along with an integrated practice, their unity is realized and mastered. The unfolding of the *Explanation of the Hidden* mirrors this very process. In short, an abiding imperative for Yang dgon pa is the interpenetration of body and mind, leading eventually to a radical integration, expressed as a philosophical monism of human embodiment.

In the foregoing passage, Yang dgon pa first argues that knowing the *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of the body and mind are important, and that without either one, a Buddhist path cannot be completed. Then he tells us that knowing their inseparability is critical for understanding “the ultimate wisdom essence,” the goal of enlightenment in his tradition. In this part of the passage, Yang dgon pa’s statements paraphrase elements of the perspective he inherited. But then he begins to diverge from previous paradigms, when his introduction to the topic culminates in a

statement that rhetorically subverts the mind, and privileges the body, a move that begins to reveal to the reader the deeper nature of his project. Yang dgon pa now states that knowing the nature of the mind, without a knowledge of the body, is insufficient for enlightenment to be fully enacted: “If a person who follows the Paramitayāna understands the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the mind but does not know the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body, although his knowledge might be profound, he will be in the dark as to the method for actualizing [that knowledge].” This statement is a direct critique of a path that focuses only on the mādhyamika approach to understanding the nature of things. In doing so it obliquely relegates mentalist understandings of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* to a lower status than the semantic innovations of his theory that privilege the body. Now, the reader might be wondering if he could be going so far as to imply that the body fully trumps the mind as the basis for the enactment of enlightenment. In this passage, Yang dgon pa does not go quite this far, but rather offers a quotation from the *Samputa Tantra* to further clarify his perspective, taking the argument to a slightly more emphatic level by asserting that all the Buddha's teachings are essentially sterile without knowledge of the body. Or, to put the statement in its implied positive form, knowing the reality of the body (*lus kyi de nyid*) is critical for attaining the highest goals of this tradition. So, as we can see from this introductory passage, Yang dgon pa tells us in no uncertain terms why he is composing a work on the vajra body. He is writing because a knowledge of the body's corporeal way of being, expressed as *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, is the key to tantric enlightenment, before any other goals of the Buddhist tradition can be achieved. As we will discover, the mind certainly is also an important element for enacting enlightenment, but for Yang dgon pa, the mind is understood as an embodied entity.

## Defining *Dngos po'i gnas lugs*

Yang dgon pa's introduction to his main topic in the *Explanation of the Hidden* tells us that he aligns *dngos po'i gnas lugs* with human embodiment, but he does not explicitly assign the term to one concise definition. Another one of his famous works, however, the retreat manual *Retreat Teachings, The Source of All Positive Qualities*, contains a passage in which Yang dgon pa glosses the term precisely and specifically. Here he breaks the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* into its parts, and defines both *dngos po* and *gnas lugs* in a way that helps us understand both the literal meanings of the term's components, and Yang dgon pa's specific emphasis with regard to the term:

*khyad par gyi lam gyi skabs su gsang sngags kyi rgyu lam 'bras bu'i go don 'di gsungs te/ rang gi lus phung khams skye mched brtan g.yo'i dngos po thams cad ye nas lha'i dkyil 'khor rang bzhin du gnas te/ de bla ma gdams ngag zab nas byas pa min/ slob ma shes rab che nas 'byung ba min/ gshis de ltar gnas pa de gnas lugs/ de de ltar ngo ma shes pa de ma rig pa/ tha mal gyi lus dang snod bcud rang rgyud par gzung bas 'khrul pa/ der nad dang gnod pa nyon mongs pa mi dge sdug bsngal sna tshogs 'byung ba'o.*<sup>282</sup>

The following is the meaning to be understood with regard to the cause, path, and fruition when practicing the special path of secret mantra: All stationary and mobile **things (dngos po)**, such as your body with its *skandhas*, *dhātus*, and *āyatanas*, have naturally existed as the deity's *maṇḍala* from the beginning. That is not activated by the lama's profound advice. Nor does it arise from the great knowledge of a student. The innate disposition that exists like that is the **nature (gnas lugs)**. Not recognizing things to be like that is ignorance. Taking your ordinary body and the external world to be independently existent is delusion. Therein arise various illnesses, harms, affliction, non-virtue, and suffering.

Here, Yang dgon pa indicates that *dngos po*, in a general sense, means “thing” or “entity,” glossing the term as the material or substantial things existing in the animate and inanimate world. However, Yang dgon pa uses as an example for *dngos po* “your body with its *skandhas*,

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<sup>282</sup> *Ri chos yon tan kun 'byung gi lhan thabs chen mo*, 28/2-4.



*dhātus*, and *āyatanas*,” suggesting that the particular sense of the term *dn̄gos po*, for the purposes of his use within the compound *dn̄gos po'i gn̄as lugs*, is the entirety of the body-mind organism. Furthermore, he tells us, this thing (*dn̄gos po*), this body, does not exist only as a quotidian form. Its innate disposition (*gshis*) is the deity’s *maṇḍala*. With this terminology, there is an implication, understood in the context of a tantric lexicon, that the deity's *maṇḍala* is the subtle substrate coexisting with this body, the subtle network of channels, cakras, winds, and syllables making up the inner *maṇḍala* of the body.<sup>283</sup>

This deity's *maṇḍala* that co-exists as the body, Yang dgon pa tells us, cannot be made to emerge through ritual, or even through Buddhist meditative or yogic practices. As he puts it, “it is not activated by the lama's profound advice, nor does it arise from the great knowledge of a student,” indicating that it is naturally and innately present. He calls that innate presence the “innate disposition” (*gshis*) and this, he tells us, is the real meaning of “nature” (*gn̄as lugs*). The “innate disposition” (*gshis*) is a term that is often associated with the most fundamental basis of liberation, the nature of mind, or the Buddha nature.<sup>284</sup> By way of glossing this term (*gshis*) as a synonym for nature (*gn̄as lugs*), Yang dgon pa directly indicates that *nature* means a fundamental, underlying basic truth or ground of being. Nature does not mean in this case “situation” as Yang dgon pa uses *gn̄as lugs*, on occasion, elsewhere. But this ground of being is not confined to the mind’s nature here. Rather, Yang dgon pa aligns this innate disposition (*gshis*) and this nature (*gn̄as lugs*) with the body (*dn̄gos po*) as the deity’s *maṇḍala*, in essence

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<sup>283</sup> Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication, 2012.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

aligning ultimate truth with the subtle body.<sup>285</sup> This alignment, as quietly executed as it is here, hints at a perspective we find unfolding in the *Explanation of the Hidden*. While previous exegetes aligned the body with relative truth and the mind with ultimate truth, either explicitly or implicitly,<sup>286</sup> for Yang dgon pa, the vajra body aligns with ultimate truth, and the mind aligns with that truth only by virtue of being embodied.

When considered as a whole, the gloss in the passage above sheds valuable light on Yang dgon pa's larger interpretation of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. Through glossing *dngos po* as the things of the world, his definition acknowledges a valence of meaning within the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* that would gesture towards the “nature of things.” But within the context of what Yang dgon pa calls “the special path of Vajrayāna,” his definition indicates that the meaning of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* is the innate disposition (*gshis*) of the body as an entity (*dngos po*), which exists primordially as the deity's *maṇḍala*, an oblique reference to the innately present vajra body. The

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<sup>285</sup> Some of the canonical tantras that Yang dgon pa relies on and quotes from to support his vision in the *Explanation of the Hidden* from also align the term *dngos po* (things, materiality) with a nature that is divine. For example, the *Samputa Tantra* says, “This nature of all material things is itself the Bhagavān, possessing vajra” (*Dngos po kun gyi rang bzhin 'di/ de nyid bcom ldan rdo rje can*) [*Yang dag par sbyor ba zhes bya ba'i rgyud (Samputa-tantra)*, in *Sde dge 'i Bka' 'gyur*, Toh 381, Rgyud 'bum, ga (Delhi: Delhi Karmapae Choedhey, Gyalwae Sungrab Partun Khang, 1982-85), 213/4].

<sup>286</sup> As demonstrated in Chapter Two, the exegetes on *dngos po'i gnas lugs* preceding Yang dgon pa within this stream of discourse described the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of mind in epistemological terms aligned with the ultimate goals of the tradition, and this was contrasted with a *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of mind described in terms of a tantric body. Gling ras pa, a main founder of the Dragon sect, went so far as to align the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body explicitly with relative truth, and the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of mind with ultimate truth: “All phenomena of relative cyclic existence are called the body's *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, and abide as the nature of the form *kāyas*. The phenomena of ultimate nirvana are called the mind's *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, and abide as the *dharmakāya*” (*kun rdzob 'khor ba'i chos thams cad ni/ lus dngos po'i gnas lugs zhes bya ste/ gzugs sku'i rang bzhin du gnas so/ don dam mya ngan las 'das pa'i chos ni sems dngos po'i gnas lugs zhes bya ste/ chos sku'i rang bzhin du gnas so/*) [Gling ras pa, *G.yo ba rlung gi gdams lo ro ras chung pa'i zhal gdams*, in *Bsre 'pho yig rnying*, ed. Padma dkar po (Palampur, District Kangra, H.P.: Khampa Gar Monastery, 1985), 324/4-5].

joining of the terms *dngos po*, as body, and *gnas lugs*, as nature, neatly implicates the body in the realm of the ultimate, a realm that was often in his lineage reserved for a valorized notion of mind, discussed in disembodied terms.

### **A Subtle Body: Layers of *Dngos po'i gnas lugs***

Returning to Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden*, we will now look at Yang dgon pa's more specific statements concerning *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as the body. If *dngos po'i gnas lugs* refers to the human body, what kind of body is it? Yang dgon pa tells us next that he is going to discuss this body via four *dngos po'i gnas lugs*; that of body, speech, mind, and all three inseparable. Now, I will pause here to note that when Yang dgon pa speaks of body (*lus*) in *The Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, he is sometimes referring to the broad category of body into which fall all the varieties of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*—i.e., body, speech, and mind and the three inseparable. This broad concept of body is a category that he sometimes refers to as the vajra body, as in the case of the title of his work, and that he sometimes refers to simply as “body.” This broad category includes body, speech, and mind. On the other hand, sometimes he also uses the term “body” to refer to the narrower topic of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body (*lus kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*), which is a more specific category, held distinct from speech and mind. I will try to take note when a slippage of this sort is occurring, and will identify (when it is not obvious) which kind of body Yang dgon pa is referring to—the broad body of embodied being, or the narrow body of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body.

After introducing the outline points of the four *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, Yang dgon pa begins to describe, with a few general statements, the kind of body (as the broader category) he

perceives as the purview of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. This is the body alluded to in the title of his work *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*. The body that is the main topic for Yang dgon pa is not the flesh-and-blood body, but rather the “reality of the body” (*lus kyi de nyid*) referenced earlier in a quote from the *Samputa Tantra*, and the nature (*gnas lugs*) or innate disposition (*gshis*) of the body referenced in Yang dgon pa’s definition of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* in *Retreat Teachings: The Source of All Positive Qualities*. In short, his topic in the *Explanation of the Hidden* is the vajra body, a layer of being that co-exists with the physical form as its subtle underpinning. In the statements below, he begins to explore the vajra body (the larger category) as consisting of the particular components of body (the smaller category), speech, and mind:

*tha mal gyi lus ngag yid gsum dang/ he ru ka'i sku gsung thugs<sup>287</sup> rgyu lam 'bras bu thams cad du<sup>288</sup> dbyer med pas rdo rje<sup>289</sup> sku gsung thugs so/ de dang<sup>290</sup> rtsa dang yi ge dang thig le<sup>291</sup> de thams cad la dbang byed pa<sup>292</sup> ye shes kyi rlung te<sup>293</sup>/ de dang rim pa bzhin<sup>294</sup> de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi sku rdo rje dang/ gsung rdo rje dang/ thugs rdo rje dang/ snying po kye'i rdo rje'o/<sup>295</sup>*

One’s ordinary body, speech, and mind are inseparable from the *Heruka*’s body, speech, and mind at all levels of the cause, path, and fruit. Therefore, there is vajra body, speech,

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<sup>287</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 120/1; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 5: *gsum* inserted.

<sup>288</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 120/1: *du* omitted.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 120/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing) 5: *rdo rje'i*.

<sup>290</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 5: *yang*.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 5: *dang* inserted.

<sup>292</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 120/2: *pas*.

<sup>293</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 5: *ste*.

<sup>294</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 120/2, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 5: *de dang rim pa bzhin* is omitted.

<sup>295</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 425/2-3.

and mind. There is that and<sup>296</sup> channels, syllables, vital essences, and the master of all those which is the gnosis wind.<sup>297</sup> Sequentially aligned with those: the body vajra of all Tathāgathas, their speech vajra, their mind vajra, and the heart of Hevajra.<sup>298</sup>

Here we are first afforded a glimpse into the perspective that one's ordinary body, speech, and mind are now, have always been, and always will be, the body, speech, and mind of a deity, a fully enlightened Buddha, an idea that has a long precedent in early commentaries on the Buddhist tantras.<sup>299</sup> This turns out to be a case that Yang dgon pa continues to reinforce moving forward in the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*. We also begin to glimpse here that the body, speech, and mind that exist as divine are not so easily observable. Rather these exist on the subtle level as channels (Tib. *rtsa*, Skt. *nāḍī*), winds (Tib. *rlung*, Skt. *vāyu*), and vital essences (Tib. *thig le*, Skt. *bindu*). Like many aspects of Yang dgon pa's somatic ideation, a theory positing a subtle body undergirding the flesh-and-blood body is not Yang dgon pa's own invention. The idea of a subtle body (*sūkśma-śarīra*) is at least as old as the *niruttarayoga*

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<sup>296</sup> Beijing variant: "Therefore."

<sup>297</sup> He mis variant: "By mastering that, along with channels, syllables, and vital essences, there is gnosis wind."

<sup>298</sup> This classification of the body, speech, and mind of all Tathāgathas and the heart Hevajra can be found in the first and second verses of the *Hevajra Tantra* [*Kye'i rdo rje zhes bya ba rgyud kyi rgyal po (Hevajra Tantra)*, in *Bka' 'gyur Dpe bsdur ma* (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 1996-2008), 3].

<sup>299</sup> Yang dgon pa quotes a tantric source, *Dpal nam mkha' dang mnyam pa'i rgyud kyi rgyal po zhes bya ba (Glorious Equal to the Sky Rājā-Tantra)* for this idea: *kun tu sangs rgyas rnams kyi sku// kun tu gsung dang thugs kyi mchog// brtan g.yo kun dang gcig pas na// rdo rje zhes byar btags pa nyid//* (The supreme bodies of the Buddhas, their speech and their minds are one with all animate and inanimate things: This is what is labeled 'vajra') [Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 425/1-2]. This is also an idea that is present explicitly in many of the sources Yang dgon pa relies on in the *Explanation of the Hidden*, such as the *Samputa Tantra* and the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*.

*tantras*,<sup>300</sup> with origins extending back as far as the Indian *Chāndogya Upanishad*.<sup>301</sup> We also find the tripartite division in *Hevajra-tantra*, in *Cakrasaṃvara-tantra*, in *Guhyasamāja-tantra*, in *Kālacakra-tantra*, and other tantras that Yang dgon pa cites in his *Explanation of the Hidden*. But what makes Yang dgon pa’s introduction of the subtle body here original is not so much the basic idea but rather the fact that he extracts and synthesizes general statements that valorize the body, and then theorizes the nature of the vajra body and its layers as a way of introducing his primary topic. In short, he zeroes in on this subtle body not as a preamble or mere mention but rather as the center of his work.

Now, Yang dgon pa has not yet introduced the terminology (literally) of a subtle body, but he introduces the term just a folio later, where he contrasts the idea of a “coarse body” (*lus rag pa*), which he describes as “the physical support for the senses, together with the insides” (*dbang rten khog pa dang bcas pa*) with the idea of a “subtle body” (*lus phra ba*) made of “channels throughout the entire body” (*lus ril po rtsa*).<sup>302</sup> Given that he is offering this distinction in the section of his work that discusses the channels, we can understand the body here to refer to the smaller category of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body (*lus kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*) rather than the larger category of the vajra body. However, the theme of a subtle layer of embodiment follows throughout the entire work. As we will see, the section of his work treating the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of speech displays a similar dyad of coarse winds and subtle

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<sup>300</sup> For a brief discussion of the classificatory term of a subtle body and its applications in the tantras, see Paul Williams and Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 202-05.

<sup>301</sup> Sharma discusses the origins of the idea of a subtle body in the Upanishads [Arvind Sharma, *A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 193.

<sup>302</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 431/6.

winds. The fact that he includes mention of the coarse body under this heading of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body could lead us to conclude that the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body is the *entirety* of the stratified body, with all its levels—in other words, the full situation of its embodiment. But Yang dgon pa's unabated emphasis on exploring the subtle body indicates that the primary locus of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* for him is the *layer of the body undergirding its rough substantiality*, the layer that is subtle and not manifest to the naked eye. For Yang dgon pa, this is the layer that matters most because it is this layer that provides the foundation for tantric practice and makes attainment of the highest goals of his tradition possible. In fact, while the *Explanation of the Hidden* valorizes the body definitively, emphasis on the coarse (*rags pa*) layer of embodiment, the layer of visible flesh, blood, bones, fluids, and material substance, is minimized except for a bare mention. Yang dgon pa does not describe the coarse layer in any detail. This omission is significant given the growing importance of the *Four Tantras (Rgyud bzhi)* in Central Tibet during Yang dgon pa's lifetime and the proliferation of the Tibetan medical model during his day. So the dyad of coarse and subtle becomes a useful part of his discussion, and these keywords help steer us towards a theoretical map in which the body is layered, a coarse layer of embodiment in conversation with a subtle layer of embodiment.

The next few lines of text reflect the terminology of the subtle layer of being: the tripartite channels, winds, and vital essences. Here Yang dgon pa attempts to theorize, in an incipient way, the broad characteristics of the three components of the subtle body:

*de la yi ge ni rtsa dang rlung dang*<sup>303</sup> *thig le'i chos su 'dus pas gsum yin te*<sup>304</sup> / *gnas pa rtsa/ g.yo ba rlung/ bkod pa byang chub kyi sems so*<sup>305</sup> / *de la*<sup>306</sup> *rtsa khyim dang 'dra/ thig*

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<sup>303</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 120/3: *rlung dang* is illegible or missing.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, (He mis), 120/4: *gsum ste*.

*le nor dang 'dra/rlung bdag po dang 'dra'o/ de gsum yang lus ngag yid gsum yin te/ rdo  
rje rol pa zhes pa phag mo'i rgyud las*<sup>307/</sup>

*gnas pa rtsa la g.yo ba rlung//  
de ltar bkod pa byang chub sems//  
lus kyi ngo bo ngag gi lus//  
de ni sems kyi rten du bcas*<sup>308</sup>

*ces gsungs pas/ rtsa ni lus kyi ngo bo rlung ni ngag gi lus/ byang chub kyi sems ni sems  
kyi brten*<sup>309</sup> *yin no*<sup>310</sup>

With regard to that, by collecting [this] writing into the categories of channels, winds, and vital essences, there are three.<sup>311</sup> The channels are stationary. The winds move, and the *bodhicitta* is positioned. To elaborate, the channels are like a house. The vital essences are like wealth. The winds are like the owner [who lives in the house]. These three are also body, speech, and mind. *Vajra Play: A Vārāhī Tantra* says,

Stationary are the channels, moving are the winds,  
Positioned is the *bodhicitta*.  
Those comprise the essence of the body, the body of speech,  
And the support of mind.<sup>312</sup>

Thus, the channels are the essence of body. The winds are the body of speech. *Bodhicitta* is the support of mind.

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 120/4: *so* is missing.

<sup>306</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 5: *yang*.

<sup>307</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 120/5: line is illegible except for the words *zhes bya ba* and *rgyud*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 5: *rdo rje rol ba [pa] zhes bya ba rdo rje phag mo'i rgyud las*. This tantra is not found in the versions of the Tibetan Buddhist canon that are now extant.

<sup>308</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 121/1; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 5: *dang bcas*.

<sup>309</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis) 121/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 6: *rten*.

<sup>310</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 425/3-6.

<sup>311</sup> Slob dpon Mchod rten believes this is a statement about the contents of this work, that the word *yi ge* means Yang dgon pa's writing, the words of *The Explanation of the Hidden* (Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication, 2012).

<sup>312</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: "Those are the essence of the body, the body of speech, together with the support of mind."



In this description, the principal general characteristic of the channels is that they are “stationary,” analogous to a structural dwelling. The principal general characteristic of the winds is that they are moving and volatile winds, analogous to an “owner” who commands the space within the structure of the channels. The house-and-owner analogy is useful in that it helps us understand that, structurally, the winds are the motion-oriented internal element of the subtle body, whereas the channels form a shell for the winds, and—relative to the winds—do not move. The vital essences, he tells us, are positioned, which can be referring either to the placement of vital essences in the process of tantric visualization, or (more likely) the innate presence of vital essences in specific bodily locations. Yang dgon pa compares the vital essences here to wealth.<sup>313</sup>

These analogies do not just indicate the general characteristics of the tripartite layer of the subtle body; they also indicate the nature of the relationship between the three elements of the subtle body. The winds are aligned with a sentient metaphor, the “owner,” and the channels and vital essences are aligned with the “owned.” To understand this without presaging too heavily the unpacking of Yang dgon pa’s tripartite layers, it helps perhaps to briefly consider the backdrop to Yang dgon pa’s esoteric context, the doctrine of wind-mind inseparable (*rlung sems dbyer med*), a doctrine promulgated by Nāropa that became a well-developed linchpin of Bka’ brgyud exegesis on the six yogas.

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<sup>313</sup> According to Slob dpon Mchod rten, the vital essences as “positioned” can mean that the vital essences are intentionally visualized, but more likely this refers to the *bodhicitta* that exists innately in specific locations, such as the crown *cakra*, the heart *cakra* and the uvula. The vital essences are compared to wealth, because this element of the body is naturally endowed with the asset of great bliss (Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication, 2012).

The wind-mind inseparable doctrine holds that mind (often embodied as the vital essences that Yang dgon pa mentions here) and the winds are inextricably joined, so that every movement of thought causes the winds to move, and vice versa. Not only that, but the volatility of wind, its connection to mental and emotional life, and its connection to the force of karma means that wind-mind (*rlung sems*) has a kind of agency that exercises control over the body. Sgam po pa, for instance, classifies wind (*rlung*) as one of the four major components of conceptualization, because in his words “it exercises a controlling function over channels and vital energy.”<sup>314</sup> Sgam po pa’s description of wind as exercising a controlling function accords with and illuminates Yang dgon pa’s description of the wind as the “owner” of the channels. Yang dgon pa’s description of wind throughout this section is consistent with a force that causes physical evolution and growth, physical imbalance and disease, and ultimately (when rightly directed) liberation. Furthermore, in Yang dgon pa’s work, the inseparability of wind and mind is assumed, to the degree that—like his predecessors dating to Nāropa—he frequently uses the compound wind-mind to refer to the location and movement of wind. While this marriage between mind and wind is innate, from his perspective, it is also true that in yogic practice, the intention is to recognize this linked nature, and enact a state of being in which wind and mind are intentionally brought into a more integrated and conscious union.

From the perspective of the intimate relationship between wind and mind, the analogy of wind as the “owner” of the house of the channels is apt, and adds a dimension of complexity to the understanding of what the concept of *wind* encompasses. Not only is

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<sup>314</sup> Trungram Sherpa, “Gampopa, the Monk and Yogi: His Life and Teachings” (Harvard University Doctoral Dissertation, 2004), 214, quoting Sgam po pa.

wind linked inextricably to conceptuality; Yang dgon pa's presentation of wind in the *Explanation of the Hidden* suggests that it is linked—through the mode of thought and emotion—to karmic personhood. Wind, as an active expression of mind and thought, is the volitional and active component of the subtle body. The identification of the term “wind” with the notion of an “owner” in this passage, or the “master” in the previous passage, gives the impression that the winds possess a kind of agency or autonomy, a notion that dovetails with the idea that the mind and wind are closely aligned. The “master” of the wind therefore moves through channels that remain relatively stable, as the structural conduits for a more rapidly changing and traveling wind-mind. The hint we see here of the relationship between wind and karmic personhood is borne out later when Yang dgon pa begins to discuss the relationship between wind and the death process, wherein wind is the mechanism by which a person moves from lifetime to lifetime. The varieties and functions of wind, and the compound *wind-mind*, are a topic covered by Yang dgon pa in his discussion of the second of his four *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of speech, and will be discussed in Chapter Five.

In any case, we can see in the Yang dgon pa's short introduction to the tripartite nature of the subtle body (in the passage describing the owner, the house, and the wealth) that the relationship between these three aspects of embodiment—channels, winds, and vital essences—is mutually dependent and supportive. While these three are discussed as distinct elements of a subtle physiology, they are interdependent in their form and function. Furthermore, the channels, winds, and *bodhicitta* are, according to Yang dgon pa, the Vajrayāna equivalent of body, speech, and mind, and exist as the subtle analogues for these. The definition, description, and theorization of each of these three aspects of the

subtle body is a principal agenda of Yang dgon pa's work. Unlike his *Retreat Teachings* collection, a work that discusses the body in instrumental terms for the purpose of performing practice, the *Explanation of the Hidden* discusses the body in ontological terms. It attempts simply to describe and theorize the body, especially these three aspects of embodiment, and discuss the implication of an embodied vision of enlightenment for the salvific path.

### **Yang dgon pa's Rationale and Preparation for Composing the *Explanation of the Hidden***

Yang dgon pa's dedication to describing and celebrating a subtle physicality as the basis of the Buddhist path is revealed in a reflection on his intention for writing the *Explanation of the Hidden*. This statement indicates the nature of his project, and hints at how he came to write it, although we also see indications of his intention elsewhere as well, such as in the colophon and statements in the body of the text. It happens that Yang dgon pa's student Spyan snga ba also commented on Yang dgon pa's reasons for writing this work, and his preparation for the writing, so we will look at his comments as well, since they shed light on how Yang dgon pa's statements were received during his lifetime. Yang dgon pa's statement of intention comes right after the verses of homage. In this "intention to explain" (*bshad par dam bca' ba*), as he calls it, he crafts the ethos of his text and lays out his rationale for composing it. He begins by identifying the recondite nature of the vajra body:

*bshad par dam bca' ba*<sup>315</sup> *seng ge 'phrog byed dbyig gi snying po slob ma bse ru rgyal*  
*ba'i sras kyis mi shes pa'i gang*<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 114/5: Phrase elided.

The intention to explain [is as follows]: That which is not known by the Lion,<sup>317</sup> the Ravisher,<sup>318</sup> the Heart of the Treasure,<sup>319</sup> the Students,<sup>320</sup> the Rhinoceroses,<sup>321</sup> or the Sons of the Victor.<sup>322</sup>

He tells us that the content of this work is so rarified that it is not known by gods or even by the most esteemed of Buddhist archetypes. As the interlinear notes gloss the arcane list of possible knowers of the teachings Yang dgon pa is about to present, Yang dgon pa says it is not known by Brahmā, Indra, Viṣṇu, or even the classical masters of Buddhist tradition, the Śrāvakas, Pratyekabuddhas, or even by Bodhisattvas. Now, the referent of “that which” as in “that which is not known by” is not directly specified here and is kept vague. However, the title that precedes the phrase above, and the content that follows it indicates that the pronoun “that which” (*gang*) refers to none other than the vajra body itself. If this pronoun does indeed reference the body, it is a compelling statement with which to introduce this text’s content: the body itself is so concealed that its nature eludes conventional wisdom. What is not stated directly here (but is in our root source elsewhere, as will be seen below) is that the body’s true situation is the purview of only those who follow the tantric path. Those who do not follow the tantric path are not able

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<sup>316</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 422/3-4.

<sup>317</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 1, interlinear note: *tshangs pa* (Brahmā).

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: *dbang phyug* (Indra).

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: *khyab jug* (Viṣṇu).

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: *nyan thos* (Śrāvakas).

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: *rang rgyal* (Pratyekabuddhas).

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: *byang sems* (Bodhisattvas). These notes line up with Spyan snga ba's commentary, which gives the same interpretation [Spyan snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Sbas bshad kyi dka' 'grel*, 412/6-413/1].

to access this knowledge, and therefore are not able to attain the complete fruition of the Buddhist path.<sup>323</sup>

This statement is not original, and can be found in various forms. For example, at the very beginning of the *Saṃpuṭa Tantra*, a source that Yang dgon pa often quotes in the *Explanation of the Hidden*, we find a similar statement:

*khyab 'jug dang/ dbang phyug chen po dang/ tshang pa dang/ nyen thos dang/ rang sangs rgyas rnams kyi spyod yul ma yin pa'i phyir gsang ba'o*<sup>324</sup>

Because [tantra] is not the sphere of experience of Viṣṇu, great Indra, Brahmā, the Śrāvakas, or Pratyekabuddhas, it is secret.

Yang dgon pa's placement of his analogous statement at the beginning of the *Explanation of the Hidden* rhetorically validates his composition as belonging to a lineage of transmission extending back to the Indian tantras themselves. The statement claims that this hidden nature of the vajra body is not manifest to everyone. It is, by elimination, only the "sphere of experience" of those who practice tantra. As it did in these ancient contexts, the statement emphasizes the rarity and the specialness of the tantric lineage of transmission, and it underscores the role of experience in unlocking the secrets of this lineage.

The "Intention to Explain" section of the *Explanation of the Hidden* continues, laying out Yang dgon pa's process of preparation and his qualifications for writing this work:

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<sup>323</sup> Spyān snga ba explains further: "Those kinds of beings [who do not practice tantra] do not understand the Buddha of the great secret who actualizes the thirteenth level in a single lifetime" (*Sbas bshad kyi dka' 'grel*, 413/1-2). In the written materials of the New Schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the bodhisattva levels are sometimes expanded to thirteen. For example, Rtse le Sna tsogs rang grol posits thirteen levels, with the thirteenth being buddhahood itself: Rtse le Sna tshogs rang grol, *Lamp of Mahamudra*, 1st ed. (Boston: Shambhala, 1989), 54.

<sup>324</sup> *Saṃpuṭa Tantra (Sde dge Bka' 'gyur)*, 146/7.

*gang la brten nas<sup>325</sup> bde ba<sup>326</sup> myur skyob ji snyed chos kun thams cad de yis gsal byed  
thabs bshad rgyud<sup>327</sup>// rdo rje lus kyi gnas lugs sbas pa<sup>328</sup> bla ma'i drin kyis mngon byung  
myong ba'i nges thob pa// dri med rgyud kyi dgongs pa zab mo mkha' 'gro'i gsang tshig  
gzhan la phan phyir yi ger dgod/<sup>329</sup>*

Having relied on that, I definitely attained certainty regarding the illuminator of all the dharmas that quickly protect [one] via bliss, the ‘explanatory continuum’<sup>330</sup> which is the hidden nature of the vajra body,<sup>331</sup> through the kindness of the lama(s), and put down in words the secret diction of the *dākinīs*, which are the profound intention of the stainless tantras.

This passage contains elements of rationale, but also a background of Yang dgon pa’s preparation for writing the work. He was introduced to this teaching through reliance and elucidation, presumably by his teachers, by tantric methods of practice, and by explanation. It seems important to note this phrase in Yang dgon pa’s passage: “the explanation of the hidden nature of the vajra body” (*rdo rje lus kyi gnas lugs sbas bshad*). The omission of a connecting particular between *gnas lugs* and *sbas bshad* confirms, again, that it is not the description that is hidden. It is the nature of the vajra body that is hidden, or concealed. Here *gnas lugs* seems to

<sup>325</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 115/1: *brten pa*.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 115/1; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 2: *bde bas*.

<sup>327</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 115/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 2: *rgyud*.

<sup>328</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 422/3: *bshad*

<sup>329</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 422/3-6. The last word here is spelled *dgod* in the Pha jo ldings and He mis versions. It has been corrected to *bkod* in *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 2.

<sup>330</sup> He mis variant: “An explanatory continuum that clarifies however many dharmas there are that quickly protect one by bliss, depending on [the body].” This reading makes more sense considering the body is later equated to an explanatory continuum, at the end of Yang dgon pa’s work.

<sup>331</sup> Pha jo ldings variant: which is explanation of the hidden nature of the vajra body. I supply the Beijing reading of this line, because it makes much more sense given that *bshad rgyud* is an apposition of the vajra body in Sa skya lam 'bras sources.

mean “situation” rather than substrate or essence. The situation of the vajra body is that it is hidden. This implies another reason for the writing of the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, to unveil that very hidden situation of the vajra body. However, its secrets cannot be unlocked fully without the component of a transmission via human relationship, as we see when Yang dgon pa says that he himself learned this “through the kindness of the lamas.” Spyan snga ba’s commentary on these lines affirms the role of education in learning the vajra body:

*gang la brten na bcu gsum pa'i ye shes tshe 'di nyid la thob par byed pa'i thabs ston pa'i sngags 'chang grub pa byes pa gcig la brten/ gang gis grten na de'ang dbang po sang<sup>332</sup> rab gcig gis brten/ brten tshul gang la brten na gsang sngags rdo rje theg pa la brten/ thabs 'di la ni ma brten par/ thabs gzhan gyis ni sangs mi rgyas<sup>333</sup>*

“Having relied on that” means having relied on a realized holder of the mantra tradition, who has obtained the gnosis of the thirteenth level in this lifetime. The person who does the relying should be someone with extremely superior faculties. The method of reliance is the Vajrayāna of secret mantra. If one does not rely on this method, but instead relies on others, one will not become enlightened.

While this commentary may or may not reflect Yang dgon pa’s meaning, it does give a window into the reception of his work, and tells us how it was read in his day, at least by this one student. The word “reliance” appears many times in this passage of commentary, and it seems to be there to remind readers that the tantric path alluded to by Yang dgon pa cannot be followed in isolation, but is rather a path of mediated religious experience. The element of reliance also becomes a source of authority for the work itself. Yang dgon pa’s qualifications begin with his reliance on his teachers, their methods, and the tradition of Vajrayāna. It is a reminder that authority is bestowed on authors in the Tibetan environment on the basis of what and who they have relied on prior to their original compositions. We also find here the assertion that the

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<sup>332</sup> This is probably a misspelling of *sangs* (Slob dpon Mchod rten, Skype interview, 2013).

<sup>333</sup> Spyan snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Sbas bshad kyi dka' 'grel*, 413/2-3.



“person who does the relying should be someone with extremely superior faculties.” This statement is in line with the “mixing and transference” literature preceding and following Yang dgon pa’s composition, which specifies that the person who is introduced to *dngos po’i gnas lugs* and its subsequent levels of practice should be a “sudden-realizer” (*chig char ba*) who is capable of swift development on a religious path.<sup>334</sup> However, this prerequisite specified by Spyān snga ba is conspicuously absent from Yang dgon pa’s own text. The lack of specification that this text is for “sudden-realizers” may gesture to an egalitarian impulse in the *Explanation of the Hidden*, a wish on the author’s part not to limit access to this work on the part of his readers, although it was quickly reversed by his student. The absence of such a restriction is also a fitting introduction to a description of embodiment that Yang dgon pa states is true for everyone regardless of their religious training.<sup>335</sup> However, an actual perception of the vajra body remains the purview of the initiated. Even so, it is not beyond description. It is, after all, a real and enduring substrate of body, a notion that will be explored in the next chapter. To some degree, therefore, this is a text of human anatomy.

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<sup>334</sup> See Chapter Two of the dissertation for more on the category of the sudden realizer.

<sup>335</sup> The key notion that everyone possesses a vajra body (but does not necessarily realize it) is reinforced in various ways throughout the *Explanation of the Hidden*. For example, Yang dgon pa states, “One’s ordinary body, speech, and mind are inseparable from the *Heruka*’s body, speech, and mind at all levels of the cause, path and fruit” [Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 425/2], as discussed earlier in this chapter. Yang dgon pa is consistent in explaining that the vajra body is a universal substrate to all ordinary bodies. Spyān snga ba’s perspective concurs: “The vajra body is the underlying characteristic of the so-called ordinary body” [Spyān snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Sbas bshad kyi dka’ ’grel*, *ibid.*, 413/6], discussed below.

### ***Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body: What's in a Name?***

Further clues to the way that Yang dgon pa is construing the notion of *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* and how that relates to his larger theory of human embodiment may be discerned by scrutinizing the implication of the title of the work, along with one sustained commentary on its connotations. Titles, in the Tibetan literary milieu, and key words within them are often significant clues to intertextuality and textual ancestry, and that is the case with Yang dgon pa's title. This ancestry itself tells us much about how Yang dgon pa conceived this composition and how his positions within it built on—and differed from—the somatic practice of his Sa skya and Bka' brgyud heritage. The *Explanation of the Hidden* is not a commentary on a particular work, as in the case of many expository works. Rather, it is a synthesis that draws on numerous tantric sources, following a common outline borrowed from a lineage of texts extending back to Nāropa. While Nāropa's works provide a precedent of content, no precedent for Yang dgon pa's title is found in Nāropa's writings. The title compound *Explanation of the Hidden (Sbas bshad)* surfaces in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, with Virūpa's visionary transmission to Sa chen Kun dga' snying po of the *Lam sbas bshad*, which—the reader may remember from Chapter One of this thesis—was part of the transmission of teachings that Yang dgon pa received from Sa skya Paṇḍita, according to Spyān snga ba.

Another invocation of this title name may be found in the colophon of the *Nature of the Vajra Body (Rdo rje'i lus kyi gnas lugs)* by Phag mo gru pa, who was a student of Kun dga' snying po. The reader may remember from Chapter Two that this very text provides, in its topic and structure, one of the clearest models, in the generations preceding Yang dgon pa, for the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*. While the term *Explanation of the Hidden (sbas bshad)* is not in the title of that work, the colophon states:

*sbas bshad sbyor ba bzhi ldan gyi gnad dang bcas ba 'di śākya'i dge slong rdo rje rgyal po zhes sbyar wa'o.*<sup>336</sup>

This Explanation of the Hidden, with the essential points of the four applications, was written by the Śākya monk Dorje Gyalpo.<sup>337</sup>

So although Phag mo gru pa's work on the vajra body does not bear the words *Explanation of the Hidden* on the title page, the phrase appears in the final colophon as a gloss for the entire work.

This similarity of appellation is an indication that Yang dgon pa may have wished to situate his own work within the lineage of transmission that came to him through both Sa skya Paṇḍita, who transmitted to him the lineage of Virūpa's *Sbas bshad*, and the 'Bri gung master Gcung Rin chen, who transmitted to him Phag mo gru pa's heritage.

In addition to this, Yang dgon pa's own guru Sa skya Paṇḍita provides another precedent with two works titled *Explanation of the Hidden Path (Lam sbas bshad)*.<sup>338</sup> The first work, which is attributed to Sa skya Paṇḍita but is unsigned, is a three-folio commentary discusses a verse drawn from the short, cryptic *Vajra Lines of the Path with the Result* by the Indian adept Virūpa (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century). Virūpa's *Vajra Lines*, also quoted by Yang dgon pa in the *Explanation of the Hidden*, is a seminal work for the Sa skya lineage and marks the genesis of the Sa skya

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<sup>336</sup> Phag mo gru pa, *Rdo rje lus kyi gnas lugs*, 584.

<sup>337</sup> Rdo rje rgyal po is one of Phag mo gru pa's names.

<sup>338</sup> It should be noted here that the gloss on *lam sbas bshad* in several Sa skya sources is glossed as *lam sbas te bshad pa* [see for example, Blo gros rgyal mtshan, *Lam sbas te bshad pa'i man ngag gi zin bris*, in *Lam 'bras slob bshad* (Dehra dun, Uttar Pradesh, India: Sakya Center, 1983-85), 27]. In that context, a better translation for the title would be *The Path, Hidden and Explained*. However, for consistency, I have continued to render *sbas bshad* "explanation of the hidden", based on Spyan snga ba's gloss of Yang dgon pa's title.

doctrine of Path and Fruit.<sup>339</sup> This doctrine is believed by that lineage to “embody the vital meaning of the entire Buddhist doctrine in general and of the Hevajra Tantra in particular.”<sup>340</sup> Sa skya Paṇḍita’s short commentary takes a single line of Virūpa’s work as the basis for exegesis: “Above the seventh spiritual level, the mūdra seals of the four *cakras*. The ability to shake, and so forth, a hundred million vast domains of the *sambhogakāya*, and so forth”<sup>341</sup> (*sa bdun pa yan chad longs sku'i zhing khams 'khor bzhi'i rgya dung phyur la stsogs pa sgul ba la stsogs pa nus*).<sup>342</sup> In *An Explanation of the Hidden Path*, Sa skya Paṇḍita explains that this single line indicates how a bodhisattva, on the spiritual levels seven through ten, engages with tantric practices to dissolve the energy winds (*rlung*) into the central channel.<sup>343</sup> This *Explanation of the Hidden Path* might be understood as a tantric explanation of what occurs, secretly, for a bodhisattva traversing the Mahāyāna *būmis* (stages). The second work, also called *Explanation of the Hidden Path*, was written by Sa skya Paṇḍita while he was in China, at the end of his life. This work contains a concise synopsis of the tantric visualization of the internal vajra body needed for the key practices of the Path and Fruit.<sup>344</sup> While the content of Sa skya Paṇḍita’s two *Explanation of the Hidden Path* works differs considerably from Yang dgon pa’s work, the

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<sup>339</sup> This pithy root text, also called the *Lam 'bras rtsa ba*, is discussed in detail by Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 183-95. An English translation exists there, and also in Cyrus Stearns, *Taking the Result as the Path: Core Teachings of the Sakya Lamdré Tradition*, 1st ed., vol. 4, The Library of Tibetan Classics (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006).

<sup>340</sup> Stearns, *Taking the Result as the Path*, 4, 1.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>342</sup> Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 487.

<sup>343</sup> Kun dga’ rgyal mtshan Sa skya Paṇḍita, *Lam sbas bshad*, in *Sa skya bka’ ’bum dpe bsdur ma las Sa-paṅ Kun dga’ rgyal mtshan gyi gsung ’bum* (Pe-cin: Kruṅ-go’i Bod rig pa dpe skrun khañ, 2007), 131-133.

<sup>344</sup> Kun dga’ rgyal mtshan Sa skya Paṇḍita, *Lam sbas bshad*, in *Lam 'bras slob bshad* (Dehra dun, Uttar Pradesh, India: Sakya Center, 1983-85), 300-311.

subject matter of the vajra body is held in common. Perhaps Yang dgon pa's naming of his own work after Sa skya Paṇḍita's work was a way of subtly aligning himself with his teacher's legacy. But, perhaps even more likely, he saw that the title *Sbas bshad* also fit the nature of his own project. Just as Sa skya Paṇḍita's work attempts to unveil the subtle yoga inherent in the Mahāyāna path to enlightenment, yielding an explanation of the hidden path (*lam sbas bshad*), Yang dgon pa's work attempts to unveil the nature of the vajra body, the subtle layer of being inherent in the ordinary flesh-and-blood body yielding an explanation of the hidden vajra body (*rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*).

We can get further insights into the title of Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden* as well as into the larger scope of the work from a separate short commentary called *Commentary on the Difficult Points of the Explanation of the Hidden* (*Sbas bshad kyi dka' 'grel*), written by Yang dgon pa's main disciple, Spyan snga ba. While Spyan snga ba claims that this work is a record of interpretations he heard directly from the mouth of Yang dgon pa, we cannot assume that Spyan snga ba's perspective mirrors his teacher's intentions exactly. In some ways, we can see that it does not. Nevertheless, given that we have no other source from Yang dgon pa's time period that attempts any kind of general framing of his work, or that even mentions it, these statements provide a rare and valuable window into the early reception of Yang dgon pa's work. The few commentaries by Spyan snga ba, as short as they are, give us important insight into how Yang dgon pa's work influenced the thought of others (or at least one other) during his lifetime, and helps us assess whether the points that Yang dgon pa *seems* to emphasize in his work were in fact seen by others as important, or whether immediate inheritors were interested in tempering or altering his statements. It appears that Spyan snga ba saw the title as offering an opportunity to reflect on Yang dgon pa's overall project and intention. He also attempts to define the key

concepts of the title—which are also key concepts related to the overall content of the work—a project that Yang dgon pa himself does not undertake.

Spyan snga ba divides his exegesis of the title into two parts—a commentary on the term “vajra body” and a commentary on the term “Explanation of the Hidden.” About the vajra body, he explains:

*rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad zhes bya ba/ rdo rje lus zhes pa la rtsa yig rlung sems kyi nas lugs shes dgos/ de ma shes na sgom pa don gyi gnad mi she/ de ma shes na yon tan mi skye/ lus kyi de nyid mi shes pa de dag 'bras bu med pa'o'*<sup>345</sup>

The [title] *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body* can be understood as follows. “Vajra body” should be understood as the nature of the channels, syllables, winds, and mind. If you do not know that, you will not understand the meaning of meditation. If you do not understand that, good qualities will not arise. People who do not understand the reality of the body will not reach the fruition.<sup>346</sup>

There is nothing in these remarks that is not reflected in Yang dgon pa’s introduction to his own work. But the point of significance here is *what* Spyian snga ba chooses to emphasize in commenting on the words “vajra body”: Of many things he could have said, he reiterates Yang dgon pa’s statements about the critical importance of knowing the body’s way of being, reinforcing the rationale for the *Explanation of the Hidden*. The fact that Spyian snga ba takes the space to say here that knowledge of the body is the critical prerequisite for Buddhist enlightenment, in the very front matter of his own commentary, may indicate that Spyian snga ba believed this is why the anatomy of the vajra body, so carefully unpacked by Yang dgon pa in

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<sup>345</sup> Spyian snga ba Rin chen Idan, *Sbas bshad kyi dka' 'grel*, 407/2-3.

<sup>346</sup> This phrase is an invocation of the passage from the *Samputa Tantra* that Yang dgon pa uses to introduce the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body (see page 120-21 of the dissertation): *Lus kyi de nyid mi shes pas/ de dag thams cad 'bras bu med* (Because of not knowing the reality of the body, all those [practices] are fruitless).

the *Explanation of the Hidden*, matters. In essence, it provides a defense of his teacher's inordinate emphasis on the body. His use of the term “mind” for the third component of the vajra body is also a choice of some significance, and mirrors the somatic theory we see conveyed in Yang dgon pa’s own work. Setting aside other possible word choices such as *bindu* (*thig le*) or *bodhicitta* (*byang chub kyi sems*), Sphyan snga ba—like Yang dgon pa—classifies mind as a subset of body. This theme will play out throughout Yang dgon pa’s text as a major point of consideration: mind is categorically subsumed by physical existence, and exists in intimate relationship with the body.

This passage is also relevant to our consideration of the meaning of the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, because it provides us with an instance of the word “nature” (*gnas lugs*) being used to mean situation, or mode of existence. Yang dgon pa’s formal gloss of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* in his *Retreat Teachings* work broke up the compound word, glossing the word *gnas lugs* as the substrate or underlying reality of the body. Here, however, we have a sentence that demonstrates an alternate usage of *gnas lugs* to mean “situation” or “way of being” (rather than substrate). In this case, the sentence is “‘Vajra body’ should be understood as the nature of the channels, syllables, winds, and mind.” Here, the grammar indicates that *gnas lugs* does not mean an underlying substrate, as it does in some contexts, because the “channels, syllables, winds, and mind” are modifying the word “nature,” and the vajra body has so far been depicted as equivalent to these (not the underlying nature of these). The word *gnas lugs* is not serving here to denote the essence of embodiment. Rather, the grammar positions the word to refer to the composition of the body, its various parts. The vajra body exists as (which is to say, it is composed of) the four components of channels, syllables, winds, and mind. This reflects a tendency we also see in Yang dgon pa’s own work to toggle between understanding *gnas lugs* as

meaning the essence or underlying truth about the body, and meaning the make-up or composition of the body. Just as with the English term “nature,” the meaning of the term *gnas lugs* is sometimes essentializing and sometimes compositional.

Spyan snga ba refines his general statements a bit later in the same commentary, glossing the vajra body as the cause of the ordinary body:

*rdo rje'i lus zhes pa ni/ tha mal gyi lus zer ba'i rgyu mtshan/ tha mal gyi lus ngag yid gsum dang he ru ka'i sku gsung thugs/ rgyu lam 'bras bu thams cad du dbyer mi phyed pa'i don gyis na rdo rje'o/ bkod pa rtsa'i gnas lugs/ rtsa yi ge'i rten 'brel/ khams bdud rtsi'i chags tshul/ de rnams mngon du byed pa snying po ye shes kyi rlung ston pa rnams sbas pa dang/ rdo rje lus kyi gnas lugs mi shes par/ mtha' drug tshul bzhi'i sgo lcags kyis sbas pa rnams/ rang dgar 'jug pa rnams la gsangs te/ bla ma'i drin gyis mngon du byung ba gsung las thos pa gcig ma nor bar bstan cing rtogs pa'o'*<sup>347</sup>

The vajra body is the cause of the so-called ordinary body. Vajra means that the ordinary body, speech, and mind, and the *heruka*'s enlightened body, speech, and mind are inseparable throughout the cause, path, and fruition. The revelations of the gnosis wind—the heart of the actualization of the nature of the arranged channels, the connections of the channel-syllables<sup>348</sup> and the way the elemental nectar condenses—are hidden. The secret is kept from those who do not know the nature of the vajra body, those people who want to just practice this on their own, by the lock of the six parameters and four methods.<sup>349</sup> [Recognition] is actualized through the kindness of the lama. It is unerringly transmitted and realized through listening to the teacher's speech.

<sup>347</sup> Spyian snga ba Rin chen Idan, *Sbas bshad kyi dka' 'grel*, 413/6-14/2.

<sup>348</sup> According to Cyrus Stearns, in the Path and Fruit system in which Yang dgon pa was trained, the term “channel-syllables” does not literally refer to sounds or language, but rather refers to the ends of the channels that are shaped like specific syllables (Cyrus Stearns, personal communication, 2013).

<sup>349</sup> The six parameters and four methods is a hermeneutical device central to the commentarial literature of the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* that was developed by Candrakīrti in his *Guhyasamājantra-pradīpoddyotana-nāma-ṭīkā-ṣatkoṭi-vyākhyā* [Wedemeyer, *Āryadeva's Lamp that Integrates the Practices (Caryāmelāpakapradīpa): The Gradual Path of Vajrayāna Buddhism According to the Esoteric Community Noble Tradition*, 60]. The six parameters (*mtha' drug*) are 1) literal (*sgra ji bzhin pa*) 2) figurative (*sgra ji bzhin ma yin pa*) 3) implied meaning (*drang don*) 4) definitive meaning (*nges don*) 5) intentional (*dgongs pa*) 6) unintentional (*dgongs pa ma yin*) [interlinear note, Spyian snga ba Rin chen Idan, *Sbas bshad kyi dka' 'grel*, 407/5]. The four ways (*tshul bzhi*) are (1) the general method (*spyi'i tshul*), (2) the literal method (*yi ge'i tshul*), (3) the hidden method (*sbas pa'i tshul*) and (4) the ultimate method (*mthar thug gi tshul*)



Here we find an additional treatment of the meaning of the vajra body, expressed with a precision that we do not find in Yang dgon pa's own work. The vajra body, Spyan snga ba asserts, is the cause (*rgyud mtshan*)<sup>350</sup> of the ordinary body, and is inseparable from it. Given that the ordinary body apparently refers to the flesh-and-blood body, this points us to a vision of embodiment that does not denigrate the flesh, but rather recognizes its inherent interdependence with the valorized vajra body. This point is made by Yang dgon pa himself as well, but Spyan snga ba's singling out of this point indicates that this idea was received by his disciples as a central one. However, Spyan snga ba also tells us that while the vajra body is not separate from the quotidian realities of the flesh, the revelation of the ordinary body as a vajra body (the real situation that the body houses channels, winds, and vital essences) remains hidden. The tendency of language ("the lock of the six parameters and four methods") to conceal this body's situation prevents the uninitiated, those who have not sought and received oral instructions, from accessing the truth about the vajra body. Spyan snga ba's indication here of the secrecy of this body brings up an interesting point of contrast. The idea that the reality of the vajra body is the purview of the elite or the initiated is not an idea that Yang dgon pa emphasizes in the *Explanation of the Hidden*. Rather, as we will see in Chapters Four and Five, in Yang dgon pa's work there is a consistent theme of asserting the innateness of this vajra body, the alignment of

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[Phur bu tshe ring, *Nang rig pa'i tshig mdzod* (Beijing: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 1994), 240]. The device is discussed in Ernst Steinkellner, "Remarks on Tantristic Hermeneutics," in *Proceedings of the Csoma de Kőrös Memorial Symposium*, ed. Louis Ligeti (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1978), 445-458 and Robert Thurman, "Vajra Hermeneutics," in *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), 119-148.

<sup>350</sup> *Rgyud mtshan* often means "reason," but it has a secondary meaning of cause, or causal conditions.

the vajra body with the quotidian, and the conclusion that everyone, with or without revelation, possesses a “body, speech, and mind of the *heruka*,” and therefore everyone (even without their knowledge) is already partaking of the fruition. However, this idea exists in tension with the reality that a project that describes the vajra body with such detail is itself a validation of the role of education in this process of revelation.

Spyan snga ba continues with a commentary on the word *sbas pa* (hidden) in the title of Yang dgon pa’s work. Here he explores why the nature of the body is hidden:

*lus kyi gnas lugs sbas pa ni/ blo zhan can ni theg pa dman pas/ lus sems dbyer med kyi gnad thun mong ma yin pa/ shes dka' bas sbas pa'o/ rnam pa gcig du na/ rgyud dkruk/ lung bcus/ man ngag gab/ mtha' drug tshul bzhi'i sgo lcags kyis bla ma la ma brten par rang dgar 'jug pa rnam la sbas pa'o/ yang na lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes chen po de rtogs dka' bar sbas pa'i phyir gsang ba'o'*<sup>351</sup>

As for the hidden nature of the body: It is hidden because people of lesser intellect, those of the lower vehicle, have difficulty understanding the extraordinary point of the inseparability of body and mind. On the one hand, it is hidden from those who wish to practice without relying on a teacher, through concealed special instructions such as “shaking one's being”<sup>352</sup> and “the ten winds,”<sup>353</sup> and by the lock of the six parameters and the four methods. On the other hand, it is hidden because it is secret, in the sense that the great co-emergent gnosis is difficult to realize.

The first sentence is worth considering on its own: “The nature of the body is hidden.” This sentence, while written by Spyam snga ba, gives us a gloss of the word *gnas lugs* in a context close to Yang dgon pa’s time and place. While the body itself may not be hidden, its nature (*gnas*

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<sup>351</sup> Spyam snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Sbas bshad kyi dka' 'grel*, 407/3-5.

<sup>352</sup> An instruction related to the physical exercises that enhance inner heat (*gtum mo*) practice (Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication 2012).

<sup>353</sup> “Lung bcus” may be a misspelling (or old spelling) of “rlung bcu”, which refers to the ten winds (Slob dpon Mchod rten, May 2012). Spyam snga ba is referencing instructions that can only be understood through a sustained apprenticeship with a tantric master.

*lugs*) or underlying substrate is concealed. This contributes a bit more to our understanding of the implication of the word *gnas lugs*. One revealing detail about this passage is that Spyān snga ba pairs “hidden” (*sbas*) not with the word *description* (*bshad*), but with the word *body* (*lus*). By virtue of this gloss, *Explanation of the Hidden* becomes a work about “the hidden aspects of the vajra body” (*rdo rje lus kyi sbas*) rather than a text about the vajra body (*rdo rje lus*) described in a hidden or esoteric manner. With such an interpretation, the title would be rendered *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, and following this lead, I have chosen to translate the title this way. As will emerge in the following chapters, Yang dgon pa’s vision of the body supports such a reading.

To say that the body’s nature is hidden is to imply that the body may *seem* obvious in immediate experience, but something about it is inherently recondite. Its real mode of existence (*gnas lugs*) is not obvious, but something to be discovered and understood gradually through a process of education and—in the context of tantra—inner visionary experience catalyzed by meditation practice. In the *Explanation of the Hidden*, the nature of the body is layered, with outer layers obscuring more subtle layers within: a coarse body hiding a subtle body, channels hiding winds, and winds hiding *bindu*, *bindu* potentially hiding the culminating experience of a very subtle great bliss-emptiness, the goal of the tantric path. For the tantric adept, the process of studying the vajra body is one of plumbing these hidden layers. The body thus is inherently esoteric, secret, hidden—conveyed through a layered map to be explored and meditated upon.

But, while the nature of the body is hidden, it is not hidden from everyone in the same way. It is selectively hidden. As Spyān snga ba continues, it is hidden from those who belong to the “lower vehicle,” hence are not intelligent enough (or not of the right intelligence) to digest the complexity and depth of its nature, such as the inseparability of body and mind—the topic of

the next chapter. Second, it is hidden “from those who wish to practice without relying on a teacher,” or the uninitiated. Some points of the vajra body remain obscure, cloaked in abstruse referents that can only be understood through oral and visual transmission within Yang dgon pa’s own lineage, such as “shaking one’s being” (*rgyud dkrugs*) and “the ten winds” (*rlung bcu*). Yang dgon pa himself also specifies the need for practice, as we will see, towards the end of his work, but he does not make this point his emphasis. Third, Spyan snga ba tells us, the nature of the body is hidden, perhaps from most of us, because “the great co-emergent gnosis is difficult to realize.” Even when the external conditions have been arranged, there remains the internal challenge of seeing the subtle co-emergent gnosis that hides within the body. In this sense, the body remains a secret to those who do not have direct meditative experience of its true nature or mode of existence.

It is hard to overlook the presence of a “hidden” challenge within the exegesis of the hidden and the secret here, and in Tibetan Buddhist writings in general. In this case, the exegesis implicitly challenges the reader to ask whether he or she might be in fact one of these types of people: intelligent enough, with instructions from a teacher, and with a personal experience of emptiness. Spyan snga ba drops concealed language for esoteric somatic practices into the explanation, perhaps to imply that the text will remain locked in some ways for these kinds of people. This implication itself presents a challenge to the reader to do the work that makes the unlocking or unveiling of the hidden aspects of the text possible.

With regard to how an individual should come to know the vajra body, this subtle substrate of existence that is the purview of *dngos po’i gnas lugs*, it will be recalled that Yang dgon pa posits a dual modality of acquiring knowledge of the recondite layer of being. He

reveals this dual modality when explaining how he himself came to know and write about *dngos po'i gnas lugs* (as quoted previously):

*'dir dngos po'i gnas lugs bla ma brgyud pa'i rim pa las 'ongs shing/<sup>354</sup> rang gi nyams myong gi grub pa cung zad<sup>355</sup> bri bar byas ste<sup>356</sup>*

Here, I will here write a little about *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as it comes from the lamas in the succession of transmission and as it has been gleaned through my own experience.<sup>357</sup>

Yang dgon pa reveals here his own process of coming to know *dngos po'i gnas lugs* through the two modalities of transmission and experience, a process that is echoed in a number of Yang dgon pa's statements scattered throughout the *Explanation of the Hidden*. In commenting on the final word of Yang dgon pa's title, "explanation" (*bshad*), Spyran snga ba draws together some of these statements to create a snapshot of how Yang dgon pa came to know his subject, and therefore how he came to explain it:

*bshad ces bya ba ni/ tshul gang sgo nas bshad na/ rin po che nyid kyis rdo rje lus kyi rtsa'i gnas lugs/ rlung gi kha dog ring thung/ rgyu ba'i grangs/ khams bde ba chen po'i dbang du 'dus lugs mngon gsum du gzigs pa te/ de pha rgyud ma rgyud rgyud sde du ma'i lung gis tshad mas gtan la phab nas bstan pa dang/ 'dzam bu'i gling na 'gran zla dang bral ba'i rin chen rnam bzhi'i man ngag gi gnad zhib du phyi ba'i mngon du gyur/ gsal bar mngon du phyung nas bshad do/<sup>358</sup>*

"Explanation": How did this explanation come about? Rinpoche [Yang dgon pa] himself directly saw the nature of the channels in the vajra body, the colors and lengths of the

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<sup>354</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 118/4: *lus ngag yid gsum dngos po'i gnas lugs* is added here.

<sup>355</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 4: *cig* added here.

<sup>356</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 424/4.

<sup>357</sup> He mis variant: "Here, I will here write a little about *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as it comes from the lamas in the succession of transmission and the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body, speech, and mind gleaned through my own experience."

<sup>358</sup> Spyran snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Sbas bshad kyi dka' 'grel*, 407/5-08/2.

winds, the calculations of their movements, and the method to control the element of great bliss. Then, through consulting many scriptures and many tantras, such as the mother-tantras and father-tantras, he confirmed his understanding via textual authority. He then taught and greatly refined the points of the special instructions of the four precious ones that are without comparison in this world.<sup>359</sup> Having become very clear [on all this] he then explained it.

This passage provides a window into how the generation immediately following Yang dgon pa came to understand the dual process by which *dngos po'i gnas lugs* came to be known. In some ways, this synopsis accords with what we find in the root work itself, and in *The Mirror* (Yang dgon pa's life story written by Spyan snga ba). There we find Yang dgon pa's claim that the *Explanation of the Hidden* was initially inspired by a direct vision of the vajra body through meditative experience.<sup>360</sup> In the light of this claim, we might understand the *Explanation of the Hidden* as the report of visionary experience. However, this passage also acknowledges the role of Yang dgon pa's active research in the composition of the *Explanation of the Hidden*. Yang dgon pa sought textual authority for his meditative experiences, and engaged in pedagogical and personal intellectual work as a preparation for the writing process. It is apparent from the many quotations and citations present in the *Explanation of the Hidden* that this was so: Yang dgon pa read and studied the religious literature of his own lineage and the Buddhist tantras widely, synthesizing descriptions of the body from many sources.

While Spyan snga ba's statements accord with Yang dgon pa's own in some ways, they differ in others. The significant difference is that Spyan snga ba's statements carry a clear

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<sup>359</sup> The four precious ones (*rin chen bzhi*) are his four main teachers: Ko brag pa, Rgod tshang pa, 'Bri gung Spyan snga, and Sa skya Paṇḍita.

<sup>360</sup> As stated in Chapter One of the dissertation, the visionary experience is recounted in Spyan snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Me long ma chen mo*, 55/4-5. It is also mentioned by Yang dgon pa himself in Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 465/3.

indication of a hierarchy between these two modalities of education and experience. This hierarchy, while hinted at in the above statement, is even more emphatically expressed a little later in *The Difficult Points*, when he is commenting on Yang dgon pa's introduction to the dual modality that led to the act of writing about *dngos po'i gnas lugs*:

*bla ma'i drin gyis mngon du byung ba/ gsung las thob pa gcig ma nor bar bstan cing rtogs pa'o/...myong ba'i nges pa thob pa ni/ 'di ltar byas na 'di ltar 'byung zhes pa'i nges pa thob cing/ myong bas grub/ 'di nas shog gi lam gcig ston pa'o/...rdo rje lus kyi gnas lugs 'di stong ra'i tin nge 'dzin la mnyam par bzhag pa'i dus su/ rtsa rlung thig le'i gnas tshul ji lta ba bzhin du mthong ba/ rlung gi kha dog la sogs pa gzugs can la mig can gyis blta ba bzhin du gzigs pa'o/ dri ma med pa'i rgyud kyi dgongs pa ma rtogs pa/ rang (b)zo la sogs pa'i skyon med...<sup>361</sup>*

Through his lama's kindness, [the nature of the vajra body] was revealed and obtained from his [teacher's] speech, and then he unerringly taught and realized it... He says he obtained that [realization] through his own experience, which means he obtained the certainty that "If I do this, that will arise." He was accomplished through experience. Through this, he committed the path to paper...

He saw, while resting in the meditative concentration on the empty enclosure, the status of the vajra body, the situation of the channels, winds, and vital essences, just as they are. He saw the colors of the winds and so forth, just as the physical eyes see form. He saw this without the flaw of having consulted the intention of the stainless tantras, or making it up himself...

It is interesting that in this passage we find Spyān snga ba validating the authenticity of Yang dgon pa's vision by stating that it was initially inspired only by a transmission from his lama followed by his own personal, sensory experience of the subtle body, but *not* (initially) inspired by study of the tantras. The dominant term of authentication here is experience, not study. In a lineage such as the 'Brug pa Bka' brgyud, where meditation practice is valued over scholarship, such a statement is not surprising. Nevertheless, he acknowledges an education process that is relational, and textual as well. This mirrors the dual influence of human kindness and personal

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<sup>361</sup> Spyān snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Sbas bshad kyi dka' 'grel*, *ibid.*, 414/2-5.

experience on Yang dgon pa's own training. He has relied on "the kindness of his lama": a long-term personal relationship that become a vehicle for transmission. But this experience is supplemented by one other source of authority, "the secret words of the *ḍākinīs* that are the stainless tantras." This is might be an oblique reference to the seminal Nāropa treatise *The Truth of the Pure Command, the Heart of the Path of Mixing and Transference: The Special Instructions of the Ḍākinīs*, placing Yang dgon pa's text in this line of transmission, or it might reference a visionary revelation. In any event, Spyān snga ba has laid out an orderly picture of how the transmission of this teaching has occurred:

1. Yang dgon pa received instructions from his four teachers.
2. He obtained realization through his own direct experience.
3. He consulted the lineage treatises.
4. He wrote down what he had experienced in meditation, and learned via study.

Spyān snga ba's depiction of the process of study and refinement necessary for textual production provides a template for how tantric somatic meditations may in fact be learned, internalized, and transmitted. The transmission of the body's hidden nature toggles between text and experience, between diagrammatic maps and learned visualizations that come via textual authority, and the inner life of the yogi's personal experience. This points to a relationship between body, experience, and text that forms the legacy of tantric transmission. Janet Gyatso, in an article exploring how Tibetan Buddhist meditative traditions have understood the nature and value of experience, argues for a mediated nature that informs religious experience in these contexts:

Indeed, in contrast to the way that claims of private, unmediated religious experience have often served as a strategic device to preserve autonomy and immunity to scientific scrutiny (Proudfoot), claims of experience in the Tibetan Buddhist context are mediated by a variety of signs, signs made possible precisely by experience's own mediated (and mediating) nature. Such signs and expressions render the virtuoso's experience subject



not only to a kind of scrutiny but even to the participation of disciples, colleagues, and patrons.<sup>362</sup>

Spyan snga ba's descriptions of the influences that informed the composition of the *Explanation of the Hidden* provide evidence for just such a mediated type of religious experience. While Yang dgon pa may have had some kind of vision informing the composition of his seminal work, the work itself is full of the evidence of an experience heavily mediated by the authority of the tantras and by the authority of Yang dgon pa's own human teachers. Furthermore, as Gyatso suggests, the mediating effect spreads out well beyond the individual: Spyian snga ba mediates Yang dgon pa's experience by virtue of reporting that experience in his own text, and he lends his participation to the shaping of the experience by framing it as a sign of authority that Yang dgon pa is qualified to author such a somatic anatomy.

### **Concluding Remarks to Chapter Three**

Yang dgon pa's introductory comments, supplemented by Spyian snga ba's commentary, begin to introduce us to the outlines of the territory that *dngos po'i gnas lugs* covers in Yang dgon pa's vision. Already, through the consideration of the structure and title of the work, we are witnessing a *dngos po'i gnas lugs* that refers to the situation of human embodiment not as an ontological nature (*gnas lugs*) of things (*dngos po*) in general, nor an epistemic nature (*gnas lugs*) of things (*dngos po*), but rather a nature (*gnas lugs*) of the corporeal (*dngos po*), the truth about the body-mind continuum itself. For Yang dgon pa, this *dngos po'i gnas lugs* refers to the

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<sup>362</sup> Janet Gyatso, "Healing Burns with Fire," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 1 (1999): 3.

human body and mind as a whole, but it primarily concerns the subtle substrate of the body called the vajra body. This body is not simply a lump of form; it is complex and stratified. The complexity is first glimpsed in the fact that there are not one or two kinds of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, as his predecessors asserted, but rather four: a *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body, speech, mind, and all three together. As has been shown in this chapter, Yang dgon pa recalibrated the categories of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* so that the classical Mahāyāna terms of embodiment—body, speech, and mind—would align with the classical tantric elements of the vajra body, channels, winds, and vital essences. This move situates *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as a primary gloss for the vajra body by virtue of classification, definition, and exegesis.

As a description of the vajra body, the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* carries the sense of something that is innate and natural to the human condition. The vajra body, we are told, exists simultaneously with the ordinary body. However, while the ordinary body is manifest to the naked eye, the vajra body is hidden. Therefore, to the degree that *dngos po'i gnas lugs* alludes to the vajra body, it too is hidden. In this sense, the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* continues to carry the implication of being an object of realization, something to be unveiled or discovered, that we find in its usage in the Buddhist canon. Yang dgon pa's remarks about his own education and training in preparation for writing attest to the role of this process of cultivation and unveiling. *Dngos po'i gnas lugs* may be innate, but a degree of self-cultivation is required for this object of knowledge to manifest. The process of self-cultivation we have seen here includes the cultivation of relationship with a teacher, education, and religious practice. These efforts, he suggests in his introductory remarks to the *Explanation of the Hidden*, cannot be made following a mentalistic model such as *madhyamaka*, in which only the realities of the mind are explored; the efforts must be in service of the knowledge of the realities of the body, a knowledge gleaned through the

vehicle of tantric practice specifically. In these introductory remarks we also see Yang dgon pa assert that knowledge of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* is not optional on the Buddhist path: it is a critical prerequisite for Buddhahood.

The introductory material in Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden* provides an initial sketch of our critical term *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. In the following chapters, I will continue to explore the question of what Yang dgon pa means by this term through considering how he unpacks his four kinds of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. In addition we will look at how Yang dgon pa's initial assertions play out as he unfolds his somatic theory. The largest issue I will be keeping track of in the thesis regards the fundamental sense of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* for Yang dgon pa. In exploring this issue, I will also look at some related questions within a broader theory of somatic being. What is Yang dgon pa's understanding of the vajra body? What are its components? What is the relationship between the ordinary body and the vajra body? How is mind, a critical term of Buddhist enlightenment, conceived vis à vis the body in this somatic theory? And finally, what are the philosophical implications and problems of a Buddhist soteriology that takes the body as the primary basis for enlightenment?

## Chapter Four

### The *Dngos po'i gnas lugs* of Body, Speech, and Mind

At the end of the previous chapter, we considered how the introductory material in the *Explanation of the Hidden* reveals that *dngos po'i gnas lugs* refers to the hidden truths about the body: not primarily the flesh-and-blood body, but the vajra body. In this chapter, I will explore how Yang dgon pa unpacks this notion of the hidden within the vajra body, the substrate of physical being that is not the purview of the naked eye. This chapter endeavors to follow the unfolding of Yang dgon pa's main points, and to identify some of the key characteristics and general principles of this subtle substrate, this *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body, speech, and mind as Yang dgon pa understands it. This chapter does not attempt to describe the details of the entire map of the tantric physiology that Yang dgon pa lays out. This map is complex and detailed, and many of its details are peripheral to the main questions of this thesis. I seek to explore some main features of the map (the major cities, in this analogy) along with those details that are relevant to my larger questions. I am also interested in the strategies of making the map, as well as the implications of such a project. In short, the thesis is interested in discovering the traits of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* within the characteristics of a tantric physiology that seeks to support a broader theory of somatic enlightenment.

**Part I: A *Dngos po gnas lugs* of the Body (*Lus kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*)**

Yang dgon pa's subtle body (*lus phra ba*) exists in three dimensions: channels, winds, and vital essences. These three components are, according to Yang dgon pa, the nature—or substrata—of the body's coarse materiality with respect to the three dimensions of embodiment, namely body, speech, and mind. These dimensions of body, speech, and mind—we will remember from the previous chapter—are understood to be part of a larger category of body, which is the overarching category for Yang dgon pa's work.

At first it might appear that Yang dgon pa postulates the subtle body as a tantric alternative to the coarse, externally verifiable body; however, the situation is quite a bit more complex than that. Yang dgon pa's subtle body is fully interdependent with, relies on, and includes many elements of the coarse physical, visible body. In his discussion of the channels, winds, and vital essences, therefore, we see a theme of interplay between the subtle body and its visible manifestations such as flesh and fluid, and visible everyday processes such as defecating and breathing. The relationship between the coarse and subtle can only be teased out through some attention to the details of his map, as it is not an issue that Yang dgon pa tackles head on. However, it is one of the guiding questions of our thesis, and it will be of interest to us as we look at some of the telling details here regarding what the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body (as a smaller category) means for Yang dgon pa.

As shown above in Chapter Two, previous presentations on *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, beginning with Nāropa, had most certainly given the subtle body due attention, but these presentations did not scrutinize the subtle body in detail. Whatever detail was provided, in most cases, corresponded to what needed to be known for the tantric techniques that funnel the winds into the central channel. In contrast, Yang dgon pa devotes much of the *Explanation of the Hidden* to describing in considerable detail a map of the subtle body synthesized from various tantric sources, and then rounds out this description with additional somatic dimensions of body, speech, and mind. Yang dgon pa was not satisfied with a rough map, with simply presenting a sketch of the equipment needed to funnel the winds into the central channel. He instead wished to expound a full tantric anatomy that he proposed as being as authentically and naturally present as the coarse, objectively verifiable physical body. He wished to describe how this subtle anatomy had real and significant connections to the coarse substantial body, on the one hand, and also to what for others was largely thought to be the insubstantiality of the cognitive faculties, on the other. In fact, his presentation of the subtle body is so detailed, it reads like a tantric anatomical textbook. And this, I argue, is how Yang dgon pa hoped *The Explanation of the Hidden* would function—not just as a practical religious handbook, but also as an enduring manual for people interested in a tantric Buddhist theoretical perspective on the body. It seems to be a move to position Buddhism as a path of access to the power of both the subtle body and the everyday coarse body, including knowledge of its health and wellbeing.

## The Body within the Body

As discussed above, Yang dgon pa places a smaller category of body within the overarching category of the vajra body, which he calls the “*dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body” (*lus kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*). The smaller category stands apart from the vajra body in the way it is classified as a subset of the vajra body, and the way it is discussed in terms of specific topics. Speaking generally, there is an emphasis, within the smaller category, on the body as a structurally stable physical support for a speech and a mind that are more volatile and that inhabit and animate the body. Yang dgon pa occasionally alludes to the components of this smaller category of the body as “the support,” with speech and/or mind named as “the supported.”<sup>363</sup> As was discussed in Chapter Two, Yang dgon pa discusses the three components of the subtle body and their impact on the coarse body, as well as the mind itself, in terms of an outline that he extracts from a work he names the *Vajra Rosary* (*Rdo rje phreng ba*), but which appears to be in fact the *Non-dual Victory Tantra* (*Gnyis med rnam rgyal gyi rgyud*). In the *Explanation of the Hidden*, a stanza from the *Non-dual Victory Tantra* introduces the entire copious section called the “*dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body.” While this chapter of the *Explanation of the Hidden* largely treats the topic of channels, which Yang dgon pa calls the “essence of body,”<sup>364</sup> we find here a number of related topics exploring the nature of human corporeality. All these topics of focus are laid out in the stanza from the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*, the same stanza that is also quoted by Nāropa and other commentaries on *dngos po'i gnas lugs* preceding Yang dgon pa:

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<sup>363</sup> Examples of this use can be found in Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 442/5 and 455/2.

<sup>364</sup> *rtsa ni lus kyi ngo bo* [ibid., (Pha jo ldings), 425/6].

*lus ni byang chub lnga rnam dang//  
rtsa dang byang chub sems dang ni//  
mi gtsang rdzas dang rnam rtog gis//  
lus kyi chos ni gnas pa yin//*<sup>365</sup>

The body: The five-fold awakening,  
Channels, *bodhicitta*,  
Unclean substances, and thought.  
By virtue of these, the phenomenon of body exists.

Following the lead of this quote, Yang dgon pa creates an outline of five sections for the five topics that are proposed to make up the category of body here:

1. The fivefold awakening (embryology)
2. Channels
3. *Bodhicitta*
4. Unclean substances
5. Thought

The first topic concerns the development of the human body in utero. The second through the fourth have to do with the body throughout a human life. The fifth concerns the mind, but (significantly) is placed in the category of body. While Yang dgon pa proceeds to explore each of these dimensions in turn, he does so unevenly. He allocates most of his attention to the first two dimensions of body: the body's formation in the womb and the mature body's channel-map. This unevenness underscores that for Yang dgon pa, the primary subject of soteriological concern remains the subtle body. The final three dimensions he discusses in a cursory manner. Nevertheless, their inclusion is worth attending to as well, as these dimensions help round out a theoretical vision of the body as being decidedly inclusive of material and mental dimensions at the same time.

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 425/6. *Gnyis med rnam rgyal gyi rgyud*, 429.



## The Developing Body

While previously Yang dgon pa had defined the channels as “stationary,”<sup>366</sup> this indicated the stable status of channels upon their full maturity, relative to the volatile winds. In Yang dgon pa’s section on the five-fold awakening, we are afforded a very different view of the channels and the body in general. In this section, reflecting the development of life from conception to birth, the subtle body is most definitely not stationary, but rather is a developing and maturing entity, in this case throughout the period of gestation. The reason for taking a good look at this portion of the *Explanation of the Hidden* is that Yang dgon pa’s embryology helps us understand the relationship between the vajra body and the flesh-and-blood body, as he has chosen to present it. It also clarifies this aspect of his somatic theory: his stance on the body as a developing organism must somehow co-exist with a philosophy that the body is already the *heruka*, a Buddha. In this model of gestation, we see a body that is both in the process of normal, ordinary development and manifesting the qualities of enlightenment at the same time, a key aspect of Yang dgon pa’s overall project. Finally, we need to look at this section because his description of the stages of gestation is considerably more developed than that of his predecessors, indicating an interest in thoroughness that adds credence to the hypothesis that Yang dgon pa’s project was to create a tantric answer or supplement to an emerging medical model.

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<sup>366</sup> When first introducing the concept of the vajra body, Yang dgon pa says, “The channels are stationary. The winds move, and the *bodhicitta* is positioned” (*Gnas pa rtsa/ g.yo ba rlung/ bkod pa byang chub kyi sems so*) [*Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 425/3].

Yang dgon pa discusses conception and fetal development via two developmental models, both of which have precedents in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist expositions of embryology.<sup>367</sup> The first he calls the “five manifest awakenings” (Tib. *mngon par byang chub pa*, Skt. *abhisambodhi*), a term and model found in some root tantras of the *niruttara* class and their commentaries. The term refers to the gradual awakening or creation of the deity’s body during the creation phase (*bskyed rim*) of tantric visualization practice, but it is simultaneously aligned with the awakening (meaning development) of the fetus in the mother’s womb from conception to birth.<sup>368</sup> The second developmental model we find in Yang dgon pa’s embryology is the “ten incarnations of Viṣṇu” (*khyab 'jug gi 'jug pa bcu*), a model that describes the physical development of the fetus during the ten lunar months of gestation. Differing versions of this latter model are found in the *Vajramāla Tantra*<sup>369</sup> and *Kālacakra Tantra*.<sup>370</sup> While Frances Garrett explores one model of the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu to some extent in *Religion, Medicine and the Embryo in Tibet*,<sup>371</sup> she does not treat the model of the five awakenings. This latter model of embryology has received very scant attention in secondary scholarship and therefore deserves close attention, because it became a common way to describe fetal development in Tibetan religious writings. Furthermore, Yang dgon pa unpacks the five awakenings in

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<sup>367</sup> For a thorough discussion of some models of gestation found in Tibetan Buddhist sources, and their Indian precedents, see Garrett, *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*, 85-126.

<sup>368</sup> Another clear example of this alignment can be found in Jamgon Kongtrul’s commentary on Mchog gyur gling pa’s treasure text *Lam rim ye shes snying po* [Kong sprul Blo gros mtha’ yas, *The Light of Wisdom*, 1st ed., 2 vols., vol. 1 (Boston: Shambala Publications, 1995)], 100-102.

<sup>369</sup> Kittay, “Interpreting the Vajra Rosary,” 265, 606.

<sup>370</sup> Wallace, *The Kālacakratantra: The Chapter on the Individual Together with the Vimalaprabhā*, 10.

<sup>371</sup> Garrett, *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*, 98-100.

remarkable detail, offering not one but two versions of this model and subsuming the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu within one of them.

Yang dgon pa calls his two versions of the five awakenings typology “outer” version and “inner” version. In both versions, the first three manifest awakenings relate to conception, the fourth relates to gestation in the womb, and the fifth relates to the fully formed human body. However, the names of the awakenings and their descriptions are slightly different between the two models, as shown in the chart below. The primary difference between the two models is that, in the inner version, each awakening corresponds to one of the five gnoses. Below, I will go through Yang dgon pa’s two versions of the five awakenings to introduce this important and pervasive typology and to explore Yang dgon pa’s particular version of it. Beginning with the five *outer* manifest awakenings (*phyi'i mngon byang lnga*), Yang dgon pa describes the first three thusly:

*ma khrag dang ldan zhing nad med pa'i mngal stong pa de chos nyid stong pa nyid las*<sup>372</sup>  
*mngon par byang chub pa'o/ pha'i khu ba dang ma'i rakta 'dzom pa ni/ gdan nyi zla las*  
*mngon par byang chub pa'o/ bar do'i rnam par shes pa khyab byed las*<sup>373</sup> *kyi rlung dang*  
*'groggs te/ pha'i bshang*<sup>374</sup> *lam nas zhugs te'*<sup>375</sup> *thig le dang 'groggs nas ma'i mngal du*  
*zhugs pa ni gsung yig 'bru las*<sup>376</sup> *mngon par byang chub pa'o'*<sup>377</sup>

The condition of menstruation along with an empty womb free of illness is the **manifest awakening through**<sup>378</sup> **dharmatā emptiness**. The coming together of the father’s semen

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<sup>372</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 122/2: *la*.

<sup>373</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 6: *las* elided.

<sup>374</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 122/6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 7: *gshang*.

<sup>375</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 122/6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 7: *nas*.

<sup>376</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis): 123/1: *la*.

<sup>377</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 426/2-3.

<sup>378</sup> He mis variant: *in*.

and the mother's blood is the **manifest awakening through the sun and moon seat**. The bardo consciousness, accompanied by the karmic<sup>379</sup> pervading wind, enters the father's anus, joins with his semen, and enters the mother's womb. This is the **manifest awakening through<sup>380</sup> the speech-syllable**.

As we see here, the process of human conception is modeled after the first phases of a tantric *sādhāna*, in which a yogi sequentially dissolves appearances into emptiness, visualizes a sun and moon seat, and then visualizes a seed syllable on top of the seat. Yang dgon pa then proceeds to describe in detail the period of gestation according to the model of the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu. While the fourth manifest awakening apparently corresponds to the entire period of gestation in the womb, Yang dgon pa links it to the third month of gestation when the sexual organs develop:

*de'i dus su<sup>381</sup> pho thams cad rdo rje ltar ske nyag<sup>382</sup> du chags te<sup>383</sup> / srog 'dzin la brten nas chags/<sup>384</sup> mo thams cad dril bu ltar khong stong<sup>385</sup> du chags<sup>386</sup> te/ de ni thugs phyag mtshan las<sup>387</sup> mngon par byang chub pa'o/<sup>388</sup>*

At that time [in the third month], all males develop a waist indentation like a vajra, which is developed on the basis of the life-holding [wind].<sup>389</sup> All females form an empty hollow like a bell. This is the **manifest awakening of mind through<sup>390</sup> the hand implements**.

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<sup>379</sup> Beijing variant: “karmic” elided.

<sup>380</sup> He mis variant: in.

<sup>381</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 127/5: *na*.

<sup>382</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10: *sked nyag*.

<sup>383</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 127/6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10: *la*.

<sup>384</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 127/6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 10: phrase elided.

<sup>385</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10: *khog stong*.

<sup>386</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 127/6: *chags pas*.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 127/6: *la*.

<sup>388</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 428/6-29/1.

The physical development in the third month affords an opportunity to draw a correspondence between the physical shape of the fetus' body and the typically gendered tantric hand implements of vajra and bell. The correspondence underscores the relationship between the physical body and Buddhist practices for reaching the salvific release, and thus both physicalizes and naturalizes the enlightenment process, creating a vision in which a kind of proto-enlightenment is achieved prior to a human lifespan, an enlightenment inherent in the natural process of the body's own development. This presentation maps the tantric symbolism onto the physical body in a way that is vivid and literal.

Finally, the fetus' development is complete and final awakening occurs, corresponding respectively to physical birth and the fully visualized deity:

*de ltar pho mo ma ning gi gzugs su<sup>391</sup> skye ba mngon par 'du byed pa te<sup>392</sup>/sku yongs su rdzogs pa las<sup>393</sup> mngon par byang chub pa'o<sup>394</sup>*

In that way, birth in the form of a male, female, or androgyne actually manifests.<sup>395</sup> This is the **awakening through<sup>396</sup> the completed body**.

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<sup>389</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: phrase elided.

<sup>390</sup> He mis variant: in.

<sup>391</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 132/1; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 13: *kyis*.

<sup>392</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 13: *ste*.

<sup>393</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 132/3: *la*.

<sup>394</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 430/6.

<sup>395</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: In that way, by the form of a male, female or androgyne, birth actually manifests.

<sup>396</sup> He mis variant: in.

The final awakening is the emergence of a developed fetus from its gestational womb, in the form of a gendered body. It is notable that a place is provided for three sexes rather than two, without explicitly privileging one over the other except perhaps by order of mention, implying that each are the “deity” innately, by virtue of birth. Thus, Yang dgon pa provides a remarkably clear example of mapping the process of development phase yoga (Tib. *bskyed rim*, Skt. *utpattikrama*) onto the stages of fetal development. What seems to differentiate the outer awakening from the inner form is simply the set of correspondences. For Yang dgon pa, the outer dimension of awakening aligns fetal development with the development phase of tantric practice, but the inner dimension of awakening aligns fetal development with the five gnoses.

In turning our attention in the direction of Yang dgon pa’s inner manifest awakenings, which introduce correspondences of the five gnoses with the five phases of gestation, we find little change in the correspondence between the phases of awakening and their physical manifestations. However, the process of human development from conception through birth is also aligned with the archetypal five gnoses. Yang dgon pa describes the inner awakenings as follows:

*rnal 'byor chen po'i rgyud kyi rjes su 'brang pa nang gi mngon byang lnga dang sbyar na/ dang po pha'i bshang lam nas zhugs te lte ba'i 'og rdo rje'i lam na gnas pa la pha'i thig les 'phul te<sup>397</sup> / zla ba me long lta bu'i ye shes las mngon par byang chub pa'o/ de nas<sup>398</sup> ma'i skye gnas su phyin pa na rakta'i dangs<sup>399</sup> mas<sup>400</sup> btums pa nyi ma mnyam pa*

<sup>397</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 132/4; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 13: 'phul te 'ongs ba ni.

<sup>398</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 13: nas omitted.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*, 13: *dwangs*.

<sup>400</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 132/5; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 13: *phyi nas* inserted.

*nyid kyi ye shes las mngon par byang chub pa'o/ de ltar nyi zla gnyis kyi bar<sup>401</sup>/ bar do'i rnam par shes pa lhan gcig skyes pa'i dga' ba dang bcas pa ni<sup>402</sup>/ sa bon so sor rtog pa'i ye shes las mngon par byang chub pa'o/ de gsum rlung sems bde ba'i rnam par 'dres te/ mer mer po dang nur nur po<sup>403</sup> tar tar por gyur pa ni/ 'dres pa bya ba grub pa'i ye shes las mngon par byang chub pa'o/ de nas 'khrang 'gyur gyi skabs su gzugs kyi rnam par grub nas<sup>404</sup> lus rim kyis rdzogs nas<sup>405</sup>/ skye ba mngon par 'du byed pa ni/ rdzogs pa chos kyi dbyings kyi<sup>406</sup> ye shes las mngon par byang chub pa'o'<sup>407</sup>*

If one wishes to apply this to the five inner manifest awakenings, following the [tradition of the] great yoga tantras, first, [the consciousness] enters the anus of the father and comes to abide below the navel, in the penis. It is then ejaculated with the father's semen into [the mother].<sup>408</sup> This is **awakening through the moon, mirror-like gnosis**. Then, after arriving in the mother's womb,<sup>409</sup> it is wrapped<sup>410</sup> in the elixir [*dwangs ma*] of menstrual blood. This is **awakening through the sun, the gnosis of equanimity**. Between the sun and moon, in the same way, the bardo consciousness with co-emergent joy is **awakening through the seed, discriminating gnosis**.<sup>411</sup> These three mix in the form of wind, mind, and bliss, becoming oval, thickened, and elongated.<sup>412</sup> **This is awakening through the mixture, activity-accomplishing gnosis**. Then, during the period of solidification, [the consciousness] takes on the aspect of form, and the body

<sup>401</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 132/6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing),13: na inserted.

<sup>402</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing),13: dang bcas te gnas pa ni.

<sup>403</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 133/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing),13: dang inserted.

<sup>404</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis),133/3: grub pa na.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid., 133/3: lus rnam yongs su rdzogs pa ste; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing),13: te.

<sup>406</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 133/4: kyi elided.

<sup>407</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 430/6-431/4.

<sup>408</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: and comes into [the mother].

<sup>409</sup> Beijing variant: After it arrives in the mother's womb.

<sup>410</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: wrapped externally.

<sup>411</sup> Beijing variant: In the same way, the bardo consciousness residing between the sun and moon with co-emergent joy is awakening through the seed, discriminating gnosis.

<sup>412</sup> Frances Garrett gives these as the translations for *mer mer po*, *nur nur po* and *ltar ltar po*, respectively [Garrett, *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*, 92].

gradually develops,<sup>413</sup> resulting in eventual birth. **This is awakening through completion, dharmadhātu gnosis.**

Yang dgon pa traces his source of authority for the inner awakenings to the sixth verse in the chapter eight of part one of the *Hevajra Tantra*:

*zla ba me long ye shes ldan//  
rta bdun pa ni mnyam pa nyid<sup>414</sup>//  
rang lha'i sa bon phyag mtshan ni//  
so sor rtog<sup>415</sup> par brjod par bya//  
thams cad gcig gyur bya nan tan<sup>416</sup>//  
rdzogs pa chos dbyings dag pa ste//<sup>417</sup>*

The moon is mirror-like gnosis.  
The sun is equanimity.  
The seed and hand-implement of your deity  
Is expressed as discriminating.  
All becoming one is attainment.  
Completion is purified as *dharmadhātu*.

This scriptural quotation aligns the gnoses with tantric visualization practice, but there is no explicit association with conception, gestation, and birth, so it might be that the correspondences are Yang dgon pa's own innovation. As we saw in his own account of the inner awakenings, Yang dgon pa aligns each step in the process of conception, gestation, and birth with both (1) a specific step of development-phase meditation practice and (2) one of the five gnoses. It is for

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<sup>413</sup> He mis variant: bodies are fully complete.

<sup>414</sup> *Kye'i rdo rje*, 21: *bdun gyi bdun pa mnyam nyid ldan*.

<sup>415</sup> Co ne, Li thang *Bka' 'gyur* (*Dpe bsdur ma* notation): *rtogs*.

<sup>416</sup> *Kye'i rdo rje*, 21: *thams cad gcig gyur nan tan nyid*.

<sup>417</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 431/4-5; *Kye'i rdo rje*, Part 1, Chapter 8, Verse 6, p. 21.



this reason, perhaps, that Yang dgon pa calls these the “inner awakenings.” What is interesting about this presentation is that it reminds us that Yang dgon pa was aware of the conventional hierarchies of outer, inner, and secret, and of course, subtle and very subtle, but he continued to challenge that hierarchy, by insisting on constantly relating even the innermost gnosis of a Buddha back to the quotidian realities of the flesh, as we see in the above passage so vividly.

### Yang dgon pa’s Five Manifest Awakenings: Outer and Inner

<b>Outer Manifest Awakenings</b>	Awakening through <i>dharmatā</i> emptiness	Awakening through the sun and moon seat	Awakening through the speech-syllable	Awakening of mind through the hand implements	Awakening through the completed body
<b>Physical Correlate</b>	Menstruation/womb	Joining of father’s semen and mother’s blood	Intermediate consciousness enters womb via father’s ejaculation.	Gestation, especially gendered development	Fully formed body
<b>Inner Manifest Awakenings</b>	Awakening through the moon	Awakening through the sun	Awakening through the seed	Awakening through the mixture	Awakening through completion
<b>Physical Correlate</b>	Consciousness enters the father’s body and travels to the mother via ejaculation.	Consciousness is wrapped in the elixir of menstrual blood.	Between sun and moon, intermediate consciousness resides with co-emergent joy.	Semen, blood, and consciousness mix as wind, mind, and bliss. Early fetal development.	Body forms and is eventually born.
<b>Gnosis</b>	Mirror-like gnosis	Gnosis of equanimity	Discriminating gnosis	Activity-accomplishing gnosis	Dharmadhātu gnosis

What we can see from comparing the outer and inner presentations of the manifest awakenings is that there are minor differences in the names of the two versions of the manifest

awakenings, and minor differences in their physical correlates, but no contradictions as far as the process of conception and development are concerned. In the outer version of the manifest awakenings, the first two awakenings do not involve the transmigrating consciousness. The first, the awakening of *dharmatā* emptiness, is simply the womb, and the mother's menstrual blood. The second awakening is the union of blood and semen, presumably the moment before the consciousness mixes with them. In the inner version of the manifest awakenings, however, we see that the consciousness is involved from the very start, perhaps because of a need to correlate the five gnoses with consciousness throughout the awakenings. Via the altered and de-formalized names of the inner manifest awakenings, the veil is pulled back on the meaning of the terms themselves. The "moon" becomes the semen, and the "sun" becomes the mother's blood. The "seed," in this particular schema, is the blissful transmigrating consciousness that has blended with the moon and sun. The fourth awakening is not even correlated with a tantric symbol, just taking the name "mixture." It is as if Yang dgon pa's inner version of the awakenings is trying to reinterpret the awakenings as at once more physical, by virtue of their explicit names, and yet more subtle and refined by virtue of their association with the gnoses. In short, more tied to human embodiment, and less to an imagined reality of a divine *maṇḍala*.

Although both schemas have precedents in the tantras, Yang dgon pa's proliferation of the five stages into inner and outer forms is an innovation that appears to be of his own invention, and it is consistent with the general impulse of the *Explanation of the Hidden* to synthesize various models of the vajra body into a single vision. No precedent for this dual model of the five awakenings is found in the works that are the closest influences to Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden*. Phag mo gru pa's *Nature of the Vajra Body (Rdo rje lus kyi gnas lugs)* discusses the five awakenings as they correspond to the five stages of tantric visualization

practice (what Yang dgon pa calls the "outer" awakenings) in a manner that is fairly extensive, but does not introduce a schema of inner awakenings.<sup>418</sup> The embryology of Rje btsun Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1147-1216) does not use a schema of the five awakenings at all,<sup>419</sup> and 'Jig rten gsum mgon presents a schema that resembles Yang dgon pa's outer awakenings, but in a far briefer manner, and he does not attempt to align fetal development with the five gnoses.<sup>420</sup> Yang dgon pa's decision to create a synthetic model with respect to the five awakenings strengthens his case (from two perspectives, rather than just one) that enlightenment exists nowhere other than in the physicality of the human body. The first model presents a vision of human development that mirrors the development of a deity. The second presents a vision of human development in which the human form innately and extemporaneously embodies the highest gnosis. Both models, as a map of fetal development, reinforce a perspective that the human body is an innate Buddha, without recourse to formal practice. While there are many precedents for this general perspective in the tantras, Yang dgon pa's exegetical framework here makes its materialization explicit, from more than one angle.

This synthetic impulse continues in Yang dgon pa's second developmental model for conception and gestation, the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu. Here, Yang dgon pa attempts to synthesize a detailed model of in-utero development, corresponding to the ten incarnations, within the overall framework of the five awakenings, yet another indication that Yang dgon pa's project is to create a definitive tantric human anatomy inclusive of the various models found in

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<sup>418</sup> Phag mo gru pa, *Rdo rje lus kyi gnas lugs*, 562-64.

<sup>419</sup> Grags pa rgyal mtshan, *Rgyud kyi mngon par rtogs pa rin po che'i ljon shing*, in *Rgyud sde kun btus* (Kathmandu: Sachen International, 2004), 124-26.

<sup>420</sup> 'Jig rten mgon po, *Tshangs par spyod pa thig le'i khrid*, 172/3-4. 'Jig rten gsum mgon dispenses with his discussion of embryology in less than one line of text.

the tantras, and also of the transmissions on the body received from his own teachers. Yang dgon pa classifies this second model, the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu, under the category of the fourth outer manifest awakening. The model describes the physical development of the fetus during the ten [lunar] months of gestation, aligning each month with one of the incarnations. Differing versions of this model are found in the *Kālacakra Tantra* and *Vajramāla Tantra* and—while Yang dgon pa quotes the *Kālacakra*'s verses on the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu as a source of authority for his model<sup>421</sup>—he does not actually follow the lead of the *Kālacakra* literature in unpacking the stages of gestation.<sup>422</sup> Instead, we find a parallel between Yang dgon pa's stages of development and an unusual version found in *The Precious Verdant Tree: A Clear Realization of Tantra* (*Rgyud kyi mngon par rtogs pa rin po che'i ljon shing*), the copious handbook for esoteric meditation practice by the great Sa skya patriarch Grags pa rgyal mtshan, who was the principal teacher of Yang dgon pa's great teacher Sa skya Paṇḍita.<sup>423</sup> As we will recall, elements of similarity with Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden* indicate that Yang dgon pa may

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<sup>421</sup> Yang dgon pa provides the quote: *Nya dang rus sbal phag dang ni// ra ma gnyis dang nag pa dang/ mi yi seng ge mi thung dang// sangs rgyas dad pa can de bcu//* [Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 428/2].

<sup>422</sup> The correspondences of the stages of Viṣṇu in the *Kālacakra* literature is explored in Wallace, *The Kālacakratāntra: The Chapter on the Individual Together with the Vimalaprabhā*, 10-11. In the *Vimalaprabhā*, only the first four stages take place inside the womb. The remaining stages take place during the human lifespan. For the stages of Viṣṇu in the *Vajramāla Tantra*, see Kittay, "Interpreting the Vajra Rosary," 606-09. Both Grags pa rgyal mtshan and an interlinear note in the Pha jo ldings version of the *Explanation of the Hidden* recognized these two tantras as the source of the classification. See Grags pa rgyal mtshan, *Rin po che'i ljon shing*, 125, and Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), interlinear note, 428/3. The fact that Tibetan Buddhist canonical tantras contained this model did not necessarily make it acceptable to all Tibetans. According to Garrett, Mkhas grub nor bzang rgya mtsho (1423-1513) condemned the convention, calling it "lies and fabrications" (Garrett, *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*, 99).

<sup>423</sup> See Grags pa rgyal mtshan, *Rin po che'i ljon shing*, 124-25 for his presentation of the ten incarnations.

have been inspired by this work. Frances Garrett notes that while “the connection of the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu is derived from various Indian sources” in this work, Grags pa rgyal mtshan “uses an unusual list of those incarnations” and correlates each incarnation with a month of gestation, unlike other tantras.<sup>424</sup> Given the fact that Yang dgon pa’s stages most closely resemble Grags pa rgyal mtshan’s system, it is possible that Yang dgon pa’s correlation with the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu may have been inspired by Grags pa rgyal mtshan’s work, or by his student Sa skya Paṇḍita, as we know that Yang dgon pa wrote the *Explanation of the Hidden* after studying with Sa skya Paṇḍita for a year at Sa skya Monastery in Western Tibet. We also find in Grags pa rgyal mtshan’s work an exploration of the topic of the subtle body as a theoretical subject, in ways that anticipate the theoretical rhetoric of Yang dgon pa’s *Explanation of the Hidden*. If Yang dgon pa did indeed receive this strain of study via the Sa skya lineage, it is yet another piece of evidence that Yang dgon pa’s work transmits the early legacy of the Sa skya lineages’ somatic teachings.<sup>425</sup>

In any case, Yang dgon pa’s version of gestation is much more detailed than the description provided in Grags pa rgyal mtshan’s work, which briefly lists the ten stages and correspondences. Before introducing the ten incarnations, he describes conception, and he then proceeds to describe the early development of the fetus in its first few weeks of life:

*de yang mer mer po zho chags 'dod pa<sup>426</sup> lta bu zhag bdun/ tar tar po<sup>427</sup> zho legs par  
chags pa lta bu zhag bdun/ de nas<sup>428</sup> gor gor po zho bsrugs pa las mar byung ba lta bu  
ste<sup>429</sup>*

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<sup>424</sup> Garrett, *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*, 99.

<sup>425</sup> This is a point of view asserted by Sde gzhung Rin po che. See Chapter One of the Dissertation.

<sup>426</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 8: 'dong ba.

For the first seven days, [the fetus] resembles an oval glob, like yogurt beginning to congeal. The next seven days, the fetus develops into an elongated shape that is like well-congealed yogurt. Then<sup>430</sup> it becomes a circular lump, like yogurt that has been stirred.

At this point, Yang dgon pa comments, the channels of the subtle body begin to develop, beginning with the navel *cakra* (*nirmāṇacakra*), followed by the central channel that extends in two directions, forming the core of the body. This description heralds Yang dgon pa's overall perspective that the subtle body generates the coarse body's growth, rather than the other way around. He continues:

*de yang mngal du zla ba gnyis song nas/ rtsa ba'i rlung lnga dang/ rtsa'i gtso bo gsum dang/ 'khor lo bzhi'i lte ba'i rtsa mdud rnams chags te/ gyen rgyu dang thur sel gyi rlung gis rtsa gsum po'i steng 'og gi sgo sel nas<sup>431</sup>/ lus kyi dkyil 'dir<sup>432</sup> mgo mjug 'phra bas te<sup>433</sup>/ khyab 'jug nya'i rnam pa can no<sup>434</sup>/ zla ba gsum na 'khor lo bzhi'i nang 'dabs rnams chags<sup>435</sup>/ yan lag gi gzhi things te/ dpung pa gnyis dang/ rla gnyis dang/ skyes pa yin na pho mtshan dang mgo bo'i mtshan ma<sup>436</sup> cung zad tsam 'bur du dod te/ khyab 'jug rus*

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<sup>427</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 125/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 8: *ltar ltar po*.

<sup>428</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 125/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 8: *zhag bdun na* inserted.

<sup>429</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 427/4-5.

<sup>430</sup> Beijing variant: “for seven days” inserted.

<sup>431</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 127/2: *bas*.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, 127/2: *ldir ba la*

<sup>433</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 9: *phra ba ste*.

<sup>434</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 127/3; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 9: *rlung ldang 'jug la brten nas* added before this clause.

<sup>435</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 127/4: *chags pas*.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*, 127/5; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10: *rnam pa*.

*sbal gyi rnam pa can no/ de'i dus su pho thams cad rdo rje ltar ske nyag<sup>437</sup> du chags te/ srog 'dzin la brten nas chags<sup>438</sup>/ mo thams cad dril bu ltar khong stong<sup>439</sup> du chags<sup>440</sup> te/ de ni thugs phyag mtshan las mngon par byang chub pa'o/ de nas zla ba bzhi nas<sup>441</sup> yan lag gi rlung lnga srog 'dzin la brten nas<sup>442</sup> chags pas/ thog mar dpung pa gnyis dang mig<sup>443</sup> 'byung ngo/ lus smad 'phra zhing stod rgyas la<sup>444</sup>/ mgo<sup>445</sup> cung zad mtho zhing mig gsal bar snang ba<sup>446</sup> khyab 'jug phag gi rnam pa can no/<sup>447</sup> zla ba lnga na rus pa gsum brgya drug bcu dang/ de'i tshigs dang de snyed<sup>448</sup> gzhi chags pas/ lag pa gnyis dang rkang pa<sup>449</sup> dang mgo bo'i dbyibs dod nas<sup>450</sup> 'gyur te/ ra ma gnyis kyi rnam pa can no/ de man chad zla thibs su mi 'gro/<sup>451</sup> zla<sup>452</sup> drug na sha dang lpags pa dang dbang po'i<sup>453</sup>*

<sup>437</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 127/5: *skyed nyag*; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10: *sked nyag*.

<sup>438</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 127/6: *'chags la*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10: phrase elided.

<sup>439</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10: *khog stong*.

<sup>440</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 127/6: *chags pas*

<sup>441</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 128/1: *na*.

<sup>442</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 128/1: *te*.

<sup>443</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 128/1-2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing): *mig gnyis*.

<sup>444</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis) 128/2: *pa*.

<sup>445</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis) 128/2: *mgo bo*.

<sup>446</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 128/2: *bas*.

<sup>447</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 128/3: *lnga pa* inserted.

<sup>448</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 128/3: *kyi* inserted.

<sup>449</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 128/4: *gnyis* inserted.

<sup>450</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 128/4: *par*.

<sup>451</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing) 10: phrase is an interlinear note; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 128/5: phrase elided

<sup>452</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 128/5: *zla ba*

<sup>453</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 10: *dbang po lnga'i*.

*mtshan ma dod pa 'byung te/ yan lag gi rlung lnga rdzogs pas<sup>454</sup> nag pa'i rnam pa can no/ zla ba bdun smin ma dang skra dang<sup>455</sup> ba spu'i gzhi chags ste/ mgo bo seng ge ltar rdzogs pas mi'i seng ge'i rnam pa can no/ zla ba brgyad na pho mo'i dbang po gsal bar dod de/ gzhan yang skra mdog nag pa dang<sup>456</sup> sen mo sngo ba tshun chad gsal te<sup>457</sup> dbang po dang yan lag dang nyid lag gi bye brag phyed pas/ mi'u thung gi rnam pa can no/ zla ba dgu na lus zungs bdun kyang<sup>458</sup> rdzogs te/ skye mched thams cad yongs su rdzogs pas/ mngal nas 'ong 'dod pa<sup>459</sup> te ngang pa'i rnam pa can no/ zla ba bcu na lus yongs su rdzogs ste<sup>460</sup>/ bde bar btsa' ba ni sa bcu rdzogs pa'i<sup>461</sup> sangs rgyas kyi rnam pa can no<sup>462</sup>*

Furthermore, by the time [the fetus] has reached its second month in the womb, the five root winds, the three main channels, and the channel-knots at the center of the four *cakras* have formed. The upward moving and downward clearing winds clear the upper and lower doors of the three [main] channels. Through that, the body expands and the head emerges subtly, and<sup>463</sup> the fetus takes on the form of the **Viṣṇu incarnation fish**.

In the third month, the spokes inside the four chakras form, and the basis of the limbs is laid out. The upper arms, the thighs, the penis (if the fetus is a boy), and the form of the head begin to protrude a little bit. The fetus has the form of the **Viṣṇu incarnation turtle**. At that time, all males develop a waist/neck indentation like a vajra, which is developed on the basis of the “life-holding” [wind].<sup>464</sup> All females form an empty hollow like a bell. This is the “manifest awakening of mind through the hand implements.”

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., 10; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 128/5: *yang lag gi rlung lnga rdzogs pas* elided.

<sup>455</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 128/6: *skra dang* elided.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 129/1 (He mis): *dang* elided.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid., 129/1-2 (He mis): *mngon pa tshun chad gang yin gsal ba te*.

<sup>458</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 11; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 129/3: *kyang* elided.

<sup>459</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis) 129/3; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 11: *'byung 'dod pa*.

<sup>460</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 129/4: *nas*.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 129/4: *nas*.

<sup>462</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 428/3-429/5.

<sup>463</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: “depending on the arising and entering of winds” is added.

<sup>464</sup> This last sentence clause is missing from Beijing.



Then in the fourth month, the five branch-winds are formed in dependence on the vitalizing wind. First, the two shoulders and the eyes<sup>465</sup> emerge. The lower part of the body is narrow and the upper part is wide. The head becomes more prominent and the eyes appear clearly. It is in the form of the **Viṣṇu incarnation pig**.

In the fifth month,<sup>466</sup> the 360 bones, the joints, and the basis for all those are formed. The two arms, legs,<sup>467</sup> and the shape of the head become developed. The fetus takes the form of **the two Ramas**. Up until this point, the moon does not disappear.<sup>468</sup>

In the sixth month, the soft tissues, the skin and the characteristics of the faculties<sup>469</sup> develop. Because the branch-winds are completed,<sup>470</sup> the fetus takes the form of **Kṛṣṇa**.

In the seventh month, the basis of the eyebrows, hair, and pores forms. Because the head is completed like a lion, the fetus has the form of a **human-lion**.

In the eighth month, the male or female organ is clearly developed. Furthermore, things become clearer from the hair color of the fetus, which is black, to the fingernails, which are blue. Because the details of the faculties, limbs, and small appendages become distinct, the fetus has the form of a **dwarf**.

In the ninth month, the seven bodily constituents are completed, and all the ayatanas are complete. The fetus wants to get out of the womb, and takes the form of a **swan**.

In the tenth month, the body is fully complete, and can easily be born. The fetus has the form of a perfect **Buddha** of the tenth level.

Yang dgon pa's ten incarnations of Viṣṇu, with their corresponding months and the characteristics of fetal development, are summarized in the chart below. Unlike Grags pa rgyal mtshan's easy one-to-one correspondence with the ten months of gestation, Yang dgon pa aligns the Viṣṇu incarnations with only nine of the ten months, perhaps unsure of what to do with the

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<sup>465</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: two eyes.

<sup>466</sup> He mis variant: Fifth, in the fifth month.

<sup>467</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: two legs.

<sup>468</sup> Beijing: phrase is an interlinear note. He mis: phrase elided.

<sup>469</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: five faculties.

<sup>470</sup> In Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 10: this first clause is an interlinear note. In Hemis, it is elided.

two Ramas (which count as two of the incarnations, and therefore Grags pa rgyal mtshan assigns the two Ramas to two consecutive months). This slight difference from his predecessor perhaps suggests that Yang dgon pa was still thinking his received legacy through, or it could simply have been a mistake. Furthermore, Yang dgon pa's description of the physical attributes of the fetus is much more detailed than the treatment we find in Grags pa rgyal mtshan, suggesting that Yang dgon pa may have wished to tie the ten stages more manifestly to the flesh-and-blood attributes of the human body than his predecessor had ventured to do. In general, it appears that Yang dgon pa wished to show that there is a close and intimate connection between the flesh-and-blood body and the subtle body, but also between the flesh-and-blood body and the development of a fully enlightened Buddha.

## Yang dgon pa's Gestational Model

Gestational Period	Incarnations of Viṣṇu	Fetal Characteristics (Coarse Body)	Subtle Body Development	Analogy
Week one		Oval glob		Yogurt
Week two		Elongated shape		Well-congealed yogurt
Week three		Circular lump		Yogurt that has been stirred
First month			3 main channels, 5 root winds, 4 <i>cakras</i> develop	Navel chakra compared to an ox eye
Second month	Fish	Body inflates, head emerges subtly	Upward moving and downward clearing winds clear the upper and lower doors of the three main channels.	
Third month	Turtle	Upper arms, thighs, and genitals begin to form. Head becomes more prominent.	Spokes inside 4 <i>cakras</i> form	
Fourth month	Pig	Two shoulders and two eyes emerge. Lower part of fetus is narrow, upper part is wide. The head becomes even more prominent.	Five branch-winds begin to form	
Fifth month	Two Ramas	360 bones and joints are formed. Arms, legs, and head become defined.		
Sixth month	Kṛṣṇa	Soft tissues, skin, and five sense faculties develop.	Branch winds are completed	
Seventh month	Human-lion	Eyebrows, hair, and pores form.		Head looks like a lion's head
Eight month	Dwarf	Genital organ development is complete. Details of the sense organs, hair, fingernails, fingers, and toes become distinct.		Fetus resembles a dwarf
Ninth month	Swan	Body's trunk, head and limbs complete their formation. Fetus wants to be born.		
Tenth month	Buddha	Body is fully formed. Baby is born.		Baby is like a Buddha of the 10 <sup>th</sup> level

We can see in this model of development many pieces of evidence for the privileged position of the subtle body in Yang dgon pa’s Buddhist anatomy. For instance, the critical elements of the subtle body—the three main channels, the knots at the center of the four *cakras*, and the five root winds—are the first structural elements of the body to form. In Grags pa rgyal mtshan’s work, this same basic order of development can be found. As Frances Garrett summarizes, “Drakpa Gyeltsen maintains that the coarse body, consisting of the aggregates, elements, and sense-spheres, is established from the subtle body, consisting of the winds and mind.”<sup>471</sup> We can see this philosophy also in Yang dgon pa’s embryology, where the subtle energy winds, inciting the subtle channels to grow, are what give the material body its shape:

*gyen rgyu dang thur sel gyi rlung gis rtsa gsum po'i steng 'og gi sgo sel nas/ lus kyi dkyil 'dir mgo mjug 'phra bas te*<sup>472</sup>

The upward moving and downward clearing winds clear the upper and lower doors of the three [main] channels. Through that, the body inflates and the head emerges subtly.

This statement, preceding the stages of Viṣṇu, can be interpreted to apply to all subsequent stages, and demonstrates that Yang dgon pa inherited a perspective on human development in which the subtle body, with its winds, channels, and vital essences, generates and animates the coarse body, rather than the other way around. The subtle substrate of the physical, the body’s *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, is a force that shapes the material, even while the material places constraints on the subtle.

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<sup>471</sup> Garrett, *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*, 99. The idea that the coarse body extends from the subtle body is also present in canonical tantric sources.

<sup>472</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 428/4-5.

We can also see in Yang dgon pa's model that he traces the origins of the subtle body to a set of conditions in which both consciousness and an ascendant wind play a key role. In Yang dgon pa's account, while the root winds form during the first month of gestation, there is one mother-wind that is prior to all of them. The original wind, we learn from Yang dgon pa's description of conception, is the pervading wind, which is fused with the consciousness of the bardo-being. That particular wind is the trace of "body" that escorts consciousness from lifetime to lifetime. This will become significant later when we discover that, in Yang dgon pa's description of the nature of material speech, the pervading wind is responsible for the integration of body and mind, acting like a glue that holds together body, subtle body, and mind between lifetimes and during the lifespan as well. It will help Yang dgon pa account for the reincarnation process, a major vulnerability for a theory that sees all aspects of human existence as related to the body.<sup>473</sup>

Yang dgon pa attributes the origin of the channels to a triangular "knot" at the navel *cakra*, a concentrated channel intersection where—he tell us—consciousness resides, and from which, according to Yang dgon pa's theory, the supreme central channel develops. One point to be noticed is that the subtle body begins in nodes of concentration that are physically located. From the very beginning, we see that there is a specialization of channels and winds, and that there is an inherent hierarchy. As the location of consciousness, and the source of the central channel, an elevated status is attributed to the navel *cakra* from the beginning.<sup>474</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>473</sup> See Chapter 5 of the Dissertation for Yang dgon pa's discussion of physical death and the role of the subtle body in reincarnation.

<sup>474</sup> Klong chen Rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer (1308-1364) presents a similar idea, that the fetus' bodily growth proceeds from the navel *cakra* for the entire nine months in the womb (Garrett, *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*, 96).

both the pervading wind and the navel *cakra* have an abiding connection to consciousness, affording both of these aspects of the subtle body a greater agency than other parts of the subtle anatomy: the pervading wind-mind moves from father, to mother's womb, to the core of the navel chakra. From that center of consciousness, the growth of the fetus begins. In short, we can trace the impetus of physical growth to a set of conditions that includes consciousness, wind (as an element of the subtle body), and material substance (the mother and father's elements), yet another nexus of the intersection and mutual causality of body and mind that we find throughout Yang dgon pa's theory.

Overall, Yang dgon pa's discussion of a gradual and detailed embryology proffers a perspective on the human body that mirrors the idea of a spiritual path. As we have seen, this perspective has origins in the antecedent works commenting on the topic of the body that Yang dgon pa relied on. His reasons for including such a detailed embryology probably include a wish to situate his work in line with the authority of the tantras and also with Nāropa, who in his own work mentions the five awakenings. But, there were undoubtedly other reasons, as we see Yang dgon pa being quite selective about which topics he considers worthy of extensive commentary, and the embryology topic is definitely one. Frances Garrett argues that the Tibetan religious interest in embryology may be related to an interest in framing religious development as a series of paths and stages.<sup>475</sup> Not to discount this theory, but looking at Yang dgon pa's work, I am inclined to propose that the interest in embryology may have emanated out of a wish to position the human body as a critical topic of religious significance. An impulse to theorize the body

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<sup>475</sup> Ibid., 87. Garrett emphasizes a growing investment in the "stages of the path" (*lam rim*) paradigm within Tibetan monastic culture as a possible reason for the Tibetan religious interest in embryology, but also entertains other possibilities: "Prioritizing parts of the body at the embryonic level may have harmonized with a given writer's philosophical or contemplative system, a matter of philosophical or logical aesthetics" (ibid., 123).

specifically as a primary vehicle for salvation is found in the tantras, and was inherited by Tibetans. The models of gestation that have origins in āyurvedic literature may have been drawn into the tantric literature for this other reason as well: they provided yet another way to comment on the body and to incorporate it into a Buddhist vision of becoming enlightened. The developing body, such as a body in the womb, provides an object with which to reflect on how a body can be both evolving and perfect at the same time. Although both models progress to perfection upon the birth of a baby (the Buddha and the stages of Viṣṇu), every stage also stands as its own perfection, especially as Yang dgon pa conceives of the model as subsumed under the categories of the awakenings.

The emphasis on an evolving body is not reserved only for the chapter on embryology. It is maintained throughout the *Explanation of the Hidden*. The human organism, which Yang dgon pa frequently asserts is innately buddha (or the *heruka*), is in a state of constant flux and growth. For instance, his subsequent sections of the book on the topic of path and result carry the structure of “formation” (*chags pa*), “living” (*gnas pa*), and “dying” (*jig pa*). Clearly, the basis of self-cultivation, the *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of the body, is not characterized by stasis, but by evolution and change. We find this evolutionary somatic perspective penetrating as far as the deepest recesses of the channels. In discussing the shape of the heart *cakra*, for example, Yang dgon pa explains that even *cakras* evolve. In discussing the nature of the hidden channel “free from *māra*” (*bdud bral ma*),<sup>476</sup> Yang dgon pa states:

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<sup>476</sup> This is one of five hidden channels (*sbas pa'i rtsa lnga*) that Yang dgon pa identifies as residing in the heart *cakra*. Rang 'byung rdo rje, writing a century later, comments on these fairly extensively [Rang byung rdo rje, *Illuminating “The Profound Principles”*: A Concise Elucidation of “The Profound Inner Principles,” Which Contain the Essence of the Ocean of Yoga-Niruttara Tantras, trans. Elizabeth Callahan (Upcoming Publication 2014), 89-90], and references Yang dgon pa's presentation as well.

*de dbu ma'i rgyab kyi rtsa'i cha*<sup>477</sup> *bdud bral ma zhes bya ba yon tan gyi rtsa er ma*<sup>478</sup> *kha bye ba lta bu yod de/ sems can la kha thur du bltas te btsum*<sup>479</sup> *yod/ byang chub sems dpa' la 'phred*<sup>480</sup> *la phyed byed*<sup>481</sup> *yod/ sang rgyas la kha gyen la ltas te kha bye*<sup>482</sup> *nas dbu ma'i rang bzhin du yod*<sup>483</sup>

The part of the channel at the back of the *avadhūti* is called “free from *māra*.” It is a quality channel, and is like a blooming *erma* [flower].<sup>484</sup> In sentient beings, it curves downward and is closed. In bodhisattvas, it is straight out and half open. In Buddhas, it curves upwards and is fully open, existing as the nature of the central channel.<sup>485</sup>

This passage provides an example of Yang dgon pa’s perspective that while the seeds of a vajra body may well be innate, the form of the vajra body evolves and develops with time and with moral cultivation. This vision of a *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body that exists in flux, as well as a flesh-and-blood body that changes in concert with its subtle correlates of channels, winds, and vital essences, contrasts sharply with other characterizations of the basis of enlightenment that we see commonly in the new (*gsar ma*) lineages before and during Yang dgon pa’s time, in

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<sup>477</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 165/6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 35: *rgyab kyi cha rtsa*.

<sup>478</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 165/6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 35: *g.yer ma*.

<sup>479</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 166/1: *tsums*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 35: *btsums*.

<sup>480</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 166/1: *kha 'phred*.

<sup>481</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 35: *kha phyed phye*.

<sup>482</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 166/1: *byed yod do*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 35: *phye nas yod do*. The sentence ends here (the rest is elided) in both versions.

<sup>483</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 446/1-2.

<sup>484</sup> He mis and Beijing name this as *g.yer ma* (pepper), which would seem to refer to the flower or pod of *zanthoxylum planispinum*, which grows in the lower elevations of the himalayan region.

<sup>485</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: clause elided.



which both the basis and fruition of enlightenment are framed as that which is permanent, infinite, and unchanging. For example, Mi la ras pa describes *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as the basis for enlightenment in terms that align it with *mahāmudrā*, and situate it in the realm of the unchanging:

*dang po dngos po gshis kyi gnas lugs/ sangs rgyas gyi dgongs pa/ sems can gyi sems nyid/ kha dog dang dbyibs su ma grub pa/ mtha' dang dbus su ma grub/ rgya chad phyogs lung dang bral ba/ yod ma myong/ /med ma myong/ ma 'khrul/ ma grol/ rgyus ma bskyed/ rkyen gyi ma bsgyur/ sangs rgyas mkhas te ma bcos/ sems can blun te ma bslad/ rtogs pas bzang du ma song/ 'khrul pas ngan du ma song/ de ni gzhi kun la gnas pas gzhi phyag rgya chen po 'o/<sup>486</sup>*

First, there is the intrinsic nature of *dngos po*.<sup>487</sup> It is the intention of the Buddhas, the quintessential mind of sentient beings, not made of color and form, not made of center or edge, free from falling into partiality, which has never existed, and never not existed, not deluded, not liberated, not arising from causes, not changing due to conditions, not improved by the skill of Buddhas, not corrupted by the stupidity of sentient beings, not made better by realization, not made worse by confusion. Because that resides in the basis of everything, it is basis *mahāmudrā*.

This description of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* (here glossed as *dngos po gshis kyi gnas lugs*) is a far cry from Yang dgon pa's own understanding and framing of the term. It highlights a tension that must have existed palpably in Yang dgon pa's time between presentations of the basis (*gzhi*) as a malleable and changing human body, and a stable and unchanging nature of mind. Previous models had succeeded in holding these two polarities in balance by creating a dichotomy of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* that held body and mind as separate topics of exegesis. But Yang dgon pa chose another path, and in remaining loyal to an embodied *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, he is compelled

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<sup>486</sup> Mi la ras pa, *Zab lam phyag rgya chen po dang nā ro chos drug gzhung gces pa rab btus pa nges don rin po che'i mdzod*, 33b/7-34/5.

<sup>487</sup> The compound *dngos po'i gnas lugs* is broken up by the word *gzhi* (basis), but in context, it is clear that this is Mi la ras pa's commentary on the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as it was inherited from Nāropa. He is presenting this as the first of three topics: the basis, path, and fruition.

to contend with the consequences of his chosen path by making sense of a basis that—while sufficing in itself—is also characterized by development and evolution.

### **Channels as the Origin and Pathways of Consciousness**

For Yang dgon pa, channels—the second topic regarding his expansive sense of body as inherited from the *Non-dual Victory* tantra—are subtle pathways extending throughout the body through which the volatile winds move.<sup>488</sup> Since winds and mind are fused in tantric theory, the channels are the pathways not only for winds, but also for the mind that rides on those winds. Therefore, channels are the avenues by which the mind comes to pervade the entire body. Yang dgon pa picks this up as a key mechanism for his theory of a radical mind-body unity. The pathways explain how and where the mind pervades the body, and spatially maps the possibility for the mind’s liberation as a somatic event, i.e., by virtue of the entry of the wind-mind into the central channel, and so forth. Yang dgon pa’s discussion of the map of channels sweeps from the three main channels, through the *cakras*, and finally out to minor channels that end at the periphery of the body. Following the lead of *Kālacakra* materials, the body is—in places—aligned with time, and with specific holy places in the external world, but Yang dgon pa stays fairly close to a descriptive map of the body.

Now, as we remember from Yang dgon pa’s embryology, the origins of the body are not so much traced to a single cause as to a set of conditions specified as a subtle wind fused with a

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<sup>488</sup> Yang dgon pa states that there are 21,600 channels that carry wind and 72,000 channels that carry blood [Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 432/1]. Yang dgon pa concerns himself only with the former, which are the channels that come under the category of vajra body.

transmigrating consciousness, and the physical substances of a mother and father, along with their state of bliss during sexual intercourse. The question now arises, given the intermingling of these conditions—consciousness, wind (the subtle body), and fluids (the coarse body)—once these conditions are in place, what generates what? Is consciousness, wind, or the coarse body the driving force pushing the body’s development forward? Does mind propel the growth process forward, or does the physicality of the body do this? Now, in considering the history of how the mind-body relationship is framed before Yang dgon pa, there are many statements that Yang dgon pa could have drawn into his work to settle this latter question of whether mind is the origin of body or body the origin of mind. In the antecedent works that Yang dgon pa relied on to construct his original tantric synthesis, there are framing statements about this relationship between mind and body, and between mind and matter, that place mind and/or consciousness in a privileged position with respect to both the body and the material world. For example, we find the statement in the *Non-dual Victory Tantra* tantra that “all phenomena are the mind itself” (*chos rnams thams cad sems nyid te*)<sup>489</sup> in the same chapter from which Yang dgon pa extracts the key verses that he uses to construct an outline for the *Explanation of the Hidden*. While this statement could be interpreted in several ways, one way to understand it is simply that it reflects a straightforward *yogācarā* perspective that is found in many tantras. This kind of statement (fairly common in the tantras) gives Yang dgon pa a metaphysical opening to assert that mind (*sems*) or consciousness (*rnam shes*) generates or projects the subtle body, but he avoids this theoretical stance in the *Explanation of the Hidden*. We can also note that in a context more similar to Yang dgon pa’s own, Grags pa rgyal mtshan, in his *Precious Verdant Tree (Rin po che'i ljon shing)*, which we will remember from earlier in this chapter, attributes the origins of

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<sup>489</sup> *Gnyis med rnam rgyal gyi rgyud*, 329.

the coarse body to winds and mind. He says, “The coarse *skandhas*, *dhātus*, and *āyatanas* are made from the subtle wind and mind” (*rags pa'i phung po dang khamdang dang skyed mched phra ba'i rlung dang sems las grub pa yin no*).<sup>490</sup> While Yang dgon pa does situate the wind-mind as a factor in the body's growth, he does not assert that the coarse body is created from a subtle mind. It is striking that Yang dgon pa himself does not draw on these sorts of statements that would settle the question of origins and instigation on the side of the mind in the *Explanation of the Hidden*, but rather excludes certain common ways of framing, and in doing so makes a statement about what his position is *not*, favoring a more complex treatment of the issue.

One reason he may have avoided such statements is that in Yang dgon pa's mind-body theory, there is ultimately no duality between body and mind, even though the two are discussed distinctly. Rather the relationship between the mind (or the various consciousnesses) and body is mutually generative and interactive. While Yang dgon pa's predecessors were content to frame the body as the product of the mind, and therefore implicitly inferior to the generative and original mind, we find a perspective in the work of Yang dgon pa that takes the body as a basis for framing. The perspective is evident throughout his work, but we find an interesting example in his treatment of the *dnagos po'i gnas lugs* of body, specifically in his perspective of what the channels are and what they are capable of. Here the channels act not only as pathways for the consciousness, but rather they are generative of consciousness in the first place. We will remember from the embryology section that consciousness and wind (a fusion of mind and subtle body) instigate the growth of the channels of the subtle body. In an interesting contrast, Yang dgon pa's sweep through the channel-network yields a vision in which the subtle body is also generative of consciousness. In a passage describing the channels that extend to the sense

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<sup>490</sup> Grags pa rgyal mtshan, *Rin po che'i ljon shing*, 125/5.

faculties, we see the network of channels is actually generating the six sense consciousnesses, rather than being generated by them:

*de la mdzes ma<sup>491</sup> zhes bya gcig dbu ma'i rtsa khams kun dha<sup>492</sup>/ rten pa dang<sup>493</sup> g.yo ba'i nus pa dang/<sup>494</sup> kung gzhi'i rnam par shes pa'i dang ma<sup>495</sup> bskyed/ ro bcud ma zhes bya ba ro ma'i rtsa nyi ma brtan pa dang g.yo ba'i nus pa dang/ nyon mongs pa can gyi yid kyi rnam par shes pa'i khams bskyed/<sup>496</sup> kun skyob ma zhes bya ba rkyang ma'i rtsa/ gla rtsi brtan pa dang g.yo ba'i nus pa<sup>497</sup> dang/ yid kyi<sup>498</sup> rnam par shes pa'i khams bskyed/ de gsum kyi rtsa sna gsang gnas kyi bu kha gnyis na zug pa'o/ sum skor ma zhes bya ba mig gi 'bras bu la zug nas/ mig gi rnam par shes pa'i khams bskyed/ 'dod pa ma zhes bya ba rna ba gnyis la zug nas rna ba'i rnam par shes pa'i khams bskyed/ khyim pa ma zhes bya ba sna'i 'doms par zug nas/ sna'i rnam par shes pa'i khams bskyed/ gtum mo ces bya ba lce'i dkyil du zug nas/ lce'i rnam par shes pa'i khams bskyed/ mdud bral ma<sup>499</sup> zhes bya ba ba spu'i khung bu rnams su zug pa'i tshul gyi lus kyi rnam par shes pa'i khams bskyed<sup>500/501</sup>*

Thus, the channel called “the beautiful one” has the power to move and stabilize<sup>502</sup> the jasmine<sup>503</sup> element of the central channel, and generates the quintessence of the all-basis

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<sup>491</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 156/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 28: *rtsa mdzes ma*.

<sup>492</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing): *kun 'dar*.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*, 28: *rten pa dang* elided.

<sup>494</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 156/4: *g.yo ba'i nus pa bstan pa dang*.

<sup>495</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 29: *dwangs ma*, throughout.

<sup>496</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 156/3: *kun gzhi'i rnam par shes pa'i khams bskyed*. Previous two phrases elided.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*, 156/4: *g.yo ba brtan pa'i nus pa dang*.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, 156/4: *ye shes kyi*.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, 157/3: *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 29: *bdud 'dul ma*.

<sup>500</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 157/3: *do* inserted.

<sup>501</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 441/5-442/3.

<sup>502</sup> Beijing variant: "and stabilizze" (elided). He mis variant: demonstrates the power to move.

consciousness. The channel called “potent taste” functions to generate the power to stabilize and move the sun-channel of the right side, and to generate the element of mental consciousness.<sup>504</sup> The channel called “all-pervading” functions to generate the power to move and stabilize the musk [channel]<sup>505</sup> of the left side, and to generate the element of mental consciousness.<sup>506</sup> The ends of those three channels extend to the two orifices at the secret place. The one called “threefold,” having ended at the two eyeballs, generates the element of eye-consciousness. The one called “desire” extends to the two ears, and generates the element of ear-consciousness. The one called “fierce” extends to the middle of the tongue and generates the element of tongue-consciousness. The one called “free-from-*māra*,”<sup>507</sup> through reaching into each of the pores, generates the element of body-consciousness.<sup>508</sup>

In this passage, we see a vision in which the channels of the subtle body generate the eight consciousnesses, rather than the other way around. Yang dgon pa’s use of the word “generate” (*bskyed*) is key to our understanding the unusual nature of this passage. The passage suggests that the subtle channels, which Yang dgon pa describes in physical terms, produce a human being’s consciousness events. A similar map of the channels that reach to the sense doors can be found in Chapter 3 of the *Profound Inner Principles* by the third Karmapa Rang 'byung rdo rje (1284-1339), a text written after Yang dgon pa’s time in a closely related lineage that also presents a detailed somatic theory. However, Rang 'byung rdo rje’s presentation does not

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<sup>503</sup> *kun da* (from the Sanskrit *kunda*), spelled here *kun dha*, is a metaphor for the procreative fluids. An example of this meaning can be found in the *Hevajra Tantra* commentarial literature (Elizabeth Callahan, personal communication, 2012).

<sup>504</sup> He mis variant: Sentence elided (apparently a copy error).

<sup>505</sup> He mis variant: to generate the stabilization of the power of movement of musk.

<sup>506</sup> He mis variant: wisdom consciousness.

<sup>507</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: “demon-tamer.”

<sup>508</sup> This passage describes the channels extending from the heart *cakra*. For a visual representation of this passage, see Appendix III of the dissertation: The Cakras and the Constituents, Heart Cakra.

attribute a causal relationship between the channels and the consciousnesses.<sup>509</sup> In fact, in Chapter Two of the same work, he is quite clear on the causal relationship between mind and the channels:

Beings' coarse *skandhas*, *dhātus*, and *āyatanas*, and everything produced by their subtle channels, winds, and *bindus*, manifest from the stained mind's very thusness, the luminosity of its causal continuum—they do not manifest from external particles or the like, because everything is an appearance of mind.<sup>510</sup>

Rang 'byung rdo rje's perspective highlights the contrast we find between Yang dgon pa's work and other somatic theorists of his general time period. For Yang dgon pa, the mind's "very thusness" does not act as the pre-eminent cause of all material life and its subtle underpinnings. Rather, the causal relationship between mind and the subtle body, and mind and the coarse materiality of the flesh does not proceed in a one-way direction. Yang dgon pa holds that, while consciousness moves into matter and propels its development from the time of conception, mind also extends out of matter, and cannot function without the basis of substantiality. Yang dgon pa's steadfast refusal to elevate the mind's nature as something above the nature of the subtle body is one of the original hallmarks of his work.

### **Yang dgon pa and Spyan snga ba's discussions of the Central Channel**

Apparently the tantric vision of the channels that Yang dgon pa draws on was beginning to be challenged by a set of empirically minded critics, of uncertain identity. That questions such as "what exactly are these channels" and "how can we know they exist" were in the air at the

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<sup>509</sup> Rang byung rdo rje, *Illuminating "The Profound Principles"*, 90 (translation by Callahan).

<sup>510</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

time is evidenced in the *Explanation of the Hidden*. Furthermore, these questions seem to have brought up a more general issue on the relationship between the observable substantiality of the physical world and the subtle physicality proposed by tantric sources. We find in Yang dgon pa's work evidence of a concern about what exactly the subtle body is, and how it relates to materiality. This concern is even more evident in one of the commentaries on *Explanation of the Hidden* by his student Sphyan snga ba, which we will look at below. More broadly, the concern seems to center around the question of truth, and whether the subtle body is true or not.

Nowhere in the *Explanation of the Hidden*, or its commentaries, does this issue come up more strongly than in the discussion of the most important of all channels, the central channel (Tib. *dbu ma*, Skt. *avadhūti*). The channels are all connected, via complex intersections, to a mother of all channels, the so-called “central one” which—in the practices of tantric traditions—plays a key role in the adept's liberation. This channel is believed, in tantric theory, to provide a location in which consciousness dissolves into an ontological state of luminous emptiness that embodies the pinnacle of all Buddhist practice. Apparently this channel, running in front of the spinal column, had been a subject of discussion over the centuries by both the Tibetan medical community and tantric theorists. In the second chapter of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, Yang dgon pa makes an important contribution to this discussion. He reflects on both the central channel's nature and location in a way that is not found in other works, as far as I have been able to determine. He is clearly concerned that its nature and location be properly understood by his readers, who may well have been practitioners of meditations that employ visualizations of this channel.

Perhaps the most interesting issue we find in this passage is the concern to pin down the exact location of the central channel. The discussion here implies that there was some degree of



contention about what the central channel is, and where exactly it is located. This contention is expressed in the text as a series of refutations of the proverbial *la la* [“some people”] who assert various possibilities related to the truth-status of the central channel. The first hypothetical concerns the possibility that perhaps the central channel is nothing but a fiction:

*dang po rtsa'i gtso bo gsum la/ dbu ma 'di la btags yod yin zer te/ de ltar na dbu mas  
bsdus pa'i yon tan thams cad btags yod du 'gro ste/ gsang sngags kyi lam sgrid du mi  
btub/*<sup>511</sup>

Some allege the first among the three main channels, this central channel, is imaginary. If that were the case, all the qualities included in the central channel would become imaginary as well, and one would not be able to traverse the path of secret mantra.<sup>512</sup>

The possibility of the complete fictitiousness of the central channel, that this channel might be merely imaginary, might well have been a topic of discussion during Yang dgon pa's time, given the recent emergence of the medical work *Four Tantras* in Central Tibet, and it is conceivable that skepticism from the more empiricist medical commentators would have provoked the anxiety of the religious establishment since the core practices of liberation in this tradition depend on the truth-claims of the tantras, and the existence of this central channel in particular.

Yang dgon pa's reflection continues to refute such possible misperceptions about the true identity of this critical channel:

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<sup>511</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 434/5-6. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 18: The Beijing version has this variant: *dang po rtsa'i gtso mo gsum la/ rtsa dbu ma 'di la la la btags yod yin zer/ 'di gsang sngags ye ma go ba'i skad yin/ de ltar na rtsa dbu mas bsdus pa'i yon tan thams cad btags yod du 'gro ste/ gsang sngags kyi lam sgrid du mi btub/*

<sup>512</sup> Variant (Beijing): Some people allege the first among these three main channels, this central channel, is an imputation. This is talk of someone who does not understand secret mantra at all. If that were the case, all the qualities included in the central channel would become imputations as well, and one would not be able to traverse the path of secret mantra.

*la la srog pa rtsa la 'dod de/ srog pa rtsa la<sup>513</sup> rlung sems 'dus na smyo 'bog du 'gro ba yin/ dbu mas yon tan 'ba' zhig bskyed pa las/ skyon rngan<sup>514</sup> pa byin yang byed ma shes pas ma yin/ la la rgyungs pa yin zer te dbu ma'i chos bzhi ma tshang/ rtsa'i gnad 'chugs pas ma yin/<sup>515</sup> des na rtsa dbu ma ngos zin pa nyung bar 'dug/<sup>516</sup> de ngo ma shes par thabs lam sgom pa rgod bro bar gda'<sup>517</sup>*

Some claim [the central channel] is the life-channel.<sup>518</sup> If wind and mind collect in the life-channel, that leads to insanity. But the central channel generates only good qualities; even if faults were given to it, it could not act on these. Therefore, [the central channel] is not [the life-channel].

Some people say it is the spinal cord. Because the four attributes of the central channel<sup>519</sup> are not complete [there] and because the point of channels is mistaken, [the central channel] is not [the spinal cord].<sup>520</sup>

Few people recognize the central channel. Not recognizing it, but nevertheless meditating on the path of methods, is a ridiculous joke.

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<sup>513</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 140/4: *rtsar*.

<sup>514</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 19: *brngan*.

<sup>515</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 140/6: *dbu ma'i chos bzhi la tshang pa'i gnas 'chags pas ma yin*.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, 141/1: *rtsa dbu ma ngos zin pa nyung ba yin*.

<sup>517</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 434/6-435/1.

<sup>518</sup> The identity of the life-force channel also seems to have been a point of discussion. In the *Explanation of the Vajra Body*, Yang dgon pa does not define it, but a century later, Rang 'byung rdo rje would say that the life-channel and the central channel start out the same, but become differentiated with moral cultivation: "At the time of the ground, the *madhyamā* channel (*dbu ma*) and the life-force channel (*srog rtsa*) are indivisible. By meditating on the path that penetrates the vital points, at the time of the result, the channels are purified and there is only the *madhyamā*" (Rang byung rdo rje, *Illuminating "The Profound Principles"*, 81).

<sup>519</sup> Various versions of the four attributes are to be found in different commentaries, and Yang dgon pa himself does not specify which version he relies on. Sa chen Kun dga' snying po explains the four attributes of the central channel as "fine like the stem of a lotus, sharp like the point of a spear, [capable of] cutting like the edge of a sword, and smooth like the surface of a mirror" (Stearns, *Taking the Result as the Path*, 4, 91).

<sup>520</sup> He mis variant: It is not a place formed to include the four qualities of the central channel.

It is striking that the arguments that Yang dgon pa refutes are (1) that the central channel is imaginary, (2) that it is the life-channel, and (3) that it is the spinal cord. While the central channel was not a topic of discussion in the medical literature of Yang dgon pa's day, the life-channel and the spinal cord were considered to be physical structures in medical literature such as the *Four Tantras*, perhaps indicating here that Yang dgon pa was defending the central channel from being conflated with a medical model of the ordinary body.

Yang dgon pa's discussion here reads like a defense of the true identity of the central channel, but so far his argument tells the reader only what the central channel is *not*. Yang dgon pa next proceeds to build an identity for the central channel, first referencing the tantras, and then segueing into a complex map of channels that branch off from the central channel. In this description, Yang dgon pa naturalizes the central channel, and all of the other channels as well, as an innate, locatable structure within the human body.<sup>521</sup> Before he launches into this map, however, he turns to the authority of the tantras to describe this channel's qualities and its location in accordance with tantric lore:

*rtsa dbu ma 'di ltar gnas par gda' te/ thun mongs ma yin pa'i gsang ba zhes bya ba rnal  
'byor chen po'i rgyud las/*

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<sup>521</sup> The naturalizing of the channels as a part of the physical body, or even a precedent for the physical body, is a theoretical move found in some tantras of the *niruttara* class. For example, the *Samvarodaya Tantra* theorizes the body's channels determine the physical form: *lus kyi rang bzhin ji lta bu/ de bzhin rtsa yi gzugs ni ci/ rtsa yi grangs kyi tsad ni du/ de bzhin lus kyi gong bu ci/ sbas pa'i dam tsig gi ni brda* (Just as the nature of the body is, so the form of the channels exist. The extent of the number of channels determines the mass of the body. This is the sign of the hidden *samaya*) [*Bde mchog 'byung ba'i rgyud (Samvarodaya Tantra)* in *Sde dge 'i Bstan 'gyur*, Toh 373, Rgyud 'bum, kha , 529/5-6]. This excerpt comes from Chapter One of the *Samvarodaya Tantra*, a chapter Shinichi Tsuda does not consider in his scholarly study of this tantra.

*srog gi dbyig pa'i*<sup>522</sup> *nang na gnas//*  
*sum chu rtsa gnyis mdud dang ldan//*  
*phra bas phra ba yang dag mchog//*  
*phyi rol ma yin nang na min//*

*ces gsungs so/ de la srog 'dzin pa'i rtsa lus kyi dkyil na gnas pa/ spyi gtsug nas lte 'og bar*  
*du zug pas/ de la 'khor lo drug gi lte ba'i rtsa mdud bcas pa ste*<sup>523</sup>

The way the central channel exists is like this. The great yoga tantra called *The Extraordinary Secret* says:

It exists in the life-staff.

It has 32 knots.

It is the perfect supreme one, the subtlest of the subtle.

It is not outside, and is not inside.<sup>524</sup>

To elaborate, the life-holding channel extends from the crown of the head to below the navel, and resides in the very center of the body. There are channel-knots in the middle of six *cakras*.

Yang dgon pa does not unpack the descriptive details within the quotation he provides from *The Extraordinary Secret*. Rather, he seems content to locate the channel more generally in the center of the body, extending from the crown of the head to the navel, perhaps not feeling a need to elaborate further. However, his previous refutations leave open obvious questions. If the central channel is neither imaginary nor a physical structure such as the spine, what is it? On what level

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<sup>522</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 19: *srog gi dbyu gu'i. Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 141/3: *srog gi dbang dbyug ma'i*.

<sup>523</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 435/1-3.

<sup>524</sup> It appears that this tantra (*Thun mongs ma yin pa'i gsang ba zhes bya ba rnal 'byor chen po'i rgyud*) is no longer extant. The quote found, however, with slightly different wording in the *Glorious Mahāmudrā Bindu Tantra* (*Dpal phyag rgya chen po'i thig le'i rgyud*): *Srog gi dbyug pa dbu na gnas/ phra ba'i phra ba yang dag mchog/ sum cu rtsa gnyis mdud dang ldan/ de ni phyi rol nang du min/ [Dpal phyag rgya chen po'i thig le zhes bya ba rnal 'byor ma chen mo'i rgyud kyi rgyal po'i mnga' bdag, in Bka' 'gyur Dpe bsdur ma, Toh 420 (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 2006-09), 266].*

of materiality does the central channel exist? What does it mean to say it is the “the subtlest of the subtle”?

Given these ambiguities, it is not surprising that Yang dgon pa’s student Spyan snga ba, perhaps in response to a challenge from without, and apparently finding Yang dgon pa’s explanation somewhat unsatisfactory, follows up in his short commentary on the *Explanation of the Hidden*. Spyan snga ba found this passage in Yang dgon pa’s work so important that he chooses it to begin his *Treasury of Points of Hidden Advice on the Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, stating that his teacher’s treatment of the central channel here is one of the unique and distinguishing features of Yang dgon pa’s work.<sup>525</sup> He goes on to explore the lingering questions about the central channel’s material status in more detail than Yang dgon pa provided:

*la la don dam pa la dgongs nas btags yod tsam las/ dngos por grub pa med zer te ma go  
ba yin/ gsang sngags kyi lugs kyi rten 'brel thams cad lus la bsgrigs pas/ de la kun rdzob  
rdzas kyi dbu ma med na/ dbu mas bsdus pa'i yon tan bshad pa thams cad don med du  
'gyur bas/ yar sna mar sna'i srog rten zungs gnyis po gang la brten/ de ni gsang sngags  
gting nas ma go ba bya ba yin/*<sup>526</sup>

Some think that, from the ultimate perspective, [the central channel] is merely imaginary, and therefore it does not exist as a thing (*dngos po*). That is a misunderstanding. All of the circumstances of the tradition of secret mantra are set in place in the body. If there were no relative, material central channel in the [body], all the explanations of the qualities included in the central channel would become meaningless. What would the two life-support-holders at the upper and lower ends [of the central channel]<sup>527</sup> rely on? That is a deep misunderstanding of secret mantra.

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<sup>525</sup> Spyan snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Sbas bshad kyi zhal gdams* , 500/3.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, 501/5-02/1.

<sup>527</sup> In some systems of tantric theory, the upper and lower ends of the central channel contain a white vital essence and red vital essence that are a support for the life-force. This is perhaps what Spyan snga ba means here by *srog rten zungs gnyis po* (the two life-support holders) [Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication, 2012]. Rang 'byung rdo rje explains that these two vital essences reside at either end of the central channels and hold the life-force wind inside the central channel [Rang byung rdo rje, *Illuminating “The Profound Principles”*, 79].

This passage is a remarkable example of interpretation of Yang dgon pa's vision of the material status of the central channel. At the beginning of the passage the central channel is defined as *dngos po*, the same term that we find in the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, here contrasted with something imagined. This would indicate that in this case *dngos po'i gnas lugs* means materiality and that Spyan snga ba is asserting that it has a physical existence in the body.

But what would that mean? Anticipating the possibility of such a question, Spyan snga ba clarifies, remarkably, that the central channel is relative (*kun rdzob*) and material (*rdzas*). This is an extraordinary assertion and may, in fact, unlock a fuller understanding of what Yang dgon pa really means by the vajra body and the nature of its existence. Apparently, the central channel (and by extension the vajra body) is not just real; it has the quality of some sort of materiality (*dngos po*) and substance (*rdzas*), at least according to Spyan snga ba's understanding. Furthermore, it is existent on a relative (*kun rdzob*) level, a level that usually applies to the conventional world, not the exalted realizations that are normally said to ensue inside the central channel. This also provides us with a strikingly clear gloss for *dngos po*. It is not merely a thing; it is a thing that seems to have form, materiality, or substance. With this understanding, the meaning of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* leans towards a gloss of "the nature of matter" or "the nature of substance." We will keep in mind this possible gloss as we move forward. While Spyan snga ba is not explicit on what this discussion might mean for the vajra body as a whole, it gestures in a direction that links Yang dgon pa's tradition directly following out of the *Explanation of the Hidden* once again to a vision of embodiment in which materiality is explored as a complex and critical ingredient of human transcendence.

Spyan snga ba continues to explore this theme as he tries to pin down an even more precise location for the central channel by commenting on the line “It is not outside and it is not inside” (*phyi rol ma yin nang na min*), a line from the *Extraordinary Secret Tantra* that Yang dgon pa cited in support of his own description of the central channel:

*de ltar dbu ma 'di yod lugs la/ phyi rol kyang ma yin nang na yang ma yin zhes pas/srog pa rtsa'i phyi ma yin te mdun na yod/ nang ma yin te phyi na gnas pa'o/ srog gi dbyug pa yang de gnyis kyi phyi nang dngos por 'dug la/ snang ba'i yul gsal ba'i yang dag du srab par snang ba gcig gi g.yogs par snang la/ shi tsa na dngos po med par 'gro ba gcig yod pas so/ de rnams kyis 'ubs dril na/ rtsa dbu ma srog rtsa'i mdun ngos na byas pa<sup>528</sup>*

Concerning the way this central channel exists, [the root text] says it is not outside or inside. [This means the central channel] is not outside the life-force channel, but exists in front of it. It is not inside [the life-force channel], but is located on the outside. The outside and inside of those two life-staffs exist as material things (*dngos po*), but the appearing objects are covering an appearance that is, in truth, delicate. This is why, when we die, these [channels] will no longer be material things (*dngos po*). If these [points] are summarized, the central channel is located on the front surface of the life-force channel.

In Spyān snga ba’s attempt to pin down the exact location of the central channel, the point of reference throughout becomes the life-force channel. Now these lines might easily have been understood as echoing the non-dual philosophical traditions that attempt to break through the conceptual imputations of polar opposites (inner and outer), but instead Spyān snga ba interprets them in the most physical sense, indicating a literal location for the central channel. As he reads the statement, the fact that the central channel is “not outside” means that the central channel is not encasing the life-channel (*srog pa rtsa'i phyi ma yin*), which seems here an orienting physical structure in the body, possibly referring to the spinal cord, but is rather in front of it (*mdun na yod*). The fact that the central channel is “not inside” means simply that the central channel is outside of the life-channel. This would seem to indicate that the central channel runs parallel to

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<sup>528</sup> Spyān snga ba Rin chen ldan, *Sbas bshad kyi zhal gdams*, 500/3.

the life-channel, and is in front of it. And the final sentence (“The outside and inside of those two life-staffs exist as material things”) reinforces, if we had any doubt, that the life-force channel and the central channel actually exist in physical reality. Once again we are offered the phrase *dngos po* to contemplate. Here again we have a layered understanding of materiality. There is one that can apparently be seen, its existence not a mystery (the life-channel), and another which is “difficult to realize” (to use Yang dgon pa’s previous description) and must be located here by the tantric commentator (the central channel).

At this point, it appears that the quality of being *dngos po* includes a sense of being *not* imputed, which would indicate that anything that is *dngos po* is not imaginary. But on the other hand, as Yang dgon pa told us previously, it is not easily perceived either in the way that a coarse internal structure such as the spine is easily perceived. Even so, *dngos po* has form and dimension, at least to the degree that it can be located in a specific place. This *dngos po* is clearly not an ordinary sort of substance. Sphyan snga ba seems to be getting at a kind of *dngos po* that conceals a deeper subtlety when he says “the appearing objects are covering an appearance that is, in truth, delicate.” Sphyan snga ba explicitly confirms that the *dngos po* he is describing is not solid or coarse, but subtle and fine: “That central channel, which is like a lotus thread, is subtle” (*pad ma'i skud pa ltar dbu ma de ni phra bar yod pa'o*).<sup>529</sup> So, in Sphyan snga ba’s work, we are afforded a glimpse of a layer of embodiment that is at once both subtle (*phra ba*) and material (*dngos po*).

Sphyan snga ba concludes with the statement, “This is why, when we die, these [channels] will no longer be material things (*dngos po*).” This clause implies that the channels, this subtle

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<sup>529</sup> Ibid., 502/4.



variety of *dngos po* within the body, disappear when a person dies. Even the central channel, one of the most important parts of the vajra body, ceases to exist in the body at death. Assuming the channels become non-substantial immediately after death, this is indeed a subtle kind of substantiality or materiality. Now we are afforded a vision of a vajra body that exists only in a living organism. Therefore, according to Spyran snga ba, the vajra body is not an immortal body, at least in the way it appears in life. It seems to possess an aspect of perishability, even while it exists as the “*heruka*’s body,” the expression of fully awakened buddhahood. But there is also another possibility, namely, that some aspect of the vajra body leaves the flesh-and-blood body after death. We will explore this issue further in Chapter Five, as this turns out to be the case in Yang dgon pa’s vision later on in the *Explanation of the Hidden*.

Spyan snga ba’s clarifications suggest why the physical body becomes so critical for Yang dgon pa. It is through working with the central channel that an adept becomes a Buddha, but that central channel is *dngos po*, intimately physical. Therefore, the adept must work with physicality, with the body’s innate substantial nature, to become a Buddha. Yang dgon pa’s discussion and Spyran snga ba’s further glosses imply that *dngos po’i gnas lugs* refers to the overall condition of human embodiment: it refers to the substrate underlying substantiality, a substrate that is in some sense substantial or material itself. This vision of human embodiment is stratified: There are layers to the body’s innate truth. There is the layer that can be seen (the coarse) and the layer that is recondite (the subtle). Yang dgon pa is mainly concerned with the “subtle,” the recondite layer, the body’s *dngos po’i gnas lugs*. Its presence, Yang dgon pa tells us, is not easily perceived. Eventual perception comes through visionary experience and through education, including the act of reading. In this understanding, the *Explanation of the Hidden*

itself is catalyst for the perception of this subtle layer of being. It apparently precedes formal training in the practices that fully actualize *dngos po'i gnas lugs*.

### ***Bodhicitta, Unclean Substances, and Thought***

As mentioned earlier, Yang dgon pa devotes most of his attention, in the large section on the body's *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, to the first two of five topics, the awakenings (embryology) and the channels. This uneven attention is consistent with Yang dgon pa's overall project to treat the subject of the vajra body, the subtle substrate that his student Spyan snga ba identifies as a kind of *dngos po*. The first two topics give Yang dgon pa an opportunity to explore this subtle substrate through discussing the development and the maturity of the channels of the body. These channels are of particular interest to Yang dgon pa in relation to his career as a tantric educator: within the tantric system of Yang dgon pa's lineage, the channels become a basis, along with wind and *bodhicitta*, for somatic practices that lead to liberation. Nevertheless, Yang dgon pa does give some attention to the *Non-dual Victory Tantra's* final three components of body: *bodhicitta*, unclean substances, and thought. We will look at his brief treatment of each in turn. About *bodhicitta*, he comments tersely:

*da lus kyi chos gsum pa byang chub kyi sems dang ni ces pa/ rtsa khar gnas par  
byang sems gnas te/ de yang lus kyi zungs sems kyi rten yin pas gnyis ka'i chos su  
'ong te<sup>530</sup> rgyas par 'og du bstan no/<sup>531</sup>*

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<sup>530</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis): 'ong gsungs te.

<sup>531</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, (Pha jo ldings), 455/1-2.

The third topic of body is [expressed in the phrase] “*bodhicitta*.”<sup>532</sup> Wherever channels exist, *bodhicitta* exists. Because it is the energy of the body and the support of mind, it comes under both topics [body and mind]: It is explained more thoroughly below.

The reason for the brevity here appears to be just as Yang dgon pa states, that “it is explained more thoroughly below” in Yang dgon pa’s section on the *dngos po’i gnas lugs* of mind. As we learn later in the *Explanation of the Hidden*, in his extensive commentary on *bodhicitta* as a component of mind, Yang dgon pa equates *bodhicitta* with physical quintessences (*dwangs ma*) that result from the refinement of food, air, and so forth. The interesting thing to note here is that Yang dgon pa classifies *bodhicitta* as a component of both body and mind, once again blurring the division between these two. *Bodhicitta* is the “energy of the body” (*lus kyi zungs*), meaning that the quintessences feed and nourish the subtle and coarse body, providing the essential nutrients for formation of the subtle channels and coarse physical substances. *Bodhicitta* is also the “support of mind” (*sems kyi rten*) because *bodhicitta*, as various quintessences (*dwangs ma*), is the physical correlate of mind. I will explore these topics below in Part III of Chapter IV.

As for the unclean substances, Yang dgon pa’s comments on this topic are brief as well:

*lus kyi chos bzhi pa mi gtsang rdzas dang ces pa/ skra dang ba spu la sogs<sup>533</sup> pa’i khams sum cu rtsa<sup>534</sup> gnyis te/ mtshan nyid pa mi gtsang ba’i rdzas sum cu so bdun<sup>535</sup> zer/ gsang*

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<sup>532</sup> Yang dgon pa is referring to the original phrase in the *Non-dual Victory Tantra* that provides his topics. It actually reads *byang chub sems dang ni*, but this is provided for metric purposes and to relate it to the original quote only.

<sup>533</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 186/1: *bskyed* inserted. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 47: *skyed* inserted.

<sup>534</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 47: *so*.

*sngags pa yul nyi shu rtsa bzhi la sogs par 'dod de<sup>536</sup> / lus la srin bu'i rigs dang yang stong phrag brgyad cu yod par gsungs so<sup>537</sup>*

The fourth topic of body is [expressed in the phrase] “unclean substances.” These are the thirty-two constituents<sup>538</sup> of hair, pores, and so forth. Scholars call them the thirty-seven<sup>539</sup> unclean substances. Secret mantrins assert that they are the twenty-four countries and so forth. It is said that the body has 80,000 kinds of parasites.

The 32 constituents (*khams*) that Yang dgon pa mentions first here are a common classification for the components of the physical body, named not only in tantric sources such as the *Vimalaprabhā*<sup>540</sup> but even in Theravada works such as Buddhaghoṣa’s *Visuddhimagga*.<sup>541</sup> The constituents include all of the elements of the coarse physical form that are sometimes elevated, within tantric practice, to a divine status. The fact that Yang dgon pa classifies the coarse body under the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body indicates that he does not entirely banish gross materiality from this same category that is focused on the

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<sup>535</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 186/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 47.

<sup>536</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* 47: do.

<sup>537</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 455/2-4.

<sup>538</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: thirty-two constituents that give rise to hair, etc. This variant reading places *khams* as the source of hair etc. As we will see later in this chapter, Yang dgon pa’s discussion of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of mind proffers an understanding of *khams* that is both generative of the unclean substances, and synonymous with those unclean substances, so both readings--while quite different--are plausible.

<sup>539</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: thirty-two.

<sup>540</sup> Wallace, *The Kālacakratantra: The Chapter on the Individual Together with the Vimalaprabhā*, 72.

<sup>541</sup> Buddhaghoṣa lists the thirty two unclean substances as head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidney, heart, liver, midriff, spleen, lungs, bowels, entrails, gorge, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, mucus, synovial fluid, urine, and brains [Buddhaghoṣa, *The Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (Berkeley, Calif.: Shambhala Publications, 1976), 237].

subtle body. This is precisely the kind of instance that supports an interpretation of *gnas lugs*, in Yang dgon pa's work, not only as referring to an underlying substrate or essence, but also as simply indicating a situation or way of being. While the vajra body remains Yang dgon pa's main topic of consideration, the body's *dngos po'i gnas lugs* includes a wider understanding of the body, including its overall composition of subtle and coarse elements.

*Bodhicitta* and unclean substances are juxtaposed in this discussion as different sides of the same coin. *Bodhicitta*, synonymous with quintessences, provides a valorizing perspective on body's liquid and solid substances, whereas the category "unclean substances" (*mi gtsang rdzas*) is a disparaging perspective on the very same substances. While the two categories are not perfect correlates, there are a number of constituents in the list of 32 substances that are classified as elixirs in Yang dgon pa's treatment of that subject later on (this can be seen in Appendix 3 of the dissertation). An argument can certainly be made that Yang dgon pa only comments on these two categories in cursory acknowledgement of the organizing quotation from the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*. However, the juxtaposition of the two categories of elixirs and unclean substances does indicate an effort to include substantial physicality in the notion of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, and once again shows Yang dgon pa grounding the vajra body in quotidian realities of a living, breathing organism.

Up to this point, Yang dgon pa's notion of embodiment has in fact proved to be very much grounded in the subtle body and physical body: a body that is both produced by and produces consciousness. We have seen that, at the very least, consciousness and the body are deeply interpenetrating. Therefore it is not too much of a surprise to find that

Yang dgon pa, following the lead of the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*, even classifies thought (Tib. *rnam rtog*, Skt. *vikalpa*) as a topic of body:

*lus kyi chos lnga pa rnam rtog ni khams lnga rgyu'i tshul du 'dus pa las/ rig pa*<sup>542</sup> *'bras bu'i tshul du 'dres*<sup>543</sup> *nas/ khams*<sup>544</sup> *lnga tshur snang ba dang rig pa*<sup>545</sup> *par 'dzin pa gnyis/ mdung khyim bzhin du rgyu 'bras kyi rten 'brel 'dzom pa las lus su grub pa te/ lus*<sup>546</sup> *rnam rtog gi rang gzugs su sems rang snang*<sup>547</sup> *bas lus dbyer med*<sup>548</sup> *de ltar 'ong ba lags*<sup>549</sup>

The fifth phenomenon of body is thought. The five elements exist in the manner of the cause. Awareness follows<sup>550</sup> in the manner of a result. The five elements appearing here, and awareness grasping there, are like a pole and tent. From the coming together of the interdependence of cause and effect, the body is produced. Body is the embodiment of thought, and the inherent expression of mind.<sup>551</sup> Therefore, body and mind are inseparable. It happens in that way.<sup>552</sup>

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<sup>542</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 47: *shes pa*. This discrepancy in the Beijing version of the *Explantion of the Hidden* may be significant here. *Rig pa* can either mean a valorized awareness, or it can be a word for intelligence or mentality. Perhaps someone changed *rig pa* to *shes pa* in the version used to produce the Beijing text to avoid the confusion with the highly valorized form of *rig pa* found in the teachings of the Great Perfection (*Rdzogs chen*). It is a striking difference between editions that indicates there may have been some unease about what the passage is implying.

<sup>543</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 186/5: *'dus*.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, 186/5: *rigs khams lnga*.

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.*, 186/5; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 48: *shes pa*.

<sup>546</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 186/6: *lus kyi*.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*, 187/1: *gnang*.

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*, 187/1; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing): *kyang* added.

<sup>549</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 455/4-5.

<sup>550</sup> He mis variant: *gathers*.

<sup>551</sup> He mis variant: Mind inherently exists as the embodiment of the body's thought.

<sup>552</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: Although body and mind are inseparable, it happens in this way.

In this passage, Yang dgon pa proceeds to help us understand mind as a subset of body by returning to the theory of transmigration and conception. We are offered a vision of human embodiment that, rather than attributing the cause of matter to mind (a common perspective in many tantras), attributes the cause of mind to matter in the form of the five elements, the five material building blocks of organic life. This clarification is remarkable because previously in Yang dgon pa's embryology section, it appears at first glance to be the other way around. There Yang dgon pa lays out a sequence of events in which the transmigrating consciousness, as wind and mind inseparable, enters the father's anus, joins with his semen, and enters the mother's womb. After this, the five bodily elements are created.<sup>553</sup> However, here in the present passage, he clearly situates the five elements, commonly associated with the material world, as the prior condition or cause for awareness.

Yang dgon pa's ensuing statement suggests there is not ultimately a contradiction here, because prior to the process of emergence of the five bodily elements is the initial moment of conception, which is a fusion of the five elements with the bardo consciousness. Yang dgon pa describes the moment of conception as the "five elements appearing here and awareness grasping there." We see in the ensuing statements that materiality and awareness cannot exist independently in a human form, just as a tent cannot exist without a pole and canopy. The five elements, or physical materiality, like a pole, act as the support for awareness, which is like a canopy. Such an analogy would have struck an immediate chord with Tibetans, many of whom lived their lives in tents. The implication is that the

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<sup>553</sup> *De nas dang po 'byung ba rlung nas bzung nas sa'i bar du rim pa bzhin chags pa yang/ phyi snod kyi 'jig rten ltar chags la* ("Then, the elements are sequentially formed, beginning with wind, and ending with earth, like the outer environmental world is created") [Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 426/4].

creation of a body at conception is not possible without the existence of materiality (the five elements), likened to a planted pole, and karmic awareness grasping after the materiality, likened to the tent bound to and draped around the pole. This would comply with Yang dgon pa's theme throughout the *Explanation of the Hidden* that corporeal existence is the support and basis for mind, making its functions possible.<sup>554</sup> This critical moment of grasping mind latching on to physical matter becomes the causal instant leading to a lifetime of the nonduality of mind and matter.

The tent-and-pole analogy is followed by a concise and direct philosophical reflection on the relationship between body and mind: “Body is the embodiment of thought, and the inherent expression of mind. Therefore, body and mind are inseparable” (*lus rnam rtog gi rang gzugs su sems rang snang bas lus dbyer med de ltar 'ong ba lags*).<sup>555</sup> This sentence encapsulates and confirms that, while Yang dgon pa attributes a causality to matter, Yang dgon pa primarily sees a mutual dependence of body and mind, and ultimately an inseparability of body and mind, which is the theoretical monism that culminates in his discussion of the fourth *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. However, as we see here and elsewhere, while Yang dgon pa aims to elevate the status of the body, he is careful not to privilege either body or mind to the degree that either is *excluded* as a critical component

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<sup>554</sup> Grags pa rgyal mtshan expresses a similar idea in that he identifies body and speech as the support (*rten*), and mind as the supported (*brten*) [Grags pa rgyal mtshan, *Rin po che'i ljon shing*, 120/3]. However, in a direct contrast to Yang dgon pa, he asserts that body and speech are a product of mind [ibid., 120/1].

<sup>555</sup> Here the phrase “embodiment of thought” implies that the body is an expression in a physical form (*gzugs*) of the thinking mind (Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication, 2013). The term for embodiment here is *rang gzugs*, which appear again in the context of Yang dgon pa's culminating argument for the continuous inseparability of body, speech, and mind. In that context, I will discuss it further.



of human embodiment and human causality. Rather, he continually grants a kind of mutuality. In fact, Yang dgon pa is compelled to assert both perspectives as true. Mind is an expression of body, and body is an expression of mind, playing out in many complex and specific ways. Both perspectives must be true because, in Yang dgon pa's view, while body and mind can be isolated for the purposes of focus and discussion, ultimately, as he foreshadows in this passage and will describe later, body and mind are inseparable.

## **Part II: The *Dngos po'i gnas lugs* of Speech**

Yang dgon pa's second dimension of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* is speech. As we will recall from Chapter 3, the creation of a discrete category for speech was one of Yang dgon pa's doctrinal innovations with regard to the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. The addition of a speech-category served several ends. First, it broke up the body-mind dyad of previous doctrinal models of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. Further, in aligning the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body, speech, and mind with channels, winds, and vital essences, Yang dgon pa could then affix the basis for all three aspects of tantric Buddhist practice primarily in the body itself. Finally, the novel third category, resting as it does between body and mind, occupies a liminal space that bridges physical and mental dimensions of being, and draws attention to the soteriological functions of motility and voice.

In a discussion that parallels the impulses of the previous major section on the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body, Yang dgon pa is primarily interested not in coarse breath or voice, but rather in the subtle substrate of speech, the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of speech as it is expressed in the vajra body, namely as wind (*rlung*), a subtle form of speech that circulates

through the channels of the subtle body. Whereas the mechanism of channels is largely structural, the mechanism of wind is volitional, energetic, and developmental. Yang dgon pa presents the winds as a force that drives physical and spiritual development, as well as physical movement, thought, and emotion. The winds push matter from within to move and grow. Yang dgon pa aligns winds with karma when the winds are moving, and with gnosis when the winds are still, an alignment that might seem at first blush to contrast with the idea that the enlightened body is a body in evolution. In fact, it would be possible to say, looking at Yang dgon pa's work, that the entire category of wind covers all aspects of perceivable movement, growth, or development, whether of body, speech, or mind. Just a little over a century later, Rang 'byung rdo rje, in his autocommentary on the *Profound Inner Principles (Zab mo nang don)*, a work that echoes and cites Yang dgon pa's opus,<sup>556</sup> goes so far as to reduce the definition of wind to movement itself, within the human body and mind: As he puts it, "Movements are called wind."<sup>557</sup> Yang dgon pa's description of wind as the force behind human movement, change, and development is rather consistent with Rang 'byung rdo rje's definition.

In Yang dgon pa's work, the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of speech includes this notion of movement, but there is also, as with the section on the body, five topics of speech that cover a wide variety of understandings of the identity of speech. Echoing his discussion of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body, Yang dgon pa broaches the topic of speech by citing once again the *Non-dual Victory Tantra's* root verses:

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<sup>556</sup> Rang byung rdo rje, *Illuminating "The Profound Principles"*, 91, cites Yang dgon pa as a source for exegesis on the five hidden channels (*sbas pa'i rtsa lnga*).

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

*ngag ni 'byung ba lnga rnams dang//  
yi ge dang ni dbyangs rnams dang//  
sbyor ba dang ni tshig dag gis//  
ngag gi chos ni gnas pa yin//<sup>558</sup>*

Speech: The five elements,  
Syllables, vowels,  
Integration, and words.  
By virtue of these, the phenomenon of speech exists.

On the basis of this passage, Yang dgon pa divides his discussion of the *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of speech into five categories: (1) the five elements, (2) syllables, (3) vowels, (4) integration, and (5) words. Yang dgon pa explicates the first category, the five elements, in terms of the volatile energy-winds that move throughout the vajra body. In this section, predictably the longest of the five, Yang dgon pa describes the form and function of the winds that circulate through the channels, and those that pervade physicality more generally. He also underlines again the material qualities of the phenomenon of speech. The other four categories concern the literal act of speaking and the nature of voice, a vibratory event that, no matter how mundane, is an expression of the functions of an innately liberated vajra body.

In his section on the body's winds, Yang dgon pa devotes a good deal of attention to parsing the winds, discussing their names, characteristics, and functions, and how and when they move. His discussion of the winds is his own amalgam of tantric sources, as well as instructions that he says were received from Sa skya Paṇḍita.<sup>559</sup> Here I do not have the space to trace all the specific elements that he synthesizes from each of these sources,

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<sup>558</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 456/4-5. Also, *Gnyis med rnam rgyal gyi rgyud*, 429.

<sup>559</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 464/4.

but I will explore some influences, and will mainly look at how Yang dgon pa uses tantric sources to develop his own theories and agendas. The major classifications of winds to which he introduces us are common across many tantric exegetical sources. In the first half of this section of the dissertation, I will discuss how he frames and describes the major somatic winds, and then will look at some specific winds in more depth.

Yang dgon pa divides wind into two main categories: coarse wind and subtle wind.<sup>560</sup> Yang dgon pa identifies the coarse wind (*rlung rags pa*) as an energy force that moves through the channels, and also includes the physical phenomenon of breathing. Yang dgon pa maintains that there are 21,690 coarse winds pervading the body<sup>561</sup> and that they can be understood via several classificatory systems. The main system that Yang dgon pa discusses is that of ten winds, of which there are five root winds and five branch winds, a system that has precedent in early tantric sources.<sup>562</sup> For the five root winds, he quotes from *The Mahāyoga Tantra called Vajra Door (Rdo rje sgo zhes bya ba rnal 'byor chen po'i rgyud)*, a tantra that according to Christian Wedemeyer no longer exists in either Sanskrit or Tibetan.<sup>563</sup> He lists the five root winds from this tantra as (1) the life wind or

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<sup>560</sup> Precedent for this division of the winds into coarse and subtle can be found in early sources such as the *Guhyasamāja* literature. For example see Zla ba grags pa, *Gsang ba 'dus pa'i mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan gyi 'grel pa*, in *Bstan 'gyur dpe bsdur ma*, Toh 1817, Rgyud, ngi (Beijing: krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 1996-2008).

<sup>561</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 456/5.

<sup>562</sup> For example see 'Phags pa Klu sgrub, *Dpal gsang ba 'dus pa'i rgyud kyi rgyud 'grel*, in *Sde dge 'i Bstan 'gyur*, Toh 1784, rgyud, sa (Delhi: Delhi Karmapae Choedhey, Gyalwae Sungrab Partun Khang, 1982-85), 278a/3.

<sup>563</sup> Wedemeyer, *Āryadeva's Lamp that Integrates the Practices (Caryāmelāpakapradīpa): The Gradual Path of Vajrayāna Buddhism According to the Esoteric Community Noble Tradition*, 164, fn. 52.

the life-holding wind, (2) the downward voiding wind, (3) the upward moving wind, (4) the equalizing wind, and (5) the pervading wind.<sup>564</sup> These five winds are responsible for the functioning of the five aggregates, and are ultimately embodiments of the five Buddhas.<sup>565</sup> This set of correspondences can also be found in 'Jig rten mgon po's *A Commentary on the Bindu of Impeccable Conduct (Tshangs par spyod pa thig le'i khrid)*, discussed in Chapter Two as a likely inspiration for Yang dgon pa's work.<sup>566</sup>

According to Yang dgon pa's synthesis, the root winds are located in the physical body in specific locations and exercise specific functions.<sup>567</sup> The life wind, or the life-holding wind, is located in the heart and the life-channel. It functions to keep body and mind from separating and causes one to cling to the sense of self or "I." The upward moving wind resides inside the larynx (or adam's apple) in the throat. It enables the swallowing of food and the work of drawing up. It makes speech and laughter possible. The downward clearing wind is located in the perineal region down to the anus and urinary opening. It is responsible for expelling and retaining urine, semen, blood, and feces. The equalizing wind is located at the navel. It is responsible for digestion of food, separating

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<sup>564</sup> *Srog rlung, thur sel gyi rlung, gyen du rgyu ba'i rlung, mnyam gnas kyi rlung, and kyab byed kyi rlung* [Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 457/3-4].

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*, 457/5-6.

<sup>566</sup> 'Jig rten mgon po, *Tshangs par spyod pa thig le'i khrid*, 173/2-3. These correspondences are also found in commentaries on the tantras. For example, see 'Phags pa Klu sgrub, *Dpal gsang ba 'dus pa'i rgyud kyi rgyud 'grel*, 166a/3.

<sup>567</sup> The correspondences of these bodily locations with the root winds can also be found in early sources such as the *Vajramāla tantra* (Mkhas grub Nor bzang rgya mtsho, *Ornament of Stainless Light*, 14, 196), and 'Phags pa Klu sgrub (Nāgārjuna), *Rim pa lnga*, in *Sde dge 'i Bstan 'gyur*, Toh 1813, Rgyud, ngi (Delhi: Delhi Karmapae Choedhey, Gyalwae Sungrab Partun Khang, 1982-85), 169a/1-6.

the quintessences and the waste, transforming the quintessences into the seven constituents and sending the waste downwards. The pervading wind is located in the 12 major joints. It is responsible for the body's movements such as ambulation, rising, sitting, and posturing.<sup>568</sup> The five root winds and their corresponding aggregates, functions, and locations are laid out in the chart below.

### The Five Root Winds and their Correspondences According to Yang dgon pa

Root Winds	Life-holding wind	Downward voiding wind	Upward moving wind	Equalizing wind	Pervading wind
<b>Aggregate</b>	Consciousness	Mental Formations	Perception	Feeling	Form
<b>Location</b>	Heart and life-channel	Perineal region	Larynx	Navel	Crown of the head, and the middle of the 12 major joints
<b>Functions</b>	-Keeps body and mind from separating -Makes us hold to a self or "I"	Expelling waste and retaining functions	-Facilitates swallowing, speech, and laughter -Pulls things up	-Digestion -Separation of the quintessences from the waste -Transforming the quintessences into the seven constituents -Sending the waste downwards	-Responsible for the movements of the body: walking, sitting, getting up, posturing, and so forth.

The five branch winds are (1) arising and moving, (2) thoroughly moving, (3) perfectly moving, (4) definitely moving, and (5) fully moving.<sup>569</sup> These five winds reside in the five

<sup>568</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 458/3-5.

<sup>569</sup> The five branch winds: *sdang zhing rgyu ba*, *rnam par rgyu ba*, *yang dag par rgyu ba*, *nges par rgyu ba*, and *rab tu rgyu ba* (ibid., 457/4).

senses, and are responsible for linking consciousness with the outside world.<sup>570</sup> These winds, he maintains, are ultimately expressions of five bodhisattvas. The five branch winds are associated with seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling, and tasting, respectively. In this theory of the subtle nature of speech, the branch winds make it possible for the mind to be aware of what the sense organs perceive. This process of perception is assisted by empowering winds of the five elements that act as quintessences, or power sources for the branch winds. However, Yang dgon pa provides a caveat that, while he has named five distinct branch winds, strictly speaking, the branch winds are nothing but the life-holding wind that is moving into each of the five senses.<sup>571</sup> The five branch winds, therefore, are labels for the life-holding wind, by virtue of their location in a moment of perception. In other words, in essence, these five are really manifestations of the life-holding wind, a dominant wind that will be discussed further below. It appears that the precise role of the life-holding wind was still being worked out around this time in the New School (*gsar ma*) lineages. Yang dgon pa maintains the life-holding wind also carries out its functions via the five branch winds. Furthermore, each of the branch winds is connected with five major internal organs, deep in the recesses of the body. The winds dwell in the organs, and extend from there to perform their various functions, including the functioning of the sense

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<sup>570</sup> A detailed presentation of the five branch winds and their correspondences may also be found in Rang byung rdo rje, *Illuminating “The Profound Principles”*, 70-71.

<sup>571</sup> *Srog ‘dzin gyi rlung dbang po lnga’i nang du rgyu ba yan lag gi rlung lnga ste* [Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 459/2].

organs.<sup>572</sup> The five branch winds, with their corresponding senses, functions, empowering quintessences, and places of origin are laid out in the chart below.

**The Five Branch Winds and their Correspondences  
According to Yang dgon pa**

<b>Branch Winds</b>	<b>Arising and moving</b>	<b>Thoroughly moving</b>	<b>Perfectly moving</b>	<b>Definitely moving</b>	<b>Fully moving</b>
<b>Alternate Name</b>	Nāga	Turtle	Lizard	Gift-of-the-Gods	Victorious-in-Archery
<b>Senses</b>	Eyes	Ears	Nose	Body	Tongue
<b>Sense Function</b>	Make form known	Make sound known	Makes smell known	Makes tactile sense known	Makes taste known
<b>Empowering Five Element Quintessences</b>	Water-wind	Wind-wind	Earth-wind	Space-wind	Fire-wind
<b>Origin</b>	Intestines	Liver	Lungs	Heart	Kidneys
<b>Activity Function</b>	Alleviates diseases	Governs extension and contraction of the limbs	Causes anger and agitation	Causes yawning and attachment	Causes sneezing and maintains life

Yang dgon pa states that the power of these coarse winds vacillates over the duration of a human lifespan. When one is young, the winds are powerful and there is growth and development. As adulthood is reached, the force of the winds slows. Then, as the force of the winds declines, the body ages. Yang dgon pa correlates these changes to the strength of the breath:

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<sup>572</sup> Ibid., 458/5-459/5. Examples of correlations between the sense organs and the internal organs are found in some tantras, and it may be an old system. Yang dgon pa's correlation serves to tighten the web of interconnections between coarse and subtle, between mental perception and physical being, and so forth. For a Bon tantric source, see Dan Martin, *Mandala cosmogony : Human Body Good Thought and the Revelation of the Secret Mother Tantras of Bon*, vol. 124, Asiatische Forschungen (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), 58.



*rlung bcu po de la 'byung 'jug gnas gsum te/ de yang lo nyi shu rtsa lnga'i bar du nang du 'jug pa nus pa che bas/ lus kyang je rgyas bskyed pa'o/<sup>573</sup> nyi shu rtsa lnga nas bzhi bcu rtsa<sup>574</sup> lnga'i bar<sup>575</sup> gnas pa nus pa che bas/ lus kyang<sup>576</sup> rdzogs shing brtan pa'o/ bzhi bcu rtsa<sup>577</sup> lnga nas<sup>578</sup> phyir 'byung ba nus pa che pas lus rgas shing khogs pa'o/<sup>579</sup>*

Those ten winds have exhalation, inhalation, and abiding. Until age twenty-five, the force of the winds' **inhalation** is strong, so the body grows and develops. Between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five, the force of the winds' **abiding** is strong, so that the body is complete and stable. After age forty-five, the force of the winds' **exhalation** is strong, so the body ages and shrinks.

The terms inhalation, abiding, and exhalation might apply to literal breath respiration, or it may apply to the activity of the subtle energy winds, or perhaps to both. It seems to mean that in youth the consuming energy feeds the force of the subtle winds, propelling physical growth. In adulthood, the force of consumption equalizes, and the body does not grow, but remains fairly stable. In old age, the ability to consume and process declines, and the body ages and shrinks.

### **The Life-Wind and the Pervading-Wind**

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<sup>573</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 197/3: *lo* inserted.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid., 197/3: *zhe*.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid., 197/3: *tshun chad* substituted.

<sup>576</sup> Ibid., 197/3: *kyang* elided.

<sup>577</sup> Ibid., 197/4: *zhe*.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid., 197/4; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 55: *man chad* substituted.

<sup>579</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 460/3-4.

The root and branch winds are not of equal status, but rather are presented in a hierarchy of form and function. As mentioned earlier, Yang dgon pa tells us that the five branch winds are but names of the activity of a dominant major wind, namely the life-wind (*srog rlung*), also known called the life-holding wind (*srog 'dzin gyi rlung*). Yang dgon pa defines this wind as the most important of the five winds, a valuation that continued in the major Tibetan lineages of somatic exegesis.<sup>580</sup> Yang dgon pa—like later exegetes after him—charges the life-wind (as we will remember from the previous discussion of the major winds) with the function of holding the body and mind together during the lifespan, and also for generating the experience of self-identity. He also credits the life-wind with stimulating the functions of the other major winds, and activating the positive effects of good health, as expressed in the tantric context:

*rlung bcu po de'i gtso bo srog 'dzin pa yin te/...srog 'dzin mnyam gnas kyis  
d(w)angs snyigs phyed<sup>581</sup> nas/ khyab byed dang 'dres pa la<sup>582</sup> rtogs pa skye bar  
gsungs/ thur sel gyen la logs pas/ me rlung stobs 'phel/ des srog 'dzin d(w)angs/  
gyen du bstan<sup>583</sup>/ khyab byed sgoms pa<sup>584</sup> las rlung mal du tshud/ gegs mi yong  
bar<sup>585</sup> yon tan bsam gyis mi khyab pa skye'o/<sup>586</sup>*

<sup>580</sup> The dominance of the life-holding wind is described in many sources. Some articulate explanations of its centrality and the reasons for its dominance can be found in the work of Rang 'byung rdo rje (Rang byung rdo rje, *Illuminating “The Profound Principles”*, 120-21), and Jamgon Kongtrul [Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, *The Treasury of Knowledge: Book Six, Part Four, Systems of Buddhist Tantra*, trans. Elio Guarisco and Ingrid McLeod (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2005), 177-178].

<sup>581</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 211/4; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 64: *phye*.

<sup>582</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 211/4: *nas*.

<sup>583</sup> *Ibid.*, 211/5; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 65: *gyen rgyu brtan*.

<sup>584</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis); *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 65: *snyoms pas*.

<sup>585</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 65: *gegs mi 'ong/ me'i nus pa thur la phubs pas thig le gyen la thegs pa las*.

The principal of the ten winds is the life-holding [wind]...The life-holding [wind] causes the equalizing [wind] to separate the quintessences from the waste, and then mixes with the pervading [wind], generating realization. Because it causes the downward-clearing [wind] to turn upwards, the power of the fire-wind increases. By that, the life-holding [wind] becomes vibrant, and the upward moving wind is stabilized. The pervading wind is meditated on, causing the karmic winds to decline. Hindrances do not arise and inconceivable qualities are generated.<sup>587</sup>

Here, Yang dgon pa presents the life-wind as a dominant force that stimulates the metabolic process from digestion to the fruits of Buddhist realization (*rtogs pa*).

Furthermore, the life-wind is the force that makes the downward clearing wind move upwards, an event that puts into motion an increase in the positive qualities of the vajra body such as heat and the ascent of vital essences, as well as a stabilization of the rest of the winds. A bit later in the same section, he tells us, the life-holding wind is also what generates the power of the five elements in the body.<sup>588</sup> In short, the life-holding wind demonstrates an agency that empowers and activates other winds and the ordinary life-sustaining components and processes of the body.

In this sense, the life-holding wind would seem to be a dominant force among the ten winds. However, in a twist of theory that may be unique to Yang dgon pa (future exegetes settled on the prominence of the life-holding wind during transmigration), the life-holding wind is dominant only while a body is alive. After death, he tells us, it is not the life-holding wind that accompanies consciousness into the bardo, the state between death

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<sup>586</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 466/4-467/1.

<sup>587</sup> Beijing variant: Hindrances do not arise. Because the power of fire is kindled below, the vital essence is drawn upward, and inconceivable qualities are generated.

<sup>588</sup> *'Byung ba lnga'i nus pa thams cad srog 'dzin gyis bskyed do/* [Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings) 467/2].

and rebirth, but rather the pervading wind, also called the “karmic wind,” which at that time ascends to a dominant role.<sup>589</sup> The pervading wind is therefore also the force that accompanies consciousness into the womb of the mother, in the process of rebirth.<sup>590</sup> The fact that Yang dgon pa settles on the pervading wind as the purveyor of consciousness from one life to the next may represent an arcane moment in the development of wind-theory, since later exegetes of the body would eventually assert that the life-holding wind maintains its status even through the phase of transmigration, as the privileged companion of consciousness out of the body and beyond.<sup>591</sup> The fact that Yang dgon pa assigns this role to the pervading wind may be related to his overall project to elevate the status of the body in Buddhist theory and practice. Not only does Yang dgon pa align the pervading wind with karma and with the transmigrating consciousness, he asserts that the pervading wind is the only one of the five winds that pervades the entire body.<sup>592</sup> When the body dies, the pervading wind accompanies the consciousness out of the body and into the bardo. Furthermore, he tells us, the fact that the pervading wind leaves the body at death is the reason why the channels disappear at death. Yang dgon pa explains:

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<sup>589</sup> Ibid., 463/2-3.

<sup>590</sup> Ibid., 426/3-4.

<sup>591</sup> For example, Rang byung rdo rje maintains that the life-holding wind accompanies the consciousness at death (Rang byung rdo rje, *Illuminating “The Profound Principles”*, 120) and rebirth (ibid., 49).

<sup>592</sup> This attribute of the pervading wind is common in the tantras (that it pervades the entire body) but it is uncertain where Yang dgon pa got the idea that the pervading wind transmigrates. For example see 'Phags pa Klu sgrub (Nāgārjuna), *Rim pa lnga*, 169a/4.

*khyab byed lus las byung na tshe'i dus byed pa'o/ khyab byed lus thams cad la  
khyab pas sems kyang<sup>593</sup> lus thams cad la khyab pa'o/<sup>594</sup> 'phar rtsa chad nas 'chi ba  
dang/ 'chi tsa na rtsa bsdud pa'i<sup>595</sup> rgyu mtshan yang de yin no/<sup>596</sup>*

As long as the pervading [wind] has arisen in the body, one is alive. Because the pervading [wind] pervades the entire body, the mind also pervades the entire body. This is the reason that when the pulse stops at death, as soon as you die, the channels contract.<sup>597</sup>

Here we see a remarkable indication of the enduring connection between the pervading wind, the mind, and the channels that convey the wind-mind all over the human body. Here it is the pervading wind that is most closely identified with a transmigrating consciousness. Since the pervading wind is non-dual with mind, it is possible for there to be a mind that pervades the entire body and this pervasiveness is clearly connected so intimately to the channels, which existed during one's life, that they effectively disappear at death. This one sentence thus tells us something significant about the subtle channels that carry wind: they depend on this karmic wind-mind in order to manifest. However, the reverse does not seem to be the case. While the vajra body's channels apparently cannot exist without wind and mind circulating through them, the wind-mind seems to exist (at least in the bardo) without the channels. This would indicate that the pervading wind (which is classified by Yang dgon pa himself as "coarse") and consciousness is the most simplified or pared down

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<sup>593</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 203/1: *kyis*.

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*, 203/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 59: *da lta* inserted.

<sup>595</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 203/2: *'thul ba'i*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing): *'thum pa'i*.

<sup>596</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 463/1-2.

<sup>597</sup> He mis variant: the channels spread out. Beijing variant: the channels are concealed. The lack of agreement of the verb in the various editions perhaps suggest that the fate of the channels at death was a contested idea.

version of human embodiment. Now this clarifies why, perhaps, Yang dgon pa favors the pervading wind over the life-holding wind as the wind of transmigration. Whereas the life-holding wind primarily resides at the heart, the pervading wind's character is that it suffuses the entire body. Of the two, it is the more embodied wind. Therefore, perhaps, it serves as a placeholder for both the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of speech and of body after death. Its fusion with consciousness would therefore fulfill Yang dgon pa's requirement for the human condition that body, speech, and mind are always, without exception, inseparable even after death.

### **The Subtle Wind and the Gnosis Wind**

The life-holding wind and the pervading wind, as important as they may be, still fall under the category of coarse winds. Yang dgon pa explains that the coarse winds can also be classified as karmic winds (*las kyi rlung*), a category that includes all the winds discussed so far: “Karmic winds generally refer to all the winds in everyday life” (*las kyi rlung zhes pa yang spyir 'jig rten pa'i lam man chad du rlung thams cad yin*).<sup>598</sup> We have seen so far that coarse or karmic winds are a layer of embodiment that is related to the everyday functions of the body and mind, but nevertheless able to eventually transcend—in the form of the pervading wind—the flesh-and-blood body at the time of death. Yang dgon pa maintains that the coarse winds perform the ten functions of activating the five aggregates and five sense organs, as described above. In everyday life, the winds express

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<sup>598</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 463/2.

themselves outwardly as physical respiration and inwardly as the movement of conceptuality. This coarse layer is deeply aligned with body, mind, emotion, and thought.

Despite their mundane functions, we discover as Yang dgon pa moves into the realm of the subtle that these karmic winds, the very winds associated with corporeal development, growth, and sustenance, are the material utilized and harnessed in the process of moral cultivation on the tantric path. When rightly utilized, their identity changes from karmic winds to gnosis wind, a process that Yang dgon pa describes as he transitions from discussion of the coarse to the subtle. Yang dgon pa introduces us to a contrast between these karmic winds and the gnosis wind early on in the section on the topic of winds:

*de rnam dbu mar 'jug cing 'gro 'ong med pa/ rnam rtog dang bral ba ni<sup>599</sup> ye shes  
kyi rlung/ nyi zla nas rgyud/ 'byung 'jug dang bcas/ rnam rtog sna tshogs su g.yo ba  
las kyi rlung ste<sup>600</sup>*

When the [coarse winds] enter the central channel, they stop moving. The freedom from conceptual thinking is the gnosis wind.<sup>601</sup> When there is movement in the sun and moon<sup>602</sup> and respiration, many thoughts move. This is karmic wind.

We see here that while the karmic wind is movement and the resultant conceptuality, gnosis wind is *not* so much a distinct wind as it is a state of stillness, and its resulting freedom from conceptuality. In short, gnosis wind is not so much a discrete entity as it is a state of being. It is important here not to assume that this state of being is solely the result of tantric practice. Rather, as with so many other processes and structures of religious

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<sup>599</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 191/4: *rnam par rtog pa bral bas*.

<sup>600</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 457/6-458/1.

<sup>601</sup> He mis variant: Because there is freedom from conceptual thinking, it is gnosis wind.

<sup>602</sup> The right channel (*ro ma*) and left channel (*rkyang ma*) [Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication 2012].

transcendence in Yang dgon pa's work, this state is naturalized as a product of innate human physicality. Yang dgon pa states that there are four or eight occasions when the winds enter the central channel in ordinary life.<sup>603</sup> An interlinear note in the Beijing version of the *Explanation of the Hidden* lists the four occasions as birth, death, astrological transitions, and sexual intercourse.<sup>604</sup> However, while the winds enter on their own in natural circumstances, the yogi engages in strategic practices to draw the winds into the central channel and cause them to abide there.

Education in *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, the state of the components of the vajra body itself, is one such method. Yang dgon pa intimates as much through the metaphysical language with which he introduces the notion of the existence of subtle wind. Beneath, or more accurately, pervading the coarse layer of physical being is a subtle layer of wind that permeates the entire body and mind. By virtue of its alignment with mind, it pervades even the external world. This subtle wind (*phra ba'i rlung*), Yang dgon pa tells us, is the stratum of wind that is fused with mind or consciousness. By his description, the subtle wind is the most enduring of the winds that links inner somatic reality with the outer existential world. Yang dgon pa describes it this way:

*phra ba'i rlung ni rnam mkhas khyab tshad sems kyis khyab pa la/ sems dang rlung dbyer  
med pas/ phyi nang thams cad rlung rnam par shes pa'i rang gzugs te/ rim pa lnga pa  
nas/*

*rlung rnams phra ba'i gzugs kyis ni//  
shes dang<sup>605</sup> yang dag 'dres gyur nas//  
dbang po'i lam nas byung<sup>606</sup> nas ni//*

<sup>603</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyis sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 462/3

<sup>604</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyis sbas bshad* (Beijing), 58.

<sup>605</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyis sbas bshad* (He mis), 214/2: *shes pa*.



*yul rnam la ni dmigs par byed//*<sup>607</sup>

*ces so/ dgongs pa lung ston las/*

*ji ltar mi mngon phra ba las//  
rtag tu gsal bar brjod pa yin//  
'gro ba yul phyogs<sup>608</sup> las byed pa//  
'di<sup>609</sup> ni de la brten pa<sup>610</sup> yin//<sup>611</sup>  
ji srid 'jig rten 'das pa<sup>612</sup> dang//  
de bzhin btags pa sna tshogs rnam<sup>613</sup>//  
rlung las rtag tu 'byung ba yin//<sup>614</sup>  
byang chub sems kyi ngo bo 'di//  
phung sogs gnyis med mkha' dang mnyam//  
nang na ma yin phyi rol min//<sup>615</sup>*

*ces gsung so/*<sup>616</sup>

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<sup>606</sup> Peking *Bstan 'gyur*: 'byung [Nāgārjuna, *Pañcakrama: Sanskrit and Tibetan Texts Critically Edited with Verse Index and Facsimile Edition of the Sanskrit Manuscripts*, ed. Katsumi Mimaki and Tōru Tomabechi (Tokyo, Japan: The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies for Unesco, 1994), 19].

<sup>607</sup> This is Verse 30 of Chapter 2 of the *Rim pa Inga*, the chapter on the second stage called "The stage of complete purity" (*thams cad dag cing rnam par dag pa'i rim pa*) [ibid., 19].

<sup>608</sup> *Dgongs pa lung bstan pa zhes bya ba'i rgyud*, in *Bka' 'gyur Dpe bsdur ma* (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 2006-09), 638: *sogs*.

<sup>609</sup> Ibid., 638: *'dir*.

<sup>610</sup> Ibid., 638: *rten*.

<sup>611</sup> Ibid., 638-39, inserts the following lines here: *zhi ba dang ni rgyas pa dang// dbang dang de bzhin mngon spyod rnam<sup>613</sup>// de nyid gsum gnas la rten nas// de kun byang chub sems kyi byed*.

<sup>612</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis): 214/4; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 66: *btags pa. Dgongs pa lung bstan pa zhes bya ba'i rgyud*, 638: *gdags pa. Snar thang Bka' 'gyur: brtags pa* (*Bka' 'gyur Dpe bsdur ma* notation).

<sup>613</sup> *Dgongs pa lung bstan pa zhes bya ba'i rgyud*, 638: *rnam rtog byang chub sems shes pa'i* inserted.

<sup>614</sup> Ibid., 639: *bde sdug la sogs chos rnam kyi// sa bon lta bur bshad pa yin//* inserted.

<sup>615</sup> Ibid., 638-9.

<sup>616</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 467/6-468/2.

The subtle wind is as follows: Wherever space pervades, the mind pervades. Because mind and wind are inseparable, all external and internal phenomena are the embodiment of wind-consciousness. As *The Five Stages* says:

The form of the subtle winds blends completely with consciousness. Through the arisings via the path of the senses, objects are perceived.

Furthermore, *The Prophesied Intention (Dgongs pa lung ston)*, says:

It is said that from the unmanifest subtle, [appearances] are constantly manifesting. The functioning of beings and objects<sup>617</sup> depends on just that. So far as the world is imagined, there are various other imaginings. This continually arises from wind. This essence of *bodhicitta* is non-dual with the *skandhas* and so forth, and is equal to space. It is not inside and it is not outside.<sup>618</sup>

Here, Yang dgon pa—with the support of a selection of tantric sources—presents us with an ontology that understands all external and internal phenomena as the expressions of wind. His exposition mirrors a view that all external phenomena are a reflection of mind, in line with the Buddhist idealist philosophy found in many of the tantras he relies on, not to mention the exegetical works of the Bka' brgyud lineage during his day. However, while he begins with mind as the all-pervading existential node, he segues to wind as the all-pervading force in keeping with his project to reestablish the vajra body as the preeminent orienting perspective. If all external phenomena are a reflection of mind, then by virtue of the inseparability of mind and wind, all external phenomena are also a reflection of wind. He supports this assertion with two sources. One, *The Five Stages (Rim pa lnga)* by Nāgārjuna,<sup>619</sup> tells us that the winds “blend completely with consciousness,” and

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<sup>617</sup> *Dpe bsdur ma* variant: objects and so forth.

<sup>618</sup> As can be seen above in the Tibetan, the passage has many additional lines in the extant versions of *The Prophesied Intention* in the Tibetan Buddhist canon. It appears that Yang dgon pa used an early version of this tantra.

<sup>619</sup> This work by Nāgārjuna is the subject of a commentary by Tsong kha pa that has been translated into English recently by Robert Thurman. See Tsoñ-kha-pa Blo-bzañ-grags-pa,

therefore—via the sense consciousnesses— form the connection between outer objects and inner perception. The second, *The Prophesied Intention*, a commentary on the *Guhyasamāja* tantra, goes even further to assert that everything is the expression of the subtle wind. Subtle wind is non-dual with space, and non-dual with the body-mind aggregation (*skāndhas*) at the same time. From this perspective, wind is the mechanism by which perception and cognition, and any relationship to the external world, are possible.

After establishing this ontological perspective, Yang dgon pa proceeds to explain how this perspective is taken into practice, either intentionally (through yogic practice) or unintentionally (through natural states). He enters this explanation through a definition of gnosis wind (*ye shes kyi rlung*), a term that has ample precedent in the tantras, and contrasts this term with karmic wind (*las kyi rlung*).<sup>620</sup> In defining gnosis wind, he briefly connects the ontology of subtle wind to the practical application of yoga, a lapse from theory into practice that nonetheless serves an important purpose for him, given the centrality of wind to the applications of the tantric path. Yang dgon pa describes the gnosis wind as follows:

*ye shes kyi rlung ces pa yang rlung sems nam mkha'i ngo bor shar ba gcig yin/  
rlung phyi nang gcig du 'dres nas rgyu ba chad pa la dbu mar chud<sup>621</sup> pa zer/ nang  
rten 'brel de'i dus na dbu mar chud<sup>622</sup> pa'o/ phyi'i rlung thams cad dbu ma'i phugs*

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*Brilliant Illumination of the Lamp of the Five Stages (Rim Inga rab tu gsal ba'i sgron me) : Practical Instruction in the King of Tantras, The Glorious Esoteric Community*, trans. Robert A. F. Thurman, Treasury of the Buddhist Sciences series (New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies 2010).

<sup>620</sup> See, for example, *Rdo rje phreng ba*, Toh 445, rgyud, ca, 238b/4.

<sup>621</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 215/1; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 67: *tshud*.

<sup>622</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 215/2: *tshud*.

*gcig du btums pa*<sup>623</sup> *sdod pa ni ma yin no/ des na rlung phyi nang bsre ba zhes bya/ gzhan dang mi mthun pa'i gnad de yin no/ rlung sems dbyer med/ snang sems dbyer med/ lus sems dbyer med*<sup>624</sup> *lus ngag yid gsum dbyer med la sogs pa thams cad kyi gnad*<sup>625</sup> *des go bar bya'o/ gnad 'di su la yang mi 'dug pas shin du gsang.*<sup>626</sup>

The gnosis wind is an experience of wind and mind appearing as the essence of space. After mixing outer and inner winds as one, movement ceases, having entered the central channel. The inner causal nexus is that the winds enter the central channel. This does not mean that all the outer winds are absorbed into the innermost central channel and stay there. Therefore, “mixing of outer and inner winds as one” is unlike other essential points. The inseparability of wind and mind, the inseparability of appearances and mind, the inseparability of body, speech, and mind, and so forth: all the essential points of all these doctrines should be understood by way of that. Because no one else has this essential point, it is very secret.

Here Yang dgon pa introduces a gnosis wind that is an experience or discrete event catalyzed by meditative practice or natural causes. Yang dgon pa calls the meditative practice that catalyzes the gnosis-wind “the mixing of outer and inner winds as one” (*rlung phyi nang bsre ba*) and he seems to lay claim to this particular hermeneutic, saying that “no one else has this essential point” (*gnad 'di su la yang mi 'dug*). From the description we see here, it appears that the process of the formation of gnosis wind is (1) a subjective experience that perceives wind and mind as non-dual with space, and (2) a subsequent entry of the body’s winds into the central channel. Gnosis wind, therefore, appears to be not separate from the subtle wind, but rather the enactment of the subtle layer of embodiment, or a merging of the coarse with the subtle through the drawing of coarse

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<sup>623</sup> Ibid., (He mis), 215/2: *bstums nas. Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 67: *gtums nas*.

<sup>624</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis): phrase elided.

<sup>625</sup> Ibid., 215/4: *la sogs pa'i gnad thams cad*.

<sup>626</sup> Ibid., 215/5: *gsong gcig. Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing): *cig* inserted. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 468/3-5.

winds into the central channel. This passage serves to tie his vision of the body as the physical basis for transcendence with the practical instructions of his tradition.

Yang dgon pa hastens to clarify that this process should not be understood too literally: “it does not mean that all the outer winds are absorbed into the interior of the body and stay there.” By this, he seems to mean that the winds do not abide in the central channel permanently, but it is not definite what he means by this. On the one hand, this statement might mean that the external elements, such as the outer air, do not literally dissolve into the body. On the other hand, it might mean that while the energy winds dissolve into the central channel, the yogi’s physical breath does not dissolve into the central channel, and his breathing does not literally stop. In either case, he seems to be saying that the dissolution is an experience of inseparability, rather than a literal inseparability. He urges the reader to understand all the categories of inseparability discussed in tantra in the same way. As he puts it, “‘mixing of outer and inner winds as one’ is unlike other essential points. The inseparability of wind and mind, the inseparability of appearances and mind, the inseparability of body, speech, and mind: all the essential points of all these doctrines should be understood by way of that.” It is significant that Yang dgon pa culminates his discussion of wind with an emphasis on the distinctiveness of his concept of the inseparability of the various classifications used to understand parts of the body. And, in fact, the culmination of a discussion of separateness with an assertion of inseparability is Yang dgon pa’s hallmark in the *Explanation of the Hidden*. We will have a chance to explore this in more detail in the next chapter, which treats Yang dgon pa’s theory of inseparability.

The section that discusses the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of speech as the subtle winds that circulate through the body reveals a somatic vision in which winds, mind, and matter are kept apart only for the purposes of discussion, and are in truth intimately connected to the degree that they are inextricable. This section also offers us an understanding that *dngos po'i gnas lugs* is not static, and that it has some measure of form or materiality. This *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of speech, a category of Yang dgon pa's own invention, forms a bridge between the mind and matter that previous commentators on *dngos po'i gnas lugs* had so consistently kept apart, discussed either in terms of form (*lus kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*) or epistemic meditations and states (*sems kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*). The winds, in their coarse form, offer a repository for mind (as consciousness and awareness), allowing it to be included as part and parcel of the body. Yet, in order not to lose the stream of epistemic states and meditation entirely, the gnosis wind shows up with its potential for stillness within process, and somehow this also is a part of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, a state of being that allows for the possibility that embodiment (as wind) does not end with the edge of the skin, but continues into the entire existential world (in Yang dgon pa's words, "Wherever space pervades, the mind pervades. Because mind and wind are inseparable, all external and internal phenomena are the expression of wind-consciousness"). In short, *dngos po'i gnas lugs* is human embodiment, but we also see here an epistemic embodiment that is experienced as spacious.

## Syllables, Vowels, Integration, and Words

The other four dimensions of speech for Yang dgon pa concern how the act of speaking is possible in the body, what utterance is, and what conditions are necessary for speaking to come about. Drawing on a common idea in tantric physiology, Yang dgon pa constructs a theory of voice and speech. While the ideas presented have precedent in tantric sources, the way he weaves these ideas together is uniquely his own. Yang dgon pa summarizes a theory of verbal expression in speech that is possible because of “vajra syllables” that are innately present in the channels and the *cakras* of the body:

*ngag gi chos gnyis pa yi ge dang ces pa ni/ ngag rlung yin na bshu bshu ba gcig las mi  
yong ba yin pa la<sup>627</sup>/ ming dang tshig sna tshogs su brjod pa ci yin snyam na/ lus la ming  
dang tshig gi rtsa ba sangs rgyas kyi gsung rdo rje'i yi ge yod pa yin te/ de'ang rtsa gsum  
gyi ma<sup>628</sup> sna<sup>629</sup> rdo rje'i bzlas pa 'byung 'jug gnas gsum rang bzhin gyi yi ge gsum yod/  
da lta<sup>630</sup> yang ngag thams cad kyi srog yin/ de'i<sup>631</sup> nang nas kyang/ nyi zla gang nas rgyu  
yang dbu ma'i sna la 'gro bas/ am ngag thams cad kyi srog gzhi yin te<sup>632</sup>/ de yang tshig ji  
snyed pa'i rtsa ba yang dbyangs dang gsal byed yin/ de'i rtsa ba 'brus gsum<sup>633</sup>/ a de ngag  
thams cad kyi srog du yod de/ a med na brjod du mi btub/<sup>634</sup>*

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<sup>627</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 215/5: *yong ba las*; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 67: *las mi yong ba la* (in place of *las mi yong ba yin pa la*).

<sup>628</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 216: *mar*.

<sup>629</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 67: *na*.

<sup>630</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 215/1: *de ltar*.

<sup>631</sup> *Ibid.*, 216/2: *de ni*.

<sup>632</sup> *Ibid.*, 216/2: *am ngag thams cad kyi gzhi ma srog yin no*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 68: *a ngag thams cad kyi gzhi'am srog yin te*.

<sup>633</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings): *'bras bu gsum*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 216/3; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 68: *'bru gsum*.

<sup>634</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 468/5-469/1.

The second phenomenon of speech is syllables. You may think if speech is wind, then nothing but a whisper would come out,<sup>635</sup> so how can there be various names and words uttered? In the body, the root of names and words exists as the speech of all buddhas, vajra letters. In the lower end of the three main channels are three syllables, the nature of the inhalation, exhalation, and abiding of vajra recitation. This is the life of all your current speech. From among those, when the wind passes from the sun and moon into the central channel, this is the life-foundation<sup>636</sup> of all vocal sounds. Furthermore, the root of all speech is vowels and consonants. The root of those is the three seeds.<sup>637</sup> The root of those is the short *A*. That *A* is the life of all speech. If there were no *A*, verbal utterance would be impossible.<sup>638</sup>

We see in this passage a widespread tantric theory of the origin of language and voice as originating in the syllables innately present in the subtle body, especially the key letter ‘*A*,’ which stands at the junction of the three main channels. Yang dgon pa calls this letter the life (*srog*) of all human vocalization. This letter also, in tantric practice, corresponds with inner yogic heat (*gtum mo*) and its concomitant *cakra*, below the navel. From that, the potential of speech unfolds as the various syllables in the body’s channels and *cakras*. He continues:

*de ltar lus la ah li kah li/ dbyangs dang gsal byed kyi yi ge'i tshogs<sup>639</sup> ma tshang ba med pas tshig gang<sup>640</sup> yang brjod du rung bas te/ rgya/ bod/ bal po/ kha che/ hor/<sup>641</sup> thams*

<sup>635</sup> He mis variant: then a whisper would come out.

<sup>636</sup> Beijing variant: foundation or life.

<sup>637</sup> Pha jo ldings variant: three fruits. He mis and Beijing variant: three seeds (which would refer to three seed syllables). I have gone with the latter variant in the translation.

<sup>638</sup> Yangongpa traces the idea that the syllable *A* is the root of speech to *Dgongs pa lung ston* (Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 469/5).

<sup>639</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 217/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 68: *thams cad* inserted.

<sup>640</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 217/2: *gang* elided.

<sup>641</sup> *Ibid.*, 217/2: *kha che/ hor* elided. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 68: *kha che* elided.



*cad la rang rang gi yi ger yod pas/ rang rang gi skad 'gyur mi 'dra bar 'gyur ro/<sup>642</sup> yul phyogs gzhan du phyin na zla ba drug na yul phyogs gang yin de dang/<sup>643</sup> khamd dang skye mched mthun par 'gro te/ nang 'gyur bas phyi 'gyur skad shes pa'o/ zla ba drug bsgoms pas dngos grub thob pa'i rgyu mtshan yang de yin/ de ltar rtsa gsum 'khor lo bzhi rtsa bran bsam gyis mi khyab pa na yi ge rtsa mdud yi ge/<sup>644</sup> gzugs su yod pas/ tshig sna tshogs su brjod cing/ 'khor lo'i dbus kyi yi ge/<sup>645</sup> thung ngu rnams a dang srog gcig pas/ tshig thams cad kyi srog du 'ong ste/...de ltar rtsa'i yig dang rlung 'dzom pa'i rten 'brel las tshig byung la ngag brjod pas sgra ru gsal bar bstan pa'o/<sup>646</sup>*

The vowels,<sup>647</sup> consonants, and syllables without exception exist in the body; therefore, anything can be spoken. Because India,<sup>648</sup> Tibet, Nepal, and Mongolia all have their own letters, they each have their own languages.<sup>649</sup> If you go to another country, after six months, you get to know that place, and your *dhātus* and *āyatanas* change in accord with those people. As your inside changes, your outside also changes and you come to know the language. That is why, if you meditate for six months, you obtain *siddhis*. In the three main channels, four *cakras* and the many minor channels, there are syllables in the channel-knots, in the form of vital essences.<sup>650</sup> Therefore, you can utter various words. The short letters<sup>651</sup> in the middle of the *cakras* are one with the *A* and life-force, and therefore become the life of all words...

Like that, words come from the interdependence of channel-syllables and the gathering of winds. Then speech is uttered and sounds are clearly demonstrated.

<sup>642</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 217/3; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing): *rang rang gi skad mi 'dra ba 'byung ba'o*.

<sup>643</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 217/3: *yul phyog gzhan du phyin na gang yin de dang zla ba drug nang de'i*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 68: *yul phyog gzhan du phyin na zla ba drug na yul phyogs gang yin de dang*.

<sup>644</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 217/4; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 69: *thig le'i*.

<sup>645</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 217/6: *thig le*.

<sup>646</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 469/2-6.

<sup>647</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: All of the vowels.

<sup>648</sup> *rgya* may refer to India or China.

<sup>649</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: different ways of speaking evolve.

<sup>650</sup> He mis and Beijing: “vital essences.” Pha jo ldings: “syllables.” Because I think the most likely reading is “vital essences,” I provide that here.

<sup>651</sup> He mis variant: vital essences.

The innateness of this somatic condition makes all kinds of languages possible: “All of the vowels, consonants, and letters without exception exist in the body. Therefore, anything can be spoken.” The fact that speech is embodied, that it is a somatic phenomenon, explains its universality. The fact that it exists as potential explains its many permutations as various languages and sounds. The discussion here of the connection of the human body with its regional environment is particularly fascinating. Here Yang dgon pa explains that how the body exists and functions depends on where we live and whom we live with. He uses this premise to explain how people learn foreign languages (“If you go to another country, after six months, you get to know that place, and your *dhātus* and *āyatanas* change in accord with those people. As your inside changes, your outside also changes and you come to know the language”). This also explains, he suggests, why people who do retreat become accomplished. This is the first time that we are afforded a vision of a vajra body that adapts and changes in accord with its environment.

The final sentence in the above passage sums up Yang dgon pa’s theory of the origin of human speech: “Words come from the interdependence of channel-syllables and the gathering of winds. Then, speech is uttered and sounds are clearly demonstrated.” An act of verbal expression depends initially on the body’s channels that take the shape of vajra syllables,<sup>652</sup> and on the gathering and stirring of wind around those syllables that are the seeds for a particular act of speech. However, several other conditions must be in place for the act of speech to occur. Yang dgon pa continues:

*ngag gi chos gsum pa dbyangs rnams dang ces pa te/ de yang phyi 'byung ba'i sgra yang nam mkha' go phye ba las byung zhing/ ngag du brjod pa/ rtsa dang mgrin pa dang/ lus*

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<sup>652</sup> In the Path and Fruit system, the channels take the shape of syllables, and this is the origin of speech (Cyrus Stearns, personal communication, 2013).

*kyi nang stong pa las byung te...stong pa las<sup>653</sup> dbyangs byung la des sgra skad du  
brjod/<sup>654</sup>*

The third phenomenon of speech is vowels.<sup>655</sup> The sound that comes out arises because of the opening of space. Utterances of audible speech arise from the channels, the throat, and the emptiness in the body. Vowels come from emptiness,<sup>656</sup> and that causes the utterance of audible language.

The condition of space or emptiness is also necessary for a vibratory sound to occur. At this point in his theory of speech, Yang dgon pa has provided us with three pre-conditions for speech: the innate syllables in the subtle body, the stirring of winds, and the presence of emptiness or space in the body. Speech will still not occur, however, without an integration of several conditions. Yang dgon pa continues,

*ngag gi chos bzhi pa sbyor ba dang ces pa/ 'o na<sup>657</sup> yi ge dang rlung gi rten 'brel las tshig  
du byung zhing/ stong pa las sgra skad du 'byung<sup>658</sup> na sna nas rlung bus pa la<sup>659</sup> tshig  
brjod par mi 'ong ba ci yin snyam na/ ngag gi sbyor ba ma tshang ba ste/ de yang rlung  
sems gcig pa'i gnad kyis rtsa yig dang rlung sems gcig du 'tshogs pa'i<sup>660</sup> sbyor ba dang/*

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<sup>653</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 218/5: *byung kyang* inserted here.

<sup>654</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 469/6-470/2.

<sup>655</sup> It seems from Yang dgon pa's description that by "vowels" (*dbyangs*), he means the vibratory sounds of the voice generally.

<sup>656</sup> He mis variant: Although that arises from emptiness, vowels arise.

<sup>657</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 219/1: *rtsa dang* inserted. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 69: *rtsa* inserted.

<sup>658</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 219/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 70: *'ong*.

<sup>659</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 219/2: *bus pas na yang*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing): 70: *bus pa na yang*.

<sup>660</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 219/3: *tshogs pa gcig pa'i*.

*ngag 'byung ba'i rkyen rkan dang/ mgrin pa dang/ sna dang/ mchu dang/ lce dang/ so la  
sogs pa'i 'du phrod<sup>661</sup> kyis/ sbyor ba las/ ngag du brjod pa'o<sup>662</sup>*

The fourth phenomenon of speech is integration.<sup>663</sup> Now, you might wonder, if words come from the interdependence of the root letters and winds, and vocal sounds arise because of emptiness, why don't words come out when we exhale from the nostrils? That is because the integration of speech is not in effect. By the essential point that wind and mind are the same, there is a unifying of the channel letters and wind-mind, and one integrates the conditions—the palate, throat, nose, lips, tongue, teeth and so forth—needed to utter speech.

This passage provides us with a tidy summary of Yang dgon pa's theory of verbal expression, and establishes the critical role of a volitional embodied mind in the process of speech. Yang dgon pa weaves together his theory of the inseparability of wind and mind with a theory of speech based on the subtle anatomy of the body. As we recall from the previous chapter, wind and mind are inseparable. Therefore wind alone does not activate the letters. Nor does mind exert control over the somatic moving winds to make them activate the letters. Rather, when one endeavors to speak, a process occurs in which the wind-mind, an amalgam that exists throughout the body, moves through the channels as a volitional whole to activate the letters in the channels and—based on the emptiness in the body—sound comes forth. Then, dependent on integrating the gross physical structures of the palate, throat, nose, lips, tongue, and teeth, language is produced. The emphasis of the fourth phenomenon of speech is on the coordination of multiple conditions, which includes

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<sup>661</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 70: 'phrod.

<sup>662</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 470/2-4.

<sup>663</sup> *'byor ba*. Yang dgon pa seems to use the term here to mean the joining together of the conditions of the root syllables, wind-mind and the effort to activate the coarse anatomy of the body to produce speech (Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication 2012).

both mind and physical structures. At no point here does the mind operate independently to produce speech; rather we see wind acting as the material correlate of mind.

After presenting this fairly involved description of the process of verbal expression, Yang dgon pa uses the fifth phenomenon of speech (words) as a way to summarize what has proceeded before. He explains that there is a series of causal links that leads to speech, and this process is virtually spontaneous:

*ngag gi chos lnga pa tshig dag gis ces pa/ yi ge du ma 'dus pa las ming/ min du ma 'dus pa las tshig/ tshig du ma 'dus pa las ngag te/ ngag chol<sup>664</sup> ba ma yin pa 'brel cing don dang ldan pa ni/ sems rnam rtog gi sbyor ba las/ lus ngag yid gsum gcig pa'i gnad kyis/ sems rnam rtog gang<sup>665</sup> 'gyus pa de tshig du gsal ba'o<sup>666</sup>*

The fifth phenomenon of speech is words. From the collection of various letters, names arise. From the collection of various names, words arise. From the collection of various words, speech arises. Speech, without confusion, has connection and meaning. From the integration of thoughts in the mind, because of the point of the oneness of body, speech, and mind, whatever thoughts move,<sup>667</sup> these are manifest as speech.

Once again, as we saw in the section on the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body, Yang dgon pa wraps up his discussion on the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of speech by emphasizing the inseparability of body, speech, and mind. He underscores the centrality of this point by naming it the essential point of the oneness of body, speech, and mind, singling this out as a node of this overall theory. It is worth noting here that we see this word “essential point” (*gnad*) used in this work when Yang dgon pa is singling out a philosophical point or a

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<sup>664</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 219/6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 70: 'chol.

<sup>665</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 220/1: gang elided.

<sup>666</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 470/4-5.

<sup>667</sup> He mis variant: the mind's thoughts move [and].

special practice. In this case, he seems to be drawing attention to his monistic philosophical stance that body, speech, and mind are utterly indivisible. While speech has its origin in the mind, the mind's ideas cannot manifest in language, and be communicated, without the medium of the body. Similarly, words produced would not have connection and meaning without the medium of the mind. But, as he tells us throughout, these two mediums are not really separable. The category of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of speech expresses this very inseparability of body and mind as the wind-mind. Furthermore, the mobile quality of the wind-mind becomes essential for any kind of enactment, from the integration of conditions leading to the utterance of a word to the event of salvific release through volitional direction of those very winds into the central channels. While that direction leads, ultimately, to a temporary stillness of the winds, a somatic version of enlightenment, the overall vision of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of speech is one of motility.

### **Part III. The *Dngos po'i gnas lugs* of Mind**

Returning to Yang dgon pa's analogy of the channels as the house and the winds as the owner, we may recall that *bodhicitta* was compared to the "jewels" belonging to the owner. The network of channels throughout the body is stationary and unmoving, like a dwelling for the moving winds, likened to the owner of the house. The vital essences, he suggests, are similar to the wealth of the house's owner, and in the following section, we see that vital essences (Tib: *thig le*, Skt: *bindu*) are characterized as a distillation of the nutrients that are valuable to the body, as a source of energy and pleasure. Extending from this vision of a body and speech that are entwined with coarse materiality and its subtle

substratum, Yang dgon pa proceeds to describe a third and final dimension of the human organism, the dimension of mind. Through Yang dgon pa's description of the nature of the body's materiality and speech's materiality, he has already established that mind (Tib. *sems*, Skt. *citta*) is an entity that is inextricably connected to bodily phenomena. He establishes this through many doctrinal moves, some of which were already discussed above: classifying thought as a subset of the body, establishing the inseparability of mind and mind, and positing consciousness as a product of the channels. As a natural extension of his somatic orientation, Yang dgon pa's notion of mind (*sems*) is not grounded primarily in concepts of formlessness or in the rhetoric of *mahāmudrā*, but rather in the basis of the subtle body and its functions. As he puts it in the beginning of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, “*bodhicitta* is the basis of mind,”<sup>668</sup> not referring to the disembodied notion of compassion found in Mahāyāna Buddhism, but rather the embodied *bodhicitta* of tantric meaning, subtle virile substances. These are the “jewels in the house” of the body, to use Yang dgon pa's metaphor.

We begin to glimpse the fullness of Yang dgon pa's somatic characterization of mind in his section on the third *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of mind. In this section, Yang dgon pa explores mind as a multi-faceted entity, based primarily in the body, but extending into the realm of rarified states of existential experience. In Yang dgon pa's view, mind is lodged in the workings of the subtle and coarse body, but extends into the realm of subjective states of mind as well. Drawing once again on a passage from the *Non-dual Victory Tantra*, Yang dgon pa classifies mind into five components or facets:

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<sup>668</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings): 425/5.

*sems ni ye shes lnga rnams dang//  
bde ba thig le nyid dang ni//  
mi rtog pa yi ting 'dzin gyis//  
sems kyi chos ni gnas pa yin//*<sup>669</sup>

Mind: The five gnoses,  
Bliss, *bindu*, and  
Non-conceptual meditative concentration.<sup>670</sup>  
By virtue of these, the phenomenon of mind exists.

Once again, Yang dgon pa adopts his formal outline from a quotation from the *Non-Dual Victory Tantra*. This five-fold division of mind can be seen, at first blush, to encompass affective, physical, and existential aspects of embodied experience. It postulates a vision in which mind is a multi-faceted set of phenomena, rather than a monolithic entity to be defined in just one way. This multivalent perspective allows Yang dgon pa to pursue an overall thesis that everything about the mind can be understood via the body, and all religious practice can be accomplished via the physical. Yang dgon pa's thesis requires that mind be tethered to the body. But there also remained a need to acknowledge the perspective of his predecessors in the lineage who took pains to distinguish mind from body, and who took the mind away from any physical location. This could also be accomplished via a multi-faceted model of mind. This would allow Yang dgon pa to forward his radical somatic ideology while remaining within the acceptable confines of the expectations of his exegetical religious community. The multi-dimensional model allows the traditional ontologies of a nature of mind (*sems kyi gnas lugs*) to co-exist with an embodied sense of mind (as *sems kyi dngos po'i gnas lugs*).

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<sup>669</sup> Ibid., (Pha jo ldings), 471/2. *Gnyis med rnam rgyal gyi rgyud*, 429.

<sup>670</sup> While the Tibetan says “non-conceptual meditative concentration” (*mi rtog pa yi ting 'dzin*), Yang dgon pa treats non-conceptual (*mi rtog*) and meditative concentration (*ting 'dzin*) as two separate topics.



## Mind as Quintessence

As we see from the above quotation, the *Non-Dual Victory Tantra* positions “the five gnoses” as the first phenomenon of mind. However, Yang dgon pa’s somatic vision would not be served by this order of presentation, in which gnosis is posited as the mind’s basis. So, remarkably and in bold fashion, Yang dgon pa proceeds to rearrange the order to suit his own prioritization of what needs to be understood first about mind. He seems to realize the need to at least mention this inversion to his reader so, following the citation of this key quotation, he remarks, “If we rearrange the order, the first characteristic of mind to be presented is the nature of vital essence *bodhicitta*, which is the support” (*phrugs su bsdebs pa/ sems kyi chos dang po brten thig le byang chubs sems kyi gnas lugs bstan te*).<sup>671</sup> Thus, Yang dgon pa opts to begin with the more somatic of mind’s dimensions, which he describes as the support for the less form-bound dimensions of the mind, which are “the supported.” He clarifies that the nature of vital essence *bodhicitta* is aligned with the extracted essences of nutrients that I will translate here as “quintessences” (Tib. *dwangs ma*, Skt. *rasa*), which nourish the body and makes its metabolic processes possible. As we will recall, Yang dgon pa has already discussed the quintessences to some degree in both the sections on body and speech. The end product of perception, each of the consciousnesses, were described as a kind of quintessence, and the five root winds were discussed as five quintessences. We have already seen, in short, that the sense consciousnesses are understood as a kind of quintessence,<sup>672</sup> as an end product of the channels that enact

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<sup>671</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 471/2.

<sup>672</sup> When discussing the sense consciousnesses in the section on the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body, and elsewhere, Yang dgon pa sometimes uses the term *dwangs ma* (quintessence)

perception, and the five root winds are understood as a kind of quintessence, as the force or power (nutrients) behind the five branch winds.

The topic of quintessences (*dwangs ma*) is beginning to receive some scholarly attention in Western academic writing. Frances Garrett has noted in her book *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet* that the term *dwangs ma* is found in various tantric and Tibetan medical writings, but has different meanings across sources. She cautiously addresses the meaning of the term as follows:

The term *dwangs ma* sometimes refers to the nutritive essences that are the first bodily constituents to develop from a person's intake of food and drink into the stomach....The term may also refer to the substance created at the *end* of the metabolic process, namely, the seventh constituent of *khu ba* [juice/semen or menstrual blood]. In the context of menstruation, it is this substance that accumulates in the reproductive vesicles of a woman and is then emitted from the womb at certain times of the month as waste. How the substance makes this journey, however, is a topic of some debate.<sup>673</sup>

Here Garrett is talking about the mundane medical kinds of *dwangs ma*, not the subtle *dwangs ma* of tantric practice. However, interestingly, Yang dgon pa's meaning of *dwangs ma* covers several of the meanings that Garrett offers above. But for Yang dgon pa, quintessence seems to correlate with all physically useful substances created through gross and subtle metabolic processes, extending from the beginning of the process to the end. On the one hand, he defines the quintessences, along with the separated waste (*snyig ma*), as the first products of the digestion of food and drink. In this case, the quintessences are a distilled essence of food and liquid that is carried by and absorbed into the body as the various liquid and solid components of

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interchangeably with *kham*s (element). Garrett discusses this conflation of terms and the ambiguity it presents in Garrett, *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*, 78.

<sup>673</sup> Ibid., 79.

the body, while waste is discarded. However, he also identifies the quintessences as the gradually evolving products of ongoing metabolic activity and the varied end products of metabolic process (not only the essence of food but the formed structures of the body). As Garrett suggests, in one schema Yang dgon pa describes *khu ba* as the end product of this process, acknowledging *khu ba* as the greatest refinement of *dwangs ma*. But elsewhere, he places the products of metabolic process, such as human bones, blood, bile, skin, and even consciousness, on an even par with *khu ba*.

Yang dgon pa tells us that there are many kinds of quintessences (*dwangs ma*), but he settles on classifying them into nine types for discussion in the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of mind section: the quintessences of the four elements and quintessences of the five nectars. As for the four elements, Yang dgon pa explains that the material elements of earth, water, fire, and wind are expressed as the solid parts of the body (flesh and bones), the liquid parts of the body (blood and liquid), the heat of the body, and breath in the physical body. He then proceeds to give vivid metaphors for four categories of channels, heat, blood, and wind. As Yang dgon pa put it:

*'byung ba bzhi la*<sup>674</sup> *sha dang ru pa ni sa/ drod thams cad me*<sup>675</sup> *khrag dang gsher ba thams cad*<sup>676</sup> *chu/ dbugs*<sup>677</sup> *kyi rnam pa rlung te/ rtsa'i d(w)angs ma dar dkar gyi skud pa'am/ ba thag*<sup>678</sup> *lta bu dang/ drod kyi d(w)angs ma me long la nyi ma phog pa lta bu dang/ khrag gi d(w)angs ma mtshal cog la*<sup>679</sup> *bcag pa lta bu dang*<sup>680</sup> *rlung gi d(w)angs ma nor bu la has btab pa lta bu ste*<sup>681</sup>

<sup>674</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 221/4-5: *'byung ba la*.

<sup>675</sup> Ibid., 221/5; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 71: The order of this clause and the next one are reversed.

<sup>676</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis) 221/5; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 71: *rnams*.

<sup>677</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis) 221/5: *thams cad* inserted.

<sup>678</sup> Ibid., 221/6: *sba thag*.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid., 221/6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 72: *ma* inserted.

As for the four elements, flesh and bones are earth. All heat is fire. Blood and liquid are water.<sup>682</sup> The aspect of breath is wind.<sup>683</sup> The quintessence of the channels is like a white thread or a spider's silk thread.<sup>684</sup> The quintessence of heat is sun hitting a mirror. The quintessence of the blood is like scattered vermilion.<sup>685</sup> <sup>686</sup> The quintessence of wind is like huffing on a jewel.

These four metaphors would seem to have their origin in Indic tantras. According to the work of Orna Almogi, very similar (but not identical) metaphors for channels, heat, blood, and wind are found in *The Special Instructions of the Secret Vital Essence (Gsang ba'i thigs pa'i man ngag)* and its autocommentary attributed to Vimalamitra, in use in the Rnying ma school.<sup>687</sup> They are discussed in several Tibetan commentaries on the topic of the vajra body in relation to *dwangs ma*.<sup>688</sup> The four quintessences in this classification act as the building blocks of physicality. The solid matter in the body is the quintessence or distillation of the element of earth in the human physical form. The liquid present throughout the body is the quintessence of the element of water as it manifests in human physical form. The heat of the body is the quintessence of the element

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<sup>680</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 221/6: The clause describing *khrag* and the one describing *drod* are reversed.

<sup>681</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 471/3-5.

<sup>682</sup> He mis and Beijing variant (clauses reversed): Blood and liquid are water. All heat is fire.

<sup>683</sup> He mis variant: Aspects of all [kinds of] breath are wind.

<sup>684</sup> He mis variant: A rope of yak hair.

<sup>685</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: vermilion that has not been scattered.

<sup>686</sup> He mis variant: These last two sentences are reversed.

<sup>687</sup> Orna Almogi, "The Materiality and Immanence of Gnosis in Some Rnying-ma Tantric Sources," in *Yogic Perception, Meditation and Altered States of Consciousness*, ed. Eli Franco (Wien: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009), 250-256.

<sup>688</sup> Almogi mentions their presence in the work of Mi pham Rgyal rgya mtsho (1846-1912) [*ibid.*, 255].

of fire as it manifests in the human body. The breath and energy (*rlung*) in the body, its motility, is the quintessence of wind as it manifests in the human body. Yang dgon pa presents the four element quintessences only briefly here, and they seem to act as the most all-encompassing presentation of *dwangs ma*: The quintessences are distillations of four gross material elements into four qualities of human and other kinds of physicality—solidity, viscosity, motility, and temperature.

His second classification of quintessences, the five nectars, is more complex than the four elements, and they appear—at first—to be specific substances, rather than qualities of physicality. However, Yang dgon pa’s account of the five nectars reveals these terms as placeholders for a more multifaceted understanding of what he means by “quintessence” than is immediately apparent. Yang dgon pa begins by discussing the five nectars from the perspective of the five *cakras*, the key centers in the meridian of the subtle body. Again he draws freely on Indic tantric sources:

*bdud rtsi lnga ni 'khor lo lnga'i d(w)angs ma ste/ dri chen gyi d(w)angs ma<sup>689</sup> spyi bo/ ga  
pur mgrin pa/ gla rtsi snying kha/ sihla lte ba/ mdangs chen gsang gnas so/ de yang dpal  
kun tu kha sbyor las/*

*bshang gci bad kan khrag dang ni//  
de bzhin lnga pa khu ba te//  
bdud rtsi lnga'i rang bzhin lus//  
de phyir rdo rje lus<sup>690</sup> can zhes brjod//<sup>691</sup>*

<sup>689</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 222/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 72: *gyi dangs ma* elided.

<sup>690</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 222/4; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 72: *lus* elided.

<sup>691</sup> *Rgyud thams cad kyi gleng gzhi dang gsang chen dpal kun du kha sbyor rgyud kyi rgyal po'i rgya cher bshad pa rin chen phreng ba*, in *Bstan 'gyur Dpe bsdur ma*, Toh 1199 (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 2006-09), 919. Here the last line is *de ni rdo rje can zhes brjod*.

*ces gsung te/ bdud rtsi lngas khamsum cu rtsa gnyis bskyed la/ de dag gi d(w)angs mas  
rnam par shes pa tshogs brgyad/ dbang po lnga la sogs pa bskyed pa ste/ rgyas par rtsa'i  
gnas<sup>692</sup> skabs su bstan no/<sup>693</sup>*

The five nectars are the quintessences of the five *cakras*: “odorous” is the crown, “camphor” is the throat, “musk” is the heart, “frankincense” is the navel, “great brilliance” is the secret place.

Regarding those, the *Glorious Complete Union* says,

Feces, urine, bile, blood, and  
Likewise, the fifth, semen:  
The body is the nature of these five nectars.  
Therefore, it is said to possess vajra body.

The five nectars produce the thirty-two constituents (*khamsum*), and the quintessence of those produces the eight consciousnesses and the five sense organs and so forth. An extensive presentation is taught in the “channels” section.

Before introducing this quotation, Yang dgon pa has told us that the five quintessences (*dwangs ma lnga*) are equivalent to the five nectars (*bdud rtsi lnga*). In the passage above, he proceeds to reveal the identity of those five nectars as “the quintessences of the five *cakras*” (*bdud rtsi lnga'i dwangs ma*). He also identifies the five nectars individually in code: odorous, camphor, musk, frankincense, and great brilliance. He provides a quotation that interprets these as feces, urine, bile, blood, and semen,<sup>694</sup> but it appears that the five nectars are actually an encoded form of the

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<sup>692</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 222/4; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 72: gnas elided.

<sup>693</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 471/5-472/1.

<sup>694</sup> In the *Hevajra Tantra*, the first four terms (odorous, camphor, musk and frankincense) are decoded to mean feces, semen, urine, and menstrual blood [David L. Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*, vol. 6, London oriental series (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 99-100]. It is uncertain whether the discrepancy here is due to different codes in different tantras, or whether Yang dgon pa does not list his nectars in the same order as the quote provided. Furthermore, it should be noted that the five nectars are not consistent across tantras and commentaries.

five *cakras*. Just as the five code words (odorous, camphor, musk, etc.) mask the identity of the five unclean substances (feces, urine, bile, etc.), the five unclean substances themselves also turn out to represent the principles of quintessence associated with the *cakras*.

Yang dgon pa aligns each nectar with a *cakra*: We learn that “odorous” is the crown *cakra*, camphor is the throat *cakra*, and so forth. These cakras produce the many quintessences (*dwangs ma*) that make up the ordinary physical body: “The five nectars produce the 32 constituents (*khams*), and the quintessences of those are the eight consciousnesses and the five sense organs and so forth. An extensive presentation can be found in the channels section.”<sup>695</sup> If we do as Yang dgon pa suggests, and go back to look at his channels section, we find that the producers of the 32 constituents, and the producers of the quintessences of the eight consciousnesses, and so forth, are the ***five cakras of the subtle body***. In the channels section, Yang dgon pa describes the five chakras, their connected channel network, and the constituents (*khams*) that these produce, beginning with the crown of the head and ending with the *cakra* at the secret place. In this description, Yang dgon pa provides the name of each of the channels that produces constituents, explains where they branch off from each *cakra*, and specifies the location where each channel ends in a channel knot. He correlates each of these channel knots with the traditional 24 sacred places, the 16 channel grounds, and so forth of tantric fame. Then he ties each channel to its specific constituent. Appendix 3 of the thesis summarizes the specific *cakras*, their correlations, and their specific constituents posited by Yang dgon pa.<sup>696</sup> The chart in the Appendix makes the nature of these correspondences clearer.

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<sup>695</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 472/1.

<sup>696</sup> This particular map of the *cakras*, sacred places and constituents appears to be an amalgam of the correspondences found in the *Sampuṭa Tantra*, in *Rdo rje phreng ba* and possibly also the

What precisely Yang dgon pa means by saying “the five nectars are the quintessences of the five *cakras*” [*bdud rtsi lnga ni 'khor lo lnga'i d(w)angs ma ste*] remains rather vague. On the one hand, he may mean that the quintessences are the five nectars (and many other bodily fluids and solids) produced by the five *cakras*. On the other hand, there is a possibility he means the five nectars are the five *cakras*, which each act as a sort of “quintessence.” When we look back at Yang dgon pa’s channels section, we discover that the five *cakras* located in the head, throat, heart, navel, and lower abdomen produce the entire physical body from the inside out, including the unclean substances that he has referred to above as the most explicit identity of the five nectars. In this very same section, he informs us that his description of the *cakras* and the physical and mental constituents extending from them comes from Sa skya Paṇḍita’s *Explanation of the Esoteric Path (Lam sbas bshad)*, a short commentary on an excerpt of Virūpa’s famous *Mārghaphala*, which Yang dgon pa asserts contains an “arrangement of the intentions of the tantras of Hevajra and Cakrasaṃvara.”<sup>697</sup>

Wedemeyer, in an article that uses the five meats and five nectars as the basis for discussing the problem of the hidden language of the tantras, notes that—in the examples that he found—these nectars always referred to something that was imbibed. He observes that “the

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oral instructions of Sa skya Paṇḍita. The same branch channels that Yang dgon pa lists here can be found *Sampuṭa Tantra (Sde dge Bka' 'gyur)*, 156-57, and Kittay, “Interpreting the Vajra Rosary,” 599-600. A very similar (but not identical) map and correspondences are found in the work of Rang ‘byung rdo rje as well, and I am grateful to Elizabeth Callahan, the translator of his *Zab mo nang don*, for pointing this out. See Rang byung rdo rje, *Illuminating “The Profound Principles”*, 189-197.

<sup>697</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 444/2-3. Davidson tells us that Sa chen's commentaries on the *Lam 'bras* likewise assert that Virūpa’s text is compatible with either the *Hevajra* or *Cakrasaṃvara Tantras*. However, as Davidson notes, the contents “did not agree exactly with the yogic systems enjoined in either of their tantras” (Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 355).



two verbs which are consistently used in scriptural contexts related to the five meats and ambrosias [are] eating and offering."<sup>698</sup> Wedemeyer considers the possibility that the five nectars may be symbolic for the five unclean human waste substances, and that the eating of the unclean substances may be symbolic for a wider idea of overcoming dualistic conceptuality, but he does not explore any instances in which the unclean substances are correlated with the *cakras*. The work of Yang dgon pa (and perhaps also of Sa skya Paṇḍita) provides a remarkable idiosyncratic example for how the five nectars were understood as quintessences of the vajra body, at least in this one theoretical context. Here we have yet another example of how the tantras require an expansive, even poetic, reading that seeks to unearth potential figurative and/or multiple meanings of terms, a kind of reading that Yang dgon pa amply demonstrates in his synthetic theorization of the nature of human embodiment.<sup>699</sup>

However, in this same article, Wedemeyer makes the point that both literalist and figurative interpretations of the “semiotics” of the tantras may miss subtleties of meaning, and the truth lies in understanding a broader context in which these works are written, read, and used. The five nectars are well-established in tantric lore as transubstantiated physical substances. While they are labeled as unclean in a conventional context, they take on a “clean” identity from

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<sup>698</sup> Christian K. Wedemeyer, “Beef, Dog, and Other Mythologies: Connotative Semiotics in Mahāyoga Tantra Ritual and Scripture,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religions* 75, no. 2, 401. Also see Frances Mary Garrett, “Tapping the Body's Nectar: Gastronomy and Incorporation in Tibetan Literature,” *History of Religions* 49, no. 3 (2010). This article by Frances Garrett explores the nature of these substances, but also makes no mention of instances demonstrating a connection between these tantric nectars and the vajra body.

<sup>699</sup> Wedemeyer recognizes the validity of such readings: “Others have drawn attention both to the important testimony of the surviving Tantric commentarial literature (many examples of which suggest readings other than the literal) and to note-worthy indications native to the Tantric ‘primary scriptures’ (*mūla-tantra*) themselves which seem to indicate that these works were not intended to be understood entirely or exclusively literally” (Wedemeyer, “Beef, Dog, and Other Mythologies,” 388).

the tantric perspective, an idea that would be well known to the readers of Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden*. The nectars themselves are symbols that gesture to the notion that the unclean aspects of the body are, in truth, clean and sacred, an idea that underpins Yang dgon pa's own somatic theory. In Yang dgon pa's work, the *cakras* and channels are a kind of quintessence (*dwangs ma*), that produces *other* kinds of quintessence. The products of the *cakras*, as mentioned above by Yang dgon pa, include both physical experiences and organs: "the eight consciousnesses and the five sense organs and so forth" (*rnam par shes pa tshogs brgyad/ dbang po lnga la sogs pa*).<sup>700</sup> But the products of the *cakras* also include substances that have impure associations for an ordinary Buddhist reader, the 32 constituents that extend back to early Indian Buddhist descriptions of the human body. Yang dgon pa's description makes no reference, however, to their uncleanliness. He simply refers to them by the label "constituent" (*kham*s), which we will recall Yang dgon pa occasionally uses as a synonym for quintessence (*dwangs ma*). Among these many constituents, we find the very nectars that Yang dgon pa uses to introduce the first outer valence of the five nectars (feces, urine, bile, blood, and semen). This leaves us to consider the possibility that the five *dwangs ma* are inclusive of all the products of the five *cakras*, both useful and obsolete. If this is the case, then Yang dgon pa may be intentionally calling our attention to how far his apotheosis of the body extends. The *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of the body includes not only the substrate of the body, and not only the vital components of the body's physicality, but its waste products as well.

The likelihood that the five nectars carry a literal meaning, as well as a symbolic meaning in Yang dgon pa's understanding of quintessences (*dwangs ma*), is supported as we read further in this section. In line with his synthetic impulse, Yang dgon pa presents a sampling of different

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<sup>700</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 472/1.

tantric systems of understanding *dwangs ma*, indicating that he is interested in showing various ways that *dwangs ma* can be understood. In one of these systems, we find the notion of the five nectars resurfacing in a different context. He offers us a passage in which *dwangs ma* refer to the substances in a chain of gradual metabolic refinements, beginning with the ingestion of food:

*dang po zas zos pa gyen rgyus 'phul nas gnas su*<sup>701</sup> *lhung ba dang/ mkhris pa'i rtsa ser*<sup>702</sup>  
*du snang ba'i nus pas ser log*<sup>703</sup> *bsgyur nas/ mnyam gnas kyis dangs*<sup>704</sup> *snyigs phye nas/*  
*snyigs ma long du bskyur te/ thur sel gyi phyir 'phen/ dangs ma bad kan du 'gro/ de dangs*  
*snyigs phye ba'i dangs ma mchin pa'i rtsa me sa ri ka'i nang du khrag du 'gro/ de'i dangs*  
*ma sha ru 'gro/ de'i dangs ma mtshil du 'gro/ de'i dangs ma rkang dang rus par 'gro/ de'i*  
*dangs ma rkang mar*<sup>705</sup> *rgyungs pa*<sup>706</sup> *dang klad par 'gro/ de dangs snyigs phye ba'i*  
*dangs ma khu bar*<sup>707</sup> *'gro ste/...dangs ma de'i 'og ma dangs chen/ de'i 'og ma rakta/ de'i*  
*'og ma dri chu/ de'i og ma khu ba/ de'i og ma dri chen no*<sup>708</sup>

First food is swallowed by the upward moving [wind] and descends into the core of the body. By the power of the golden moisture of the bile channel, the [food] becomes bolus.<sup>709</sup> The equalizing [wind] separates the quintessence from the waste. The waste is carried down to the abdomen and is discarded by the downward moving [wind]. The quintessence becomes phlegm. The quintessence that comes from the separation of the quintessence from the waste becomes blood inside the *me sa ri ge* channel of the liver. The quintessence of that becomes flesh. The quintessence of that becomes fat. The quintessence of that becomes limbs and bones. The quintessence of that becomes bone marrow<sup>710</sup> and brains. The quintessence that comes from the separation of the

<sup>701</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 223/4; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 73: *snod du*.

<sup>702</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 223/5; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 73: *gser*.

<sup>703</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 223/5: *gser mdog*.

<sup>704</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 73: *dwangs ma* throughout.

<sup>705</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 224/2: *dang* inserted.

<sup>706</sup> *Ibid.*, 224/2: *rgyu ma*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 73: *gzhungs pa dang*.

<sup>707</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 224/2: *thig ler*.

<sup>708</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 472/3-6.

<sup>709</sup> He mis variant: becomes yellow in color.

<sup>710</sup> He mis variant: legs and intestines.

quintessence from the waste becomes the vital essence<sup>711</sup> ....The quintessence after that is *dwangs chen*. After that is menstrual blood. After that is urine. After that is semen.<sup>712</sup> After that is feces.

In this presentation, we see quintessences present at every step in a process of nourishing the physical body, from eating food to the transformation of that food into flesh, bones, organs, and bodily fluids. In fact, here, quintessences (*dwangs ma*) are the useful physical substances of metabolic refinement; they are contrasted to the products that are not useful, which go by an antithetical label, waste (*snyigs ma*), which is discarded. In this interpretation, quintessences are both products of metabolic process, and progenitors of other quintessences. What we see here is that quintessence is the distillation of matter, specifically that which contributes to the vitality of the human organism, contrasted to that which is discarded. This is basically the kind of description we find in āyurvedic medical works and in the *Four Tantras* itself. However, unlike the process described in medical works, Yang dgon pa appends the five nectars onto the penultimate quintessence of the refinement, vital essence (*thig le*). In a rather cryptic ending to this process, Yang dgon pa tells us that “under” (*de'i 'og ma*) the vital essence are, sequentially, the nectars of “great quintessence,” uterine blood, urine, semen and feces. In reading this text with several specialists, none of them could tell me definitively what it means to say that the five nectars are “under” each other, at the end of this process. However, Frances Garrett points out that the term *khu ba* is often used in a general sense to refer to fluids that are a product of the body, including both reproductive fluids and waste.<sup>713</sup> If this is the case, we could understand

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<sup>711</sup> Pha jo Idings has semen (*khu ba*). I have provided the He mis and Beijing reading here (vital essence), as it seems more plausible.

<sup>712</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: This sentence is elided.

<sup>713</sup> Garrett, *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*, 78.

that the five nectars are meant literally. To say that the nectars are “after” *khu ba* might mean simply that the five nectars are classified under the term *khu ba*. If the five nectars here are the literal human fluids that are refined (semen, uterine blood) or discarded (feces, urine) in the process of metabolism, this would mean that Yang dgon pa is identifying the waste of the human body (*snyigs ma*) as really a quintessence (*dwangs ma*), by virtue of its connection to the (valorized) human body. This interpretation would work nicely in his own context, and would also serve to distinguish Yang dgon pa’s discussion here from the medical model, which gives no place to the five nectars in their metabolic descriptions. This move would also serve to juxtapose the medical vision of the body as something prone to disease and decay with the tantric vision of the body as inherently whole and sacred. This is yet another possible indication that Yang dgon pa was aware of conversations in the medical community and wished to demonstrate that the tantric model of the body has its own distinct understanding of physical processes such as digestion.

### **Mind as Bliss**

The sheer textual space that Yang dgon pa devotes to the section on quintessences indicates that the primary aspect of the mind's *ngos po'i gnas lugs* to be realized by a yogi, in his view, is these various understandings of the substances called *dwangs ma*. However, his treatment of the mind's attributes extends from the realm of the embodied into the realm of the affective, cognitive, and epistemic, as we see with the next four phenomena of mind, beginning with bliss. In this section, Yang dgon pa briefly indicates that the relationship between the *dwangs ma*, the first phenomenon of mind, and bliss (*bde ba*), the second phenomenon of mind,

is a relationship of a support (*rten*) to something that is supported (*brten*). In this case, the supported bliss or great bliss (*bde ba chen po*) is a critical term that appears with great frequency in the *niruttarayoga* tantras. There it is often associated with sexual bliss, an affective and physical state of heightened well-being associated with tantric yoga and liberation. But, in tantric understanding, we also find a valorized great bliss that seems to pervade all aspects of existence, and is not subject to changeable conditions. This latter understanding is in line with Yang dgon pa's presentation of this attribute of mind. As he unpacks the term, this affect is presented as an ever-present substrate of the physical existence of a sentient being rather than a passing affective state.

In this section, Yang dgon pa provides two passages from the *Hevajra Tantra*. This section also contains an interesting list of seven kinds of great bliss:

*de la bde ba chen po zhes pa yang lag bdun dang ldan pas te/ zag pa med pa'i bde ba ste/ kha na ma tho ba thams cad dang bral ba/ rang dbang can gyi bde bas ste/ rkyen gzhan la mi ltos pa/ 'dus ma byas kyi bde ba te/ rgyun mi 'chad pa gnyis su med pa'i bde ba ste/ dngos po thams cad la khyab pa/ bsam gyis mi khyab pa'i bde ba te/ 'jig rten pas ro ma myongs pa<sup>714</sup> dang/ rang bzhin med pa'i bde ba ste/ mi gnas par bde sdug<sup>715</sup> ro snyom pa dang/ ngo bo nyid kyi bde bas te/ ma bchos pa'o/ de ltar byang chub sems<sup>716</sup> kyi ngo bo yan lag bdun ldan gyi bde ba chen po yin no/<sup>717</sup>*

So called “great bliss” has seven branches:

1. Non-deteriorating bliss is utterly without fault.
2. Autonomous bliss is not dependent on other conditions.
3. Uncompounded, non-dual bliss is continuous.

<sup>714</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 243/1; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 85: *myangs*.

<sup>715</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 243/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 85: *bde sdug* elided.

<sup>716</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 243/2: *sems* elided.

<sup>717</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 480/5-481/2.

4. Non-dual bliss pervades all things.
5. Inconceivable bliss is not experienced by worldly people.
6. Bliss without inherent existence is the non-abiding equal taste of happiness and suffering.<sup>718</sup>
7. Essential bliss is without artifice.

In this way, the essence of *bodhicitta* is the great bliss that possesses these seven branches.

Yang dgon pa does not specify where he found this classification of seven branches of bliss, but presumably, like much of the material in his synthesis, it comes from a tantric source. What we do see in this list, combined with the quotations that he provides, is a vision of bliss that is apparently both physical and epistemic. The language used to describe bliss here—non-deteriorating, inconceivable, uncompounded, non-dual, without inherent existence, without artifice—is precisely the same language used in the context of *mahāmudrā* exegesis to describe the nature of mind (*sems kyi gnas lugs*) and is related to epistemic experience. However, the term great bliss (*bde ba chen po*) has inherently tantric physical and affective implications. By drawing on these two kinds of language or features in this one set of attributes, Yang dgon pa expresses his position that the mentalistic qualities that his lineage predecessors relegated to the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of mind are in reality not disembodied, but rather embodied as human affect, in a conventional tantric sense. Furthermore, by linking this affective state of great bliss to the *dwangs ma*, which acts as the physical support for that bliss, Yang dgon pa locates the most valorized terms of enlightenment (inconceivable, uncompounded, non-dual, without inherent existence, without artifice) deeply within the human physical form, both in the subtle channels and the coarse physical substances of the body.

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<sup>718</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: “of happiness and suffering” elided.

## Mind as Gnosis, Non-duality, and Samadhi

The third characteristic of mind, for Yang dgon pa, is gnosis, specifically the five kinds of gnosis found commonly in many of the *niruttarayoga* tantras. The great bliss, an innate and subtle aspect of embodied experience, manifests as a multifaceted display of gnosis. Yang dgon pa explains that the display depends on whether or not the great bliss is recognized. If it is recognized, it manifests as five gnoses. If it is not recognized, it manifests as five afflictions. But, recognized or not, the five afflictions are inherently the five gnoses, so Yang dgon pa maintains the connection in this passage to the basis (*gzhi*) that is his main concern in the *Explanation of the Hidden*:

*sems kyi chos gsum pa ye shes lnga rnams dang ces pa ni/ bde ba chen po de nyid  
mdangs<sup>719</sup> cir yang 'char ba/ rgyu sems can gyi dus na nyon mongs pa lnga/ de'i rang  
gzugs 'gro ba lnga/ lam rnal 'byor pa'i dus na ting nge 'dzin lnga/ de'i rang gzugs sa lam  
gyi yon tan brgya phrag bcu gnyis la sogs pa'o/ 'bras bu sangs rgyas kyi dus na ye shes  
lnga/ de'i rang gzugs rgyal ba rigs lnga'o/ de yang dpal nam mkha' dang mnyam pa'i  
rgyud las/*

*'gro lnga 'di dag de bzhin gshegs pa lnga//  
gar mkhan dag dang ri mo bzang ltar gnas//  
gang du bde chen zhes bya gcig pu nyid//  
gcig pu'i nyams kyis sgyu ma'i gar mdzad do//*

*ces so/ de yang sems can gyi dus na bde chen ngo ma shes pas gti mug/ rang dang gzhan  
la tshor ba<sup>720</sup> 'dod chags/ des sdug bsngal ba zhe sdang/ gzhan gyis thob kyis dogs pa  
phra dog/ rang snyems pa 'chang ba nga rgyal te/ nyon mongs pa lnga po re re la yang  
lnga kha<sup>721</sup> tshang zhing yul<sup>722</sup> gyi byed pas gang yang rung ba gsal bar ston pa yin no/*

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<sup>719</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 244/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 86: gdangs.

<sup>720</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 245/1: rang dang gzhan rnams 'tshol ba'i. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 87: rang dan gzhan nas tshol ba.

<sup>721</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 245/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 87: ka.



*bde chen gyi gshis ye shes<sup>723</sup> te/ kun la khyab cing gnyis su med pa mnyam pa gnyis kyi ye shes/ de nyid<sup>724</sup> cir yang ma grub pa chos kyi dbyings kyi ye shes/ rkyen gyis cir yang 'char ba so sor rtog pa'i ye shes/ tshogs brgyad kyi bya ba byed pa<sup>725</sup> bya ba grub pa'i ye shes/ gsal la rtog pa med pa<sup>726</sup> me long lta bu'i ye shes te/ sems kyi ngo bo sprod pa'i zung du<sup>727</sup> med pa bde chen gyi rang bzhin<sup>728</sup> ye shes lnga'o/ dug lnga yang de las ma 'das pas/ spang bya gnyen po dbyer med/ rgyu 'bras dbyer med/ thabs kyis zin pa dang ma zin pa'i bye brag gis<sup>729</sup>/ la sogs pa dang lam du 'gro ba ma nges pas/ dug lnga lung ma bstan no<sup>730/731</sup>*

The third characteristic of mind is the five gnoses: Whatever light shines from that great bliss is—in the context of the cause, which is sentient beings—the five afflictions. The embodiment of that is the five kinds of beings. In the context of the path of the yogi, it is the five meditative concentrations. The embodiment of that is the 112 qualities of the grounds and paths<sup>732</sup> and so forth. In the context of the fruition, which is buddhahood, it is the five gnoses. The embodiment of that is the buddhas of the five families. Furthermore, it says in the *Equal to Sky Tantra*:<sup>733</sup>

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<sup>722</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 245/2: *lus*.

<sup>723</sup> *Ibid.*, 245/3; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 87: *lnga* inserted.

<sup>724</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 245/4: *de nyid kyi ye shes de nyid*.

<sup>725</sup> *Ibid.*, 245/5: *bas*.

<sup>726</sup> *Ibid.*, 245/5: *pas*.

<sup>727</sup> *Ibid.*, 245/6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 88: *zug rngu*.

<sup>728</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 245/6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 88: *rang mtshan*.

<sup>729</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis): *gis* elided.

<sup>730</sup> *Ibid.*, *lung ma bstan ma yin no*.

<sup>731</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 481/4-482/5.

<sup>732</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: of the path.

<sup>733</sup> The version of the *Equal to the Sky Tantra* (Toh. 441) found in the extant Tibetan Buddhist canons does not contain this quote. The earliest mention that I can find is in the work of Āryadeva, with the same attribution to the *Equal to the Sky Tantra* [Āryadeva, *Spyod pa bsdu pa'i sgron ma*, in *Bstan 'byur dpe bsdur ma*, Toh 1803, Brgyud (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang), 184]. This quote, attributed to the same tantra, can also be found in Padma dkar po, *'Byung ba ro snyoms kyi rnam bshad ku mu ta*, in *The Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Kun-mkhyen Padma-dkar-po* (Darjeeling: Kargyud Sungrab Nyamso Khang, 1973-74), 110/6-111/2.

These five kinds of beings are the five thus-gone-ones.  
They exist like dancers and excellent paintings.  
So-called “great bliss” is one single thing.  
By the experience of one, a dance of many is made.

Regarding that, in the context of sentient beings, great bliss is not recognized and therefore manifests as stupidity. Making distinctions between self and other, there is desire.<sup>734</sup> From that there is the suffering of anger. Fearing that others will succeed, one experiences jealousy. Holding oneself as superior, there is pride. Thus, in each of those five afflictions, all five [afflictions] are present. So, depending on the stimulating object,<sup>735</sup> an appropriate emotion arises.

The true disposition of great bliss is gnosis.<sup>736</sup> Because it pervades all and is non-dual, it is the gnosis of equanimity. Because that itself<sup>737</sup> is not existent as anything whatsoever, it is *dharmadātu* gnosis. Because it can arise as anything due to conditions, it is discriminating gnosis. Because it does the work of the eight collections, it is the gnosis that accomplishes activity. Because it is clear and non-conceptual, it is mirror-like gnosis. These five gnosises are the essence of mind, great bliss free from separating complications.<sup>738</sup> The nature<sup>739</sup> of great bliss is the five gnosises. Because the five poisons do not go beyond that, the things to be abandoned and the remedies are inseparable. The cause and fruit are inseparable. The various people who are held by or not held by skillful means accumulate karma and travel an uncertain path. Therefore, the five poisons are neutral.<sup>740</sup>

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<sup>734</sup> I have used the He mis and Beijing variant here. Pha jo ldings: There is the desire that senses self and other.

<sup>735</sup> He mis variant: body.

<sup>736</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: the five gnosises. A interlinear note present in all four versions of the *Explanation of the Hidden*: “With regard to this, some people think that it is incorrect to count the five gnosises as a part of the minds of ordinary people, because although [ordinary mind] is asserted as gnosis, it is really consciousness. But there is no problem because ancient scriptures such as *Rdo rje gdan bzhi* have clearly taught the characteristics of gnosises [as ordinary mind].”

<sup>737</sup> He mis variant: Because that gnosis itself.

<sup>738</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: the pain of complications.

<sup>739</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: inherent characteristic.

<sup>740</sup> He mis variant: "the five poisons are not neutral." This variant may represent an attempt to excise a potentially controversial perspective.

Thus, Yang dgon pa concludes that the essence of the five poisons is the five gnoses, and that these gnoses are innate qualities of the human mind's nature. Therefore, even the five poisons are inherently gnosis, neutralizing them from an ultimate assignment of value.

In short, Yang dgon pa's assessment is that ordinary mind, with its spectrum of affective states, is naturally suffused with gnosis. When we consider that Yang dgon pa is speaking in the context of discussing the basis (*gzhi*), this perspective becomes quite a natural one. However, the perspective is also consistent with Yang dgon pa's somatic theory that presents a body as innately Buddha. Here, the mind is innately a Buddha's gnosis, and—at least as far as that perspective is concerned—requires no purificatory practice.

Yang dgon pa's fourth and fifth components of mind are non-duality and meditative concentration, dimensions of mind that he dispenses with briefly, considering the esteem that these critical terms enjoyed in the *mahāmudrā* texts of his day. In his commentary on Yang dgon pa's five phenomena of mind, Spyan snga ba makes some statements that attempt to clarify a relationship between them. It is worth bringing this up here because whether or not they reflect Yang dgon pa's intention, they do gracefully connect the five phenomena of mind, making them more understandable. Spyan snga ba carries Yang dgon pa's initial statement connecting the quintessences (*dwangs ma*) with bliss further, classifying the five gnoses as “the mind's essence” and non-duality as “the mind's activity.” So now, if we are to put these connections together, we have a base of vital essences, which support the affect of bliss. The essence of that bliss is the five gnoses, and the activity of that bliss-mind is non-duality. Spyan snga ba helps us consider the relationship between these various dimensions of being, and how they might all be related to the same category of “mind.”

To say that non-duality is an activity might seem to imply volition, but Yang dgon pa's commentary leads us in another direction. This has to do with the mind's spontaneous, rather than volitional, activity:

*sems kyi chos bzhi<sup>741</sup> ye shes kyi mtshan nyid yul dang yul can du mi rtog par rang gsal  
ba te/ te lo pas nā ro pa la bos te gsungs pa/*

*kye ho 'di ni rang rig ye shes te//  
ngag gi lam 'das yid kyi spyod yul min//  
te lo nga yis ci yang bstan du med//<sup>742</sup>  
rang gis rang nyid mtshon ste shes par byos//<sup>743</sup>*

*ces pa dang/ de nyams su blang thabs yang te lo pa'i chos drug te/*

*mi mno/ mi bsam/ mi sems/ mi sgom/ mi dpyad/ sems rang bzhin du gnas/*

*ces gsungs pas/yul dang yul can gyi rnam rtog ni yid kyi sgro btags yin la/ sems kyi ngo  
bo yul med du rang gsal ba/ gshis ci yang ma yin/ mdangs cir yang ma 'gags/ ngo bo ci  
yang mi rtog pa'o//<sup>744</sup>*

The fourth phenomenon of mind is the characteristic of gnosis, a natural luminosity that does not conceive of a subject or object. As Tilopa said to Nāropa,

Kye ho! This is self-aware gnosis.  
Beyond the path of speech, not in the scope of mind,  
I, Tilo, have nothing to teach.<sup>745</sup>  
Take yourself as the example, and know thyself.<sup>746</sup>

<sup>741</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 246/3; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing): *pa* inserted.

<sup>742</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 246/5: *te lo nga la ci yang gtan du med*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 88: *te lo nga yis bstan du ci yang med*.

<sup>743</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 246/5: *rang gis rang rig nyid la shes te byon*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing): *rang rig nyid la shes te byos*. The latter is apparently a copying error, and the words *rang gis* should be placed at the beginning of this line.

<sup>744</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings): 482/5-483/2.

<sup>745</sup> He mis variant: To me, Tilo, nothing is lasting.

<sup>746</sup> He mis variant: Knowing your own awareness, come forth.

The method to practice is Tilopa’s six teachings:

Do not ruminate. Do not think. Do not cogitate. Do not meditate. Do not analyze.  
Stay in the nature of mind.

Thoughts of subject and object are mental reifications. The essence of mind is an inherent clarity that does not objectify. It has no basis whatsoever. Its luminosity is utterly unimpeded. Its essence is utterly non-conceptual.

What is remarkable about this passage is not its content, but its brevity. The content of the *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of mind sections of the ancestor and descendant texts in the lineage of the *Explanation of the Hidden* present this non-conceptual rendering of the mind as the entire thrust of their discussion of the mind’s *dnegos po'i gnas lugs*. In contrast, Yang dgon pa makes this section his shortest, but with a brief reference to Nāropa, whose outline inspires some of the *Explanation of the Hidden*.

Yang dgon pa’s fifth component of mind is meditative concentration (Tib. *ting nge 'dzin*, Skt. *samādhi*).<sup>747</sup> The use of the word “meditative concentration” (*ting nge 'dzin*) would seem to imply a mind that is immersed in a state induced by meditative practice, and Yang dgon pa’s commentary confirms this perspective:

*sems kyi chos lnga pa ting nge 'dzin ni skabs 'dir rgyun ma chad pa la 'jug te/ sems rang bzhin*<sup>748</sup> *du 'gyur ba med cing/ 'du 'bral*<sup>749</sup> *med pas skad cig ma rgyun dang bcas pa te/ sems can nas*<sup>750</sup> *sangs rgyas kyi bar du sems nyid rig pa rgyun chags su yod pas/ kun gzhi rgyu'i rgyud*<sup>751</sup> *ces bya'o*<sup>752</sup>

<sup>747</sup> Spyan snga ba assists us by classifying unbroken meditative concentration as an “aspect” (*rnam pa*) of mind.

<sup>748</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 247/3; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 88: *dus gsum* inserted.

<sup>749</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 247/4: *'bral ba*.

<sup>750</sup> *Ibid.*, 247/4: *rnam*.

<sup>751</sup> *Ibid.*, 247/5: *kun gzhi'i rgyu*.

The fifth phenomenon of mind is meditative concentration. In this context, one enters into continuity. The nature of mind does not change.<sup>753</sup> Because it is without formation and dispersal,<sup>754</sup> it has momentary continuity. From the condition of sentient being through the condition of buddhahood,<sup>755</sup> the mind itself, awareness, is continuously present. Therefore, it is called the causal continuum of the all-basis.<sup>756</sup>

The “mind itself, awareness” exists throughout embodied existence from the state of an ordinary being to a buddha, and therefore is considered a continuity, continuously present. Although the mind as meditative concentration appears to be a practiced mind, Yang dgon pa steers us back to understanding that this mind of samādhi is in fact an innate quality of being that is discovered as continuously present, rather than a state manufactured from meditative work. This perspective is in keeping with the Yang dgon pa’s soteriology of the innate freedom present in the unaltered embodied state.

#### **Concluding Remarks to Chapter Four**

Putting together Yang dgon pa’s five phenomena of mind, much can be grasped about his understanding of the relationship between the body, the vajra body, and the mind. The body, we can see from this vision, is not only the support of mind, the body *is* the mind, or rather the distinction between body and mind is tenuous. Yang dgon pa’s presentation of the *dnegos po’i*

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<sup>752</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo lding), 483/2-3.

<sup>753</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: “throughout the three times” inserted.

<sup>754</sup> He mis variant: without separation.

<sup>755</sup> He mis variant: Sentient beings, until they reach Buddhahood, possess the mind itself, awareness, continuously present.

<sup>756</sup> He mis variant: Therefore, it is called the cause of the all-basis.

*gnas lugs* of mind orients our attention to mind that is primarily and foremost a set of physical quintessences, which support all the more mentalistic aspects of mind that his religious ancestors valorized and identified as the qualities of a Buddha's enlightenment.

One set of these quintessences, the four elements (*'byung ba bzhi*), refers to the gross material building blocks of physicality; solid matter, liquid in the body, heat in the body, and respiration. In this unpacking, mind as the four elements is really matter, in the most literal sense. Another set of quintessences, the five nectars (*bdud rtsi lnga*), range in meaning from being the five cakras of the vajra body to being five effluvia of the physical body. This classification also places mind in the realm of matter. As the five cakras, the quintessences are in the role of generating the physical body. As the five effluvia, but especially as semen (*khu ba*), they are cast in the role of the body's most potent distillation. In both roles, we see a common principle in the identity of quintessence (*dwangs ma*). Quintessence is generally either an originating source or a concentrated final distillation.

In this sense, while there are specific quintessences in Yang dgon pa's vision of the body, quintessence also appears to be a principle of origination, concentration, or distillation that can be applied to bodily structures that are covered by Yang dgon pa's other categories. For example, the cakras are quintessences, a category of mind, but Yang dgon pa also considers them to be channels, a category of body. The breath is considered a quintessence, a category of mind, but breath is also included under the category of speech. The five effluvia are quintessences in the mind category, but they are also included in the 32 unclean substances that are classified under the category of body. It appears that *dwangs ma* has the quality of embodying a distilled vital energy that crosses the boundaries of physical categories of body, speech, and mind. As such, it

presents an ideal focus for Yang dgon pa's section on the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of mind, as it begins to dissolve the boundaries between these categories.

As we will recall, in the works leading up to Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden*, a clear division was made between the body's *dngos po'i gnas lugs* and the mind's *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, and the mind's nature was presented in decidedly epistemic terms. We will also recall that the *mahāmudrā* strains of the Tibetan tradition gave pre-eminent status to a non-conceptual, non-locatable mind, a "nature of mind" (*sems kyi gnas lugs*), ethereal and experiential in its descriptions, rather than primarily material, physical, or embodied. The mainstream *mahāmudrā* understanding of a "nature of mind" allowed for a doctrine of transference and permeability that was compatible with the notion of emptiness, and of buddhanature, which talks about an innate and pure essence that pervades all living things. This innate pure essence was seen as a seed that stays constant from lifetime to lifetime. Its more ethereal description makes its transference seem more plausible. Yang dgon pa's dissolution of the barriers between body and mind represents a radical fringe impulse within the Tibetan tantric yogi community, and this impulse may have threatened mainstream doctrines of the tradition, considering how later exegetes within Yang dgon pa's own lineage reined in his somatic orientation.

The formless theorization of the mind might well have produced tensions within yogic communities of Tibet, rubbing up against the tantric strains of the tradition that valorized the body and emotions. Yang dgon pa's mind, at least in this particular work, is inextricable from the body. In comparison to even his own *mahāmudrā* exegesis, this work depicts a mind's nature (*gnas lugs*) that is primarily physical (*dngos po*) in the sense that mind is primarily an embodied entity. It is not just supported by matter: in Yang dgon pa's



theory, the mind *is* matter. His definition of mind is multifaceted, but there is an undeniable emphasis on the connection of mind with the vajra body and the physical body, consistent with the thesis of this work. For Yang dgon pa, mind cannot in any way be extracted from the body, and cannot exist divided from it, a position that would seem to challenge a doctrine of rebirth, although—as we will see—Yang dgon pa’s complex understanding of body makes even this potential stumbling block possible to overcome. And, while he affords a modest place in this work for a *mahāmudrā* understanding of the mind, he makes a point of initiating the discussion about mind with a more physical understanding of what mind is.

Perhaps due to the primacy of mind as a critical term in Tibetan Buddhist theory, it is clear that one of Yang dgon pa’s primary aims in *Explanation of the Hidden* is to explore and ultimately establish the nature of the relationship between mind and body. This exploration takes Yang dgon pa and his readers through an emerging portrait of embodiment in which distinctions between mind and body are explicitly made, only to be dissolved. The body’s quintessences are envisioned as a blissful support for non-conceptual gnosis, in a view in which support and supported stay under a single category. This very unusual discussion of mind sets the reader up for Yang dgon pa’s culmination of his discussion of the physical nature of body, speech, and mind. As we will see in the coming chapter, in Yang dgon pa’s final assessment, he declares that while he has just described in separate and detailed sections the physical nature of body, speech, and mind, these cannot be distinguished as separate, and must be understood as an integrated whole. The repeated creation and subsequent dissolution of distinctions is a doctrinal hallmark of Yang dgon pa and a preparation for his culminating argument that the body’s components—

despite any apparent separateness that the reader might still perceive—actually exist in a state of radical and total integration.

## Chapter Five

### Yang dgon pa's Doctrine of Radical Integration and the Implications of an Embodied Buddhahood

In the first two-thirds of *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, Yang dgon pa describes and maps a body that is stratified, a coarse body undergirded by a subtle network of channels, winds, and quintessences—in other words, a vajra body. He has laid out a theory of subtle embodiment that consists of the three components of body, speech, and mind. We are guided to an understanding that developing the foundation of *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* means knowing the attributes of body, speech, and mind as distinct and specific dimensions of human embodiment. A complex network of channels, a series of winds and their functions, and a multi-faceted vision of mind that includes its fundamental material dimensions have been described. Each of these aspects of embodiment is afforded detailed attention and the author also explores the ways that they interact with and empower one another.

Yet despite the particularity of these three dimensions of the vajra body, the vision Yang dgon pa is presenting IS an integrated system in which channels, winds, and quintessences are interdependent to the extent that no one dimension could be formed, exist, or function without the others. Already, in the individual sections concerning body, speech, and mind, occasional reference has been made to the unity of two dimensions, such as that body and mind are inseparable, or that wind and mind are inseparable. We have, in fact, seen many indications of the mutuality of mental and physical aspects of human life. But when we reach Yang dgon pa's

fourth *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, the theme of inseparability comes to the fore and begins to undercut any remaining sense of a particular nature of body, speech, or mind on its own. Now Yang dgon pa breaks down the very divisions that he has just developed, concluding his discussion of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* with an extensive theory of a radical, existential integration.

Yang dgon pa maintains that, while the human body can be divided, for the purposes of description, into body, speech, and mind, the human body's components ultimately defy reduction. As Yang dgon pa puts it "body, speech, and mind are beyond inclusion or exclusion" (*lus ngag yid gsum 'du 'bral med*).<sup>757</sup> He calls this principle of indivisibility the "*dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body, speech, and mind inseparable" (*lus ngag yid gsum dbyer med dngos po'i gnas lugs*), and names this the fourth *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. Yang dgon pa explains his reasoning for a theory of indivisibility or inseparability with several arguments. He begins with an analysis of inseparability by returning to a metaphor that he introduced when discussing mind as a subset of body in the section on the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of the body. In that context, Yang dgon pa likened the body to a tent pole, and the mind to a tent's canopy. In this context, he revives the tent metaphor again, but in a different way, to illustrate how his three major components of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, body, speech, and mind, are interrelated:

*lus ni rlung gi 'du byed dang rnam par shes pa mdung khyim ltar 'tshogs pa'i rlung rnam shes la las dang bag chags kyi rang gzugs*<sup>758</sup> *lus su snang ba te/ ngag sems dang dbyer med/ ngag ni lus kyi rtsa dang yi ge dang sems kyi rnam rtog dang/ rlung sems dang lus kyi sbyor ba 'tshogs pa*<sup>759</sup> *las byung te/ rlung*<sup>760</sup> *sems dbyer med*<sup>761</sup> *sems tshogs brgyad*

<sup>757</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 484/3.

<sup>758</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 248/3: *rang* inserted.

<sup>759</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 89: *tshogs*.

<sup>760</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 248/4: *lus*.

<sup>761</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 89: *lus sems dang dbyer med*.

*kyi rnam shes/ rtsa rlung ti le'i*<sup>762</sup> dangs ma'i rten 'brel las byung zhing/ brtan g.yo lus ngag thams cad sems rang snang bas/ ngag dang lus dbyer med/<sup>763</sup> de ltar lus ngag yid gsum<sup>764</sup> 'dzom pa'i chu'am<sup>765</sup>/ tsan dan gyi kha dog dang dri<sup>766</sup> ltar dbyer med pa'o/<sup>767</sup>

The **body** is like a home (tent) for the formations of wind and consciousness. The residents, wind and consciousness, appear as the body,<sup>768</sup> which is the embodiment of the karma and habits. Hence, [body] is inseparable from speech and mind.

**Speech** arises from the body's channels, syllables, the mind's concepts, wind-mind, and the activities of body combined.<sup>769</sup>

Wind and **mind** inseparable,<sup>770</sup> the mind's eight collections of consciousness, arise from the interdependence of the quintessences of channels, winds, and vital essences. The animate and inanimate worlds, body and speech, all are projections of mind. Therefore [mind] is inseparable from body and speech.

In that way, body, speech, and mind are like mingled water,<sup>771</sup> or like the color<sup>772</sup> and scent of sandalwood.

Yang dgon pa's argument here is essentially one of interdependence. Body, speech, and mind are inseparable as interdependent components of a single, indivisible whole. Starting with body as

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<sup>762</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 248/5; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 89: *thig le*. The Beijing and He mis version change *ti le* to *thig le* throughout, so I will not continue to note the discrepancy.

<sup>763</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 248/5: *lus ngag dang dbyer med do*.

<sup>764</sup> *Ibid.*, 248/6: *po de* inserted. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 89: *po*.

<sup>765</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 248/6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 89: *'jim pa'i sa chu'am*.

<sup>766</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 248/6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 89: *dri ro kha dog*.

<sup>767</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 483/4-6.

<sup>768</sup> He mis variant: one's own body.

<sup>769</sup> Beijing variant: “[Hence], speech is inseparable from body and mind” inserted.

<sup>770</sup> Beijing variant: phrase elided.

<sup>771</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: like earth and water in mud.

<sup>772</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: insert “taste.”

the basis of consideration, the body is likened to a tent and the resident of the tent is wind (the subtle layer of “speech”) and consciousness.<sup>773</sup> Yang dgon pa has already established in earlier statements that wind and consciousness are inseparable, as clearly indicated by the common term wind-mind. The body, while it houses wind-mind, is also a physical expression or outcome of the karma and habitual patterns of that very same wind-mind. So body is inseparable from speech and mind, on the basis of the fact that body originates from wind and mind’s karma.

The appearance of the tent metaphor twice is interesting in that it intentionally locates his work in the Himalayan geographic region, a move that may be significant. The metaphors in this passage, in fact, seem to be serving two purposes simultaneously. First and foremost, they provide aesthetically evocative images that capture the meaning of inseparability for Yang dgon pa. In the case of a tent, it captures the sense of interdependence: a tent and its residents (body and wind-mind) rely on each other to function. He brings in two other metaphors here to illustrate the inseparability of body, speech, and mind: “body, speech, and mind are like mingled water, or like the color and scent of sandalwood.” In the case of the water metaphor, it captures the sense of utter inseparability (water mingled with water cannot then be separated out).<sup>774</sup> In the case of sandalwood, it captures the sense of how an entity’s qualities cannot be separated from the entity itself (the color and scent of sandalwood cannot be extracted from the sandalwood itself). Secondly, the three metaphors taken together serve to tie Yang dgon pa’s work back to its Indic roots (the sandalwood metaphor), but also situate his work in a Tibetan

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<sup>773</sup> In the previous invocation of this metaphor, Yang dgon pa likened the five elements to a tent pole, and the canopy of the tent was likened to awareness. See page 197 of the dissertation.

<sup>774</sup> In the case of the He mis and Beijing variant, earth and water cannot be separated out from mud.

context (the tent metaphor), and therefore to root the *Explanation of the Hidden* both in the authority of the Indic tantras and in the authority of a uniquely Tibetan experience.

Turning to speech, Yang dgon pa summarizes his foregoing *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of speech by saying that speech arises from the body's channels, syllables in the knots of the channels, the mind's concepts, the movement of wind-mind, and the volition to speak. Finally, taking mind as the basis of consideration, Yang dgon pa offers two arguments for inseparability. The first is that mind arises from the interdependence of the quintessences of channels, winds, and vital essences (and is even classified *as* those quintessences), so it is itself a product of all the components of the subtle body combined. The second argument is the classical Buddhist *cittamātra*, or "mind only" perspective that all phenomena, including that of body and speech, are a projection of mind. This argument references the more conventional Buddhist philosophy of mind that also speaks to the inseparability of mind and matter, in this case the material world as a whole, but once again it is not privileged as the linchpin of Yang dgon pa's discussion. We might think that mind ultimately might become ascendant in Yang dgon pa's theory, if he relies on the *cittamātra* perspective that all phenomena are but a mental projection. Or we might anticipate a use of this perspective as a reason to dismiss the body and speech as mere projections. On the contrary, as we have already seen, Yang dgon pa weaves the thread of *cittamātra* into a tantric theory in which mind is not a disembodied creator of the animate and inanimate universe, but a natural and corporeal phenomenon that unfolds from deep inside the channels of the subtle body and is indivisible from wind during life and through transmigration. While in *cittamātra* theory, body and speech might be mind's projections, Yang dgon pa's somatic theory reveals a vision in which mind is also simultaneously the product of body and speech. The fact that phenomena are mind's projection does not negate the power of those

phenomena for Yang dgon pa. On the contrary, body and speech enjoy equal or superior footing in Yang dgon pa's work, as the origin and extension of mind. Mind not only depends on body and speech for its existence, but also is indivisible from them. Thus, in keeping with his overall emphasis in the *Explanation of the Hidden*, Yang dgon pa consistently leads with the body in his analysis throughout the work.

Having argued for inseparability of the *dnagos po'i gnas lugs* of body, speech, and mind on the basis of their interdependence, and on the basis of the fact that all phenomena are mind's projection, Yang dgon pa's next tactic is to argue for inseparability through an exploration of causality and change. He argues that experience reveals that a change in any one component of body, speech, or mind leads to changes in the other components of physical life:

*da lta yang lus 'gyur na sems dang ngag kyang 'gyur te/ rang snang 'gyur bas gzhan snang 'gyur/ ngag dang sems 'gyur na lus kyang 'gyur/ dper na sems zhe sdang du skyes pa'i dus na ngag tshig rtsub/ lus khro byed du lam 'ong ste/ der gzhan pa de yang de ltar yang mthong bas/ rang 'gyur bas<sup>775</sup> gzhan 'gyur ba'o/ te ltar ma shi'i bar la lus ngag yid gsum dbyer med du 'dug te<sup>776</sup>*

Right now, if the body changes, mind and speech also change. If our subjectivity changes, then how we appear to others changes. If our speech and mind change, our body also changes. For example, when anger arises in the mind, we speak harshly and our body acts out. We see that the others' [speech and body] are also like that. Because one aspect changes,<sup>777</sup> the others also change. In that way, until we die, our body, speech, and mind exist inseparably.

Yang dgon pa here appeals not to theory, but rather to the observed experience of change to demonstrate that body, speech, and mind are integrated to the extent that any change in one

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<sup>775</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 249/4; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 90: *tsa na*.

<sup>776</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 484/1-2.

<sup>777</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: As soon as one aspect changes.



component is immediately evident in the others. Using the example of emotion, he notes that when an emotion such as anger arises in the mind, our body and speech express it. To turn, as Yang dgon pa does here, to a universal human experience allows the reader to immediately identify how body, speech, and mind are inseparable. This is a moment in the text that reveals Yang dgon pa's concern with personal experience, a concern that we see come up again and again as a source of authoritative knowledge. Knowledge is not just what the texts say, but rather is what is gleaned from human experiences. The foregoing passage is one of the instances where we hear Yang dgon pa's own voice, not drawing on a tantric schema, but just speaking out of a personal observation about human experience.

### **Death as Proof of Inseparability**

The intra-subjectivity between mind, body, and speech, observable in everyday life, continues—Yang dgon pa states—as long as we are alive. At this point in his argument, he begins to broach the problem of death. In general, in a theory in which the body is central, we might expect the occasion of death to pose a challenge to the possibility of reincarnation, so widely held in Buddhism. As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, in the Buddhist literary tradition and rhetorical imagery, the body is often denigrated as unworthy, filthy, and ultimately perishable. It is depicted in Mahāyāna literature as the temporary vessel of the mind, left behind to rot and decay after death. Indeed, as long as the body and mind are kept at a distance, death poses little problem. The body, within a philosophy of body-mind dualism, can serve as a temporary home for the mind. At death, this same body-mind dualism becomes a solution that allows for transmigration from life to life: if the body and mind are dual, mind can separate from

the body, to continue on in a disembodied state. However, Yang dgon pa's section on the inseparability of body, speech, and mind decisively argues against a body-mind dualism, and instead posits a radical, somatic integration, in which body, speech, and mind are utterly inseparable. Furthermore, of the three components of corporeal existence, the body—not the mind—remains the dominant figure throughout Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden*.

A theory of radical integration and the dominance of the rubric of body present a unique challenge to the doctrine of reincarnation. If body, speech, and mind are one, how can a transmigrating mind move on after death? If the body clearly dies and decays, and it is inseparable from the mind, this would seem to pose an issue for a continuity of mind that reincarnates. Yang dgon pa anticipates the unique challenge that death poses for his theory, and takes the opportunity on several occasions in the text to address death and its consequences for a vajra body. Returning to Yang dgon pa's arguments for the inseparability of body, speech, and mind, his third argument concerns death. He points out, in his third argument, that the phenomenon of death demonstrates, rather than refutes, the inseparability of body, speech, and mind:

*shi tsa na lus ro zhes shul du lus/ ngag 'gags nas 'gro snyam na/ de ni 'khrul pa'i rnam  
rtog te/ de kho nas<sup>778</sup> lus yod kyang bya ba mi byed pa de kas/ sems 'phos tsa na dbang  
po<sup>779</sup> thams cad 'gags pas dbyer med pa'o/ de ltar ma yin na shi ba'i ro yang ngag 'byin  
cing bya ba byed par rigs so/ don kyi<sup>780</sup> lus ngag yid gsum 'du 'bral med de<sup>781/782</sup>*

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<sup>778</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 249/5: na.

<sup>779</sup> Ibid., 249/6: *dbang po* elided.

<sup>780</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 90: don du.

<sup>781</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 250/1: *dus thams cad du 'bral ba med do*.

<sup>782</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 484/2-3.

As soon as one dies, a “corpse” is left behind, and speech stops. Then we think of moving, but that is a deluded concept. By that alone, although there is a body, it is unable to function. By just that, the mind leaves, and all the sense organs stop.<sup>783</sup> This proves that these are inseparable. If it were not like that, it would be possible for a dead corpse to speak and function. The ultimate body, speech, and mind are beyond inclusion or exclusion.<sup>784</sup>

At first blush, it appears that Yang dgon pa describes death as the occurrence of the mind leaving the body, rendering body and speech unable to function. This perspective might still participate in a duality of body and mind. However, Yang dgon pa tells us that what is left behind is not a body but a corpse, another entity from which the essential features of what it means to be a body have been excised. Furthermore, speech is no longer speech: it has “stopped.” Then we might wonder, on what grounds have the essential features of body and speech been excised from the body? For Yang dgon pa, the parameters of body, speech, and mind seem to be related to functionality. The tripartite body, speech, and mind is deserving of those labels as long as they function as such. If these are not functioning, they are no longer themselves, no longer “body, speech, and mind.” They are another entity entirely: a corpse, a discarded shell.

But, in that case, what are the body, speech, and mind that move on after death? If body, speech, and mind are inseparable during and after death, how does this work when the ordinary body appears to have morphed into a corpse? Yang dgon pa indicates here, at the end of the passage above, an answer to these questions. What stays inseparable at death is not the body, speech, and mind that are manifesting as fleshy materiality, but something called the “ultimate body, speech, and mind” (*don gyi lus ngag sems*). It should be noted here that while both the Pha

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<sup>783</sup> He mis variant: everything stops.

<sup>784</sup> *‘du ‘bral med*. This compound term is a synonym for inseparable (Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication 2012). He mis variant: are inseparable at all times.

jo ldings and He mis versions of the *Explanation of the Hidden* have “ultimate” (*don gyi*) before “body, speech, and mind” the Beijing version has the clause “in fact” (*don du*), which gives us a very different reading of this passage. This discrepancy in the two versions may indicate a subtle attempt, perhaps in the hands of later editors, to tone down Yang dgon pa’s meaning here, which affords the body a place that later commentators reserved only for the mind: a place within the category of the ultimate. In the context of the logic of this passage, however, it seems likely that the original text did indeed read “ultimate” (*don gyi*), because Yang dgon pa proceeds in the next sentence to introduce the reader to a whole new type of body, speech, and mind that he has not yet described in the *Explanation of the Hidden*. This new type helps him address the question of what happens to the body, speech, and mind at death, and helps him establish the continuity of a radical integration of these three dimensions. Yang dgon pa explains this new type of “ultimate body, speech, and mind” by pointing to an additional layer of subtlety—now newly theorized—within the vajra body:

*don gyi dbu ma sems dang 'bral ba med de lus rtsa rgyun ma chad/ snying po nam mkha'i  
rlung sems dang 'bral ba med pas/ ngag rlung rgyun ma chad/ thi(g) le<sup>785</sup> dangs ma bde  
ba'i ngo bo sems dang 'bral ba med pas/ sems thi(g) le rgyun ma chad pas/ de'i rang  
gzugs gang du yang lus ngag yid gsum du snang te<sup>786</sup>*

Because the ultimate central channel is inseparable from mind, body and channels are unbroken. Because the essence-space wind is not separate from mind, speech and wind are unbroken. Because the quintessence of the vital essence is not separate from bliss-essence of mind, mind and vital essences are unbroken. The embodiment of those always appears as body, speech, and mind.

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<sup>785</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 250/4; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 90: *thig le* throughout.

<sup>786</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 484/4-5.

This passage, for all its brevity, proposes some bold ideas. First, it establishes three very subtle elements of the body that correspond to channels, winds, and vital essences: an “ultimate central channel” (*don gyi dbu ma*), an “essence space wind” (*snying po nam mkha'i rlung*), and a “quintessence of the vital essence” (*thi[g] le d[w]angs ma*). These three, the passage tells us, are not separate from mind. Therefore, a refined form of the elements of the vajra body (an “ultimate body, speech, and mind”) exists inseparably from mind, apparently always. To use Yang dgon pa’s term, channels, winds, and vital essences are “unbroken” from the mind via this very subtle substrate. The word “unbroken” seems to be a direct reference to the condition that Yang dgon pa is addressing here: death. The implication is that when the connection between mind and the coarse body is broken at death, the connection between the mind and the three elements of the subtle body (channels, winds, and vital essences) remains unbroken, due to the fact that the ultimate central channel, the essence space wind, and the quintessence of the vital essence are always inseparable from mind. This would imply further that the transmigrating mind is not what it seems. It is, rather, a transmigrating body, speech, and mind of a very subtle kind.

Now, Yang dgon pa has argued the inseparability of body, speech, and mind from several standpoints. They are inseparable from the perspective of their interdependence. They are inseparable from the standpoint of causality. Finally, they are inseparable by virtue of the fact that a subtle body, speech, and mind somehow transmigrate together. With that theory as a basis, it is possible to posit an inseparability that continues throughout all conditions and human states of being:

*de'i rang gzugs su gang du yang lus ngag yid gsum du snang te/ nyin par gyi dus su rnam  
smin gyi lus ngag yid gsum/ rmi lam gyi dus su bag chags kyi lus ngag yid gsum/ bar do'i*

*dus su yid kyi lus ngag yid gsum/ sangs rgyas pa'i dus na ye shes kyi lus ngag yid gsum te 'bral ba med do*<sup>787</sup>

The embodiment of those always appears as body, speech, and mind. During the day, these are inseparable as a fully-ripened body, speech, and mind. In dreams, these are inseparable as a habitual body, speech, and mind. In the intermediate state, these are inseparable as a mental body, speech, and mind. At the time of buddhahood, these are inseparable as a gnosis body, speech, and mind.

Here we see Yang dgon pa working to ensure a continuity for the components that he has defended as the key basis for enlightenment: body, speech, and mind. The solution to this continuity lies in a key phrase here that begins the passage: “The embodiment of those always appears as body, speech, and mind” (*de'i rang gzugs su gang du yang lus ngag yid gsum du snang*). The referent of “those” is the “ultimate body, speech, and mind” (*don kyi lus ngag sems*), which consist of the ultimate central channel, the essence space wind, and the quintessence of the vital essence. With that referent, the meaning is that this very subtle vajra body is always manifesting in an embodied way (*rang gzugs su*), as body, speech, and mind, from birth, through life, into the intermediate state, and into the next life. What exactly he means here by “always” (*gang du yang*) unfolds in the sentences following. This one passage unpacks in a concise manner the extent of Yang dgon pa’s devotion to an embodied view of the person, from the ordinary state through the state of a Buddha, throughout day and night, throughout even life and death. Here we see that body, speech, and mind remain inseparable throughout various states of human experience and physical transformation, from daytime experience to nighttime experience, from the state after death to the state of enlightenment. However, while continuous in name and in inseparability, the triad is not identical throughout every state and condition. During daytime experience in life, a given human being is a body, speech, and mind that are

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<sup>787</sup> Ibid., 484/5-6.

“fully-ripened,” referring to the karma of the human being taking its form of fullest expression. At night, in dreams, the human being becomes a habitual body, speech, and mind that are the result of patterns carried by the consciousness. In order to compare these various dimensions of body, along with the previous dimensions Yang dgon pa has heretofore discussed, I have created a table (see Appendix 2).

Second, body, speech, and mind are experiential, appearing in an embodied form (*rang gzugs*) that morphs depending on the state.<sup>788</sup> We are now afforded an insight that Yang dgon pa’s understanding of body, speech, and mind is epistemic. His categories of body, speech, and mind here imply an ascendance of the subjective: there is no objective body, speech, and mind, only the body, speech, and mind of human states of being. An objective reality of body, speech, and mind does not define the triad; a human *experience* of the state of body, speech, and mind defines these three central categories. For instance, in the state between death and rebirth (*bar do*), a being becomes a mental body, speech, and mind. At buddhahood, a being becomes a gnosis body, speech, and mind. Here Yang dgon pa makes a case for a consistency of inseparability, a consistency of epistemic perception, and a consistency of a triadic nature, but not a case for a consistency of substance, form, or even function. Body, speech, and mind exist as epistemic constructs that morph into various states of latency, or expression, depending on the conditions. So, for example, it appears that in dreams, the fully-ripened body becomes latent and the habitual body becomes manifest, and in the in-between state (*bar do*), the fully-ripened body

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<sup>788</sup> Yang dgon pa deploys the term *rang gzugs* frequently in the *Explanation of the Hidden* to mean embodiment. The key term can also be found appearing with frequency in the short *Non-dual Victory Tantra* in 22 chapters, which would have been known to Yang dgon pa. There the term, which appears on almost every page, refers to one’s own body especially when visualizing oneself as a deity, as in the phrase “having perfectly generated your own body” (*rang gzugs yang dag bskyed nas ni/*). See *Gnyis su med pa mnyam pa nyid rnam par rgyal ba’i rtog pa’i rgyal po (Advayasamatāvijayākhyā-kalpa-mahārāja)*, 169/4.

perishes, and the mental body becomes manifest. Yang dgon pa has constructed a remarkable vision of embodiment that allows for the continuity of body, speech, and mind even after the coarse physical body has perished. This continuity is made possible by the idea of a mental body (*yid gyi lus*) that carries with it the elements of the subtle vajra body in the form of an ultimate central channel, an essence space wind, and a quintessence of the vital essence.

It might be argued here that, in positing a mental body, Yang dgon pa has failed to stay true to his vision that the ordinary human body, with all its substances, is the expression of the *Heruka* and the primary vehicle of transcendence. This concession on his part is probably to be attributed to the fact that the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation does pose a challenge to a theory that affords the body such a sacred status, Yang dgon pa seems to try to work with this problem without abandoning the body, a tough challenge. Positing of a mental body that carries the traces of a vajra body in some ways solves the problem, but it raises a host of questions of its own. If the channels disappear at death, as Yang dgon pa has asserted previously, where do they go? If the vajra body goes with or as the mental body, what does that look like? Does the “ultimate body, speech, and mind” have a form? If not, how is it anything at all? How does something with form and color (the vajra body) condense into something that can no longer be seen, and then transmigrate? Yang dgon pa does not address these questions. Perhaps such issues account for why later commentators within Yang dgon pa’s own lineage pulled back from his radically embodied perspective that painted even the mind in physical terms, and opted instead once again to separate the mind from the body within their discussions.

As Yang dgon pa concludes his section on the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body, speech, and mind inseparable, his rhetoric becomes emphatic as he underscores the importance of this aspect



of his theory, the key point that posits the ultimate inseparability of body, speech, and mind.

Regarding the indispensable status of this perspective, he says:

*de ltar lus ngag yid gsum dbyer med pa'i gnas lugs/ rdo rje theg pa'i rang gzhung thun  
mong ma yin pa ste/ ma rgyud nas risa gtso bor ston pa dang/ pha rgyud nas rlung gtso  
bor ston pa dang/<sup>789</sup> de thams cad nas sems gtso bor ston pa thams cad des shes pa dang  
go bar mdzod/<sup>790</sup> lus ngag yid gsum dbyer med pa la 'khor 'das kyi chos rnams ji ltar  
gnas cing 'char ba dang/ rigs drug gi snang ba'i 'khrul gzhi/<sup>791</sup> sgo 'gegs lugs dang/ rang  
gzhan gyi snang ba tha dad pa gcig gis byed pa dang/ lam rim pa gnyis kyi gnad/ lus  
gnad kyi rlung/<sup>792</sup> dbang du bsdu ba dang/ rlung sbyor gyis lus sems dbang du bsdud pa  
dang/ dmigs pas lus ngag dbang du bsdud pa'i thabs gnad/ gegs sel gyi gnad rnams des  
go bar bya'o/<sup>793</sup> gnad 'di ma go na gnad thams cad 'khrul 'gro bas/ 'di gal che'o/ de  
rnams kyi gsang tshig zhal las shes par bya'o/<sup>794</sup>*

So, the nature of the inseparability of the triad of body, speech, and mind is specific to the tradition of Vajrayāna. The mother tantras present the channels as the main [topic]. The father tantras present the winds as the main [topic]. All [tantras] present mind as the main [topic]. You should come to know via all of these [sources].<sup>795</sup>

The inseparability of body, speech, and mind is the mode by which one should know how all the phenomena of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa exist and appear. It is the way of blocking the door to the basic delusion of the projections of the six realms. It is that which dissolves

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<sup>789</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 251/5-6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 91: the order of the *ma rgyud* and *pha rgyud* clauses are reversed.

<sup>790</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 521/6-252/1: *ston pa'i dgongs pa tham cad de shes par mdzod*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 91: *bstan pa'i dgongs pa thams cad des shes pa dang go bar mdzod*.

<sup>791</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 252/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 92: *dang* inserted.

<sup>792</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 252/3; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 92: *sems* inserted.

<sup>793</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 252/4: *gegs sel gyi gnad dang thams cad kyis go bar bya'o*.

<sup>794</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 485/2-5.

<sup>795</sup> He mis variant: You should come to know all these teacher's intentions. Beijing variant: You should come to know and understand all the intentions of these teachings.

the difference between self and others. It is the mode by which one should know the essential point of the two phases of the path,<sup>796</sup> the mastery of winds<sup>797</sup> through the points of posture, the mastery of body-mind through training in breathing, the essential point of method of mastery of body and speech through visualization, and the essential points of dispelling hindrances.

If you do not know this one essential point, all essential points become confused. Therefore, this is very important. The secret words of those [instructions] should be learned from the mouth [of your teacher].

Yang dgon pa begins by asserting that the doctrine of inseparability is unique to the tradition of the Vajrayāna. And indeed we see his vision of integration continue to inform his *Explanation of the Hidden* through the end of the text. The above passage provides a remarkable summary of the many specific ways that a notion of inseparability works within a Vajrayāna context. He tells us that all phenomena should be known via this truth of inseparability, gesturing to an epistemology that takes inseparability as the key way of knowing or perceiving the world. This epistemology of inseparability, he tells us, is “the way that the different projections of self and other are made into one,” a statement that appears to refer to standard language of non-duality within the yogic traditions inherited in Tibet. He also points out that the concept of inseparability is the way one should understand “the essential point of the two phases of the path” (*lam rim pa gnyis kyi gnad*), gesturing to a common notion that a yogi should strive to unify the two phases of visualization practice, the creation phase (*bskyed rim*) and the completion phase (*rdzogs rim*). Finally, he

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<sup>796</sup> Interlinear note in Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings): “[The two phases are] the development phase and perfection phase unified, which are the basis of training and that which perfects the training.” The two phases of the path, the development phase and the completion phase, are two stages (sometimes envisioned as two aspects of a single process) of tantric visualization practice mentioned almost ubiquitously in Tibetan materials on *sādhana* practice. The development phase concerns the gradual development of the visualization of a deity. The completion phase concerns the dissolution of that visualization into its essential emptiness (Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication 2012).

<sup>797</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: mastery of wind-mind.

states that the notion of inseparability should inform all somatic practices of yoga, breathing, and dispelling hindrances, practices that would be connected with the six doctrines of Nāroṇa. In short, it is a mode of perception that is applied to ritual and liturgical practices, and it is this very mode of perception that makes these practices work.

Finally, he asserts that “The secret words of those [practices] should be known from the mouth of your teacher,” indicating that the application of the mode of perception called inseparability is to be left to the oral tradition. We do see, however, that the beginning of the practice of inseparability is “knowing and understanding” that body, speech, and mind are inseparable, the principal practice of knowledge through which Yang dgon pa’s text guides the reader in *Explanation of the Hidden*. The statement about the need for the oral tradition also indicates that Yang dgon pa may have written this work with a wider audience in mind, as he generally avoids discussion of specific practices, even when he reaches the section entitled “the path,” a section of the outline usually reserved for the discussion of practice.

Given the variety of practices that Yang dgon pa has named here, and the passages leading up to it, we now have a wider vision of what Yang dgon pa actually means by the notion of inseparability. In the context of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, he has indicated that inseparability of body, speech, and mind means an intertwining, at the deepest level, of the psychophysical elements of human life. Channels depend upon the winds to grow and develop. Speech depends upon winds and the thoughts in the mind to manifest. Mind cannot function without the support of the body’s physicality. In this sense, inseparability means interdependence. However, we also see inseparability in the way that the categories of body, speech, and mind overlap on many levels. The idea that wind and mind are inseparable, that cakras are a category of mind’s quintessences, and that the five root winds are a kind of

quintessence are examples of this. In these examples, inseparability is more literal and material. Categories of body, speech, and mind are referring to the various functions and body parts of a single organism, rather than discrete entities. On that level, the term “inseparability” (*dber med*) means something akin to integration. Both as interdependence and as integration, inseparability states the true condition of the body’s real state of being. Moreover, one more valence for this term is found here in the last portion of the passage. Inseparability is not only a truth about the body’s being. It is also a “mode through which one should understand.” It is, in this last sense, a *mode of perceiving*. It is an integrative perspective on everything. In this sense, the fourth *ngos po'i gnas lugs* is an epistemic realization that the previous three *ngos po'i gnas lugs* are really one, much in the way the fourth *kāya* functioned as the unity of the other three *kāyas* in some systems of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist discourse.<sup>798</sup>

### **Yang dgon pa’s Self-Traversing Path**

In the lineage of texts leading up to the *Explanation of the Hidden*, from Nāropa’s *The Truth of the Pure Mandate* (*Bka' yang dag pa'i tshad ma*) through the works preceding Yang dgon pa’s generation such as ‘Jig rten gsum mgon’s *A Commentary on the Bindu of Impeccable Conduct* (*Tshangs par spyod pa thig le'i khrid*), the main topic of concern and the broadest section within the texts’ outlines is the Buddhist path, including instructions on specific practices. Like Yang dgon pa’s *Explanation of the Hidden*, these earlier works bookend their path section with sections on the basis and the fruition, but in comparison to the broad and

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<sup>798</sup> Haribhadra forwarded a theory of a fourth *kāya* that transcended the notion of three separate *kāyas*. This notion would eventually be adopted in many Tibetan presentations (Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied: Sources of Controversy in India and Tibet*, 285-86).

detailed path sections in these works, these bookends are short. The one exception is the work that is arguably the closest precedent in form, name, and impulse to Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden*, that is, Phag mo gru pa's *Nature of the Vajra Body (Rdo rje lus kyi gnas lugs)*. Phag mo gru pa allows his basis section, which is a theoretical treatment of the vajra body itself, to take up almost half the space in this work. The other half concerns the somatic practices designed to draw the winds into the central channel. But in contrast to all of these precedents, Yang dgon pa's largest section in the *Explanation of the Hidden* is decidedly the basis, the section describing the psycho-physical aggregates as *dngos po'i gnas lugs*.<sup>799</sup> But, eventually, even *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body* arrives at the section called "The Path." This section is very short, but it is also one of the most remarkable in the work, and it shows how seriously Yang dgon pa believed that the spiritual dimensions of the path already have some kind of material existence in the body.

In all of the previous works that constituted Yang dgon pa's main precedents, the path sections provide didactic instructions on how to implement practices to achieve the state of liberation. In *Explanation of the Hidden*, however, we find few references to practices, and virtually no explicit directives. Rather, we find a remarkable theoretical treatment that naturalizes the path as the spontaneous outcome of human embodiment. In Yang dgon pa's theory of path, simply by virtue of inhabiting a body, a person enacts and traverses the Buddhist path. Yang dgon pa describes a naturalized path by virtue of which the lifespan of a living being, from the

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<sup>799</sup> This fact underscores that Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden* intends to act as a handbook principally about the tantric theory that supports that path, rather than a handbook of practice. Yang dgon pa's students Sphyan snga ba classified the *Explanation of the Hidden* as a subsection of Yang dgon pa's *Retreat Teachings* series. His other texts in this series emphasize the path, in a more conventional sense, and the specific practices intended to work with and manipulate the elements of subtle body for salvific release.

formation of the body in the womb to its demise at death, naturally and without effort embodies the integration of “method and insight,” standard terms for the goal of Tibetan Buddhist practice.

Yang dgon pa presents this remarkable theory in three subsections related to the formation, life, and death of the human body:

*lam gyi chos thams cad ji ltar tshang ba la gsum te/ chags pa thabs dang shes rab du chags pa dang/ gnas pa thabs dang shes rab du gnas pa dang/ 'jig pa thabs dang she rab du 'jig pa'o'*<sup>800</sup>

How all the phenomena of the path are completed:

1. When forming, formed as method and insight.
2. When living, living as method and insight.
3. When dying, dying as method and insight.

He then unpacks his outline, arguing that human physical development, the psycho-physical dimensions of human life, the conditions of a vajra body, sensory experiences, natural states of consciousness such as dreaming, and the dissolution of the body at death all naturally and spontaneously embody the dyadic union of method and insight:

*dang po ni sngon gyi las kyis rgyu byas/ pha ma'i 'du 'phrod kyis rkyen byas/ bar do'i rlung dang rnam shes kyis mtshams sbyar te*<sup>801</sup>*/ lus len pa ni/ pha ni thabs/ ma ni shes rab/ ti le dkar po ni thabs/ dmar po ni shes rab/ bar do'i rnam shes thabs/ las kyis rlung 'du 'phrod ni shes rab*<sup>802</sup> *bde ba ni thabs/ rang gi ngo bo stong pa ni shes rab/ pha'i lam du zhugs pa ni thabs/ ma'i mngal du skyal ba*<sup>803</sup> *ni she rab te/ de rnam tshogs pa las lus*

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<sup>800</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyis sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 485/6-486/1.

<sup>801</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyis sbas bshad* (He mis), 253/4: *nas*.

<sup>802</sup> *Ibid.*, 253/5: *bar do'i rlung thabs/ rnam shes shes rab*. *Rdo rje lus kyis sbas bshad* (Beijing), 93: *bar do'i rlung ni thabs/ rnam shes ni shes rab*.

<sup>803</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyis sbas bshad* (He mis), 253/6: *zhugs*.

*chags so/ ma'i mngal ni she rab/ skye ba ni thabs te/ thabs kyis<sup>804</sup> shes rab grub pa dang/  
shes rab la<sup>805</sup> thabs shar ba'o/*

*gnyis pa gnas pa thabs dang shes rab du gnas pa ni/ skyes pa thabs/ bud med shes rab/  
g.yas pa thabs/ g.yon pa shes rab/ nyin par<sup>806</sup> thabs/ mtshan mo shes rab/ rlung dang thi  
le<sup>807</sup> thabs/ rtsa shes rab/ rlung gi yang steng rlung dang rtsol ba thabs/ srog dang og  
rlung shes rab/ thi[g] le bdud rtsi lnga'i dangs ma thabs/ 'byung ba gzhi'i dangs ma shes  
rab/ rtsa'i 'khor lo gong ma thabs/ 'og ma shes rab/ lus ngag thabs/ sems shes rab/ snang  
ba thabs/ stong pa shes rab/ dbang po drug thabs/ yul drug shes rab/ 'gro ba thabs/ 'dzin  
pa shes rab/<sup>808</sup> gnyid thabs/ rmi lam shes rab/<sup>809</sup> de la sogs pa phyi nang gi chos thams  
cad la thabs dang shes rab du ma gyur ba<sup>810</sup> med de/ thabs kyis<sup>811</sup> shes rab grub pa dang/  
shes rab las<sup>812</sup> thabs shar bar shes par bya'o/*

*gsum pa 'jig pa thabs dang shes rab du 'jig pa ni/ 'byung ba bzhi thim pa thabs/ dbang po  
thim pa shes rab/ snang ba<sup>813</sup> rags pa thim pa thabs/ phra ba thim pa shes rab/ rtsa mdud  
grol ba thabs/ yig ge<sup>814</sup> g.yo ba shes rab/ rlung 'gags pa thabs/ rnam rtog 'gags pa shes  
rab/ lus ngag phra rags thim pa thabs/ 'od gsal 'char ba shes rab te/ thabs kyis<sup>815</sup> shes  
rab grub pa dang/ 'chi ba shes rab/ bar do'i skye ba thabs te/ shes rab las thabs shar*

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<sup>804</sup> Ibid., 254/1: *la*.

<sup>805</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 93: *las*.

<sup>806</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 254/3: *mo*.

<sup>807</sup> Ibid., 254/3; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 93: *thig le*.

<sup>808</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 254/6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 93: last two phrases are *rkang lag thabs/ 'gro dang 'dzin pa shes rab*.

<sup>809</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 254/6: *rmi lam thabs/ gnyid shes rab*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 93-4: *gnyid shes rab/ rmi lam thabs*.

<sup>810</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 255/1: *grub pa*.

<sup>811</sup> Ibid., 255/1: *la*.

<sup>812</sup> Ibid., 255/1: *la*.

<sup>813</sup> Ibid., 255/3: *dbang po*.

<sup>814</sup> Ibid., 255/3; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 94: *thig le*.

<sup>815</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 255/5: *la*.

*ba'o*<sup>816</sup> *de ltar 'jig chags gnas gsum thabs dang shes rab du 'dug la/ lam kyi ngo bo thabs dang shes rab yin pas lam thams cad tshang te*<sup>817</sup>

First, previous karma has created the cause. The mother and father's sexual intercourse creates the conditions. The wind and consciousness of the bardo unite with that, and a body is taken. The father is method. The mother is insight. The white vital essence is method. The red is insight. The consciousness of the intermediate state is method. The karmic wind of intercourse is insight.<sup>818</sup> Bliss is method. The self-essence of emptiness is insight. Coursing down the father's path is method. Taking birth from the mother's womb is insight. From the coming together of those things, the body is formed. The mother's womb is insight. Birth is method. By<sup>819</sup> method, insight is created. In<sup>820</sup> insight, method appears.

Second, when living, living as method and insight. Men are method. Women are insight. The right is method. The left is insight. The day is method. The night is insight. Winds and vital essences are method. Channels are insight. The upper wind and exertion are method. The lower wind and the life-force are insight. The quintessences of the five vital essence nectars are method. The quintessences of the four elements are insight. The upper channel-cakras are method. The lower channel-cakras are insight. Body and speech are method. Mind is insight. Appearances are method. Emptiness is insight. The six senses are method. The six objects are insight. Going is method. Staying is insight.<sup>821</sup> Sleep is method. Dream is insight.<sup>822</sup> Things like this demonstrate that there is nothing of all inner and outer phenomena that does not become<sup>823</sup> method and insight. One should know that insight is created through<sup>824</sup> method, and method appears from<sup>825</sup> insight.

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<sup>816</sup> *Ibid.*, 255/5-6: *thabs las shes rab grub pa dang/ shes rab thabs shar ba'o*.

<sup>817</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 486/1-487/3.

<sup>818</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: The wind of the intermediate state is method. Consciousness is wisdom.

<sup>819</sup> He mis variant: in.

<sup>820</sup> Beijing variant: from.

<sup>821</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: Feet and hands are method. Walking and grasping are insight.

<sup>822</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: Dream is method. Sleep is insight.

<sup>823</sup> He mis variant: does not consist of.

<sup>824</sup> He mis variant: in.

<sup>825</sup> He mis variant: in.



Third, when dying, dying as method and insight. This dissolution of the four elements is method. The dissolution of the senses is insight. The dissolution of coarse appearances<sup>826</sup> is method. The dissolution of subtle [appearances] is insight. The freeing of the knots in the channels is method. The moving of the letters<sup>827</sup> is insight. The stopping of the breath is method. The stopping of conceptuality is insight. The dissolution of coarse and subtle body and mind is method. The dawning of luminosity is insight. Thus, insight is created through<sup>828</sup> method. Death is insight, and birth into the bardo is method. Thus, method appears from insight.<sup>829</sup> In that way, death, formation, and life all exist as method and insight. Because the essence of the path is method and insight, all paths are complete [in that].

For Yang dgon pa, all the aspects and stages of life naturally and spontaneously express the dyad of method and insight, and that dyad covers all aspects of the Buddhist path. Indeed it covers the rest of life as well, including sexual intercourse, cycles of time, gender structure, the body's functions, sense experience, sleeping, and even death. Given that the integration of method and insight is a common idea in the Mahāyāna and tantric Buddhist root and commentarial literature used to describe the fruition, Yang dgon pa presents us here with a vision in which the body (and its experiences, such as right, left, day, and night) spontaneously, and without special effort, enacts the Buddhist salvific process.

It might seem as if this passage would be enough to make this point, but Yang dgon pa does not stop there. Rather, he widens the principle to cover more aspects of Buddhist practice, and at the same time brings this principle closer and more specifically into the realm of the physical body. Human life not only naturally embodies method and insight; the body itself spontaneously enacts the forms of religious ritual effortlessly and without volition. Having stated

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<sup>826</sup> He mis variant: course senses.

<sup>827</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: vital essences.

<sup>828</sup> He mis variant: in.

<sup>829</sup> He mis variant: Insight is created from method, and method appears as insight.

that human life naturally enacts the dyad of method and insight, he goes even further to relate other common doctrines and rituals to the spontaneous cycles of the body.

Yang dgon pa begins by exploring the possibility that the process of “ripening and liberating” (*smin grol*), a common way of classifying the process of the tantric path into two phases, is really the process of conception, gestation, birth, and life. We already saw intimations of this perspective in Yang dgon pa’s discussion of fetal development, in which the fetus mirrors the development of a Buddha. But, in this case, Yang dgon pa relates the process of conception and birth to specific rituals and practices that tantric adepts are familiar with as the doorway and heart of their practice. Yang dgon pa begins with the tantric ritual of the “path of ripening empowerment” (*smin lam dbang*), which is—as Yang dgon pa explains it—inherent in the act of conception:

*gsang ngags gi*<sup>830</sup> *lam thams cad smin grol gnyis su 'dus la/ de yang thog mar smin lam dbang*<sup>831</sup> *sngon du 'gro ba ste/ dang po lus grub pa'i dus na dbang bzhi thob pa ni/ yab kyi thi[g] le bar do'i shes pa*<sup>832</sup> *la phog pa bum dbang/ mngal du dkar dmar 'dzom pa*<sup>833</sup> *ma'i thi[g] le*<sup>834</sup> *btums pa gsang dbang/ lhan chig skyes pa'i dga' ba dang bcas pa shes rab ye shes kyi dbang/ rnam par shes pa bde bas*<sup>835</sup> *mi rtog par [b]rgyal ba*<sup>836</sup> *dbang bzhi*

<sup>830</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 256/1; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 94: *kyi*.

<sup>831</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis): *bzhi* inserted.

<sup>832</sup> *Ibid.*, 256/2: *rnam par shes pa*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 94: *rnam shes*.

<sup>833</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 256/3: *te*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 94: *ste*.

<sup>834</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 256/3; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 94: *les*.

<sup>835</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 256/4: *bde gsal*.

<sup>836</sup> *Ibid.*, 256/4; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 95: *brgyal ba*.

*pa ste/ bar do'i*<sup>837</sup> *lus ngag yid gsum kyi dri ma dag nas rnam smin gyi lus ngag yid gsum gyi skal pa thob pa'o*<sup>838</sup>

All the paths of secret mantra can be condensed into ripening and liberation. Regarding that, first comes the path of ripening, empowerment,<sup>839</sup> which is the preliminary act. When the body is first formed, one receives the four empowerments. The merging of the father's semen with the intermediate consciousness is the vase empowerment. The mingling, in the womb, of the white and red, which is then coated with the mother's vital essence, is the secret empowerment. The aspect of co-emergent joy is the consort-gnosis empowerment. Consciousness falling into non-conceptuality by way of bliss is the fourth empowerment.<sup>840</sup> Once the stains of the body, speech, and mind<sup>841</sup> of the intermediate state are purified, one obtains the good fortune of a fully ripened body, speech, and mind.

Here Yang dgon pa envisions the tantric paths of ripening as inherent in being born. The great Rnying ma tantric commentator Rtse le Sna tshogs rang grol (b. 1608) provides a standard explanation of the path of ripening as typically consisting in receiving tantric ritual empowerment(s) from a tantric guru, and the path of liberation as consisting in the meditative practices of development and completion. Development phase refers to visualization, formal *sādhana*, and ritual practices. Completion phase sometimes refers to the practices of somatic yogas such as inner heat, and sometimes to non-elaborate meditation practices such as *mahāmudrā*.<sup>842</sup> But as Yang dgon pa explains it here, the tantric ritual of empowerment is already intrinsic to the very act of conception. The process of the merging of an intermediate

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<sup>837</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 256/5; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 95: *bar do yid kyi*.

<sup>838</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo Idings), 487/3-5.

<sup>839</sup> He mis variant: the four empowerments.

<sup>840</sup> He mis variant: Consciousness falling into bliss, clarity and non-conceptuality is the fourth empowerment.

<sup>841</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: the mental body, speech, and mind.

<sup>842</sup> Tsele Natsok Rangdrol, *Empowerment and the Path of Liberation*, trans. Eric Pema Kunzang (Kathmandu, Nepal: Ranjung Yeshe Publications, 1983), 15-17.

being's consciousness with the father's semen, followed by fertilization and the arising of the passion and non-conceptuality of sexual intercourse, all enact a kind of "empowerment" of the fetus, purifying it for the next step of this innate Buddhist path.

To show further how the body expresses the path of liberation, Yang dgon pa recapitulates the application of the development and completion phases to gestation and the natural bodily processes inherent in the body after birth. He first addresses the body's enactment of the generation phase, which occurs through the phases of fetal gestation, which he glosses as the development of a Buddha's body. This is followed by the development of the structures of the formed body as the full tantric *maṇḍala*:

*de nas grol lam rim pa gnyis las/ bskyed pa'i rim pa ni mer mer po dang nur nur po la  
sogs pa lus rim kyis chags par skye gnas bzhi/ dag pa'i mngon par byang chub pa lnga la  
sogs pa'i tshul gyis lhar bskyed la/ de las lus bskyed de/ phung po khams skye mched yan  
lag dang bcas pa rims kyis rdzogs pa ni<sup>843</sup> rigs lnga yum<sup>844</sup> byang chub sems dpa' khro  
bo dang bcas pa/ rtsa khams dpa' bo dang dpa' mo/ yul sum cu so bdun gzhal yas khang/  
dur khrod srung 'khor dang bcas pa'i bskyed rims phun sum tshogs pa mngon du byas  
pa'o/ de yang rgyud brtag pa gnyis pa las<sup>845</sup>*

*rnam par dag pa'i sems kyis ni/<sup>846</sup>  
rang bzhin mya ngan 'das pa nyid//  
lha'i rnam pa'i gzugs kyis ni//  
bzhin la<sup>847</sup> kha dog gnas pa ni//  
bskyed pa tsam gyis rnam par gnas//  
'on kyang bag chags phal pas so/<sup>848</sup>*

<sup>843</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 257/2: *dang bcas pa la sog pa yong su rdzogs pa ni*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 95: *dang bcas pa yong su rdzogs pa ni*.

<sup>844</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 257/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 95: *yab yum*.

<sup>845</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 257/4: *kye'i rdo rje las*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 95: *kye rdo rje'i rgyud brtag pa gnyis pa nas*.

<sup>846</sup> *Kye'i rdo rje*, 39: *rnam dag rnam pa'i sems kyis ni*.

<sup>847</sup> *Ibid.*, 39: *lag*.

*ces so/ de ltar lus grub pa bskyed rim*<sup>849</sup>

From the two phases of the path of liberation, the first is the development phase: The body is gradually formed going through the phases of “oval,” “thickened,” and so forth. There are four kinds of birth. By ways such as the five manifest awakenings, the deity is developed. From that, the body is born. The gradual<sup>850</sup> completion of the aggregates, *dhātus* and *āyatanas*, with their branches are the mothers<sup>851</sup> of the five families, bodhisattvas and wrathful ones. The channels and constituents<sup>852</sup> are heroes and heroines. Thus, the full development phase, with the thirty-seven countries, the celestial palace, the cemeteries, the protection circle, is completely actualized [in the body]. As the *Tantra in Two Parts*<sup>853</sup> says,

The completely pure mind  
is already naturally nirvāṇa.  
The form of the deity exists,  
with a similar color,  
by just being born.  
However, our habits are ordinary.

In this way, the formation of the body is the generation phase.

Once the body has been formed, it carries out the tantric completion phase practices through the natural events of everyday living. Yang dgon pa relates the ordinary mechanisms of breathing, thinking, dreaming, sleeping, and waking to the five completion stages found in the Cakrasaṃvara tantra:

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<sup>848</sup> Ibid., Part II, Chapter 2, Verse 44, 39.

<sup>849</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 487/5-488/3.

<sup>850</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: full.

<sup>851</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: mothers and fathers.

<sup>852</sup> In this case, the constituents (*kham*s) probably refers to the products in the channels as discussed in the previous chapter, and referenced in Appendix III. See Garrett, *Religion, Medicine and the Human Embryo in Tibet*, 78, for the overlapping uses of the terminology *kham*s, *gdangs ma* and *thig le*.

<sup>853</sup> He mis variant: the *Hevajra Tantra*. Beijing variant: the *Two-part Hevajra Tantra*.

*rlung 'byung 'jug rdo rje'i bzlas pa/ snang ba gsum gyi rnam rtog sems la dmigs pa/ rmi lam sgyu lus/ gnyid 'od gsal/ nyin par zung 'jug<sup>854</sup> te rim pa lnga'i tshul gyis rdzogs pa'i rim pa yang tshang la<sup>855</sup>*

The five stages of the completion phase are also fulfilled [in the body]:<sup>856</sup> inhaling and exhaling [while breathing] is the “vajra recitation,”<sup>857</sup> the concepts of the three appearances<sup>858</sup> are “focusing on the mind,” dreams are “illusory body,” sleep is “luminosity,” and waking is “union.”

Yang dgon pa continues to unfold the vision of a body that naturally enacts tantric practice through explaining how the four *mudrās*, the fire ceremony, and the practice of *ganacakra* are enacted spontaneously and naturally by the body:

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<sup>854</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 258/1: 'byung 'jug. This seems to be a copy error.

<sup>855</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 488/2-3.

<sup>856</sup> The five stages are completion phase practices found in the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*: isolation of speech, isolation of mind, illusory body, luminosity, and union (*ngag dben, sems dben, sgyu lus, 'od gsal*, and *zung 'jug*). See Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, *The Treasury of Knowledge: Book Eight, Part Three: The Elements of Tantric Practice: a general exposition of the process of meditation in the indestructible way of secret mantra*, 292. Another version of five stages are also found in the Guhyasamāja tradition. See Tsoñ-kha-pa Blo-bzañ-grags-pa, *Brilliant Illumination of the Lamp of the Five Stages (Rim lnga rab tu gsal ba'i sgron me) : Practical Instruction in the King of Tantras, The Glorious Esoteric Community, and Nāgārjuna, Pañcakrama*.

<sup>857</sup> The vajra recitation is a phase of tantric completion phase practice involving formal training in vase breathing. For a description of this practice in the context of the *Kālacakra Tantra*, see Mkhas grub Nor bzang rgya mtsho, *Ornament of Stainless Light*, 14, 483-493.

<sup>858</sup> The white, red, and black appearances are related to phases that the mind goes through when transitioning between states of consciousness and unconsciousness. The three appearances, in the teachings of the six yogas of Nāropa, are believed to occur with the arising and dissolution of every conceptual thought. See Elio Guarisco, “Introduction,” in *The Treasury of Knowledge: Book Six, Part Four, Systems of Buddhist Tantra* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2005), 35-36. For a description of the three appearances at death, see Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, *The Light of Wisdom*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Kathmandu: Ranjung Yeshe Publications, 1998).

*lus lha skur gnas pa ni dam tshig gi phyag rgya/ lte ba'i a shad kyi me ham dang snyom par 'jug pa ni<sup>859</sup> las kyi phyag rgya/ dug gsum la sogs pa<sup>860</sup> phra rags kyi rtog pa 'gags pa chos kyi phyag rgya/ de rnams gshis lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes<sup>861</sup> phyag rgya chen po te/ phyag rgya bzhi'i tshul gyis lam rim pa gnyis rang chas su tshang ba'o/ lam gyi yan lag rnams tshang te/ sum mdo thab khung/ a thung me lha/ ro rkyang dgang blugs/ rlung dang thi[g] le bsreg rdzas te sbyin sreg rang chas/ kha zas gang za ba<sup>862</sup> tshogs kyi yo byad/ mnyam gnas kyi rlung rnal 'byor pa/ dangs snyigs 'byed pa cho ga/ rtsa khams dkyil 'khor gyi 'khor lo/ dangs ma rtsa mig du slebs pa mchod pa te/ tshogs 'kor rang chas<sup>863</sup>*

The existence of the body as the deity's body is the *samayamudrā*. Bringing the fire of the *A* stroke at the navel into union with the *ham* is *karmamudrā*.<sup>864</sup> The stopping of the coarse and subtle thoughts of the three poisons, and so forth,<sup>865</sup> is *dharmamudrā*. The ultimate nature of those is the *jñanamudrā* of co-emergence.<sup>866</sup> Thus, by way of the four *mudrās*, the two phases are intrinsically complete.

The branches of the path are also complete [in the body]: Where the three main channels join is the “hearth.” The short *A* is the “fire god.” The right and left channels are the “fire ceremony spoons.” Wind and vital essences are the “burnt offerings.” Thus, an intrinsic fire ceremony is present in the body.

Whatever foods one eats are “the requisites of the *gaṇacakra*.” The equalizing wind is “the yogi.” The separating of nutrients from waste is the “the ritual.” The channels and elements are the “*maṇḍala-cakra*.” The arriving of the nutrients at the center of the channels is the “offering.” Thus, an intrinsic *gaṇacakra* is taking place in the body.

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<sup>859</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 258/3; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 96: *gtum mo* inserted.

<sup>860</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 258/3: *dus gsum log nas*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing): *dus gsum la sogs pa*.

<sup>861</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 258/3-4: *de rnams kyi gshis lhan gcig skyes pa ni*.

<sup>862</sup> *Ibid.*, 258/6; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 96: *zos pa*.

<sup>863</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings): 488/3-6.

<sup>864</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: "of inner heat" inserted.

<sup>865</sup> He mis variant: The stopping of the coarse and subtle thoughts, having reversed the three times. Beijing variant: The stopping of the coarse and subtle thoughts of the three times, and so forth.

<sup>866</sup> He mis variant: The ultimate nature of those, co-emergence, is *jñanamudrā*.

The four mudras are inherent in sexual intercourse. The fire ceremony is inherent in the structure and function of the subtle body of channels, winds, and vital essences. The *gaṇacakra* (sacred feast) is inherent in the process of consuming and digesting food. Ordinary foods are the substances for the sacred feast. The equalizing wind, which we will recall from the section on the winds is the instigator of digestion, is the yogi performing the feast. The separation of the quintessences from the waste is the liturgical ritual performed by this yogi. The channels and constituents produced from the quintessences are the *maṇḍala* constructed within the ritual. Finally, the arriving of nutrients at the center of the channels is the ritual offering of the feast. Thus does the body perform the sacred liturgical ritual of *gaṇacakra* simply through the process of imbibing and digesting food. Similarly, he adds, human gestation involves a natural receiving of tantric empowerment and the perfection of the development and completion phases of practice. His brevity here may simply be due to the fact that he already described the correspondences of fetal development to the tantric path in the embryology section, and will do so once again below.

In the next passage, he continues to develop the idea that the development and completion phases continue to unfold throughout life and are simultaneous with human embodiment:

*de ltar lus len tsa na dbang bzhi*<sup>867</sup> *thob*<sup>868</sup> *de nas lus rdzogs kyi bar du bskyed rdzogs rnamslabs pa/ bskyed pa dang lam rdzogs rims*<sup>869</sup> *yan lag dang bcas pa/ gnyid*<sup>870</sup>

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<sup>867</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 259/2: *rdzogs par* inserted.

<sup>868</sup> Ibid., 259/2: *de nas lus rdzogs par thob* inserted.

<sup>869</sup> Ibid., 259/3; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 96: *lam bskyed rdzogs*.

<sup>870</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis): *nyid*.



*rdzogs rims/ sad pa bskyed rims/ shi ba rdzogs rims/ skye ba bskyed rims la sogs pa'i tshul du lam rang chas/*<sup>871</sup>

So, as soon as one takes a body, one<sup>872</sup> obtains the four empowerments.<sup>873</sup> Then, while the body is developing, one trains in the development and completion phases.

The phases of the development path and completion together with their branches:<sup>874</sup> Sleep<sup>875</sup> is the completion phase. Waking is the development phase. Death is the completion phase. Birth is the development phase, etc. In this way, the path is intrinsic.

Here, Yang dgon pa begins to knit the larger picture together into a remarkable doctrinal point: the Buddhist path, since it manifests naturally in the body and the process of living, is not a path to be consciously enacted through formal religious practice. It is already intrinsic and innate to the reality of being alive and in a body. Yang dgon pa introduces us here to a phrase that he seems to have coined to express this idea: “intrinsic path” (*lam rang chas*). Since organic life enacts this intrinsic path, death and rebirth—often framed in Buddhist practice as the epitome of the cycle of *samsara*—enacts the intrinsic fruition of that path:

*de'i 'bras bu 'chi ba chos sku/ bar do longs sku/ skye ba sprul sku'i tshul du 'bras bu rang chas te/ rdo rje lus kyi rang 'gros*<sup>876</sup> *lam 'bras bu dang bcas pa/ rgyu lhan cig skyes/ lam lhan cig skyes/ 'bras bu lhan cig skyes kyi tshul du lhun gyi rdzogs pas*<sup>877</sup> *gsang sngag*

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<sup>871</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 488/6-489/1.

<sup>872</sup> He mis variant: “fully” inserted.

<sup>873</sup> He mis variant: “Then one fully obtains a body” inserted.

<sup>874</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: Development, and the path of development and completion together with their branches.

<sup>875</sup> He mis variant: Daytime.

<sup>876</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 259/5; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 97: *la* inserted.

<sup>877</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 259/6: *lhan gcig tu rdzog pas*.

*tshé cig gis sangs rgya ba'i rgyu mtshan dang sbyang gzhi sbyong byed ces pa'i lam*<sup>878</sup>  
*bskyed rdzogs kyi don thams cad des go bar bya'o'*<sup>879</sup>

The fruition of that [path]: Dying is the *dharmakāya*. The intermediate state is the *sambhogakāya*. Birth is the *nirmāṇākāya*. In this way, the fruition is also intrinsic.

The self-traversing path of the vajra body with its fruition<sup>880</sup> is spontaneously perfected by way of having a natural cause, natural path, and natural fruition.

This is the cause of secret mantra's enlightenment in a single lifetime. Through that, all the meanings of the development and completion path<sup>881</sup> which is the "basis of purification and the act of purifying" can be understood.

The ordinary body, from its conception to its demise, from death through to rebirth, is on a self-traversing path (*lam rang 'gros*) that spontaneously completes itself. The cause, path, and fruition are natural (Tib. *lhan cig skyes pa*, Skt. *sahaja*), or innate. This was a point that was intimated in the context of the embryology, but was not brought into full clarity until this point in Yang dgon pa's discussion. He even goes so far as to say this is the reason (*rgyu mtshan*) that attaining the goal of buddhahood is possible in a single lifetime. The body, without effort, realizes that very goal by simply living its life.

At this point, Yang dgon pa has made a case that the body itself enacts the path of ritual practice, Dharma in action. But he goes even further to assert that the body is also the Dharma of text:

*lam gyi chos thams cad ma tshang ba med par lus thabs kyi rgyud/ 'khor 'das kyi chos thams cad 'dus pa la*<sup>882</sup> *brten nas gsal bar ston pas bshad rgyud do/ dpal bir ba'i rdo rje*

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<sup>878</sup> Ibid., 260/1; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing): *lam* elided.

<sup>879</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings): 488/6-489/2.

<sup>880</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: In the vajra body's self-traversing, the path with the fruition...

<sup>881</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: "path" elided.

*tshig rkang nas/ lus thabs rgyud sogs gsum pa bzhi'i rgyu dbang/ cas pa dang/ lus la brten nas bde chen kyi sgrib pa 'dag cing/ gsal bar ston pas bshad rgyud cas gsungs so/*<sup>883</sup>

There is not a single aspect of the path that is not fulfilled in the body, so [the body] is a “method tantra.” Because it collects all of the phenomena of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, [the body] clearly teaches,<sup>884</sup> so it is also an “explanatory tantra.”

The glorious Virūpa says in the *Vajra Lines*, “The body is a method tantra and so forth, the third and the fourth tantric empowerment” And, “Relying on the body, the obscurations to great bliss are purified and because it teaches, [the body] is an explanatory tantra.”<sup>885</sup>

Here Yang dgon pa suggests that body not only enacts the path, it exists naturally as the core tantric texts. Early Sa skya commentators also unpacked Virūpa’s verses through the metaphor of body as text.<sup>886</sup> More broadly, however, the new (*gsar ma*) lineages of Tibetan Buddhism use the term “method tantra” synonymously with “father tantra” (*pha rgyud*), and apply it to tantras that generally emphasize male deities, and that have as their goal actualization of an illusory body.<sup>887</sup> An example is the *Hevajra Tantra*, and given the close connection between Virūpa and that cycle of teachings, it is understandable why the father class of tantra was selected as a metaphor here for the body. Within the Buddhist tantric systems of Tibet, an explanatory tantra is understood as

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<sup>882</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 260/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing): *thams cad lus la*.

<sup>883</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 489/2-3.

<sup>884</sup> He mis and Beijing variant: Because all of the phenomena of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* clearly teach depending on the body...

<sup>885</sup> These lines from Virūpa’s *Vajra Lines*, which occur towards the beginning of that work, can be found in slightly different version in Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 484: *lus thabs rgyud stsogs la gdan stsogs stsogs gsum pa bzhis rgyu'i dbang/ and lus la brten nas bde chen gyi sgrib pa 'gag cing 'tshang rgya bar gsal bas bshad rgyud*.

<sup>886</sup> *Ibid.*, 493, fn. 3.

<sup>887</sup> Guarisco, "Introduction," 7.

a commentary on a root tantra. While the seeds of Yang dgon pa's doctrine of a self-traversing path can be found in *niruttarayoga tantras*, and is explicitly drawn from Virūpa's *Vajra Lines*, presumably via Sa skya Paṇḍita or Ko brag pa's transmission, the synthesis and gathering together of these points and the naming of a "self traversing path" appear to be Yang dgon pa's own doctrinal innovation.

The picture that Yang dgon pa has presented to us so far shows how the body—along with its functions, processes and phases—is the path that brings liberation to its full fruition. This happens naturally, and without effort or education. Yang dgon pa has so far stated this in the most literal sense, without qualifying his point of view. However, this vision suggests a potential problem. If the tantric path is self-traversing by virtue merely of having a body, why would a yogi make any efforts toward learning or engaging in formal practices? Yang dgon pa anticipates this question:

*des na de ltar gdod nas gnas na bla mas mtshon pa dang<sup>888</sup> nyams su blang ci dgos zhe  
na/ de ni ngo ma shes cing thabs kyi ma zin pa<sup>889</sup>/ byad kyi nor bu bzhin/ rang la yod  
kyang phan ma thogs pa'o/ de yang brtag gnyis las/*

*rin chen gzi brjid 'bar ba yi//  
phreng ba dkrugs<sup>890</sup> pa lha mos ltos//  
ma phugs pas ni sbyor bral 'gyur//  
phugs pas dga' ba sbyin pa'o//<sup>891</sup>  
de ltar 'khor ba<sup>892</sup> 'dod pa yis//  
yon tan lnga ldan rin chen nyid//  
ma dag pas ni dug du 'gyur//*

<sup>888</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 260/5: *lam* inserted.

<sup>889</sup> *Ibid.*, 260/5: *thabs la smongs pa*.

<sup>890</sup> Li thang, *Co ne Bka' 'gyur* (*Dpe bsdur ma* notation): 'khrug

<sup>891</sup> Snar thang, *Pe cin Bka' 'gyur*: *pa po*.

<sup>892</sup> *Kye'i rdo rje*, 69: *bar*.

*dag pas*<sup>893</sup> *bdud rtsi lta bur 'gyur*//<sup>894</sup>

*ces so/ lam snying po'i rang 'gros 'khor ba dong nas sprug cing/ sang mi rgya ba'i rang dbang med pa'o*<sup>895</sup>

Therefore, since [the path] exists primordially like that, we might say, “why does it need to be pointed out by a lama, and why practice?”<sup>896</sup> That is not recognizing, and not being held by the method.<sup>897</sup> It is like the jewel of the strong man. Although it exists in you, there is no benefit. With regard to that, *Part Two* [of the *Hevajra Tantra*] says,

Look, goddess, whose necklaces  
Shimmer with blazing splendor,  
A jewel uncut is useless,  
But a jewel cut bestows joy.  
In that way, if the jewel  
Of the five sense pleasures of saṃsāra  
Is not purified, it becomes poison.  
If purified, it becomes nectar.<sup>898</sup>

The essential self-traversing path stirs saṃsāra from its depths, and one cannot help but to attain buddhahood.

Yang dgon pa indicates that the presence of a self-traversing path does not obviate the need for formal practice. Two metaphors support this point. The “jewel of a strong man” is a common metaphor in Tibetan commentarial literature used to illustrate the Mahāyāna theory that we carry

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<sup>893</sup> Li thang, *Co ne Bka' 'gyur: par*.

<sup>894</sup> *Kye'i rdo rje*, 69.

<sup>895</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 489/3-6.

<sup>896</sup> He mis variant: why practice a path?

<sup>897</sup> He mis variant: and being deluded about the method.

<sup>898</sup> The verses come in the context of the tantric ritual slaying of a symbolic victim, and the “jewel” here seems to be referring to the body of the victim, although Yang dgon pa seems to utilize the verse simply in support of the need to practice in order to purify saṃsāra. An alternate translation can be found in Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*, 6, 117.

around buddhanature, but do not realize it is there.<sup>899</sup> A modern oral teaching by Khra 'gu Rin po che tells the story this way: A strong man (*gyad*) has a jewel embedded in his forehead, but he is not very smart. He reaches up to feel the jewel, believing it to be there, but is unable to feel it or benefit from it because there is a fold of skin over the jewel. Similarly, our obscurations, like the fold of skin, prevent us from discovering and benefiting from innate buddhanature, which is like the jewel.<sup>900</sup> Yang dgon pa is applying this analogy to the intrinsic path within the body that naturally enacts enlightenment. While individuals have it, they do not realize it, so they must engage in tantric practice to make the jewel manifest. Then he evokes another jewel metaphor in a quote from *Hevajra*. This represents the tantric perspective that the five sense pleasures are like an uncut jewel. They are only useful if the pleasures are “purified,” which here would mean framed and trained within formal tantric practice. But having made concession to those who might worry about the antinomian tendencies of his own position, he concludes the passage by returning to his own emphasis, which remains in significant tension with a need for formal practice: “The essential self-traversing path stirs *samsāra* from its depths, and one cannot help but to attain buddhahood” (*lam snying po'i rang 'gros 'khor ba dong nas sbrug cing/ sang mi rgya ba'i rang dbang med pa'o*). The language of inevitability undermines the caveat he has just supplied. While Yang dgon pa acknowledges the idea that students of tantric Buddhism must not abandon practice, the point he seems invested in says something different: the body is already a self-traversing path.

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<sup>899</sup> Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication 2012.

<sup>900</sup> Khenchen Trangu Rinpoche, *The Practice of Tranquility and Insight: A Guide to Tibetan Buddhist Meditation*, trans. Peter Alan Roberts (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1993), 104.

## Yang dgon pa's Self-Fulfilling Fruition

Yang dgon pa devotes the last few folios of his work to the third major section of the *Explanation of the Hidden*, the fruition. Mirroring the impulse of the Path section, he structures this final section around the phases of an ordinary human lifespan: when formed, formed as a Buddha, when living, living as a Buddha, and when perishing, perishing as a Buddha. Here Yang dgon pa demonstrates again how fundamental articulations of the fruition of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhist practice are present innately in the ordinary human body. Earlier in the embryology section, we saw this impulse playing out in Yang dgon pa's alignment of fetal development with the five manifest awakenings. In the fruition section, however, he goes further to say that birth from a womb ensures that a being embodies the four *kāyas* throughout life:

*de ltar mngon par byang chub pa lnga'i tshul gyis mngal nas skyes pa thams cad/ lha mngal skyes/ rdzus nas skyes pa thams cad lha rdzus skyes te<sup>901</sup>/ rnam smin gyi lus sprul sku/ bar do yid kyi lus dang rmi lam bag chags kyi lus longs sku/ sems chos sku te sku gsum dbyer med bde ba chen po'i<sup>902</sup> sku'o/<sup>903</sup>*

All beings born from a womb by way of the five manifest awakenings are born of a divine womb. All beings born by miraculous birth have a god's miraculous birth.<sup>904</sup> Therefore, the fully ripened body is the *nirmanakāya*. The mental body of the intermediate state and the habitual body of dreams is the *sambhogakāya*. The mind is the *dharmakāya*. The inseparability of the three bodies is *mahāsukhakāya*.<sup>905</sup>

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<sup>901</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 262/5: *brdzus nas skyes pa'i lha thams cad lha rdzus skyes*.

<sup>902</sup> *Ibid.*, (He mis), 262/6: *bde ba chen po lhan gcig skyes pa'i*.

<sup>903</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 490/3-5.

<sup>904</sup> He mis variant: All gods born from a miracle have a god's miraculous birth.

<sup>905</sup> He mis variant: the coemergent *mahāsukhakāya*.

In this passage Yang dgon pa aligns the experiences of an ordinary body (*lus*) with the enlightened *kāyas* (*sku*) of a Buddha. The “fully ripened body,” the “mental body of the bardo,” and the “habitual body of dreams” are sets of terms that normally are either opposed entirely to enlightenment, or are viewed as a basis of purification that has potential to become a *kāya*. But here, these impure bodies are revealed as the pure *kāyas* of a Buddha. Once again, he wraps up with the point of inseparability: just as body, speech, and mind are inseparable, the *kāyas* are also inseparable.

Next, Yang dgon pa makes the case that when a body lives, it naturally lives as a Buddha (*sangs rgyas su gnas pa*). He explains this by showing that in the act of being born and living, any given human being and its family embody exemplars of Buddhist ideals, the archetype of the fully ordained monk, and the archetype of the Buddha. He begins with the ordained monk who is practicing tantra:

*dang po pha mkhan po/ ma slob dpon/ lte ba ni gnas/ mngal gyi khru<sup>906</sup> mchos gos/ skra  
dang kha spu bregs pa'i dbu<sup>907</sup> zlum zhabs rjen/ spyi bor thal mo sbyar ba phag/ a haṃ gi  
sgra sngags kyi bzlas pa/ zla bcu bsnyen par rdzogs pa/ 'gro ba'i bya ba ni khrims te/  
sprul pa'i dge slong du byon pa'o<sup>908</sup>*

First, the father is the abbot. The mother is the tantric master. The navel is the sacred place. The womb is the monk's robe. Lack of head and facial hair is the monk's bare head and feet. The palms joined at the crown of the head is the prostration<sup>909</sup> The sound

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<sup>906</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* 265/3; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 101: *ma* inserted.

<sup>907</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 265/4: *mgo*.

<sup>908</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 491/5-6.

<sup>909</sup> The “palms joined” is referring to the natural position of the hands of the fetus (Skal bzang lha mo, personal communication, 2013).



of a *ham*<sup>910</sup> is the recitation of mantra. The ten months are the ordinarion. The act of going forth is the discipline. Thus [the fetus] becomes an emanated monk.

In this remarkable passage, the conditions of conception, gestation, and birth are compared to the requisites and conditions needed for a monk's ordination. The father and mother are the preceptors and the fetus is the ordinandus. The womb is the monk's robe needed in the ordination ceremony. The natural lack of hair on the fetus is likened to the shaved head of the monk. The position of the fetus in the womb, with hands near the head, is the monk's prostration. Then the monk apparently begins tantric practice. The ten months in the womb are the completion of tantric retreat.<sup>911</sup> The sound of the baby crying at birth is the mantra. Thus, Yang dgon pa concludes, a baby is intrinsically born a fully ordained monk (*dge slong*). Yang dgon pa attributes this set of correspondences to the second part of the *Hevajra Tantra*. And indeed, there we find the following verses in Chapter Four:

lto ba gnas su brjod par bya//  
skye gnas 'dod chags bral bar 'gyur//  
mngal gyi phru ma chos gos nyid//  
de bzhin ma ni mkhan po nyid//  
mgo bor thal mo sbyar ba phyag//  
'gro ba'i bya ba khriims kyi gnas//  
sngags kyi bzlas pa a dang ham//  
skye gnas 'khor lo'i rnam pa a//  
bde chen gyi yang rnam pa ham//  
gcer bu skra dang kha spu bregs//  
sngags 'don skyes pa dge slong nyid//  
'di dag rkyen gyis sems can rnam//  
sang rgyas nyid du the tshom med//  
zla ba bcu yang sa rnam yin//

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<sup>910</sup> Ibid., 2013, says this refers to the sound of a baby's crying when it is born.

<sup>911</sup> An “approach” (*bsnyen pa*) is a tantric practice liturgical performed in retreat in which one “approaches” a deity by accumulating a specific number of mantras (Slob dpon Mchod rten, personal communication, 2012).

sems can sa bcu'i dbang phyug go//<sup>912</sup>

[The mother's] abdomen is the *vihāra*. Her womb causes one to be without passion. The amnion is the dharma robe. The mother is the *upādhyāya*. Hands joined at the head is the prostration. One's activities are the ethical rules. *A-ham* is the mantra recitation. The form of the womb chakra is *A*. The form of great bliss is *ham*. Born naked, with shaved head and face, and reciting mantras, one is a monk. Given those circumstances, beings are without a doubt buddhas. [Since] the ten months are the levels, all beings are lords of the ten levels.

We see a clear connection to Yang dgon pa's presentation here. However, Yang dgon pa's version is shorter and in prose (instead of verse), indicating his tendency to refashion and paraphrase what he finds in the tantras to suit his own model. In any event, here Yang dgon pa puts together the exalted terms of embodiment of Mahāyāna and tantric sources (the scholar, the tantric master, the monk, and the *kāyas*) with the body parts and phases of an ordinary human life.

Finally, Yang dgon pa makes the case that even the dissolution and death of the physical body along with its channels, winds, and vital essences is the expression of enlightenment. As he puts it, when the body dies, it perishes like a perfect Buddha (*rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas su 'jig pa*):

*tshē'i dus byas te 'chi pa'i dus su/ rtsa mdud grol<sup>913</sup> ba sprul sku/ yi ge zhig thig le g.yo ba  
longs sku/ 'od gsal shar ba chos sku'o/ phra rags kyi rnam rtog thim pa spangs pa phun  
sum tshogs pa'o/ 'chi ba<sup>914</sup> don dam pa rtogs pa phun sum tshogs pa'o/ 'byung ba lnga*

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<sup>912</sup> *Kye'i rdo rje*, Part II, Chapter Four, Verses 61-64, pp. 53-54. A similar convention is found in the *Rdo rje phreng ba* (Kittay, "Interpreting the Vajra Rosary," 609).

<sup>913</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 271/2: 'gro inserted.

<sup>914</sup> *Ibid.*, 271/4: 'od gsal inserted.

*dang dbang po lnga thim pa rgyal ba rigs lnga/ 'od gsal*<sup>915</sup> *rigs drug pa rdo rje 'chang ngo/ 'chi ba chos sku/ bar do gzugs sku'o*<sup>916</sup>

When one's life is over, and it is time to die, the releasing of the knots in the channels is the *nirmāṇakāya*. The destruction of the letters and the moving of the vital essences is the *sambhogakāya*. The dawning of luminosity is the *dharmakāya*. The dissolution of the coarse and subtle conceptuality is the full abandonment. The final death<sup>917</sup> is the full realization. The dissolutions of the five elements and the five senses are the Buddhas of the five families. Luminosity<sup>918</sup> is the sixth Buddha Vajradhāra. Death is the *dharmakāya*. The bardo is the *rūpakāya*.

Even the dying body, the dissolving consciousness and the collapsing elements and senses embody the fruition of the *kāyas* of a Buddha, along with a Buddha's abandonment and realization.<sup>919</sup> Even the relative channels, winds, and vital essences embody the *kāyas* as they perish. Note that this is an interesting point when placed alongside the fact that Yang dgon pa also just made the case that the coarse materiality of the body, as well as the subtle substrate of the vajra body, also embody the fruition. What we see here is the suggestion that the fruition is characterized by changeability rather than stasis. The fruition of a Buddha is however the body is manifesting at the moment. The body itself, in its many forms—from material, to habitual, to mental—is always Buddha, regardless of its state. If this is so, then the fruition of *dnegos po'i*

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<sup>915</sup> Ibid., 271/5: '*char ba* inserted.

<sup>916</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 494/4-6.

<sup>917</sup> He mis variant: the ultimate luminosity of death.

<sup>918</sup> He mis variant: The dawning of luminosity.

<sup>919</sup> Abandonment (*spangs ba*) and realization (*rtogs pa*) are a common dyad in Mahāyāna discourse used to describe the qualities of a fully enlightened Buddha. The abandonment refers to the abandonment of all faults. Realization refers to the realization of all good qualities. For a detailed description of the specific faults and qualities that a Buddha abandons and realizes, see Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan, *Mountain Doctrine : Tibet's Fundamental Treatise on Other-Emptiness and the Buddha-Matrix*, trans. Jeffrey Hopkins and Kevin A. Vose (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2006), 580-586.

*gnas lugs* is not something that is easily defined, except as a principle that perfection exists in the ground of ordinary embodiment.

In the final passage of the work, before the colophon, Yang dgon pa concludes by emphasizing two final points: The body is innately Buddha, and practice is necessary in order to make that known. In making these points, he comes full circle, returning from the fruition back to the basis, and tying basis, path, and fruition together:

*de ltar skye 'chi gnas gsum sangs rgyas yin pas*<sup>920</sup> 'bras bu'i chos thams cad tshang ste/  
*med pa log nas btsal ba'am ngan pa gcig bzang por btang rgyu med de/ dus gsum du*  
*'gyur ba med pas rgyu sems can gyi dus na sangs rgyas nyid yin no/ de yang rgyud brtag*  
*pa gnyis pa las*<sup>921</sup>

*sangs rgyas ma yin sems can ni//*  
*gcig kyang*<sup>922</sup> *yod pa ma yin pas//*  
*kye'i*<sup>923</sup> *rnal 'byor ldan pa yis//*  
*nga rgyal mi bcag mtho mi btsam//*  
*kun rdzob gzugs su gnas nas ni//*  
*'di dag bde gshegs rigs su 'gyur*<sup>924</sup>/<sup>925</sup>

*cas so/ 'o na de ltar gdod nas sangs rgyas yin na lam bsgrod ci dgos zhes na/ kye'i rdo*  
*rje las*<sup>926</sup>

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<sup>920</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 271/5: *de ltar skye 'chi gnas gsum sangs rgyas pa yin no/ sangs rgyas yin pas*.

<sup>921</sup> Ibid., 272/1; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 105: *de yang kye'i rdo rje rgyud las*.

<sup>922</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 272/2: *ci yang*.

<sup>923</sup> Ibid., 272/2; *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 106: *skye bo*.

<sup>924</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 272/3: *skyed*.

<sup>925</sup> This verse does not appear in the versions of *Hevajra Tantra* extant in the Tibetan versions of the canon at present. It may have appeared in an earlier version, as Rgyal thang pa Bde chen rdo rje (13th century) also quotes this same verse, attributing it also to Hevajra. See Francis V. Tiso, "A Study of the Buddhist Saint in Relation to the Biographical Tradition of Milarepa" (Columbia University Doctoral Dissertation, 1989), 319.

*sems can rnams ni sangs rgyas nyi//  
'on kyang blo<sup>927</sup> bur dri mas sgribs<sup>928</sup>//  
de nyid bsal nas sangs rgyas nyid//<sup>929</sup>*

*ces so/ de ltar gdod ma nas sku gsum lhan cig skyes pa'i sangs rgyas su gnas pa ni/ dngos  
po'i gnas lugs/ de ltar ngo ma shes pa ma rig pa/ de ltar log par rtog pa<sup>930</sup> 'khrul pa/ yin  
pa la yin par ngo shes shing/ goms par byed pa lam/ kun btags kyi 'khrul pa rtsa ba nas  
dag cing/ ji lta ba'i rang mtshan mngon du gyur pa 'bras bu'o/<sup>931</sup>*

In that way, because birth, death, and life are the state of buddha, the fruition of all dharma is complete [in those];<sup>932</sup> There is no reason to seek elsewhere, or to try to improve them. Because this never changes, at the time that one is an ordinary sentient being, one is also the Buddha.

The *Two Part Tantra* says,

There is not a single sentient being who is not Buddha.  
Therefore, a person practicing yoga should be neither proud nor hostile.  
After living in an ordinary form, all will join the ranks of the ones gone to bliss.

But if this is asserted, one might ask, “If everyone is Buddha, why do they need to follow a path?” The *Hevajra Tantra* says:

Sentient beings are Buddhas, but they are obscured by adventitious stains.  
If those are cleared away, there is Buddha.

In that way, [every being] primordially abides as the co-emergent Buddha of the three *kāyas*. Not knowing the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* to be like that is ignorance. Thinking things are otherwise is a delusion. Realizing that is how it is, and getting accustomed to that is

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<sup>926</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 272/4: *rtag gnyis las*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 106: *Rdo rje'i gur las*.

<sup>927</sup> *Kye'i rdo rje*, 54: *glo*.

<sup>928</sup> *Ibid.*, 54: *bsgribs*.

<sup>929</sup> *Ibid.*, Part II, Chapter 4, verse 69, p. 54.

<sup>930</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 272/6: *rtags pa*. *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Beijing), 106: *brtags pa*.

<sup>931</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (Pha jo ldings), 495/3-5.

<sup>932</sup> He mis variant: In that way, birth, death and life are the state of buddha. Because these are buddha, the fruition of all dharma is complete.

the path. Purifying the root of the delusion of projections and actualizing the inherent characteristics of how things are is the fruition.

This final passage of the *Explanation of the Hidden* summarizes the overall impulse of Yang dgon pa's work. Here *dngos po'i gnas lugs* does not seem to imply the small and particular details of the vajra body, but rather the entire condition or situation of embodiment, which is the situation that the ordinary body really exists as the "co-emergent Buddha of the three *kāyas*." Here he is referring not to the nature of things, or to the nature of the vajra body, but rather to a wider idea of the nature of human embodiment. The human body, going through its ordinary experiences of birth, living, and dying is naturally in a state of being Buddha. Therefore, the basis itself holds the key to the path and the fruition. This passage also shows us the degree to which Yang dgon pa wished to stay true to the body, as the self-fulfilled basis of enlightenment. He stays so true to that basis that he explains the path and the fruition not as a path of self-cultivation leading to an exalted fruition, but rather as a process of getting used to the basis, which is the human body going through its life cycle. As for his use of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* here, it may hold the key to understanding the term in its broadest sense, but I will save that issue for the conclusion to the thesis.

### **Concluding Remarks to Chapter Five**

In this chapter, we have looked at the last third of Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*. We have seen him posit and describe a fourth category of *dngos po'i gnas*, a category of his own invention, called the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body, speech, and mind inseparable, and we have seen him make the case that the body enacts all aspects of the Buddhist

path and embodies the entire fruition, enlightenment itself. Yang dgon pa tells us that body, speech, and mind are in fact not separate entities, but exist in a state of radical inseparability, and makes his case for this inseparability via four arguments. First, he argues that body, speech, and mind exist in dependence on one another, an argument of interdependence. Second, he points out that body, speech, and mind give rise to each other, an argument of mutual causality. Third, he shows that body, speech, and mind are overlapping categories, an argument for integration. Fourth, he argues that the phenomenon of death shows the inseparability of body, speech, and mind because these continue in some form in the intermediate state.

As already intimated, this final argument brings up what might be significant challenges to a theory that posits the body as the critical instrument and expression of enlightenment. The body, at least as it is conceived in an ordinary sense, is perishable, and this poses a problem especially for a doctrine that asserts the sacredness of the body's substrate. It also poses a problem for a theory that body and mind are inseparable. To get around these problems, Yang dgon pa posits an "ultimate body, speech, and mind" that leaves the flesh-and-blood body, speech, and mind at death. This ultimate body, speech, and mind, he tells us, consist of a very subtle version of a central channel, wind, and quintessence. As such, it must partake of some sort of subtle substantiality, or form, at least to the extent that it is named and identified. However, Yang dgon pa does not explain precisely what this form is, or the mechanism by which this very subtle substance or form would transfer from body to body. It is a hypothetical statement, and while it makes some reference to the bodily terminology, it remains untheorized. He also calls this transmigrating body, speech, and mind a "mental body, speech, and mind" (*yid kyi lus ngag sems*). If it is a mental body, speech, and mind, we might wonder if Yang dgon pa has not sacrificed his principle of granting the body foundational status in all phases of human existence.

In short, he seems to have succumbed to the vulnerability entailed in the fact that the very materiality he has valorized throughout the *Explanation of the Hidden* eventually perishes, and has, like so many other theorists, conceded that in transmigration it is the mind and not the body that most fundamentally holds sway.

This problem is ameliorated to some extent as Yang dgon pa continues to explore what is meant by inseparability. On the one hand, he indicates that inseparability is an ontological truth. This ontological truth can be seen in the intertwining at the deepest level of the psychophysical elements of human life. It can be seen in the interpenetration, interdependence, and integration of body, speech, and mind on many levels. While the components of a human being are functionally separable, they are in truth an integrated whole. On the other hand, we saw above that Yang dgon pa also indicates that inseparability is a mode of perceiving, or an epistemic truth. In that aspect of inseparability, there is a possibility that body, speech, and mind inseparable exist only to the degree that they are so perceived. This would explain how there are so many versions of body, speech, and mind: the “fully ripened body, speech, and mind” of the physical body, the “vajra body, speech, and mind” of the subtle body, the “habitual body, speech, and mind” of dreams, the “mental body, speech, and mind” of the intermediate state, and finally the “gnosis body, speech, and mind” of enlightenment. An appeal to human experience would help resolve the apparent lack of consistency in these various forms of embodiment, and could explain how a “mental body, speech, and mind” is still connected to the notions of body that Yang dgon pa has heretofore explained as a human’s *dngos po'i gnas lugs*. But if Yang dgon pa intends to grant authority to an *experienced* body, speech, and mind, he does not explicitly say so. The closest he comes is to insist on the continuous inseparability of the three modes (body, speech, and mind), an inseparability that can be perceived and embodied. While it might seem



that resorting to subjective experience as the ground for inseparability throws us back again to a doctrine that holds mind as the fundamental basis of truth, that may in itself be an inherited assumption that the perceiver must always be the mind. In Yang dgon pa's theory, we have seen that not to be the case. Subjectivity itself is radically embodied.

A second issue that remains to be resolved might be noted with respect to Yang dgon pa's vision of the "intrinsic fruition" (*'bras bu rang chas*) that also naturally exists in the quotidian human body. In maintaining that the fruition of the Buddhist path is already innately present in conception, gestation, birth, living, and dying, we may wonder what is held in common in these radically different ways that the body manifests? What is enlightenment if it can be found equally in the glob of tissue in the womb, in the adult body, in the perishing body, and in the body after death? To posit such disparate material forms of enlightenment is challenging for a tradition in which enlightenment is usually understood to be a stable state of unchanging great bliss or peace. In contrast, an embodied enlightenment must embrace change and ever-shifting forms. Yang dgon pa does not consider the implication of this fundamental discrepancy between his vision of enlightenment and the more conventional idea that can posit a stable spiritual state, but I will turn to it in the conclusion of the thesis.

## Conclusion

Having now closely considered the highlight of Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*, one of the features of the work that stands out the most is its sustained and virtually unequivocal devotion to the body as a worthy focus of soteriological theory. The complexity and focus of this treatment was unprecedented in either the Indic source tantras that Yang dgon pa used as his touchstone for his work or the essays of his more proximate Tibetan predecessors. While the arc and degree of detail and focus of the project were unprecedented, Yang dgon pa was skillful to present his ideas in the form of a synthesis of terms and conceptions that individually had already been intimated or developed in previous works, in the service of making it acceptable within the confines of tradition. In particular, Yang dgon pa's thematization of the body as a critical concept is facilitated and made possible by the key term that he seizes on as the nexus of his somatic theory, *dngos po'i gnas lugs*.

As we saw in Chapter Two, sources in the Buddhist canon reveal gradations of meaning for *dngos po'i gnas lugs* ranging from the metaphysical to the epistemic. In some cases, the term was situated in a way that aligned its meaning with embodiment, such as in the songs of Saraha, but this connection was still implicit. In these early instances of the term, it was valorized as a synonym for the highest goals of the Buddhist path. At some point in the 10th century, however, with the writings of Nāropa, the meaning of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* began to branch off into new

territory. Nāropa expanded the meaning of *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* by positing two categories of the term, a *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of body and a *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of mind. With this move, Nāropa opened an exegetical space for the human body as a subject of critical reflection, affording the body a position of semantic power with respect to enlightenment and the highest goals of the tradition. In his work, and that of his descendants, *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* began to gesture explicitly to the matrix of a vajra body underlying, but not separate from, physical existence, and to a non-dual gnosis underlying a complex mind. The new exegetical space opened by Nāropa was expanded upon by several generations of Buddhist religious figures who gradually began to foray into the territory of theorizing the body. Especially significant in this regard were the works *Nature of the Hidden Vajra Body* by Phag mo gru pa and *A Commentary on the Bindu of Impeccable Conduct* by 'Jig rten mgon po, both of which began to take the body-seriously as a topic of consideration. At the same time, a set of short works on the topic of *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* within the very same lineage continued to uphold the term's older meanings, especially as an epistemic state of non-dual knowing.

Yang dgon pa himself inherited this set of influences and prior meanings of *dnegos po'i gnas lugs*, and seized upon it for his own work, as the term provided an ideal nexus for his own theoretical agenda. The fact that the word *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* had been aligned historically with the ultimate truth in tantric and Mahāyāna contexts squared with his project to uplift the body to the status of a primordially enlightened entity. But Yang dgon pa unpacked the term much farther, leaving behind the rhetoric of a disembodied exalted awareness in the process. Instead, he recalibrated the term to form the basis of a tantric lexicon of embodiment. One of the key ways he did this in the *Explanation of the Hidden* was to proliferate *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* into

four types, and align it with an embodied schema of the hallowed notion of the vajra body, speech, and mind.

He also redefines the term itself to point to an underlying substrate (*gnas lugs*) of the body (*dngos po*). He does this in his formal definition of the term, but he also backs this definition up by focusing primarily on the subtle substrate of channels, winds, and drops throughout the work. In this there is no hard and fast line between the vajra body and the physical body. The cakras, for example, are the progenitors of the 32 unclean substances, and the ordinary processes such as digestion turn out to be the expression of the workings of the winds and quintessences, which are part and parcel of the vajra body. Yang dgon pa's formal definition of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* emphasizes a valorized vajra body, but the work itself challenges his definition as we discover that the categories of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, while they emphasize the vajra body, in fact include the entire package of the body from conception through death and even into the after-death state.

While Yang dgon pa divides the subtle from the coarse, and separates body, speech, and mind from one another for the purposes of discussion, his theory culminates in a doctrine of radical inseparability in which the body becomes an indivisible whole. The one constant, in his theory of *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, turns out to be this principle of inseparability that follows a person even into the state after death. In order to achieve the aim of keeping body and mind inseparable, Yang dgon pa is compelled to posit multiple forms of body, speech, and mind, which account for human experience in various states of material embodiment, from gross material embodiment to the experience of a mental body of the intermediate state. So the question now becomes, what exactly is this *dngos po'i gnas lugs* that has the body, speech, and mind in all their permutations as its referent, if the latter are subject to such radical changes?

Some clues as to what exactly the term really means can be found in what we have learned about *dngos po*. If we are to believe Spyan snga ba, the subtle channels are *dngos po*. *Dngos po* has a sense of materiality, but it is not necessarily an ordinary materiality. For Yang dgon pa, *dngos po* includes both coarse and subtle types. While the coarse refers to the conventional material world, the subtle does not always do so. We are shown a vision in which the subtle is in an intricate relationship with the coarse, and often overlaps with it, but somehow moves away from the material body at death to form the “ultimate body, speech, and mind.” Furthermore, while the subtle’s presence is innate, it can only be seen by yogic vision. This subtle does not seem to be material in the ordinary sense. It carries the sense of a density of form, but not necessarily matter, as we find traces of this form leaving the body after death. It seems that *dngos po* ranges from the grossly visible forms to subtle forms invisible to the naked eye, and its nature (*gnas lugs*) is what is revealed in the course of education and practice.

A further key to understanding *dngos po'i gnas lugs* may also be found in the way Yang dgon pa concludes the *Explanation of the Hidden*. Looking again at the concluding passage that we saw in the last chapter:

*de ltar gdod ma nas sku gsum lhan cig skyes pa'i sangs rgyas su gnas pa ni/ dngos po'i gnas lugs/ de ltar ngo ma shes pa ma rig pa<sup>933</sup>/ de ltar log par rtog pa 'khrul pa/ yin pa la yin par ngo shes shing/ goms par byed pa lam/ kun btags kyi 'khrul pa rtsa ba nas dag cing/ ji lta ba'i rang mtshan mngon du gyur pa 'bras bu'o/<sup>934</sup>*

In that way, [every being] primordially abides as the co-emergent Buddha of the three *kāyas*. Not knowing *dngos po'i gnas lugs* to be like that is ignorance.<sup>935</sup> Thinking things are otherwise is a delusion. Realizing that is how it is, and getting accustomed to that is

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<sup>933</sup> Yang dgon pa Rgyal mtshan dpal, *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad* (He mis), 272/6: *ma rigs*.

<sup>934</sup> *Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*, 495/4-5.

<sup>935</sup> He mis variant: It is unsuitable to not recognize that *dngos po'i gnas lugs* is like that.

the path. Purifying the root of the delusion of projections and actualizing the inherent characteristics of how things are is the fruition.

Just before this passage, we have been exposed to a discussion in which the fetus is the Buddha, the ordinary living body is the Buddha, and the dying psychophysical being is the Buddha. Coming as it does at the end of the entire work, the term *dngos po'i gnas lugs* has special significance. The *dngos po'i gnas lugs* that he has introduced us to is not exclusively the domain of the physical body, but it definitely includes the physical body. It is not exclusively the domain of the subtle body, but it definitely includes that, too. It is not exclusively the domain of mentalistic experience, but it includes that also. What we have seen, in Yang dgon pa's work, is an attempt to show that each and every phenomenon of human corporeal life, including its demise, is a part of the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body, speech, and mind. Therefore, perhaps the closest and most accurate rendering of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* is not the situation of coarse material existence nor the nature of the substrate (or underlying nature) of materiality, but a broader idea: the nature of human embodiment itself, as an enduring principle. What joins all of Yang dgon pa's various classifications of body, speech, and mind is not determined solely by matter, as we would think of it, but rather by a notion of embodiment. This definition of *dngos po'i gnas lugs* as embodiment is captured most vividly in Yang dgon pa's assertion that body, speech, and mind—through all their radical changes—always possess embodiment (*rang gzugs*).

This last passage of the *Explanation of the Hidden* is remarkable when paired with Yang dgon pa's introductory remarks on the very same topic at the beginning of the work. There he says, emphatically, that a yogi must know *dngos po'i gnas lugs*, specifically as body, in order to attain the highest goals of the tradition. We did not really understand why, at the beginning of his work, this might be so. But now at the end we are provided a clear answer. A yogi must come to

know the body not merely as an instrument to engage the winds to enter the central channel. He must come to know the body for a wider reason: because the body *is* the path of practice, and— even more radically—the body *is* enlightenment. To know the entire situation of the human psychophysical organism is to know enlightenment. Not to know it is to hold on to delusion. This simple but remarkable statement is a complete divergence from many of the works preceding Yang dgon pa’s own where the nature of mind or of emptiness is the central focus for Buddhist knowledge and liberation.

This brings us to consider the significance of the silences in Yang dgon pa’s work, which speak as loudly as what he actually articulates. We will recall that one of the ancestor works that seems to have inspired Yang dgon pa most directly is Phag mo gru pa’s *Nature of the Vajra Body*. Yet even Phag mo gru pa, as interested in the body as he was elsewhere, says here, “The characteristics of mind transcend those of the body” (*sems kyi mtshan nyid lus las 'das pa*),<sup>936</sup> referring to the reliability and stability of the mind’s qualities compared to those of the body. This kind of statement was common in the works of the Bka’ brgyud lineage of this period, but Yang dgon pa avoids any such statement that elevates the mind over and above the body. He does not say that the mind is an originator of the world’s phenomena, although there are ample precedents for this idea in some of the tantras he draws from. He does not say that *dngos po* (material things) are the cause of suffering and that non-material things (*dngos med*) are the cause of liberation, an idea that is represented in the *Non-Dual Victory Tantra*. He avoids statements that uplift the mind over the body, or that denigrate the body’s material being. It is what he does not say that in some ways speaks most loudly. He does not provide the mind a

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<sup>936</sup> Phag mo gru pa, *Sems dngos po'i gnas lugs ngo sprod mdo rgyud nas lung drangs pa*, 245/6.

position of authority, and the silences in the work, coupled with his carefully worded statements that bring attention to the body, bestow on the latter, in contrast, a powerful locus of authority.

In the end, what we witness in the world of Yang dgon pa's *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body* is the construction of a comprehensive theory of embodied enlightenment that succeeds in repositioning the body as the central critical term in soteriological exegesis. While the building blocks of his theory had precedent in the tantras and in the Sa skya and Bka' brgyud transmissions Yang dgon pa inherited, the synthesis of these ideas into a soteriological whole was Yang dgon pa's own work. It is easy to see why elements of this work might have presented points of challenge that contributed to the marginalization of some of its more radical ideas. A landmark opus that represents the culminating moment of the lineage of texts on *dnegos po'i gnas lugs*, Padma dkar po's *Commentary on the Scripture (Gzhung 'grel)*, reveals the direction that the 'Brug pa bka' brgyud lineage took the exegesis of terms. There, we see a *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* once again scaled back to two types, that of body and that of mind. While his section on the body's *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* is longer than the section on the *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of mind, he affords preminent status to the mind, aligning it with ultimate truth. And, as in the works preceding Yang dgon pa, Padma dkar po reduces the textual space for the basis (*gzhi*), which is (for his lineage) the psychophysical organism, and once again refocuses on the idea that the path (*lam*) should maintain a place of priority.<sup>937</sup>

At this point, we can only speculate on the reasons for the resubversion of the body. One reason might simply be the weight of the authority that Nāropa's work had in the Bka' brgyud lineages. Since Nāropa separated mind from body, why would one give credence to Yang dgon

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<sup>937</sup> Broido, "Padma dkar po on Tantra," 31.



pa's alternative model instead? Second, Yang dgon pa's prioritization of the body may have been viewed as a challenge to a popular ascendance of *mahāmudrā* exegesis, which valorized a nature of mind primarily presented in mentalistic terms. Third, Yang dgon pa's emphasis on integration strongly implies that the nexus for practicing non-duality is no longer the mind: it is now the body. This would have been welcomed, and perhaps was, in yogic environments where the emphasis was often on somatic practices. But 13<sup>th</sup>-century central Tibet onwards was witness to an increasing and fervent movement towards institutionalization, including an emphasis on education, writing, reading, philosophical debate, and other intellectual activities. In that environment, it is possible that the avenue to the highest goals of the tradition would become aligned with these activities, positioning the mind as the nexus for non-duality and other practices of transcendence. Finally, as pointed out above, Yang dgon pa's theory may have been challenging to doctrines of transmigration, which is a central theme of Buddhist exegesis.

Nevertheless, we do see that Yang dgon pa's work not only survived, but also—as we saw in Chapter One—has had significant impact on generations of religious exegetes and practitioners. My interest in his work stems from a feeling that Yang dgon pa calls our attention to an overlooked issue for the field of Tibetan Studies. Just as there were subtle debates over the role and nature of the mind and of reality in Tibetan Buddhist soteriological thought, there were debates about the role and the nature of the body, as a critical term and theoretical concept. Just as Yang dgon pa allowed the body to reclaim a place of authority as the teacher, the text, the basis, the path, and the fruition of Buddhist practice, we would do well to allow the body space in our scholarship to reclaim a place of authority as a critical focus of discussion.

## Appendix I

**Outline of the *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body***  
**(*Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad*),**  
**Based on the *Summary of the Expanation of the Hidden Vajra Body***  
**(*Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad gyi bsdus don*)**  
**by Spyan snga ba**

- Homage to Vajradākinī
- Versified statement of the intention to compose the *Explanation of the Hidden*

I. A short synopsis

II. The extended explanation

1.1. How all the phenomena of saṃsara and nirvāṇa abide in the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body, speech, and mind [the basis]

1.1.1. The presentation of the body-vajra of all buddhas, the *dngos po'i gnas lugs* of body

1.1.1.1. How the body is formed from the five manifest awakenings

1.1.1.1.1. The outer five manifest awakenings

1.1.1.1.2. The inner five manifest awakenings.

1.1.1.2. How the nature of channels exists

1.1.1.2.1. A concise presentation of the divisions of the number-situation, and of the placement of the three nadis and chakras, together with their shapes

1.1.1.2.2. An extensive explanation by way of a detailed analysis of each [of the above]

[The three (main) channels]

1.1.1.2.2.1. A presentation of the way qualities develop: the situation and attributes of the central channel, together with its measurements

1.1.1.2.2.2. An explanation of the meaning of the three main channels by two ways of developing qualities: the attributes and situation of the right and left channel together with their measurements.

1.1.1.2.2.3. An explanation of the types of channels not asserted previously

An extensive presentation of the *cakras*

1.1.1.2.2.1. The mode of the crown *mahāsukhacakra* with eight channel-spokes

1.1.1.2.2.2. The *sambhogacakra* at the throat

1.1.1.2.2.3. The *dharmacakra* at the heart

1.1.1.2.2.4. The mode of the navel *nirmāṇacakra* with eight spokes

1.1.1.2.3. A conclusion by way of combined classes

1.1.1.3. How *bodhicitta* exists

1.1.1.4. How the elements of unclean substances exist

1.1.1.5. How the elements of thought exist

1.1.2. The presentation of the speech-vajra of all buddhas, the *ḍngos po'i gnas lugs* of speech

1.1.2.1. Presenting the winds of the five elements as a speech phenomenon

1.1.2.1.1. Coarse winds

1.1.2.1.1.1. A concise teaching by way of a summary of the numerical divisions of coarse winds

1.1.2.1.1.2. An extended explanation

1.1.2.1.1.2.1. The situation of natural winds

1.1.2.1.1.2.2. Having become accustomed to that, the way wind enters the central channel

1.1.2.1.2. Subtle wind

1.1.2.2. Presenting consonants as a speech phenomenon

1.1.2.3. Presenting vowels as a speech phenomenon

1.1.2.4. Presenting integration as a speech phenomenon

1.1.2.5. Presenting words as a speech phenomenon

1.1.3. The presentation of the mind-vajra of all buddhas, the *dnegos po'i gnas lugs* of mind

1.1.3.1. Presentation of the nature of the support, *bindu*, *bodhicitta*

1.1.3.2. Presentation of the supported, great bliss, as a phenomenon of mind

1.1.3.3. Presentation of the essence, the five wisdoms, as a phenomenon of mind

1.1.3.4. Presentation of the activity, not conceiving of subject-object, as a phenomenon of mind

1.1.3.5. Presentation of the aspect, unbroken meditative concentration, as a phenomenon of mind

1.1.4. The presentation of the presentation of the non-dual nature of body, speech, and mind, the wisdom-vajra of all buddhas

1.2. How the dharmas of the path are completed by mastering method and wisdom [the path]

1.2.1. If forming, forming as method and wisdom

1.2.2. If abiding, abiding as method and wisdom

1.2.3. If dying, dying as method and wisdom

1.2.4. The way of attaining the four powers of dream-path [not found in the root work]

1.2.5. The way of getting used to the path of liberation, the generation phase

1.2.6. The way of getting used to the completion phase as intrinsic

1.2.7. The way the path and fruition are completed

1.3. How the dharmas of the fruition are completed by mastering perfect buddhahood

1.3.1. When formed, formed as a perfect Buddha

1.3.1.1. Formation of the body as the five Buddha families

1.3.1.2. Formed as the five manifest awakenings

1.3.2. When living, living as a perfect Buddha

1.3.2.1. Living in a body emanated as a monk

1.3.2.2. Living in a body as a perfect Buddha

### 1.3.3. When dying, dying as a perfect Buddha

### III. The Conclusion of the text

1. The reason for writing about my experience of the profound points
2. The dedication for the attainment of a body that is the emanation of a lord
3. Presentation of the name of the author, and a wish for no obstacles.

## Appendix II

### Classifications of Body, Speech, and Mind in *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*









Type of Body, Speech, and Mind	Context of Discussion	Description
Coarse Body	Formation and life ( <i>chags pa, gnas pa</i> )	Physical support for the senses, flesh-and-blood body
Coarse Wind	Formation and life	Five root winds, five branch winds
Coarse Mind	Death ( <i>'jig pa</i> )	Coarse thoughts
Habitual Body, Speech, and Mind	Dream ( <i>rmi lam</i> )	xxx
Mental Body, Speech, and Mind	Intermediate State ( <i>bar do</i> )	xxx
Subtle Body	Formation and life	Channels
Subtle Wind	Formation and life	Subtle wind and gnosis wind
Subtle Mind	Death	Subtle thoughts
Ultimate Body	Death	Ultimate central channel
Ultimate Speech	Death	Essence-space wind
Ultimate Mind	Death	Quintessence of the vital essence
Vajra Body	Formation and life	Five-fold awakening, channels, <i>bodhicitta</i> , unclean substances, thought
Vajra Speech	Formation and life	Winds, letters, syllables, vowels, integration, words
Vajra Mind	Formation and life	Vital essences, <i>bodhicitta</i> , bliss, meditative concentration, gnosis

### Appendix III: The Five Cakras and the Constituents

	Channel Name	End of Channel	Shape of channel knot	Sacred Country	Constituent (khams)
<b>Crown Cakra</b>	Non-doing (Mi byed ma)	Cranium	འཇིག་	Pullīramalaya	teeth and nails
	Subtle form (Phra gzugs ma)	Crown of head	མེད་	Jālandhara	Head and body hair
	Excellent One (Bzang mo ma)	Right ear	འཇིག་མེད་	Oḍḍiyāna	Skin, body odor
	Left One (G.yon pa ma)	Nape of neck	མེད་	Arbuda	Bile, elements on left side of body
	Tamer (Dul byed ma)	Left ear	འཇིག་	Godāvārī	Tendons
	Generating the Tortise (Rus sbal skyes ma)	Between eyebrows	རྩ་	Rāmeshvara	Bones
	Existence (Srid pa ma)	Two eyes	འཇིག་	Devīkoṭa	kidney, spleen
	Bestower of Power (dbang bskur ma)	Two shoulders	མེད་	Mālava	Heart and pericardium

	Channel Name	End of Channel	Shape of channel knot	Sacred Country	Constituent (khams)
<b>Throat Cakra</b>	Anger (sdang ma)	Armpits, and kidneys	འཇིག་	Kāmarūpa	Eye faculty
	Vacuous (gshang ba ma)	Two nipples	མེད་	Oḍra	Liver, gall bladder
	Fierce mother (ma mo ma)	Navel	འཇིག་	Trishakuni	Lungs
	Night (mtsán mo ma)	Tip of nose	འཇིག་	Koshala	Intestines
	Soothing (bsil ster ma)	Upper palate	འཇིག་	Kaliṅga	Sinews and ribs
	Ruddy (gro ba ma)	Adam's apple	འཇིག་	Lampāka	Stomach
	Dark grove (nag tshal ma)	Heart center	འཇིག་	Kāñchi	Anus
	Lips (mchu ma)	Genitals	འཇིག་	Himālya	Penis and Clitoris

Heart Cakra	Channel Name	Function	End of Channel	Consciousness Generated
	Beautiful ( <i>mdzes ma</i> )	Generates power to move the element of the central channel	Secret place	All-basis
	Potent taste ( <i>ro bcud ma</i> )	Generates the power to stabilize and move the roma	Secret place	Mental
	All-pervading ( <i>kun khyab ma</i> )	Generates power to move and stabilize the kyanma	Secret place	Mental
	Three cycles ( <i>sum skor ma</i> )	Seeing	Two eyeballs	Eye
	Projecting ( <i>dod pa ma</i> )	Hearing	Two ears	Ear
	Dog ( <i>khyi ma</i> )	Smelling	Two nostrils	Nose
	Fierce ( <i>gtum mo</i> )	Tasting	Tongue	Tongue
	Tamer of maras ( <i>bdud 'dul ma</i> )	Feeling	All the pores	Body

Navel Cakra	Channel Name	End of Channel	Shape of channel knot	Sacred Country	Constituent (khams)
	Beautiful color ( <i>mdog mdzes ma</i> )	genitals		Pretapurī	Phlegm
	Ordinary ( <i>thun mong ma</i> )	anus		Gṛihadevatā	Pus
	Giving movement ( <i>rgyu ster ma</i> )	thighs		Saurāshṭra	Blood
	Fear and suffering ( <i>'jig skrag tsa na sdug bsngal</i> )	calves		Suvarṇadvīpa	Menstrual blood
	Spouse ( <i>mdza' bo ma</i> )	fingers and toes		Nagara	Fat, marrow
	Accomplishing ( <i>grub pa ma</i> )	upper foot and backs of hands		Siddhā	Tears
	Fire ( <i>me ma</i> )	thumbs and big toes		Maru	Mchil ba, mucus
	Cooling ( <i>bsil ster ma</i> )	knees		Kulutā	Nasal mucus



	<b>Channel Name</b>	<b>End of Channel</b>	<b>Shape of channel knot</b>	<b>Realm and kind of karma</b>
<b>Secret Cakra</b>	Branch of central channel	Eyebrows	ॐ	Gods
	Branch of central channel	Beating heart	ॐ	Humans
	Branch of central channel	Left forehead	ॐ	Demi-gods
	Branch of central channel	Crotch	ॐ	Animals
	Branch of central channel	Navel	ॐ	Hungry ghosts
	Branch of central channel	Soles of feet	ॐ	Hell beings

## Appendix IV

### Works Cited by Yang dgon pa in *Explanation of the Hidden Vajra Body*

#### ***Bka' 'gyur (Canonical Scriptures)***

*Dbang mdor bstan pa (Sekoddeśa)*. In *Sde dge 'i bka' 'gyur*. Toh 361, rgyud 'bum, *ka*, 29-43.

*De bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi sku gsung thugs kyi gsang chen gsang ba 'dus pa zhes bya ba brtag pa'i rgyal po chen po (Sarvatathāgatakāyavākcittarahasya-guhyasamāja-nāma-mahākālpārāja)*. In *Sde dge 'i bka' 'gyur*. Toh 442, rgyud 'bum, *ca*, 181-297.

*Dgongs pa lung bstan pa zhes bya ba'i rgyud (Sandhivyākaraṇa)* In *Sde dge 'i bka' 'gyur*. Toh 444, rgyud 'bum, *ca*, 317-416.

*Dpal nam mkha' dang mnyam pa'i rgyud kyi rgyal po (Khasamā-tantrarāja)* In *Sde dge 'i bka' 'gyur*. Toh 386, rgyud 'bum, *ga*, 399-405.

*Gsang ba 'dus pa'i rgyud phyi ma*. In *Sde dge 'i bka' 'gyur*. Toh 443, rgyud 'bum, *ca*, 297-316.

*Kye'i rdo rje zhe bya ba rgyud kyi rgyal po (Hevajra-tantrarāja)*. In *Sde dge 'i bka' 'gyur*. Toh 417-18, rgyud 'bum, *nga*, 3-61.

*Bde mchog nam mkha' dang mnyam pa'i rgyud (Saṃvarakhasamā-tantra)*. In *Sde dge 'i bka' 'gyur*. Toh 441, *ca*, 174-180.

*Rdo rje phreng ba'i rgyud (Vajramāla-tantra)*. In *Sde dge 'i bka' 'gyur*. Toh 445, rgyud 'bum, *ca*, 417-556.

*Rgyud kyi rgyal po dpal bde mchog nyung ngu (Tantrarājaśrīlaghusaṃvara)*. In *Sde dge 'i bka' 'gyur*. Toh 368, rgyud 'bum, *ka*, 428-494.

*Rnal 'byor ma'i rgyud kyi rgyal po chen po dpal gdan bzhi pa (Catuhpīṭha-mahāyoginītantrarāja)* In *Sde dge 'i bka' 'gyur*. Toh 428, rgyud 'bum, *nga*, 363-464.

*Yang dag par sbyor ba zhes bya ba 'i rgyud (Samputa-nama-tantra)* In *Sde dge 'i bka' 'gyur*. Toh 381, rgyud 'bum, *ga*, 148-318.

#### ***Bstan 'gyur (Canonical Treatises)***

*Birwa pa (Virūpa)*. *Lam 'bras bu dang bcas pa'i gdams ngag*. Toh 2284, rgyud, *zhi*, 279-286.

*Brgya byin sdang po (Indranāla)*. *Sangs rgyas thams cad dang mnyam par sbyor ba mkha' 'gro ma sgyu ma bde mchog gi rgyud kyi don rnam par bshad pa (Sarvabuddhasamāyoga-*

*dākinījālasamvara-tantrārthodaraṭīkā*). In *Sde dge 'i Bstan 'gyur*, Toh 1659, rgyud, *ra*, 491-779.

Dpa' bo rdo rje. *Rgyud thams cad kyi gleng gzhi dang gsang chen dpal kun tu kha sbyor las byung ba'i rgya cher bshad pa rin po che'i phreng ba*, Toh 1199, rgyud, *ja*, 4-223.

*Dpal de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi gsang ba rnal 'byor chen po rnam par rgyal ba zhes bya ba mnyam pa nyid gnyis su med pa'i rgyud kyi rgyal po rdo rje dpal mchog chen po brtag pa dang po (Śrī-sarvatathāgataguhyatantrayogamahārāja-advayasamatā-vijaya-nāma-vajraśrīparamamahākālpa-ādi)*. In *Sde dge 'i Bstan 'gyur*, Toh 453, rgyud 'bum, *cha*, 207-663.

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*Rdo rje rol pa zhes bya ba rdo rje phag mo'i rgyud*

*Rdo rje sgo zhas bya ba rnal 'byor chen po'i rgyud*

*Thun mong ma yin pa'i gsang ba rnal 'byor chen po'i rgyud*

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