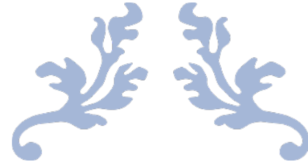
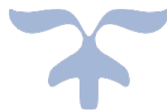


PRISONS OF FREEDOM

An Interdisciplinary Study of Contemplative Practices in Great Perfection Buddhism



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Introduction: Himalayan Journeys

The Protagonist: The Sky-Gazing Yogi on the Mountain

Nearly seven hundred years ago, on the side of a peak in the great Himalayas, in a place called White Skull Snow Mountain (*gangs ri thod dkar*), there sits a bearded yogi staring into the rays of the sun. In his early 60s, he is dressed in a cotton cloth and the sun is shining on his wrinkled face. He seems content and relaxed and if we were to look closely, we might even detect a smile flash across his lips. Above him is the blue Tibetan sky; below him narrow valleys and deep ravines.

He is, of course, meditating. As he holds his posture and gaze without moving for many hours, he spontaneously starts to perceive specks of light against the deep blue background of the open sky. At first, the lights just flicker and oscillate hectically. Then, they naturally start to form strings that resemble pearl necklaces that gradually shapeshift into more elaborate patterns and geometric forms.

As the yogi curiously and attentively follows the display, the luminosity grows spectacularly in size, displaying more meaningful motifs, such as rainbows, lotus flowers, and even large *stūpas*, hemispherical structures containing relics that are used places of meditation. Finally, without the slightest effort of active visualization, he finds himself in the midst of a magnificent *maṇḍala*, a world of gods, until he himself transmutes into a Buddha. Ultimately, as the visions swirl into the expanse of the blue sky, evaporating just as miraculously as they appeared, our yogi's body itself dissolves into light.

Now that we have met the protagonist of this study, I would like to use this introduction for a few preliminary remarks. I present my study's objective, my sources, and my method: 1) My *objective* is to offer new perspectives on frequently overlooked dimensions of meditation; 2) I do so by looking at the historical *sources* of one particular contemplative system; 3) and I approach these sources through an interdisciplinary *method* that integrates the cognitive sciences into the humanities.

The Objective: A Contextualization of Meditation and its Ethos of Freedom

My study is concerned with the contemplation performed by the yogi. Sitting on the mountain in Tibet, he performs one of Buddhism's most secretive practices. More specifically, it is the highest meditation of Tibet's most ancient religious tradition, namely "Direct Transcendence" (*thod rgal*). My study both is both fashionable and timely in the current climate as it focuses on a specific contemplative technique that is

so esoteric in nature that it is hardly known and certainly not practices by non-initiates of this particular lineage.

More standard forms of meditation, of course, have not only become exceedingly popular practices amongst the general population but also important themes of research in recent years. Today, meditation is frequently—more or less explicitly—identified with "mindfulness." While "mindfulness" has its roots within early Buddhism (Gethin 2011; Dreyfus 2011a; Dunne 2011; Bodhi 2011; Samuel 2015), it has taken on a cult-like following amongst Western practitioners in recent years, leading to what some commentators called the "McMindfulness" craze (Purser and Loy 2013).[1]

After Western Buddhism grew exponentially in popularity during the 1960s, it was Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), inaugurated in the following decade, which likely represents the most decisive chrysalis in the rise of meditation practice in our cultural context. Mindfulness, in simple terms, involves bringing one's attention to experiences occurring in the present moment by following the rhythm of one's breath, attending to one's thoughts and feelings in an accepting and non-judgmental way, or scanning one's body for sensations (Gunaratana 1993; Kabat-Zinn 2001). More recently, mindfulness meditation has become a panacea, promoted as a technique to improve health, heal psychological disorders, guarantee economic success, and so forth.

While the field of contemplative research is diverse, in this dissertation, I suggest that five of its core principles are generally assumed to be operative in understanding meditation: 1) Its aim is the liberation of the self; 2) it is a positive practice that leads the individual to a happier life; 3) it is a relaxing practice; 4) it is a skill that can be learned; and 5) it works by focusing on the present moment.

Together these five attributes can be unified under the umbrella of what the Greek would have called the "ethos" of the contemporary understanding of contemplation, namely that it leads to an increase in freedom. The conviction that meditation is, to say it by means of the title of one the Dalai Lama's books, *The Way to Freedom*, obviously stems from the teachings of Buddhism itself. Buddhists hail meditation as the ultimate path to enlightenment (Schmithausen 1981; Bronkhorst 1986; Buswell and Gimello 1994). Even more generally, freedom (Skt. *mokṣa, mukti*, from *muc*, signifying "release," Tib. *thar pa*) is a core persuasion of Indian religions,

[1] The epitome of this trend towards mindfulness might be the book by U.S. Congressman Tim Ryan. (Ryan 2013)

where it denotes the liberation from the sources of suffering and bondage that constitute cyclical existence.

In the emergent field of meditation research, the most fashionable concept to convey this ethos of freedom is "neuroplasticity." This notion stands for the many ways in which the physical, psychological, and social circumstances shape human brain function and the structural architecture of the brain (Fuchs and Flügge 2014). Like Nietzsche's human animal "whose nature has not yet been fixed," scientists speak of neuroplasticity in order to submit that cultural practices have the ability to shape the human brain throughout life (Nietzsche 1993, 88).

Consider, for example, the research by Richard Davidson and his team at the University of Wisconsin, which led experiments in cooperation with the Dalai Lama on meditation and its effects on the human brain. Their results indicate not only that meditation practice changes the neural activity in certain brain regions but also that these functional transformations are the result of neuroplasticity, changes in the physical structure of the brain (A. Lutz et al. 2004; R. J. Davidson and Lutz 2008; R. J. Davidson and Begley 2013).

> From a neuroscientific perspective, the first promising claim made by Buddhist contemplative traditions is that experience is not a rigid, predetermined, and circumscribed entity; but rather a flexible and transformable process. On this view, emotions, attention, and introspection are ongoing and labile processes that need to be understood and studied as skills that can be trained, similar to other human skills like music, mathematics, or sports. This principle is foundational for Buddhist contemplative practice, because such practices are based upon the notion that the mind is malleable in this way (A. Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007, 521).

If you think back at our yogi's meditation practice, recalling the open blue sky, the spontaneous manifestation of luminous epiphanies, and the effortless metamorphosis into a Buddha, you may recognize it as a particularly suggestive expression of this ethos of freedom. Even though our yogi sits watchfully on the ground of the mountain top, between the open sky above and the deep ravines below, his meditative journey is styled as a skyward leap into the openness of the blue firmament. This priority is

even epitomized in the name of the esoteric visionary method, whose etymology consists of the Tibetan words *rgal* ("to traverse") and *thod* ("peak").

While this imagery of skyward leap into freedom intrigues me, the journey that we are about to embark upon starts there where the yogi himself started, namely on the Tibetan ground below the blue sky. Just as this ground upon which meditation is performed is diverse in its topography, ranging from the dry steppes to the deep ravines out of which the Himalayan peaks grow, the meditation practices that our yogi engaged in throughout his life is more variegated than the idyllic image of Direct Transcendence would make us believe.

The five major parts of this dissertation culminate in a section entitled "The View from the Peak." In these pages, I briefly summarize how the study of meditation on the ground of a particular context can enrich the understanding of meditation in the contemporary context. Specifically, because the meditation practices performed on the Tibetan ground challenge some aspects of the five key traits of meditation mentioned above, case studies such as ours can help us formulate more comprehensive models of what meditation was like throughout human history.

The Sources: The Contemplative System of Great Perfection Buddhism

Now, you might have noticed a paradox in my argumentation and wonder how I could possibly comprehensively contextualize "meditation" if it is such a complex and variegated phenomenon. As a historian, my best means to counteract the universalizing tendencies of other discourses is to turn to a particular historical phenomenon. As a consequence, I try to ground my study of meditation within specific textual sources stemming from a particular religious tradition that thrived on the Tibetan plateau over the course of a precise historical period. I am speaking, of course, of the "Great Perfection" (*rdzogs pa chen po* or *rdzogs chen*, *Dzogchen*), which represents the highest teachings of the oldest Buddhist School of Tibet, namely the "Ancient School" (*rnying ma*, *Nyingma*).

More specifically, I focus my inquiry on the most significant of the Dzogchen traditions, namely the so-called Seminal Heart (*snying thig*) Great Perfection.[2] This tradition's textual corpus consists of early scriptures, the so-called *Seventeen Tantras*

[2] The Dzogchen tradition consists a complex amalgamation of teachings, lineages, and orientations. Unless otherwise indicated, I use the terms Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) and Seminal Heart (*snying thig*) interchangeably in this study, , since my focus is on the latter, and it itself self-identifies as the Great Perfection, even if in fact there are many other variants.

(*rgyud bcu bdun*), which are said to have been brought to Tibet during the height of its importance in the eighth century. The corpus was then systematized and ordered in the subsequent writings by our sky-gazing yogi, who was the most famed Dzogchen master of all time, Longchen Rabjampa, Drimé Özer (*klong chen rab 'byams pa dri med 'od zer*, henceforth Longchenpa, 1308–1364). Following these textual sources, I will retrace the history of the Great Perfection from the seventh to the fourteenth centuries.

It is generally agreed that the entire contemplative system of the Great Perfection, which is also known as "Utmost Yoga" (Skt. *Atiyoga*, Tib. s*hin tu rnal 'byor, gdod ma'i rnal 'byor*), is firmly inscribed in the ethos of freedom. The tradition, indeed, is famous for its appreciation of human nature as inherently and primordially integrated with a pure "awareness" (*rig pa*), the recognition of which invariably leads to self-liberation. Both the early scriptures and later exegetes offer extensive discussions on freedom, even going as far as distinguishing five different types of freedom: (1) self-freedom (*rang grol*), (2) primordial freedom (*ye grol*), (3) naked freedom (*cer grol*), (4) unbounded freedom (*mtha' grol*) and (5) unique freedom (*gcig grol*) (MTP, 465.5; GTG, 178.6; TCD2, 1614.4).

Secondary scholarship largely endorses this appreciation of the Great Perfection as a tradition of freedom. In his fundamental book, *The Philosophical Foundations of Classical rDzogs chen in Tibet* (2013), David Higgins argued that the tradition is marked with a paradigm of religious thought and practice premised on "primordial freedom" (*ye grol*). In Dzogchen, the "traditional idea of freedom as the liberation from or of factors that bind one to *saṃsāra* was rendered problematic by the insight that human reality is, in its most basic condition, devoid of error and bondage." "Humans," so he concludes, "are fundamentally always and already free" (Higgins 2013, 213–14).

> The problem of "finding freedom," the goal of all lesser Buddhist paths, is resolved in the recognition that human beings do not have freedom but fundamentally are free; freedom is not an attribute of a subject, not something we have, but the ontological precondition of human existence. (Higgins 2013, 262)

As we will familiarize ourselves with the Great Perfection, we will realize that the lonely yogi gazing into the dark blue sky is only a little piece within a much richer network of phenomena. In each of the ten chapters of this dissertation, I start with a

section entitled "The Base of the Mountain," in which I bring our yogi back from the sky onto the ground upon which he performs his meditation. We will understand that the yogi was not born onto that mountain but that he had to traverse dangerous terrain in the deep ravines of the Tibetan ground before climbing an uneven turf to reach his destination. We will see that the variegated surfaces of his adventurous journey are also an expression of the socio-political topography that gave rise to his religious tradition between the seventh and the fourteenth centuries. We will also come to appreciate that that the sky-gazing practice performed on the top of the mountain is embedded within a series of other—oftentimes radically different—techniques that are employed either in the ravines, during the climb, or after retreating back from the mountain. Finally, we will discover that the different trails that lead him up to White Skull Snow Mountain reflect the multiple modalities that the contemplative system carved into the Tibetan territory, from captivating myths, to elaborate anatomical depictions of the body, to sophisticated philosophical speculations about the nature of reality.

Merely by virtue of its diversity, its ruggedness, and its precariousness, the ground upon which our yogi comes to meditate forces us to question the universal validity of the ethos of freedom. In fact, once we turn our focus away from the openness of the blue sky above to descend into the lived reality of our yogi's experience, it will become apparent that his meditation is just suffused with the themes of imprisonment as it is with freedom. You might be surprised to hear that we will encounter stories of yogis being imprisoned as children, contemplative instructions on how to corral the luminous manifestations into enclosures, anatomical speculations about confined energies within the depths of our human heart, phenomenological accounts documenting the inevitability of construction in human perception, and intellectual dread about the restraining forces of philosophical writings.

The Method: Contemplative Science as Transdisciplinary Experimentation

As I was trying to grapple with this tension between the sky-gazing yogi leaping off into the open sky and his tortuous climb full of perils, violence, and imprisonments, the University of Virginia launched the Contemplative Science Center. Dedicated to the study of contemplation as "the variety of experiential, integrated, and immersive forms of learning and resiliency," and led by my graduate advisor, David Germano, I

was catapulted within the heart of what is a vibrant field of research, namely "Contemplative Science" (CS). A young and remarkably interdisciplinary discipline, CS allowed me to adopt a less radical perspective in regards to our yogi's practice; one in which imprisonment and freedom can coexist side by side.

While dedicated to the scientific study of the clinical and neuroscientific aspects of meditation practice, CS was born in a liminal space that is not all that different from the yogi's place on the mountain, between the open sky above and the confining ravines below: CS is located somewhere in between East and West, religion and science, practice and thought, general population and scientific elite, and so forth.

The approach suggested here matured over the course of several years of intense confrontation with this emergent discipline. As a consequence, you will not only find references to a broad spectrum of theoretical thinkers from religious studies, Buddhist studies, ritual studies, anthropology, and philosophy, but also be referred to evidence from the cognitive sciences. The cognitive turn, having swept across virtually all humanistic disciplines in recent years (Slingerland 2008; Bainbridge 2006; Bloch 2012; Carroll 2004; Cohen 2007; Dutton 2009; Hogan 2009; A. Richardson 2010; Smail 2007; Starr 2013; Vermeule 2011; Whitehouse 2004; Zunshine 2010), offers sheer endless possibilities to productively explore some of the most long-standing questions in the humanities. In the case of this study, drawing on an eclectic set of research from the cognitive sciences enables me to offer a more balanced view of the history of the Great Perfection and of its practices of meditation; one in which freedom and confinement can co-exist side by side.

It is quite apparent that religious studies and the humanities, on the one hand, and the cognitive sciences and the natural sciences, on the other, are characterized by different epistemological presuppositions. My approach should therefore be described as experimental. It moves fluidly in between various modes of dialogue: In some instances, I perform a hermeneutically open association of history and cognition, in which cognitive theories provide me with broad metaphors that allow me to illuminate the tension between imprisonment and freedom in interesting ways. In other moments, research from the cognitive sciences enables me to submit possible explanations for the precise mechanisms underlying certain phenomena observed during our yogi's meditation. In yet other situations, I gain new insights by illuminating what is familiar with something that is not-so-familiar, for example, by using Western psychological vocabulary to shed new light on Buddhist practices, and vice versa.

I draw on a broad range of areas of research from the cognitive sciences. One theme of interest in the first two parts of the study is trauma, where I draw initially on social-cultural approaches to collective trauma (Part I), before turning my attention to more specific trauma symptoms from individual psychology (Part II). Another cluster of theories explores unconscious bodily energies, which frequently manifest as an under- and over-modulation of emotions, and blends with clinical approaches to the human psyche that search for ways to balance arousal and relaxation (Part III). Another set of ideas that I draw upon demonstrates the potential of processes that lie beyond our awareness, such as research on memory, dual-process theories, as well as studies on implicit perceptual processes (Part IV). Finally, I focus on the relationship between language and experience, drawing on a series of theories from the cognitive sciences, ranging anywhere from verbal overshadowing to ambiguity aversion and meaning making (Part V).

Although the breadth of my applications might strike you as overly ambitious, my experimental approach is premised on the firm conviction that scholars of religion should take an activist stance in regards to the cognitive turn. If humanists want to not only shape the future of our disciplines but also actively partake in the overall intellectual orientation of our world, we can no longer ignore, or rely on fragmentary uses of cognitive science in our studies. Instead, we need a sustained, systematic, and profound engagement with the emergent discipline. My motto could therefore be described as follows: If we find ourselves as part of an expedition high up in the Himalayas, shouldn't we move to the front of the group, take out our compass, and explicitly express our opinion on which path will lead us to our destination? I therefore wholeheartedly concur with Edward Slingerland, one of the leaders of this type of active engagement, when he writes that "scholars with humanities expertise need to be on the ground floor of basic theorizing and experimental design, and not viewed as merely passive providers of cultural and historical data" (Slingerland 2008, 33).

Finally, it must be noted that the tension between freedom and imprisonment is also an important part within this transdisciplinary encounter. At times, one disciplinary discourse would free up vistas that were unthinkable within the other framework. At other moments, one perspective would plunge us into a ravine by putting new constraints on a more flexible way of thinking in the other. Catherine Malabou, one of the most philosophically self-reflective participants in the cognitive turn, speaks of the relevance of interdisciplinary thinking for our understanding of

the discrepancy between our subjective experience of being confined and the emphasis on freedom in the emergent science of human cognition in the following terms:

> But *What should we do with our brain?* is not a question reserved for philosophers, for scientists, or for politicians—it is a question for everyone. It should allow us to understand why, given that the brain is plastic, free, we are still always and everywhere ''in chains''; why, given that the activity of the central nervous system, as it is revealed today in the light of scientific discovery, presents reflection with what is doubtless a completely new conception of transformation, we nonetheless have the feeling that nothing is transformed; and why, given that it is clear that there can no longer be any philosophical, political, or scientific approach to history that does not pass through a close analysis of the neuronal phenomenon, we nonetheless have the feeling that we lack a future, and we ask ourselves *What good is having a brain, indeed, what should we do with it?* (Malabou 2008, 11)

The Journey: Climbing Mountains

Our expedition is a Himalayan journey because its point of departure is the mountain upon which the yogi sits while he performs Direct Transcendence meditation. The mountain, in fact, is a powerful place that has always played a key role in the imagination of Tibetans. Even though the practice itself entices us to soar into the blue sky of the ethos of freedom, the solidity of the mountain upon which the yogi performs his meditation keeps us grounded.

As for the specific itinerary of our journey, this dissertation is divided into five parts. Not only does each of them look at meditation, history, and cognition—something like the flora and fauna of the Himalayam countryside—but each part also follows its own journey, which starts out by simply describing the ground upon which our yogi sits. In each part, we discover a different strata of the Himalayan mountain below him: 1) cosmological accounts of his religious tradition's earliest history; 2) mythic narratives that tell stories of religious persecution and universal human suffering; 3) anatomical descriptions of our yogi's visionary body and the energies contained therein; 4) phenomenological depictions of the visionary manifestations

appearing in front of his eyes; 5) and philosophical speculations about the relationship between linguistic representation and meditative experience.

As the ground that supports our yogi's sun-gazing meditation grows in detail, it gradually reveals unexpected designs that run counter to the dominant understanding of meditation and the Great Perfection. The power of the mountain lies in its ability to bring together two worlds: On the one hand, it is the jumping off point into the sky-gazing meditation that instantaneously emancipates our yogi, as he directly transcends the peak of the worldly material reality by dissolving into light. On the other hand, it is not only the result of a slow process of evolution as the mountain rose out of the Himalayan soil over thousands of years, but also part of complex interrelated processes as masses of land were steadily pushed against each other to form a rugged topography that lies below the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas.

In the Great Perfection, camphor (Tib. *ga bur*, Skt. *karpūra*,) is frequently used as an analogy to describe the ground in terms of such a dialectical logic (TCD1 305,6). Like camphor, which can manifest both as poison or as medicine, the mountain is the solid ground of worldly limitation below our feet, just as it is the access-point to the freedom of the open sky above. In *The Lamp of the Precious Great Differentiation of the View*, a text associated with Padmasambhava, one of the heroes of the Ancient School of Buddhism, the ground is compared to a *phármakon* as it can both heal and make sick:

> For example, although camphor is not fundamentally dual, on account of heat and cold, it appears as medicine or poison. Recognizing it to be poisonous when cold, it is not eaten. Similarly, since everything emerges out of the state of the ground, it is through understanding or ignorance that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* manifest" (RCS, 110.2).[3]

More profoundly yet, I see the mountain not only as an ambiguous place, but also as a *locus* of dialectic. It reveals what I believe to be the primary principle of Great Perfection thought and practice, as well as its main contribution to the cognitive study of meditation, namely the idea that one only reaches the heights of sky-like freedom

[3] dper na ga bur gzhi la gnyis med kyang/ tsha grang rkyen gyis sman dug gnyis su snang/ grang ba'i dug du ngo shes za mi srid /de bzhin gzhi yi ngang la kun byung bas/ rtogs ma rtogs kyis 'khor 'das gnyis snang.

if one is willing to first march through ravines, climb mountains, and leap over crests. As we follow our yogi's meditative journey, we will come to understand that the mountain upon which he sits matters less because it gives direct access to a realm that transcends earthly existence, but primarily because it shows that one can only pursue the freedom of the open sky if one has traversed the deep crevices and climbed the uneven territories that lie below it.

I: The Rise and Fall of the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th centuries)

Chapter 1: The Epiphany of the Ground: Mythical-Historical Reflections on the Early History of Great Perfection Buddhism

The Base of the Mountain: The Myth of Cosmogony as Backdrop to Direct Transcendence

Although it seems that our yogi is sitting there on the side of the mountain all by himself, he forms part of a community of practitioners that sit around him. Together, over the course of many generations, these expert meditators developed their techniques and the world-view guiding them. This worldview is not only essential to their meditation practice, but also multilayered in its own right. In this sense, we could say that the ground upon which our yogi performs his practice is not even, flat, and homogenous, but rather marked by changing topographies that reflect the complexity of the social context into which he was born.

In Buddhism, meditation is conceived of as one part of a larger path that is intended to lead the practitioner towards the religion's ultimate soteriological goal. Buddhists speak of four core "ingredients" to their religion, namely "philosophical view" (*lta ba)*, "meditation" (*bsgom pa*), "conduct" (*spyod pa*), and the "effect" of the practice (*'bras bu*) (Cabezón 2013, 19). While the "philosophical view" means that a Buddhist needs to have the right understanding of the path, and "conduct" designates the discipline that is required to remain on the path, "meditation" is understood to be the actual path towards enlightenment. Thus, even if all three elements are closely intertwined and equally necessary to progress on one's spiritual journey, meditation holds a central role within the Buddhist world.

In Tibet, more specifically, the "path" (*lam*) of practice is frequently associated with a range of other designations, such as "vehicle" (*theg pa*), "application" (*nyams su len pa*, lit. "bring into personal experience"), "action" (*byed pa*), "attainment" (*sgrub pa*), "method" (*tshul*), or "means" (*thabs*). Furthermore, Tibetans also used a series of different names for meditative practices of "mental focus," such as *bsam gtan* (Skt. *dhyāna*), or *ting nge 'dzin* (Skt. *samādhi*). Collectively, these expressions highlight the fact that Buddhism displays a bewildering amount of different forms of meditation, some of which vary so drastically in frequency, duration, location, posture, method, and motivation that it is virtually impossible to offer a universally valid definition of the concept. Instead, we must turn to particular historical contexts in order to understand what meditation truly means.

In the Great Perfection, the world-view that forms the basis for its meditation practice is best approached through its elaborate foundation myth that tells stories of

cosmogony, of human straying, and of liberation. Our yogi, as he sits on the mountain, is said to perceive a series of "four visions" (*snang ba bzhi*). These visions are said to manifest naturally and spontaneously, almost as if they were flowing from within the yogi himself. In this context, the manifestation of visions must be understood as a sequel to or repetition of the remarkable myth of cosmogony, which shares in this movement from interiority to exteriority in the form of luminosity.

The tale dawns in a startling fashion with the so-called "epiphany of the ground" (*gzhi snang*). We read about a "ground" (*gzhi*), imaged as a perfectly self-contained and luminously shining "youthful body in a vase" (*gzhon nu bum pa'i sku*), which opens up to emanate a variegated array of light rays. After the epiphany of maṇḍalic shapes of light, the radiation of luminosity gradually loses its transparency, solidifying more and more, until one path leads it to take on the form of living beings and the universe of material objects as we know it. The myth, however, also presents an account of soteriology in the form of a celebration of a Buddha known as Samantabhādra (lit. "All Good One," Tib. *kun tu bzang po*).[4] This "First Buddha" (Skt. *ādibuddha*, Tib. *dang po'i sangs rgyas*), upon emanating from the source of light, is immediately liberated due to a recognition of the innate wisdom that is present in all sentient beings.[5]

Direct Transcendence reproduces the myth of creation and liberation: Just as the practitioner's visions emerge like the youthful body in a vase (after its seal is broken and the "inner" luminosity (*nang gsal*) of the ground projects outward into the outer space (*phyi'i dbyings*), the latent awareness inside of our hearts breaks out of its container to give way to luminous visions. Similarly, the subsiding of the visions in what is also known as the "vision of original purity" (*ka dag gi snang ba*), corresponds to the mythic liberation of All Good One whose recognition of the light display as himself reestablishes this state of luminous interiority, returning him to the originally pure ground.

Stéphane Arguillère rightly avows that "it is difficult to understand what can be the sense of this movement of exteriorization followed by interiorization [in the

[4] In reality, the Great Perfection is a complex tradition that consists of several orientations that developed over history. This study focuses on its most famous and sophisticated version, which is known as the Heart Essence (*snying thig*).

[5] Throughout Dzogchen teachings, there exist many different versions of this myth of creation. I am drawing particularly from its earliest versions in *The Seventeen Tantras* as well as Longchenpa's retelling in his *Treasury of Words and Meaning.* For secondary literature on this myth, see Achard 1999, 103–9; Bertrand 2011, 21–28; Arguillère 2007, 334–438; Kapstein 2000, 167–70; Germano 1992; Kongtrul 1995.

myth of creation and liberation of Samantabhādra], except to establish a parallel to the experience in the meditative practice of Direct Transcendence" (Arguillère 2007, 402). He then proceeds to associate the movement of exteriorization with the first three visions of Direct Transcendence "in which the radiation of wisdom (*ye shes kyi sdang*) emerges (*shar*) in the form of luminous visions (*snang ba*) […] developing in stages until they fill the entire perceptive field of the meditator" and the movement of interiorization with the fourth vision, in which we find "similar resorptions to the ones that are described in the case of All Good One" (Arguillère 2007, 402).

Considering that this myth plays a central role in the tantric scriptures and in the commentaries—Longchenpa even offered extensive philosophical discussions on the nature of the ground—it is not very surprising that scholarship has pointed out that the ground's epiphany is central to the identity of the Great Perfection.[6] In fact, it could be argued that the narrative of cosmogony, human straying, and Samantabhādra's liberation represents the founding myth of Dzogchen *par excellence*.

Not only is our yogi's experience directly shaped by the mythic narrative of the origin of the cosmos, but the myth can also be associated with the historical ground upon which the tradition was founded. Indeed, a historian of religion must read such a myth of cosmogony within the socio-political context in which it was written. The first versions of the narrative are found in a collection of texts known as *The Seventeen Tantras*, which eventually came to constitute part of the standard collections of Nyingma Tantras, the so-called *One Hundred Thousand Tantras of the Old School (rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum).*[7] Bryan Cuevas describes these scriptures and the controversies regarding their authorship as follows:

> The seventeen interrelated Dzokchen Nyingthik scriptures are accepted by tradition as divine revelation received by the [...] mystic Garap Dorje. The Seventeen Tantras nevertheless betrays [sic] signs of being compiled over a long period of time by multiple hands. The precise identity of

[6] The doctrine of the seven Grounds is old and it already appears in two of *The Seventeen Tantras*. See GTG, 152.3f. and LDG, 437.2f. Longchenpa's commentaries can be found in: TCZ1: 646.2 f and TDD, 776.2 f. For secondary literature on these seven theories, see (Arguillère 2007, 344–79; Longchenpa 1994, 153–61; Germano 1992, 63, 143–54; Higgins 2013, 204ff.; Achard 2002).

[7] *The Seventeen Tantras* are sometimes also classified as eighteen or nineteen. Together with *The Seminal Heart-Essence of the Sky Dancer* (*mkha' 'gro snying thig*) by Padmasambhava and *The Seminal Heart-Essence of Vimalamitra* (*bi ma snying thig*) by Vimalamitra, they constitute the foundation for Longchenpa's technical writings on the Great Perfection. For the most comprehensive discussion of these texts, see: (Germano 1992, 39–59).

> these unknown redactors is a riddle that I hope may soon be solved. Whatever the case, we must accept that the collection in the form it is known to us today consists of several layers of history reflecting diverse influences. (Cuevas 2003, 62)

The historical evidence points to Dzogchen tantras first appearing on the scene of history in the tenth century. Nevertheless, as Achard took notice in regards to the Bön scriptures, "they may certainly be earlier than that," and Cuevas is right in noting that these scriptures must have been composed by multiple authors over the span of what was likely a period of several decades. More specifically, although it is historically difficult to trace these texts back to the period of the Tibetan empire in the seventh century, they claim to have been brought to the plateau during the earliest period of Tibetan history, hidden before the fall of the empire, and then unearthed from the Tibetan ground in the eleventh century.

The Myth of Cosmogony and the Processing of the Early History of Tibet

The geographical characteristics of Tibet, a country located on a high plateau and surrounded by the world's highest mountain ranges, undoubtedly shaped the religion of Tibet and its contemplative systems, all of which are brimming with imagery of snowcapped crystal mountains and blue cloudless skies. Our yogi's experience on the side of his mountain, of course, closely reflects this, as he too practices on a peak by staring into the blue Tibetan skies. Tibetan history, by contrast, does not take place in the blue sky, but rather on the ground of the earth below the yogi. In the remainder of this chapter, I offer an introduction into the variegated topography of this social ground of the earliest history of Tibet. Unlike the realm above, the social ground of Tibet is not marked by openness, or at least not consistently, but rather by structure, confinement, and contention.

The Empire and the Early Collective Memory of Tibet

The psychiatrist Eric M. Plakun has sensibly suggested that the rise of the empire and the conversion of Tibet to Buddhism, around the seventh century, can be regarded as a "dramatic transformation" that was instrumental for the forging of Tibetan identity (Plakun 2008, 429). The creation of Tibetan identity—what we could call its "collective memory" (Halbwachs 1950)—involved a series of interrelated projects between the

seventh and the ninth centuries: the unification of various kingdoms into a single empire, the military expansion into much of Asia, the creation of a writing system and an official language, and the importation of Buddhism.

For Tibetans, who defined their identity largely through Buddhism, the final aspect might be the most fundamental one. Of unusual importance in the process of bringing Buddhism to Tibet were the three Religious Kings (*mes dbon rnam gsum*) or Dharma Kings (*chos gyal*), Songtsen Gampo (*srong btsan sgam po*, 569/605–649), Trisong Detsen (*khri srong lde btsan*, reigned 755-797/804) and Ralpacan (*ral pa can*, 802-838). While Buddhism may have had fragmentary transmissions in Tibet since the time of king Lha Thothori Nyantsen (*lha tho tho ri gnyan*, 5th century) (H. E. Richardson 2003, 159), it is only with Songtsen Gampo that we witness an expansion of Tibetan power through the unification of what was previously a series of kingdoms, the creation of the alphabet and the classical Tibetan language, and the systematic introduction of Buddhism to Tibet (Shakabpa 1967, 25).

The second Dharma King, Trisong Detsen, pushed the introduction of Buddhism forward, establishing what is commonly thought to be the earliest Buddhist monastery in Tibet, Samye (*bsam yas*). Even more substantially, for our present purposes, Nyingma chronicles present him as instrumental for the history of Dzogchen. The scriptures, in fact, narrate how the wisdom of the Great Perfection was transmitted through an unbroken lineage that started from Vajrapāṇi to the obscure Garab Dorje (*dga' rab rdo rje*, Skt. *Vajraprahe*), before moving through the hands of the no less enigmatic figures like Mañjuśrīmitra, Śrīsiṃha, Jñānasūtra, to finally make it all the way to Tibet, where it arrived in the eighth century thanks to the Indian masters Vimalamitra and Padmasmbhava (lit. "Lotus-Born," alternative name Guru Rinpoche). These Indian Buddhists were invited by king Trisong Detsen during the time of one of the world's largest translation-projects, aiming at the translation of all Buddhist texts into Tibetan.

Finally, Ralpacan, referred to as the "son of god" in the *Testament of Ba* (*dba'/sba bzhed*) (Pasang Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, 17), expanded the Tibetan empire to its greatest extent until it included parts of China, India, Nepal, and Mongolia (Kolmaš 1967; Beckwith 1987; Vitali 1990, 17; McKay 2003b). He too was known as a great supporter of Buddhism, inviting craftsmen from surrounding countries, promoting Buddhist literature and translation, building and restoring temples, and regulating donations for monks (Shakabpa 1967, 49–50; Yeshe De Project 1986, 296–97; Das 1970).

Ralpacan died in 838 and while some accounts suggest that he might have accidentally slipped down a flight of stairs, it is likely that he was sick and possibly died as part of a larger feverish epidemic that struck the region around this time (Pelliot 1961, 133; H. E. Richardson 1981). His successor, Ü Dumtsen (*'u'i dum btsan*), was to become the last king of the Yarlung Dynasty. Shortly before the middle of the ninth century, during the reign of Ü Dumtsen, a civil war broke out and the Tibetan empire fell shortly thereafter (Shakabpa 2009, 173; Khangkar 1993; Karmay 2003, 57). An etic-historical perspective suggests that the Yarlung dynasty came to an end because of external pressures, notably the collapse of the Uyghur Khaganate to the north as a result of the revolt by the Yenisei Kirghiz in 840 (Stein 1972, 71–72).

The Collapse of the Empire and the Collective Trauma of Fragmentation

There is no doubt that the collapse of the empire represented a major trauma for the Tibetan collective psyche. Generally speaking, trauma—meaning "wound" in its original Greek meaning—is a notion that is limned with various brushes. While DSM classification of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) lists individual symptomatology and focuses on the exposure to extreme physical or psychological threat, researchers have also started to pay extensive attention to collective experiences of trauma in recent years. In fact, trauma has become a popular trope to interpret not only physical harm and individual psychological circumstances but also socio-cultural events (Caruth 1995; 2016; Tal 2004; Rippl et al. 2013).

A few decades after discussions of "collective memory" emerged in the social sciences in the 1950s, researchers started to speak of trauma as a "cultural" or "collective" phenomenon. Defining it as "an empirical, scientific concept, suggesting new meaningful and causal relationships between previously unrelated events, structures, perceptions, and actions," such a framework of cultural trauma can be beneficially utilized to understand the extreme circumstances in the early history of Tibet (Alexander 2004, 1). In the case at hand, these junctures are not natural disasters and technological catastrophes, but rather social, political, cultural, symbolic, and religious transformations. Jeffrey Alexander, in his attempt to offer a social theory of trauma, notes:

> Collective traumas are reflections of neither individual suffering nor of actual events, but symbolic renderings that reconstruct and imagine them. Rather than descriptions of what is, they are arguments about

> what must have been and what should be. From the perspective of cultural sociology, the contrast between factual and fictional statements is not an Archimedean point. The truth of a cultural script depends not on its empirical accuracy, but on its symbolic power and enactment. Yet, while trauma process is not rational, it is intentional. It is people who make traumatic meanings, in circumstances they have not themselves created and which they do not fully comprehend. (Alexander 2012, 4)

Alexander's work perfectly epitomizes a turn towards a more comprehensive understanding of human suffering and stress that grew out of trauma studies. Today, discussions of national, cultural, and collective trauma are just as cardinal as investigations into individual experiences of loss and stress (Becker, Dochhorn, and Holt 2014). My judgment is based on such a copious appreciation of pain, which draws a combination of various disciplinary angles, such as neurosciences, coping theories, psychology, political history, and religious studies.

Many scholars working on collective trauma have focused specifically on the Holocaust. Although the systematic attempt at eradicating the Jews is regarded as the prototypical genocide of the twentieth century, researchers also point to the fact that there exist subtle differences between the historical event and the collective memories of the trauma. The Jewish representation of the Holocaust, for example, is stabilized through processes of memorialization" (Mazur and Vollhardt 2016). Thus, as Anthony Collins submitted, "an important aspect of this type of narrative is not simply the way in which it represents a historical event, but the collective identities that it produces" (Collins 2015, 107).

Unsurprisingly, for a people that grounded its first unified identity predominantly on Buddhism and Empire, Tibetans made sense of their trauma of the latter's disintegration through turning to the former, particularly by means of stories, legends, and myths. I suggest that the Great Perfection's myth of cosmogony needs to be regarded as one such narrative aimed at processing collective trauma. The myth of cosmogony reflects the fledgling community of the Ancients' attempt to cope with high levels of socio-political pressures, multiple crises, and significant loss in status after the fall of the empire.

The correlation between trauma and the creation of narratives has been a theme of investigation in the study of religion. Scholars have not only pointed to the fact that modern religious narratives serve the purpose of overcoming trauma (Durà-Vilà,

Littlewood, and Leavey 2013), but have also shown that old scriptures—such as the Bible—bear the mark of trauma (Birnbaum 2008). Benjamin J. Abelow went as far as expanding his research into the New Testament by arguing that even Hindu and Buddhist ideas, such as karma and reincarnation, were developed out of experiences of childhood trauma (Abelow 2011). James Rodger and Zachary Steel further expanded on the correlation between trauma and culture by noting that "traumatically fragmented pieces of self might be shaped and contained by local cultural beliefs and practices," even claiming that "a fragmented-self may indeed be more susceptible to cultural-shaping," with religious narratives providing a sort of "glue" (Rodger and Steel 2016, 156).

In Tibet, the collapse of the Tibetan empire, only two short centuries after its emergence as one of Asia's great powers, led into a period of time that has frequently been described as marked by anarchy and religious degradation. The period was, without a doubt, characterized by the disintegration of the empire's political centralization, rebellions against the inheritors of imperial Tibet, and the rise of a series of regional warlords (Van Schaik and Galambos 2012, 4). Lasting roughly one hundred and fifty years, Tibetans speak of the years following the collapse of Great Tibet as an "Age of Fragmentation" (*sil chad du 'chad pa*).

In using this terminology, the Tibetan imagination surrounding the trauma of the loss of the empire closely resembles more universal imagery of cultural trauma as a tearing of the basic fabric of a community. As Ciano Aydin argued, "the trauma disorganizes the group's psychic economy because the beliefs, values, expectations, and ideals that are part of its cultural identity are radically shaken, challenged, and disrupted" (Aydin 2017, 129). Kai Erikson has also paid extensive attention to the correspondence between individual and collective trauma, noting that trauma ruptures the social tissue of a culture just as individual trauma tends to split apart mind and body (Erikson 1995). In his study, entitled *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (1976), the sociologist writes:

> By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively [...] by collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the

> awareness of those who suffer from it, so it [is] a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared […]. "We" no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body. (Erikson 1976, 153–54)

Such interpersonal division is a crucial element in the myth of cosmogony. In fact, as I already implied, the myth is not merely one of cosmogony, but also a tale of the origins of the painful existence of ordinary human beings. As it continues, the myth not only explains that human beings are born within the light rays that spill out of the rent open container, but that they also quickly degenerate, coalescing into solidity and losing their luminous luster. Through a process that the tradition images as "going astray" (*'khrul pa*, lit. "error," or "delusion,"), human beings fail to grasp their own identity within the display of lights and gradually become imprisoned in their own reified designs of selfhood. Put differently, the misprisoning of their own identity, the failure to appreciate who they truly are, leads them into the prison of their isolated existences. In so doing, they alienate themselves not only from the universe that surrounds them but also other human beings that emerged out of the originally unified source of light.

The collapse of the Tibetan empire, of course, was a moment of similar division and disarticulation of unity as the institutions of the state gradually lost their stability. Trade routes and monastic networks disappeared as the state fell into disarray. As Davidson put it, "the result was not simply the demise of a central government but the collapse of civil and social institutions as well. The early writers are poignant regarding the loss of identity and virtue resulting from the gathering violence" (R. M. Davidson 2005, 70).

In fact, the Age of Fragmentation was also marked by conflicts between warring groups as a civil war broke out as two sons of Ü Dumtsen competed for power. Tride Yumtän (*khri lde yum brtan*), the son of his first wife, ruled over the central kingdom of Ü, and Namde Ösung (*gnam lde 'od srung*), the son of his second wife, ruled probably in the eastern territories (Shakabpa 2009, 173). The two warring parties, emerging out of an unresolved question of royal succession and centered on the two sons of Ü Dumtsen, were furthermore embedded in a more complex socio-political web of powers, in which clans—such as the Dro, the Chog, or the Ba—played a key role (Petech 1994; Vitali 1997, 196–97; R. M. Davidson 2005, 67).

Trauma moments are not only instances of fragmentation and division but also of shock. Srdjan Sremac and R.Ruard Ganzevoort, for instance, argue that "as a traumatic event irrupts into life [it] reconfigures the ways we see the world," as "earlier taken-for-granted references have been traumatically interrupted and stripped of their previous significations" (Ganzevoort and Sremac 2019, 4). Correspondingly, James Rodger and Zachary Steel heed that trauma "might be defined as involving threats to the integrity of important individual and communal beliefs and systems of meaning, critical to the individual's and group's concepts of life and selfhood" (Rodger and Steel 2016, 60).

Researchers point out that collective trauma is an inconceivable event, which affects the identity of a community by challenging its most cherished sources of meaning. "Traumatic events," so Judith Herman contends, "are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life" (Herman 1992). In addition, Ciano Aydin writes that "trauma is basically a type of damage that violates the familiar ideas and expectations about the world of an individual or society, plunging them into a state of extreme confusion and uncertainty" (Aydin 2017, 127)

In this context, it is a worth-while endeavor to introduce the findings by psychologists who have made noticeably similar pleas regarding the consequences of individual trauma. Bessel Van der Kolk, for instance, noted that "trauma by nature drives us to the edge of comprehension, cutting us off from language based on common experience or an imaginable past" (Van der Kolk 2015, 43). Clinical studies with patients also reveal that traumatized people struggle with the formulation of an autobiographical narrative. If the healthy mind tends to form "a narrative, which entails perspective (usually first person), a plot, and a structure normally consisting of a beginning, middle, and an end" (R. A. Lanius 2015, 4), victims of trauma have a hard time crafting a coherent narrative of their own lives. As Lanius expressed it, "psychological trauma may not only affect the perspective of an individual's narrative but also the plot and the structure of the narrative" (R. A. Lanius 2015, 4).

There is little doubt that the collapse of the empire was a type of event for which no mental frame was available in the ninth century. In the early Great Perfection scriptures, struggles with meaning-creation are pervasive, particularly in the mythical narratives. Oftentimes, the myth of the ground's epiphany appears like a narrative that was never supposed to be written down. There is no clear story available and the author(s) appear unable to put the event into a clear sequence of words. In *The Pearl*

Necklace Tantra, for example, we read of the ground in the form of an explicit rejection of what "has been designated as 'intellect' (*blo*)," noting that "there is no collection of names (*ming*) and letters (*yi ge*)" and that "it can't be established in terms of mind (*yid*) and mentation (*sems*)" (MTP, 461.1).[8]

The trauma seems to be outside of our ordinary mind, beyond the realm of cognition, impossible to conceive of linguistically or logically. Throughout the scriptures, the ground is defined in negative terms: It is "empty" (*stong pa*), "free from extremes" (*mtha' bral*), "indeterminate" (*lung ma bstan), "*unformulated" (*spros bral*), "aimless" (*gtad med*), "unobstructed" (*zang thal*), and "unimpeded" (*ma 'gags pa*). Most explicitly, the ground is the "absence of any epiphany" (*snang ba gang yang med*).

The Search for Meaning and the Reinforcement of the Buddhist Collective Memory

As I previously elucidated, one paramount advantage of cultural approaches to trauma, such as the one proposed by Alexander and his colleagues, is that it is less engrossed in the historical events and more concerned with the collective meanings that these events take on within a specific cultural context. Trauma researchers also convincingly argued that collective memories of traumas tend to become gradually detached from the actual historical events, so that they actually can be remembered by group members that were born many generations after they took place (Licata and Mercy 2015).

Collective trauma has also been studied in contexts that extend far beyond the Holocaust, such as the Apartheid regime, the formation of the states of India and Pakistan, or the African American experience in North America. Indeed, cultural trauma has even been adopted to shed light on the situation of modern Tibet (Kapstein 1998; Terheggen, Stroebe, and Kleber 2001; Kolas and Thowsen 2005; Hussain and Bhushan 2011; 2013; Gayley 2017). This being said, trauma has not been invoked in the discussion of the early history of the Tibetan people and my personal conversations with scholars in the field revealed that much of their hesitation is due to the scarcity of historical sources on this period. As Davidson propounded, the "almost complete lack of postdynastic royal inscriptions, the absence of chronologically confident textual materials, and the lack of almost any concrete

[8] blo zhes kun tu ma btags pas/ [...] ming dang yi ge'i tshogs med pas/ [...] sems dang yid du ma grub pas.

references to Central Tibet in Chinese histories of the period all obscure the condition of Ü-Tsang" (R. M. Davidson 2005, 62).

Yet, as Davidson immediately relativizes this hesitation, "one of the primary dicta of historical writing is that an absence of evidence is sometimes misleading, and the time of fragmentation is an example of this phenomenon. Because of a paucity of information, it comes as something of a shock to think of Central Tibet in the late ninth and most of the tenth century as a place where much must have been happening" (R. M. Davidson 2005, 62). Indeed, the darkest age of Tibetan history has recently been depicted in a more enlightened and creative way than previously thought (Dalton 2013).

Furthermore, in accordance with the cultural viewpoint taken in this chapter, it might not be the uncovering of accurate historical sources but rather the reconstruction of Tibetan attempts at meaning generation, which allow us to appreciate the trauma suffered by the early civilization. The words of Ron Eyerman, articulated through his study on the formation of an African American identity, are relevant to our understanding of the trauma of the collapse of the empire: Just as the trauma of slavery, the collapse of the empire matters "not as institution or even experience, but as collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people" (Eyerman 2001, 1).

The collective memory of the Tibetan people, in other words, was forged out of an attempt to make sense of the overwhelming historical problem of the loss of the empire. Being degraded from the rulers of much of Asia to a loosely organized set of clans without unified center, Tibetans must have been searching for basic answers regarding their trauma: "Why did this happen to us?" "How did this happen to us?" This attempt to make meaning of that which is "indescribable" and "undiscussable" in the traumatic experience is the inaugural step in healing this type of suffering (Bar-On 1999; 2002).

Research on cultural trauma has discovered that spirituality plays an axiological role in coping and that many cultures tend to rely on religion as a measure to create meaning out of traumatic and stressful experiences (Koenig 1997; Pargament 1997; Park 2005). Srdjan Sremac and R. Ruard Ganzevoort, for instance, say that traumas "are on the one hand important drivers for religious reflection and action," while "on the other hand they constitute fundamental challenges to religious meaning systems." "Religious traditions," so they conclude, "provide a repertoire of language

and actions that can express and transform these challenging experiences" (Ganzevoort and Sremac 2019, 1).

Early Tibetans did exactly that. The loss of political independence during the collapse of the powerful Tibetan empire and the increasing conflict within the various communities vying for power are quite neatly encoded within the myth of the epiphany of the ground.

This self-contained source of light has ruptured boundaries, while its emitted envoys become dissociated from the vital origin of their power, dispersing more and more across a vast area of land, and ending up in complete isolation in a sphere where they become so overpowered by alterity that they lose any sense of their own identity.

More in detail, Tibetans attempted to make sense of the collapse of their empire by describing Ü Dumtsen, also known as Langdarma (*glang dar ma*, lit. "Dharma Bull," reigned 838-841), as an anti-Buddhist king who converted back to the indigenous religion on the Tibetan plateau, known as Bön (Karmay 2003). Traditional sources indicate that Langdarma fiercely persecuted Buddhists, executing monks and closing down monasteries. Furthermore, he is even said to have been involved in the assassination of his brother, executed by two pro-Bön ministers, and then taking over his throne in 838 (Shakabpa 1967, 51).

> Darma turned his mind against the Dharma and became possessed by a demon, according to the religious view. During the next six and a half months, he appointed evil ministers who closed temples, burned books, defrocked monks, and caused the remaining religious to flee back to India or to Kham or Xining in northeast Tibet, on the borders of China. (R. M. Davidson 2005, 65)

According to the Tibetan collective memory, it was only four years later that Langdarma was himself killed by a Buddhist monk by the name of Lhalung Palgyi Dorje (*lha lung dpal gyi rdo rje*). Fundamentally, Palgyi Dorje is intimately associated with the founding locations and figures of early Tibetan identity: He is said to have been a monk at Samye monastery, where he was ordained by Vimalamitra and received his teachings from Padmasambhava (J. B. Gyatso 2006; Van Schaik 2011, 96). Traditional accounts tell the story of how the monk heard about Langdarma's persecution of Buddhism while meditating in a cave at Drak Yerpa (*brag yer pa*) to the

East of Lhasa. Determined to save the Buddhist religion in Tibet, he dressed up as a practitioner of tantra to gain access to the king before killing him.

> Pelgyi Dorje is said to have murdered the king while performing a ritual dance, a bow and arrow concealed in the long robe of his costume. He then fled on a white horse that had been colored black with charcoal, and wearing the black side of a reversible two-toned robe. Crossing a river, the horse was washed white, and Pelgyi Dorje reversed the robe to show the white side, thereby evading soldiers in pursuit. (Mandelbaum, n.d.)

As secondary scholarship has taught us, the historical evidence regarding the actual circumstances of the fall of the empire—albeit scarce—suggests that Langdarma was not persecuting Buddhism and that the Tāntrika on the white horse never existed (Drège and Yamaguchi 1996; Kapstein 2000, 52; R. M. Davidson 2005, 66; Schlieter 2006). It is also due to these discrepancies that many Tibetologists shy away from articulating an overarching narrative. However, this does not need not be so. On the contrary, it is precisely the absence of historical-textual evidence in favor of the traditional accounts of the collapse of the empire that bolster the cultural trauma narrative of Tibetans.

In other words, from a cultural perspective, it is significant that neither the anti-Buddhist portrayal of king Langdarma nor the assassination by Palgyi Dorje seem to have actually happened as historical events as the discrepancy between history and memory points to an experience of a collective trauma and a people's attempts to process it. More specifically, the fall of the empire is a cultural trauma, which is so productive that it further reinforces the collective memory of Tibetans as a people of Buddhism.

It is in this sense that Vamik Volkan's controversial claim that collective trauma is always a "chosen trauma" needs to be understood. According to this Turkish Cypriot psychiatrist, communities do "choose" to portray a moment as traumatic by constructing a "mental representation of an event that has caused a large group to face drastic losses, feel helpless and victimized by another group, and share a humiliating injury" (Volkan 2001, 4).

Chapter 2: Rise Like a Phoenix: The Ground and the Formation of the Identity of the Ancient School

The Base of the Mountain: Direct Transcendence and Its Origins in Mythical-Historical Grounds

What unites all Tibetans during the early years of their culture's history was not only the shared experience of the empire's collapse, but also a common desire to overcome the collective crisis it created. The meditation performed by our yogi—creative, constructive, and visionary in nature—can be recognized as one such attempt to articulate a new vision in the wake of the collapse of perspective. What is remarkable about the Great Perfection's mode of imagining its emancipation is that the liberating thrust was not found in the blue sky, but rather in the solid mountainous ground. Indeed, although the meditation is marked by vivid images of flickering lights, Buddhist symbols, and godly figures that emerge against the backdrop of the blue sky, they are styled after the breaking open of the youthful body in a vase and the gushing forth of luminosity from the inside of a self-contained sphere.

In their emphasis on the ground as the locus of creativity, the Great Perfection expresses a trait that marks the identity of the Ancient School as a whole. The Ancients, in fact, trying to overcome the dramatic loss of the empire, engaged in an identity-building project from the late tenth century onward. These years, also known as the Tibetan Renaissance (R. M. Davidson 2005), were marked by enormous strides to create Buddhist worlds on the Himalayan plateau. Tibetans did so by acquiring knowledge in the most diverse disciplines, ranging anywhere from literature to art, from medicine to hippology, from politics to astrology, and so forth. As one commentator described it, "From the late tenth through the twelfth century, Tibetans longed for all things knowable in the wide world, as if the intellectual famine of the previous era required satiation, like some colossal dragon suddenly waking voracious from a lengthy repose" (R. M. Davidson 2005, 155).

Paradoxically, scholars of cultural trauma have expostulated that it can frequently be translated into a collective memory, and even culminate in a strong system of meaning and sense of self (Gillies and Neimeyer 2006; Bar-Tal et al. 2009). As Hirschberger put it, while "collective trauma may threaten collective identity [and] may raise questions about the significance of the group, and about core belief systems," it "does not necessarily have a negative impact on group identity and cohesion and often bolsters affiliation with the group through a feeling of shared fate and destiny" (Hirschberger 2018, 3–4).

The Ancient School was able to utilize the collapse of the empire, the loss of meaning, and the fragmentation of society in order to construct a new type of collective identity. Just as term "Great Perfection" was first expended to designate a separate "vehicle" (*thegs pa*) in the *Lamp of the Eye of Meditation* (*bsam gtan migs sgron*) in the ninth century, the designation "Ancient" (*rnying ma, Nyingma*) was first used in 1062 in central Tibet (Hāṇḍā 2001, 284); both movements ultimately being born out of the memory of the fallen empire (Karmay 2007, 13; Van Schaik 2004b, 178).

During these years, the loss of structure—mythically imagined in the collapse breaking vase—led to two specific projects of re-construction, namely, Dzogchen philosophy and the Treasure Tradition. For imaging their new identities, both of these traditions did not look to the open sky above the Himalayan peaks for inspiration, but rather to the ground beneath them. The Great Perfection myth of cosmogony speaks of a ground (*gzhi*), which is explicitly identified with awareness, and the ground's epiphany (*gzhi snang*), which is said to be the manifestation of awareness within human experience. Similarly, the treasure tradition's logic postulates on a narrative of so-called *tertöns*, treasure revealers who unearth old texts and other materials from out of the Tibetan ground in the form of "earth treasures" (*sa gter*) (J. B. Gyatso 1996; Doctor 2005; J. B. Gyatso 1993b; Martin 2001; Ehrhard 1999).

The revelation of Treasures is centered on their historical importance as they are said to be disclosed in moments when the people need the benefit of the previously hidden teachings (Doctor 2005, 17; Cuevas 2003, 88–89; J. B. Gyatso 1998, 169). The Terma Tradition has even been explicitly associated with periods of collective trauma. As Janet Gyatso stated:

> The content of a Treasure text is said to have been formulated specifically to benefit the Tibetans at a particular moment in their history. The Treasure prophecies often describe the wars and political upheavals of such moments, their traumas somehow to be alleviated by the new religious practices introduced by the Treasure scripture (J. B. Gyatso 1998, 151).

In its philosophical expression, the ground's historical importance is less obvious but by no means absent. The narrative of the ground's epiphany and First Buddha's liberation offers not only many philosophically rich insights into our human nature and our place within a Buddhist universe, but it also tells the story of how these

teachings entered into the historical world of humans. In the manner of a prototypical founding myth, it is Samantabhādra himself who bridges the gap between pre-history and history as he plays a crucial role in the transmission of Dzogchen teachings to humanity.

In grappling with its origins, the tradition's own stories explain that the Great Perfection originated with the All Good One, who passed the teachings on to Vajrasattva, before they entered into the world of human beings in the country of Oḍḍiyāna, which is usually identified with the Swat Valley in present-day Pakistan.

Even after they penetrated history, the teachings remain located somewhere in between myth and history as *The Seventeen Tantras* represent a group of writings, which came to be considered as so-called "Treasures" (*gter ma*, *Terma*). According to the traditional Dzogchen account, after having entered Tibet during the empire's most powerful moment, the scriptures were then transmitted to Nyang Tingdzin Zangpo (*myang ban ting 'dzin bzang po*), who chose to not disseminate but to conceal them in the late eighth century at the famous meditation center association with Samye (*bsam yas*) monastery, known as Chimphu (*mchims phu*).

According to the colophon of the longest of the scriptures—*The Tantra of Self-Arisen Awareness*—after they have been hidden in the eighth century—the tantras were discovered as Termas a century or two later by Dangma Lhungyi Gyaltsen (*ldang ma lhun rgyal*) at the Hat Temple (*zhwa'i lha khang, Zha Lhakhang*) in central Tibet (R. M. Davidson 2005, 228–29). After that, the texts were again continuously transmitted and passed along to Chetsün Senge Wangchuk (*lce btsun seng ge dbang phyug*) and Zhangtön Tashi Dorjé (*zhang ston bkra shis rdo rje*, 1097-1167); the latter being the first datable figure related to *The Seventeen Tantras* (Lingpa and Kapstein 1991, 559–61).

The Ground of the Great Perfection and the Treasure Tradition

Although the Terma and Dzogchen background narratives don't seem to resemble each other upon first sight, one being framed as history—the recovery of material texts out of the Tibetan ground—and the other as myth—an imagined ground that radiates reality outside of temporality—they share a series of structural traits. Most generally, the Great Perfection and the Treasure Tradition both relied on the concept of the fertile "ground" (*gzhi* / *sa*) as an effective means to respond to the particular challenges they face during their formative years. Let us now look at a few specific similarities between the philosophical ground of the Great Perfection and the scriptural ground of the Treasure Tradition in order to better understand our yogi's underlying identity.

Creativity Out of Non-Agency

In the mythical-historical territory where the myth of the ground's epiphany meets the historical ground of the Tibetan plateau, we behold a principal characteristic of the Ancient School's *modus operandi* that would also frame the meditative practice of our yogi centuries after the articulation of hi tradition's identity: The endorsement of a creativity that simultaneously abdicates self-agency. The mythical-historical accounts of the Great Perfection ground represent it as a type of creative potential without agency.

In the Treasure Tradition, textual innovations are attributed to the great Indian tradition of Buddhism as the Ancient School plays the role of passive recipient since the time of the empire. This complete loyalty to its original sources and the negation of the self as agent is frequently expressed in the dictum "nothing is self-fabricated" (*rang bzo med pa*) (Dalton 2013, 16, 124–25). As Holly Gayley has put it:

> In the treasure tradition [...] one can detect a fascinating interplay between the heightened agency of tertöns, who found new ritual cycles and lineages through their revelations, and their deflection of the credit for their activities and prolific writings to Padmasambhava. The innovative nature of treasure revelation—introducing not only fresh formulations of esoteric teachings and rituals but also new relics, pilgrimage sites, monastic institutions, and incarnation lines—is masked through a phenomenon I call the "rhetoric of destiny" (Gayley 2017, 172).

The Treasure Tradition not only allowed for a continued stream of textual *poiesis* while simultaneously abdicating agency, but it also allowed the Great Perfection religious teachings to thrive and gain legitimacy by attributing them to the great religious masters of the imperial past (Thondup 1986; J. B. Gyatso 1993b; Ehrhard 1999; Martin 2001; Doctor 2005). The revelation of texts supposedly buried as treasures in the ground of the sacred places of the Tibetan kingdom or in the minds of future practitioners, points to a paradoxical self that is both innovative yet without agency. In fact, in the Treasure Tradition the ground is ultimately the agent in the revelation process as it is inhabited by various "local deities." These deities carry names that explicitly point to strong types of selfhood, such as "master of the ground" (lit.

"ground-self," Tib. *gzhi bdag*) or "master of the earth" (lit. "earth-self," Tib. *sa bdag*) (Pommaret 1994; 2004). The great scholar of the Nyingma tradition, Samten Karmay, has explicitly pointed to the importance of the interaction with such spirits and the articulation of a Tibetan identity. Speaking of the worship of the mountain deities (*yul lha*, *gzhi bdag*), he reflects that

> Participation in such a ritual therefore implies total integration into this community: this in turn implies inherited social and political obligation, moral and individual responsibility, and an affirmation of communal and national solidarity in the face of external aggression. [...] The mountain cult in Tibetan culture therefore plays a very significant role in the building up of national identity through each individual's identification of himself as an active member of the community and as a patriot of the nation. (Karmay 1994, 117–19)

The Dzogchen teachings, in turn, mimic the Treasure Tradition's "agency-less creativity": The ground is particularized in a paradoxical fashion as both an "empty essence" (*ngo bo stong pa*), on the one hand, and "radiant nature" (*rang bzhin gsal ba*), on the other (J. B. Gyatso 1993a; 1998, 146–47). As one commentator composed it, the ground "discloses the true nature of appearances as space-like emptiness, nonetheless appearing vividly" (Lobel 2018, 151). Guenther, correspondingly, speaks of the "dynamic aspect of *Existenz*" and notes that it is the "autodisclosure of one's existentiality as the means to come to grips with its underlying dynamics" based on this tension between "openness/nothingness" (Guenther 1984, 193). Hatchell, finally, writes that "while the ground is described in negative terms, as being empty of reality/unreality and so forth, it is not an emptiness of static darkness, but one that is alive with radiance and light" (Hatchell 2014, 99).

While we do not find an explicit endorsement of the Tibetan ground as a locus of awareness, the picture of a pure interiority—the famous youthful body in a vase—out of which all the vital energies of the universe radiate, imagistically parallels the Ancients' overall emphasis on their own land as well as their reliance on the hidden Treasures' continued revealing radiance. Just like the treasure—in its pre-revelatory state—the youthful body is invisible, formless, and self-contained. Both the treasures of the royal period and the ground embody potential rather than actualization, interiority rather than exteriorization, hiddenness rather than manifestness. Samten

Karmay traces an analogous type of interiority in probing the early Tibetan identity in its geographic dimension:

> During this period […], the country's geographical identity was expressed in terms of its centrality in relation to four other countries with which there was contact. India in the south was looked to as the source of religion; Iran in the west was envied for its great wealth; Turkestan in the north was feared for its military aggressiveness; and China in the east was admired for its knowledge of science. (Karmay 1994, 112)

Not unlike the neglect of the explosive disruption of the vase's integrity, the Ancient School tends to omit significant traumatic dimensions when it portrays is own historical origins. In some ways this is already implied in the youthful body's interiority. In fact, the youthful body in a vase can be seen as a form of imprisonment, with the term "youthful" literally translating as "prince" (*gzhon nu*). According with the etymology of this old French expression, we could say that the luminous body as *prīnceps* was not only the "first man" or "sovereign" of Dzogchen, but laso the one that was "captured" (*capiō*) "first" (*prīmus*).

This self-limiting dimension becomes even more apparent as we follow the myth. Even though I have demonstrated that the epiphany of the ground in its outward radiation can also be seen as a dramatic transformation into something that is almost unrecognizable from its original form, the tradition tends to emphasize the continuity between the ground and the emergent universe. Both the history of Treasures and the myth of Dzogchen are marked by a very strong "selfhood." Again, given the range of Tibetan language, there exists a subtle linguistic difference with the Terma stressing *bdag* and Dzogchen relying on the term *rang*.

Upon emerging out of the ground's manifesting light display, Samantabhādra—who is also appropriately equipped with the moniker "Primordial Buddha" (Tib. *dang po'i sang rgyas,* Skt. *ādibuddha*)—avoided the reification of "self" and "other" that marks the birth of humanity and instead recognized himself in the epiphany. As a result of this self-recognition, this insight into the mystery of one's true self, he not only avoided the straying into the world of *saṃsāra*, but he also succeeded in reversing the process of the ground's exteriorization. In *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, we read:

> From the beginning and end of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, the Buddha has not strayed into delusion (*'khrul*), yet through the capacity of rising from the ground, self-appearances are known to lack inherent existence (*rang snang rang bzhin med par shes*). Without getting lost outside the variety of the mind of conceptualization and analysis, the flickering movement immediately cuts through itself.[9] (*GTG*, AB1, 107.5-107.6)

Past Glory Out of Present Suffering

A second trait that characterizes the identity of our yogi's tradition is its insistence upon an originally positive state of being in light of present suffering. In the early years, the Terma revelations seem to have been so closely associated with ancestor cults that they might have even emerged out of them. "In many parts of the Tibetan plateau," so Sarah Jacoby recently maintained, "communities understood their local sacred mountains to be the ancestors of their regional leaders, thus connecting systems of political power and social organization with the spiritual power embodied in the mountains." "Treasure revealers," so she believes "fit into this equation [by acting] as mediators between the land deities cum sacred ancestors and the political leaders of the region, whose hegemony was tied to receiving the favor of their ancestral mountain deities" (Jacoby 2014, 103).

On a less local level, the premium on the past is also linked to the memory of "Great Tibet" *(bod chen po*), which is consistently depicted in grandiose terms as it is said to have been the realm of an enormous empire reaching from Persia to China and from Nepal to Mongolia. As we saw, it was during those years of greatest power—when Vimalamitra and Padmasmbhava were invited by Trisong Detsen—that the Dzogchen scriptures are said to have entered Tibet to be taught to a few influential Tibetans.

[9] de ltar 'khor 'das thog mtha' la/ sangs rgyas 'khrul par ma gyur pa/ gzhi las 'phags pa'i dbang po yis/ rang snang rang bzhin med par shes/ rtog dpyod yid rnams phyir ma shor/ 'gyu ba rang thog chod pa'o.

* In my translation, I have benefited from David Germano's unpublished version of the Treasury of Words and Meaning. ** I have also opted to translate all the passages in prose, even though many of the old scriptures are in verse. The reasons for this choice are related to my overall attempt at moving away from a purely literary and semiotic interpretation of the Great Perfection to explore the very real dimensions of freedom and imprisonment at work within the tradition.

Both traditions are oriented towards questions of origins located in divine unfragmented pasts. As for the Treasure Tradition, its identity is firmly grounded in the glorious past of their prestigious role during the period of the Tibetan empire prior to the age of fragmentation, of which the revealers were constantly reminded by the haunting memories and omnipresent vestiges in the form of destroyed temples and monasteries. As one commentator offered, writings in the Ancient tradition "draw on the distant past as a force to be summoned in order to accomplish their aims" (Gayley 2017, 172). The treasure revelation is therefore imagined as a "descent" (*babs*) as the lineage transmission of texts flows from the distant past into the present (Dreyfus 2003, 501; Germano 2002). The domination of the past over the living present locates the poietic thrust in the conviction that the land of snows is an exceptionally fertile realm for the spreading of Buddhism (Kapstein 2000, 136). Indeed, by far the most dominant literary trope of the early treasures is Tibetan history, especially national narratives dedicated to the legacy of the emperors, the patron deity of Tibet named Avalokiteśvara, or the celebration of other figures during the Tibetan empire, and the "Precious Guru" Padmasambhava.[10]

If the Treasure Tradition locates its religious roots in the period of the Tibetan empire by attributing its scriptures to a time before the fragmentation, this prioritizing of the past over the present finds its expression also in the Dzogchen myth of cosmogenesis. Of particular importance, in this context, is the emphasis put on a state of being before the birth of the universe as we know it. As something that has been there "before" the rupture, the depiction of the ground prioritizes what is ancient over what is modern. Indeed, the ground is frequently also called the "original ground" (*gdod ma'i gzhi*), "primoridal Ground" (*ye gzhi*), "initial Ground" (*thog ma'i gzhi*), "original state" (*gdod ma'i ngang*), and "the way of original being" (*thog ma'i gnas lugs*), and described as "originally pure" (*ka dag*). Although scholars are correct in pointing out that this expression should not be regarded simply as a temporal definition of the ground (Kapstein 2000, 167–70), which is also pictured as "atemporal" (*dus med*), "indeterminate" (*ma nges pa'i dus*), or a sort of "fourth time" (*dus bzhi pa*), there is no doubt that a priority for what is past is at least part of the concept. The only

[10] See, for example, *The Pillar Testament (mani bka' 'bum*), *The Chronicle of Padmasambhava* (*padma thang yig*), or *The Five Chronicles* (*bka' thang lde lnga*). Later, it was Nyangrel Nyima Özer (1124-1196) and Guru Chöwang (1212-1270), who produced texts dedicated to the history of the Tibetan empire, Avalokiteśvara and Padmasambhava. While the earliest strata of Treasures focused primarily on the Tibetan emperors, from the twelfth century onward it was Padmasambhava who increasingly became the center of attention in most of these Treasure texts. See, (R. M. Davidson 2005, 213)

commentator noting this peculiarity is Arguillère, who clarified that "even though it has been too rarely highlighted until now, this temporal connotation, present everywhere in Dzogchen, to speak about realities—of which it incidentally puts forth an eternal nature—is very remarkable" (Arguillère 2007, 337).

The scholars that have investigated the ground, in which the Great Perfection emerged, from a historical vantage point, have frequently declared that it was likely generated out of the forces of tantra. The classification of Buddhist tantras is no simple matter and there exist multiple systems (Hodge 1994; Mimaki 1994). Generally speaking, however, we can think of it in terms of a five-fold division into the three lower tantras of "Action" (Skt. *kriyā*, Tib. *bya ba'i rgyud*), "Practice" (Skt. *caryā* Tib. *spyod pa'i rgyud*), or Yoga ("Union"), Mahāyoga ("Great Yoga"), and Yoginī tantras (whose name is inspired by the term for "female practitioner of yoga") (P. Williams 2000, 202–5; Skorupski 1996, 100–102; English 2002, 2–6; D. Snellgrove 1959; 1987; Mayer and Cantwell 2010; Dalton 2013; Gray 2007; Beyer 1973).

Scholarship indicates that the notion of the "great perfection" emerged out of Indian meditative practices of deity yoga in the eighth century. According to Samten Karmay, the term that later came to denominate an entire religious tradition came from the primary Mahāyoga tantra of the Ancients, the *Secret Nucleus Tantra* (*Guhyagarbhatantra*) (Karmay 2007, 11ff.). As the deity yoga practice of visualizing one's self as the deity comes to an end, the practitioner is instructed to dissolve the entire visualization in a stage known as the completion stage. In the *Guhyagarbhatantra*, the meditative process is completed with a third step, which encourages the practitioner to rest in the natural state of the pure and luminous mind that remains after the visualization is dissolved. This final phase is known as "the great perfection" (*rdzogs chen*).

Continuing Karmay's research, it was Sam van Schaik who suggested that in the early tradition of the Ancients, the presence of both Mahāyoga and the Dzogchen does not point to the "existence of two separate traditions" (Van Schaik 2004a, 167). Based on his studies of Dunhuang texts from the eighth and ninth centuries, van Schaik notes that the Great Perfection and the Great Yoga were interwoven traditions, with the former serving as somewhat of a philosophical backdrop for the latter. He writes:

> The Great Perfection instructions were rarely taken literally: few *Ngapas*, if any gave up every religious practice to just sit around being

> enlightened. Instead the Great Perfection remained a kind of framework for meditation and study, a reminder that enlightenment was not to be found "out there" but was immediately present in the pure nature of one's own mind (Van Schaik 2011, 66).

In one specific Dunhuang texts, entitled *Questions and Answers of Vajrasattva (rdorje sems dpa' zhus lan*), van Schaik finds not only evidence that Mahāyoga and Dzogchen were co-existing traditions but that the Great Perfection stood for a particular "way" (*tshul*) of practicing Mahāyoga generation and completion stage techniques (Van Schaik 2004a, 173).

Although the textual evidence suggests that the interpretations of Karmay and van Schaik have validity, during the time of the Tibetan empire, only the first three categories of tantras, collectively known as the lower Tantras, were imported into Tibet and officially acknowledged. In many ways then, they represent the core texts of the early Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The first two categories consist largely of Mahāyāna ritual texts with worldly *(laukika)* goals (Sanderson 1994, 97). They contained instructions for the worship of deities, offerings and praises, as well as *dhāraṇīs* to achieve supernatural attainments *(siddhis)*, such as finding treasures, alchemical transformations, flying, making one's body invisible, forcing access to heavenly realms, protecting from evils, alleviating illness, controlling the weather, generating health and prosperity (D. Snellgrove 1987, 232–4).

Particularly the *kriyā* tantras were populated by a specific type of texts known as the *dhāraṇīs*. This type of text is closely associated with memory and already surfaces in earlier scriptures, such as Mahāyāna texts like the *Lotus Sutra* or the *Heart Sutra*. Davidson is correct in claiming that "the Nyingma authors dipped into the archive of seminal works translated from both Indic and Sinic sources" to articulate their "gnoseology of awareness" (R. M. Davidson 2005, 236). In fact, I would even argue that there exists a vital shared motivation between the earlier tantras and the Great Perfection scriptures.

Within the school of the Ancients, the two mythical-historical grounds of the glorious past ultimately coalesce into one. As Davidson propositioned, both of them draw their identity from the "tomb and ancestral cults of the royal house" (R. M. Davidson 2005, 242). Davidson was also the one to point out that both the Dzogchen scriptures and the *termas* formed part of an ancestral cult, being narratives coming from a "grand ancestor residing in the tomb of the Buddha," rather than bodily

presences of living authors (R. M. Davidson 2005, 240–42). This points us to another shared characteristic of the two traditions, namely their responsiveness to memory and remembrance.

Scholarship has repeatedly animadverted that the treasure texts can be regarded as traces and memories that are marked by gaps rather than continuities, ruptures rather than perpetuity (J. B. Gyatso 1986). Peter Schweiger rightly entered that the Terma tradition is

> based on an understanding of time not as a homogeneous measure of a continuous sequence of events, but rather as a dimension containing "holes" through which the "power of sacred origins" can repeatedly manifest itself directly and spontaneously in the present. Time is, so to speak, a transparent and porous sheet through which historic events become visible, always against the founding background of their cultural origins. (Schweiger 2013, 69–70)

While Herbert Guenther has correctly called the Great Perfection tantras "forgotten" tales (Guenther 1994, xvii), they must also be understood in their function as exercises at *anamnesis*, texts of remembrance. It is in this mnemonic function that the treasures that are *The Seventeen Tantras* reveal surprising affinities with the tantras translated during the Imperial period. Thus, although there is no literary, archeological, or historical evidence of a movement by the names of *Atiyoga*, *Mahāsaṅdhi*, or *Mahāsampanna*—the Sanskrit terms that could be employed to designate Dzogchen—in Indian Buddhism that was transmitted to Tibetan during the "early dissemination" (*snga dar*) of the teachings in the seventh and eighth centuries (Karmay 2007, 33; Lingpa and Kapstein 1991, 353), the shared emphasis on rememberance gives some legitimacy to the traditional account of the Ancient School's origin during the empire.

Closely linked to their emphasis on remembrance is the traditions' emphasis on visionary quests in the formation of religious identity. There are two primary modes of treasure discovery: the first one is known as "earth treasure" (*sa gter*) and involves the unearthing of textual fragments buried in the ground, a statue, or a monastery wall; the second one, the so-called "mind treasure" (*dgongs gter*), involves a mental process during which a text that is buried in the discoverer's mind is revealed. It is in this second type of treasure revelation that we find a strikingly similar visionary process that leads from primordial atemporality into human history and

language. The revelation of mind treasures can be depicted as a process of "un-minding:" The texts were buried in the revealer's most fundamental level of mind in the past, encoded in the "genuine awareness of radiant light," recovered in the present through a process of "pure vision" (*dag snang*) that gives access to the memory of this pristine state of radiant light, and the process of perception of the treasure text is following a rhythm that moves gradually from an initial dawning in the form of random changing and shaking (*g.yo ba*) to a spontaneously translation into Tibetan (J. B. Gyatso 1998, 159–73).

Freedom Out of Playfulness

> That which is called "the great originally pure ground" abides in terms of the triad of essence, nature, and compassion. That essence is unchanging wisdom that is unceasingly radiant and known as the "natural condition of the Youthful Body in a Vase." Its nature is the unceasing epiphany of the five lights. The epiphany of compassion is like the cloudless sky. This is called the "natural condition of original purity" that is completely devoid of any limitations, having not fallen in any direction. (RRS, 529.5)[11]

The ground is described not only as "empty essence" (*ngo bo stong pa*) and "radiant nature" (*rang bzhin gsal ba*), but also as "all-pervading compassion" (*thugs rje kun khyab*) (Germano 1992, 62–63, 921). In this third quality, the Great Perfection expresses not only a valence that moves further beyond its initially negative definition of the ground as empty, but one that distances our Direct Transcendence yogi from the logic of the Treasure Tradition.

While it is true that texts concealed in the interiority of the Tibetan earth could be labeled as "pervasive" inasmuch as they are only resting in a latently internal state before manifesting their meaning and knowledge in the form of revealed scriptures,[12]

[11] gzhi ka dag chen po zhe bya ste/ ngo bo rang bzhin thugs rje rnam pa gsum du gnas so/ ngo bo mi 'gyur ba'i ye shes/ ma 'gags par gsal ba gzhon nu bum sku'i gnas lugs zhes bya'o/ rang bzhin 'od lnga'i snang ba ma 'gags pa'o/ thugs rje'i snang ba ni/ dper na sprin med pa lta bu'o/ de ni ka dag gi gnas lugs zhes bya ste/ rgya gar yang ma chad/ phyogs gar yang ma lhung ba'o.

[12] This argument has been made by Janet Gyatso. It is one of the few moments where she establishes parallels between the religious teachings of the Great Perfection teachings and the Treasure Tradition. (J. B. Gyatso 1998, 201–2)

the revelation of Treasures differs from the cosmogonic manifestation of the ground in Dzogchen. More specifically, the way that this pervasive energy is set free differs radically in these two traditions at the core of the Ancient School's religious activities. On the one hand, in the Great Perfection, the ground is said to possess an "expressive energy" or "dynamism" (*rtsal*), which is intrinsically creative.

By contrast, the creative self of the Terma tradition is marked by three fundamental attributes that point to an entirely separate type of energy flow, namely extraction, subjugation, and descent. The revelation of the buried treasures is not only premised on the actual extraction of a physical object from the ground and consistently associated with sexual yoga practices of the completion stage (J. B. Gyatso 1998, 140, 194–97), but also linked to autochthonous and non-Buddhist spirits and gods of Tibet that inhabit the ground where they are hidden (R. M. Davidson 2005, 217, 373). As Jacoby put it, the "most powerful of the motley group of land deities were those inhabiting sacred mountains (variously called *yul lha*, *gzhi bdag*, *gnyan*, and *dgra lha*), who ruled over the 'masters of the ground' (*sa bdag*) in their territories" (Jacoby 2014, 105).

These local spiritual forces are known as "masters of treasures" (*gter bdag*) or "religious guardians" (*chos srung*, *srung ma*) and serve as protectors of the treasures hidden by the great imperial figures, such as Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra. The lack of agency on the part of the "treasure revealer" (*gter ston*) is here grounded in the idea that the protector always exerts a certain power over the one who benefits from protection, while the process of *poiesis* involves the grappling with these indigenous powers in his efforts to extract the texts. As a consequence, for the treasure revealer, the visionary quest of transforming Tibet into the land of Buddhism involves "extraction" (*bdon*) of treasures and is always focalized on the "subjugation" (*gdul ba*) of spirits by means of special powers and tantric body practices (J. B. Gyatso 1996, 147–51). In fact, as Francoise Pommaret noted, the spirits are also known as *dam can* (lit. "those who are bound by an oath") as they have "been subjugated and sworn to protect the Buddhist doctrine" (Pommaret 1994, 40).

Padmasambhava perfectly exhibits the *modus operandi* of the Treasure Tradition. As *Guru Rinpoche*, he is not only credited with a key role in the importation of Buddhism to Tibet and the principal hider of treasures in the Tibetan ground, but also known as the foremost tamer of demons (Kapstein 2000, 155–57; J. B. Gyatso 1998, 154–55). As Terrone elaborates:

> The relationship between these land deities and humans is often a tension-filled one in which their nature is wild, restive, and fueled by forces not necessarily conducive to the flourishing of nature's human inhabitants. Tibetans venerate the eighth-century Padmasambhava not only as the founder of Buddhism in Tibet and the most powerful tantric master in the world […], but also as the tamer of opposing forces personified by the demons, spirits, and mountain gods inhabiting the land and possibly reluctant to welcome a new and foreign culture. (Terrone 2014, 466)

The difference between the disclosure of awareness in the Great Perfection and in the Treasure Tradition can also be illustrated by reviewing the role of the concept of the "vase" (*bum pa*) in the two traditions. We have already seen that the Dzogchen myth puts the "youthful body in a vase" (*gzhon nu bum pa'i sku*) at the center of its cosmogonic account as it identifies it explicitly with the ground. The *tertöns*, likewise, are frequently associated with the so-called "Treasure Vases" (Skt. *nidhana kumbha*; Tib. *gter gyi bum pa*).

This being said, while Samantabhādra as the Great Perfection ground is spontaneously manifesting and playfully expressive, the Treasure revealers exemplify a different behavior in their responsiveness to the Tibetan soil. In fact, as Jacoby remarks, while "most scholarship on the Treasure tradition has focused on the scriptures and artifacts that revealers claim to have withdrawn from the Tibetan earth and sky," this is not the only operation that takes place as "Treasure revealers also often inserted sacred substances back into the earth and water" (Jacoby 2014, 103). With Antonio Terrone, we could speak of an "ecology of revelation" (Terrone 2014).

Indeed, as evidence shows, these sacred substances were oftentimes collected and inserted into "Treasure vases" (*gter 'bum*) (Jacoby 2014, 103). The burying of these treasure vases, as *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols* (2003) explains, takes place "in sacred geomantic sites, including mountain passes, pilgrimage places, springs, oceans, and streams" and is intended to "spread abundance to the environment, and to appease the indigenous spirits who dwell in these places" (Beer 2003, 202). Furthermore, since the Treasure Tradition—likely from its earliest moments—was intimately linked to ancestral worship, it is clear that the burying of Termas also serves to strengthen the semi-transcendent identity of the Treasure revealer and to ensure the continuity of the social group to which he belongs.

Although I have emphasized a shared concern for remembrance in order to compare Dzgochen scriptures to the *kriyā* tantras and Karmay and Van Schaik are correct in pointing to the arresting continuities between the Great Perfection and Mahāyoga, my investigation into the ground gestures at constitutional differences between the various teachings of the Ancients. As for the difference between the *kriyā* tantras and the Great Perfection, the former is less concerned with remembrance as a magical act. As Yukei Matsunaga has shown, *dhāraṇīs* are regarded as both "memorization" and "magic spells" (Y. Matsunaga 1977). Similarly, Paul Williams argued that the association between power and memory is grounded in the fact that "the memorized *dhāraṇī* contains the power of the word of the Buddha, which is able to protect one from harm and overcome enemies" (P. Williams 2000, 206). These elements of power and control over others are largely absent in the Great Perfection.

Then as well, the association of the treasure revelation process with the taming demons and the performance of sexual practices makes it quite clear that the Treasure Tradition was heavily inspired by the Mahāyoga tradition. Although we find some the sexual and violent the "path of desires" (*chags lam*) in Great Perfection texts, particularly in the form of the one-hundred wrathful and peaceful deities, the overall discourse of Dzogchen is markedly different from earlier tantra. As Germano posits:

> Whereas other tantric discourses are dominated by intuitions of danger, of the violent impulses that constitute our embodied identity and instinct for self-preservation, the Great Perfection seems instead to be driven by a stronger intuition of an underlying positive force enfolded in our bodies with the capacity to simply dissolve these forces, an instinct for relationship. (Germano 1994, 232)

The difference between these two visions of Tibet is also processed within other mythic narratives of the Ancients, expressly as the story of Samantabhādra is frequently contrasted to the myth of Rudra. If the narrative of Samantabhādra stands for the ground as a type of spontaneous and natural radiation that defines the world-view of Dzogchen, the myth of Rudra reflects priorities of both Terma and tantra as we read about violence, subjugation, and conversion (Dalton 2013, 33).

This second myth, indeed, has its origin in the tantras of Indian Buddhism (Hiltebeitel 1989) and spins the story of the defeat of Maheśvara by the Buddha.[13] As Matthew Kapstein spotted in his discussion of the Rudra myth as it is retold by the fourteenth-century Treasure revealer Orgyen Lingpa (*o rgyan gling pa*, 1323-c.1360) in his *The Testament of Padmasambhava* (*padma bka'i thang*), "the Rudra episode […] begins by indexing itself in relation to the temporal projection of mundane being that unfolds when the expressive power of the ground has passed into bewilderment" (Kapstein 2000, 176). In other words, by "placing the entire episode outside the domain of Samantabhādra's teaching," the Rudra myth explicates not only the bewildering nature of *saṃsāra* but rather its vicious and evil nation (Kapstein 2000, 176).

In short, the two myths not only sum up the Great Perfection's distance from tantra but also from the Treasure tradition. On the one hand, the story of Samantabhādra is the founding myth of Dzogchen. Here, liberation is based on simplicity, spontaneity, and inherent perfection. On the other hand, both Mahāyoga and the Treasure traditions are roused with the qualities of the myth of Rudra, in which sexuality, violence, and subjugation organize the story (Kapstein 2000, 177).

In contradistinction to extraction, subjugation, and descent, the Tibetanizing thrust of the Dzogchen's self is best described by the term *snang ba*, which can be variously illustrated as "epiphany," "vision," or "disclosure." In *The Seventeen Tantras* the energy of awareness is furthermore qualified as "spontaneously productive" (*lhun grub*) and frequently expressed through metaphors of light. The ground is marked by "(dis)play" (*rol pa*), "radiance" (*gdangs*), "effulgence" (*ye gdangs*), and "radiant light" (*'od gsal*). The myth of origin of the Great Perfection, in fact, is not only concerned with the ground in its primordial interiority but also in the "way in which the ground epiphanizes in spontaneous presence" (*lhun grub gzhi snang gi shar tshul).* In *The Tantra of Great Beauty and Auspiciousness*, this spontaneity of the ground is construed as follows: "Unceasing (*ma 'gags pa*) space manifests as energy. Unceasing epiphany arises as lights. Unceasing enjoyment dawns as wisdom. Unceasing essence emerges as bodies" (KSD, AB? 214,4).[14]

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[13] In the Great Perfection, the myth is discussed in detail in Longchenpa's *Dispelling all Darkness Throughout the Ten Directions* (*phyogs byu'i mun sel*). (R. M. Davidson 1991; Stein 1995; Kapstein 1992; Arguillère 2007; Germano 1994)

[14] thugs rje ltar 'char ba'i go ma 'gags pa/ 'od ltar 'char ba'i snang ba ma 'gags pa/ ye shes ltar 'char ba'i longs spyod ma 'gags pa/ sku ltar 'char ba'i ngo bo ma 'gags pa.

Samten Karmay once noted that not all phases of Tibetan history were able to mint a strong national identity amongst the inhabitants of the plateau. "With the advent of Buddhism and particularly from the eleventh century onwards," he claimed, "the national consciousness of the Tibetan people suffered greatly." In fact, he continues, if "nationalism requires will, self-assertion, self-identification and self-determination," then during the period in question, "immersed in the tranquility of Buddhist compassion, the Tibetan people had almost forgotten who they were and where they were" (Karmay 1994, 112). This being said, although the "all-pervading compassion" of the Dzogchen ground might not be as willful, assertive, and determined as the Treasure revealer's interaction with the soil in the land of snows, this does not necessarily mean that it played a lesser role in the articulation of a Tibetan identity.

The View from the Peak: From Individual Freedom to Social Context

Since the inaugural academic research on Buddhism by Western scholars in the late nineteenth century, the association between meditation and the self has been an almost unchallenged dictum. Rhys Davids, whose role in promoting the term "mindfulness" as a translation of *sati* has recently been highlighted (Gethin 2011), accepted the practice of meditation as a rational technique for transforming the self while rejecting the doctrine of rebirth and other "outgrowth[s] of superstitions and misunderstandings" (Davids and Davids 1910, 12). Referring to the Pāli expression "*sato sampajāno,*" he commented that the "doctrine of being mindful and self-possessed is one of the lessons most frequently inculcated" in the early Buddhist scriptures (Davids and Davids 1910, 101).

Over the past years, many psychologists and meditation teachers picked up this "anthropocentric" meaning of meditation by describing it as a medium to deal with contentions regarding the self. Mindfulness is seen as an instrument to shift self-referential thinking (Farb et al. 2007), implicit self-image (Dambrun and Ricard 2011; Hölzel et al. 2011), and enhance skills like self-observation (S. L. Shapiro et al. 2006), self-regulation (S. L. Shapiro and Schwartz 2000; Rigby, Schultz, and Ryan 2014; J. Lutz et al. 2016), self-compassion (Neff 2003; Bluth and Blanton 2014), self-focused attention (Jain et al. 2007; Heeren and Philippot 2011; Campbell et al. 2012), and self-integration (Rubin 1996).

Mindfulness is said to be beneficial for identity-formation (Crescentini and Capurso 2015; Crescentini, Matiz, and Fabbro 2015), and some sort of reference to the "self" is present in almost all definitions of mindfulness (e.g. (Walsh and Shapiro 2006, 228–29; Cahn and Polich 2006, 180). One recent article even speaks of the "mindful self" (Xiao et al. 2017), while another one proposed "a framework for understanding the neurobiological mechanisms of mindfulness" by speaking of S-ART, which stands for "self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-transcendence" (Vago and David 2012).

The bulk of contemplative science research is concerned with finding universal procedures for self-improvement. As mindfulness gradually merged with a sort of marketing strategy for promoting identity makeovers and its commercialization through self-help books, guided classes, and retreats took on a cult-like following, commentators started to critically evaluate the prioritization of the self. Purser and Loy, for instance, defined mindfulness meditation as it practiced in contemporary society as a "banal, therapeutic, self-help technique" (Purser and Loy 2013, 2). The psychologist Thomas Joiner, more radically, suggests that modern mindfulness

meditation is so concerned with the improvement of the self that it actually contributes to the development of narcissistic and self-obsessed mindsets (Joiner 2017). Theodore Zeldin, likewise, claims that mindfulness meditation makes people into narcissists because they fail to engage others and effectively act to transform the world surrounding them (Figl 2018).

Although meditation is frequently seen as the endeavor of an individual self, this first part of my dissertation evidences that contemplative practices are embedded within larger cultural contexts that shape our identities. In order to be relevant, research on meditation needs to move beyond its exclusive focus on the self and become conscious of the collective dimension of such practices.

It is good to see that this type of thinking has gradually started to emerge amongst certain researchers in CS in recent years. For instance, the studies that show how contemplation helps us deal with social anxiety (Farb et al. 2007; P. Goldin et al. 2013), or enhances our emotion regulation abilities and our capacity to respond to environmental circumstances (P. R. Goldin and Gross 2010; J. Lutz et al. 2014; Grecucci et al. 2015; Guendelman, Medeiros, and Rampes 2017; Beblo et al. 2018), are demonstrating the significant overlap between individual psychology and collective context. Such approaches, show how CS can complement its investigations into states of consciousness, brain waves, or levels of blood pressure with the specific historical-cultural manifestations, symbolisms, and vocabulary that accompany them on the ground.

As I try to show through this entire study, our understanding of the sky-gazing practice hinges in many ways on our appreciation of the ground upon which the yogi sits. In the first two chapters, this grounding contextualization has involved two steps:

First, it led us to understand that Direct Transcendence stands in a complex relationship with the Great Perfection's myth of cosmology. Just as the visions (*snang ba*) are manifesting in the perceptual field of the meditator, so the cosmos unfolds as a result of the "epiphany of the ground" (*gzhi snang*). Since identities are collective, myths are the ideal means to negotiate and articulate them. Our identity, in short, always transcends us as individuals, even in the most intimate and private moments of meditation.

Second, my analysis showed that this mythical narrative is itself also grounded in an even more concrete context, namely the history of early Tibet. The genesis of the cosmos, a seemingly otherworldly reality that begins with the breaking open of a luminous vase of light and continues with the effulgence of luminous energy through

the universe, is ultimately grounded in the experience of the Tibetan people during the years that shaped their identity like none other. More generally speaking, a tradition's history inevitably shapes its cultural, social, and religious values in such a way that everything that can possibly be imagined is ultimately shaped by it.

To illustrate this foundational nature of a culture's mythical horizon, we should revisit the close association between the moment of cosmogony and the practice of Direct Transcendence. In what has been called a "hymn of praise" to the epiphany of the Ground (Germano 1992, 369), *The Pearl Necklace Tantra* describes the moment of the birth of the universe in terms that closely resemble our yogi's experience on top of the mountain. "Phenomenal existence (*snang srid*) rising (*bzhengs*) from the ground, how lofty in height! Effortless self-liberation (*rang grol*), how vast in its extent! A great primordial beginning, how wise in its domain! (MTP, 470.2).[15] Here, the "rise" (*bzhengs*) of "phenomenal existence" (*snang srid*) from or within the "ground" (*gzhi*) is celebrated as a sort of miracle, the foundation for everything that "appears" (*snang*) and "exists" (*srid*).

Most importantly, the coming into being of the Dzogchen universe defines the most fundamental traits of the meditative practice that would become the center-piece of the tradition's system for centuries to come. The rise of these phenomena from the ground is not only "used in discussing contemplative practice," but also itself "imaged as a display of light viewed by a nameless viewer standing on a cliff (the 'ground'), with original purity the cloudless sky above him/her, the Bodies of Enjoyment in the sky in front on the horizon and so on down to the six impure worlds stretching across the plains below" (Germano 1992, 372).

I further hope that my discussion of other concepts, such as trauma, resilience, and identity was also useful in contributing to our awareness of the collective dimension of meditation. The collapse of the Tibetan empire represented a loss of structure, meaning, and order that formed the basis for any future cultural undertaking on the plateau. While the movement of the Great Perfection had its first stirrings amongst certain aristocratic clans associated with the Tibetan empire, its true moment of origination coincided with the death knell of the earlier status quo.

Together with the Treasure Tradition, the Great Perfection articulated a strong identity by weaving mythical-historical narratives of an expressive, creative, and

[15] snang srid gzhi* bzhengs dpangs re mtho/ 'bad med rang grol rgya re che/ ye thog chen po 'khor re mkhas. *I have corrected "bzhi" for "gzhi" based on TDD.

productive ground of awareness. As we saw, in Dzogchen mythology, this liberating dimension is expressed in a rich cluster of words that includes the following: "originally pure" (*ka dag*), "original Ground" (*ye gzhi*), "primordial Ground" (*thog ma'i gzhi*), "original state" (*gdod ma'i ngang*), and "the way of original being" (*thog ma'i gnas lugs*), "sphere" (*klong*), "expanse" (*dbyings*), "expressive energy" (*rtsal*), "spontaneously productive" (*lhun grub*), "radiance" (*gdangs*), "effulgence" (*ye gdangs*), and "radiant light" (*'od gsal*).

The collapse of the empire and the loss of this grandiose self established the horizons for future meditation practice. Society, in fact, captures us not only in rules, routines, and customs, but in mental frameworks that define the very notions of freedom and imprisonment themselves. At the same time, however, it is only through this very situatedness within a cultural matrix that we can envision freedom. This reveals the dialectical logic of the spiritual progression underlying Great Perfection meditation, namely that it is only through the confining ground that our yogi can embrace the freedom of the sky above him. Society offers us a necessary context, a stable reference, a fixed vantage point that is necessary to see clearly and to envision freely.

The members of the Ancient School, due to their strong identification with Tibet and its mythical-historical identity, cherished their specific place on earth more than many other cultural traditions across the globe. The ground of the epiphany of Dzogchen philosophy and the ground of the Treasure revelation represent the epitome of a uniquely Tibetan vantage point that would inform not only Great Perfection mediation but many other future developments of Buddhism on the plateau.

II: The New Schools and the Marginalization of the Ancients (11th-12th centuries)

Chapter 3: The Bursting of the Youthful Body in a Vase: The Rise of the New Schools and the Processing of Trauma in Mythical Narratives

The Base of the Mountain: The Opposing Collective Memories During the Tibetan Renaissance

Perched on the slopes of White Skull Snow Mountain, our sky-gazing yogi sits below a very famous peak in Central Tibet, approximately fifteen miles to the South of Lhasa. This location forms not only part of the variegated geographical topography of the Tibetan soil, but also of a cultural ground that founds our yogi's visionary horizon. It has not only been the backdrop to the rise and fall of the empire and the subsequent struggle for the articulation of an Ancient identity, but also to other socio-political circumstances. This chapter introduces additional groups that claimed their stake in the Tibetan soil. This will make it clear that the ground upon which our yogi sits is less homogenous than we previously thought. Contested, conflicted, and fragmented, it is best imagined as consisting of a series of tectonic plates that push and pull in various directions rather than as a single surface.

The Ancients, indeed, were not the only ones trying to articulate their identity out of the ruins of the empire in eleventh-century Tibet. On the contrary, they were competing with formidable opponents, namely the New Schools (*gsar ma, Sarma*). While our yogi's tradition built its identity by soliciting answers from the mythical-religious ground of Tibet, the New Schools rose to the status of political power because of the access to new teachings from a land to the South, namely India. This influx of new teachings allowed them to create their own identity based on powerful techniques for manipulating consciousness.

We have seen that the tantras are generally divided into a five-fold system and that the first three were already present during the Tibetan empire. The true birth of tantra, however, took place in the sixth and seventh centuries in India with the rise of the Yoga tantras, which shifted the emphasis from external ritual activities to internal spiritual aims. Of particular importance is the *Compendium of All the Tathagātas' Essence* (*Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha, de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi de kho na nyid bsdus pa*), which was written in the seventh or eighth centuries and promote an elemental shift in priorities. This text is filled with rites of consecration, mantras, and maṇḍalas, which were no longer only concerned with worldly goals, but also inspired by soteriological objectives, i.e. enlightenment. These texts were imported to Tibet, during the imperial period, when the empire sponsored a translation project that adopted these well-ordered maṇḍalas, as well as hierarchical structures organized

around Buddhas such as Vairocana, also for political reasons (R. M. Davidson 2002, 139).

In India, at the end of the eighth century, we witness the emergence of new types of tantra, known as the Mahāyoga and the Yoginī tantras. Notably the last class, which emerged from the ninth century onwards, was immensely popular, with the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* (Tib. *'khor lo bde mchog*), the *Hevajra Tantra* (Tib. *Kye'i rdo rje*, lit. "Hail Vajra,"), and the *Kālachakra Tantra* (Tib. *dus kyi 'khor lo*, lit. "The Wheel of Time Tantra") becoming highly influential texts in the formation of the new Tibetan identity during the Renaissance.[16]

It is during the second dissemination of the teachings that we witness the birth of the distinction between the New Schools (*gsar ma*) and the Ancients (*rnying ma*) precisely because the former translated and highlighted new forms of tantric practices from the South Asian continent. While the Nyingmapas invoked the heritage of the materials transmitted to them during the time of the Tibetan Empire, the translators of the New School journeyed to the south of the Himalayas to bring with them the latest ritual and contemplative practices associated with the tantric systems of Guhyasamāja, Hevajra, and Cakrasaṃvara (R. M. Davidson 2005, 205).

The Rise of the New Schools and their Tantric Techniques of Self-Transformation

These scriptures—describing breathing patterns, bodily postures, hand gestures (Skt. *mudrā*, Tib. *phyag rgya*), verbal utterances (Skt. *mantra*), empowerments (Skt. *adhiṣṭhāna*, Tib. *byin gyis brlabs pa*), initiations (Skt. *abhiṣeka*, Tib. *dbang bskur ba*), and so forth—offered specific techniques for cultivating attention, training memory, and regulating emotions. If Davidson, in his excellent study on the rise of tantric Buddhism, has shown that religious "empowerments" (*dbang*)—playing off the political transmission of royal authority in India—fulfilled a crucial role at different moments in the history of Buddhism, this chapter points to the close association between the exertion of tantric power and the bodily senses. In the Tibetan universe, this close association between the techniques of sensory manipulation and the exertion of power (*dbang*), is even reflected in the etymology of the term used to describe the "senses" (*dbang po*).

[16] While Yamāntaka and Guhyasamāja would become key deities for the Gelug school (*dge lugs*), Heruka Cakrasaṃvara became the principal deity for the Kagyü (*bka' brgyud*) and Hevajra for the Sakya (*sa skya*). (Cozort 1996; 1986, 117–33; Skorupski 1996; Gray 2007; Newman 2000; V. Wallace 2001)

In the tantric practices imported by the New Schools we find three features that mark today's conception of meditation, namely the training of attention (Andresen 2000; Ivanovski and Malhi 2007; Cahn and Polich 2006; Goleman 1977; A. Lutz, Slagter, et al. 2008; Austin 2014), the enhancement of memory (Kang et al. 2013; Ziegler et al. 2019), and the regulation of emotions (A. Lutz, Brefczynski-Lewis, et al. 2008; Menezes and Bizarro 2015; Jones 2018; Beblo et al. 2018). Most importantly, all three of these traits are considered to be integral parts for achieving happiness.

As for attention, many of the tantric breathing techniques imported from India were seen as tools to regulate attention. Cultivating focus is the starting point of what is likely the most famous tantric practice, namely "deity yoga" (Skt. *devatā yoga*, Tib. *lha'i rnal byor*) (Cozort 1986; Harding and Kongtrul 2002; Yarnall 2003; Gray 2007). This practice involves the visualization of oneself as a divine figure. The practice starts with the "vivid appearance of the god" (Tib. *rnam pa gsal ba*), during which the meditator develops focused attention on attributes of the god he is visualizing.

As part of their tantric program, the New Schools not only engaged in techniques of attention regulation but also others that were even closer aligned with processes of identity-formation. Specifically, the tantric techniques they cultivated were concerned with the cultivation of an autobiographical memory that could help them overcome the identity crisis of the previous centuries and formulate the socio-political power that they held during those years. This is nowhere as apparent as in the second attribute of deity yoga practice. After vividly calling to mind the attributes of the god, the practice continues with the so-called "recollection of purity" (Tib. *rnam pa dag par dran pa)*, which stands for a profound identification of one's self with that of a supremely reigning deity.

The visualizations are implemented by following a standardized protocol, a so-called *sādhana* (Tib. *sgrub thabs*, lit. "means of achievement"), whose goal it is to elucidate the specific symbolic meanings of each individual attribute of the deity. Specifically, the god who is to be visualized—the so-called "personal deity" (Tib. *yi dam*, Skt. *iṣṭadevatā*, lit. "the deity to whom one is committed")—is marked by pure attributes, which correspond to specific cognitive dimensions related to Buddhist teachings. Richard Kohn, in his excellent study of the Mani Rimdu festival in Northern Nepal, describes this mnemonic element of the practice as follows:

> The commentaries, for example, explain that Lord of the Dance's clasped hands are the union of method and wisdom, and that they clasp a *vajra*

> because wisdom and method are bound as of one taste with the indivisible diamond of bliss. […] Having a pure body means that Lord of the Dance's hands are not *like* the union of wisdom and method, they *are* the union of wisdom and method. In "recollecting the purity" of the deity, the meditator calls these pure attributes to mind in detail. Thus, when he has recreated himself as the deity, his hands are not flesh and blood, but wisdom and method and so on .

Deity yoga is a practice that follows an arch of biographical identity-formation. One not only dissolves the old self in order to regenerate a new type of selfhood in the likeness of a god, but one also follows up this process of generation to act out one's new identity in new ways. As the meditation of the generation phase moves from the cultivation of concentration to the training in memory, the practitioner also trains in the third key attribute of deity yoga practice, namely "divine pride" (Tib. *lha'i nga rgyal 'dzin pa*). This points to another trait of meditation that surfaces in the tantric techniques imported in Tibet during the Renaissance period by the New Schools, namely emotion regulation.

Classical Tantra is usually divided into two different sets of practices, divided into the so-called "generation stage" (Skt. *utpatti-kramah,* Tib. *bskyed rim*) practices and the techniques of the "completion stage" (Skt. *utpanna- or sampanna-kramah*, Tib. *rdzogs rim*). Divine pride, by presuming "the thought that one is oneself the deity being visualized" (Cozort 1986, 57), leads directly into completion stage practices, which can be regarded as a sort of a culmination of the process of generation undertaken during deity yoga (Mullin 2006b). As Kohn puts it, "the process of perfection continues the efforts of the creation process [and] makes the yogic vision of the creation process real" (Kohn 2001, 31). Gavin Kilty, likewise, noted that "the generation stage is a preparatory ripening before the completion stage, during which these imagined enlightened forms are made real" (Kilty 2012, 3).

Completion stage techniques consist of rather involved techniques of bodily manipulation to grasp the soteriological potential of extreme experiences such as sexuality, violence, and death. One famous completion stage practice is the so-called "inner fire" (Tib. *gtum mo*, lit. "fierce woman"). To start this meditation, the practitioner visualizes two "drops" (Skt. *bindu*, Tib. *thig le*)—a female and a male one—which are imagined as fire and liquid respectively. Then, one is instructed to visualize a little flame in the abdomen, which blazes up as one inhales. With the

increase of air, the flame grows in size and heats up the drop located the top of the central channel, at the crown of his head. As the male *thig le* melts, it runs down in the form of a nectar, which mixes with the female energy below. As it descends through his central channel, washing through the four energy wheels, the practitioner is said to experience four joys (*ānanda*).

The yogi then increases this feeling by reversing the nectar's movement as he draws the melted mix of male and female energies upwards through the cakras all the way back to the crown of his head. Finally, the practice culminates with the expansion of the blissful experience throughout the body as the nectar is dissipated into all the minor channels running through the meditator's subtle anatomy. Together these two sets of practices share an underlying orientation, namely the emphasis on self-transformation by regulating attention, memories, and emotions.

Three Trauma Symptoms in the Myth of Cosmogenesis

The situation in Tibet during the late tenth and eleventh centuries allows us to exhibit another structural trait of collective trauma, namely that the concatenation between perpetrators and victims is frequently enmeshed and shifting over time (Giesen 2004; Hirschberger 2018). In fact, as the New Schools assembled their strategy to respond to the trauma by relying on power (*dbang*) of the "senses" (*dbang po*), they slowly turned into the new leaders on the Tibetan Plateau. In this process, their status gradually changed from being that of the victims to that of dominators. In other words, while certain traditions on the Tibetan plateau found their freedom to transform themselves, this act of liberation was often carried out by imprisoning or at least limiting the freedom of others.

In fact, while the period designated as the "later dissemination of the teaching" *(bstan pa phyi dar)* or as the age of the "new translations" *(gsar 'gyur)*, signified an upswing for Tibet, many of the aristocratic clans associated with the empire suffered further massive blows. In fact, the religious, economic, and political status of the Ancient School was radically controverted as the "New Schools" (*gsar ma*, *Sarma*) asserted their power.

In a land where Buddhism served as the *lingua franca* since its introduction in the seventh century, the access to new teachings turned out to be the decisive advantage for the New Schools. The new translators of Buddhism quickly rose to prominence and became celebrated feudal lords upon their return to Tibet; thus, radically challenging the power, prestige, and authenticity of the aristocratic clans of

the Ancients (R. M. Davidson 2005, 119–41, 205, 211). "With each new translation," so Adam Lobel recently put it, "the older Tibetan translations came to seem less genuinely Indic; and some claimed that the previous tantras were indigenous fabrications, especially without access to the Sanskrit originals" (Lobel 2018, 56).

As I mentioned earlier, the tantric techniques of self-transformation imported by the New Schools were part of a larger agenda, which served as intellectual weapons to take over the Tibetan plateau: The creation of a new self based on new knowledge. How deep the doctrine of the creation of a radically new self ran through the New Schools becomes ostensible if we recall the final attribute of deity yoga practice—"the divine pride"—in which the practitioner is instructed to "to assume the ego of the deity." Scholarship has rightly declared that deity yoga practice, imported by the Sarma translators during the Tibetan Renaissance, is essentially the "transformation of personality" (R. M. Davidson 2002, 164). As Christian Wedemeyer tendered:

> The central aim of this self-creation yoga is for the practitioner to do away with the perception of herself as ordinary—as well as the pride that is believed to be associated with that perception—and to replace it with a perception of herself as a divine, enlightened being, with the sense of proud empowerment and universal efficacy that characterizes such a being (Wedemeyer 2013, 117).

It is now time to look at one particular shadow-side of these contemplative practices of self-transformation, namely how it has very real consequences for the communities that do not have access to these techniques. While the previous chapter focused on the social meanings of traumatic events, cultural traumas also "involve various relationships between *memory*, *body*, *language*, *sensations*, and *space*" (Ganzevoort and Sremac 2019, 4). Scholars have even argued that cultures respond to trauma similar to individuals, manifesting something akin to PTSD symptoms (Heinberg 1994). As Herman put it, "repression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness" (Herman 1992, 9). Hirschberger, analogously, declared that "collective reactions to a history of trauma are similar in many respects to individual post-traumatic reactions" (Hirschberger 2018, 5).

I now investigate how the Dzogchen myth of cosmogenesis is a dissociative narrative, which encodes not only the socio-political trauma that its proponents

suffered during their formative years, but also displays a series of rather distinct symptoms of trauma. By focusing on the dysregulation on the same three cognitive function that marked the tantric practices—attention, memory, and emotion—I do not mean to argue for a causal link between the Great Perfection's mythically encoded symptoms of trauma and the Sarma practices of self-transformation. Rather, their shared focus on attention, memory, and emotion serves to reflect on how tantric techniques can have dissociative repercussions—not only for those who practice them—but also for the traditions that are not explicitly relying on these technological innovations.

The Loss of Attention: The Epiphany of the Ground and the Stirring of the Wind

While the short introduction to tantric techniques clarified that the New Schools engaged in advanced techniques that aimed at the cultivation of attention, the careful regulation of breathing patterns, and the freeing of air flow and life energies, the Great Perfection's myth of cosmogony displays the opposite tendencies: Loss of attention, sensory over-stimulation, and hyperventilation.

One of the most vexing problems in scholarship on the Great Perfection, both from within the tradition and outside of it, is the reason for the disruption of the originally pure ground. All we read in the scriptures is that the epiphany of the ground is incited by an enigmatic "stirring" (*g.yos*) of "the wisdom wind" (*ye shes rlung*), which is causes the rupture of the seal (*rgya kha ral*) of the vase of light (TDD, 178.2-179.1).[17] David Germano offers a succinct summary of this initial moment when he writes:

> The primeval moment when a gnostic wind stirs from within the ground's primordiality, and for obscure reasons rents open the sealing enclosure of the "vase" such that in an instant from nothing comes everything, as luminous spiraling galaxies suddenly expand outwards from the infinite singular darkness of the ground's pure potentiality" (Germano 1992, 65).

[17] nang dbyings ka dag gi ye gzhi gzhon nu bum pa sku'i kha ral te ye shes kyi rlung g.yos pas. […] nang gzhon nu bum pa sku'i rgya kha ral te.

This account is already present in the earliest scriptures. For instance, in *The Tantra of Great Beauty and Auspiciousness*, we read that "when the inner youthful vase body is breaking open (*kha ral*) […] in that precise moment my epiphanies are rent (*ral*) into exteriority" (*KSD*, AB1, 215.2).[18]

The first thing that stands out in these accounts is their suddenness and violence. This is not only noticeable in the specific formulation "in that precise moment" (*dus de tsam na*), but also in the fact that it is the "stirring," "quivering," or "shaking" (*g.yo*) of the wind that is liable for the ground's emergence, which is itself furthermore described as a "tearing open" (*ral*) of the "seal" (*rgya*) of the vase of light. The ground's epiphany is illustrated in such terms because the traumatic experience of the Ancients was an emotional shock. In the Tibetan world, indeed, the word "wind" (*rlung*) is synonymous with "breath" and closely associated with one's "life force" (*srog*). As Epstein and Topgay worded it,

> Both medical and religious texts lay a strong emphasis on these currents of psychic energy. […] Tibetan medical texts are filled with descriptions of the manifestations of dysfunction of the pranic [wind] flow, and Tantric religious texts voluminously elucidate the reorganization of these currents that occur in death or in meditation. An understanding of the Tibetan approach to mind is not possible without an appreciation of the character of these pranic currents. (Epstein and Sonam 1982, 68).

Wind is such a cardinal constituent in the Tibetan apperception of the link between body and mind that is it also closely associated to Traditional Tibetan Medicine (*bod kyi gso ba rig pa*), being described in detail in the most authoritative medical texts, the so-called *Four Tantras* (*rgyud bzhi*) (Rabgay 1984; Millard 2007). Here, various winds are associated with psychophysical symptoms: Disruptions in the "ascending wind" (Tib. *gyen rgyu rlung*), for example, manifest as difficulties in speaking, stammering, paralysis in the face, or memory loss (P. Dorjee, Moore, and Jones 2005, 168). By contrast, the loss of rhythm in the "life-holding wind" (Tib. *srog 'dzin rlung*)—which is more directly linked to consciousness and the body-mind connection—leads to a series of other problems, such as hallucinations, confusion, restlessness, anxiety, depression, dizziness, or even insanity (Yoeli-Tlalim 2010, 320).

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[18] nang gzhon nu bum pa'i sku zhes bya ba kha ral te […] / dus de tsam na nga'i snang ba phyir ral te.

In the case of the Dzogchen myth of cosmogony, evidence indicates that the stirring of the wind is the result of an arousal of the body's very source of vitality, what Guenther called a "field of bio-energetic forces" (*srog-rlung*) (Guenther 1994, 68). Hyperarousal is a group of symptoms that are extremely common in sufferers of trauma. While present-day research focuses particularly on hyperarousal as a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—as victims are sensitive and overly responsive to stimuli in the world around them—hyperarousal is also a basic symptom in the original moment of trauma (van der Kolk 1989).

The discovery that "intense, sudden, uncontrollable, unpredictable, and extremely negative" events have the greatest potential to be traumatizing could prove useful in contextualizing the Great Perfection's dissociative experience (Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006, 24). Just as the rupture of the vase is accounted for by the sudden stirring of wind, psychological trauma is essentially linked to forms of hyperarousal, which usually manifests in the form of elevated heart rates and increased rhythm of breathing (Bryant and Panasetis 2001). A noteworthy form of hyperarousal is involuntary hyperventilation, which is a standard symptom of panic attacks and trauma response (Chiarla et al. 1989).

The stirring of the breath within the youthful body in a vase can further be defined as a disruption of the cognitive function of attention regulation. Indeed, both scholars of Buddhologists and cognitive scientists are equally aware that practices of attention regulation frequently involve the focus on one's breath. Respiratory maneuvers have been shown to create mild hypercapnia, a condition of abnormally elevated carbon dioxide (CO2) levels in the blood (Lichstein 1988), which also occurs in the transition from wakefulness to sleep and in hypnagogic states (Naifeh, Kamiya, and Monroe Sweet 1982). Furthermore, specific breathing patterns, such as hyperventilation have not only been linked to hypercapnia but has also been associated with potentially positive consequences, such as changes in EEG and blood flow between various brain regions (Telles et al. 2017; Ma et al. 2017; Heck et al. 2017). Interestingly, these hypercapnia states have also been linked to near-death experiences, such as bodily depersonalization and the perception of being drawn towards a bright light (Meduna 1950; Klemenc-Ketis, Kersnik, and Grmec 2010; 2010).

In Tibetan medicine, the imbalance of the wind energy is an outstanding phenomenon and in the *Four Tantras*, we even find descriptions of several dozens of diseases related to the disturbance of wind (Millard 2007). Research into the Tibetan experience of violence, persecution, and exile in the present has confirmed this close

association between socio-political marginalization and dissociative symptoms (Adams 1998; Janes 1999; Prost 2006; Benedict, Mancini, and Grodin 2009). Fascinatingly, several research groups plausibly roll out that *srog-rlung* (life-wind) imbalances are an indigenously Tibetan way to speak about various forms of "mental illness" (*sems nad*), especially what we would call PTSD (Clifford 2001; Benedict, Mancini, and Grodin 2009; Deane 2019; Samuel 2019). Epstein and Topgay argued already in the 1980s that it is the increase in the currents of wind, what Tibetans image as "having wind" or "high wind," which causes "symptoms of violent or hysterical behavior" (Epstein and Sonam 1982, 74).

More recently, Pema Dorjee and his colleagues published *Heal Your Spirit, Heal Yourself: The Spiritual Medicine of Tibet* (2005), in which we find elaborate discussions of the central role that wind plays in Tibetan conceptions of physical and mental health. More specifically, they provide the reader with a series of intriguing references that point to anxiety, trauma, and the susceptibility to influences from the outside as reasonable causes for the increase of wind-activity. Just as the activation of the wind within the youthful body in a vase broke open the seal to then lose its centeredness by radiating into the external environment, experts on Tibetan medicine contend that the increase in rlung energy "can cause us to become unstable and susceptible to external occurrences" (P. Dorjee, Moore, and Jones 2005, 139). They even go as far as suggesting that we "compare the effect of the disordered *rLung* energy to that of a hurricane, which twists and uproots trees, and collapses buildings" (P. Dorjee, Moore, and Jones 2005, 163).

The Loss of Memory: The Breaking of Selves and the Multiple Voices of Trauma

If I have demonstrated that the tantric technique of deity yoga allowed the practitioner of the New School to proclaim sovereignty over his identity, the early Dzogchen narratives express the Ancients' experience of being split into a multitude of voices, a variety of personalities, and incommensurable memory traces.

Matthew Kapstein, one of the thinkers whose writings on the Dzogchen has not succumbed to the one-sided myth of freedom, has sensibly observed that "it remains a peculiar feature of the Great Perfection approach to 'memory' that it emphasizes above all a type of psychological act that stands quite apart from both the intentional character and the temporal reference we usually attribute to memory" (Kapstein 2000, 195). While his comment points to his profound understanding of the tradition's overall vista, I suggest what could be one possible underlying causes for this

consistent articulation of memory as an "unintentional and atemporal psychological act," namely trauma.

The cultivation of attention and concentration is intimately associated with our ability to estimate time and retain memory. Affective states can cause the subjective passage of time to slow down so that time intervals are overestimated (Droit-Volet and Gil 2009; Schirmer 2011; Wittmann 2013). Particularly physical arousal—such as in moments of hyperventilation—acts as if it were speeding up a hypothetical internal pacemaker and leads to distorted time estimations with emotional stimuli being significantly overestimated (Gil and Droit-Volet 2012).

In the cognitive sciences, the neurobiological correlates of trauma—such as in states of depersonalization or derealization—have been shown to correspond to difficulties in the formation and retention of memory. The altered activation of the posterior hippocampus, for example, has been established to be related to both states of depersonalization and the impairment of the encoding of episodic memory (Bergouignan, Nyberg, and Ehrsson 2014). Likeminded assertions could be made for the diminished activity of the prefrontal cortex in traumatized individuals, which is—being the region of the brain responsible for the storage and retrieval of autobiographical memories—indispensable to our conceptions of both time and selfhood (Gusnard et al. 2001; Vogeley and Fink 2003; Arzy, Molnar-Szakacs, and Blanke 2008; Nyberg et al. 2010; Peer et al. 2015; Fuster 2015).

Further, excessive emotional arousal, possibly due to the secretion of hormones or neurotransmitters like dopamine, is known to impair the encoding of explicit information. In the most dramatic cases, the affective follow-up of trauma lead to complete amnesia (Ross 2009; Van der Hart et al. 2004; R. A. Lanius, Vermetten, et al. 2010).

In the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist world, "memory" (Tib. *dran pa*, Skt. *smṛti*, *smaraṇa*, P. *sati*) is an immensely foundational cognitive function. Not only that, but the association between memory and attention is such a core intimation that they are designated with the same term in the Tibetan language (*dran pa*).[19] In light of this, it is worth exploring whether the Great Perfection's disruption in attention regulation could also be accompanied by difficulties in retaining memory.

[19] For the association between memory and mindfulness in Buddhist contexts more generally, see (J. B. Gyatso 1992)

Much textual evidence suggests such a correlation. For instance, in a section in which he discusses the epiphany of the Ground in great detail, Longchenpa cites an astonishing passage from *The Six Spaces Tantra*, where it says:

> Thus, omniscient wisdom manifests as the aspect of compassion. All of this is not something that is apprehended through memory. Aside from abiding (*gnas*) within its own intrinsic nature (*rang bzhin nyid*), it is not present (*gnas*) in terms of coarse duality (*gzung 'dzin*). Epiphanizing as the subtle aspect of the depth-radiance, this is the pathway of all sentient beings and, like a seed, is intensifies upward (*gong du 'phel*).[20] (*LDG*, AB2, 182.2)

Although in this passage, "*dran pa*" could also be translated as "referential thought" or "ordinary mind," I suggest that we consider a more literal option. In fact, if the formative scriptures of Dzogchen function as narratives intended to process trauma, then the "absence of memory"– here, we could speak of "amnesis," "unconsciousness," or "inattentiveness" (Tib. *dran med*, Skt. *vismṛti*, *asmṛti*)—is in no way surprising. Even more, in light of the association between attention and memory, it is hardly a coincidence that this amnesia is directly linked to the arousal, the "upward" movement taking place during the ground's epiphany. More loosely put, "getting a rise out" of the youthful body in a vase very well might have provoked him to forget the details of what happened.

Another specific symptom of trauma that affects memory is the unavailability of "information to one part, but not to another part of the personality" (Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006, 93). The image of the shattering of the vase and the subsequent fragmentation of the self illustrate this inability to integrate traumatic experience. In the Great Perfection myth of origin, the tendency of splitting one's personality into various separate parts also finds expression in the prolific multiplication of beings that are said to epiphanize out of the body of light following its fragmentation. Longchenpa describes this as follows:

[20] de phyir thams cad mkhyen pa yi/ ye shes thugs rje'i cha la snang/ 'di kun dran pas bzung ba min/ rang bzhin nyid du gnas pa las/ gzung 'dzin rags par mi gnas so/ gting gsal phra ba'i char snang ba/ 'di ni sems can rnams kyi lam/ gong du sa bon bzhin du 'phel.

> When the epiphany of the self (*rang snang*) dawns (*shar*) in the eight gateways of spontaneous presence, the originally pure Reality Body appears like a cloudless sky above. Directly in front, the epiphany of the Enjoyment Body's clear light realm pervades the expanse of the sky. Below, through this expressive energy there is the great epiphany of the ground and through its expressive energy, in turn, the Enjoyment Body's epiphany arises. In between, the natural Emanational Body's realms manifest. Below that, from the gateway of cyclic existence, we witness the self-epiphany (*rang snang*) of the limitless realms of the six classes living beings. Because all of them self-arise (*rang shar*) from the epiphanies of the eight spontaneously present gateways, this is referred to as "the great epiphany of *saṃṣāra* and *nirvāṇa* arising simultaneously." (TDD, 178.5-179.1)[21]

Amnesia surfaces repeatedly in the mythic account of the Great Perfection's traumatic origination. For instance, the tradition's myth is marked by a paradoxical ability to recall the traumatic episode while entirely lacking any "sense of personal ownership," as if they were saying "it happened, but not to me" (Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006, 93).

According to *The Seventeen Tantras*, the epiphany of the ground can lead either to the enlightenment of beings or to their wandering in *saṃsāra* (Tib. *'khor ba*), the fundamental difference between the two being that the former "recognize" (*ngo shes pa*) themselves as part of the epiphany of awareness, whereas the latter do not. In that case, they make an "error" (*'khrul pa*), mistakenly believing themselves to be different and radically separate from the world of external objects surrounding them. David Germano, speaking specifically of "perceptual errancy," rightly compares the phenomena to a "hallucination" (Germano 1992, 70). Using a creative translation of the term *'khrul pa*, we could say that the tradition declares them as "mad" or "insane."

It is a well-known fact that trauma displays as a "symptom cluster," which manifests on a spectrum of multiple sensory modalities, including not only our visual

[21] rang snang lhun kyi sgo brgyad shar dus steng du ka dag chos sku'i snang ban am mkha' sprin med lta bu/ thad kar longs sku 'od gsal gyi zhing snang nam mkha'i dbyings khyab pa/ de'i rtsal las 'og na gzhi snang chen po dang de'i rtsal las 'og na longs sku'i snang ba dang phyogs mtshams na rang bzhin sprul sku'i zhing snang dang/ mar 'og na 'khor ba'i sgo las 'gro drug rang snang gi zhing khams tshad med pa sde/ de thams cad lhun grub sgo brgyad kyi snang ba las rang shar bas 'khor 'das kyi snang ba chen po dus gcig la shar ba zhes bya.

sense but also our senses of touch, smell, taste, hearing, and speech (Woods and Wineman 2004; Smith et al. 2015). For example, it is quite common for unprocessed embodied memories to cause physiological symptoms such as pain, tics, tactile hallucinations, and so forth (Janet 1909; Nijenhuis and van der Hart 1999; El-Hage et al. 2002).

During the Tibetan Renaissance, it was distinctly the sense of hearing that was a realm of contestation. "The sonorous gravitas inherited from the ancient emperors," so Davidson eloquently put it, "had become lost in a cacophony of new voices, speaking languages of different gods, borne by individuals […] who may have come from outside the noble clans" (R. M. Davidson 2005, 211). Although their thematic and stylistic characteristics make it clear that *The Seventeen Tantras* are not a random collection of unrelated scriptures—some of them even explicitly linking themselves to other texts within the corpus—it is nonetheless evident that they were not redacted by a single author and were composed over a longer period of time. As Christopher Hatchell reminds us, particularly the epiphany of the ground consists of stories that are "typically brought up in pieces, so it is difficult to point to a definitive telling of the story in a single text" (Hatchell 2014, 98).

The Great Perfection tantras also exhibit what trauma researchers call "alterations in the perspective of their narrative." These alterations, so Ruth Lanius explains, "can lead survivors to experience voices in the second-person perspective," so that "the person is no longer the only storyteller of his/her lived experience but rather another or other narrative voice(s) also speak inside his/her head" (R. A. Lanius 2015). The idea that the texts are spoken by voices coming from ages past, emerging out of graves of saints or ruins of the imperial palaces, correlates to the fact that trauma-related disorders have been consistently associated with voice hearing (Anketell et al. 2010; Brewin and Patel 2010; Longden, Madill, and Waterman 2012).

More generally speaking, the Great Perfection myth of cosmology might display a general difficulty in the retention and consolidation of memory. Of course, the "epiphany of the ground" is the ultimate narrative of how the "self" is created according to this tradition's philosophy—so much so that it even pictures a sort of proto-self in the visceral form of a youthful body in a vase that then splitters into an endless series of *Lichtgestalten* that hold themselves to be independent "selves." Yet at the same time, the myth seems to lack the pathos of a personally experienced trauma. The epiphany of the ground reads like a traumatic narrative—not only because of its

account of the catastrophic rupture of wholeness and the straying of humanity into the prison of *saṃsāra*—but also because of its fragmentary and broken up nature.

To say it in the words of trauma specialists, the Nyingma writers appear to recall the events "but lack the emotional and physical feelings that belong to the memory, and the sense that it happened to them personally" (Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006, 39). Traumatized individuals remember both too much and too little of the traumatizing event. In the mythic account of the Great Perfection, we detect this discrepancy in the mixture between the extreme detail with which certain characteristics of the display are described and the simultaneous absence of some crucial details. The truly pathogenic moment—what Brewin calls the "hot spot" of the trauma—which is the actual cause for this stirring of the wind, is completely unclear to the Great Perfection (Brewin 2003).

The Loss of Affect: The Epiphany of Buddhas and the Dysregulation of Emotions

"Depth,"If we have seen that the tantric techniques of the New Schools successfully bridle the body—bringing it under control of mental and emotional processes through the purposeful instigation of extreme states of arousal—the Dzogchen myth reveals the Ancients' capital struggles in regulating emotions and discloses a trauma-induced tendency to dissociate from the body. To state my point concisely, in traumatized individuals, *psyche* and *soma* tend to split apart.

As we saw, the epiphany of the ground involves the manifestation of a variety of maṇḍalic universes that include all sorts of beings. At the moment of its climax, the ground discloses itself in the form of the famous five Buddhas known as Vairocana, Akṣobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, and Amoghasiddhi. These epiphanies point to the fact that the myth is not only concerned with the cognitive functioning of attention and memory, but also a third dimension of our minds, namely affect. Indeed, the deities that are said to manifest at the origin of our cosmos take on two forms as they are said to be either peaceful or wrathful. Together, they shape an impressive maṇḍala consisting of one hundred figures that are drawn from the eighth-century *Guhyagarbha Tantra* (Dalton 2013, 73).

This affective dimension of the epiphany remains a constant throughout the centuries, as the later tradition highlights that ordinary people's attitude towards the visionary manifestations—markedly at the moment of death when these same maṇḍalic forms of lights are said to manifest as visions—is one of great fear and trepidation (Coleman and Jinpa 2007). Although phobias have frequently been

conceived as fears of specific external cues (such as social situations, spiders, heights, and so forth), trauma research has demonstrated that inner phenomena, such as thoughts, fantasies, or memories can also be subject to phobias and avoidant behavior (Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006, 92). In light of the fact that traumatic memories have been recounted as "hallucinatory, solitary, and involuntary experiences that consist of visual images, sensations, and physical acts which may occupy the entire perceptual field, and are terrifying to the individual," it is no surprise that they too can become subject to phobia (Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006, 41).

The Great Perfection is explicit about the fact that the visionary manifestations—what we could call "trauma flashbacks"—are closely associated to two different types of affective states. On the one hand, most people are afraid of these visions, shying away from them as they are said to resurface during the time of death, a moment that paradigmatically stands for a larger category of instances during which the traumatized individual is triggered and the original traumatic memory is reactivated (Brewin 2001). As Rodger and Steel have argued, "traumatic experience may become associated with cultural symbols, from the moment of encoding into memory, such that the same or related cultural symbols […] may be sufficient to trigger a breaking through of sealed-over, affect-laden aspects of self or traumatic-experience into conscious awareness" (Rodger and Steel 2016, 157).

On the other hand, avoidance can take on a form that stands for the other half of a general pattern in post-traumatic emotion dysregulation (Dell 2002; Şar et al. 2004). In fact, traumatized individuals know not only emotional overmodulation—feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame (M. W. Miller and Resick 2007), but also undermodulation; that is moments when they experience detachment such as depersonalization, derealization, emotional numbing, and so forth (E. R. S. Nijenhuis And Den Boer 2007; Lanius, Frewen, Et Al. 2010).

Frequently, these two tendencies coexist as one part of the personality recounts trauma with a visible loss of affect and another part is avoiding the immersion into the experience out of fear is a typical symptom of trauma-related depersonalization (Harvey and Bryant 1998; Carrión and Steiner 2000; Dell 2002). Together, these two tendencies stand for a unified phenomenon, "inability to regulate affect," which is one of the most frequently observed symptoms in the wake of trauma (Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006, 49).

The Great Perfection narrative might manifest both under- and over-modulation of affect. In fact, the dramatic episode of the explosion of the youthful body of light as a result of hyperventilation is complemented by a conspicuously unemotional attitude pervasive throughout the Great Perfection tantras. Drawing on Judith Herman's work, we could describe the early Dzgochen myths as "pre-narratives" which she describes as "repetitious, stereotyped, and emotionless" (Herman 1992, 175). The myth of origin presents the reader with a striking paradox because the drama of a clearly traumatic nature is narrated in an almost serene tone.

In light of trauma studies, I therefore suggest that the tradition's own engagement with its dissociative myth of origin also displays a typical loss of affect, a type of numbing that is a common symptom of traumatization. Like traumatized individuals, who "complain of feeling two dimensional, or like zombies, one-dimensional cardboard figures, or robots" (Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006, 95), the myth of origin is marked by emotional numbness or shallowness. Germano, for example, comments that the Great Perfection's narratives strike us as "a type of cosmology far removed from our own lives" (Germano 1992, 56).

In the ground's epiphany, the affective dissociation is frequently located in particular spatial characteristics that point to a certain confusion and disorientation. In the previously cited passage from *The Tantra of Great Beauty and Auspiciousness*, we read that as the "epiphanies are torn outward," they manifest as "transparent, released, intangible, awake, undulating, shimmering, and diverse" (*KSD*, AB1, 215.2).[22] The disorientation is here indicated by the unsteadiness of hallucinatory perception, which is reported as "undulating" (*'gul ba*) and "shimmering" (*'phrig pa*). Even more, the uncommon Tibetan terms recruited for "transparent" (*sang ma seng ma*), "released" (*shag ma shig ma*), "intangible" (*khral ma khrol ma*), and "awake" (*yang ma yeng ma*), sonically translate the oscillating form of the mythical vision into vocalized sounds.

In other moments, the ground reminds us of a vast canvass, almost like a huge screen upon which the epiphany is projected like a movie. The ground is said to be a "sphere" (*klong*) or an "expanse" (*dbyings*) and its epiphany is said to fill "entire perceptual field," giving birth to various buddhas and pure lands, which are said to appear "above," "in front," or "below." The mythic narrative of the ground's

[22] dus de tsam pa'i snang ba phyir ral te/ sang ma seng ma/ shag ma shig ma/ khral ma khrol ma/ yang ma yeng ma/ 'gul ba/ 'phrig pa/ sna tshogs su 'phro ba 'byung ngo.

epiphany creates the impression of a perceptual totality that encompasses the entire range of human sight. Reading the passages dedicated to the ground one frequently gets the impression of a lack of orientation, a sort of "spacing out" (*'byams*) which the later tradition explicitly endorses as a type of experience that corresponds to the liberating power of the expansiveness of space (J. B. Gyatso 1998, 202). Inside and outside, up and down, self and other; none of these categories we gather for situating ourselves ordinarily in the world are adopted in speaking about the ground.

The experiences represented here are closely relatable to moments when our prefrontal cortex becomes temporarily inactive, notably when a special chemical messenger, the neuro-transmitter dopamine, is flooding our brains. As I previously mentioned, this happens specifically in moments when we get excited or aroused. In such moments, to say it in the words of the professor of Pharmacology Susan Greenfield, dopamine is

> being *released* like a fountain from the primitive region at the top of the spine (brain-stem) *outwards* and *upwards* throughout the brain, where it then changes the responsiveness of neurons in many different areas, including the prefrontal cortex. When dopamine reaches the prefrontal cortex, it inhibits the activity of the neurons there, and so recapitulates in some ways the immature brain of the child; this area of the brain is only fully active in late teenage years. Just as children are highly emotional, excitable, so adults in this condition also are more *reactive* to the *outside world* and to sensations rather than inner "cognitive" thought processes. (Greenfield 2011, 49)

The manifestation of dissociative symptoms as a result of trauma has also been linked to altered perceptions of one's body and its relationship to the environing world that frequently culminate in the dissociation from one's body (Wolf et al. 2012). Not only do traumatized individuals feel variously detached from their bodies—as if their bodies belonged to someone else, or as if their mind and body were not connected—but they can be so de-sensitized that they manifest as negative somatoform symptoms, such as a loss of sensation or anesthesia of the senses of perception or of touch, loss of motor skills, or even paralysis (Janet 1907; 1909; Butler et al. 1996; Nijenhuis and van der Hart 1999).

Scholarship generally concedes that the Great Perfection myth must be regarded as a visceral narrative rather than a dry account of the origin of the universe. Drawing on the terminology of Herbert Guenther, we could speak of the myth as a "felt" image or as an "imaged" feeling (Guenther 1994, 39). Higgins, similarly, reminds us that according to the Dzogchen tradition, the ground "is a matter of direct experience for [the] adherents of the path (*lam du rjes su 'dzin pa*), whereas the intellectual, or what we can call 'metaphysical,' grounds are products of abstract theorizing entertained by adherents of philosophical systems (*grub pa'i mtha' rjes su 'dzin pa*)" (Higgins 2013, 207).

However, what scholarship to date has underestimated is the traumatic dimension of bodily sensation in the Great Perfection. In its depictions of space, affect, time, and so forth, the mythic account recites the story of a body that dissociates. The most radical articulation of this ruptured somatic presence, of course, is the formulation of the ground as a youthful body in a vase shattering into pieces.

Chapter 4: "Raise an Army, I will Not Let You Go!": Attachment Perspectives on Suffering in Human Existence

The Base of the Mountain: Imprisonment in Mythical Narratives and Contemplative Practice

In the previous chapter, we saw that our sky-gazing yogi sits on top of a social ground that is disputed. Because it consists of various tectonic plates that push and pull in various directions, it comes as little surprise that the Dzogchen ground was also subject to repeated earthquakes. These moments of rupture and fragmentation are clearly reflected in the myth of cosmogony, which dawns in a decidedly startling fashion with a "big bang," the so-called "epiphany of the ground" (*gzhi snang*). In *The Seventeen Tantras*, this event is even imagined as the breaking open of a "youthful body in a vase" (*gzhon nu bum pa'i sku*), a sort of flask, which contains an essence of ever-youthful freshness. In another example, the origin of the universe is comparted to the hatching of a peacock's egg (*rma bya'i sgo nga*):

> Awareness abiding (*gnas*) within the ground is the perfectly complete triad within wisdom's expanse, just like peacock's egg endowed with the radiant clarity of the inner light of wisdom. Awareness shining forth on the path is like rainbow colors. Awareness reaching its extent resembles the peacock's chick bursting out of the egg (SGT, 372,4).[23]

It has rightly been noted that all of these images reveal the Great Perfection's fascination with the "early history of the Universe" (Germano 1992, 60). However, the coming into being of the ground upon which our yogi sits, is more than just a "natural" phenomenon, akin to an earthquake, a big bang, or the hatching of an egg. On the contrary, we are dealing with the birth of a culture, a collective identity, a religious tradition.

In fact, if the Dzogchen myths of cosmogony are connected to the larger religious landscape on the Tibetan plateau, then they can also be read as attempts to process the "emergence of the modernist movements," which provoked itself "a series of crises and transformations in pre-existing Buddhist groups (beginning with their

[23] gzhi la gnas pa'i rig pa ni/ ye shes dbyings na sku gsung rdzogs/ dper na rma bya'i sgo nga bzhin/ nang 'od ye shes gsal bar bstan/ lam la 'char ba'i rig pa ni/ dper na 'ja' tshon lta bur bstan/ mtha' la skyol ba'i rig pa ni/ dper na rma bya'i phru gu sgo nga nas/ brdol te don pa lta bu'o.

constitution as the 'ancients')" (Germano 1994, 266). Thus, from a social-historical perspective, the myth of cosmogony is a tale that accounts for the very emergence of the school of the Ancients and the Seminal Heart tradition.

While the eleventh and twelfth centuries witnessed the experimentation with a great breadth of religious movements, within and outside of the Ancient School, the emergence of the Seminal Heart caused a rare dilemma: The terms, content, and priorities of the newly emergent teachings were nowhere to be found in the earlier Great Perfection. Usually, the Great Perfection is said to have evolved in three stages: the "mind series" (*sems sde*), the "space series" (*klong sde*), and, finally, the "instruction series" (*man ngag sde,* lit. "secret oral instruction series"), which corresponds to the Heart-Essence tradition studied here.

If the mind series is steeped in the rhetoric of negation, spontaneity, and the complete absence of practice, the later manifestations investigated here display a plethora of meditative techniques, visionary manifestations, subtle body theories, and a cosmology crawling with peaceful and violent deities. In other words, neither in the Mind Series scriptures, nor in the commentarial literature of Nubchen Sangye Yeshe (gnubs chen sangs rgyas ye shes, ninth century) or of Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo (rong zom chos kyi bzang po, 1040-1159) do we find discussions of visionary practices, subtle bodies, embryology, or violent deities.

In order to appreciate this critical moment of coming into being of a religious tradition, it might be useful to look at a different set of myths that accompany the myth of the breaking of the youthful body in a vase. These more personalized anthropomorphic stories add another layer to the trauma of marginalization, which demonstrate that our yogi's journey did not start on top of the mountain. On the contrary, his endeavor began in the crevices that were opened up in the valleys below the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas. In these anthropomorphized stories, known as "allegories" (*lde'u*), we find young children forced to leave their mothers and fathers, before being imprisoned in deep ravines by old women and grandmothers, who are helped by friendly and warring soldiers.

Ultimately, the meditative practice, which our yogi comes to perform on the side of the mountain can itself be seen as a retelling of his tradition's long history of imprisonment and emancipation. Even though the relaxed and natural attitude and the spontaneous manifestation of visions could make us belief that the visionary world of Direct Transcendence is entirely different from the contested ground upon which it was developed, this is not the case. On the contrary, as the final part of this

chapter will show, the visionary technique are themselves so full of imagery confinement that it is highly likely that they were created as practical responses to the socio-political trauma the tradition suffered during its early years.

The Creation of the Self and the Universality of Existential Imprisonment

The emphasis on early moments of existence are ultimately an expression of the Great Perfection's larger inquiries into what it means to "come into being as a self" (*rang snang*). The Dzogchen myth argues that as the ground epiphanizes, we witness the birth of selfhood. In the *The Blazing Lamp Tantra*, for example, we read that:

> From within this abiding ground (*gnas pa'i gzhi*), the seed of error (*'khrul pa*) and its causes are the aspect lucidity that has slipped outward [to] suddenly manifest (*snang*) objectively as the mind that holds to a "self" (*bdag tu bzung*) […] In this way, the objective sphere is apprehended as a "self" (*bdag bzung*) (DYC, 45,6).[24]

Thus, the emergence of the self is frequently considered to be an ambivalent or even negative phenomenon. The ground's epiphany (*gzhi snang*), the breaking and opening up of the vase, its slipping outward (*phyir shor*), its projecting into a vast "expanse" (*dbyings*), rather paradoxically, leads into the "capturing" (*bzung*) of the "self" (*bdag*). In *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound* we read:

> The ground and cognition become sullied and the revolving process of apprehended objects (*gzung*) and sensory faculties (*dbang po*) sets in. The conditions are that, through the objective sphere and the apprehension factor (*gzung cha*), there come to be individual distinctions based upon their respective boundaries. […] The psychic energy in question involves subjective apprehensions (*'dzin pa rnams*) that are flickering, subsiding, and prolific. The pollution lies in its apprehension (*'dzin pa*) in a stained fashion, such that your own self-identity (*rang rgyud*) is fettered (*bcing*) by this way of comprehending. Even though that which

[24] de ltar gnas pa'i gzhi de las/ rgyu dang 'khrul pa'i sa bon ni/ gsal ba'i cha ni phyir shor bas/ […] yid tsam phyir 'gyus snang cha la/ yul de bdag tu bzung ba'i blos/ […] de ltar yul la bdag bzung ba'o.

> is comprehended (*gzung ba*) is not what it seems, you become tightly bound (*dam du bcing ba*) by clinging to its veracity (GTG, 142,6).[25]

In psychology and cognitive science, attachment theory focuses not only on the early years of human existence, but also on the many ways in which the emergence of human selfhood can be problematic if the circumstances are not ideal. This area of research, which has proven well-suited for cross-cultural investigations (van Ijzendoorn and Sagi 1999; Otto and Keller 2014), shows that humans create their sense of selfhood by means of two radically opposed tendencies when interacting with the environment: attachment and aversion. These two orientations, are believed to lay at the core of all of human and animal life, and have been identified as "the two major categories of psychobiological systems that make up personality" (Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006, 41).

The first category is comprised of systems that are seeking to approach stimuli that we consider attractive, such as nurturing food or companionship. The second category, by contrast, consists of psychobiological systems that are geared towards avoiding or fleeing from stimuli that we consider adverse and threatening to our well-being.

Since these orientations have been evolutionarily designed to guide our action in a goal directed manner, they are also known as "action systems" (M. B. Arnold 1960; Frijda 1986). Action, in this context, however, has to be understood from a broad perspective. In fact, it includes a type of cognition, which is running an unconscious type of surveillance program that is always active, even when we are concerned with other issues. As the cultural psychologists working with experiments of priming have demonstrated, this unconscious monitoring is constantly occupied with the evaluation of our environment as either "good" or "bad." As John Bargh has recently put it, "this initial reaction colors everything that comes after it: good or bad, stay or go, like or dislike, approach or avoid" (Bargh 2017, 127).

In this context, it is useful to recall my earlier discussion of how Tibetans consider winds to be central to the health and disease of the human being. Wind (Tib. *rlung*), in fact, is one of three "humors" (Tib. *nyes pa*; Skt. *doṣa*; lit. "fault" or

[25] gzhi dang shes pa sbags pa dang/ gzung dang dbang po 'gor tshul lo/ rkyen ni yul dang gzung cha las/ mtha' dang mtha' yi byed pa dang/ […] shes pa 'ju dang yal pa dang/ mched par 'dzin pa rnams yin no/ sbags pa dri mar 'dzin pa ste/ shes byas rang rgyud bcing pa'o. gzung ba ma yin sa la yang/ bden pas dam du bcing ba'o.

"weakness") (Y. Gyatso 2005)—together with bile (Tib. *mkhris pa*), and phlegm (Tib. *bad kan*)—in the human organism (Yoeli-Tlalim 2010; Deane 2019). While the Buddha is said to have distinguished between physical illness (*kāyiko rogo*) and mental illness (*cetasiko rogo*), already in the Pāli canon (Nandisena 2014), Dorjee and his colleagues have correctly argued that "the basic cause of illnesses according to Buddhist philosophy, psychology and medicine, is the ego, full of trivial pursuits and clinging attachments" (P. Dorjee, Moore, and Jones 2005, 138). Because of this, the three physical energies are ultimately correlated with the three "mental factors" (Tib. *nyon mongs*; Skt. *kleśa*) or "three poisons" (Tib. *dug gsum*; Skt. *triviṣa*) of Buddhism, which are "delusion" (Tib. *gti mug*; Skt. *moha*); "attachment" (Tib.*'dod chags*; Skt. *rāga*), and "aversion" (Tib. *zhe sdang*; Skt. *dveṣa*) (Epstein and Sonam 1982, 68).

As Dominic Sur correctly noted, Buddhism frequently adopts "medical language" also to express its teachings, with the idea that the "Buddhist path is built on 'acceptance and rejection' (*blang dor*), or bias," being particularly popular (Rong-zom Chos-kyi-bzang-po and Sur 2017, 227). In fact, acceptance and rejection, the "adopting" (*blang*) of certain things and the "discarding" (*dor*) of others, serves as a sort of membrane through which human beings establish the homoeostatic balance that we call "self."

The Great Perfection, likewise, advocates for a parallel conception of how human existence is, by definition, marked by a certain degree of determination from what is "other." The mind of the humans is predisposed to a painful existence because it operates to form its "self" through interpersonal relationships, which can be illustrated as a "boundary making" with what is "other." David Germano beautifully projects this unfolding, as he writes:

> … should it err in interpreting the lights as some unknown, vaguely threatening Other divorced from its own intelligence as a proto-subjectivity, it "strays" into the harrowing world of a lonely alienated "subject" surrounded by discrete "objects" and other subjects that create a basis tension that the "subject" seeks to resolve by alternately "possessing" and "destroying" the others through actual and imaginative attempts at union and negation (i.e. love and war) (Germano 1992, 70)

Similarly, in *The Mirror of the Heart of Vajrasattva*, we find a first-hand illustration of this interpersonal dimension of self-emergence:

> The ground's essence is empty, its nature is radiant, and its compassion has the capacity to epiphanize (*snang nus pa*) to sentient beings. When the aspect of ignorance cognitively grasps (*'dzin byed*) for a mere instant, darkened cognition reflects. "Have I (*nga*) emerged form over there (*pha gi*) or has that over there (*pha gi*) emerged from me (*nga*)?" (DJS, 332,4).[26]

Our passions are jailors, craving and aversion their chains, the self that is bound by them becomes our most fundamental prison. Not only that, by separating ourselves from the "other" to be either rejected or craved, we imprison ourselves even further within a world of objects that dominate us seemingly at will. As Alan Mittleman, in his study of Isaac Breuer's philosophy, once submitted:

> After the *I* divorces the representations and recognizes them as things-in-themselves, it finds that it has become entrapped in the world-in-itself. Feeling is a state of enslavement (*Knechtschaft*) that presents an ongoing contrast to the state of sovereignty (*Herrschaft*) otherwise enjoyed by the *I*. Breuer is very much concerned to develop this fundamental dialectic of the human experience. Man's most simple and continual experience of lordly freedom continually resolves into its opposite: bondage to the things of this world. (Mittleman 1990, 59)

The Rise of the Seminal Heart and Disorganized Attachment

In the Great Perfection, another image called upon for the initial self-emergence is the confusion regarding faces as the scriptures often refer to the straying as a form of "non-recognition" (*ngo ma shes*). The literal meaning of the Tibetan expression "non-recognition" points to the fact that this is an issue that is not purely perceptional, but rather interpersonal in nature: non-recognition is nothing else than the "not-knowing" (*ma shes*) of the "face" (*ngo*).

[26] gzhi de ngo bo stong pa/ rang bzhin gyis gsal ba/ thugs rje sems can la snang nus pa'o/ de nas nang 'dzin byed kyi shes pa ma rig pa'i cha las byung ba breng tsam 'gyus pa las/ shes pa spun pos pha gi las nga byung ngam/ nga las pha gi byung snyam pa'i shes pa byung ba tsam gyis 'khrul lo.

Here too, attachment theory could provide us with an illuminating perspective. In her famous book on attachment trauma, *Prisoners of Childhood* (1981), Alice Miller enlists an image that was originally proposed by Donald Winnicott to limn this type of non-recognition from the viewpoint of a child:

> The mother gazes at the baby in her arms, and the baby gazes at his mother's face and finds himself therein […] provided that the mother is really looking at the unique, small, helpless being and not projecting her own expectations, fears, and plans for the child. In that case, the child would find not himself in his mother's face, but rather the mother's own projections. This child would remain without a mirror, and for the rest of his life would be seeking this mirror in vain. (A. Miller 1981, 27)

In the psychology of attachment, this type of confusion is generally attributed to the contradictory behavior of the attachment figure. In fact, in childhood, the "face" of the other is oftentimes both the primary source of comfort and warmth and a cause of fear and anxiety (Main and Hesse 1990). This results in a type of biological paradox, a double-bind: on the one hand, our bodies are made to seek physical closeness in order to receive nourishment, protection, and soothing; on the other hand, this biological need puts us into an impossible position because it forces it to approach the very source of terror and trauma that we need to avoid in order to survive. Mary Main and Erik Hesse, early attachment researchers, have called this unresolvable dilemma "fright without solution" (Hesse and Main 2000).

Historically speaking, in the Renaissance of Tibetan culture, occurring from the late tenth century to the early twelfth century, Dzogchen was so completely transmuted that its adherents would have likely not recognize themselves in their earlier forms. Expressed differently, as the New Schools imported advanced tantric materials on meditative technologies and subtle body theories, putting unprecedented pressures on the increasingly marginalized group of the Ancients, the Great Perfection became divided within itself.

Particularly during the twelfth century, the discrepancy between the Mind Series and the Instruction Series led to increasing controversies regarding the true nature of the Great Perfection. In fact, if we read the mythic narratives found in the Seminal Heart scriptures—in particular the allegories (*lde'u*) that complement the myth of the epiphany of the ground—as historical documents, it becomes apparent

that they reflect a socio-political context of social struggle and competition. In those narratives, indeed, we find that the emergence of the cosmos continues in less than harmonious ways, as life on earth is narrated in narratives of young children, mothers and fathers, old women and grandmothers, friendly and warring soldiers, and so forth.

The most prominent example of these myths is found in *The Tantra of Self-Arisen Awareness*, where the dissociative scene is set by introducing an intelligent child and his dull-minded grandmother:

> In the past, in a country known as "thoroughly pure awareness buddha field," there stood a castle with eight doors. On the top of this castle there lived a little boy whose name was "performing the awareness of epiphany" and his grandmother known as "cloudy eyed." In the lower part of this country, there lived a wicked king named "famous lord," who had five children. As the five princes went to amuse themselves and the grandmother "cloudy eyed" appeared down in the lower part for some rest, they put her into prison. Just imagine! Then, when her son went after his grandmother, he too was arrested and put into shackles. Just imagine! (*RRS*, 579.4-580.5)[27]

The child's name, which consists of the words to "perform" (*byed*) the "awareness" (*rig*) of the "epiphany" (*snang ba*), points to the little child's productive and energetic qualities that he shares with both the ground and the Seminal Heart tradition in their respective epiphanies. Guenther has meaningfully translated the son's name as "the inspiring youngster," emphasizing his excitability as the most differentiating characteristic. Even more relevantly, he points to the uneasy relationship between the little child and his care-takers as it is his excitability that distinguishes him from the unexcitability and unexcitation of his grandmother "cloudy eyed" (*ling tog can*) (Guenther 2005, 124–25).

[27] sngon yul rnam par dag pa rig pa'i zhing khams zhes bya ba na/ mkhar sgo brgyad dang ldan pa'i mkhar zhig yod do/ mkhar de'i rtser khye'u snang ba'i rig byed bya ba yod/ de la ma rgan mo ling tog can zhes bya ba yod/ yul de'i mda' na sdig/ spyod pa'i rgyal po grags pa dbang phyag bya ba de la bu rgyal bu lnga yod pas/ sras po lngas sku rtsed la song bas/ rgan mo ling tog can mdo na mar skyo sangs la byung bas/ sras rgyal bu lngas btson du bzung zer ba de ya cha/ de nas bu ma'i stegs ma la song ba yang bzung nas lcags su bcug zer ba te ya cha.

In other passages, the myths narrate the early life of little children as filled with hardship as they suffer at the hands of the older generation. In the thirty-ninth chapter of the same tantra, the scripture recounts the story of two children in the form of a dramatic abduction by figures standing close to them.

> In the past, in a country known as "vastness," there existed a teacher by the name of "dispenser of light." He had two children, who had been imprisoned in a barren and deep ravine. Just imagine! Then, five soldiers appeared and conquered the stone castle from the top. Just imagine! After the two children have been thrown into a deep pit, grandmother "cloudy eyed" shut the door. Just imagine! (*RRS*, 560.6.)[28]

This narrative, short and abrupt—and consistently punctuated with the interjection "Just imagine" (*zer te ya cha*)—represents an anthropomorphization of the myth of the breaking of the vase. The two children are reified figures that contrast sharply with both the teacher and the kingdom in which they are born. Understood to be siblings of a single mother, they stand for the epiphany of the ground, the rupture of the original unity of the primordial ground, and the multiplication that would ultimately form the universe as we know it. Finally, their imprisonment stands for the humanity's straying as it mistakes its own identity and enters into the captivity of saṃsāra.

In light of such accounts of persecution due to creative energies, it is likely that the Renaissance period was not only an epoch of great religious diversity but that even individual traditions, such as the Great Perfection, were marked by intra-religious conflicts. They too lacked clear boundaries of definition in the fluidity of the period.

The cognitive perspective can help us interpret these various types of self-assertion, competition, and conflict. In trauma research, the myth of the children's imprisonment corresponds closely to forms of disorganized attachment (Shemmings and Shemmings 2011; Solomon and George 2011; Shemmings and Shemmings 2014). It is striking that that the children are said to be betrayed by various figures standing close to them. In his commentary, written in the fourteenth century, the revealer

[28] sngon yul yangs pa can zhes bya ba na/ ston pa 'od 'gyed pa zhes bya ba yod de/ de la bu spun gnyis yod pa/ grog po stong par btson du bzung zer te ya cha/ de nas dmag mi lnga byung nas rdo' mkhar rtse nas bcom zer te ya cha/ bu gnyis dong du bcug nas rgan mo ling tog can gyis sgo bcad zer te ya cha.

Rigdzin Gödem Ngödrup Gyaltsen (*rig 'dzin rgod ldem dngos grub rgyal mtshan*, 1337-1408) of the Northern Treasures (*byang gter*) specifies, for example, that the soldiers were closely associated with the children, noting that they were originally jailed by "four disloyal friends" (DSR, 633-650).

Particularly, since episodes of betrayal by an attachment person have been systematically linked to an increased risk of traumatization (Benamer 2010; Liotti and Gumley 2008; Blizard 2003; Liotti 2009; 2006; Bettmann and Friedman 2013), attachment theory has also been taking on an increasingly prevailing role in research on trauma (Waelde et al. 2001; Freyd 1996). In the *Handbook of Attachment,* more precisely in a section entitled "Attachment and Dissociation," we read:

> Early experiences with a frightened or frightening caregiver cause a child to develop multiple, incompatible models of the self and the other. In interactions with the caregiver, the child experiences rapid shifts in which the caregiver is at first frightened, then no longer frightened, then caring for the child. With each shift, a different model of self (perpetrator of fright, rescuer, loved child) and of the caregiver (victim, rescued victim, competent caregiver) is operative. These multiple models of the self and other cannot be integrated by young children and are retained as multiple models (Cassidy and Shaver 2016, 722).

Attachment theorists mobilize experiments with young infants to show some prominently contradictory attitudes towards their primary care-takers as they are unclear whether to love or hate them. Frequently, these children are displaying behavior that is marked by a tendency to both approach and flee at the same time. For instance, such children are seen to crawl backward towards their mother.

In the Seminal Heart's mythical world, this disorganized attachment is disclosed in the stories of abuse of children by attachment figures. In fact, it is relevant that the old woman known as "cloudy eyed," is repeatedly identified as the grandmother (*a phyi*). In the fortieth chapter of *The Tantra of Self-Arisen Awareness*, for instance, we read a story about a mother and a father who conceived two children, a girl and a boy. As the parents send the children away into a country of a demon to retrieve fire and flowers, the son refuses to go out of fear of being imprisoned by the demon. In response, the parents argue: "Son, don't say this. In the country of the demon (*bdud*), there lives an old woman called "cloudy eyed." She is your

grandmother, ask her for fire" (RRS, 570.4).[29] After requesting the support of five companions, the boy sets out to the country of the demon. Of course, as the boy himself predicted, he and his sister are immediately found by the demon, who has them detained.

So far so good, but now there comes a surprising twist in the story. While we do encounter the aforementioned grandmother, her demeanor towards her grandchildren is quite contrary to the parents' prophecy.

> Grandmother "cloudy eyed" locked the doors and told the attendants: "Because they killed my children in the past, do not let them escape." The servants responded: "It will be done so." There was no opportunity for them to leave. Then, the child spoke as follows: "Grandmother, my two [parents] told me that my grandmother by the name of "cloudy eyed" lives in the country of the demon and they told me to ask for fire. Therefore, let me go without holding me [prisoner]." The old woman answered: "I will not let you go. I will not set you free because your father has killed my children." Then the boy responded: "If you don't let me go, I will raise an army." The woman responded: "Raise an army, I will not let you go." At that point, the youth passed along the following message to three visitors: "Friends, in the country "jewel heap," there are four outcasts. Your little child "intelligence of epiphany" has been imprisoned there. Swiftly bring a big army." The visitors, saying that they would do so, left (*RRS*, 572,2).[30]

This episode not only revisits previously encountered themes (such as the imprisonment of young children) and familiar characters (such as the little child

[29] yang pha ma gnyis na re 'od skad zer ro/ bu de skad ma zer bar bdud kyi yul na/ a phyi ling tog zhes bya ba yod kyis/ de khyod kyi a phyi yin gyis de la me slong la shog byas pas.

[30] a phyi ling tog can gyis/ sgo lcags bcug nas/ 'khor rnams la sngon 'dis nga'i bu bsad pa yin pas 'di ma btang zhig byas pas/ 'khor rnams na re/ de ka ltar bgyi'o zer nas/ 'gro ba'i dbang ma byung ngo/ de nas yang bu des 'di skad ces byas so/ phyi bdag gi gnyis kyi zhal nas/ khyod kyi a phyi ling tog can bya ba de bdud kyi yul na yod kyis/ de nas me long la shog zer ba lags kyis/ bdag ma bzung bar thong byas pas/ rgan mos na re khyod mi btang ba yin/ nga'i bu khyod kyi phas bsad pa yin pas mi btang ngo zer ro/ de nas bu des 'di skad ces byas so/ bdag mi btang na dmag 'dren byas pas/ mo na re/ khyod rang dmag drongs zer nas mthar ro/ de nas khos mgron po mi gsum la phrin btang ba/ kye grogs po dag/ yul rin chen spungs pa zhes bya ba na/ gdol pa'i rigs kyi mi bzhi yod kyis/ der khyod kyi khye'u rig byed btson du bzung bas/ dmag dpung mang po chos shig cig byas pas kho na re phrin bgyi'i zer nas song nog.

"intelligence of epiphany", or the grandmother "cloudy eyed"), but it also offers new details about the incarceration and the contact between the jailors and the captives. If I already set down that the trauma in the Great Perfection narratives is personal and frequently grounded in family relationships, the plot gradually thickens as it becomes clear that the trauma is a phenomenon that crosses generations. The grandmother not only imprisons her two grandchildren but she also accuses them and their father of killing her own children.

Both individual and collective trauma, in fact, are frequently intergenerational in nature (Mucci 2013). Especially on a cultural level, trauma leaves traces that last for several generations (Yehuda, Halligan, and Bierer 2002). As Gilad Hirschberger put it,

> Collective memory of trauma is different from individual memory because collective memory persists beyond the lives of the direct survivors of the events, and is remembered by group members that may be far removed from the traumatic events in time and space. These subsequent generations of trauma survivors, that never witnessed the actual events, may remember the events differently than the direct survivors, and then the construction of these past events may take different shape and form from generation to generation (Hirschberger 2018).

Indeed, it is a paradoxical characteristic of cultural trauma that its effects may actually increase over time as the attribution of collective meaning to certain events can become more *puissant* from generation to generation (Klar, Schori-Eyal, and Klar 2013). Here again, we could also pertinently invoke sVolkan's understanding of trauma as something that is "chosen" by a community in order to articulate its very essence of cultural identity (Volkan 1997).

The Violent and Imprisoning Side of Great Perfection Myths and Meditation

In the Great Perfection, mythical narratives are not only stories of trauma and suffering. On the contrary, the myths we looked at so far always conclude on a redemptive note. In the myth of cosmogony, for example, the Buddha All Good functions as a horizon for the possibility of healing of individual and collective pain of fragmentation and imprisonment. As Matthew Kapstein worded it, it establishes "an essential relationship between the primordial Buddha and sentient beings, such

that it be possible for us to recover the ground of our being and thus to participate in Samantabhādra's beginningless enlightenment" (Kapstein 2000, 169).

The myth of Samantabhādra introduces its general intention, namely to offer an alternative way to deal with the inevitable epiphany of the ground and the swirling play of rainbow-colored light-displays. Instead of straying, dissociation, and trauma, the outstanding locutions of this mythological narrative are self-recognition, liberation, and union. The Primordial Buddha, so the story goes, upon emerging out of the ground's manifesting light display, avoided the reification of "self" and "other" that marked the birth of humanity and instead recognized himself in the epiphany. As a result of this self-recognition, this insight into the mystery of one's true self, he not only avoided the straying into the world of *saṃsāra*, but he also succeeded in reversing the process of the ground's exteriorization. In *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, we read:

> From the beginning and end of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, the Buddha has not strayed into confusion, yet through the capacity of rising from the ground, self-appearances are known to lack inherent existence. Without getting lost outside the variety of the mind of conceptualization and analysis, the flickering movement immediately cuts through itself. (GTG, 107.5-107.6)[31]

The key to Samantabhādra's liberation, so the tantras tell us, is a type of self-identification that lies beyond the logic of attachment or aversion. As All Good recognizes himself in the display of lights that lies outside of him, the outward spiraling manifestations of the ground (*phyir gsal*)—its "flickering movement" (*'gyu ba*)—is immediately reversed and the epiphany returns back into the ground where it abides as the pure potential of the "internal radiance" (*nang gsal*).

While this spontaneous and effortless type of enlightenment fits well with the sky-gazing meditation of our yogi, this is not the whole truth. In fact, there exist other forms of mythical and contemplative redemption that are less "peaceful" in nature. In the *The Tantra of Self-Arisen Awareness*, the narrative of the two blood-related boys—

[31] de ltar 'khor 'das thog mtha' las/ sangs rgyas 'khrul par ma gyur pa/ gzhi las 'phags pa'i dbang po yis/ rang snang rang bzhin med par shes/ rtog dpyod yid rnams phyir ma shor/ 'gyu ba rang thog chod pa'o.

whose story we left as they were captured by five soldiers and the Old Lady—takes a dramatic turn towards liberation:

> Just imagine! Then four persons pursued and captures the five riders and unhorsed them. Just imagine! The two boys liberated themselves and killed their prison guards. Just imagine! They immediately escaped to the Sun Castle in the distance, where they collected the taxes from the people (RRS, 563-567).[32]

The activist orientation of the myth of the abused children is also reflected in Direct Transcendence, which is not as effortless and natural as our opening account would make us believe. In fact, it could be said that our yogi gradually takes control of his own actions, becoming an active agent in his recovery from trauma. While he doesn't necessarily kill his jailors, as in the myth of the little children, he nonetheless takes an activist stance as he becomes a type of prison guard himself.

During the four visions, as the flickering dots of light start to form pearl-like strings, the tradition speaks of the manifestation of the so-called "seminal nuclei" (*thig le*) and the "linked chains" (*rdo rje lu gu rgyud*). In a passage of *The Blazing Lamp Tantra*, we find a crucial description of how the linked chains manifest during Direct Transcendence meditation and what can be done in order to stabilize their visionary manifestation.

> The lamp of the pure expanse gathers the nature of awareness so that it appears in the enclosure of the linked chains. For whomever is experientially familiar (*goms*) with this, it is an unchanging and self-radiant (*rang gsal ba*) blue, abiding (*gnas*) in the enclosure (*ra ba*) of an aura of encircling hoops. It appears (*snang ba*) as naturally radiant (*rang gsal*) outer objective sphere, unfabricated in nature. (GMB, 62.6)[33]

[32] de nas mi bzhis deng pas zin te/ mi lnga rta dang phral zer te ya cha/ bu gnyis rang gis rang shor nas btson bsrung bsad zer te de yang ya cha/ bu gnyis cig char phar nyi ma can du phros nas/ 'bangs la dbya bsdus nas/

[33] rnam dag dbyings kyi sgron mas ni/ rig pa yi ni ngo bo sdud/ lu gu rgyud kyi ra bar* snang/ 'di la sus goms don de nyid/ mthing ga mi 'gyur rang gsal ba/ mu khyud kyi ni ra bar gnas/ rang gsal phyi yi yul du snang/ ngo bo nyid ni ma bcos pa'o. *I have corrected dbar for ra bar based on TB version and TDD.

The first element that is worthy of note in this passage is the persuasion that the visions are "unfabricated" (*ma bcos pa*), "naturally radiant" (*rang gsal ba*), "unchanging" (*mi 'gyur*). In fact, as we shall discuss more in the following chapters, the Great Perfection reiterates that the visions manifest naturally and spontaneously (*lhun grub*)—on their own terms—without effort on the part of the practitioner.

At the same time, this passage hints at an element of incommensurability between the rhetoric of naturalness with the actual practice of our yogi, namely the bestowing of the term "enclosure" (*ra wa*) onto the treatment of the "linked chains." During the visionary practice, the "linked chains" (*lu gu rgyud*) and the "seminal nuclei" (*thig le*, Skt. *bindu*) are complemented by a third element, namely the patches of dark blue color (*mthing kha*), the so-called "expanse" (*dbyings*; Skt. *dhātu*).

In the early scriptures, we find many examples in which the Direct Transcendence practitioner is instructed to stabilize the manifestation of the linked chains and the nuclei by containing them within the blue expanse, which serves as a sort of canvas on which the intricate details of the visions are painted during contemplation. In another passage from *The Blazing Lamp Tantra*, for example, the practitioner is instructed to "place (*gzhug par bya*) the linked chains within the prison (*go rar*) of the expanse, where they will continuously appear without dependency and in a non-grasping and non-abiding manner" (GMB, 307.4).[34] The idea of containment is also present in *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, where it is written that the practitioner "should train" (*bslab par bya*) by means of the "key points of binding (*bcings*), capturing (*zhags*), transforming faculties (*dbang po sgyur*), and severing the root (*rtsa ba bcad*)" (GTG, 118.2)[35]

In the later commentarial literature—particularly Longchenpa's exegesis of the old tantras—we also find repeated elaborations of what the technique of "fencing in the linked chains" implies. In *The Treasury of Words and Meanings*, we read:

> The key point of awareness is to keep the eyes unwavering and the mind undistracted. Based on that, when the appearance of the expanse (*dbyings snang*) along with the linked chains (*lu gu rgyud*) dawns (*shar*),

[34] rdo rje nyid ni lu gu rgyud/ 'di nyid nang du gzhug par bya/ rang gi ngo bo rtog med du/ nang gi dbyings kyi go rar yang/ ma bzung mi gnas tshul gyis ni/ 'bral ba med par rgyun du snang.

[35] gnad kyis bcings dang zhags* pa dang/ dbang po sgyur dang rtsa ba bcad/ 'dren cing gzugs la bslab par bya. *I changed bzhag to zhags based on TDD and TB. ** I changed dngos po to dbang po based on TB and TDD.

> subdue (*'khul*) the linked chains so that they do not flutter (*'phrig med*) and apprehend (*'dzin*) them within the enclosure of the expanse (*dbyings kyi ra ba*). (TDD, 377.4)[36]

In her book, *Trauma and Transformation at Ground Zero* (2011), Storm Swain introduces Winnicot's distinction between an "aggression [which] is reactive to the encounter with the reality principle," on the one hand, and an aggression that is "the destructive drive that creates the quality of externality," on the other. Consequently, she suggests that human beings are animated by a profoundly positive type of "inborn aggression," which is not "an angry reaction against reality," but rather an "aggression that is about creation" (Swain 2011, 168).

In the words of Swain, the Great Perfection's response to trauma, which culminates in the imprisoning of specks of light during the highest form of visionary meditation practice, could be described as an "unconscious destruction." This destruction, so Swain explains, "is not about destroying the external with which you are angry, but about destroying the internal image of the other as you have created it" (Swain 2011, 168). In a few words, by imprisoning the "linked chains" within the expanse, the Great Perfection practitioner replays the original trauma myth while giving it a new outcome—at least within his own mind.

This becomes even more unambiguous if we consider that Longchenpa wields the same terms to image the imprisonment of the little children and the fencing in of the luminous chains of light. In another passage from *The Treasury of Words and Meaning*, we read:

> Without separating from the target [the appearances], always abide in the thought of the budddhas. By inserting awareness into the prison of the expanse, fundamental nature of things will not be lost. Continually remaining within that, it is certain that the four visions will reach optimization. If there is movement, by reifying the conceptual, you accumulate the karma of saṃsāra. By controlling the key point of the support of those movements, that is, the channels and winds, the flow

[36] rig pa'i gnad ni mig mi 'gul sems ma yengs pa las dbyings snang lu gu rgyud dang bcas pa shar dus dbyings kyi ra bar lu gu rgyud 'khul 'phrig med par 'dzin pa ste.

> of reifying conceptuality is severed. This is an extremely important point. (TDD, 406.4)[37]

In his *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, he writes that the "linked chains should be apprehended within the prison" (*lu gu rgyud go rar bzung*) (TCD2, 21.1). In this same text, Longchenpa recruits another formulation for describing the enclosing process performed during the visionary manifestations, namely the term "prison" (*btson*). Longchenpa speaks of the "key point of the awareness-wind" (*rlung rig gi gnad pa*), arguing that "when one has gathered the object and the gates and one relies on the quiet of the wind, this is known as 'the imprisoning (*btson du gzung ba*) of awareness (*rig pa*)'."[38] In *The Treasury of Words and Meaning*, similarly, he makes the case that "as the appearance of the expanse manifests, the linked chains are imprisoned therein (*btson du 'dzin pa*) (TDD, 386,2). "[39] This same expression already occurs in one of the early tantras concerned with the visions, namely *The Blazing Lamp Tantra.* Here it is written: "Through the expanse's manifestation in the objective sphere, the linked chains are imprisoned (*btson du 'dzin*)" (GMB, 308.2).[40]

Despite all the parallels outlined here, it is imperative to stipulate that the type of incarceration we talked about in the first part and the techniques of "fencing in" discussed here differ in significant respects. Chiefly, the little lambs are not detained within a narrow and contained place—such as the prison or the ravine in which the children were held captive in the mythic account—but rather in an area that is open and spacious. Like lambs that are free to roam on a patch of grass, the linked chains appear in the practitioner's vision against the background of an enormous field known as "the expanse" (*dbyings*). Thus, although the vocabulary maintains the connotation of a containment in the form of fences (*ra ba*) and prisons (*go ra*, *btson*), these limitations set the perimeter for a vast and spacious area.

[37] gsum pa sems kyi mi 'gul ba gsum ni gtad pa'i 'bem dang ma bral bas rtag tu sangs rgyas kyi dgongs pa la gnas/ rig pa dbyings kyi go rar bcug pas dngos po'i gnas lugs 'khyor sa med/ rtag tu de nyid kyi ngang dang ma bral bas snang ba bzhi tshad du phyin par nges so/ de'ng 'gyu bas rtog la rtog pas 'khor ba'i las sog pa las/ 'gyu ba'i rten rtsa rlung gnad du gcun pas rtogs pa rgyun chad pa'i rang gnad gal po che'o.

[38] gsum pa rlung rig gi gnad ni/ yul dang sgo gnyis 'dzom dus rlung dal ba bsten pas rig pa btson du gzung ba zhes bya ste.

[39] dbyings snang shar bar lu gu rgyud brtson* du 'dzin pa ste. *I have changed btson for brtson because of context.

[40] yul la snang ba'i dbyings kyis ni/ lu gu rgyud de btson du 'dzin.

In a like manner, the description of what happens during these visionary journeys is no longer dominated by a rhetoric of traumatic imprisonment in a foreign land—the boys being captured in a foreign land of a demon—but rather a gentler form of regulation. In fact, one frequently gets the sense that the "fence" in which the lambs are being transported could also be described as their "home." In *The Six Spaces Tantra*, for example, we find a reference to the role of the expanse to something akin to a "home of awareness" (*rig pa'i khyim*) in which the nuclei is put into (*tshud*) (LDG, 126.4).[41] Another term for the expanse (*dbyings*), of course, is the "objective sphere" (*yul*), which, as Hatchell correctly certified, means as much as "home" or "home region" in its colloquial use. As he put it, it appears that "the expanse is thus the place where at the end of the day things settle down, where the chaotic motion of the lambs is finally contained, and into which visions finally dissolve" (Hatchell 2014, 68).

[41] Hatchell also mentions a passage in *The Pearl Necklace Tantra*, where the expanse is the "fence" that contains the linked lambs, and acts as "awareness' home. Unfortunately, I was unable to find this reference anywhere. (Hatchell 2014, 366)

The View from the Peak: From Happiness to Trauma

Meditation is generally said to be a practice that makes us happier. Buddhism identifies our ordinary experience as suffering and the new way of seeing, which we gain through meditation practice, as the best means to find happiness. In short, Buddhism was advertised as the "science of happiness" *par excellence* (Yongey Mingyur, Swanson, and Goleman 2006; Hanson 2009; Woollard 2010; D. Dorjee 2014; Wright 2018).

Contemporary research on meditation drew from these long-standing priorities and successfully demonstrated that mindfulness is indeed an effective means to increase our well-being (Goyal et al. 2014; Campos et al. 2016). Clinically, meditation has proven effective for reducing stress (Khoury et al. 2015; Sharma and Rush 2014; Chiesa and Serretti 2009), anxiety (Hofmann et al. 2010; K. W. Chen et al. 2012; Rodrigues, Nardi, and Levitan 2017), depression (Hofmann et al. 2010; Bieling et al. 2012; Piet and Hougaard 2011), PTSD (Boyd, Lanius, and McKinnon 2018), weight management (Olson and Emery 2015), eating disorders (Godfrey, Gallo, and Afari 2015), and drug addiction (Chiesa and Serretti 2014; E. L. Garland, Froeliger, and Howard 2014; Black 2014), as well as psychiatric disorders (Ernst, Esch, and Esch 2009; Rubia 2009; Sedlmeier et al. 2012; Goldberg et al. 2018), including psychosis (Aust and Bradshaw 2017; Cramer et al. 2016; Louise et al. 2018).

It has also been associated with changes in genetic expression and biomarkers leading to a reduced risk of certain inflammation-related diseases (Buric et al. 2017; Sanada et al. 2017). It is helpful for the treatment of pain in certain physical conditions, such as cancer (Chiesa and Serretti 2011; Grossman et al. 2004; Shennan, Payne, and Fenlon 2011; Zeidan et al. 2011), insomnia (S. N. Garland et al. 2016; Ong and Smith 2017), and as a means to improve various mental functions, such as cognition, attention, or memory (Bostanov et al. 2012; Jain et al. 2007; Jha et al. 2010; MacLean et al. 2010; Malinowski 2013; Moore et al. 2012; Zeidan et al. 2010), or athletic performance (Colzato and Kibele 2017).

The scholar of religion, Kelly Bulkeley, however, has critiqued that cognitive scientists headline the "happy benefits" and ignore "its darker roots in disordered neural functioning," and warned that their "primary mission […] is to make madness go away" (Bulkeley 2004, 106). "What is missing," so he reminds us, "is the darkness, [as] the only reason Damasio ever mentions sleep, dreams, and the unconscious is to highlight what consciousness is not-namely, clear, coherent, and controlled" (Bulkeley 2004, 29–30).

Another specialist of religion and its study in psychology, who showed awareness of the problematic nature of the overemphasis on the positivity of religious experience, is Ann Taves. She encouraged her colleagues to become more "attentive to the breakdown, reconstitution, and transformation of meaning systems in the context of traumatic life events and religious/spiritual transformation" (Taves 2009, 99).

Of course, this shortcoming is a direct consequence of the modernist study of Buddhism, which tends to relegate the importance of the cultural and historical context. "Part of the reason for this lacuna in the scientific understanding of meditation," so one group of researchers propositioned, "derives from the fact that scientific research on meditation, especially at the clinical level, has become increasingly divorced from the study of the literature and practitioners from contemplative traditions" (Lindahl et al. 2014, 1).

Like this study as a whole, the second part of this dissertation was concerned with reinserting research on meditation within the context of Tibet, where many of the practices are not only advertised as powerful but even considered to be dangerous. The proponents of the New Schools, for instance, always knew that their tantric practices were ambiguous in nature as they had the potential to be both spiritually transformative and psychologically damaging. In fact, the new tantric schools introduced these technologies to Tibet with specific disclaimers that they were commanding tools of mental transmutation that carried the potential for a series of significant dangers. As Steven Beyer explained:

> This awareness of the psychological dangers of uncontrolled visualization is one of the reasons for the erection of preparatory standards and for the constant insistence upon the necessity for preliminary practices, not only because the unprepared practitioner is a danger to himself, with the ever-present possibility of self-induced hallucinatory schizophrenia, but also because he presents a real threat to others, should he happen to achieve any control over reality without being morally prepared to handle his power (Beyer 1973, 76).

In order to become more nuanced, research on meditation needs to move beyond its exclusive focus on happiness and flourishing and become conscious of the traumatic dimensions of such practices. It is good to see that some Western researchers

of meditation also came to recognize the potentially harmful and negative effects of the practice (Van Dam et al. 2018; Schlosser et al. 2019). Jared Lindahl and his colleagues, in particular, have committed themselves to the analysis of qualitative interviews of Western Buddhist practitioners and experts in order to fashion a taxonomy of the Varieties of Contemplative Experience, showing that many meditators experience practices frequently as challenging, difficult, distressing, or impairing (Lindahl et al. 2017). In more recent studies, their lab also explored the dissociative and depersonalizing effects of meditation practices (Lindahl et al. 2019; Lindahl and Britton 2019).

As I try to show through this entire study, our understanding of the sky-gazing practice hinges in many ways on our appreciation of the ground upon which the yogi sits. In the two chapters of this part, this grounding contextualization has involved two steps.

First, moved beyond the early years of Tibet, during which the Great Perfection originated in a context of historical crisis, and addressed the later controversy regarding the relationship to the "New Schools" of Tibetan Buddhism. These groups, in fact, formed during the second dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet from the late tenth to the twelfth centuries. While the Great Perfection is famous for rejecting elements central to the Sarmas practices, such as deity yoga, sexual tantric practices, and violent imagery, there is no doubt that they too were contributing factors in the development of the tradition of the Ancients. Even more, meditative technologies might not be simply religious instruments, but also powerful tools for affecting change in the realms of socio-political history. Thus, while contemplation might be liberating for some, it can have constricting, imprisoning, and dissociative consequences for others.

Offering a close reading of the myths and practices, this chapter suggested that Dzogchen yogis likely became victims of more targeted marginalization during the Renaissance period. In the Great Perfection myths, freedom frequently carries connotations that can not only be linked to specific tantric techniques of self-transformation imported by the Sarmas but also a series of symptoms of trauma. As we saw, the dysfunction of attention, the loss of memory, and the dysregulation of affect are illustrated in a rich array of vocabulary, such as "transparent" (*sang ma seng ma*), "released" (*shag ma shig ma*), "intangible" (*khral ma khrol ma*), "awake" (*yang ma yeng ma*), "space out" (*'byams*), "emerge" (*'byung*), "arise" (*shar*, *'char ba*), "move

upward" (yar rgyu), "play" (*rol pa*), "shaking" (*g.yo ba*), "undulating" (*'gul ba*) and "shimmering" (*'phrig pa*).

Second, I addressed the controversy of the identity of the Great Perfection tradition itself. Although this dissertation focuses primarily on the tradition's most sophisticated version, the so-called "Heart-Essence" (*snying thig*) Great Perfection, this orientation represents only the latest branch (in the eleventh century) of a much larger tree of Dzogchen teachings.

I also took the traumatic dimension of the early Great Perfection one step further by introducing an entirely different set of terms pervasive throughout the scriptures. In dealing with the visionary manifestations, the Direct Transcendence practitioner is instructed "train" by "binding" (*bcings*), "capturing" (*zhags*), "transforming faculties" (*dbang po sgyur*), and "severing the root" (*rtsa ba bcad*)." More specifically, the various ways in which the scriptures speak of "imprisonment" (*go rar bcug pa, btson du gzung ba, btson du 'dzin*) suggests that the liberation of awareness—in the early Great Perfection—is consistently taking place under the banner of restrictive experiences. Sometimes, the practice of Direct Transcendence does not take place in the open space with the blue sky as backdrop and the rays of the sun as luminous inspiration, but can also be practiced in complete darkness in specially designed chambers. Meditation can make us both into captives and into jailors.

In the mythic universe of Dzogchen, confinement is not only a useful category to explore the marginalization suffered in the wake of the rise of the New Schools, but also the internal ontogeny of the Dzogchen tradition itself. In fact, by telling stories of intimate, familial, and transgenerational abuse—relying on terms like "youth" (*gzhon nu*) and "children" (*bu*), "mothers" (*ma/ yum*) and "fathers" (*pha/ yab*), "lords" (*bdag po*) and "ladies" (*bdag mo*), and "grandmothers" (*a phyi*)—the myths showcase that the trauma was internalized and perpetuated within the various strands of the Great Perfection itself. Linking these narratives with evidence from history and cognitive science, I evinced that the Great Perfection, during the renaissance of Tibetan culture in the eleventh and twelfth century, was a religious tradition that reflected on how trauma leaves traces in our bodies, in our brains, and in our communities.

More generally, I hope that my attention to trauma encourages a more nuanced study of meditation that includes the darker sides of the practice. In Buddhism, trauma transcends history as it can be regarded as its ultimate foundation myth. Ignorance, suffering, and alienation are omnipresent in this religious tradition. Like the Dzogchen myth of origin, many Buddhist stories—the Buddha's life story being

the first one—are tales that are dedicated to the painful existence of human beings. Subjected to the law of karmic retribution, humanity is trapped in the cycle of *saṃsāra*, stuck in an endless cycle of rebirths. According to Buddhist teachings, we are not always as fortunate as we are now in our human existence. On the contrary, the scriptures even depict purgatorial hells (Tib. *dmyal ba*, Skt. *naraka*, P. *niraya*), in which beings are tortured in the most gruesome ways possible: from being covered in blisters of frozen pus and being crushed into bloody jelly by huge rocks, to being shaved into tiny slices with sharp razors (D. Matsunaga and Matsunaga 1972; Teiser 1988).

This universal dimension of suffering is also apparent in the Dzogchen myths themselves. Consider, for instance, the story of the children, who were sent out by their parents to retrieve certain treasures from the land of a demon. In *The Treasury of Reality's Expanse*, Longchenpa not only offers a detailed analysis of the meaning of demons (*bdud*), but also generalizes the demonic energies underlying human existence in ways that are notably similar to his analysis of the coming into being of the "self." Like Longchenpa's cosmogonic reflections, where attachment and aversion were held to be culpable for the misrecognition of self and other, Longchenpa argues that the most fundamental demon is known as the "demon of bondage," which underlies ordinary human cognition as it is characterized by the "fixation on conceptual attributes" (*mtshan 'dzin*) (CBD, 290.4).

This being said, as the final part of chapter four illustrated, I locate the innovative thrust of my dissertation not simply in the acknowledgement of trauma. Rather than recasting the cardinal scholarly reception of Great Perfection Buddhism as a tradition of freedom, I hope to slightly shift our focus from the result of the practice to its actual performance on the ground. What does this mean concretely? Trauma, dissociation, and imprisonment, in my analysis, are beneficial means to frame the pursuit of happiness. In other words, it is precisely because of the overwhelming presence of pain in myth of Samantabhādra, the primordial Yogi, that his journey becomes one of liberation.

I believe that the dialectical logic of spiritual progress in the Great Perfection, in which it is the confining ground that allows us to perceive the open sky of freedom, can inspire us to gain new perspectives on the mechanisms of meditation more generally. By definition, happiness is only then a useful concept when we have suffering. Suffering and happiness are not only integral parts in practices of meditation, but might even reinforce each other. Put differently, a meditator's

happiness might to a large extent derive from the amount of pain that he or she had to overcome before starting to sit on top of the mountain, gazing off in to the sky.

III: The Growth of Great Perfection Contemplative Practices (12th-13th centuries)

Chapter 5: "Shake Your Limbs and Whirl Your Head": The Preliminary Practices (*sngon* 'gro) and the Arousal of Awakening

The Base of the Mountain: Contemplative Practices as Embodied Responses to Trauma

Although the ultimate metamorphosis of our sky-gazing yogi is dramatic as he is said to dissolve into light, his actual practice is performed within a human body made out of flesh and bones, blood and veins, hormones and chemicals. Not only that, he lives in a culture in which the human body is also seen as a crucial vehicle for spiritual transformation. His physical basis is therefore imbued with subtle energies that reside in various nodal points throughout his body, flow through a complex network of channels, and become visibly manifest by projecting out of his eyes into the sky, which acts like a screen for self-reflection. In this chapter, I introduce the Great Perfection conception of the human body in order to show that our yogi's meditation practice functions by engaging, stimulating, and arousing its many different energies.

Before that, however, we need to briefly return to the historical development of the tradition. In fact, our yogi's body is the result of a complicated historical process of rejection, assimilation, innovation that involves long-standing yogic and tantric traditions of Indian provenance. In the first two parts of the dissertation, I introduced the historical theories by Karmay and van Schaik, who contradicted the historical self-depictions of the *Seventeen Tantras* and argued that the Dzogchen Nyingthig tradition emerged out of Mahāyoga meditation techniques. An interpretation that lies somewhere in between the emic and etic depictions is the one proffered by David Germano, who argues that the while the Great Perfection tradition emerged out of Mahāyoga, it did so by isolating its transcendent rhetoric while discarding the sexual and violent dimensions of standard tantra. In his article, "Architecture and Absence," he speaks of early Dzogchen as a "pristine" tradition that was marked by the idea of "absence." "Yet this absence," so Germano points out, "is utterly defined by what it has excluded—it is not a simple absence, but rather an absence of precise systems, systems which are inexorably evoked though now under erasure" (Germano 1994, 208–9).

For Germano, the vacuum created by the negation of practice is sort of an assimilatory strategy that allowed the Tibetans to gradually adopt the complex contemplative practices and subtle body manipulations of the tantric system in their own significantly adapted versions.

> This carved out space of absence thus functioned partially to maintain a bounded zone in which Tibetans could think, resisting the pressure of domination from the flood of Indic culture through rhetorical negation, and then while still holding it at an arm's distance, perform the alchemy of cultural assimilation. (Germano 1994, 210)

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries offered the Ancient School a socio-political context within which they could perform exactly this type of assimilatory alchemy. While the "cult of the translators" clearly demonstrates that the Sarmas dominated much of the intra-Tibetan struggles for authority, the Tibetan political and military circumstances on the plateau overall recovered only very slowly. Lacking a central power, Tibet remained politically fragmented and divided into various estates and principalities. As a result, from a political standpoint, this period of religious absorption was anything but calm and peaceful. This became glaringly apparent towards the end of the Renaissance period when Tibet's situation changed once again dramatically in the first half of the thirteenth century. At this point, a more formidable military power came to the fore and decided to extend its influence over the plateau, namely the Mongol empire (Petech 1990; Czaja 2013; Buell 2016, 193–94; McKay 2003b; Wylie 1977).

In 1239, after having grown to be a tremendous force, bringing all the land surrounding Tibet under its control, the Mongol army was led by Köten Khan (*go dan khan*, 1206-1251), the grandson of the famed world-conqueror Genghis Khan (*ling gir rgyal po*, 1162-1227), on its way to conquer Tibet. After the invasion, it was Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltsen (*sa skya paṇḍita kun dga' rgyal mtshan*, 1182-1251) who was first invited to the Mongol court in 1244. Establishing an alliance with the Sakya school of Tibet, it was Kunga Gyaltsen's nephew, Pakpa Lodrö Gyaltsen (*'phags pa blo gros rgyal mtshan*, 1235-1280)—who spent his educational years at the court in Mongolia—who was appointed in 1264 as the official leader of Tibet, executing his power in accordance with Mongolian interests.

The pact between Pakpa Lodrö and Köten Khan guaranteed a peaceful cohabitation between Mongolia and Tibet, with the latter being the source of income in the form of taxes and an asset in the form of religious knowledge, especially regarding rituals and magical powers for protection against their enemies. Their junction was also a watershed moment in the crystallization of the so-called "patron-priest relationship," which would extend into many different dimensions of Tibetan

society and remain a crucial model for political, economic, and religious interactions throughout much of Tibetan history.

Around the same time, a kindred relationship formed between the powerful Drigung Kagyü (*'bri gung bka' brgyud*) and the Ilkhanate of Persia in the Western part of Tibet (Alikuzai 2013, 122–23; Samten and Martin 2015). The Kagyü's alliance with a rivalling Mongolian power in competition with Köten Khan and his clan, was bound to lead to violent confrontations, which culminated in an attack on Sakya monastery and the eruption of a civil war in 1285. It was only in 1290, when Kublai Khan (1215-1294) deployed an enormous army to reclaim Tibet—destroying Drigung Monastery and killing thousands—that the conflict was resolved and the Sakya were authenticated as the unquestioned leaders over the country.

As for the destiny of the Old School, their situation had certainly improved since the traumatic events that were the fall of the empire and the rise of the New Schools. However, as Alex McKay stated, the Ancient School was nonetheless "excluded from any significant role in central Tibetan politics" (McKay 2003a, 10). Largely due to the continued marginalization in light of the missing link to original Sanskrit texts and the literary legitimization associated with it, the Nyingma were still not recognized as productive contributors in the articulation of Tibetan Buddhism.

In this part of my dissertation, I demonstrate how it was precisely this position on the margins of the power centers that allowed the Ancient School to gradually recover from the trauma that marked their formative years over the previous centuries. Like David Snellgrove commented on the interaction between the historical situation of the Ancients and their religious circulation, they "continued the elaboration of their various teachings" in a situation in which they were both "lacking the support that was always needed for building temples and monasteries" and "free of any kind of centralizing control" (D. L. Snellgrove 2003, 451).

Like in the very physical practices mentioned in the preceding paragraph, our yogi's meditative practice is profoundly somatic in nature. In fact, although the tradition's focus on the visionary manifestations in the open sky could make us almost believe that he floats off into the ephemeral realm of air, this is not the case. On the contrary, he sits on the firm ground and inhabits a human body. Let us now look at the Great Perfection conception of the body in order to explore how our yogi's meditation practice functions by actively engaging with its many energies.

The Spontaneous Access to Memories through Direct Transcendence

In his discussion of the Great Perfection, Matthew Kapstein has pointed repeatedly to the supreme importance of "memory" (*dran pa*) in interpreting its practices of meditation. Importantly, he recognized the interplay between amnesis (*dran med*) and "memory," "rememberance," "mindfulness," "recollection," or what he calls "mnemic engagement" (*dran pa*). In short, he summarizes his understanding as follows: "All acts of mnemic engagement involve the apparent recovery or retention, that is to say nonloss, of a causally or temporally precedent psychic or experiential condition by an act of awareness" (Kapstein 2000, 185). He elaborates:

> To clarify somewhat the notion of nonintentional presentation, consider those instances in which we have a "sense-memory" or the memory of a mood, not in the propositional sense of remembering that we were once in the mood in question, but in the sense of being in a certain mood and re-cognizing it, as part of that experienced state of being. "Memory," in such cases, is the palpable recovery of a state of being or affect, and thus in a peculiar sense is no more intentional in its phenomenological character than were the apparently recovered experiences when they originally occurred. (Kapstein 2000, 182)

Kapstein's analysis is backed up by textual sources stemming from the Dzogchen corpus itself. In Rigdzin Gödem Ngödrup Gyaltsen's *The Intention of Buddha Vajrasattva, the Wide-Open Tantra of Universal Liberation*, for example, we read repeatedly about the importance of rememberance during Direct Transcendence meditation: "The best [practitioner] looks at self-awareness through memory" (*rab kyis dran pas rang rig lta*), "upon remembering, suffering immediately fades away" (*dran ma thag tu sdug bsngal yal*), "only through mnemic engagement is the [dualism of] subject and object liberated" (*dran pa tsam gyis gzung 'dzin grol*), "this is why the swiftness of mindfulness is supreme" (*de phyir dran pa myur bar mchog*) (SDS, 142.6-144.6). In light of such an overwhelming emphasis on practices of recollection, Kapstein concludes that "memory is […] revealed to be the most natural thing in the world and, hence, absolutely authoritative" (Kapstein 2000, 196).

Of course, we find elements that point to such a naturalness of memory in Direct Transcendence, most obviously, in the spontaneous emergence of the visionary manifestations that replay the myth of cosmology. Tögal, a word consisting of the

Tibetan words *rgal* ("to leap over") and *thod* ("peak"), is sometimes believed to be the translation of the Sanskrit terms *avaskanda* and *viśkanda*, *vyutkranta* (Stein 1987, 51ff.; Germano 1992, 944). In Indian sources, such as the Prajñāpāramitā and other Mahāyāna texts, these terms are also used to indicate practices that leap or skip over something, particularly steps in the meditative itinerary (Ruegg 1989, 164–75). These terms point to the dominant understanding of Direct Transcendence as a technique of spontaneous liberation. The practice, sharing the typical Great Perfection emphasis of release over control, spontaneity over structure, and freedom over imprisonment, could be seen as the epitome of remembering naturally. The practitioner is said to be simply waiting, without any effortful visualization or bodily movement, on the side of a mountain or a closed room, gazing into the rays of the sun, the blue sky, or the utter darkness.

This priority is also reflected in secondary scholarship. Van Schaik indicated that one of the most distinctive virtues of the Great Perfection is its radical rejection of "meditation with techniques rooted in cause-effect structures" (Van Schaik 2004b, 71). Lobel recently wrote about the natural remembering of one's true nature by speaking of Great Perfection meditations as premised on "disclosive approaches where innate enlightenment need merely be uncovered" (Lobel 2018, 52). Finally, Higgins defines Dzogchen's practical path leading towards liberation as "endotelic:"

> Since the path is the self-disclosure of an ever-present goal, it is in no sense predetermined, having no pre-established point of departure, no trajectory and no destination. In short, the rDzogs chen path as a process of existential disclosure is neither instrumental (pursued as a means toward an end) nor teleocratic (channeled toward a pre-established end); it is a path that is forged in the going, without one knowing precisely where or even why one is going. It is in this sense "a path without progression" (Higgins 2012, 262–63).

The Subtle Body as Palace of Enlightenment and Cell of Suffering

While there is much merit to the conception of Direct Transcendence as a spontaneous practice premised on the natural radiation of the luminosity contained within our bodies, it also simplifies the lived realities of our yogi. This is so for at least two primary reasons: First, because the body is not merely a container of positive

enlightened energy but also of more negative and painful energies; Second, because our internal energies, particularly the painful ones, are not always flowing naturally.

Bodily Energies and Implicit Traces of Painful Memories

"Depth," so Janet Gyatso once declared, "marks the authenticity of realization; centrality and pithiness are superior to superficiality." Depth and interiority, so she concludes, "are not only metaphors; they are penetrated quite literally (or, bodily)" (J. B. Gyatso 1998, 222). Although the Hindu and Buddhist psychological traditions have been shown to prioritize mind over body, "moving progressively away from body-centeredness with greater focus on realizing consciousness as-such as the goal" (Rao and Paranjpe 2016, 95), the Great Perfection authenticates a concern for the body and the senses.

After Christian Wedemeyer, in his excellent book on tantric Buddhism, spoke of the "epistemic Buddha" as he is "considered equivalent to truth and vice versa" (Wedemeyer 2013, 97), in Dzogchen, we are dealing with an "embodied buddha." Although it is a mystical tradition, the Great Perfection is not simply idealistic or dualistic—an attitude that would view the mental and physical realms as distinct and separate aspects of reality—but rather a religious tradition that values life's physical substratum, in general, and the human body, in particular. Christopher Hatchell also concedes that the "body is commonly called a 'vessel' or 'support' (*rten*)", not only in Buddhism, but also in the Great Perfection (Hatchell 2014, 205).

Another standard formulation in Great Perfection literature is the metaphorical representation of the "essence of the One Thus Gone" (*de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po*), the "Tathāgatagarbha," our Buddha-nature, being within the human body just as oil (*mar*) pervades a sesame seed (*til 'bru*). In *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, for example, we read: "Self-cognizant primordial awareness abides within the body like oil within a sesame seed. The body's luster and radiant glow is the pervasion by the moisture of primordial awareness" (*GTG*, 110.4).[42] Similarly, in *The Jewel Studded Tantra*, it states that "just as oil is spontaneously ever-present within a sesame or mustard seed, when sentient beings are manifesting as a physical body (*lus ltar snang*), the seed of the Buddha manifests together with its concordant light" (NPK 24.1).[43]

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[42] rang rig ye shes lus la gnas/ til bru las ni mar bzhin du/ lus kyi bkrag dang gzi mdangs ni/ ye shes rlan gyis khyab par byed.

[43] til 'bru ma ni yungs 'bru la/ mar nyid ye nas lhun grub bzhin/ sems can lus ltar snang ba la/ de bzhin gshegs pa'i sa bon ni/ mthun pa'i 'od dang bcas par snang.

Although David Germano is right that the "body-like appearances" (*lus ltar snang*) can be understood as if the author meant to say that the human being appears "ostensibly" or "deceptively" in the form of a body, I am not certain that this is what is meant here (Germano 1992, 557–58). In the Great Perfection, the breadth of meanings attributed to the concept "*snang ba*" also allows for an alternative interpretation. If we examine the passage from *The Jewel Studded Tantra* more attentively, we fathom that *snang ba* not only describes the critical moment of the breaking of the youthful body in a vase and the collapse of the structural unity of the Tibetan body, but that it also transports that memory of the human suffering within the human body (*lus ltar snang*), what we could call "embodiment." Just as the ground's epiphany and the visionary manifestations of light can be both cause for imprisonment and source of liberation, the human body is both a cell and palace. Embodiment, in other words, means to gain awareness of all the energies contained within our bodies.

In the context of the Great Perfection during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in particular, the body was not exclusively the vessel of enlightened energy but also a container for tremendous pain and suffering. The body, to render my argument in a way that maintains the etymological rhythm of the cluster of words with the Latin root *capere*, is a *receptacle* for the experiences of *captivity*, both in the form of actual persecution and more generalized suffering of human existence in the material universe. Just as Richard McNally in his *Remembering Trauma* (2003) has argued that traumatic memories are ultimately unforgettable (McNally 2003), scholars of lived religion have claimed that "the traumatic and religious experiences are often stored in somatic memories without discursive frameworks attached to them" (Ganzevoort and Sremac 2019, 5).

If the early Great Perfection was bound by socio-political circumstances of persecution, that memory gradually became encoded in the bonds of the human body. The prison of the body consists of billions of little cells, each one of them storing information about pain and suffering that can be triggered in later moments of time. While sufferers of trauma might be able to hide their pain, this act only worsens their imprisonment—making them into wardens of their own jail—as the invisibility of the trauma-memory requires it to be embedded deeper and deeper within the cells of their bodies. As Alice Miller put it, "the stronger a prison is, the thicker the prison walls

have to be, and unfortunately these walls also impede or completely prevent later emotional growth" (A. Miller 1981, 58).

Bodily Energies and Latent Memories

The second reason why the conception of Direct Transcendence as a spontaneous practice premised on the natural radiation needs to be relativized is because the memory traces within our body, our internal energies, do not always flow naturally. Stéphane Arguillère intelligently observed that the Great Perfection's claim that there exists an awareness in our own bodies—although it is usually seen as the source of the visionary manifestations that liberate practitioners—must also be recognized in its problematic connotation. In fact, precisely because as it is latent and usually "wrapped inside of the heart," so the French thinker noticed, it "hinders and obscures its adequate expression" (Arguillère 2007, 482).

In the Great Perfection, the heart, arguably the "king" of the divine realm of human embodiment, the principle locus of enlightened power and the residence of awareness, is termed *tsitta*, which, in its original Sanskrit context, means "mind" (Skt. *citta*) It carries a whole series of different names throughout Great Perfection texts, all of which point to the architectonic and enclosed nature of disclosure: The "crystal palace of five lights," the "flesh lamp of the Tsitta" (*tsitta sha'i sgron ma*), the "tent of brown carnelian (*mchong gur smug po*), the "precious palace" (*rin po che'i gzhal yas*), the "precious envelope" (*rin po che'i sbubs*).

The heart is also said to correspond to the "youthful body in a vase" (*gzhon nu bum pa'i sku*), a concept that we encountered during our mythological introduction to the Great Perfection's trauma (RRS, 536.1). In *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, furthermore, the embodied nature of memory within the "divine palace of the precious tsitta" (*tsitta rin chen gzhal*): "The radiation of its body abiding in the manner of a body within a vase is replete with faces and arms" (GTG, 126.5).[44]

This idea of the latent nature of Great Perfection memories brings us to the most pertinent research on meditation introduced in the early nineteenth century, when the French Philosopher Maine de Biran made a distinction between explicit and implicit

[44] tsitta rin chen gzhal yas na/ ngo bo ka nas dag pa'i cha/ stong gsal 'dus pa sku yi gdangs/ zhal phyag rdzogs pa bum sku'i tshul.

memory systems (Maine de Biran [1804] 1929).[45] While the former are episodic and declarative in nature, the latter are procedural. Steven Rose, in 1993, speculated whether the difference between these two types of memory might be tied to the latter of them being stored in the body, rather than the brain: "Perhaps this is because memories that involve procedural rather than declarative modes—such as riding a bicycle—are not confined simply to the brain but involve whole sets of other bodily memories, encoded in muscles and sinews?" (Rose 1993, 378).

The strongest evidence for the existence of implicit memories, finally, comes from patients suffering from specific types of amnesia, such as Korsakoff's syndrome. Named after the Russian neuropsychiatrist Sergei Korsakoff, this rare disease is caused by a deficiency of thiamine in the brain, which is frequently caused by the neurotoxic effects of alcohol. What makes it such a relevant disorder for the study of memory is that patients suffering from Korsakoff's syndrome are able to maintain a very strong implicit memory while having significant amnesia of autobiographical memories. This combination can result in paradoxical situations, such as the ones documented over a century ago by the Swiss neurologist Édouard Claparède, in which the unconscious memories of one of his patients was activated by relevant cues without her having any explicit awareness of it (Eustache, Desgranges, and Messerli 1996; Nicolas 1996).

Arousal in the Preliminary Practices of the Differentiation Between Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa

This conception of our bodily energies as something that is frequently latent and blocked deeply without our bodies, of course, has consequences for our yogi's practice. While it is true that the visions during Direct Transcendence practice disclose themselves, this process of setting free awareness is not as simple and straight-forward as these commentators would like to make us believe. Particularly, the so-called "preliminary practices" (*sngon 'gro,* lit "before-go"), which precede the actual practice of Direct Transcendence, consists of techniques that involve significant arousing and stimulating dimensions.

[45] This distinction has been developed and expanded more recently. (Neely 1977; Schacter 1987; Schneider and Shiffrin 1977; Shiffrin and Schneider 1977; Schacter and Tulving 1994; Eichenbaum and Cohen 2001; Glaser and Kihlstrom 2005)

In the Great Perfection, the standard Buddhist territory of seven preliminaries (such as the meditations on impermanence, the Vajrasattva purifications, guru yoga, contemplations on the law of karma, and so on) are complemented by sets practices that are unique to the Great Perfection. The preliminaries of Direct Transcendence consist of a three-fold series of practices, namely the yoga of the four elements' sounds, the conduct of differentiating between the domains of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and the preliminaries of body, speech, and mind. In his succinct description of the three Direct Transcendence preliminaries, David Germano summarizes them as follows:

> The yoga of the four elements' sounds refers to a series of meditations performed by concentrating on the "sounds" of these elements, such as focusing intently on the sound of turbulent water in a rushing creek, or the roar of wind on a mountain peak. The practice of "differentiation" basically involves acting out wildly in terms of your body, speech and mind by doing whatever pops into your head (imitating animals, etc.), until finally you reach a state of exhaustion […] Finally, "the preliminaries of body, speech, and mind" principally involve some simply visualization exercises, as well as a standard analytical meditation on the nature of the mind (examining its point of origination, endurance and cessation to experientially realize its ultimate emptiness), which all lead one to "settling into a state of naturalness." (Germano 1992, 124)

While the final set of exercises seems closely associated with standard forms of meditation practice, the other two techniques seem quite unlike standard Buddhist meditation and are most likely of genuinely Tibetan origin. From a comparativist perspective, the "differentiation" practice might also be indebted to a non-Buddhist heritage as it bears striking similarities with the five levels of practice (*sādhana*) of the pāśupata Śaiva according to which the adept is first instructed to act in a normative fashion, before acting out in a "manner calculated to reap ridicule […] insane in public and court dishonor" (R. M. Davidson 2002, 184, 219).

From a cognitive outlook, such a courageous type of freedom can be best understood if we turn our attention to new research findings, which explore the "wilder" side of meditation and consciousness. In recent years, indeed, the study of meditation has entered into a new phase as experts start to explore other forms of

practice that reveal radically different priorities of contemplation. The leading figure in this "revolution" in meditation research has been Maria Kozhevnikov, whose work focuses primarily on tantric practices of the Tibetan tradition. In a series of recent papers, she and her colleagues pointed out that while both calm and insight meditation of the Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions enhanced a parasympathetic activation indicative of relaxation, Tibetan practices like "deity yoga" pointed to the opposite: In the tantric context of Tibet, in fact, many practices appear to produce an enhanced sympathetic activation, which is indicative not of relaxation but rather of arousal (Kozhevnikov et al. 2013; Amihai and Kozhevnikov 2014; 2015; Kozhevnikov 2019). With Willoughby B. Britton and her colleagues, who invoke the root meaning of the Buddha—the "awakened one" (from the root *budh-*)—we could say that "awakening is" quite literally, "not a metaphor" (Britton et al. 2014).

While we find such tendencies in all three practices, it is particularly the set of preliminaries of "differentiation," which operates by embracing the wilder dimensions of the human psyche. Since the "differentiation" is divided into three stages aiming at the training body, speech, and mind. In the following pages, I capitalize on the underlying structure of the second preliminary practice, order to discuss all of the preliminaries.

The Preliminaries of the Body: Mnemic Engagement Through Sensory Overstimulation

In terms of the body, the differentiation between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, is already reported in the early Great Perfection scriptures, such as *The Tantra of the Self-Emergent Teaching*, where we find the following description:

> In terms of the body, running, laying down, standing up, shaking the limbs, circumambulating, prostrating, whirling the limbs, rolling the head—whatever action comes to memory (*dran pa*), dancing, performing mudras, changing position, perform whatever actions you imagine (*dmigs pa*). (TDD, 372.6)[46]

[46] lus ni rgyug dang nyal ba dang/ langs dang yan lag bskyod pa dang/ bskor ba dang ni phyag bya dang/ yan lag bskor dang mgo bsgril dang/ ji ltar dran pa'i las rnams dang/ gar dang phyag rgya bsgyur ba dang/ ji ltar dmigs pa'i las rnams bya.

* I was not yet able to check the reference in the original tantra (located in VNT1). I cite from Longchenpa's citations.

We find an analogous description of the behavior surrounding the body in *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*. Here, the yogi is encouraged to "move" (*'gro*), "sit" (*'dug*), "twist" (*gcud*), "extend and contract limbs" (*yang lag 'phen cing sdud pa*) (GTG, 92.2). Thus, rather than activating the parasympathetic nervous system and relaxing the body in light of stress, the Great Perfection preliminary practices represent a technique of "sensory overload."

In the practices of the body, the manipulation of consciousness is not only the result of a sudden and disruptive behavior, but rather of the imaginative endeavor of "othering" one's self, taking on another existence through one's actions. As part of this practice, the meditator should "first imagine the behaviors of the beings of the six classes and then act them out with the body" (*'gro drug gzugs kyi spyod pa rnams/ sems kyis blangs te lus kyis bya*) (GTG, 92.3). Direct Transcendence techniques de-habituate the practitioners from their usual frame of mind, break their routines, and stimulate the spontaneous internal resources of their bodies.

Oftentimes this shattering of mental sets, manifests as a proclivity for (over)-stimulation of the senses. A bit later in the practice, the Great Perfection manuals explain that during the first moments of the actual practice of meditation, the practitioner should "press the eyeballs, using only two fingers rather than three" in order to give rise to visual appearances (TDD, 283.3).[47] Although the text later specifies that "after three or four days, phenomena will arise even without applying any pressure" (TDD, 283.3),[48] this passage clearly displays that that mnemic engagement is not a natural phenomenon, but rather a physical practice that can be performed with different levels of intensity and for various intervals of time. Furthermore, the number of fingers and the intensity with which the practitioner presses (*ltem*) seems to make a difference.

The Great Perfection scriptures further indicate that the preliminaries of the body are multisensory practices, which cross several modalities of cognitive functioning: Although he presses with his fingers on to his eye-balls, the yogi starts perceiving a variety of perceptual phenomena in his visual field. Cognitive scientists would describe such phenomena as a form of synesthesia, perceptual phenomena in which stimulation of one sensory mode provokes automatic activation in a secondary sensory pathway (Cytowic 2002; Cytowic and Eagleman 2011).

[47] 'dzum gsum gyis mi bya bar gnyis kyis tsakkhu'i 'dras bu ltems pas.

[48] zhag gsum bzhi na ma ltems kyang snang.

The Preliminaries of Speech: Mnemic Engagement Through Respiration

If the Synesthesia, of course, offers us also a functional category to make sense of the Great Perfection's insistence that the preliminaries affect body, speech, and mind at the same time. Consider, for example, the third preliminary, where we not only revisit the correlation between the sense of vision and colors, but we also detect the presence of sound. First, the meditator is instructed to identify his own self with a colored letter, namely a "blue-black *hum*." While cognitive scientists have noted that while there exist over 60 types of synesthetic phenomena, they also accentuate that by far the most common form is the so-called "grapheme-color synesthesia, in which achromatic letters or digits automatically trigger an idiosyncratic color perceptual experience (e.g., the letter 'm' induces blue color percepts)" (Safran and Sanda 2015).

The third preliminary then continues to specify that the meditator should envision himself in the form of a "blue-black *hum*," while simultaneously humming "a song of long melodious *hums*." Here, the "rhythm" synchronizes the mind—the imagination of one's self as a sacred letter—and the speech—the repetition of mantra-like utterances consisting of the very letter one is imagining to become. The tradition itself delineates this multi-sensory absorptive experience as follows: "One's body then literally becomes the *hum* rather than a dualistically conceived rider and mount and is considered to be the essence of one's psychic complex of unified winds and mind, one's humming of *hums* matches the rhythms of this *hum*'s movement" (Germano 2007, 324).

The most striking feature of the preliminaries of speech in the differentiation is the repeated insistence that practitioners should intersperse their meditation with unexpected verbal utterances. As Germano posited, in order "to aid in this maintenance of awareness, periodically when the frantic nature of this process gets intense, one abruptly shouts '*phat*' in a fierce tone," while "one continues to return again and again to the wild enactments" (Germano 2007, 318). *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound* expounds the practitioner's behavior as follows:

> Since verbal expressions are the nature of conceptual thoughts, through a variety of languages, say whatever comes to mind without repressing (*bzlog pa med pa*) anything. In the languages of the gods, the serpent spirits (Tib. *glu*; Skt. *nāga*), the demons of the earth (Tib. *gnod sbyin*; Skt. *yakṣa*) the scent eaters (Tib. *dri za*; Skt. *gandharva*), the vampire ghouls

> (Tib. *grul bum*; Skt. *kumbhāṇḍa*), and Viṣṇu (Tib. *khyab 'jug*), verbalize different kinds of good and bad things. In short, the languages of the six classes of beings are mnemonically envisioned (*sems kyi dran bsam*) and verbally expressed (*ngag gis brjod*) (GTG, 92.4).[49]

Of course, the logic of these techniques of speech seems to closely reflect those of the body. In other words, not unlike the alteration that is produced by the sensory overload that results from abrupt and uncontrolled physical movements, the verbal exclamations also jolt the meditator out of his ordinary frame of mind and arouse the sympathetic nervous system in order to create a space for the energy of the unconscious realm—whether this be past trauma or more positive insights—to come to the surface.

As the practitioner repeats chants, recitations, symbolic cries, and foreign languages—all of which are marked by a certain degree of rehearsed-ness and stability that makes them recognizable as such—he becomes absorbed in the action to the point of the utterances taking on an automatic and effortless nature that lies beyond voluntary control. In *The Tantra of the Self-Emergent Teaching*, the practitioner is instructed to "repeat the sounds of mantras, recitations, preaching, express things that are non-existant, existant, and appearing (*snang ba*), as well as verbalizations of mental analysis (*yid dpyod tshig*), the cries of different animals, and the various aspects of their languages" (TDD, 373.1).[50]

Of course, the preliminary practice that converges most concretely upon the quality of sounds is another one, namely the so-called "training on the four elements' sounds" (*'byung ba bzhi'i sgra don la bslab pa*). According to *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, in this technique, the student focuses on the sound of the four elements: "the roaring noise of the sound of water," "the cool and heavy sound of earth," "the drawn-out sound of fire," and "the cool and fierce sound of wind."[51]

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[49] brjod pa rtog pa'i rang bzhin phyir/ sgra skad rnam pa sna tshogs pa/ ci smras bzlog pa med pa'i phyir/ lha dang klu dang gnod sbyin dang/ dri za grul bum khyab 'jug gi/ skad ni bzang ngan bye brag brjod/ mdor na 'gro ba drug gi skad/ sems kyi dran bsam ngag gis brjod.

[50] sngags dang kha ton chos kyi sgra/ yod dang med dang snang ba dang/ yid dpyod tshig ni sna tshogs brjod/ byol song sna tshogs brda skad dang/ skad ni rnam pa sna tshogs la.

[51] chu yi sgra ni gshad pa la/ sa yi sgra ni bsil zhing lji/ me yi sgra ni ring byed bslab/ rlung gi sgra ni gzir zhing drag.

In the same text, we find a slightly more elaborate description of these practices and the qualities of the sounds associated with them. First, the practitioner is instructed to "build a fire with wood and the like in a secluded place," until it is said to be "roaring, whooshing, sparking, and burning."[52] Then, the yogi should move on to observe water "when the winds of autumn are blowing and the crops are ripe, in an empty place where downflowing water is rushing and waves are agitated."[53] Thirdly, he should move to "where three valleys converge or on a mountain peak," where he constructs "a secluded hut with windows in every direction," in order to "turning his ear to whatever direction the wind is blowing."[54] Finally, as for the "sound of earth," it is explained to be "heavy and consistent," and the practitioner is instructed to "make egg-shaped balls [of earth], to toss them back and forth in his hands while meditating [on that sound]" (*GTG*, 54.4-6).[55]

Although the "differentiation between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*" distinguishes between body, speech, and mind, there are other instances where these three dimensions are connected through a web of relationships typical of synesthesia. For example, in *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, body and speech are connected as the sounds to be uttered are to be first "mentally" envisioned before then being "verbally" expressed. Speech and sound are directly linked to the body, more specifically to the ears: "Through the right ear, the karmic winds manifest. Through the left ear, sound is heard as wisdom itself (GTG, 168.2)."[56]

Finally, in Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* we find a passage in which he argues that the practitioner can "correct" speech problems that emerge due to a problem in one's "solitary channel" (*rkyang ma*) by either "transformation" (*bsgyur ba*), "revitalization" (*gseng ba*), or "suppression" (*mnan pa*) of one's inner winds (TCD1, 367 5-6). These passages point to an supreme physical component associated with speech, namely the wind.

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[52] yang ni dben pa de nyid du/ bud shing sogs la me bus la/ […]/ chags chen bshad dang bslab pa dang/ 'ur dang tshag dang 'tsheg pa dang.

[53] ston ser lo tog smin dus su/ lung stong thur zug chu drag 'bab/ dba' rlabs shin tu drag pa ru.

[54] lung gsum mdo'm ri rtse ru/ dben khang phyogs kyi skar khung can/ legs par brcigs te rnal 'byor ni/ rlung gi phyogs dag gang yin par/ rna bar shes pa rnam par gtad.

[55] sa yi sgra ni lci mnyam ste/ sgo ni rim pa mang byas la/ rgyun du lag pa'i 'du byed sgom.

[56] rna ba gyas pas las rlung ston/ gyon pas sgra nyams ye shes nyid.

Regulating the winds through the oscillating movement of the exhalation and inhalation—literally "propelling away (*'phen*) and gathering-in (*sdud*)" of the winds—is usually seen as a means to increase control over our bodies. In fact, David Germano noted they are intended to make "energy accessible to conscious control, as well as impelling it to optimal levels of functioning (Germano 1992, 759). However, I am not certain that these breathing techniques are really a means to reach an optimum function. On the contrary, the breath's primary function in Great Perfection preliminaries is that of activating the latently dormant memories. In this sense, these techniques are not intended for optimization, but rather for destabilization: research from the cognitive sciences seems to corroborate this view that even techniques that focalize on rhythmic breathing are able to prompt heart rate oscillations known as respiratory sinus arrhythmia (Yasuma and Hayano 2004; Russo, Santarelli, and O'Rourke 2017).

Evidence for this understanding of breathing also comes from the tradition itself. Many passages in Dzogchen scriptures speak of a type of activation of the winds. In the *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, for example, we find the exhortation to "draw the winds upwards" (*gyen la drang*) (GTG, 96.4), to "draw in" (*dgug*) them (GTG, 112.3), or that they are "spurring" (*bskul*) (GTG, 112.2, 167.6), or oscillating by "propelling-away and gathering-in" (*'phen sdud*) (GTG, 112.4). Similarly, in *The Blazing Lamp Tantra*, it is made clear that it is the hyper-active rhythm of the wind—described with adjectives like "moving, shaking, wavering, lightened, and agitated" (GMG, 295,2)[57]—which allows practitioners to remember:

> When temporarily it is itself bound by wind, cognition is without memory (*dran med*) and lazy. […] When the dynamic strength of insight (*shes rab*) is activated through the winds, even things that have not previously been heard will be remembered by the mind (*dran*) and shine forth. This capacity of having clarity or unclarity emerges because of the movements of winds, which abide (*gnas*) in the channels in the center of the body. (GMG, 295,2-3)[58]

[57] 'gyu dang 'gul dang 'phrig pa dang/ yang zhing bskyod pa'i bdag nyid du.

[58] skabs su rlung gyis rang gzung bas/ shes pa dran med rmugs par yang/ […] rlung gyis shes rab rtsal brgyed tshe/ sngon ma thos pa'i chos rnams kyang/ yid la dran zhing gsal bar 'char/ gsal dang mi gsal rtsal rnams ni/ rlung gyi g.yo 'gul nyid las 'byung/ lus dkyil rtsa nang gnas pa'o.

In a section of Longchenpa's *Treasury of Words and Meaning*, he speaks of the need to "revitalize" (*gseng*) and "coil up" (*'dril ba*) in order to stimulate the flowing of the winds.

The Preliminaries of the Mind: Mnemic Engagement Through Imaginative Realities

If the previous section evinced that the preliminary of speech naturally grows out of the practices surrounding the body—with the physical aspect of the channels, the wind, and the ears being directly linked to our capacity to express sounds—speech is furthermore connected to the mind. In fact, the scriptures claim that the mind abides "in between the heart and lungs" before "moving through the channel and emerging into the pathway of the life-channel (*srog pa rtsa*)" (RRS, 528,4).[59] In another text, *The Mirror of the Heart of Vajrasattva*, the pathway between the heart and the lungs is named the "red life-channel" (*srog rtsa dmar po*) (DJS, 335.6). Here, the channel is said to "move upward" (*yar rgyu*) and that various affective states—such as the five poisons (*dug lnga*), anger (*khong khro*) and emotional afflictions (*nyon mongs*)—use it to "mount the horse of the breath to flow out through the mouth and nose" (DJS, 335.6).[60]

Yet other passages detail practices that are intended to stimulate and impel the channel: "By turning the eyes up towards the sky and by applying pressure to this channel, the sky will be filled with luminous appearances of wisdom" (DJS, 334.1).[61] Germano rightly reminded his readers of the close connection between hatred and wind energy, by pointing to the "colloquial expression for 'anger,' which literally reads 'your winds raise up' (*rlung langs*)" (Germano 1992, 500).

Later commentators, such as Longchenpa, explain repeatedly that the practitioner should start his practice by "pressing" (*gtems*, *gcun*, *mnan*) on the vitality-channel if he is struggling to make the visions arise naturally (TDD, 284.7, TCD1 407.6). Since it is likely that this technique involved the actual pressing of the aorta (Germano 1992, 711–12), this literal intent to "knock one's lights out" might be the most radical expression of my interpretation of the introductory practices of Direct

[59] snying dang glo ba'i bar na yang/ brtsegs ma gsum du gnas pa'o/ de ni rtsa nas 'gyu ba'o/ de ni rtsa nas 'gyu ba'o/ srog pa rtsa nas lam phyung ngo.

[60] dbugs kyi rta la zhon nas rgyu'o/ de yang kha dang sna nas rgyu'o.

[61] de las mig nam mkha' la bzlog ste rtsa gcun nas bltas na ye shes kyi 'od snang gyis nam mkha' gang bar 'gyur ro.

Transcendence as techniques that are partially intended to expose the practitioner to extreme experiences. In *The Tantra of the Self-Emergent Teaching*, the preliminaries of the mind are introduced as follows: "Act out various discursive thoughts: likes, dislikes, happiness, sorrow, permanence, impermanence, views, meditation, and conduct, dharma, non-dharma, virtue, non-virtue, desire, hatred, delusion, and so forth" (TDD, 373.2).[62] Like with its physical and vocal counterparts, the preliminary of the mind plays with the malleability of the human being and our states of consciousness.

Overall, it appears clear that by experiencing the good, the bad, and the ugly of their existence, Dzogchen practitioners are encouraged to break out of their ordinary behavior to embrace every energy contained within their bodies. This recovery of all of one's memories—even the terrifying ones—is explicitly invoked in the other core text discussing the preliminary of "differentiation," namely *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*. Here, we read that "the conduct of the mind" (*sems spyod*), which involves "the pointing out of the nature of the thoughts and memories surrounding the past, present, and future" (GTG, 93.2).[63] The meditator is instructed to "practice mindful attentiveness" (*bsam pa'i dran pa*) of anything (*ji ltar*) that emerges, particularly emotions, such as happiness and sorrow (*dga' dang mi dga'*), and so forth (GTG, 93.3). The preliminaries, by stimulating his senses, activating his breathing, and inspiring his imagination, allow our yogi to break out of the bondage of previous habituation and experience.

[62] sems kyi spyod pa brtsam par bya/ dga' dang mi dga' bde dang sdug/ rtag dang mi rtag la sogs pa/ lta sgom spyod pa'i bsam pa dang/ chos dang chos min la sogs dang/ 'dod chags zhe sdang gti mug dang/ dge dang mi dge la sogs pa'i / bsam dpyod rnam pa sna tshogs bya.

[63] 'das dang ma 'ongs da ltar gyi/ dran bsam […] ngo bo bstan.

Chapter 6: "Be Still Like an Elephant": The Six Key Points (*gnad drug*) as Practices of Embodiment

The Base of the Mountain: Navigating the Risks of Paralysis and Re-Traumatization

If we look at our yogi sitting steadily on the side of the White Skull Snow Mountain until the visionary manifestations effortlessly reveal themselves to him against the background of the deep blue sky, it is hard to imagine that he prepared himself for this undertaking in the ways I described in chapter five. Indeed, I assume that you are as struck as I was when I first realized the radical discrepancy: On the one hand, we enter this serene contemplative scene of a peaceful yogi sitting on a snow-capped mountain, effortlessly gazing at a symbolically rich display of luminosities that rises gradually against the backdrop of the cloudless Tibetan sky. On the other hand, we feel ourselves overstimulated as we take stock of the hyperactive, overwhelming, and arousing nature of the complex matrix of preliminary practices that our yogi is said to perform in the days and weeks leading up to Direct Transcendence practice.

So far, we learned not only that the Dzogchen body is imbued with energies that are buried deeply within our yogi, but also that these energies are so implicit and automatic that they can reveal themselves through exceedingly one-dimensional techniques of sensory stimulation. This brings us to a theme that is central to this chapter, namely the risk that comes with the stimulation of our bodily resources. In fact, precisely because the energies are so present yet at the same time lying latently in the depths of our flesh, they can manifest in unpredictable ways. Moreover, considering that the preliminaries consist of practices that can be quite radical at times, it is clear that the yogi needs to be careful about not losing control when immersing himself into his physical experiences.

This is even more true if the energies are somehow entangled with painful memories from our past experiences. Traumatic energies, when stored in our bodies, tend to intrude into the present experience if they are touched upon even slightly. Such intrusions can present across the full spectrum of sensory experience. Consider, for example, the so-called Schneiderian symptoms during which patients have the feeling of re-experiencing their trauma. They can "have the sensation of a hand around their neck [or of] seeing the perpetrator's face superimposed on the therapist's face, and seeing specific images of traumatic experiences." Playfully etymological, we could say that because the experiences of the *captive* are embodied within the *receptacle* of flesh, humans remain *susceptible* to being *re-captured* by them.

At the same time, trauma causes individuals and collectives to lay the foundation for an ambiguous relationship to memory: If one part experiences energies too personally, too viscerally, and too intensely, the other part seems almost detached from the memory (Heim and Bühler 2003). In other words, energy is both unnatural and too natural at the same time. In one of the early Great Perfection scriptures, *The Jewel Studded Tantra*, we find a passage, in which human beings are depicted as suffering from a type of sensory paralysis as a result of their existential suffering. At first, the passage opens by noting a tragic situation of confusion:

> From the very beginning, the self (*bdag*) as well as the objects of attachment (*'dzin pa'i zhen yul*) are reality, which is entirely self-appearing (*rang snang*) through itself (*rang*). Although it is primordially manifest (*ye nas snang ba*), this has previously not been understood. The five passions, which bind (*bcings*) you to you to your concept of "self" (*bdag*), although they are primordially self-arising awareness, abiding together, this has not been recognized (*zhal ma 'tsho*). (RCP, 79.3)[64]

We see here the presence of a series of trauma-laden concepts, which I explored in the first part: The self (*bdag*) is said to be involved in processes of mutual "apprehending" (*'dzin*) with its environment, unable to recognize who it "naturally" is (*rang snang*). It is furthermore "bound" (*bcings*) by the five negative mental states—desire/attachment, wrath/aversion, pride, jealousy, and delusion. These emotions, finally, are said to be the result of a disorganized attachment bond as the "face" (*zhal*) is said to be non-nurturing (*ma 'tsho*).

The text then continues to address several other confusions, which are all due to the "blocking of the gateways to the various faculties" (*dbang po rnams kyi sgo 'gags*) (RCP, 81.1). The "eyes" (*mig*), for example, are said to be dull (*rtul*) because they don't see (*ma mthong*) that "the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind are primordially the body of our self (*rang gi lus*)" (RCP, 79.4).[65] Similarly, the tantra wonders whether their "auditory faculty" (*rna ba'i dbang po*) might be missing because humans don't

[64] bdag* dang 'dzin pa'i zhen yul ni/ dang po nyid nas chos nyid la/ 'di kun rang gis rang snang bar/ 'di kun rang gis rang snang bar/ ye nas snang ba sngar ma rig/ bdag rtogs bcings pa'i nyon mongs lnga/ ye nas rig pa rang shar bar/ lhan cig gnas pa zhal ma 'tsho
*I changed chags to bdag based on TDD.

[65] sa chu me rlung 'byun ba bzhi/ ye nas rang gi lus yin par/ sus ma mthong ba mig re rtul.

hear (*ma thos*) that the teachings are "self-resonating without interruption" (RCP, 79.4-5)[66] or whether their "noses are blocked" (*sna 'gags*) because humans appear to be incapable of smelling the "scent of the self-abiding expanse and wisdom" (RCP, 79.5-6).[67]

In this chapter, we will take a closer look at what our yogi does while he sits on the mountain. The main instructions on the practice of Direct Transcendence, consisting of "six key points" (*gnad drug*), describe techniques that are exceedingly simple and marked by their radically different manifestation from the preliminaries. Indeed, they are characterized by a ubiquitous emphasis on stability and immobility.

It is here that the growth of Direct Transcendence meditation can be inserted into its overall historical context. Despite the many political upheavals during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the years in question were crucial for the maturation of a stable Tibetan identity. As the link to India gradually grew weaker and the "textual rush" ended around 1200, the Mongol leaders looked to Tibet for the most powerful religious techniques of subjugation and protection, such that Tibet became the most influential religious-spiritual power in the region. More self-confident and assertive, the Tibetans started to digest all of the wealth of information that they acquired over the past centuries of cultural importation and began to systematically create their own version of Buddhism; an endeavor that—given the geo-political contingencies during those centuries—was as much religious as it was political.

The Old Order promoted some of its most innovative practices during those years of relative isolation and Direct Transcendence can be seen as an early version of more recent practices of self-cultivation that are popular in Asian cultures. Like such phenomena as Indian wrestling (Alter 1993), Japanese martial art karate (Donohue 1993), Chinese taiji quan (Wile 1992), or Chinese qigong (Ots 1994; N. N. Chen 2007), Direct Transcendence is a practice that helps its practitioners not only deal with collective trauma, but also allows them to assert a type of body that resists social control and political oppression.

In the case of our yogi, there is no doubt that the meditative practices of the Great Perfection, particularly Direct Transcendence, supported the tradition in recovering from the original trauma to build a robust identity over the centuries.

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[66] yang gsang bsdus pa'i man ngag bcud/ bar mtshams med par rang grag pa / gang gis 'di nyid ma thos par/ rna ba'i dbang po med dam ci. *I corrected rags pa for grag pa based on TDD.

[67] rang gnas dbyings dang rig pa'i dri/ bral ba'i skabs med rang 'khor ba/ tshor m myong ba sna 'gags sam.

Bringing the yogi onto the ground, in this chapter, requires us not only to contextualize the sky-gazing practice within the longer trajectory of preparation for the practice, but it also challenges us to think about the relationship between the two: How can it be that a practice that is premised on stability and immobility can be preceded by so much frenzied activity?

The Six Key Points and the Pendulation between Arousal and Relaxation

Bessel van der Kolk once declared that "if the memory of trauma is encoded in the viscera, in heartbreaking and gut-wrenching emotions, in autoimmune disorders and skeletal/muscular problems, and if mind/brain/visceral communication is the royal road to emotion regulation, this demands a radical shift in our therapeutic assumptions" (Van der Kolk 2015, 86). Clinical psychology is quite clear on the fact that the first step in responding to this resistance towards feeling one's body is to secure an awareness of one's body (U. F. Lanius, Paulsen, and Corrigan 2014; Schwartz and Maiberger 2018). "Body awareness," so Van der Kolk phrased it so poetically, "puts us in touch with our inner world, the landscape of our organism" (Van der Kolk 2015, 208). He continues:

> Simply noticing our annoyance, nervousness, or anxiety immediately helps us shift our perspective and opens up new options other than our automatic, habitual reactions. Mindfulness puts us in touch with the transitory nature of our feelings and perceptions. When we pay focused attention to our bodily sensations, we can recognize the ebb and flow of our emotions and, with that, increase our control over them. (Van der Kolk 2015, 208)

Other psychologists, such as Pat Ogden and Peter Levine have drawn on this insight into the centrality of the body for healing trauma to inaugurate powerful therapies, which they call sensorimotor psychotherapy and somatic experiencing (Levine 1997; Ogden 2015).

These techniques attempt to strike a balance between two tendencies which are to be avoided in their extremes: On the one hand, the contemplation stimulates the practitioner's body because this is the only way to overcome the sensory paralysis. On the one hand, the meditation encourages the practitioner to delve into traumatic memories to the point that they lose sight of their lives and lose their regulatory skills

needed to confront the present circumstances. In short, while sensory stimulation is necessary, it needs to be prudently monitored and constantly adjusted in order to avoid a re-traumatization. As Van der Hart and his colleagues noted, "Careful pacing of therapy and regulation of the patient's hyper- and hypoarousal is crucial to success" (Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele 2006, 321).

The so-called "six key points," which are usually performed directly after the preliminaries, are intended to allow the practitioner to engage with his imprisoned qualities while simultaneously remaining present in his current life contingencies of freedom and movement. By regulating various aspects of the practitioner's behavior, such as his body posture, his breathing pattern, and his gaze, they essentially balance out the stimulating nature of the preliminaries to create balanced conditions of an exposure without re-traumatization. Collectively, these practices balance arousal with calm, exposure with inhibition, intrusion with protection, and so forth.

The Three Key Points and Sensory Deprivation

The "three key points" (*gnad gsum*) follow the standard division of body, speech, and mind, which we already encountered in our study of the preliminaries. *The Tantra of the Self-Emergent Teaching* explains: "Having completed the preliminary practices in this way, in order to actually see genuine truth, the body, speech, and mind must be thoroughly controlled (*rab tu bcun*) (TDD, 373.5)"[68]

As for the first element, the key point of the body (*lus kyi gnad*) consists not only of applying three distinct physical postures—namely that of a "lion" (*seng ge*), an "elephant" (*glang chen*), and a "sage" (Tib. *drang srong*, Skt. *ṛṣi*)—but also emphasizes a lack of movement. Longchenpa, in his *Treasury of Words and Meaning*, for example, elaborates that the "body remains still without taking part in physical activities," that "the body's limbs remain still without movements to and fro," and that "one remains still without exertion as one brings actions down to the ground" (TDD, 406.2-3).[69] Jean-Luc Achard, in his discussion of the key points in the Bön Tradition, noted that "using these postures is decisive insofar as Wisdom abides within the body. Thus, if the body

[68] de ltar sngon 'gro byas nas/ mngon sum don la blta ba'i phyir/ lus ngag yid ni rab tu gcun.

[69] dang po gsum ni lus kyi bya ba la mi gnas par sdod pas 'khor ba'i 'khrul pa 'phel mi srid/ yan lag gi 'phen sdud sdod pas 'khrul pa'i 'khor lo rgyun chad/ by aba gzhis la phab ste rtsol med du sdod pas bsags pa las kyi rnam smin dang bral ba'o.

is not controlled through the use of these postures, then the natural radiance of Awareness will not be seen during Contemplation" (Achard 2016, 17–18).

The key point of speech (*ngag gi gnad*) is essentially a quieting down into increasing silence and calm. In *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, for example, it is explained that: "As for speech, it must be trained (*bslab*), remain abiding (*gnas*), determined (*la bzla*) and stabilized (*brten par bya*) (GTG, 91.1)."[70] In another tantra, we similarly read that "speech—like a mute—should be cut off in such a way that […] one is not speaking to anyone even with mere symbols, naturally (*rang*) cutting off one's mind's projections (*'phro*) and contractions (*'du*)" (TDD, 375.6).[71] Furthermore, Longchenpa offers his readers a threefold definition of how the "speech is kept unwavering" (*ngag gi mi 'gul ba*): one has to "not speak with others" (*gzhan dang ngag ma 'dres pa*), "cut off the forth and back of words" (*tshig gi 'gro ldog bcad pa*) and "stop expressing all of one's own verbalizations" (*rang gi brjod pa thams cad brjod du med pa*) (TDD, 406.1-2).

Finally, the third key point of the mind (*sems kyi gnad*) consists in the concentration on the sky, both through the conceptual faculty of the mind and the perceptional faculty of the eyes. This third key point perfectly summarizes the overall orientation of these techniques as commentators overwhelmingly concur that the key points are geared at enabling the practitioner to "keep concentration and to develop visions" (Gyaltsen 1993, 87), as "the visions are as stable as your contemplation" (Gyaltsen 1993, 96). The mind, so it seems is trained to be one-pointed in order to allow for the arising of the visionary manifestations.

The practitioner is instructed to "renounce cyclic existence," "to abandon all links to cyclic existence," and "to remain alone devoid of companions in an isolated spot or charnel ground" (GTG, 131.4).[72] Thus, while restrictions of sensory stimulation are part of the basic instructions to Direct Transcendence, this short overview makes it abundantly clear that this tendency is particularly central to the key points. In fact, if the preliminary practices consisted largely of techniques that stimulate the senses, the key points present us with a different type of mechanism. In fact, rather than

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[70] ngag ni bslab dang gnas pa dang/ la bzla brten par bya ba'o.

[71] skal ba dag ni mnyam pa yin/ ngag ni ji ltar lkugs pa bzhin/ su dang brda tsam nyid mi bya/ 'di ltar su yis byas pa'i mi/ sems kyi 'phro 'du rang chod do.

[72] sgron ma ltems pa 'di lta ste/ dad ldan 'khor ba'i yid bral bas/ bla ma mchod dang gtor ma bya/ 'khor ba'i 'brel pa kun spangs la/ dben pa'i phyogs sam dur khrod du/ grogs spangs gcig pur gnas par bya.

sensory stimulation, the key points aim at the restriction of sensory input. Consider, for example, this description of the key point of speech, in which Longchenpa points to how these techniques relate to, yet dramatically differ from the preliminaries studied above. He writes:

> Before this, in training with speech, in an unfamiliar place, you incessantly utter whatever comes to your memory (*dran*) from the past or the future like the words of a lunatic. When you become exhausted with such verbiage and your need to speak subsides, abide in a state of not-speaking. Occasionlly, even though you don't have a desire to speak, go to an isolated valley, and shout aloud until exhausted and train in the speechless state. Then, avoiding any talk with others except for reciting spiritual discourses, mantras, and prayers, remain silent and stable (*brtan par bya*). Then, having stopped all of these activities, determine not to say anything at all. (TDD, 406.2-3).[73]

In his *Treasury of Words and Meaning*, the great Tibetan master also specifies that the practice has to be "done in accordance with the key points of the triad of the eyes not wavering (*mig mi 'gul*), the mind not distracted (*sems ma yengs*), and the winds thoroughly quiet (*rlung rab tu dal ba*) (TDD, 283.2)"[74] This section is followed by a curious quote from a tantra entitled *The Blazing Lamp Tantra*, where we read: "At night in your own home, gaze continuously as though it were daytime" (TDD, 283.4).[75] The reference to the day (*nyin mo*) and the night (*mtshan dus*) appears to be a consistent association that links the key points to the unfolding of visions. Jean-Luc Achard, one of the foremost experts on the visionary contemplations of the Great Perfection, notes that the practitioner is generally instructed to "practice in very many sessions of short

[73] 'di dag gi sngon du ngag bslab pa rgyus med pa'i sar smyon pa'i tshig ltar ci dran snga phyi thams cad bslangs nas brjod pas dub ste ci yang zer snying mi 'dod pa ni smra ba'i ngang la ngag gnas par bya zhing skabs su smra snying mi 'dod kyang lung stong la sogs pa mi med par dub pa tsam brjod nas mi smra ba'i ngang la bslab bo/ de nas gzhan dang gleng ba spangs te mdo kha ton sngags bzlas pa tsam las mi bya ba ni brtan par bya ba'o/ de nas de dag kyang bkag nas ci yang mi smra bar la bzla ba ni.

[74] mig mi 'gul sems ma yengs rlung rab tu dal ba gsum gnad du bstun pa ste.

[75] mtshan dus rang gi gnas khang du/ nyin mo bzhin du rtag tu blta.
* I was unable to find this reference in the original tantra and cite from Longchenpa's TDD.

duration to afterwards, once perfectly familiarized with the technique, practice without interruption day and night" (Achard 1999, 140).

The reference to the night further reminds us that the Great Perfection practitioner—who awaits in a state of complete concentration and calm for the emergence of visions that naturally and spontaneously populate his field of visions—not only practices during the day by gazing into the open sky, the rays of the sun, a lamp, a reflective pool, or a crystal, but also in a completely dark chamber. I am speaking here, of course, of a particular style of practicing Direct Transcendence meditation, namely the so-called "dark retreat" (*mun mtshams*) practice.[76] In this meditation, which is sometimes also known as the "nighttime practice" (Lobel 2018, 221), the yogi spends time in complete isolation and darkness within a hut that hinders light penetrating from the outside. The standard time of such dark retreats is forty-nine days, but it has been claimed that Dzogchen masters have spent several years in dark retreat (Wangyal 2000, 166).

In the dark retreat, the main practice of Direct Transcendence displays its striking difference to the preliminary practices. There is hardly a stronger contrast to the preliminaries' emphasis on the creation of an environment that stimulates the senses—consider, for example, the yoga of the four elements' sounds, where one is walking through nature hitting on objects in order to hear their sounds—than the sitting in complete darkness for hours, days, or weeks on end.

The efficacy of the key points is largely premised on what cognitive researchers call "sensory deprivation" (Suedfeld 1980). This tendency is prevalent in the Direct Transcendence practice more generally as both the dark retreats (undertaken in closed rooms) and the sun-gazing practice (taking place on the top of mountains) significantly restrict environmental stimulation. "Sensory deprivation," as Jared Lindahl and his team remind us, "includes exposure to environments that present the subject with minimal sensory input. Through darkness, silence, isolation, and bodily stillness, respectively, the subject's visual, auditory, social, and kinesthetic experience is reduced as much as possible" (Lindahl et al. 2014, 7).

Indeed, it is no coincidence that the Western researchers, who have extensively studied how sensory deprivation contributes to neuroplasticity (Boroojerdi et al. 2000;

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[76] While there are references to the dark retreat practice in both the TDZ and the TCZ, Longchenpa's most elaborate explanations on the dark retreat practice are found in two Nyingthig texts dedicated to this practice (the *nyin mtshan 'od gyi 'khor lo* and *rgya mtsho ar gtad kyi mun khrid 'od gsal 'khor lo*) as well as in his commentary on the *Guhyagarbhatantra,* entitled *Dispelling all Darkness Throughout the Ten Directions* (*phyogs byu'i mun sel*).

Fierro et al. 2005; Pitskel et al. 2007; Maffei and Turrigiano 2008, 3), as well as visual manifestations (Zubek et al. 1961; Merabet et al. 2004; Mason and Brady 2009), did so not only in subjects with Charles Bonnet syndrome (Schultz and Melzack 1991; Burke 2002; Reichert, Seriès, and Storkey 2013), but also by putting them in contexts that closely resemble those in the Tibetan tradition. In experimental research settings, subjects are exposed either to specifically designed chambers (Zubek, Hughes, and Shephard 1971), to flotation tanks (Lilly 1977; Kjellgren, Lyden, and Norlander 2008), or to ganzfeld imagery, which creates an unstructured and homogenized visual field (Avant 1965; Jiri Wackermann et al. 2002). Interestingly, specifically the ganzfeld experiments rely oftentimes on the typically Dzogchen topos of the uniform sky as the ideal backdrop for sensory deprivation (Jirí Wackermann, Pütz, and Allefeld 2008).

The Three Unwavering States and the Centered Body

If the first three key points already point to the restriction of sensory input, the second set, which is known as the "three unwavering states" (*mi 'gul gsum*) only strengthen this impression. If the term "unwavering" (*mi gul ba, mi g.yo ba*), obviously stands for a type of stability, the three states are intimately associated with the body of the meditation practitioner. In short, we could speak of the three unwavering states as techniques that focus on the centering of the practitioner's body.

The key point of the gates (*sgo'i gnad*), for example, consists in adopting three distinct gazes with one's eyes, looking upwards, downwards and sideways, while leaving the pupils immobile and steady. The key point of the object (*yul gyi gnad*), quite similar, consists on centering one's perceptual focus on the lamp of pure space in the field of the pure cloudless sky. Finally, the key point of the wind (*rlung gyi gnad*) consists of breathing slowly and naturally through the mouth, letting the breath and vital energies be natural, without altering them in any way.

The three unwavering states confirm that the Great Perfection is a tradition that engages the somatic dimension of the human being, paying specific attention to what happens inside of the body. Clinical psychologists prescribing treatments for healing stress and anxiety have established that one of the best means to get into one's body is by breathing calmly, remaining calm, and relaxing one's body (Van der Kolk 2015, 209). In the Great Perfection, this tendency is especially prevalent in the key point of the wind. If the preliminaries aimed at the exposure to the trauma through the activation of the winds, the main practice of Direct Transcendence is primarily concerned with the calming of the breath. In *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, the close

association between the three unwavering states and the wind is described as follows: "With the ground (*gzhi*) of the triad of unwavering states, you arrive at the key point of the wind-mind (*rlung sems*)."[77]

To follow the functioning of the breath in Direct Transcendence, we need to remember the standard tantric subtle body theory. The tantric subtle body usually consists of three basic elements: channels (*rtsa*), winds (*rlung*), and seminal nuclei (*thig le*). These three elements of our subtle body are profoundly interconnected and only make sense in correlation to one another. The channels serve as pathways through which the winds move through our body, primarily transporting the seminal nuclei, which can be seen as the intelligent kernels of our enlightened energy. Relationally speaking, the channels are defined as the "sanctuaries" (*gnas pa rtsa*) of the spatially arrayed seminal nuclei (*bkod pa thig le*) and the dynamically moving winds (*g.yo ba rlung*) (Germano 1992, 508).

While both the channels and the seminal nuclei are usually identified as stationary and "non-moving," the wind currents transporting the energies, such as the seminal nuclei, are said to be moving. In the study of the preliminary practices, I have explained that the wind is repeatedly specified as impelling and explained this with the need to provoke an exposure to latent memories. In the key points, by contrast, the movement of the breath is supposed to be interrupted. In *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, for example, it says that: "By settling (*dal bya*) the winds as much as possible and by sending them out thoroughly (*rab tu 'phags pa*), the connection between body and mind is severed without returning to the three realms" (GTG, 61.1-2).[78] In Longchenpa's *Treasury of Words and Meaning*, he elaborates further on how to control one's winds. In detail, he argues that the breath has to "remain still in three ways": "they don't go externally," "they don't fill up internally," and "they don't go and come externally or internally" (TDD, 407.1-2).[79]

Just as the stories of hyperventilation and increased breathing rhythm, which we encountered in the mythic narratives of the early Great Perfection, pointed to psychological distress, the calming down of the winds can be regarded as a sign of

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[77] de la mtha' yid ches bya/ mi 'gul gsum la gzhi bcas pas/ rlung sems gnad la phebs pa'o.

[78] rlung ni ci nas dal bya ste/ rab tu 'phags pa las byung ba/ lus dang sems kyi 'brel chad do/ khams gsum du yang ldog pa min.

[79] rlung gi sdod pa gsum ni rlung phyir mi 'gro bar sdod pas snang rkyen tha dad pas sdod sa med/ rlung nang du mi 'gengs parpar sdod pas rnam rtog tha dad pa'i rten med/ rlung phyi nang du 'gro 'ong med par sdod pas 'khor'dos gnyis su 'dzin pa'i gzhi stongs pa'i.

health. In fact, in Tibetan medicine, if "mobile" or "high" (*rlung mtho po*) wind, which is marked by fluctuation, tends to suffer from "emotional distress" (Yoeli-Tlalim 2010, 321), or "delirium, hallucination, and hysteria" (D. Dorjee 2014, 151), "a healthy, functioning mind is said to depend on the undisturbed flow of the various wind currents" (Deane 2019, 716).

The Body as Sanctuary and Home of Freeing Energy

The key points, however, are more than just a trauma healing technique. They are, ultimately, part of the larger Great Perfection project of embodiment. In the passage from *The Mirror of the Heart of Vajrasattva* cited above, it is specified that the buddha-nature is supported (*rten*) by the "aggregate of form" (Tib. *gzugs kyi phung po*, P. *rūpa-khandha*). Most obviously, "form" is material form, such as the external matter of the four primary or underived (*no-upādā*) elements—fire, water, earth, and air—as well as the physical form of the human body. However, in a Buddhist context, form is more than mere materiality as it also includes sensibility. Abhidhamma literature explicitly speaks of secondary or derived (*upādā*) matter, which includes the human senses like the eyes, the ear, the nose, and the tongue (Hamilton 1996, 6). In other words, form ultimately is the combination of materiality, on the one hand, and sensibility to that materiality—allowing us to see, hear, smell, taste, or touch—on the other.

In the Great Perfection, just as in Buddhism more generally, the human body is not primarily relevant for its materiality, but rather for how it functions (Lusthaus 2002, 183). In the words of Christian Coseru, we could say that it is a form of "phenomenological naturalism" (Coseru 2012, 3–4). Of course, the crucial role of our sensory faculties in human embodiment has also been a core theme in certain strands of Western philosophy, which can be productively compared to Buddhist speculations on experience. While this aspect is particularly central to the work of Merleau-Ponty and his followers (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Gendlin 1962; Colombetti 2014), there is no doubt that already the early phenomenologists laid the groundwork for what we could call a personified understanding of human experience. Edmund Husserl and Jean-Paul Sartre both promoted the centrality of self-consciousness and intentionally, claiming that "we have an implicit, non-objectifying, pre-reflective awareness of our own experience as we live it through" (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, 17, 52). Just as *gzugs*/*rūpa* is not just materiality but also sensation, the human body is not just a physical *Körper*, but rather the first-person lived body experience grounded in a *Leib* (Wehrle 2019).

This type of thinking has also found its way into cognitive science research, where Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi's *The Phenomenological Mind* (2008) has left a lasting mark on future research in the field (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008). Around the same time, Mark Johnson's *The Meaning of the Body* (2007) also argued for an enactivist approach to cognition, which has since become the foundational orientation in the contemporary study of human mentation (M. Johnson 2007).

The starting point of enaction, precisely because it is premised on the relationship that we establish with the world that surrounds us, is our own body and our own position in the world. The six key points can be seen as an expression of the Dzogchen tradition's concern for situatedness. Holding one's body and gaze intentionally in a very precise and stable way, enables the practitioners to strengthen their vantage point, to reinforce their position, to increase their stature and status. Not only that, Dzogchen texts emphasize that it is precisely because of this structuring contextualization that the meditator gains the ability to see reality, to encounter others, and to respond to whatever arises in the surrounding world. Regulating our selves, in other words, allows us to attentively wait for something else to emerge.

In the Great Perfection, bodily practices like the key points play a leading role in establishing a link between our self and our environment. In fact, if the body postures, gazes, and breathing patterns are generally marked by stability—particularly if compared to the hyperactive preliminaries—the key points are nonetheless intent on getting control over one's movements. The seminal nuclei, for example, are repeatedly particularized as "moving" (*rgyu*) and "non-moving" (*mi rgyu*): When they are latent and hidden within the prison of the human body, they are described as "non-moving," and only become "moving" as they start flowing through the channels of light to then shine forth through the eyes and into the external environment in the form of luminous visions (GTG, 126,6). More specifically, the movement of the nuclei and the visions seems to be dependent on our bodies, explicitly the winds: "The linked chain's movement and pulsating, coming and going, increasing and decreasing, as well as their potential to appear (*snang*) externally is due to the circumstance of the five winds" (378.4).[80]

The "linked chains of lambs" (*lu gu rgyud*), which is said to form gradually out of multiple seminal nuclei being strung together, are particularly useful for thinking

[80] 'gul ba dang 'phrig pa dang 'gro 'ong dang 'phel 'grib dang phyi'i yul la snang nus pa'i cha rnams ni rkyen rlung lnga'i byed pa ste.

about the spatio-temporal movement that is involved in enaction. By freeing dormant memories from the confinement of their bodies through sensorimotor engagement, Dzogchen practitioners move spatially from the inside of their bodies into the exteriority of visual projections.

Guenther acutely scrutinized that the Great Perfection's liberating awareness "is simultaneously 'out there' and 'in here'" (Guenther 1994, 39–40). The increasingly fluid conception of our bodily limits becomes palpable in the third vision, known as "the vision of the awareness' optimization," which literally means "to arrive at the full measure of" or to "arrive at the limit of." At this moment, the strings of lights start to coalesce and take on the form of a *maṇḍala* of 100 peaceful and wrathful deities. Ultimately, the entire visionary field metamorphoses into a buddhafield (*zhing khams)* and the seminal nuclei become "inestimable mansions" (*gzhal yas khang*), and the linked lambs take on the form of buddha-bodies.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the preponderance of the Great Perfection's contemplative system was predicated on the idea that both the pain of straying and the liberating qualities through which the Primordial Buddha reached enlightenment are disclosed within and through our own bodies. The body is not only a *receptacle* that can hold us *captive* in our own worlds of suffering, but it is also *capacious*, and, thus, capable of holding all the dimensions of our human existence. It is in this sense that the body is a source of two distinct modes of existence, which are epitomized in the profoundest of all pains of imprisonment and the most liberating of all experiences of enlightenment. Gradually, however, as the practitioner fully embodies his flesh, the Dzogchen body becomes a "sanctuary:" Less and less a shelter for the traumatized, a safe harbor in which one can store painful memories and a repressed primordial selfhood, it becomes the principle locus of what is the tradition's most sacred asset, awareness (*ye shes*) itself. In a beautiful passage from *The Mirror of the Heart of Vajrasattva*, we read:

> Ah ho! Listen up, you who have realized the vast expanse! The essence of the One Thus Gone abides within all sentient beings of this world, just like oil permeates a sesame seed. Furthermore, its support (*rten*) is based in the aggregate of form. As for its residence, in the center of the heart, is called "Samantabhadra's amulet of the wisdom intent" and resembles a closed amulet of red-gold enamel. Within that, in the center of five-colored light, are the peaceful spiritual bodies about the size of a

> mustard seed, abiding in home of light. That is the residence of awareness, which resembles a body in a vase. (DJS, 334.1)[81]

The reference to the amulet not only points to the picture of the body as a mighty container, but also to its sacredness. In fact, as Katarina Turpeinen reminds us, in the Dzogchen tradition, the belief in "the liberation through wearing amulets" is pervasive, as they are said to have a "blessing power," thus serving as "shrines of divine presence" (Turpeinen 2015, 90). The body offers the Dzogchen practitioner not only a sanctuary from trauma, a safe haven from socio-political and religious persecution, but it also allows him to denature his very flesh into a sacred place: It becomes the "container" (-*arium*) for the "saints" (*sancti*) that are the one-hundred peaceful and wrathful buddhas. In the Great Perfection, as the body becomes a sanctuary, as the lost children return home, the fears and phobias give way to the vitality and energy that was originally present within the youthful body in a vase before its dramatic explosion.

[81] a ho klong chen rnam nyon cig/ 'jig rten gyi khams kyi sems can thams cad de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po til 'bru la mar gyis khyab pa bzhin du gnas so/ de yang rten ni gzugs kyi phung po la brten no/ gnas ni snying gi dkyil na kun tu bzang po gwa'u kha sbyor gyi dgons pa zhes bya ste dper na bse'i gwa'u kha sbyar ba bzhin du gnas pa'i nang na ,od kha dog lnga'i dkyil na zhi ba'i sku yungs 'bru tsam 'od khyim gyi tshul du gnas so/ de ni rig pa'i gnas so/ dper na bum pa'i sku lta bu'o.

The View from the Peak: From Relaxation to Arousal

At least since the work of Paul Griffiths, a philosopher of religion and Buddhism, Western conceptions of meditation are not only dominated by the tropes of self-liberation and happiness, but also by a third key idea, namely relaxation. In fact, one of the first things that comes to people's minds when they think about meditation is stress-reduction and relaxation. Focusing his attention on the cessation of consciousness, Griffiths called it an "entstatic" meditative state "in which no mental events of any kind occur" (P. J. Griffiths 1986, 13). Of course, a dominant objective of meditation is a type of concentration that operates by "guarding the sense doors," so that one can limit sensory input and at restrict attention to a single object, such as a visual object or the breath (Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho 2001; Buddhaghosa 2003).

This favoring of the centering the mind rather than dispersing it, of cooling it down rather than agitating it, is a pervasive tendency in research on meditation since the early days of meditation-research. In his book *The Relaxation Response* (1975), Herbert Benson—founder of the Mind-Body Medical Institute, which is affiliated with Harvard University and several Boston hospitals—explored the many health benefits of meditation primarily by focusing on its ability to lower stress. Essentially, he maintained that meditation operates by activating the parasympathetic nervous system, which induces a state of profound relaxation (Benson 1975).

This trend is visible until today, not only in the emphasis on the stress-reducing qualities of meditation and the omnipresence of attention (Goleman 1977; Walsh and Shapiro 2006; Cahn and Polich 2006), but also in studies that continue to highlight the activation of the parasympathetic nervous system as a means to explain contemplative practices *in toto* (Gerritsen and Band 2018).

In order to be relevant, research on meditation has to find new ways to conceive of relaxation. It is exciting to see that research on meditation has recently started to pay more attention to arousal as an important component in contemplative practices. These scholars, to say it in the words of Willoughby B. Britton and her colleagues, appreciate that in some Buddhist traditions, "awakening is not a metaphor" (Britton et al. 2014), as it has arousing rather than relaxing effects. Another one of the leading figures in this "revolution" in meditation research has been Maria Kozhevnikov, whose work focuses primarily on tantric practices of the Tibetan tradition. In a series of recent papers, she and her colleagues emphasized that while some contemplative practices enhanced a parasympathetic activation indicative of Benson's relaxation response, Tibetan practices like "deity yoga" pointed to the opposite: In the tantric

context of Tibet, they find evidence that meditation might actually lead to sympathetic activation, which points not of relaxation but rather of arousal (Kozhevnikov et al. 2013; Amihai and Kozhevnikov 2014; 2015; Kozhevnikov 2019).

The third part of this dissertation took inspiration from the work of these researchers and attempted to offer a more nuanced perspective on the relationship between meditation and relaxation. Shifting our focus from the open sky that promises the ultimate relaxation as all the tensions of our physical existence dissolve together with our bodily components, onto the ground, where Direct Transcendence is performed within the human body, I showed that much of meditation is concerned with psycho-physical energies that cannot simply be relaxed. Instead, I used the chapters of this part of my study to suggested that our yogi has two dominant meditative tools at his disposal to deal with his body's many different energies.

In chapter five, I introduced a series of practices, which reveal that meditation might not be a relaxing endeavor. In the case of Direct Transcendence practice, in general, meditation is directly linked to the "ground's epiphany" (*gzhi snang*) as the "four visions" (*snang ba bzhi*) are said to emerge only after the "seal" (*rgya ma*) of awareness is "torn open" (*ral*). In other instances, Dzogchen meditation is even exhilarated by intense moments of stimulation and the setting free of energies buried within our bodies. This arousing effect of meditation becomes particularly apparent in the preliminary practices, where the practitioners are instructed to "revitalize" (*gseng*), "massage" (*mnye ba*), and "press" (*gtems*, *gcun*, *mnan*) various parts of their bodies—such as the aorta or the eyes—in order to stimulate the flowing of internal energies and visionary manifestations.

In chapter six, by contrast, I paid attention to more familiar, concentrative and relaxing, elements of meditation practice. These are particularly apparent in the main practice of Direct Transcendence as our yogi is instructed behave in steady and calm ways while he awaits the spontaneous emergence of visions against the blue sky: He is told to sit steadfastly in a series of prescribed poses; he is instructed to adopt special gazes that immobilize the movement of his eyes; he is taught to regulate his breathing to reduce the natural agitation of his body to an absolute minimum.

Collectively, these two investigations exhibit my judgment that meditation should not be regarded as a mental operation in which one tries to relax the mind, but rather as a set of techniques that rely on our bodies and the full spectrum of their vital energies. While relaxation is certainly a big part of meditation practice, it too exists only in relationship with its opposite. Not unlike the codependency between the self

and society or happiness and suffering, relaxation is not really a relevant concept if it weren't somehow counterbalanced by stress and agitation. While it is hard to image that arousal plays an important part in Direct Transcendence practice—particularly if we think about at the original picture of our yogi looking at our yogi not only in his relaxed pose on top of the mountain as he smilingly glances at the playful flickers of light—this part of my study revealed that the preparations leading the yogi to this point on the mountain are filled with agitation and arousal.

Again, the relationship between arousal and relaxation reveals a dialectical logic as the two seem to be codetermining each other. While calm, peace, and tranquility are, without a doubt, core attributes of our yogi's meditation session on the side of the Tibetan mountain, much of this relaxation-effect is actually achieved through arousing the nervous system in the first place. An exclusive focus on techniques of relaxation might prevent contemporary meditation researchers from seeing an important truth about our human bodies: Just as our bodies are home to many different energies and sensations, so we need many different types of meditative techniques to deal with them.

IV: The Systematization of Dzogchen Contemplative Practices (13th-14th centuries)

Chapter 7: Like Figures Emerging from the Ground: Participatory Meditation as a Form of Implicit Processing

The Base of the Mountain: The Life and Work of the Great Yogi Longchenpa

Although our yogi sits on top of a single mountain, standing out from the surrounding valleys, he lives in the heart of Tibet during what was a crucial period of his culture's history, namely the fourteenth century. After his predecessors enacted their meditative techniques on the margins of Tibetan society, isolated but less actively persecuted by the dominant religious and political movements, by Longchenpa's time, his tradition "maintained […] a considerable following outside the political centers, and enjoyed religious influences in a number of times and places" (McKay 2003a, 10). The Nyingma, as my colleague Georges Dreyfus remarked, evolved a "diffuse and popular character," in the form "of a tradition which has often been attacked but has managed to maintain itself by the strength of its grass-roots support and the sanctity of its main figures" (Dreyfus 2003, 511).

Our yogi was the saintliest of all of Dzogchen's main figures. Just like the Himalayan mountain upon which he performed his meditation practice, Longchenpa towered above all the other Great Perfection thinkers for centuries. As two foremost experts on his thinking put it, "the respectability of the Nyingmapa lineages was enhanced after the brilliant synthetic and philosophical work of the fourteenth-century scholar Longchen Rabjampa" (J. B. Gyatso 1998, 127), whose exposition has "received only few radical innovations and the majority of the leading figures of this tradition limit their work to rehearsing and simplifying Longchenpa's original writings" (Germano 1992, x).

Longchenpa, first and foremost, must be recognized as the figure who integrated the Great Perfection into a coherent whole, writing not only books about the tradition's place within the over Buddhist canon, but also extensive and systematic commentaries on the previously loosely associated tantras. If the early Dzogchen scriptures read like an assemblage of texts stemming from various authors, composed over multiple decades, the philosophical masterpieces written by Longchenpa strike the reader with their unprecedented coherence.

Consider, for instance, the mythical narratives of cosmogony. While I have already validated how the myth of the Buddha All Good and the allegories of the little children contained a narrative element that pointed towards the possibility of redemption, these stories were still rather abrupt and disjoined in nature. The true

narrativization of the Great Perfection only took place in the work of Longchenpa. This is already palpable in the narrative of cosmogony, which was previously only "brought up in pieces," before being integrated into a "synthetic presentation" by Longchenpa (Hatchell 2014, 98).

Longchenpa's biography reveals that he was not only the hero of the Great Perfection but also one of the central figures in the history of the Ancient School (Stewart 2013). He was born into an aristocratic family that enjoyed a prestigious religious heritage in the valley of Dra (*grwa*) in the eastern part of Central Tibet in 1308. His father, Tänpa Sung (*bstan pa srung*), was a non-monastic tantric yogi and part of a Nyingma family lineage called Rog, which traced its origins all the way back to one of Padmasambhava's twenty-five direct disciples and one of the original seven monks ordained by Śāntarakṣita (Tib. *zhi ba 'tsho*, 725-788). Longchenpa's lineage from his mother's side was related to Dromtönpa Gyelwa Chungne (*'brom ston rgyal ba 'byung gnas*, 1005–1064), who was the main disciple of Atiśa Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna (982—1054) and the founder of the Kadam school.

These impressive lineage affiliations were only buttressed by his early education. After displaying signs of extraordinary intellectual potential, he began his studies at age five under the tutelage of his father. After having lost both his parents, Longchenpa decided to become a monk at age twelve. In 1319, Longchenpa was ordained at Samye and his training at Tibet's oldest monastery was so central to his later existence, that he became known as "Samye's recipient of many scriptural transmissions" (Tib. *bsam yas lung mang ba*). Based on his studies at Samye, Longchenpa sought for the rest of his life to express and give voice to the Nyingma vision of Buddhist enlightenment, which was ultimately rooted in the Great Perfection teachings. My colleague Gidi Ifergan invoked both the findings of Guenther and van Schaik in order to contend that Longchenpa attempted to assert his direct descendance from Samye monastery by establishing liaison between Dzogchen and the teachings of Heshang Moheyan.

"According to Longchenpa's world view," so Gidi Ifergan writes, "Samye was not only a symbol but also an actual religious doctrinal reference point that was presented there by Ha-Shang, entailing the teaching known as *gcig car*, a view of immediate realization similar in nature to Dzogchen" (Ifergan 2014, 52). In other words, the fourteenth-century exegete—in an effort to reinforce the identity of his tradition—actively re-shaped the religious doctrines of the Great Perfection in order to associate them with the name of this Chinese teacher, who famously lost the semi-

mythical debate at Samye monastery in the last years of the eighth century (Ifergan 2014, 32–33).

Our yogi, so much is clear, was profoundly grounded in the Nyingma tradition. This becomes even more evident in the second half of his life, as Longchenpa would leave the monasteries behind and live a peripatetic life in the wilderness of the Tibetan plateau. Longchenpa's identity as a Nyingmapa is not only rooted in this lifestyle, as hermit meditators were particularly valued in the Ancient School, but also in his most extraordinary teacher, Kumarādza (*rig 'dzin ku ma ra dza*, alternative name: Shönnu Gyalpo, *gzhon nu rgyal po*, 1266-1343). This *Ngagpa* practitioner, a renowned yet equally mysterious figure, whose specialty was Dzogchen meditation practice, became Longchenpa's most stimulating muse for his thinking.

According to the famous Tibetan historical survey, the *Blue Annals*, Kumarādza taught the Great Perfection system "with the help of terminology peculiar to that system" (Gö Lotsawa Shyönnu Pal 1976). As Lobel stated, "Longchenpa's most formative training under Kumārādza may have viewed the Seminal Essence—and its spontaneous approach—as at least in part a sufficient soteriological method (Lobel 2018, 90). Kapstein, likewise, noted that "the inspiration derived from this teaching would motivate the entire course of Longchenpa's later career, and the volume of his literary work devoted to it is enormous" (Kapstein 2000, 165).

During his stay with Kumārādza, one of Longchenpa's fellow practitioners in the camp returned from travels with *The Seminal Essence of the Sky Dancer (mkha' 'gro snying thig*). Only a few years earlier, a young Treasure discoverer by the name of Pema Ledrelsel (*padma las 'brel rtsal*, 1291-1315) had discovered the text through a spontaneous visionary journey that guided him to the location where the teachings were hidden. Pema Ledrelsel believed himself to be the rebirth of the daughter of King Trisong Detsen, who received the Nyingthig treasure during the period of the Tibetan empire by the famed Padmasambhava. These newly discovered instructions would greatly inspire Longchenpa's writings and further buttresses his connection with the Seminal Essence approach to the Great Perfection.

After leaving Kumārādza, Longchenpa spent extended periods of time in isolated caves, frequently around Chimphu (*mchims phu*), a hermitage above the monastery of Samye founded during the reign of king Trisong Detsen in the eighth century. During one of these retreats, Longchenpa further reinforced his identification with the school of the Ancients, being himself authorized by the most respected masters of the tradition. This time, he himself experienced a vision of two founding

figures of his tradition, in the form of Padmasambhava and his consort Yeshe Tsogyal (*ye shes mtsho rgyal*). Empowering Longchenpa as a future teacher of Dzogchen, they conferred the name "Stainless Rat of Light," Drime Ozer (*dri med 'od zer*)—which he would henceforth adopt to redact his compositions—upon him.

The Seven Treasuries and Longchenpa's Philosophy of Freedom as Anti-Intellectual Practice

Our yogi, so we have now come to see, was not only a meditator but also an outstanding philosopher. Longchenpa's most famous writings are the so-called *Seven Treasuries* (*mdzod bdun*), which he started to compose after leaving the monastery and meeting Kumārādza. Scholarship has rightly indicated that by abandoning his scholastic education and embracing the teachings of Kumārādza—the tantric yogi who was also an artist known for his painting—Longchenpa lived in a way that was interwoven with his entire philosophical project. Hillis, for example, argued that

> this quasi-nomadic lifestyle is quite consonant with tropes and metaphors commonly found in Great Perfection literature valorizing space, the absence of boundaries, natural freedom, simplicity, spontaneity, and so forth. Hence, this training with his teacher Kumārādza may be understood as a period during which these images became vivid experiences connected to specific behaviors and lifestyles for Longchenpa (Hillis 2003, 122).

In many ways, Longchenpa continued here a long-standing trend within the Great Perfection, namely the interweaving of high cultural discourses, such as philosophy, and "lower" or ordinary cultural practices. In the early scriptures we find several examples of such a grounded philosophy as the texts locate esoteric tantric teachings with ordinary human activities. *The Pearl Necklace Tantra*, for instance, correlates "eating and drinking" (*bza' dang btung ba*) as well as "sleeping and sitting" (*nyal dang 'dug pa*) with two key stages of generation phase practice, namely the "approach" (*bsnyen pa*) and the "evocation" (*sgrub pa) (MTP*, 445.5). In Dzogchen, the "approach and evocation" (Tib. *bsnyen sgrub*; Skt. *sevāsādhana*)—usually consisting out of highly ritualistic practices like the recitation of the mantra of the *yidam* and the visualization according to the *sādhana*—are transformed into the most ordinary of our activities, such as eating and sitting.

In the same tantra, we find a passage that correlates ordinary human movement with highly regulated tantric activities: “The paths of wanderers are visualized as the great lines of visualization (*dmigs*), their footprints are the designs of colored powders (of the *maṇḍala*), the urge to move is the posture (of the deity), while the movements of the bodily limbs are the *mudras*” (MTP, 446.5).[82] Here too, exercises that are usually esoteric, ritualistic, and complicated in nature are identified with our ability to walk, one of the most ordinary and fundamental of all human activities.

These examples point to what is certainly the most striking property of the Dzogchen ethos of freedom as a philosophical tenet, namely the radical opposition to any form of analytical and conceptual thought. According to Higgins, Great Perfection philosophy is premised on the idea that “goal-realization (*'bras bu*), the full disclosure of primordial awareness (*ye shes*) and its spiritual embodiments (*sku*), occurs once the discursive proliferations of mind and mental factors have ceased” (Higgins 2013, 270). Van Schaik, likewise, determined that Dzogchen philosophy is marked by the rejection of “intellectual analysis,” not only “in the context of meditation,” but even “in scholastic activities” (Van Schaik 2004b, 71). Eran Laish, equally, underscores the tradition’s preference for “intuitive disclosures” over “well-ordered analysis and argumentation,” arguing that Dzogchen “is mostly interested in disclosing the intuitive aspects that are primordial to human awareness and the aspects that make conceptual views intelligible in the first place” (Laish 2018, 94).

While “philosophy” (*lta ba*, lit. “view,” “to look,” “to read”), in a Buddhist context is usually identified with an analytical, conceptual, and dualistic mind that “looks” a reality a certain way to gain insight, Longchenpa’s “philosophy” (*lta ba*, lit. “view,” “to look”) is predicated on an entirely different operation. As Anne Klein and Tenzin Wangyal argued, the legitimacy of Great Perfection philosophy “lies neither in description nor in reasoning” (A. C. Klein and Wangyal 2006, 152), but rather in a space where “meanings are more fluidly construed than in logic, which depends on tight semantic boundaries” (A. C. Klein and Wangyal 2006, 57).

The philosophy of freedom is as fluid and non-reified as the Stainless Ray of Light that composed it. The reason for this different form of “looking” needs to be sought in luminosity, more specifically in Direct Transcendence practice, which is the bases for Longchenpa’s practical philosophy of freedom. As Adam Lobel recently

[82] 'gro ba'i lam dmigs thig chen te/ rkang pa'i rjes ni rdul tshon ris/ 'gro bar 'dod pa stangs stabs nyid/ yan lag bskyod pa phyag rgya'o.

presented the issue, Longchenpa's thought embraced the unyielding belief that "effortless practice discloses open and lucid awareness and invites simple rest in this state, free of fixation" (Lobel 2018, 149), thus rupturing "the intentional relationship and protection of consciousness, dissolving reference points" (Lobel 2018, 156).

> In effect, what Longchenpa achieves […] is a method that both absorbs and transforms the schema of view, meditation, action, and fruition into a phenomenological looking (*lta*). Rather than *a view,* we have the act or practice of *looking*, which discloses knowledge. This practice, moreover, is uncaused and effortless. Instead, the evanescent, spontaneous, indeterminacy (*nges med*), or ineffable absence (*med pa*) of phenomena is revealed. In this sense, the view of spontaneity is revealed through looking again and again, free of all views. (Lobel 2018, 154)

Longchenpa himself, reprimands other forms of meditation practices, such as generation and perfection phase practices of the tantric schools, for being based on speculative and intellectualized contemplation (GTD*,* 380.3). Speaking of deviations that a mediator can fall prey to during his practice, Longchenpa tells his readers about an "extremely important point" (*gnad gal po che*), which is the danger of forming any sort of reified view of reality: "If there is attachment to words in your conduct, you deviate into reified views, and thus it is crucial to remain unfettered by systematizations of philosophical views and meditative practices" (TDD, 389.2).[83] In another of his *Treasuries*, he writes:

> Given the unchanging, spontaneously present nature of phenomena, if you look (*lta*) again and again with self-knowing awareness, free of any complicating conceptual framework, you will see that there is nothing to look at. Nothing to look at—this is the view (*lta ba*) of omnipresent awareness. (Longchenpa 2001)

In a way then, Longchenpa's philosophy of freedom is an anti-philosophy as he articulates the emancipatory dimension of the Great Perfection by deprecating any sort of philosophical speculation, any sort of "viewing" or "looking" (*lta ba*). In his

[83] tshig la zhen nas spyod 'jig tshogs la lta bar gol bas lta sgom grub mthas bcings pa gces so.

Treasury of Words and Meaning, Longchenpa defines the "view" as "the apprehension ('*dzin*) of the analytical (*dbyod*) mind (*yid*).[84] Instead, the philosophy of freedom is "visionary" (*snang ba*) as it builds on the foundation of the "ground's epiphany" (*gzhi snang*) and the insights gained from the practice of the "four visions" (*snang ba bzhi*).

Visionary Meditation and Longchenpa's Critique of "Executive" Meditation

As we saw in chapter three, the tantric practices, usually classified under the rubric of the "unsurpassed yoga tantra" (Skt. *anuttarayoga tantra*, Tib. *rnal 'byor bla na med pa'i rgyud*), consist of two sequentially ordered techniques: the generation phase, largely centered on deity yoga, and the perfection phase, premised on bodily practices. By the time of Longchenpa, the Old School availed itself of Direct Transcendence practice to assert a decisive response to both of these techniques.

In contradistinction to deity yoga practices, whose visualization training already starts with the preliminaries and focus on the generation of buddhas and their body images (Beyer 1973, 26–27), the Great Perfection proffers its very own system of visionary encounters with deities. Unlike the tantric practices of the New Schools, which operate by means of a sādhana-logic, involving the intentional, painstaking, and repetitive visualization of specifically chosen deities with their particular characteristics (Zahler 2009, 130–36), the Direct Transcendence visions are said to manifest spontaneously as the buddha-nature is already present within the practitioner's body.

Longchenpa explicitly distinguishes Direct Transcendence from the "contrived" (*bcos ma*) visualizations of the "generation phase" practices by his repeated call for procedures and visualizations that are "spontaneous" (*lhun grub*), "free from action" (*bya bral*), and "without elaboration" (*spros med*). Thus, while the generation phase visualization is controlled and patterned, "the vision of deities unfolding in Direct Transcendence contemplation is said to be completely spontaneous, and involves no intentional fabrication or direction (with the exception of some adjustments of the direction of your gaze in relation to the nature of the visions at any given point)" (Germano 1992, 890).

The "four visions" (*snang ba bzhi*) of Direct Transcendence served as its ultimate means to display its self-liberation, asserting a program of spontaneous disclosure

[84] spyi'i lta ba dang rang gi lta ba'o/ spyi'i ni yid dpyod 'dzin pa ste.

against virtually all the competing movements in Tibet. Although it could be claimed that the descent of the "wisdom being" (Skt. *jñāna-sattva,* Tib. *ye shes sems dpa'*) into the deities of the *maṇḍala* can be spontaneous inasmuch as they are said to pervade everything anyway (Bentor 1996b; 1996a), gentle practices form part of certain yogic techniques employed by the Sarmas (English 2002, 171–77; Tsongkhapa 2012, 326–28), liturgy has been shown to allow for spontaneity in Tibetan ritual practices (Sihlé 2010, 47), and there exist some Indian precedents in tantric circles that formed their identity around the themes of naturalness (*sahaja*, *nija*) and nonartificiality (*akṛtrima*) (R. Davidson 2002; R. M. Davidson 2002; Gray 2007), the four visions of Direct Transcendence must be appreciated as a full-blown response to the Tantric techniques of the New Schools. Of course, they too culminate in the perception of "deities and their divine mansion." However, there is no sign that their appearance is "the result of long and really rather frustrating practice," as is the case in deity yoga practice (Beyer 1973, 70).

As for the perfection phase practices, they are said to exist in two versions, namely those that include no signs and those that include the visual manifestation of signs. It is obvious that Direct Transcendence shares a certain similarity to practices that include signs and some teachers have even preached that these practices—despite their different *modus operandi*—lead to the same result (Gen Lamrimpa 1999, 110). Like Direct Transcendence, the manifestation of signs follow specific rhythms types of gradual progression (Nor-bzaṅ-rgya-mtsho 2004; Tsongkhapa 2012, 308–12, 345). In one example, we read that they start out as if one were "seeing a mirage," progress to become a "smoke-like vision," before turning into a "vision like flickering fireflies" and "the glow of a butterlamp," and conclude in manifestations "like a clear autumn sky pervaded by the light of the full moon" (Mullin 2006a, 85). This being said, Great Perfection exegetes, such as Longchenpa, clearly differentiated between the visual appearances of seminal nuclei, which form the core of the practice of Direct Transcendence, and analogous manifestations of light that present themselves in the context of other Tibetan Buddhist tantric practices (TCD2,103).

These standard tantric techniques, the most famous grouping of which is known as the "Six Dharmas of Nāropa" (*na ro'i chos drug*), involve "the raising of the drop of semen through the central channel to the top of the head, the arousing of heat below the navel, and a whole complex of similar exercises" (Beyer 1973, 133), which are said to "produce" the external manifestations in a "stressful and forced" (*rtsol ba can*) way (J. B. Gyatso 1998, 194–97; Tsongkhapa 2012, 349). By contrast, Direct

Transcendence is a spontaneous technique that involves no effort and physical manipulation beyond the preliminary practices and the exceedingly simple key points.

In summary, we could say that the New Schools embraced a model of thought and practice that could be defined as "executive." The transformation of the meditator happens in a top-down fashion. Meditation, in this sense, is largely a process of habituation with the conscious mind gradually transforming the operation of the unconscious mind. Consider, for instance, the similarity with a skill like learning to play the piano. Reading the sheets of music, the piano player is instructed to move his fingers according to explicitly stated notes in such a repetitive fashion that his hands start to move naturally and spontaneously. Similarly, reading is a process that is painstaking at the beginning as it takes considerable practice to recognize letters, words, and sentence structures. Yet, once reading has been sufficiently practiced, it becomes an automatic process, which proceeds quickly and without effort. How prevalent this executive model of meditation was in the tantric schools is best illustrated by conjuring up the visualization practices. As Beyer underscores in regards to generation phase practices:

> To gain such contemplative control of reality is the work of many lifetimes. The beginner learns to visualize slowly and gradually. The process is perhaps analogous to learning to play a musical instrument, the student encouraged to play difficult pieces straight through rather than devoting himself only to the most complex passages. (Beyer, Tara, 68-82)

This top-down fashion of gradual habituation is even embedded within the terminology used for such meditation practices. In fact, the Sanskrit term *bhāvanā* (from the root *√bhū*, "to be") is a causative form, which carries an intentional connotation, meaning as much as "to cause to be" or "to bring into existence" (Bentor 2010, 90). The Tibetan term for "meditation," by contrast, is not "to cause to be," but rather "to habituate" (*sgom pa*) (Bentor 2010, 91). In this sense, the Tibetan transmission of the term appears to account for the result of intentional training in a skill, namely the gradual habituation to new modes of thinking and being.

In an attempt to oppose these techniques, Longchenpa speaks of "an extremely important point" (*chings gal po che*), noting that some people, "in training on the

conventional [seminal nuclei], advocate many strenuous yogic exercises and binding visualizations practices, while asserting that the fruit of such training is the bliss and emptiness of depth-contemplation within the coarse body" (TDD, 259.3).[85] In *The Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, Longchenpa makes a very similar distinction, noting that while the "direct path (*nye lam*) of the Mantrayāna (*gsang sngags*) is a method that is strenuous (*rtsol bcas*), elaborate (*spros pa can*), and in agreement with the key points of the channels, winds, and seminal nuclei," Direct Transcendence is "effortless (*rtsol med*) and free from elaboration (*spros pa dang bral ba*)" (TCD, 407.2).[86]

In *The Jewel Studded Tantra*, the failure to "recognize the non-duality of the expanse and awareness" (*dbyings rig gnyis med ma shes par*) is likened to "trying to cut a mountain at its base" (*ri bo sked pa brnyeg dang 'dra*) (RCP, 112.4). In his *Treasury of Words and Meaning*, Longchenpa cites this passage in order to reveal that any attempt to actively fabricate visualizations—instead of letting awareness manifest spontaneously within the sky—is nothing more than "meaningless fatigue" (*ngal ba don med pa*) (TDD, 289.5).

Of course, it could be argued that the emphasis on gaining insight through skill is a sign that even the Modernist system was ultimately grounded in a practical approach to life that values implicit processes. Adam Lobel, for instance, showed that while "the process of practicing scales on the piano, riding a bike, or training in a martial art […] exemplify a practice-caused, intentional practice, […] this skill cannot principally be learned theoretically." In other words, even though the contemplation might be habitual and intentional, it is nonetheless premised on a practical approach to life. "We cannot," so Lobel concludes, "learn to play the piano or ride a bike exclusively from excellent books on the topics, nor by contemplating how to do it; it must be learned in the doing and practicing itself" (Lobel 2018, 40). Lobel is furthermore correct when he remarks that tantric techniques—because they are akin to skills—can ultimately culminate in "a certain form of spontaneity."

> Once we have mastered riding a bike, we do not have to repeat the effort and struggle each time we ride. Rather, our body simply knows how to

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[85] kun rdzob la sbyong byed lus kyi 'khrul 'khor dmigs pa'i chings la sogs pa rtsol bcas du ma dang/ yang 'bras rags pa'i lus la ting nge 'dzin bde stong du 'dod la. For many more examples, see (Germano 1994, 213, 220ff.)

[86] gsang snags kyi nye lam ni rtsa thig rlung gsum gnad bstun pa yin la/ 'di la rtsol bcas spros pa can gyi lugs dang. rtsol med spros pa dang bral ba'i lugs gnyis yin no.

> ride, how to balance and pedal without falling, how to negotiate speed and turns in the road ahead, and we do so without any particular effort and without having to check with a set of rules or principles. We ride spontaneously after having established somatic dispositions through repeated training. This perspective is also relevant for religious training. (Lobel 2018, 40)

At the same time, however, there is no doubt that neither the idea of an intentional, repetitive, and effortful practice nor the skill-like rehearsal of automated processes is what Longchenpa is after in his philosophy of freedom. As for the intentionality in Direct Transcendence, the meditator just sits there—waiting in a dark room, staring into the rays of the sun, or gazing into the open sky—until he gradually starts to perceive odd visual manifestations that arise naturally, spontaneously, and without the slightest intention, fabrication, or effort on the part of the practitioner.

In a like manner, the spontaneity that we encounter in the case of the Direct Transcendence visions is hardly of a rehearsed and practiced type, which results from an explicitly stated program. Lobel himself acknowledges this elsewhere in his inquiry, noting that "relocating practices from the conscious-mind to the unconscious-body will not explain what Longchenpa sees as true spontaneous action" (Lobel 2018, 177). Instead of repeatedly visualizing details of previously articulated visions—like learning to "ride a *sādhanā*"—the Dzogchen practitioner is insistently reminded to resist the urge to intentionally project intentions about what he is going to see. On the contrary, he should let go of his explicit mind without and hand over control to the unconscious without trying to first shape it.

"Participatory" Meditation and the Power of Unconscious Thought

Now the question remains, how are we to understand Direct Transcendence practice? While it is relatively easy for us to get the point of tantric visualization techniques by comparing them to the execution of a skill, it is more difficult to realize what Longchenpa means by a spontaneously practice founded on primordial freedom. In accordance with the methodological orientation of this dissertation, it is only appropriate to explore whether the Great Perfection's "rhetoric" of a sensory experience of naturally emerging perception can actually hold up to scrutiny from a cognitive perspective. I plead that in order to get a better grasp of Dzogchen

contemplation, it might be useful to introduce another key area of research in the cognitive sciences, namely the so-called "dual-process theories."

Dual-process theories have been instituted to study various cognitive operations, ranging anywhere from attention to learning, in order to explore how the human mind has the capacity to process information in two very different modes. While system 2 is explicit, rule-based, slow, effortful, verbal, and tied to consciousness, system 1 processes are experiential, implicit, automatic, fast, effortless, and unconscious, and their content is not verbalizable.

If we translate these two modes of operation into the analysis of contemplative systems, we could say that while both traditions seem to rely on both systems, the priorities are radically different. The tantric meditation practices of the New Schools start with the explicit system before gradually transferring mental operations into system 1 processing. For instance, just as learning to read or to play the piano, visualization practice is intentional and requires extensive practice, which gradually renders these effortful processes automatic, spontaneous, and natural. With Antonio Damasio, we could say that we are dealing with a "process of transferring part of the conscious control to an unconscious server."

> Outsourcing expertise to the nonconscious space is what we do when we hone a skill so finely that we are no longer aware of the technical steps needed to be skillful. We develop skills in the clear light of consciousness, but then we let them go underground, into the roomy basement of our minds, where they do not clutter the exiguous square footage of conscious reflection space. (Damasio 2010, 278)

Longchenpa's ethos of freedom could thus be reframed as a critique against executive meditation practices that rely on system 2 thinking to intentionally, effortfully, and consciously direct or transform system 1 processes. In contrast to the standard, top-down model of meditation, Longchenpa does not seek to outsource explicitly articulated intentions to the unconscious processing system of his mind. On the contrary, our yogi is fascinated by the opposite: His priority lies on making ordinarily implicit processes explicit by observing them.

Direct Transcendence meditation is premised on a "mode of cognition," which we could call "bottom-up" or "participatory" as it replaces the philosophy of "looking" (*lta ba*) with that of "experiencing" (*snang ba*). Rather than imposing a

specific structure upon what we see, participatory meditation is marked by an attitude that lets meaning emerge naturally. Of course, the transition from "looking" (*lta ba*) to "experiencing" (*snang ba*) is in many ways visionary in nature as it is based directly on the "four visions" (*snang ba bzhi*). To say it in the words of one of my colleagues, Dzogchen's prioritizing of "disclosure over deconstruction"—posited on the belief that the "dynamic energy" of wisdom "actively discloses itself"—can "only be correctly and fully encountered by being seen" (Hatchell 2014, 117).

The idea of "direct perception" (Tib. *mngon sum,* Skt. *pratyakṣa*), of the "actual" (*mngon du*) manifestation of the visions is also connected to the indication that something is moving from the background to the foreground. In fact, in Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* alone, we find over a dozen mentions of contemplation as a process during which "qualities" (*yon tan*), "buddha bodies" (*sku*), "the seeds of the expanse" (*dbyings kyi sa bon*), or "stainless radiant light" (*dri ma med pa'i 'od gsal*) are said to be "coming to the fore" (*mngon du gyur*).

An angle that is closely related to this conception of participatory meditation comes from one of the very few articles explicitly addressing the meeting between contemplative practice and our unconscious mental world. In 1977, John Welwood wrote "Meditation and the Unconscious: A New Perspective" to explore contemplative practice as "a way of *seeing through* experience, always eluding any attempt to pin it down conceptually" (Welwood 1977, 2). Asking, "how does meditation 'provoke' or 'approach' the unconscious?" (Welwood 1977, 5), he proceeds to articulate the main contention of his study, namely that the co-existence of our conscious and unconscious modes of knowing should be conceived like the interactions between "figure" and "ground."

> Figure and ground are part of a constantly alternating continuum. Figures, once articulated, become incorporated into, and subsequently function as part of the background whole (hence unconsciously). For example, everything I know and have experienced about a particular person now functions as the global background in which I notice this new quality in him. This new quality stands out as figure for a while, and then also becomes part of the ground, allowing further qualities to stand out. Thus, many focal bits may function holistically as ground, without my being conscious of them in a differentiated way. This is one

> sense in which the organism "knows," as we say, "unconsciously," more than focal attention can ever articulate serially. (Welwood 1977, 9)

Longchenpa's philosophy of freedom—inaugurated on the ground of naturalness, spontaneity, and automaticity—can be understood as an endorsement of the frequently underestimated power of our unconscious minds. As Guenther formulated it, Longchenpa's "unconscious" can be imaged as "an ever-active matrix, not as a mere container, of archetypal patterns coming to life in our body-based feelings that blend with the images of our imagination as a humanly unique means to come to know ourselves in our wholeness."

> And what these images and feelings "tell" us is the story of how this process of self-realization and individuation unfolds in the experiencer. The manner in which they tell their story is exceedingly cryptic and often very abrupt. There are disconcerting gaps we must fill with our imagination. This means that we cannot simply stand aside and watch the story unfold by itself, but at every stage have to participate in its unfolding. (Guenther 1994, 36)

At the time when Welwood wrote his contribution, a similar design of attention—as a field through which all the information passes and a figure that represents the particular item that stands out so that we attend to it—had already been set down by Anne Treisman in the late 1960s. Like Welwood, Treisman's model of attention is perceptive because it highlights the interrelated nature of the simultaneous-field attention and the selective-figure attention (Treisman 1969).

In articulating his theory of the unconscious and its relationship to meditation, Welwood was further inspired by various other thinkers. For one, he draws on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who—in his lectures at Sorbonne University (1949-52)—not only punctuated that "all consciousness is the privileged consciousness of a 'figure' and tends to forget the 'ground' without which it has no meaning," but also argued that in order for us to gain insight into our unconscious, "it is necessary for what was ground to become figure" (Merleau-Ponty 1988, 113).

On the other hand, the transpersonal psychologist was an avid reader of religious literature, particularly from Asia. More specifically, it was through his familiarization with Dzogchen scriptures that he came to conceive of a "bottom-up"

up approach to making ground into figure. In the same article, in fact, he cites Herbert Guenther's assertion that according to the ethos of freedom, "attention is on the field rather than on its contents" (Guenther and Trungpa 1975, 27), and concludes: "Awakening is not additive, in the sense of unconscious contents breaking through into consciousness, but if anything, subtractive, in that it removes fixations with any particular contents" (Welwood 1977, 19).

A similar thesis has recently been presented by Johannes Bronkhorst, who maintained that while the "human faculty of speech," which is "inseparable from some other human particulars, most notably religion and culture," runs usually on two levels of cognition, meditative practices allow humans to turn of the higher form of cognition, which he transmits as the "symbolic mind."

> Absorption is a (or the) means to circumvent some, perhaps all, of the associations that characterize one of these two levels of cognition, the symbolic one […] thus leaving the non-symbolic level of cognition. The result is what is sometimes referred to as a mystical experience, but which is not confined to mysticism. It plays a role in ritual, mythology and other "religious" phenomena, and elsewhere. (Bronkhorst 2012, 4)

Now, what do the works of Welwood, Treisman, and Bronkhorst have in common and why are they relevant in our discussion of participatory forms of meditation? They are of interest to us because they offer a model of thinking about the self that values the field of awareness that lies behind what we usually conceive to be our "self." While this "invisible" dimension of our minds does play a role in executive meditation practices, it does so primarily inasmuch as it is directed by our conscious minds. In the Great Perfection, things seem different. Here, the unconscious mind is itself a source of inspiration, potential, and transformation. To put it in the form of our metaphor, we could say that the field can—in certain moments of our existence—itself move out of the background to give way to individuated figures.

In *The Tantra of Self-Arisen Awareness* this diffuse type of attention, rooted in the sensory system of our bodies, is illustrated through an evocative image of a hawk that rests in his nest. "The thought of the perfectly awakened Buddhas," so the scripture explains, "is dependent upon your physical body as its supporting basis, just like a

hawk resting in its nest" (RRS, 536.5).[87] Just as Welwood speaks of the ground as a "groundless ground," as it is both the "background" and "the ground that underlies and makes possible this present moment" (Welwood 1977, 10), the Great Perfection claims that awareness is latent yet always present. Even more importantly, just as the hawk might look like he is inattentive while actually being highly alert—ready to launch at any moment to soar through the skies on a hunt for his prey—the Great Perfection practitioner cultivates a type of attentive waiting so that his sensory organs are fully aware without actively focusing on anything in particular. It is in these moments of what we could call an "unaware awareness" that the deepest insights seem to emerge for Direct Transcendence practitioners.

[87] de'ang yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas kyi dgongs pa ni rten ni gzugs kyi phung po la brten no/ dper na khra tshang na nyal ba lta bu'o.

Chapter 8: Clothed in Nakedness: The Four Visions (*snang ba bzhi*) and the Experimental Study of Human Consciousness

The Base of the Mountain: Newfound Freedom and Political Importance

We have already received enough glimpses of Longchenpa's intellectual prowess to imagine how he could have transformed the Great Perfection into a thriving Buddhist tradition. This being said, the fact that our yogi was successful at relocating the Great Perfection from the periphery of the Tibetan universe into its center is also due to changing political circumstances, both on the Tibetan plateau and in other parts of the world. By the fourteenth century, India had no longer the same grip on the Tibetan soul as in the preceding centuries. During those years, new military, economic, and religious pressures took hold of northern India, ultimately culminating in the Muslim destruction of most Buddhist institutions of higher learning in South Asia. As a consequence, the center of Buddhism shifted northwards and Tibetans began to see themselves as the sole inheritors of India's great tantric teachings. The creative, chaotic, and diverse materials that flooded Tibet from outside and inside started to be systematized and codified.

Politically speaking, this was crucial period in the history of Tibet as it witnessed the increasing disintegration of Sakya hegemony (1260-1358), which was itself closely associated with the weakening of Mongol power in China, with the Yuan dynasty coming to its final end in 1368, four years after Longchenpa's death (Petech 1990; L. Van der Kuijp 1991). As the power of the Sakya hierarchy gradually waned, Tibet found itself adrift in uncertain allegiances in the middle of powerful political players. In an attempt to form a strong rule that would unify Tibet and offer it political independence and stability, it was Tai Situ Changchup Gyeltsen (*tai si tu byang chub rgyal mtshan*, 1302-1364) of the Phakmodrupa order (*phag mo gru pa*), who rose to power in 1958. Although the ascendancy of Tai Situ (*ta'i si tu pa*, Ch: *dà sītú*) did not last long, he did free Tibet from Sakya-Mongol rule and re-established a firm belief in the possibility of political independence within the Tibetan cultural psyche.

Re-instituting the Tibetan capital in the Yarlung valley in Central Tibet and basing his reign on references to the old Imperial court, Changchup Gyeltsen also recalled the power of the royal Tibetan kingdom, which reigned from this same place between the seventh and ninth centuries. This romantic and nationalist longing for the old Tibet was not only a unifying factor for all of Tibetan culture, but it was also a sentiment that increased the prestige of the school of the Ancients, through its treasure

revelations, imperial narratives, and its teachings on the Great Perfection. These traditions all emphasized the greatness of antiquity over modern innovation, the ground of Tibet over Buddhism's birth land to the South, and indigenous forms of spirituality over standard Buddhist scriptural transmission. To what extent these qualities of the Ancient School contributed to a significant increase in prestige as the historical circumstances changed has been best outlined by Matthew Kapstein:

> Loyalties shifted rapidly, and Central Tibet found itself adrift in uncertainty. The formative tendencies of the Nyingmapa school, already evident in the work of earlier writers, now resurfaced as a powerful polemic, upholding the spiritual and temporal magnificence of Tibet's imperial past against the decadence and factiousness of contemporary hegemonic leadership. (Kapstein 2000, 165)

Direct Transcendence and the Experimental Study of Consciousness

As we saw, the meditative journey of recovery that was Direct Transcendence practice—which by the fourteenth century became their greatest asset—was premised on spontaneous, effortless, and automatic awareness. In Dzogchen scriptures, the culmination of this process of emancipation is described as the manifestation of "wisdom" (*ye shes*) or "awareness-wisdom" (*rig pa'i ye shes*). Direct Transcendence, the meditative technique performed by our yogi, is the primary means through which the enlightened energy lying dormant in our bodies is activated. More specifically, the gradual externalization of this deeply embodied awareness takes place on the grounds of the "four visions" (*snang ba bzhi*) that represent the most characteristic trait of the highest Dzogchen practice.

The most emblematic representation of the *modus operandi* of wisdom and awareness in Direct Transcendence are the so-called "seminal nuclei" (*thig le*). With the seminal nuclei being ordered in a progressive sequence that follows the visionary manifestation of the four visions (TDD, 257.5; LYT1 463.1), as well as being conceptualized as specific "signs" that mark the progress of the practitioner's meditative practice (TCD2 372.2), Direct Transcendence can be conceived as a perceptual experiment. Our yogi, sitting on the side of the Tibetan mountain, performs a technique that helps him dishabituate his dominant mode of perceiving and defamiliarize himself with his ordinary mode of seeing the world.

Direct Transcendence forms part of those "Buddhist traditions," which Alan Richardson portrayed as premised on meditation techniques that act by "recognizing and breaking through the illusory or virtual character of human cognitive experience" (A. Richardson 2010, 23). "The aim of the Buddhist enterprise," so the German philosopher Jan Westerhoff strikes a similar tone, "is therefore not just to show that all things are like illusions because the way they appear is different from the way they are," but rather "to bring about a complete change in how we perceive and conceptualized phenomena" (Westerhoff 2010, 7). Finally, Janet Gyatso makes this same point, specifically discussing the Direct Transcendence visions, as she states that "the point is not simply to have more meditative experiences but to achieve 'realization' (*rtogs pa*) or understanding of the nature of such experiences" (J. B. Gyatso 1998, 191).

The Arraying of the Seminal Nuclei and Perceptual Meaning Making

The most fundamental discussions of the four visions take the form of highly detailed phenomenological descriptions of the visionary manifestations that can be seen during the practice. Of course, the phenomenology we are speaking of here is not the one concerned with "identifying background or implicit structures of consciousness"—such as embodiment or time discussed in previous chapters—but rather "the perceived content of experience."[88] More in detail, the visions are said to unfold over time, gradually intensifying as they progress from one vision to the next, before reaching their denouement in the dissolution of any manifestation during the fourth and final vision.

The first vision is known as "the vision of reality's immediacy" (*chos nyid mngon sum gyi snang ba*) and starts with the manifestation of luminous and foggy appearances of low intensity that may or may not develop into single or strung together sequences of "seminal nuclei" (*thig le*) that can vary in size. It is generally characterized by a lot of movement and instability as the seminal nuclei never remain still in one place. They are described as "minute and linked" (*phra la 'breng*), manifest fluttering and undulating, appearing and disappearing, coming and going, and become steady only after much practice in contemplation. Contemporary commentators compare the nuclei to a waterfall coming off a high mountain or drops of quicksilver (Wangyal

[88] For the differentiation between these two types of phenomenology, see (Chalmers 1996, 4, 11)

2000, 196ff). Longchenpa, in his *Treasure of Words and Meaning,* retells the first manifestations as follows:

> […] initially you see something that resembles smoke, then white wafting clouds, mirages, stars, fire sparks, butter lamps, and the great pervading blue light in the form a black "naro." Eventually, light rays, seminal nuclei, and immeasurable empty forms of the wisdom-expanse (*dbyings rig*) will shine forth. (TDD, 283.2)[89]

The second vision is known as "the vision of contemplative experience's intensification" (*nyams gong 'phel gyi snang ba*). Overall this vision is marked by an intensification of the visions in terms of number, shape, and size of appearances. At first, the perception of light (*'od*) that was already present in the inaugural vision intensifies radically and its manifestation becomes more balanced so that it now includes five colors. The seminal nuclei increase in number and size and there is a gradual appearance and multiplication of "adamantine linked chains" (*rdo rje lu gu rgyud*). These resemble lights that are strung together like a garland of pearls appearing within the seminal nuclei. Besides the seminal nuclei and the links of little lambs, in this vision the practitioner perceives a vast array of additional luminous configurations—such as cloudbanks, smoke, background patterns of the light at dawn, dusk, or the sky in the fall, sunset or shooting stars, checkered geometric forms, lace-work designs, vertical lines, wheels, round rainbows, lotus flowers, fireflies (*srin bu me khyer*), or large stupas—that fluctuate greatly in intensity and stability.

There appears to be some cross-traditional stability to the manifestations in those first two visions, as the pattern of crystallization appears in other meditative experiences across the Buddhist universe. In the Theravada literature, for instance, we read about a phenomenon known as *nimitta*. These visionary phenomena, which appear as a consequence of the concentration achieved through sustained attention to one's breath (Ledi Sayadaw Mahathera 1999), are described in strikingly similar terms to the Great Perfection visions: "It appears to some as a star or cluster of gems or a cluster of pearls, […] to others like a long braid string or a wreath of flowers or a puff

[89] de la dang po du ba lta bu dang/ sprin dkar po lang long lta bu dang/ smig rgyu lta bu dang/ skar ma lta bu dang/ me stag lta bu dang/ mar me lta bu dang/ mthing ga khyab pa chen po'i 'od re khaa nag po'i rnam pa na ro lta bu mthong ste/ 'od zer dang thig le dang dbyings rig gi stong gzugs tshad med pa 'char ro.

of smoke, to others like a stretched-out cobweb or a film of cloud or a lotus flower or a chariot wheel or the moon's disk or the sun's disk" (Buddhaghosa 2003, 277).

As the field of meditation research recently started to break out of its "mindfulness-hype," the study of changes in perception has become an indispensable theme of investigation. Exemplary for this revolution is the research conducted by Britton and Lindahl in the Clinical and Affective Neuroscience Laboratory at Brown University. In an article entitled "A Phenomenology of Meditation-Induced Light Experiences" (2014), they focused on meditation experiences described as lights or as having luminous characteristics, showing that they demonstrate a noteworthy continuity across various Buddhist traditions and geographical contexts. Like the Great Perfection phenomenology of visions, they demonstrate the prevalence of various isolated light manifestations in the early phase of contemplation, which meditators define as "globes," "white spots," "little stars," or "ropes of shimmering," and specified as "very distinct," like "Christmas tree lights hanging out in space except they were round," or "float[ing] together in a wave, like a group of birds migrating."

There is even evidence that visions from outside of Buddhism take on a similar form. As an illustration, in Ayahuasca visions, the content is depicted in analogous terms as a "series of visions-golden sparks, melting purple blobs, a dancing brown spot, snowflakes, saffron and light blue waves, a corona of light 'like a chrysanthemum composed of thousands of radiating petals.'" As the visions become more stable and "solidified, there appeared a Cuban flag flying over a bank building, an old lady with a gray umbrella walking through the side of a truck, a cat rolling across the street in a small striped barrel" (Beyer 2010, 226)

Not only are there certain similarities in terms of manifestations, but the advancing plot of the visions seem to be quite similar from a cross-cultural experience. Beyer, in his discussion of Ayahuasca visions based on his own experience and his ethnographic fieldwork amongst various Amazonian societies—such as the Sharanahua, the Piro, or the Tukano—records three phases, which move from the manifestation of random "geometric figures, sometimes spinning or whirling, fireflies, rippling water, raindrops" in the first stage, to more concrete pictures like "pottery and embroidery, […] faces with patterns, people and animals, unknown creatures, spirit beings" in the second, and a third phase in which the "visions begin to fade" (Beyer 2010, 227–28).

The simplest physiological explanation for these visionary perceptions is that we are dealing here with entoptic phenomena, visual effects which are created by the eye itself, without external stimulus. The so-called "floaters," also known as *muscae volitantes* or "flying flies," manifest as spots, threads, or fragments of "cobwebs," which usually float slowly before the eyes (D. Johnson and Hollands 2012).

Such physiological explanations, however, are hardly enough to appreciate Direct Transcendence as an experimental study of consciousness. More helpful, perhaps, is the recently emerging research into the phenomenology of perceptual processes. In fact, couldn't these surprising cross-cultural continuities point to the possibility that these visionary manifestations rely on a universal mechanism of cognitive functioning that is anchored in the human brain and its perceptual processes? In fact, just as the Great Perfection scriptures and commentators insist on the fact that their visions are occurring effortlessly and spontaneously, research on perception has recently emphasized the tremendous impact of unconscious, implicit, and automatic processes in human perception (Goodale and Milner 2004; Jacob and Jeannerod 2006). Mario Sigman, for example, observed that:

> One of the most spectacular cerebral transformations occurs when we learn to see. This happens so early in our lives that we do not have any memory of how we perceived the world before seeing. From a stream of light, our visual system manages to identify shapes and emotions in a tiny fraction of a second, and what is even more extraordinary is that it happens without any sort of effort or conscious realization that something must be done. But converting light into shapes is so difficult that we have yet to create machines that can do it. Robots go into outer space, play chess better than the greatest masters, and fly aeroplanes, but they cannot see.

Much of the insight into the miracles of perception comes from various experimental phenomena (Crick 1994; Eagleman 2011; Dehaene 2014), such as binocular rivalry (Alais and Blake 2005; Cosmelli et al. 2004; Ooi and He 1999; 2006; M. A. Williams et al. 2004; Carter et al. 2005), visual masking (Loftus, Hanna, and Lester 1988; Breitmeyer 2007; Ansorge et al. 2008; Bachmann and Francis 2014; Rey et al. 2015), or attentional blinks (K. L. Shapiro, Raymond, and Arnell 1997; Jolicœur, Dell'Acqua, and Crebolder 2001; Vul, Hanus, and Kanwisher 2008; Dux and Marois 2009;

Nieuwenstein, Potter, and Theeuwes 2009; Martens and Wyble 2010; G. Griffiths, Herwig, and Schneider 2013). These experiments, as Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi assert, show that we "are often incapable of seeing things happen right before our eyes (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, 108), or that we are at least not fully conscious of that what we perceive.

Phenomena like poor peripheral vision, the continuous eye movements known as saccades, and blind spots demonstrate that our perception is—despite its eeming coherence—is not very accurate, stable, or clear. In fact, it is more appropriate to avow that gaps are part of our everyday perception as the images we receive through our retinas are distorted, discrete, tiny, upside down and marked by absences. The fact that our perceptual experience is nonetheless marked by a great degree of stability, detail, and constancy is largely due to our brain's capacity to fill in the gaps left by our perception.

Vilayanur Ramachandran, the foremost expert on gap filling, launched a series of experiments in order to probe the brain's capacity for filling in perceptual gaps. In one case, studying a particular type of blind spot known as scotoma—typical in sufferers of migraine—he projected a series of numbers and letters in front of a patient. Despite the presence of a blind spot in the middle of his field of vision, the subject did not just perceive a black spot without visual information but rather a continuous column of numbers without gap. However, when Ramachandran asked him to read the numbers, he said: "Um, one, two, three, um, seven, eight, nine. Hey, that's very strange. I can see the numbers but I don't know what they are. […] They don't look blurred. They kind of look strange. I can't tell what they are—like hieroglyphics or something" (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998, 101). The experimenter, in interpreting this curious phenomenon, noted that

> This is another striking demonstration of division of labor in the visual pathways. The system in his brain that deals with surfaces and edges is saying, "There is numberlike stuff in this region—that's what you should see in the middle, but since there are no actual numbers, his object pathway remains silent and the end result is illegible "hieroglyphics." (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998, 102)

Another relevant phenomenon is the so-called Charles Bonnet syndrome, which is frequently associated with various types of visual hallucinations, particularly light-

related experiences (Vukicevic and Fitzmaurice 2008; Kazui et al. 2009). Common amongst the elderly or those with a physiological impairment of the visual system, the phenomena observed in these instances are even more radical in their significance as the visual input from the external world is frequently entirely missing.

However, not even the hallucinations that appear in patients with Charles Bonnet syndrome are different from more common perception. On the contrary, they are merely an exaggerated version of the same processes that account for gap filling in patients with scotomas or even us ordinary individuals as we generate a coherent picture of the world despite our impoverished perception (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998, 111–12). Ramachandran concludes that the ultimate reason for this gap filling is that the mind “abhors a vacuum,” propelling it to “supply whatever information is required to complete the scene” (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998, 89)

Perception, so scholars have recently argued, is part of a larger human need for sense-making. Enactive approaches to cognition have shown that all living systems are “sense-making” or “seeking” systems because they are both autonomous yet adaptive to their environment. As Jaak Panksepp and Douglas Watt have claimed, organisms are equipped with a seeking system that encourages them to engage with their environment—particularly other living beings—so that they can meet their basic biological and emotional needs (Panksepp 2007). Life is seen as a precarious situation in which the living organism strives to maintain itself through self-regulation and exchange with the environment (Varela 1979; Thompson 2007).

Enactive approaches to perceptual awareness have also demonstrated that much of what we “see” depends not primarily on our eyes, but on the much larger sensorimotor apparatus of our bodies. In Direct Transcendence, of course, this is most apparent in the six key points, according to which the practitioner should adjust his gaze, posture, and breathing pattern in order to induce the visions. It could be argued that they perform what Alva Noë suggested is our basic mode of establishing perceptual “presence.” Taking a very mundane motivation—such as wishing to see the back of a tomato—as an example, he insisted that “we peer, and squint, and move, and adjust ourselves, nearly continuously, in order to come near to, achieve access to and stabilize our contact with the world around us” (Noë 2012, 40).

In the Great Perfection, the four “divine palaces” (*zhal yas khang*), the central foci of enlightened energy, can also be regarded as a dynamic sensorimotor system that pervades the entire human body. Indeed, meditation can be understood as an

emerging procession of our innermost essence through these four hot spots: It pumps out of the heart (*tsitta*), through the luminous channels *('od rtsa*), spreading inside of the skull (*dung khang*), to finally be released through the eyes (*tsakshu/ briguta*). In the Seminal Heart tradition, the bridge between body and experience, between the automatic and the controlling, between the natural "finding" of meaning and its active construction finds its clearest expression in the visionary appearances and, more specifically, in the nature of the seminal nuclei. First of all, the seminal nuclei are said to exist in two variants as "conventional" (*kun rdzob kyi thig le*) and as "ultimate" (*don dam gyi thig le*). This distinction seems to play on the double identity of perception as something that is a mental experience yet premised on physical mechanisms.

More importantly, if the channels are seen as "sanctuaries" (*gnas pa*) for the enlightened energy and the winds as the "moving" (*g.yo ba*) force that propels awareness throughout our bodies, the seminal nuclei are described as "arrayed" (*bkod pa*) throughout our bodies (TDD, 210.2).[90] At the same time, the seminal nuclei are not only "arrayed" within the luminous channels of our bodies but also "arraying" in our visionary experience. As Germano aptly put it, the seminal nuclei are "the in-forming intelligence that 'arrays' or 'organizes' our energy into meaningful complex patterns that are integrated to form a functioning *gestalt*" (Germano 1992, 523).

In accordance with the complex nexus of meanings of the term *'god pa*—the present form of the word *bkod pa*—the seminal nuclei are both "arranged" and "placed," as well as "transferred," "displayed," and "manifested." In other words, the seminal nuclei are both confined within structures and freely moving within space. If this "imprisoned freedom" is translated into the Great Perfection's consideration of perception, we can propound it as follows: being free and left on its own, the inherent intelligence of human beings displays itself within our visual fields in the form of apprehending structures of arrayed perceptions that gradually mushroom, embellishing in complexity and inflating in size. Meaning-making, to put it briefly, is the result of both freedom and imprisonment, of disclosure and enclosure.

The Unfencing of the Seminal Nuclei and the Construction of Perception

The dual-nature of the seminal nuclei as something that is both stabilized by structure within our bodies and dynamically displaying externally in our field of vision points

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[90] gnas pa rtsa/ g.yo ba rlung/ bkod pa byang chub sems kyi gnas lugs so.

to the underlying tension between imprisonment and liberation. This same duality is even epitomized in their visual (re)-presentation of the seminal nuclei: On the one hand, they are imaged in the form of enclosing forces, such as fences, corrals, walled cities, or lassos. On the other hand, the visionary display of seminal nuclei is also said to be naturally disclosing itself in the sky. “The move from the inside to the outside,” so Hatchell reminds his readers, “is in fact one of the main features of these visionary *thig-le*, which not only function as containers—of bodies, buddhas, ideas, energies, and so forth—but also put those contents on display so they can be seen, recognized, and function in the external world.” (Hatchell 2014, 144)

The seminal nuclei form part of a larger visionary anatomy of the Great Perfection, which ultimately allows for the concretization of the flow of energy out of its latency into the world. Here, the body acts as a parallel to the ground’s epiphany, while giving it a more ordered and structured form of flowing that is contained within intentional pathways.

In Longchenpa’s *Treasury of Words and Meaning*, he notes that “just as the inner radiation (*nang gdangs*) emanates from within our channels, it epiphanizes externally (*phyir snang*) as the arising of the self-radiation (*rang gdangs*) of lamps (*sgron ma*)” (TDD, 252.2).[91] Here, we find another indispensable category in the epiphany of awareness from its internally latent state into its visionary manifestation in the sky, namely the “lamps” (*sgron ma*). The lamps are a complicated and multifaceted phenomenon in the Great Perfection (Scheidegger 2005). I would like to focus on the most critical of the lamps, the so-called “water lamp of the far-reaching lasso” (*rgyang zhags chu’i sgron ma*), which stands for the totality of luminous pathways and gateways. It has rightly been described as a “name applied to our inner luminosity as it radiates outwards from the heart” (Germano 1992, 97).

As such, the “water lamp of the far-reaching lasso” plays a stellar role in the process of blurring the boundaries between internal imagination and external reality. Germano rightly explains that this lamp’s designation as a “far-reaching lasso” points to the particular trait of the sensory faculty of vision, which has the ability to apprehend objects of external reality that are quite distant from us (Germano 1992, 104). In fact, Direct Transcendence “involves a radically active mode of perception, as instead of the mere passive registering of incoming sensory data or even the semi-active filtering and manipulation of that data, the ‘sensory data’ (i.e. the lights) itself

[91] de ltar nang gdangs rtsa nas 'phro ba ltar de phyir snang sgron ma'i rang gdangs 'char te.

[…] issues outwards from our own interiority via the eyes" (Germano 1992, 98). As Beyer put it, "vision encourages projection into the world, occupation and control of the source of experience" (Beyer 2010, 155).

In its emphasis on the externalization of the interior, Direct Transcendence could be construed as a type of hallucination. In fact, as Ann Taves recently declared, "psychologists traditionally associate 'real' perceptions with external data and 'distorted' perceptions, such as illusions, delusions, and hallucinations, with the misinterpretation or absence of external sensory data" (Taves 2009, 78). In common perception, the central mark of a hallucinating person as well as a schizophrenic is that they cannot distinguish between what is truly experienced because of an external stimulus and what is imagined in the form of an internally generated thought.

This being said, the association of Direct Transcendence with pathological or hallucinatory phenomena is not as simple as one might think. Consider the following reflections by Ann Taves, who recovers the value of internally manufactured visionary worlds although in the study of religion:

> The pejorative (and presumptively pathological) definition of hallucinations as false perceptions artificially divides the class of phenomena that arise from internal sources and completely ignores visions that occurs (remarkably frequently) in the normal population. By defining hallucinations in terms of internally generated perceptions rather than as false (that is, non-externally generated) perceptions, we can consider a wide range of phenomena including dreams and nonpathological visions together. (Taves 2009, 78)

Furthermore, the notion that the vividness of imagination "bleeds" into the world (Luhrmann 2013, 159), is also gaining momentum in the cognitive sciences, where researchers are attaining an increasing awareness of a continuity between quotidian vision and meditative visions or between the physical eye and the mental eye (Ffytche et al. 1998; Lloyd et al. 2012). The neurobiology of perceptual hallucinations and veridical perceptions, for example, have been found to be closely related to one another (Ffytche, Blom, and Catani 2010; Lloyd et al. 2012). Similar findings, once again, come from studies on drug-induced visionary manifestations. Draulio Araujo, in his highly interdisciplinary research on shamanic visions under the effect of Ayahuasca, noted that the visual cortex activates in remarkably analogous ways

regardless of whether they actually see something or just imagine it (de Araujo et al. 2012). In other words, from a neurological perspective, hallucinatory visions are just as real as the perception of external visions.

That the Great Perfection conceives of the visionary manifestations displayed during Direct Transcendence in a parallel way, as an interplay between the mental and the physical eye, has been expressed by Herbert Guenther, who accentuated that:

> It would be extremely helpful if one could understand "awareness" in a verbal sense as an 'awaring' inasmuch as this pristine awareness is not only a process (a "way") of understanding, but also a certain manner of seeing which for all practical purposes has as its starting-point the eye. The eye that "sees" does not exist apart from its cognitive domain: light and eye codetermine each other and what we call the eye is therefore nothing solid, but a dynamic regime. As such a dynamic regime the eye is termed *spyan*—the eye that "sees" in contradistinction to *mig*—the eye as an object removed from its living context.[92] (Guenther 1992, 81)

In the cognitive sciences, such an active grip of perception is further strengthened by studies on imagery and imagination. Here, experiments have illustrated that the visual image and the creative imagination have more in common than usually thought as even ordinary perception is "creative" in nature. Already in the 1970s, James J. Gibson established what he called an "ecological psychology," claiming that what we see in our head is not just a passive representation of the external world but rather the result of our embodied actions in the world that surrounds us (Gibson 1986; Heft 2001).

According to the so-called "perceptual activity theory" (Ellis 1995; Ramachandran and Hirstein 1996; Noë 2004; Thompson 2007), the mind plays an active role in constructing its apprehended objects, thus blurring "the boundary between indirect perception and imagination and suggests that imagery should in fact be viewed as a process of perceptual projection" (Coseru 2012). Other leading neuroscientists, like Steven Kosslyn and Donald Hoffman, have furthermore provided overwhelming evidence that perception is an active and creative process (Kosslyn

[92] The eyes that see (*spyan*) are clearly referring to the Eyes of the Buddha as it is a honorific term as opposed to *mig*.

1994; 2000; Kosslyn, Thompson, and Ganis 2006; Hoffman 1998). The neuroscientific data confirming this imagist presupposition has not only led Kosslyn to conclude that the same neural processes "underlie [both] perception and depictive imagery" (Kosslyn 2000), but also encouraged Hoffmann to suggest that "to experience is to construct [in vision as well as] in each [sensory] modality and without exception" (Hoffman 1998, 48).

In the Great Perfection this activist and constructivist nature of perception is once again expressed as a tension between freedom and imprisonment. As before, the seminal nuclei serve as the primary metaphor to articulate this tension: On the one hand, the seminal nuclei change their form from that of an enclosure into an extended chain of interconnected dots as they move out of the prison of the body into the practitioner's visual field. If they are at first seen in an enclosing shape as the loops of a lasso, they turn into a long rope of circular beads, representing the freeing of awareness and the openness of perception. On the other hand, as they take on the shape of long ropes, they swiftly reclaim their potential to be flung through the air as lassos. Perception is a grasping, constructing, and ultimately enclosing process that imposes separations, division, and orders on the surrounding environment. Imaged as a lasso, Dzogchen vision is not only a freeing activity that opens up the containment of the human body but also an active process that imposes itself onto the material universe surrounding us.

The Faith in the Seminal Nuclei and the Theory of Mind

As I protocoled, the early process of the manifestation of the four visions is characterized by a gradual growth in size, a steady increase in complexity, an intensification in vividness, and a strengthening in stability. The climax of Direct Transcendence is, without a doubt, characterized by the manifestation of vast maṇḍalas, divine palaces filled with richly adorned buddhas and their retinues in the third step in the *scala contemplationis*, carrying the designation "the vision of awareness reaching its limit" (*rig pa tshad phebs kyi snang ba*). As its name already indicates, this is the moment when "awareness" (*rig pa*) reaches its limit (*tshad phebs*, lit. "arrived at the full measure), the moment when the visionary manifestations appear in their greatest clarity and crystallize in their most structured form. The meditators confirm that this is the high point of transforming chaos into order as they report seeing the maṇḍala of 100 peaceful and wrathful deities, buddhafields (*zhing khams*, *dag pa'i zhing*), and palaces (*gzhal yas khang*).

Again, the seminal nuclei are central to this process explicitly underline that the "bodies of deities or buddhas appear in each of these thigles" (Achard and Tapihritsa 2016, 91). "Awareness," which was previously present in the field of vision in the form of the seminal nuclei and the chains of linked lambs, is said to "mature into spiritual bodies" (*rig pa skur smin pa*) (TDD, 247.3) and the "ultimate seminal nuclei" (*don dam gyi thig le*) are explicitly said to "ripen into the Spiritual Bodies and wisdom" (*sku dang ye shes smin pa*) (TDD, 211.5).

In other passages, Longchenpa specifies that the visions actually appear in a such a fashion that the Buddhas themselves could be said to be ripening. He specifies that there are six stages over the course of which the maṇḍala of deities gradually takes shape. First, only half of a Buddha's body (*phyed sku*) is seen, then single bodies (*sku rgyang*), then the Buddha in sexual union with his consort (*yab yum*), then the five Buddhas with their retinues (*tshom bu*), then the five Buddhas arranged in their maṇḍala (*dkyil 'khor*), and finally the "great maṇḍala" (*dkyil 'khor chen po*), which represents all the 100 peaceful and wrathful deities and the climax of the Tögal visions (TDD, 258.3; TCD2, 83.5).

Although such a spontaneous appearance of a rich mixture of living beings in their own inhabitable spaces might sound extravagant, visions are populated in prominently similar ways across cultural and historical contexts. Anthropologists have had a long-standing interest in such visionary beings (Hunter 2015), with Edith Turner even famously asserting their existence (Turner 1993). Jonathan Garb, in his excellent survey of trance in the Jewish Kabbalah, notes that it is particularly in "religious contexts" that one finds the "appearance and intervention of inner mentors, 'allies,' or 'spirit guides'" (Garb 2011, 12). Beyer, in his study of Ayahuasca visions, similarly pinpointed that "what is most striking about ayahuasca visions is the sense of personal presence—first, that one is interacting with persons and second, that the persons are external, solid, three-dimensional, real" (Beyer 2010, 238).

Contemporary cognitive science research has found its own ways to speak about the human tendency to attribute mental or soul-like presence to our environment in the so-called Theory of Mind (Bloom 2004; Lillard and Skibbe 2005; Mar and Macrae 2007). This field of investigation is concerned with the "folk psychology" of social cognition, specifically with how humans identify mental states of others in order to predict, understand, or explain their actions (Premack and Woodruff 1978, 515). As Tooby and Cosmides phrased it, "normal humans everywhere not only 'paint' their world with color, they also 'paint' beliefs, intentions,

feelings, hopes, desires, and pretenses onto agents in their social world. They do this despite the fact that no human has ever seen a thought, a belief, or an intention" (Tooby and Cosmides 1995, xvii).

Particularly cognitive scientists of religion have combined this biosocial view of meaning-making with an evolutionary perspective. Speaking of a "hyperactive agency detection device," they argue that these mentalistic inferences, which manifests in our tendency to attribute agency to our environment—not only other humans, but also animals, nature, and other "hard-to-identify" phenomena—offers evolutionary benefits to humanity (Guthrie et al. 1980; Barrett and Keil 1996; Boyer 2001; Atran and Norenzayan 2004; Barrett 2004; Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007).

Of course, this type of research into the profoundly social nature of the human default mode of thinking (Schilbach et al. 2008), is particularly useful in interpreting the later stages of the unfurling of visions as it can help us understand why our yogi naturally and spontaneously multiplies actualizations of gods, spirits, and other anthropomorphized figures. As Edward Slingerland, summarizing the claims of Theory of Mind research, concluded: "We will apparently always see meaning in our actions—populating our worlds with 'angry' seas, 'welcoming' harbors, and other human beings as unique agents worthy of respect and dignity, and distinct from objects in some way that is hard to explain in the absence of soul-talk, but nonetheless very real for us" (Slingerland 2008, 287).

The Contribution of Direct Transcendence to the Study of Consciousness

In this chapter, I explored how our yogi's Direct Transcendence practice allows him to engage with cognitive processes that usually lie outside of the field of awareness. In a way then, we could say that this particular meditative technique provides practitioners with an effective tool to explore parts of their selves that they usually don't consciously recognize as such. The Direct Transcendence visions are portrayed as "natural manifestations" or "epiphanies of the self" (*rang snang*) and are seen as attempts to "recognize one's self" (*rang ngo shes pa*).

As a form of investigation into the deepest levels of our selfhood, Direct Transcendence fits well with the priorities of recent research on meditation. The contemporary study of meditation combines insights from traditional Buddhist sources with studies from phenomenology, philosophy of mind, and neuroscience in order to study the self. These different disciplinary fields, in fact, reveal a strikingly

similar conception of our identity: While Buddhist sources argue for the lack of an inherent self and propose meditative practices used to observe the constant flow of consciousness, the contemporary fields of investigation note a parallel discrepancy between the common conception of a bounded self and evidence from experimentation that points to a less than reified sense of self.

Not only that, these discourses also share in the belief that the self is made up of various degrees of selfhood. According to Buddhism and Indian traditions, for instance, human consciousness consists of several layers. As Evan Thompson articulated,

> The first aspect is awareness, which is often likened to a light that reveals whatever it shines upon. The second aspect is whatever the light illuminates, that is, whatever we happen to be aware of from moment to moment. The third aspect is how we experience some of these contents of awareness as "I" or "Me" or "Mine." To understand how we enact a self, therefore, we need to understand three things—the nature of awareness as distinct from its sensory and mental contents, the mind-body processes that produce these contents, and how some of these contents come to be experienced as the self. (Thompson 2015, xxxii)

In the cognitive sciences too, the construction of the self has been a popular theme of reflection in recent years. In the 1960s, Paul MacLean has tried to do so by articulating the self also by means of three ingredients, speaking of a "triune brain" that explains three functions of human cognition: the control of basic bodily functions, the regulation of emotions, and the cognitive processes of memory, interpretation, and choice (Ganzevoort and Sremac 2019, 5). More recently, the three levels of selfhood have received a more in-depth treatment by Antonio Damasio, who explored human consciousness in his *Self Comes to Mind* (2010).

> Conscious minds begin when self comes to mind, when brains add a self process to the mind mix, modestly at first but quite robustly later. The self is built in distinct steps grounded on the protoself. The first step is the generation of primordial feelings, the elementary feelings of existence that spring spontaneously from the protoself. Next is the core self. The core self is about action—specifically, about a relationship

> between the organism and the object. The core self unfolds in a sequence of images that describe an object engaging the protoself and modifying that protoself, including its primordial feelings. Finally, there is the autobiographical self. This self is defined in terms of biographical knowledge pertaining to the past as well as the anticipated future. The multiple images whose ensemble defines a biography generate pulses of core self whose aggregate constitutes an autobiographical self. (Damasio 2010, 22)

Antonio Damasio's three-tiered self, known as proto-, core-, and narrative selves, is also paralleled by other scholars, who introduced similar distinctions: minimal and narrative (Damasio 2010; Gallagher 2000; Christoff et al. 2011), first-order and higher-order (Zelazo, Hong Gao, and Todd 2007), primary and secondary (Edelman 1992), and conscious and metaconscious (Schooler 2002).

This group of authors propels the endeavors of contemplative scientists, such as Richard Davidson or Antoine Lutz, who themselves come to suggest that Buddhist meditation is such a compelling phenomenon to be studied because it gives access to an embodied and pre-reflexive level of subjectivity. This level of meditative subjectivity, so they argue, is not unlike the core and minimal selves, effectively bypassing the full-blown narrative self (A. Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007; Dreyfus 2011b; Dambrun and Ricard 2011; Austin 2009; Coseru 2012; D. A. Arnold 2012; Metzinger 2009)..

Scholarship has rightly acknowledged that meditation practiced in Buddhist circles is particularly involved in "uprooting this illusory sense of an extended self—perhaps similar to the phenomenological notion of narrative self—and uncovering a profoundly embodied, intimate meeting with experience—perhaps akin to the contemporary concept of minimal self" (Lifshitz, Cusumano, and Raz 2014, 220).

In its treatment of the seminal nuclei, the Great Perfection manifests a sophisticated awareness of consciousness that rivals the insights found in other Buddhist traditions. In fact, it could be concluded that the mysterious concept of the seminal nuclei represents the Great Perfection's attempt to explore the most fundamental part of our most "minimal self." Here, Georges Dreyfus' comments on the Yogācāra self are relevant, as both traditions point to "a basic level of awareness not usually identified as consciousness but not completely non-conscious either" (Dreyfus 2011b, 144). As Dreyfus formulated it,

> The basic consciousness is the baseline of consciousness, the passive level out of which more active and manifest forms of awareness arise in accordance with the implicit preferential patterns that structure emotionally and cognitively this most basic level of awareness. Hence, consciousness is a multi-layered process that ranges from the inchoate level of subliminal awareness to the clearest states of mindfulness in which I seem to be fully present to the present moment. As such, it cannot be captured by a simple either/or distinction. (Dreyfus 2011b, 144)

Just like in the Yogācāra sources identified by my Swiss colleague (Lamotte 1973, 58), this basic level of selfhood is said to pervade our bodies, thus "accounting for the difference between a living body and a corpse" (Dreyfus 2011b, 144). Although it is "passive and inchoate," it is the true source of any of our sense-making attempts as it "provides the cognitive background out of which more salient elements make sense" (Dreyfus 2011b, 144). This most fundamental level of our identity corresponds also closely to that of the cognitive sciences, sharing particularly the latter's emphasis on the body. As Damasio put it, although there is no doubt that "the cerebral cortices endow the mind-making process with a profusion of images that" far exceed this basic level of self, it is nonetheless true that our "brains begin building conscious minds not at the level of the cerebral cortex but rather at the level of the brain stem" (Damasio 2010, 14).

To conclude this inquiry, it might be a good idea to ask the following question: What contribution does the Direct Transcendence experimentation with the deepest layers of our selves make to the study of consciousness? In my estimation, it not only confirms a variety of cognitive theories, ranging from meaning-making, the constructive nature of perception and emotion, to Theory of Mind, but it also suggests something more universal about our unconscious processing.

As a technique that explores perceptual illusions, the Dzogchen phenomenology of visions can actually make a meaningful contribution to our understanding of perception as a creative and gratifying process. As Jared Lindahl and his colleagues note, "in this trajectory of practice, certain Buddhist meditation traditions utilize visual hallucinations as a means of gaining insight into the way in

which perceptual experience of the phenomenal world is constructed, rather than given" (Lindahl et al. 2014, 7).

Based on the tradition's own philosophy of freedom, outlined in chapter seven, Direct Transcendence is testifying to the tremendous malleability of our perception. In the Great Perfection, the deepest level of consciousness is identified with the highest potential for freedom, spontaneity, and openness. In *The Absence of Letters Tantra*, we read about Samantabhādra and his liberation and return to the original ground. In that moment, he speaks as follows: "The secret emotional distortions are my magical manifestation; buddhas and sentient beings are my tomb. I, the All-Creator, am the great self-radiant epiphany (*snang ba rang gsal*)" (YGM, 222.5).[93] Analogous formulations about the freedom of the self can be found in *The Blazing Lamp Tantra*, where we read that "since this is not the domain of others, the self-arising (*rang shar*) objective sphere is primordially pure and not the field of others; it must be known by oneself (*rang shes bya*)" (GMB, 294.1).[94] Finally, in *The Pearl Necklace Tantra*, we read that "self means to be free from the usage of relying on others" (MTP, 498.6).[95]

One of the most compelling images for this conception of the unconscious is the description of Direct Transcendence a "naked vision" (*cer mmhong*). Getting rid of the clothing of conceptualization, analysis, and reification, the Great Perfection ethos of freedom submits to a participatory form of meditation in which reality is allowed to manifest itself naturally without our conscious mind imposing itself upon it. In his interactions with the cognitive sciences, the meditator Matthieu Ricard sees the strength of Buddhism precisely in such a type of utterly luminous mind and its "naked experience of awareness devoid of mental constructs."

> Buddhism says that the ultimate nature of consciousness is beyond words, symbols, concepts, and descriptions. You may speak of pure awareness devoid of mental constructs, but this is like pointing a finger at the moon and calling it the moon itself; unless you have a direct experience of this pure awareness, these words are empty. What you

[93] gsang ba'i nyon mongs nga yi cho 'phrul te/ sangs rgyas sems can nga yi dur sa yin/ kun byed nga ni snang ba rang gsal che.

[94] gzhan gyis spyod* pa'i gnas med pas/ rang shar ye nas dag pa'i yul/ gzhan gyi yul min rang shes** bya.
*I corrected dpyad for spyod based on TDD, ** I corrected zhes for shes based on TDD.

[95] rang ni gzhan ltos chos dang bral.

> said is all fine about investigating how mental contents get formed, processed, and integrated and how mental activity relates to the world and others. Nevertheless, I think it doesn't address the nature of the fundamental aspect of consciousness. [...] one needs to go deeper into the most basic phenomenon of being conscious. (Ricard and Singer 2017, 243)

The idea of dissolving any sort of structure to enter into the open realm of freedom is nowhere as apparent as in the final vision of Direct Transcendence practice. With the manifestation of the fourth vision, our yogi reaches enlightenment. At that moment, he is truly liberated (*grol ba*), disrupts the sequence of cyclical existence and new births, and enters into a state of immortality (*'chis ba dang bral ba*, lit. "separated from death"). The recognition of the luminous appearances is said to impact the physical composition of the practitioners. All material things (including the elements such as earth) cease to exist and even the physical corporeality dematerializes. More specifically, the body is said to be transubstantiated and dissolved into a "body of light."

This chapter, however, brought our yogi's sky-gazing practice onto the ground by inscribing it within the perceptual cognitive processes that underly the visionary apparitions. In so doing, it demonstrated that the malleability of how we see the world is not the only insight we gain from the Direct Transcendence experimentation with consciousness. On the contrary, I demonstrated that while the great Dzogchen master enlisted the naturally emerging four visions to articulate a radical reprehension of the constricting nature of all other forms of tantric meditation practice, the actual phenomenological descriptions of the visionary manifestations are indicative of a more apprehending nature of human perception. In other words, if we examine Direct Transcendence as a technique to scrutinize the unconscious processing mechanisms involved in human perception, it becomes apparent that human mentation—whether it be conscious or unconscious—tends to make meaning, to create order, and to impose structure in order to generate knowledge. Even if meditation is frequently a freeing experience, it actually advances by creating new types of prisons.

The View from the Peak: From Skill to Participation

A group of the most famous meditation researchers recently compared meditation to a skill “that can be trained, similar to other human skills like music, mathematics, or sports” (A. Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007, 521). Comparable to learning to play the piano, meditation is frequently premised on the gradual training of mental faculties. The skill-model of meditation puts a premium on consciousness and awareness as the true catalyst of growth. Meditation, put differently, is oftentimes conceived as a top-down process, in which conscious and explicit processes have priority over unconscious and implicit ones. Meditation is an “executive” process, as our mind’s automatic processing abilities are subordinated to those over which we hold conscious control. Unconscious processes, in other words, are appreciated primarily inasmuch as they are trained, habituated, and transformed by the conscious mind.

While our conscious minds allow us to generate a vision for our future selves, to map out a path to reach this new identity, and to implement the steps necessary to accomplish our self-transformation, the unconscious is little more than a blind automaton. The sort of agency that comes from our preconscious selves is rarely that of self-fulfillment through creativity but rather that of conservation, stagnation, and preservation of the self. In the cognitive sciences, the nonconscious processes are represented as being primarily driven by what Baruch Spinoza called “conatus,” a will to live and a regulation of basic life-functions that insure the survival of the organism that is known as “homeostasis” amongst cognitive scientists. The behavioral responses of this drive are instinctual and automatic and are generally geared towards reproduction and survival.

According to the executive model of meditation, it is assumed that at least some of these automatic responses can be delayed or inhibited through repeated practice and that that this most basic level of homeostasis can be supplemented by something like a “sociocultural homeostasis” (Damasio 2010, 268). Thus, despite the emphasis on the plastic potential of culture, the emphasis lies on homeostasis rather than transformation.

CS further shares in this conservative conception of the self inasmuch as researchers focus on the integration of the self, both in terms of phenomenological experience and in terms of neurological brain states, as the highest goal of practice. As for the first aspect, meditation has been associated with the integration of one’s identity through the creation of a more realistic apperception of the self as a process

(Rubin 1996; S. L. Shapiro and Schwartz 2000; Farb et al. 2007; Rigby, Schultz, and Ryan 2014; Crescentini and Capurso 2015; Manuello et al. 2016; Xiao et al. 2017).

The notion of the integration of the self is also patent in the discussion of the neurological correlates of mindfulness meditation. In fact, some of the most influential studies on meditation have used results from EEGs in order to argue that mindfulness leads to synchronous and harmonious brain states (A. Lutz et al. 2004; Fell, Axmacher, and Haupt 2010; Berkovich-Ohana, Glicksohn, and Goldstein 2012; Cahn, Delorme, and Polich 2013; Ferrarelli et al. 2013). This emphasis on harmony, of course, reflects a more general tendency in the neurosciences as coherent oscillations across the brain has been considered to be one of the most distinctive markers of consciousness (Crick 1994; Koch 2004).

What is noteworthy here is that while both Buddhism and the cognitive sciences are frequently lauded as the "debunkers of the centralized Self," who recognize "that it is not a thing but a process, that it is fragile, that it is transient and always in flux, and so forth" (McNamara 2009, 147), the overall emphasis of CS rests firmly on stasis and stability. Although the humanities, who have been accused of "poorly disguise[ing] their nostalgia for Man" (Dubuisson 2003, 180), are not necessarily imbued with a profound appreciation for imbalance, instability, and renewal, they have nonetheless given rise to some critical voices. Consider, for example, Kelly Bulkely, who noted that the radical prioritization of consciousness is part of their promotion of a "cult of the prefrontal cortex" (Bulkeley 2004, 158).

The third part of this dissertation built on critiques such as these in order to show that there exist meditations that do not follow this top-down, executive, and skill-based model. Introducing Longchenpa's practical "philosophy of freedom," I showed that as Direct Transcendence was consolidated, it was conceived as a "participatory meditation," critical of any sort of effortful, repetitive, and acquired form of action. If we wanted to engage in our yogi's meditative practice, for instance, there is no need to painstakingly acquire a special skill: the openness of the sky is always already there above us, our perceptual capacities are always already perfected within our bodies, the ground for liberation is always already beneath us.

In chapter seven, I took such claims seriously and explored possible cognitive mechanisms that underlie spontaneous forms of meditation practice. Cognitively speaking, Longchenpa promoted automatic, effortless, and implicit processing—what cognitive scientists call "system 1 thinking"—as the primary means of spiritual advancement. Scrutinizing the highlight of Direct Transcendence practice, namely the

"four visions," I presented them as a means to study the full spectrum of human consciousness. More specifically, I argued that participatory meditation is premised on the cultivation of awareness of processes that are usually operating unconsciously.

This being said, while this type of contemplation offers a new type of freedom by radically prioritizing the unconscious, chapter eight proceeded to reveal surprisingly constrictive tendencies in our mind's implicit processes. Indeed, although Dzogchen claims that "liberation" takes place upon "seeing nakedly" (*cer mthong 'drol*), I have shown that the Direct Transcendence visions are not necessarily marked by this type of bareness.

On the contrary, when human imagination is allowed to run freely, it seems to perceive things not nakedly but rather in heavily "clothed" formations. Both imagination and perception are ultimately bound by our inherent need for meaning-making, on the one hand, and our biocultural memories and habits, on the other. To paraphrase, even the deepest form of visionary freedom is enmeshed with new forms of apprehension as our unconscious minds present us with a self-generated reality that is just as consolidated, congealed, and structured. The implicit processes he endorses with his philosophy of freedom might not be that different from the conscious forms of cognition that Longchenpa admonishes throughout his teachings.

IV: The Scholastic Turn in the Great Perfection (14th century)

Chapter 9: "This is an Extremely Important Point!": The Systematization of Dzogchen and the Prison of Philosophy

The Base of the Mountain: The Rise of Scholasticism and Longchenpa's Political Persecution

After the Great Perfection gradually dealt with its turbulent past—also through the practice of Direct Transcendence—it was the work of Longchenpa, which allowed the tradition to assert its identity as an independent religious movement on par with the other groups on the Tibetan plateau. Situating Longchenpa on the ground of history, we see that at least some of his systematization of the philosophy of freedom was due to the socio-political circumstances that provide the context for his life and work. The age during which our great yogi lived, was a time in which scholastic philosophers, the engineers of Tibetan religion, rose to prominence. While the applicability of this term to the Buddhist context has been debated (Cabezón 1994; L. W. J. Van der Kuijp 1998; Cabezón 1998; Coseru 2012, 26), there is no doubt that the rise of "scholasticism" in the fourteenth century allowed Tibetans to systematize individual traditions through terrific intellectual prowess.

The scholastics relied on the epistemological movement (*blo rigs*) of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti and promoted their predilection for conceptual and inferential understanding (Skt. *pramāṇa*, Tib. *tshad ma*) over perception (Skt. *pratyakṣa*, Tib. *mngon sum*) (A. C. Klein 1986, 19). Consequently, it is no surprise that the age of Longchenpa was a period in which his tradition's "dismissal of literalness-obsessed intellectualism, its rejection of syllogistically-bound analysis, and its constant invocation of natural spontaneity" (Germano 1994, 298), were bound to cause harsh reactions. If scholasticism's logical discourse has been analyzed in terms of its pan-Indian currency and interpreted as a risk for the obliteration of a distinctively Buddhist identity (R. M. Davidson 2002), this is even more true in our case. In fact, it could be argued that the turn to scholasticism represented an existential threat to Dzogchen's ethos of freedom. The rise of this powerful philosophical orientation, so much is clear, made it an urgent matter for the Ancient School to articulate its intellectual self and then put it on the religious map of the fourteenth century.

As we previously saw, Longchenpa not only "put the tradition in its classical form," but "he also managed to integrate its doctrines and practices into the increasingly normative modernist discourses that had taken shape from the Indian Buddhist logico-epistemological circles, Madhyamaka, Yogacara, and tantric traditions of the late tenth to thirteenth centuries" (Germano 1994, 274). There is no

doubt that he was predisposed to ward off scholastic attacks because he himself was intimately familiar with the frameworks constructed by the Sarma traditions.

Gifted with an exceptional intellectual acumen, he not only received his ordination at Samye—the indisputable spiritual home of the Ancient School—but also spent several years at Tibet's leading Sarma center for the study of philosophy, namely Sangphu Neütok (*gsang phu ne'u thog*). At age nineteen, Longchenpa entered the weightiest monastic college of the New Schools, which specialized in epistemology, logic, and dialectical philosophical systems. Founded by the Kadampas in 1073, the seminary was central to installation of Buddhist epistemological studies in Tibet and would play a vital role in the establishment of the what is arguably the most "architectonic" tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, namely the Gelugpa School (L. W. J. Van der Kuijp 1987, 125; Onoda 1990; Everding 2009; Hugon 2016).

"The fourteenth century," so one scholar suggested, "became a time during which the enormous mass of teachings transmitted from India was systematized" (Dreyfus 1997). The rise of a self-confident Tibetan academic industry, aimed at systematic presentations of the entire range of Indian Buddhist material, can be illustrated in numerous near-contemporaries of Longchenpa: Butön Rinchen Drup (*bu ston rin chen grub*, 1290-1364) codified the Tibetan Buddhist canon, Dölpopa Sherap Gyeltsen (*dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan*, 1292-1361) founded the Jonang (*jo nang*) tradition based on his controversial "extrinsic emptiness" teaching, and Tsongkhapa (*tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*, 1357-1419) established the Gelug (*dge lugs*) School based on his vast learning and a rigorous standard of thought and practice.

More generally speaking, as the monastic institutions and sects started to define their teachings, the Tibetan religious landscape became less flexible and fluid than in previous centuries. In this context of increased contest, Longchenpa faced particular challenges. Consider, for example, the fact that Butön's catalogue of the Buddha's word (*bka' 'gyur*) and the commentaries (*bstan 'gyur*)—which lasted from 1347 to 1351—excluded many core Nyingma tantras and Great Perfection Treasures because they were judged to be inauthentic.

Furthermore, as Arguillère specified, the fourteenth century was not only "the philosophical period *par excellence*," but also one of great political upheavals. In this sense, Longchenpa's epoch can only be understood if we consider the amalgamation of various intellectual and socio-political contingencies, such as the "unachieved elaboration of dogmas," "the unfinished constitution of the canon," and "the still sought-after construction of a unified Tibetan state" (Arguillère 2007, 32). From a

historical perspective, so Gregory Hillis showed, the experience of imprisonment was very familiar to Longchenpa himself as he suffered political persecution during the second part of his life (Hillis 2003).

Longchenpa was closely associated with Gompa Künrin (*sgom pa kun rin*) of the Drigung (*'bri gung*) sub-sect of the Kagyü school, one of the most forcible adversaries of the Tai Situ Changchup Gyeltsen of the Phakmodrupa order. Longchenpa became so embroiled in the political feud between these two movements that he had to flee to Bhutan in the 1950s. It appears that his last great work, *The Treasury of the Way of Abiding* was actually redacted during those years in exile (Arguillère 2007, 157).

These intellectual and political pressures are also reflected in some of Longchenpa's autobiographical poems, such as *The Joyful Tale of Potala* or *The Swan's Questions and Answers*. In those "poems of renunciation," Longchenpa tells of his religious journeys, in which he leaves the spiritually corrupted atmosphere of monastic institutions in search of contexts that were more conducive to his philosophy of freedom, "a mythical haven of peace and liberation" (Higgins 2013, 44). In another text, entitled *The Forest Delight* Longchenpa describes a hero-saint "who lives a life of contemplation and who, although materialistically deficient, possesses the real wealth of religious discipline, knowledge and wisdom, but who is also not acknowledged for these attributes" (Ifergan 2014, 60). These texts clearly represent a protest against dominant value system amongst the New Schools, where philosophical acumen, monastic power, and political corruption would go hand in hand.

While biographers have averred that Longchenpa apparently became so embroiled in the political turmoil of these years that he was held to be one of the opponents of the Tai Situ Changchup Gyeltsen, it is less than clear how the philosopher of freedom became involved in such a worldly feud. While this chapter will not provide a direct answer to this question, I suggest that Longchenpa's philosophy of freedom was certainly a powerful new force on the Tibetan plateau and therefore anything but an inconsequential matter.

The Architecture of the Philosophy of Freedom

In chapter 7, I have shown that Longchenpa's philosophy of freedom is premised on his radical endorsement of implicit processing. Longchenpa is scolding towards any sort of goal-oriented, intentional, and dualistic mind-set; whether it be practical, psychological, or epistemological. Longchenpa's opposition to tantric approaches of Buddhist enlightenment is frequently expressed as a refutation of construction by

what he calls the "craftsperson" or "architect" (*bzo bo*) (Lobel 2018, 177). "Longchenpa," so Lobel recently confirmed, "claims that the non-Great Perfection visionary methods rely on the architect of samsaric mind—cause and effect and dualistic perception—rather than undermining samsaric mind through practicing primordial freedom" (Lobel 2018, 193).

This being said, there is little doubt that Longchenpa was the uncontested "philosophical architect" of the Great Perfection. As David Germano suggested, "while continuing the earlier emphasis on non-discursive experience and simplicity thematically and hermeneutically […] the Seminal Heart literature is clearly a genre of philosophical tantra that is systematic, complex and extremely architectonic" (Germano 1994, 297). Longchenpa's most famous works are the so-called *Seven Treasuries*, with two of them—*The Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* and *The Treasury of Words and Meaning*—being specifically dedicated to the systematic exegesis and interpretation of every minute aspect of the Seminal Heart Great Perfection.

Although the dating of these texts has been a matter of controversy in the past, Stéphane Arguillère, in what is the most detailed study of the great master's life and work, elucidated that Longchenpa wrote his two systematic treasuries between age 35 and 38, in 1343 and 1346, and the remainder of the treasuries in the years that followed (Arguillère 2007, 101). What really matters, in the grand scheme of things, is that their systematic thrust, their wide-ranging investigation, and their structural order perfectly epitomize the transformations that the Great Perfection underwent during the fourteenth century.

In order to maintain his tradition's newfound role as a self-confident and explicit participant in the religious world of Tibet, the Great Perfection systematizer needed to clarify his tradition's authenticity. The most tangible expression of this role as the chief architect of Nyingma identity might not be found in his textual production but rather in his endeavors at restoring the "Hat Temple" (*zhwa'i lha khang*), which he undertook during roughly the same years as the Butön codified the textual canon of the New Schools.

Of course, we already saw how this temple's history shares in the profoundest sources of the Nyingma identity, having been founded by Nyang Tingdzin Zangpo around the late eighth or early ninth century during the royal period. You might also remember that it played a crucial role in the history of the Great Perfection as it was used to store *The Seventeen Tantras*, which are said to have been concealed during the time of the Great Tibetan empire and revealed in the period after its fall. To be clear,

in restoring the temple that supposedly enclosed *The Seventeen Tantras* during fall of the Tibetan empire and the rise of the New Schools, Longchenpa relies on architectonic means to authenticate his own tradition's philosophy of freedom in light of a new wave of marginalization that swept over Tibet in the form of systematization.

In the following pages, I will scrutinize Longchenpa's philosophy of freedom in more detail in order to shed light on some of the ways that his systematization can be seen as diametrically opposed to the participatory form of experience he endorses. As Arguillère, in his inimitable philosophical style, suggested, "non-determination (*indétermination*) itself is determination (*détermination*): If all determination is negation, as Spinoza put it, paradoxically indetermination, as negation of determination, is equally conceivable as determination" (Arguillère 2007, 361).

The Preceptor and the Policing of Boundaries of Freedom

Throughout his extensive discussions of the subtle body, we note that virtually all elements of Longchenpa's account of the visionary anatomy contained elements that were supposed to distinguish his movement from that of the tantric traditions of the New Schools. Usually, this distinction is reflected in the division between their coarse physical (i.e. ordinarily tantric) and their subtler spiritual (i.e. Dzogchen) aspects of the body. The seminal nuclei are either sperm and hormones in their conventional form, or luminous lights in their ultimate form. The winds are either referring to the metabolism, digestion, and breath, or to the pure effulgence of awareness. The channels consist of the "luminous" variety, or the three primary channels of the tantric subtle body.

Given the contested nature of the origination of the Great Perfection in Tibet, this polemical self-assertion is not unusual. More surprisingly, Longchenpa's philosophy of freedom was not only delimitating in regards to the contemplative systems of the New Schools, but even in relationship to certain currents within his very own tradition. The "water lamp of the far-reaching lasso," for instance, can both be "pure," when it is recognized to be the tips of the luminous channel located in the center of the pupil, or "impure," when it is identified as the physical eye itself. Similarly, the heart can be both physiological flesh (*sha*) identified with the biological heart (*snying*) or the spiritual center of humans, identified as *tsitta*.

There are more instances in which the systematizer of Dzogchen policed the borders of freedom even within the tradition of emancipators itself. An example of note is when Longchenpa—without acknowledging this emendation—offers his

meditative instructions with a slight modification regarding the textual citation from an old tantra that he uses to bolster his argument. In commenting on a passage from *The Great Esoteric Tantra Devoid of Letters*, where the practitioner is instructed to "press the eyes firmly" (*mig ni rab tu mnan bya*) in order to stimulate the manifestation of the linked chains, Longchenpa writes: "the esoteric precept of the placement of awareness involves a *slight* pressing of the eyes while gazing to the side" (TDD, 386.2).[96] The ever so subtle substitution of the adverb preceding the term "to press" (*mnan*) from "firmly" (*rab tu*) to "slightly" (*rtsam*) is likely not due to a lapse of attention but rather an assertion of Longchenpa's very own priorities over the scriptural materials at his disposal. The amended adverbial qualification tones down the activist stance of the original scripture and gives the instruction a more "spontaneist" connotation. This is why, I believe that the modification is intentional and likely rooted in the systematizer's attempt to establish his philosophy of freedom as the standard model of Direct Transcendence meditation—thus distinguishing his tradition decisively from the teachings and practices of the New Schools.

Another example of intra-sectarian policing is the distinction between "visionary experiences" (*snang nyams*) and "mental experiences" (*shes nyams*), which Longchenpa originally introduced to assert the superiority of the Direct Transcendence over Sarma forms of meditation. Reasoning that the Direct Transcendence provides insights that are non-discursive in nature, the fourteenth-century giant highlights the primacy of this practice, not only over Sarma contemplations but also over the other central contemplative technique embraced by the Great Perfection, namely Breakthrough (*khregs chod*). Breakthrough is a meditative technique that presents itself as firmly anchored within the essence of relaxation as it operates through the invocation of poetic imagery of naturalness, purity, un-fabricated-ness, and freedom. The practice is famous for being predicated on effortlessness, which is assumed to give access to the mind's emptiness and primordial purity.

In Longchenpa's work, however, Breakthrough is critiqued for being not "experiential" enough and for relying too much on discursive thinking. In the two *Treasuries* concerned with the articulation of Dzogchen's philosophy of freedom, Longchenpa cites a series of passages from *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound* to make this point. There we find a typical articulation of the centrality of "visionary experiences"

[96] rig pa cog gzhag gi man ngag ni / mig yid tsam mnan nas zur la bltas pas.

as the text speaks of "wisdom's key point is that it emerges from the eyes" (GTG, 158.3),[97] of the "ceasing of the flickering memories of conceptuality through nakedly seeing the linked chains" (GTG, 177.4),[98] and of the "special feature of reality's immediacy," through which "all sentient beings are residing nowhere else than in Buddhahood" (GTG, 137.1).[99]

Longchenpa, however, far from simply collecting these spread-out textual references and weaving them together into a tight narrative, also appropriates them for his own purposes. In fact, he proceeds to make a much stronger plea. He not only asserts the importance of sensory liberation in Direct Transcendence practice but also articulates that this is the reason for its ascendency over any other form of meditation. Specifically, he relies on these scriptural passages to introduce a series of seven "particularities" (*khyad par*) to differentiate the two main Dzogchen practices. Obviously, he gives Direct Transcendence priority in virtually every category, thus denigrating Breakthrough to a secondary technique.

While this seven-fold polemic appears both in *The Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* (TCD, chapter eight) and *The Treasury of Words and Meaning*, I focus here on the latter version. To start, Longchenpa points out that while "in Breakthrough, one seeks wisdom from out of the conceptual (*rtog bcas*) radiation in the gateway of the mind," Direct Transcendence "is superior to this because it involves the luminous radiation (*'od gsal gyi gdangs*) of non-conceptual (*rtog med*) awareness as it shines forth from the eyes" (TDD. 366.1).[100] In the same vein, he argues that while Breakthrough is marked by the "uninterrupted arising of various conceptual thoughts (*rtog pa sna tshogs*)," during Direct Transcendence, "when nakedly seeing the linked chains in naked vision through the faculty of the luminous channels' brightness, all conceptual thoughts cease instantaneously and wisdom appearances shine forth boundlessly" (TDD, 366.2).[101]

[97] ye shes gnad ni mig nas 'byung.

[98] lu gu rgyud du cer mthong bas/ rnam rtog 'gyu ba'i dran pa 'gags.

[99] chos nyid mngon sum khyod par gyis/ dbang po rno dang rtul med par/ sems can thams cad sangs rgyas las/ gzhan du gnas pa ma yin no.

[100] khrags chod du yid kyi sgo rtog bcas kyi gdangs las ye shes 'tshol ba las 'dir rig pa rtog med 'od gsal gyi gdangs mig nas 'char ba ngos 'dzin pas kyang 'phags te.

[101] khregs chod du yul snang tshogs drug gi snang ba 'dzin pa'i dbang pos mthong bas rtog pa sna tshogs su 'char ba rgyun mi 'chad pa las 'dir 'od rtsa dangs pa'i dbang pos lu gu rgyud cer mthong dus rtog pa dus gcig la 'gag cing ye shes kyi snang cha dpag tu med pa 'char ba ni.

Conversely, describing Breakthrough as a meditation centered on conceptuality, in which "wisdom is not directly looked at (*dngos su bltar med*)," he concludes that Direct Transcendence is "superior in its greatness" (*ches bas 'phags*) because it is "directly seen" (*dngos su mthong*) (TDD, 366.4).[102] In other words, what Longchenpa implies is that while Breakthrough might be giving rise to visions, there are "no "manifestations" (*snang ba*) other than confused appearances (*'khrul snang*) and thus the mind, which fixates (*'dzin*) upon confused appearances will become deluded cognition (*'khrul shes*) (TDD, 366.6).[103] In his concluding annotations, Longchenpa summarizes the upper hand of Direct Transcendence in the following terms:

> Furthermore, [Direct Transcendence] is superior as it involves seeing through the faculties (*dbang pos*), they are independent of the words of mental analysis (*yid dpyod kyi tshig*) and insight (*shes rab*). There is no difference between faculties as sharp versus dull or karma as good versus bad because the three Buddha bodies manifest (*snang*) on the path. (TDD, 368.5)[104]

If Breakthrough gives access to a state of mind that needs to be cultivated before engaging in Direct Transcendence, there is still no doubt that Tögal is decisively superior to Breakthrough. This systematization, however, is not an ahistorical fact, but rather an upshot of a specific moment in time. While the rise to prominence of the sky-gazing practice is likely coinciding with the life and work of Longchenpa, what is most noteworthy is that the hierarchy that the systematizer seems to recapitulate so naturally stands in stark contrast to the fluidity of reality.

The hierarchical ordering of the two main practices is not only absent in the *Seventeen Tantras* but even contradictory to some other early interpretations of Great Perfection practice. Franz-Karl Ehrhard, for example, cites a text by Ngawang Palzang (*ngag dbang dpal byang*, 1879-1941), where the Nyingma master clearly articulates that

[102] khregs chod du ye shes dngos su bltar med la/ 'dir dngos su mthong bas phyis mang la gyi grong khyer rgyun gcod pa'i che bas 'phags te.

[103] snang ba 'od kyi khyad par ni/ khregs chod du 'khrul snang las mi snang la/ 'khrul snang 'dzin pa'i shes pa ni 'khrul shes su 'gyur bas don la gzung 'dzin las mi 'da' ste.

[104] gzhan yang yid dpyod kyi tshig dang/ shes rab la mi ltos par dbang pos mthong ba dang/ dbang po la rno rtul med pa dang/ las la bzang ngan med pa dang/ sku gsum lam du snang bas 'phags te.

there existed an "old custom" (*alter Brauch*) according to which Direct Transcendence served as a preparatory practice to Breakthrough (Ehrhard 1990, 69).

Based on these examples it is evident that Longchenpa not only critiqued the New Schools but even acted as a sort of preceptor within his own tradition. Phrased differently, in accordance with the etymology of the term—which comes from the Latin *praecept* (*prae-capere*), meaning both "warned" and "instructed"—he saw himself as both a teacher and someone that would signal against corruptions within the ethos of freedom.

The Precepts and the Corralling of the Bulls of Ignorance

In his policing of the boundaries of freedom, Longchenpa relies on a particular formula of gravitas, which he wields unrelentingly to distinguish his point of view from that of his antagonists, namely "this is an extremely important point" (*gnad 'di gal che ba*, *chings gal po che*). In one passage, for instance, he explores various differences between Direct Transcendence and Breakthrough and remarks that "while such key points (*gnad*) are explained in the Great Perfection, nowadays I (*kho bo*) alone (*tsam*) have clearly realized it, and thus understood how to interpret these tenets. This is an extremely important point (*gnad shin tu che ba*)" (TDD, 429.2).[105]

Unlike *The Seventeen Tantras*, which are said to have been authored by transcendent Buddhas, Longchenpa embodies here his role, that of the preceptor of freedom, who proclaims the truth based on his own meditative achievements and intellectual insights. Longchenpa's confidence is—throughout his polemical writings—teetering on the edge of self-conceit. As Ifergan noted, he repeatedly invokes the "motif of protest and critique of others' inadequate Buddhist conduct," while simultaneously proclaiming his "self-perception as a faithful and superior protector of pure Buddhist values" (Ifergan 2014, 57).

Besides the anatomy of the subtle body and the practice of Breakthrough, Longchenpa also relied on more philosophical distinctions in order to delineate the boundaries of freedom. While there exist passages in which he addresses "some people" (*kha cig*), who "refer to the dimension of the 'ground' (*gzhi*) as 'universal ground' (*kun gzhi*)" (TDD, 233.3),[106] the most famous philosophical controversy that

[105] rdzogs pa chen 'di nas gnad 'di lta bu bshad kyang gsal bar rtogs nas grub mtha' slong shes pa ni ding sang kho bo tsam du zad do/ 'di gnad shin tu che bar yod do.

[106] For a more extensive discussion, see (Germano 1992, 626–29).

quickened his efforts at policing the boundaries of freedom was that between the "ordinary mind" (*sems*) and "wisdom" (*ye shes*, lit. "primordial knowing").

This border is so crucial to Longchenpa's philosophical system that it has been identified as the central organizing trope by David Higgins, who claimed that "an assessment of Klong chen pa's extant corpus reveals the mind/primordial knowing distinction to be a central and unifying theme in the author's rDzogs chen writings" (Higgins 2013, 21). Higgins also noted that Longchenpa not only returned "again and again" to this theme, but also characterized it as "extremely important" (*shin tu gal po che*)" (Higgins 2013, 21–22).

As for the distinction between mind and wisdom, while the former term designates the neurotic, conceptual, and dualistic way of thinking of non-enlightened human beings, the latter stands for an ever-present (*ye*) type of intelligence (*shes*), a "primordial wisdom" (*ye shes*). In a passage from Longchenpa's *Treasury of Words and Meaning,* we read:

> The illusory appearances (*'khrul snang*) of the mind's (*sems kyi*) objects are the phenomena of *saṃṣāra* and summarized into six aspects: form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and phenomena. All of these manifest (*snang ba*) from the mind's karmic propensities (*sems kyi bag chags*) like various strands of hair (i.e. optical illusions). If one wonders why they appear (*snang*), they manifest (*snang*) because of the confused mind. Conversely, the object of wisdom is the sky-like pure reality of vast and luminous appearances (*snang ba*) of pure-land presences (*snang*) of spiritual bodies and wisdom. (TDD, 239.1)[107]

In chapter seven, I maintained that the principles of freedom, spontaneity, and naturalness, which I identified with the implicit processing mode of our minds, is premised on the distinction between "appearing" (*snang ba*) and "looking" (*lta ba*). In the passages that follow, it becomes palpable that such a philosophy of freedom runs the risk of dissipating in its epiphanizing openness. Longchenpa himself cerebrates on this dilemma, commenting that while many people claim that

[107] de la sems kyi yul 'khrul snang 'khor ba'i chos te bsdu na gzugs sgra dri ro reg dang chos te drug go/ 'di dag sems kyi bag chags las skra shad kyi rnam par snang ba ste/ gang la snang na 'khrul pa'i sems la snang ba'o/ ye shes kyi yul ni dag pa'i chos nyid nam mkha' lta bu dang/ 'od gsal gyi snang ba sku dang ye shes kyi zhing snang rgya che ba rnams so.

> since these appearances (*snang ba*) manifest (*snang*) as illusions (*'khrul*), it would follow that radiant light is an illusionary appearance (*'khrul snang*). Since these appearances (*snang ba*) commonly manifest (*snang*) in the minds of ordinary sentient beings, it would follow that clear light also commonly manifests (*snang*). If you believe that, then it would follow that all beings are freed just like great practitioners. (TDD, 239.4)[108]

Put differently, premised on the apparently opening dimensions of the term *snang ba*, Longchenpa sees himself forced to set up walls between his philosophy of freedom and the thinking of other tantric traditions. A few lines below, Longchenpa's writing takes on a more aggressive tone, leaving no doubt to what extent his philosophy of freedom needed to be protected from distortions.

> To expand on this, these days common fools say: "Appearances (*snang ba*) are your own mind (*rang gi sems*)!" Appearances (*snang ba*) are the Reality Body! Wisdom (*ye shes*) is the mind (*sems*)! There is no difference between such people and the lunatics, who say whatever comes to their mind: "My head is my butt! Fire is water! Darkness is light." (TDD, 240.6)[109]

In consistently bearing down on the radical difference between his philosophy of freedom and any other teachings on the plateau, Longchenpa policed the boundaries of his own tradition. In so doing, he contributed to the imprisoning of the very emancipatory tradition that he himself promoted as the ultimate source of freedom. In these types of contested arguments, the *preceptor* of freedom also displayed a certain degree of *conceit*. In other words, his desire to "take" (*capere*) freedom "before" (*prae*) it could be destroyed by others, led him to cultivate an "exaggerated" (*con*) "apprehension" (*capere*) of both freedom and himself.

[108] yang snang ba 'di 'khrul bar snang bas 'do gsal 'khrul snang du thal ba dang/ snang ba sems can phal la mthun snang du yod pa'i phyir 'od gsal mthun snang du grub par thal te/ 'dod na thams cadrnal 'byor pa bzhin du grol bar thal ba dang.

[109] de'ng ding sang rnongs pa phal pa dag gis snang ba rang gi sems yin/ snang ba chos sku yin/ me chu yin/ mun pa snang ba yin zhes ci rung rung smra ba'i smyon pa rnams dang khyad med pa las.

Lest the perceptive reader interpret my own "creative etymologizing" as a form of Freudian *Übertragung* let me make it clear that Longchenpa, in some instances, even invokes the language of incarceration to impugn his opponents. "In brief," he concludes his tirade against anyone questioning the preeminence of wisdom and its appearances, "those who make these absurd claims resemble a herd of bulls that should be put into a single corral (*phyogs gcig tu bzhag*), since they are not even worthy to be defeated through scriptural citation or logical reasoning" (TDD, 242.1).[110]

Longchenpa's role as preceptor, who imprisons both his own tradition and that of others, is also related to another term with the same etymology, namely the "precept." In the Buddhist context, such rules, disciplines, or principles, which are themselves "learned (*capere*) "beforehand" (*pre*), are usually designated as *śīla* in Sanskrit or *tshul krims* in Tibetan. Offering a close reading of *The Treasury of the Way of Abiding*, Lobel recently asserted that Longchenpa, by embracing the "spacious aspects of primordial freedom […] modifies the meaning of ethical commitment by dispossessing the practitioner of a conventional sense of rules and responsibility" (Lobel 2018, 297–98).

He is, of course, not wrong in this analysis. In the Sarma traditions, the sacred tantric "commitments" (Tib. *dam tshig*, Skt. *samaya*) are administered during initiatory "empowerments" (*dbang*) in the form of "a sacramental drop of sexual fluids or, more typically, perfumed water that is ingested, so that the same term refers to both the tantric vow and the sacramental drop" (Dalton 2013, 60).

By contrast, in the Great Perfection, we find four vows, which are marked by their simplicity, and defined as "absence" (*med pa*), "intensity" (*phyal pa*), "spontaneity" (*lhun grub*), and "uniqueness" (*gcig pu*). The commitments, thus, do truly lose much of their ritualistic, prescriptive, and protective valence. For instance, if the Great Perfection celebrates the heart (*tsitta*) as the locus of our inborn awareness and thus considers the vows to be "intrinsically embodied" (*lhun gyis grub pa nyid du gnas pa*) in the "Mind of Enlightenment" (*byang chub kyi sems*) (Karmay 2007, 46), the New Schools hold a different version. Their texts insist that as the sacramental drop is swallowed, it flows through the body to arrive at the heart, where it stays for the remainder of the practitioner's life. As Dalton put it, "as long as the vow is maintained, this internal sacrament provides protection, but should the vow be broken, the drop

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[110] mdor na de skad smra na ba lang gi khyur phyogs gcig tu bzhag ste/ lung rigs kyis bzlog rin mi chog ste.

will turn to poison and cause terrible and often graphically described agonies" (Dalton 2013, 60).

Yet as with the cross-traditional fertilization of the subtle body theory, an ethics of freedom brings certain risks with it. This is not only true historically, as innatist doctrines in Tibet have frequently been associated with "ethical relativism or antinomianism" (Ruegg 1989, 120–22), but also assented by scholars of Dzogchen: "Assuming such a notion of responsibility, Longchenpa's emphasis upon spontaneity, effortlessness, and a critique of voluntarism and teleological intentionality leaves his system open to the charge of moral *irresponsibility* in the literal sense" (Lobel 2018, 284). It is in this context of the inherent risks of utter freedom that Longchenpa's ethical system must be explored as yet another institution of his delimitation of freedom.

In fact, it could be argued that the Great Perfection's four vows are—despite the rhetoric of radical freedom surrounding them—not entirely emancipatory in nature. Indeed, in his *Treasury of Words and Meaning*, he speaks of the "four great binds (*chings chen po bzhi*) of the commitments (*dam tshig*)" (TDD, 308.6). Commentators have not missed this contradiction in Longchenpa's ethical system. In discussing his last major work, *The Treasury of the Way of Abiding*—which is precisely structured around the "four great commitments of the Great Perfection" (*dam tshig chen po bzhi*)—various scholars concluded that it effectuates by means of a logic of imprisonment through freedom (Hillis 2003; Lobel 2018). The ethical system of the four vows is premised on the paradoxical idea of "binding" the adept to the "freedom" of non-commitment. Consider, for instance, Hillis' legalistic interpretation of the four commitments, which reads as follows:

> (1) indicting (*gnad krol)* within [the courtroom of] suchness, (2) confining (*'gag bsdam)* within [the prison of] the actual self-emergent primordial wisdom, (3) binding (*chings su bcings ba)* [within the cell of] the unproduced which is beyond the domain of any thought, and (4) convicting (*la bzla ba),* within that which transcends the causal networks of activity and striving. (Hillis 2003, 265)

The Prison of Concepts and the Police Lineup of Contemplative Experience

As one of the English translations for the ethical "commitment" is "word-bound" (*dam tshig*),[111] it is not too surprising that Longchenpa's reflections on how ethical commitments are intimately connected to his conception of language. While I will argue that Longchenpa's words, like the precepts, are both coercing and liberating in nature, scholarship on the Great Perfection generally favors the latter dimension.

In practice, thought, and language, the spiritual practitioner is warned against becoming an architect, who creates a clear outline for contemplative exercises, structures of doctrinal thinking, or elaborate systematic treatises. "The attempt made by the confused architect to construct its way out of imprisonment," so Lobel concludes, "only adds further layers of entrapment by reifying the very techniques it designs, constructing a proliferation of confused acts in the efforts to bring karmic causality to rest. The architect's structures then become prisons" (Lobel 2018, 179). Corresponding observations have been made earlier by Arguillère, who perceived that Longchenpa rebuked Buddhist scholastics because they relied on the functioning of the ordinary mind (*sems*), which "does not give way to receptivity or passivity, through which one would open oneself up to the alterity of the world, but is rather *constructed* by itself" (Arguillère 2007, 389).

Their ideas can be backed up with textual evidence from Longchenpa's works. In his *Treasury of Philosophical Positions,* for instance, he advocates for a "non-conceptual (*rnam par mi rtog pa*) wisdom that is not a *mental construct* (*blos ma byas pa*) [but rather] the very quintessence of the Reality Body as the ground" (GTD, 1013.3).[112] Similarly, in his *The Adamantine Song of Definitive Examples and Meaning*, for instance, Longchenpa compares "philosophical systems" (*grub mtha'*) to the "spittle of worms" (*srin gyi kha chu*), reasoning that they lead us "to ensnare (*'ching*) our very own existence (*rang rgyud rang gis*)." Instead, he counsels that "it is best if there is no more clinging (*'dzin pa*) to assertions as reality is free from limitations (*mtha' bral*)" (PDN, 223.1).[113]

This being said, Longchenpa's systematization is anything but free from limitations. This is also apparent in the form of the philosophical writing itself, which

[111] It can, of course, also be translated as "sublime" or "sacred" word as the term *dam* has multiple meanings.

[112] blos ma byas pa'i ye shes rnam par mi rtog pa chos sku'i snying po gzhir gtan la phebs nas.

[113] grub mtha' srin gyi kha chu 'dra/ rang rgyud rang gis 'ching ba la/ da res mtha' bral chos nyid don/ khas len 'dzin pa med na legs.

has been recognized as part of a "genre of literature," which "is scholastic not only in its clear love for language and thought for its own sake, but also in its intense structuration with analytical internal outlines (*sa bcad*)" (Germano 1994, 298). The term "*con-cept*," meaning as much as "capturing together," poignantly illustrates the captive nature of philosophical language.

Indeed, Longchenpa constructed his philosophical position by taking on a surprising number of attributes from his opponents. Digesting the works by Candrakīrti and Madhyamaka philosophy, Longchenpa's years at Sangphu were marked by his training in in epistemology, syllogism, and debate. The seven years he spent at the foremost monastic university, only about 15 kilometers southwest of Lhasa, had a great impact on his writings as it allowed him to pen exceedingly detailed scholastic texts and doxographies about the Dzogchen tradition.

Themes of construction, architecture, and enclosure can also be identified in specific texts attributed to Longchenpa. Consider, for example, *The Wish-Fulfilling Treasury*, *The Treasury of Instructions*, and *The Treasury of Spiritual Positions*. While the third is part of the "tenet system," and the former two can be classified as an expression of the "stages of the path" genre of Tibetan literature, all of these texts are structured by a causal logic, ethical considerations, and a gradualist picture of enlightenment. In short, the bulk of Longchenpa's treasuries involve the "deliberate effort to disclose the Great Perfection as fully harmonized with, in fact the culmination of, the Indian Buddhist inheritance of theory and practice" (Kapstein 2000, 178).

Of course, even the tantras themselves already contain references to the notion of imprisonment and its harmony with the architectonic-structuring mood of language. Consider, for example, *The Pearl Necklace Tantra*, where we find a passage discussing the "five emotional afflictions" (*nyon mongs lgna*) in terms of binding and constraint:

> If you know that the emotional afflictions are stainless, self-arisen, and natural, then how are human beings bound (*'ching*)? Concerning this, if you cling (*bzung*) to the truth, then even Buddha himself will be bound (*'ching*). Which human being could not be bound? If you know that there is no truth and no inherent existence, then the defilements are naturally purified like the naturally cleared dirt of water. […] If you are clinging to dualistic fixations, you will be stuck in cyclical existence for a long time. In the house of the three realms, you'll be locked into the prison

> (*btson par tshud*) of names and forms, restrained (*bsdams*) by the chains (*lcags*) of karma and ignorance. Separated from the self-arisen lamp, you'll be covered in the dense darkness of cyclical existence. (MTP, 487.3)[114]

The tantra continues by associating the various afflictions to "being bound" (*bcings*), "one's head wrapped" (*mgo gtums*), "being surrounded by armies" (*dmag gis bskor*), "one's neck being tied with a lasso" (*zhags pas skye nas btags*), and so forth. The highest point of this rhetoric of restriction, of course, is the recurrent theme of "imprisonment" (*btson par tshud*). In this passage, it is specified that human beings are locked into a specific type of prison, namely that of "names" (*ming*) and "forms" (*gzugs*).

The reader familiar with Buddhist philosophy and Abhidharma literature will have recognized that "name and form" (Skt. *nāma rūpa*; Tib. *ming dang gzugs*) is the designation used for the fourth of the twelve links of dependent arising (*rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba'i yan lag bcu gnyis*). More specifically, it stands for the five-aggregate model of the mind (Skt. *skandha*, Tib. *phung po*), according to which our mind operates as follows: *Form* arises before we feel a *sensation*, then we witness the manifestation of *perception*, then of *activity*, and finally of *consciousness*. Without going into an unnecessarily detailed discussion of this matter, the doctrine of the five aggregates explains how the human self constitutes itself due to our senses and our minds. Eleanor Rosch, who links the early Buddhist teachings of the *skandhas* directly to the enactive conception of the mind in the cognitive sciences, chronicles the process as follows:

> It begins with a living body with its dualistic senses; develops through that living being's perception of the world through the filter of what is felt to be good, bad, or indifferent for the subject pole of the dualism; develops yet further into habits based on actions to get the good, shun the bad, and ignore the indifferent; and ends with birth into a moment of consciousness already situated in a complete inner and outer "world"

[114] de bzhin nyon mongs dri ma med/ rang byung rang bzhin nyid shes na/ sems can 'ching bar ga la 'gyur/ de nyid la ni bden bzung na/ sangs rgyas nyid kyang 'ching bar 'gyur/ sems can rnams ni cis mi 'ching/ bden med rang bzhin med shes na/ dri ma rnams ni rang sar dag/ chu yi rnyog ma rang dangs ltar/ [...] gzung 'dzin dag gis bzung na ni/ 'khor ba nyid la yun ring gnas/ khams gsum pa yi khang pa ru/ ming dang gzugs kyi btson par tshud/ ma rig las kyi lcags kyis bsdams/ rang byung sgron ma nyid dang bral/ 'khor ba'i mun nag stug pos gyogs.

> stemming from whichever of the basic impulses (desire, aversion, or indifference) of the subject towards its objects predominates. (Rosch 2016, xxxxiv)

What matters most in our current discussion is that Dzogchen philosophy is aware that the human mind, particularly because of its inherent tendency to attribute "names" (*ming*) to its experience, is always running towards imprisonment. In other words, interpretation, definition, and categorization—the fundamental operations of the philosophical turn that came to dominate not only the fourteenth century but also Longchenpa's work—stand for the human mind's inherent trend to close itself off from lived experience. As another commentator put it, the "*skandhas* are simply mechanisms for presenting stimuli to the human mind, and allowing it to form representations of phenomena." The "consciousness," which emerges in this process, "can often come between us and a more immediate representation of outer reality by virtue of our ingrained tendency to attach concepts to all sense experience" (Fontana 2013, 36).

In *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, we find strikingly similar reflections on the workings of the human mind and its tendency to "represent" reality through language: "By the distinctive proliferation of secondary implications, everything is [labeled] with a specific name (*ming*) and the objects of bewilderment come to have two aspects" (GTG, 141.6).[115] The "two aspects" (*rnam gnyis*) is not only a reference to how our application of language contributes to dualistic grasping, but it is also an indication of how the experience and its linguistic representation are two different things. As David Germano observed, "because of the extensive discursiveness or 'naming' which comes to dominate our experience, a fissure develops between the immediate presence of that which presents itself to us, and their images which we create in fantasy and history, private and public" (Germano 1992, 437).

There is no doubt that this universal human tendency to enclose experience in conceptual thought grew into a frenzy of fortification during Tibet's century of philosophy, just as Longchenpa emerged as the Great Perfections main protagonist. This is nowhere as barefaced as in his two most sweeping expositions of Dzogchen philosophy, namely *The Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* and *The Treasury of Words and Meaning*. Both are entirely devoted to a philosophical comprehension of the Seminal

[115] yan lag spras pa tha dad las/ thams cad ming gi bye brag tu/ 'khrul pa'i yul la rnam gnyis 'gyur.

Heart Great Perfection, with the former being a tightly structured journey through eleven key points, and the latter representing an encyclopedic summary of all philosophical topics conceivable within Dzogchen. Although his *oeuvre* covers a wide range of styles, ranging anywhere from simple language to poetic-metaphorical musings, the two masterful expositions of the Seminal Heart teachings represent a commentary of *The Seventeen Tantras* and are characterized by explicit, analytical, and self-conscious language.

While Hatchell intuited that a certain tension between "style" and "content" exists already in *The Tantra of the Blazing Lamps*—as it is "literary, highly intellectual, sometimes obscure, and often scholastic" in terms of style (Hatchell 2014, 121)—such discrepancies becomes abundant in Longchenpa's writings. Here, the split between the freedom of mystical content and the strictures of scholastic form cause a cognitive dissonance. Oftentimes, the reader gets the distinct impression that the medium of language actually imprisons the philosophy of freedom contained therein. We could say that as the Great Perfection reached its highest philosophical expressions, the implicit, automatic, and unconscious processes that dominated its ethos of freedom started to become themselves encapsulated in the explicit strictures and structures of language.

Such a sense of language is also corroborated by certain theories in the cognitive sciences, particularly "verbal overshadowing." Here, language, being the art form, which is farthest removed sensory experience, is also associated with a loss of meaning, insight, and understanding. Coincidentally, for an inquiry primarily concerned with the policing nature of language in the work of Longchenpa, some of the most fascinating research on how language can be detrimental to our intuitive ways of knowing comes from experiments with police lineups. About three decades ago, Jonathan W. Schooler discovered that the verbal description of a face impaired his test subjects' ability to recognize that face (Schooler and Engstler-Schooler 1990; Dodson, Johnson, and Schooler 1997; Meissner and Brigham 2001; Dehon, Vanootighem, and Brédart 2013). As Malcolm Gladwell, referring to these findings, summed it up, "when it comes to faces, we are an awful lot better at visual recognition than we are at verbal description" (Gladwell 2005, 120).

Researchers whose focus lies on decision-taking processes made similar observations. Here too, evidence points against our natural tendency to assume that more information allows decision makers to make better choices. On the contrary, as many studies have evinced, complex decisions are best taken intuitively without

critical reflection and verbal conceptualization (G. Klein 2003). Some choices are better taken without activating the prefrontal cortex and the conceptual thinking abilities of our conscious minds.

What all of those instances have in common is the idea that extra information is not only useless but sometimes even harmful to our capacity to think. In short, the more information we have, the harder it is to process it. In this sense, the systematic articulation of the philosophy of freedom limits the space-like openness that is its marking characteristic. In fact, language, even if it speaks of freedom, frequently acts as a sort of prison. Lea Wernick Fridman beautifully illustrates this tension when she writes that precisely because "words are often used to mitigate and help us escape the experience that threatens," they also have certain negative connotations for our lives.

> To name is, to some extent, like taking a snapshot of a ship that has finally come into view. The ship is captured in the snapshot, its outlines preserved and frozen, even though it has sailed on to other ports, lies anchored, perhaps, or already has been retired from service and no longer exists as it did once. And thus, with the snapshot, the view of the ship is preserved but also removed from the life-world, altered, destroyed, and something else substituted. […] Like a series of snapshots (e.g., a snapshot of the ship first appearing on the horizon, a full-view snapshot, a snapshot of the ship disappearing on the horizon), a story or narrative provides a powerful illusion of the trajectory of an experience. The illusion is different from the experience, is informed by the experience, and, indeed, is in dialogue with the experience. But, it is not the experience. It is separate from the experience. (Fridman 2000, 129–30)

This type of separation from experience was precisely what our great yogi risked with his remarkable systematization of the Great Perfection philosophy of freedom. By staking out the boundaries of freedom to protect it from the competing forces on the Tibetan plateau, the architect of the Great Perfection pinned the openness of the sky onto the ground, crafted blue prints out of the playfulness of light, and turned luminous formations into solid walls.

Chapter 10: Setting Up Playdates with Enlightenment: The Introductions (*ngo sprod pa*) and the Self-Liberation of Language

The Base of the Mountain: Longchenpa as a Revolutionary Scholastic

As we saw in chapter nine, Longchenpa's philosophy of freedom, getting tied up in strictures of language, risked losing the very ethos it was intended to promote. With the mental framework being fixed and the boundaries between the Great Perfection and all other traditions being drawn, our yogi's philosophy of freedom became a project that ran the risk of bringing plasticity to a halt. Most importantly, perhaps, Longchenpa's language threatened to transform his practical philosophy, which grew out of Direct Transcendence as a form of participant meditation, into a tedious endeavor that was far removed from the contemplative experience that originally nourished its vitality.

Longchenpa's biography, of course, reflects this increasing limitation of freedom in a very visceral sense. Getting embroiled in political power-struggles, he had to flee to Bhutan where he spent several years of his life in exile. However, just as the master eventually returned from the neighboring Himalayan kingdom after being reconciled with Changchup Gyaltsen, the confining nature of Longchenpa's writing is only one side of a very complex *oeuvre*. Eventually, Longchenpa became a famous teacher, settling at White Skull Mountain, where we first encountered him during his Direct Transcendence practice. Living in his famous hermitage of Orgyen Dzong (*o rgyan rdzong*), Longchenpa not only continued to have visionary experiences, but he also received and transmitted treasure teachings, and wrote extensively on his own treatises.

As he settled in his retreat center, our yogi gradually changed his writing style over the years, with poetic compositions becoming his medium of choice rather late in life. As Germano noted, this shift in style testifies that Longchenpa was "losing interest in the systematizing scholasticism that absorbed his energies during his 30s and early 40s," to return to his "primary love, that of poetry, which bears its final fruit in the stunning beauty of CBD and NLD (such that he ends his brilliant literary life not with a scholastic survey or summation, but with poetic images)" (Germano 1992, 37).

This being said, Longchenpa's writings have always been diverse and copious and many of his earlier compositions are not scholastic in nature. Consider, for instance, his famous poem, entitled *The Thirty Letters of the Alphabet*, which he wrote

at a moment of great transition in his life. After spending seven formative years there, Longchenpa left Sangphu monastery as a young man out of a mixture between disgust and disillusion with the way of life he encountered in the renowned monastic institution. In an often-repeated story, the hagiographies relate how Longchenpa wrote this poem berating the unethical behavior of certain monks from the Eastern region of Kham, accusing them of being full of hatred and lust, of being violent, or of drinking beer. Stylistically, the text consists of thirty lines with each one of them opening with a different letter from the Tibetan alphabet. Posting the poem for everyone to see, tradition tells us that he left the monastery in 1334 and marched off into the mountains.

Frequently, our yogi's critique of the dominant way of thinking on the Tibetan plateau took on surreptitious forms as he would express his intentions not only through his writings' content but also through their form and medium. *The Thirty Letters of the Alphabet* is a text that forms part of Longchenpa's "poems of renunciation," which I introduced previously as an attempt to express his contempt for the cultural, political, and religious values of his age. Of course, there is no doubt that "the Great Perfection's *own* valorization of poetry, analogy and allegory as the primary mode of serious philosophical thought," represent a major "divergence from other types of Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism" (Germano 1994, 298).

As a consequence, scholarship has rightly noted that Longchenpa's application of the Indian *Kāvya* style for his critiques can be seen as a reflection of a "tendency to feel out of sync with the social, political, religious trends and events in Tibet" (Hillis 2003, 122). However, at the same time, the poems can be seen as "an ostentatious show of learning" (Lobel 2018, 89), a display of a skill that he acquired precisely in the flagship institution of the very same type of tradition that he vilifies (Guenther 1983, xi–xii).

A subtler version of this same logic can be seen in a passage found in *The Treasury of Words and Meanings*, where Longchenpa describes the fourth and final vision of Direct Transcendence and its intimate association with words, speech, and syllables:

> At the time of seeing the vision of reality's exhaustion, your body becomes like a sky-faring bird freed from a trap (*rnyi las bton pa*) through your mind entering into the matrix of radiant light. This is the merging with the Great Perfection's view of self-liberation (*rang grol*), such that

> panic and anxiety, expectation and disappointment, hope and terror disappear. Purifying physical karma through the word-empowerment (*tshig dbang*), exceedingly unelaborate (*spros pa med*) wisdom will arise (*shar*) self-emergently (*rang byung*). Your speech, like an echo, will be free from expression and apprehension through the syllables (*yi ge*) abiding within the channels re-entering into the seminal nuclei of the wind (*rlung gi thig le*). This is the meaning of "the ineffable Great Perfection merging with the resonance of speech," bringing mastery (*dbang*) with exceedingly unelaborate (*spros med*) wisdom transcendent of verbalization (*smra bya*). (TDD, 408.6)[116]

In this passage, we are, first of all, reminded that our yogi's philosophy of freedom grew out of his experiences during Direct Transcendence meditation. One only needs to think about the detailed accounts of the "four visions" (*snang ba bzhi*) in order to appreciate that Longchenpa's texts—best described as "lived narratives," "lived memories," or "phenomenological reports of lived experience"— are infused with something that once stood outside of the text.

At the same time, the passage seems to suggests that the absence of discursiveness, the freedom of experience, is only possible from within the framework of speech. Put differently, since philosophy reaches beyond discursiveness only through syllables, words, and discourses, emancipation is the result of being imprisoned in language rather than residing in some utterly open space beyond discursiveness. In the previously cited passage, Longchenpa illustrates how deeply engrained language is in our human nature by inserting it within our bodies in the form of syllables that reside in our vital channels. Concisely put, one of the most fundamental characteristics of Longchenpa's practical philosophy is his belief that it not only grows out of contemplative practice, but that it also transports us back into meditative experience.

All of his work, regardless of whether it is scholastic in nature or rather poetic, analogical, and allegorical in style, must be understood as a fight against the atrophy

[116] chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba mthong ba'i dus na lus mkha' 'gro rnyi las bton pa ltar song ba ni sems 'od gsal gyi dra bar tshud pa las 'byung ba ste/ 'di ni rdzogs pa chen po rang grol lugs kyi dmigs pa la zhugs pas nyam nga dang bag tsha dang re dogs dang dga' 'jigs med pa ste/ tshig dbang gi lus kyi las dag pas rab tu spros pa med pa'i ye shes rang byung du shar ba'o/ ngag brag ca'i rnam pa ltar brjod du med par song ba ni rtsa gnas kyi yi ge rlung gi thig ler tshud pa la 'byung ba ste/ rdzogs pa chen po brjod du med pa'i don ngag gi grag pa la zhugs te/ rab tu spros med smra bya'i yul las 'das pa'i ye shes la dbang ba'o.

of religious vitality in the confined space of language. Like a caged animal that is freed from its enclosure, language leads the reader back into the wildness of an originary experience. As Germano articulated it so beautifully:

> In fact the term "Great Perfection," or its more literal rendering as "Super (*chen*) Completion (*rdzogs*)," itself yields the slipperiness and strangeness of the enterprise: it tricks one into expecting closure, the definitive take, the master narrative that will finally bring the uncomfortable ambiguity of this long human journey to an end, and yet in fact its "completion" is in many ways a complete deconstruction of the structures one brought to the text, an opening up to the process ambiguity of life-in-formation. (Germano 1994, 300)

In one passage, in which Longchenpa explores syllables, he submits that "contemplation" (*ting nge 'dzin*) is "syllables, lights, and colors and the radiation (*spro*) and reabsorption (*bsdu*) of emanations" (TDD, 317.1). We could, with a bit of imagination, translate this sentence and say: "Just as the letters are externalized onto a piece of paper in the process of writing, they are again internalized when the practitioner reads them."

Indeed, in many passages of Longchenpa's works, the two activities of reading and contemplating are treated in virtually identical ways as the letters and words are repeatedly said to make the meditator live out a perceptual experience. Although "reading" (*lta ba*, lit. "to look") for which contemporary Tibetans use the same term as for "philosophy," is a top-down activity that clearly falls under the "executive" paradigm of thinking, Dzogchen scriptures insist that it can give way to a bottom-up form of cognition that is typical of the "participatory" meditation that is the *summum bonum* of the tradition. To illustrate this point, Longchenpa cites a passage from *The Tantra of Self-Arisen Awareness*, in which it is written that

> The mind's view (*sems kyi lta ba*) is excellent when the conditioned phenomena with characteristics appear (*snang ba*) unrestrained (*ma 'gags pa*) to the visual faculty (*mig gi dbang po*). Appearances (*snang ba*) are the outer magical manifestation of the clarity of self-awareness. If the great

> self-emergent nature of non-conceptual (*rtog med*) clarity is known, this is the view (*lta ba*) that looks at /reads (*lta ba*) conditioned phenomena.[117]

The outward-directed "reading" can lead to an inward-directed "seeing" in the form of a visionary experience (*snang ba*). In *The Pearl Necklace Tantra*, likewise, we read that "the view (*lta ba*) is reversed through it directly manifesting (*snang ba*) just as "terminology (*tha snyad*) is reversed through the absence of sounds (*sgra*) and words (*tshig*)," and "intellectual frames (*blo rgya*) are reversed by being ungraspable (*gzung du med pa*)."[118]

Moreover, we also find scriptural references that argue that language itself is giving way to religious experiences. Longchenpa cites a passage from *The Six Spaces Tantra*, in which we read that "the mind-as-such (*sems nyid*), in which sounds (*sgra*) and words (*tshig*) appear (*snang*), has fully purified all designated names (*ming*)" (LDG, 159.6).[119] In yet other passages, Longchenpa reasons that "letters" (*yi ge*) can "reveal the great meaning" (*don chen mtshon*), thus serving to reintroduce meditative experiences of recognition (DJS, 349.3).

The Twenty-One Introductions and the Role of Language in Meditation Practice

The Invocation of Awesomeness, Ambiguity, and Confusion in the Introductions

One of the Great Perfection's most sophisticated means of using language in order to revivify a vibrant and fresh experience out of petrified texts, is through aesthetically and linguistically mediated meditative techniques known as "introductions" (*ngo sprod pa*). During Longchenpa's time, the introductions consisted of meditative practices that were premised on language that is particularly rich in symbols, metaphors, and images. More specifically, they offered "examples that indicates (the highest reality)" (*mtshon pa'i dpe*), which consist primarily of descriptive pictures of crystals, mirrors, space, the sky, mirrors, or the feathers or eggs of a peacock.

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[117] chos can mtshan mar snang ba la/ mig gi dbang po ma 'gags pas/ sems kyi lta ba legs pa yin/ rang gi rig pa gsal ba yi/ cho 'phrul phyi yi snang ba ste/ rtog med gsal ba'i ngo bo la/ rang byung chen por shes gyur na/ chos can lta ba'i lta ba'o.

[118] mgnon du snang bas lta ba log/ sgra tshig med pas tha snyad lo/ [...] gzung du med pas blo rgya log.

[119] sgra tshig snang ba'i sems nyid la/ tha snyad ming rnams rang sar dag.

Readers familiar with Tibetan Buddhism might know the introductions in the form of a specific teaching offered by contemporary masters. During these "introductions to the nature of the mind," the teacher oftentimes shocks his students that gather around him into a state that is said to allow them to break through their ordinary way of thinking to gain access to a deeper level of selfhood. Lama Surya Das, an American Buddhist teacher, retells his revelatory experience with Dilgo Khyentse (*dil mgo mkhyen brtse*, 1910-1991), one of the most revered Tibetan Lamas of the past century and head of the Ancient School of from 1987 to 1991, as follows:

> One day in the 1980s, Khyentse Rinpoche directly introduced me to the intrinsic nature of mind or mind essence by holding up a radiant crystal, gesturing toward it menacingly and symbolically with one large gold ring finger, and suddenly exclaiming in a shockingly loud voice, "What is mind?" With this, he shocked me into another way of being and seeing in which his buddha heart-mind, the Buddha's heart-mind, and my heart-mind were obviously not two, not three, but one and inseparable. (Surya Das 2005, 29)

"Another master," so Surya Das continues, would offer teachings during which he "used to pound on a table or clap his hands loudly at a crucial moment to introduce us to the intrinsic nature of mind," asking "Who is hearing? Who is experiencing?". Yet another one used to "wake up disciples with provocative words and symbolic gestures," before asking them to look directly into this immediate moment to see what color, what shape, what size was their mind, and in what location the heart-mind was to be found" (Surya Das 2005, 30).

In line with this study's methodological orientation, it is only natural to investigate *how* the introductions "guide" or "lead" the reader onto a different level of experience. One element of the contemporary phenomenon of introductions seems to be its pre-linguistic and pre-conceptual impact. We might be dealing with a mechanism that is not unlike the one described by Kelly Bulkley in *The Wondering Brain*, where he writes:

> What distinguishes wonder from all other passions is the way it precedes reflective thought. Wonder strikes us before we can judge something to be good or bad, helpful or dangerous, pleasurable or

> painful. In its radical novelty and decentering impact, wonder momentarily suspends the ordinary cognitive filtering processes of evaluation and categorization. (Bulkeley 2004, 52)

Bulkeley's work is not only interested in how wonder allows us to return to a pre-reflexive mode of mentation, but also forms part of a more general principle of cognition, namely that it is intimately associated with affects. "Objects of wonder," so he writes, "abruptly seize our attention through strong sensory impressions and a quickening of the spirits" (Bulkeley 2004, 52). One of the most relevant discoveries on the role of affects in religions comes from Jonathan Haidt (Haidt 2007), whose research has focused on awe-related emotions. Indeed, he notes that vastness, either transmitted through individuals, nature, or artistic expression, might be an effective way to break out of existing mental frames of meaning (Haidt 2000; Keltner and Haidt 2003). Of course, the imagery of vastness is omnipresent in the symbology of the Great Perfection, with the open blue sky being its ultimate epitome.

This being said, as the cognitive sciences opened their inquiries into the affective dimensions of human cognition in recent years, they have also started to question the distinction between somatic and intellectual modes of knowing. One of the most fundamental books in this gradual integration of human reasoning and the anatomy of sensation, was Antonio Damasio's *Descartes' Error*. Here, the popular neuroscientist explains that "nature appears to have built the apparatus of rationality not just on top of the apparatus of biological regulation, but also from it and with it" (Damasio 1994, 123).

Another excellent example of this trend towards the appreciation for affects is Giovanna Colombetti's *The Feeling Body*. She not only notes that "all living systems are cognitive systems" and that cognition is "sense-making" (Colombetti 2014, 18), but she also asserts that cognition is first and foremost affective: "Primordial affectivity is a source of meaning that grounds (makes possible) the richer and differentiated forms of sense making in more complex organisms […] mind shares the organizational properties of life, and richer forms of mind depend on richer forms of life" (Colombetti 2014, 19).

Miranda Anderson recently summarized these findings, arguing that "according to various interpretations of neurobiological research, cognition is entwined with non-conscious processes, emotions and bodily states." "Literature," so she concludes, "can be understood as another means of creating a representational

domain for emulating reality, through the imagination's figural bodying forth of the words, or through an acted play literally bodying it forth in material surrogate forms" (Anderson 2015, 21).

In light of such continuous readings of human cognition, it might be worth questioning the apparent difference between the contemporary manifestation of the introductions and their classical expression in the Dzogchen tantras. In fact, the Buddhist teachers of today not only abruptly startle their audience, but they actually carefully embed these moments of affective shock within a narrative arch. The poetic lectures, aphoristic verses, and aesthetic gestures, which pervade the introductions, strategically create an elaborate literary context that serves as background to the surprise moment.

Since this discrepancy creates a general state of confusion, the "shock" experienced by the audience might not only be affective, sensory, and somatic, but more generally "cognitive" in nature. To put it concisely, the unifying trait of the introductions, both in their classical and in their modern versions, might be their shared emphasis on provoking absurdity, unclarity, and ambiguity against the backdrop of an elaborate and extended teaching.

As a consequence, the pertinent question of this chapter might be the following: why does ambiguity lead the listener/reader/meditator into a new experience of himself? Gregory Bateson—whose work is one of the foremost examples of a type of creative interdisciplinarity that I aspire to—pointed to the significant overlap between religious, cultural, and psychological mechanisms underlying practices of ambiguity. Bateson, was particularly interested in the phenomenon of the "double bind," a dilemma in communication in which one receives conflicting messages that are mutually negating each other. Borrowing the term from his colleagues of the Palo Alto group—who used it in their studies on complex communication in patients with schizophrenia—to argue that such linguistic moments of confusion are extremely common in our normal lives, especially in play, humor, poetry, ritual, and fiction (Bateson et al. 1956).

Bateson and his colleagues, primarily Don D. Jackson, Jay Haley and John H. Weakland, further pointed to more positive forms of double binds, which included not only Zen Buddhism as a path towards spiritual growth, but also hypnosis, where confusion could actually be exploited to heal patients (Bateson et al. 1956). In this context, the anthropologist points the reader to the work of another researcher associated with their circle, namely Milton H. Erickson. Erickson, one of the most

famous proponents of hypnosis in the context of psychotherapy, found that the creation of situations of ambiguity was one of the most competent ways to induce a hypnotic state in his subjects. He even went as far as calling one of his modes of induction the "confusion technique," which consisted of him telling irrelevant stories (Erickson and Rossi 1981, 166), making out-of-character, irrelevant, non-sequitur remarks (Erickson 1980, vol I: 261), asking a sudden question (Erickson 1980, vol I: 349-50), or playing with words that had one literal meaning and different associative meanings (Erickson 1980, vol. I: 258).

Particularly salient in this context is that confusion is not seen as a "misunderstanding" that would close the mind upon a wrong meaning, but rather as a "lack of understanding" that leaves the mind open and searching for the missing meaning (Erickson and Rossi 1981, 246). In other words, for Erickson, confusion causes a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty, which causes the patient to stop what he is doing and to energize his or her internal focus in the pursuit of meaning:

> Perhaps because people are so highly dependent upon their ability to decipher the meaning of stimuli in order to decide how to respond appropriately, confusion or lack of understanding is a startling and disarming event. When confused, people become dumbfounded and their awareness withdraws inward in a search for understanding or escape. This may explain why the single most frequently used and most effective ingredient in Erickson's repertoire of induction and suggestion techniques was confusion. (Havens 2005, 249)

Great Perfection writers had awareness that their own use of language operated by being incongruous and that the introductions played a key role in producing a confusion. To better understand this, we should return to narrative of the two blood-related boys, whose story we followed over the course this study. We recall that if they were first captured by five soldiers and the Old Lady, they later liberated themselves by killing their prison guards. We left the story as the children returned to their home, the Sun Castle. The allegorical narrative, in *The Tantra of Self-Arisen Awareness*, then concludes by invoking the central theme of this chapter, namely the twenty-one introductions.

> After having been counseled by twenty-one queens, they ran to an incredibly beautiful temple guarded by five gate keepers wearing shields so that nobody could enter. Just imagine! Then, the four persons looked at their faces in four mirrors and recognized themselves. Just imagine! When they saw that the one house had eight doors, they broke out in laughter at themselves. (RRS, 563)[120]

In this story, we find several elements that have already accompanied our discussion of language in the Great Perfection. Most importantly, the twenty-one queens that are said to counsel the children are a reference to the twenty-one introductions. The narrative recalls the introductions also in another way, namely by means of the mirrors, which are employed in a highly technical way during many introductory practices. Consider, for instance, the so-called "the mirror-like wisdom introduction" (*me long lta bu'i ye shes kyi ngo sprod*), during which the meditator is instructed to "paint a maṇḍala out of colorful dust between two mirrors." After that, the practitioner should "plant the two mirrors by moving them from side to side and look at them until two visions (*snang ba*) arise" (DJS, 342.4).[121] The exercising with mirrors is so central to the introductions that one of the main tantras dedicated to this theme is literarily entitled *The Mirror of the Heart of Vajrasattva*. Playing with mirrors, so much seems clear, were frequently used in the Great Perfection to produce an ambiguity and confusion that opens up access to a different mode of thinking.

The Crystal and the Relationship between Direct Transcendence and Breakthrough

In many ways, my interpretation of the introductions as confusion-techniques can be read as a natural consequence of my earlier understanding of meditation, particularly Direct Transcendence. In chapter six, I have explored the tradition's most secretive meditation practice and argued that the gradual assembling of the initially chaotic perceptive phenomena into coherent images of great complexity exemplifies the

[120] btsun mo nyi shu rtsa gcig gis gros byas nas bsam rdugs kyi lha khang du bros te/ mi lngas phub gon nas sgo bsrungs nas sus kyang 'od ma nus zer te ya cha/ de nas mi bzhis me long bzhir byad bltas pas/ rang ngo rang gi shes zer te ya cha/ de nas khang pa gcig la sgo brgyad yo pa mthong bas/ rang la rang gad mo shor zer te yang ya cha/ de bzhin brda' yi rnam pa kun/ mtshon nas ye shes don la sbyor.

[121] me long lta bu'i ye shes kyi ngo sprod gang zhe na/ me long gnyis kyi bar du rdul tshon gyis dkyil 'khor bri ste/ phar 'gram tshur 'gram gnyissu me long re gzug ste/ de la bltas na snang ba gnyis 'char ro.

inherent human cognitive tendency to create meaning. In this sense, the introductions—by creating a confusion that parallels that of the flickering lights in the visionary meditation—can be interpreted as techniques aimed at activating our inborn meaning-making mechanism.

This shared logic of confusion is sometimes even visible in blatantly obvious as the introductions read almost like practices associated with Direct Transcendence. Consider, for instance, the third introduction, which—just like certain techniques associated with the early stages of the sky-gazing meditation—is premised on the "pressing of the eyes with one's finger," so that "the seminal nuclei of Tibet arise like fish-eyes" (DJS, 338.5). Again, like I elucidated before, it is the pressing of the eyes, a very physical and almost violent engagement with one's body, which is said to give the impetus for the introduction to the state of mind that is sought after.

This underlying continuity between the sky-gazing practice of Direct Transcendence and the symbolic-literary practice of the introductions, of course, raises a few questions regarding their position within the Dzogchen contemplative system as a whole. We could ask ourselves, for instance, whether the introductions form part of Direct Transcendence practice itself? In fact, it could be said that when our yogi reads and performs the introductions after he returns from the mountain, he is led back into a meditative experience that he first achieved on top of the mountain and through Direct Transcendence practice.

Generally speaking, however, the introductions are not associated with Direct Transcendence but rather with the other famous set of techniques in Dzogchen, namely Breakthrough (*khregs chod*) meditation. I already noted that this practice is famous for being predicated on effortlessness, which is assumed to give access to the mind's emptiness and primordial purity (*ka dag*).

Although Breakthrough and Direct Transcendence are usually understood as a codependent pair, with one reinforcing the other, in the previous chapter, I showed that Longchenpa critiqued Breakthrough for being too discursive and conceptual in nature. Like the introductions, Breakthrough is described as a technique that operates by overcoming dualistic modes of thinking by allowing the practitioner to recognize the very nature of reality. Franz-Karl Ehrhard, for instance, translates the term *ngo sprod pa* with "confrontation" and argues that this direct encounter with the nature of our mind is indicative of its association with Breakthrough. He also comments that the introductions, which are intended to offer us an "in-sight," or "inward look" (*Innenschau*), is frequently labeled as a process of "thoroughly investigating" (*rtsad*

gcod pa). Since this term could literally be translated as "cutting at the root," and Breakthrough itself is dedicated to both the "investigation and the cutting through of the mind," he enjoins that the introductions are closely associated with this second type of Great Perfection practice (Ehrhard 1990, 82).

Maybe, however, the introductions should not be ascribed to either one of these major techniques of meditation, but should rather be imagined as a sort of bridge that closes the gap between Breakthrough and Direct Transcendence. This becomes nowhere as apparent as in their respective treatments of certain key Dzogchen symbols in the introductions.

On the one hand, the conceptual content of the examples used for the introductions is clearly subscribed to the philosophical assumptions of Breakthrough. The crystal, for instance, is representing the "primordially pure" (*ka dag*) dimension that is inherent in the "ground" (*gzhi*) (Ehrhard 1990, 81).

On the other hand, the actual technical uses of these examples as a type of "contemplative paraphernalia" during the introductions are much closer associated to Direct Transcendence. The crystal, in fact, is frequently held up in front of the eyes during the introductions. In one example, the practitioners are instructed to take "a stainless crystal, to hold it up into the appearance (*snang ba*) of the window, and look into it so that lights of five colors arise abundantly" (NPP, 338.1).[122] As the crystal refracts the light of various light sources behind it, it appears quite apparent that the meditators are attempting to reintroduce the visionary experiences they had during Direct Transcendence when they were gazing into the rays of the sun.

The introductions can be said to move in between the Breakthrough and Direct Transcendence. The example of the crystal illustrates this beautifully as it is both a philosophical symbol of primordial purity and a practical tool to manipulate the perceptual apparatus of the yogi. Introductions, by moving in between Breakthrough and Direct Transcendence also bridge the gaps between philosophy and practice, intellectual insight and sensory knowledge, or metaphor and material.

In this sense, the introductions perfectly exemplify Longchenpa's attempts to fluidly move in between the prison of language and the freedom of meditative experience. The introductions, although they play with linguistic, symbolic, and

[122] gsangs sam gya' 'am rgya mtsho las byung ba'i man shel dri ma med pa zhig skar khung gi snang ba la phyar nas bltas na 'od kha dog lnga lhug par 'char te.

metaphorical meanings, successfully lead the practitioner from conceptuality back to contemplative experience.

Put differently, contemplative experience can be stimulated through language. Liberation through the prison-house of words is a notion that is deeply engrained within Tibetan Buddhism. Indeed, as Kapstein remarked, "the distinction between visionary and scholastic approaches to the interpretation of Buddhist teaching was […] by no means an impermeable one, and to recognize this is one of the ways in which our conception of Tibetan scholasticism needs to become more nuanced" (Kapstein 2000, 87).

More specifically, the integration of the substance of experience with the form of language, represents the Buddhist ideal-type of the "scholar adept" (*mkhas grub*), who is both intellectually learned (*mkhas*) and contemplatively accomplished (*grub*). In Tibet, at least, religion needs both the substance of experience and the form of language. It could be argued that Longchenpa's genius, epitomized particularly in his two treasuries dedicated to the systematic study of the Great Perfection, resides precisely in this capacity to sculpt a scholastic text that can fulfill the public need for order and structure, while simultaneously opening up hermeneutical access to private experience.

The Playfulness of Language and the Meditative Journey through Time

The introductions do not just give way to any meditative experience. On the contrary, there is little doubt that the Great Perfection introductions, although they produce a new meditative experience, are ultimately premised on the idea of a re-evocation of an earlier experience. Franz-Karl Ehrhard very convincingly argued that the "examples" used in the introductions aim at "the *reactivation or reinforcement* of a previous spiritual experience" (Ehrhard 1990, 80). In light of the fact that many of the actual practical aspects of the introductions—particularly the perceptual play with various forms of luminosity—resemble Direct Transcendence practice, we could even claim that the experience that the introductions induce are likely stemming from Direct Transcendence meditation.

Just as the children of our mythical narrative engage in their counseling sessions with the twenty-one queens only after they return home from their journey, it might be that the introductions were performed after the practitioners already had significant experiences with meditations on top of the mountain. The idea of a

"return" is pertinently represented in images of "playfulness" in the introductions. Guenther, for instance, noted:

> Such images are the sky, the sun, a crystal, a cloud heavy with rain, and a peacock's egg, the latter because of its opalescence particularly suited to illustrate the whole's pure and primal symbolicalness, its nothingness/intensity-"stuff" (*ngo bo ka dag*), an originary awareness mode that, as it were, "contains" within itself the whole's two other mutually consistent originary awareness modes, radiating from out of the whole's depth (*gting gsal*) and ready to burst forth in playful activity (*rol pa*), respectively. (Guenther 1994, 71)

If translate this paradoxical logic of emancipation through imprisonment onto the level of plasticity as a diachronic process of change, we could say that Longchenpa's conception of individuation obeys the following principle: The only way to move forward, the only way to grow, is to return to the beginning.

Play, as an act—or as an acting out—is not only connected to the dis-play of something, but also to experimentation. In *The Tantra of Great Beauty and Auspiciousness*, we read that "although the Adamantine Hero is not in a state of confusion (*'khrul*), he shows the manner of bewilderment to sentient beings" (KSD, 216,6).[123] Since, in this context, the term "Adamantine Hero" (Tib. *rdo rje sems dpa'*, S. *Vajrasattva*) refers to the lucent nature of our minds (TCD, 323.6), it could be said that Dzogchen is fascinated by moments when our minds experiment with themselves. In fact, although our minds are lucent and clear as the cloudless sky, they "act as if" they were confused. As Germano presents the issue, "awareness, though in itself stainless, brings about this playful panorama of cyclic existence and transcendence through its creative dynamism, play and adornment, and straying remains no less, nor no more, than the play of the one and only" (Germano 1992, 433).

This same element is also prevalent in the introductions, which are not only relying on the invocation of symbols of playfulness, but read like theatrical performances that make the meditators into play-actors. In the fifth introduction, for instance, the practitioners are instructed to "place the statue of a buddha in front of themselves and to put cotton clothes on it, before looking into the sky while putting

[123] rdo rje sems dpa' la 'khrul pa mi mnga' yang sems can la 'khrul pa'i tshul bstan pa'o.

crystal-glasses on top [of their eyes].” The result of this scenario is that the practitioners “will not only see the Enjoyment Body of the Buddha—including his mouth, eyes, and nose—but also the respective Pure Land” (DJS, 339.1).[124]j

The Great Perfection could be said to differ significantly from the dominant model of both psychological growth and spiritual advancement in its embrace of playfulness as a tactic to account for growth. In fact, more often than not, individuation is associated with a gradual decline in playfulness. As Patrick McNamara argued in *The Neuroscience of Religious Experience*,

> All forms of play (pretend, rough and tumble, etc.) emerge in toddlerhood, peak in the childhood/juvenile period, and fall off rapidly as sexual maturity is approached. Religious development appears to follow an opposite course. It emerges slowly in the childhood/juvenile period but then peaks during adolescence and then flowers in adulthood up to and including old age. Whereas play predominates in childhood and is nonserious, religion predominates in adolescence and adulthood and is a serious business. (McNamara 2009, 238)

Throughout the scriptures, we find “playfulness” (*rol pa*) as a dominant category when speaking about self-reflection and the breaking up of mental sets. This tendency is already prevalent in the earliest strata of text concerned with the cosmogony. In *The Jewel Studded Tantra*, for example, we encounter a beautiful passage in which the Primordial Buddha himself explains his role in the crystallization of the universe: “In this way, everything that manifests (*snang*) and everything that is heard is my play (*rol pa*), the play of Samantabhādra. Since the arising of this play (*rol pa*) is unobstructed (*ma ‘gags pa*), my qualities emerge. Just through this appearing (*snang*) of qualities, [my play] has never been and will never be exhausted” (RCP 109.2).[125] Similarly, in *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, we read: “The play (*rol pa*) of this great marvel involves no differentiation between Buddhas and sentient beings. Just as

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[124] longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku'i ngo sprod ni/ de bzhin gshegs pa'i sku ras la bris pa rang gi mdun du bzhag ste/ shel mig gi steng du bzhag nas mig nam mkha' la bltas na/ longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku kha mig rna ba can mthong bar 'gyur ro/ de bzhin du longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku'i zhing khams par mdo la 'char ba ngo shes par gyis shig.

[125] 'di ltar snang tshad thod tshad kun/ kun bzang nga yi rol par bshad/ rol pa'i 'char byed ma 'gags pas/ nga yi yon tan nyid du 'byung/ yon tan snang byed 'di tsam pas/ zad par mi 'gyur zad pa med.

there are clouds in the sky, [the play], being self-emergent and self-perfected, is serenely calm" (GTG, 137.1).[126]

Playfulness is not only central to the cosmogony of the universe as the epiphany of the ground—whose primary impetus is said to be the child-like energy of "play"—but also in Direct Transcendence practice. In *The Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, for example, we read that "by understanding appearances (*snang*) and cognition (*shes*) as reality itself, whatever path of behavior you may pursue, it will never be beyond reality itself. In whichever appearances (*snang*) may manifest (*snang*), they arise (*shar*) as unceasing (*'gag med*) play (*rol pa*) to dawn (*shar*) in the self-emergent maṇḍala" (TCD2, 198.4).[127] A similar passage can be found in *Treasury of Words and Meaning,* where Longchenpa writes that it is "through looking (*bltas*) at outer phenomena" that "whatever manifests (*snang*), appears (*snang*) free as the play (*rol pa*) of reality" (TDD, 334.3). "The method," so Lobel stated, "is to allow this play to display itself, without blocking it in any way, but also without reintroducing the habitual, dualistic mind that fixates or thinks" (Lobel 2018, 151).

Although the introductions are in many ways a past-oriented endeavor, epitomized in the playful reintroduction of a past experience, they are also concerned with the future. Introductions are the type of enterprise that leads to new ideas, innovative insights, and groundbreaking understandings of old problems. They point to the profoundly creative nature of humans as they mobilize a fleeting instant to reveal rich visions of our own essence. Introductions are not representative in the sense of *Dar-stellung*, showing us something that is already there in its concreteness, but they are *Vor-stellung*, which in German means "idea" and "image," as well as "introduction." Unlike a representation, introductions are performative, transformative, and generative way as they create something that wasn't apparent before. More specifically, if we think about the close association between the introductions and the previous meditative experiences, these simple techniques are cosmo- and anthropogonic inasmuch as they remodel us into Buddhas that reside in their very own elaborate *maṇḍalic* universes.

[126] ngo mtshar chen po'i rol pa ni/ sangs rgyas sems can 'byed pa med/ nam mkha' la ni sprin bzhin du/ rang byung rang la rdzogs pas zhi.

[127] 'di ltar snang shes chos nyid du rtogs pas spyod lam ji ltar byas kyang chos nyid las ma 'das/ snang tshul cir snang yang rol pa 'gag med du shar bas/ rang byung don gyi dkyil 'khor du shar te.

The Planned Spontaneity of the Introductions and the Freedom of Knowing One's Prison

In all the examples detailed at so far, the transporting efficacy, the ability to lead the reader or listener into a different state of consciousness, the engendering of flashes of insight and epiphany, presupposes a startling moment of confusion. At the same time, however, the power of this moment of epiphany was significantly enhanced by the context that was created to set up the moment of shock. Isn't it precisely the discrepancy between this spontaneous intervention and the state of calm—created by the harmonious and aesthetically pleasing presentations of the teacher—which makes the moment of revelation stand out?

In the case of Surya Das with his teacher, we notice this abrupt change as he notes that "the breakthrough or spiritual epiphany," which passes "from the parentlike guru to the childlike disciple," takes place "often amidst an elaborate Tantric ritual" (Surya Das 2005, 29). Indeed, scholars of ritual practices have rightly sensed that religious language—particularly the one used during ritual practices—is characterized by its highly standardized and formalized style (Bell 1997; Rappaport 1999; Tambiah 1979; Werlen 1984). It is as if Longchenpa and teachers like him tried to initially present a structured meaning in which the participants find themselves comfortable and at ease, before shocking the system by bringing ambiguity and uncertainty into the very meaning that they set up in the first place.

If that is true, then the spontaneity of the contemplative phenomenon of the introduction is only efficient if it is embedded in more deliberate type of thinking. As a consequence, I would like to advance the theory that the Dzogchen language is an *enterprise* of *reprise*: Contemplative language, such as the one found in the introductions, is premised on a complex plan that needs to be executed with much commitment, effort, and persistence. Indeed, even though the introductions are focused on spontaneous moments of revelation in the present moment, they are nonetheless written down to be rehearsed by the practitioners.

This insight, in turn, opens up an entirely new consideration in our discussion of the Great Perfection contemplative system, in general, and the relationship between spontaneity and teleology within the system, in particular. Of course, by now it is well known that Longchenpa's entire philosophy of freedom is firmly grounded in spontaneity or spontaneous presence (*lhun grub*) and that this core-idea is a central piece of the tradition's individuality. As Lobel phrased it, for Longchenpa, "spontaneous presence means that something exists without coming into being

through causes and effects. It is just there—suddenly, naturally, freely, and completely." (Lobel 2018, 6).

At the same time, the introductions make it clear that this type of spontaneity is accompanied by significant amounts of effort, planning, and preparation. In this sense, Lobel's conclusion that Longchenpa rejects intentional practices as "intentional attempts to create the causes and conditions for freedom become an obstacle to that very freedom" (Lobel 2018, 6), does not necessarily follow. In fact, the six key points, while subscribing to spontaneity in terms of their general attitude of an attentive waiting for the manifestation of the visionary apparitions, can nonetheless be understood as techniques that intentionally and effortfully create a context within which they can manifest in a spontaneous way. In the Great Perfection—in Direct Transcendence, in the introductions, and even in the philosophical writings of Longchenpa—spontaneity is planned, the spontaneous flow of images is cultivated, the implicit insight is explicitly primed.

That such a paradoxical concept like "techniques of spontaneity" is not impossible has recently been explored in a popular book, entitled *The Power of Moments: Why Certain Experiences Have Extraordinary Impact*. Written by the economists Chip and Dan Heath, the provocative investigation starts off by commenting on the importance of what we could call "moments of spontaneity," noting that "we all have defining moments in our lives—meaningful experiences that stand out in our memory," with "many of them ow[ing] a great deal to chance." Intrigued by the contact between spontaneity and chance or destiny, they rhetorically ask whether it really must be that such "defining moments just happen to us?" (Heath and Heath 2017, 4). The two brothers are clear on what their answer is: Defining moments do not just have to happen to use, they can be created, planned, and cultivated.

The introductions, both in their ancient and modern versions, are posited on the idea that we can create moments of completely spontaneous experiences. The controlling experiences over which we have no control obviously point to a profound paradox that reaches into one of the liveliest controversies in philosophy and cognitive science, namely the so-called "free will debate." While much evidence in this dissertation has pointed to the fact that our understanding of ourselves as being free in our choices and decisions—consider, for instance the theories discussed in the context of unconscious activity during perception—one way to redeem our freedom has been through recognizing our imprisonment. John Bargh, for example, noted that "acknowledging that you do not have complete free will, or complete conscious

control, actually increases the amount of free will and control you truly have" (Bargh 2017, 263).

While my investigation into the four visions as a phenomenology of consciousness has already revealed that it is precisely through the honoring of the unconscious forces at work that we can start to gain control of our lives, the introductions seem to go one step further. Here, it is not just about regaining control but about actually using the implicit forces of our minds for our consciously-set goals. The control that I am speaking of here is not one of extraordinary willpower and commitment, which would be needed to suppress our deepest unconscious impulses. Rather, it is a type of effort and planning that strategically uses our mind's natural tendencies and abilities. As Bargh put it:

> by delegating control to these unconscious forces, you become better able to accomplish your conscious and intentional goals. You put them in service of working on those important goals when your conscious mind is elsewhere and take advantage of their problem-solving and creative abilities. You put them to work for you" (Bargh 2017, 263).

As we have seen, the introductions achieve this paradoxical control over uncontrollable unconscious processes by setting up an environment in which our mind's natural tendency to operate implicit processing becomes activated. Just as people that try to lose weight should avoid contexts where tempting cues present themselves, Dzogchen literature specializes in the creation of contexts that are conducive to the activation of experiential unconscious mentation. In fact, as Bargh propounded, if it is shaped in the right way, "the outside world can activate the goals and qualities you do possess, and the behaviors that are within your realm of possibilities" (Bargh 2017, 283).

The View from the Peak: From Present-Centered Experience to the Temporal Arch of Language

The fifth and final hallmark of contemporary understandings of meditation is present-centeredness. This concept is so crucial that Jon Kabat-Zinn placed at the heart of his definition of mindfulness meditation (Kabat-Zinn 1994). He defines the "essence" of what he calls "full catastrophe living" as a "work," which "involves above all the regular, disciplined practice of moment-to-moment awareness or mindfulness, the complete 'owning' of each moment of your experience, good, bad, or ugly" (Kabat-Zinn 2001, 11).

One of the arguments of this dissertation has been that if meditation research wants to offer an accurate picture of the effects of meditation, its leaders need to start paying more attention to what happens before and after the moment of meditation itself. In this final part of my dissertation, I focused specifically on the role of language in the growth and individuation of a contemplative tradition. On a most general level, we could say that once we bring written texts into the study of meditation, we automatically move beyond the exclusive focus on the present: Not only does language allow us to articulate stories with a temporal arch, but the texts themselves are capable to travel through time. In other words, meditation texts tell stories of traditions and sooner or later become themselves parts of them.

Great Perfection writings offer a fruitful case study of how language is used to expand the range of contemplation across the full temporal scope of human existence.

In chapter 9, I showed that Longchenpa was a prolific writer, composing over 250 works and dedicating thousands of pages to his campaign. In his writings, he demonstrated his prodigious talent for synthesizing and systematizing diverse currents of Buddhist thought practice. Familiarizing himself with the works of classical Buddhist philosophy, such as Candrakīrti and Madhyamaka, Longchenpa spent years at Sangphu, the foremost scholastic university of his time. This training and his consistent attempt to articulate his philosophy of freedom in relationship to the New Schools ultimately turned Longchenpa into a jailor of his own tradition. Through his colossal philosophical construction project, Longchenpa's philosophy of freedom became a rather paradoxical building, in which the discourse on freedom becomes the very prison it tried to escape in the first place.

Longchenpa himself conceded that once he became an active participant in what can be called Tibet's "era of philosophy," his regulation of language became an obstacle to the liberating experience of meditation that was the essence of his religious

system. In his *Precious Treasury of Words and Meanings*, he delineates the analytical mind as a sort of *phármakon*, as it is both a medicine and a poison: "Since all views and meditations will become mental obscurations of the analytical mind if you don't nakedly identify this originally pure and unimpeded awareness, the antidote becomes a poison, such as a medicinal overdose" (TDD, 292.6).[128]

This being said, Longchenpa never abdicated his throne as his tradition's most influential philosopher. The tenth and final chapter of the dissertation was concerned with how Longchenpa's writings manage to use the medium of language to break through to the realm of contemplative experience. Longchenpa, in other words, remained an architect throughout his life, but he believed that the building a fortress that was impenetrable to contemplative experience, was not the only option at his disposal.

In his *Treasury of Words and Meaning*, our yogi introduces the imagery of a luminous house: "In this way, it is even very important to distinguish between the ground of the expanse (*dbyings gyi gzhi*) and the ground of the context (*gnas skabs kyi gzhi*). The times of awareness actually abiding as a house of light or not are extremely important key points to determine."[129] This passage, in which the luminous house should be understood as a radiant orb of light, points to the necessity of the manifestation of the ground, the breaking of the youthful body of the vase, the rupture of the ideal state of being, the emergence of the crisis of confusion in the midst of the rainbow colored luminosities. In other words, as part of our minds, language is an unavoidable feature of human existence. Just like a manifestly luminous house, language forms part of the "context" (*gnas skabs*) of our lives, which are all marked by a specific "place" (*gnas*) and a specific "time" (*skabs*). At the same time, it is only through language, which operates akin to the construction of a house of light, that we get the chance to reflect about ourselves and our lives, finally recognizing ourselves in the display of lights.

More specifically, I focused on the so-called "introductions," in which the meditator is said to be introduced to the nature of his own mind. Although the classical version of the introductions—simple and aesthetically-styled contemplative

[128] rig pa ka dag zang ma 'di rjen par ngos ma zin na lta sgom thams cad yid dpyod sems kyi sgrib par song bas gnyen po dug tu song ba bshal sman brjings pa lta bu zhig yin no.

[129] dbyings kyi gzhi dang gnas skabs kyi gzhi gnyis kyang phyed pa gal che la 'od kyi khang pa dngos la 'dug pa dang mi 'dug pa'i du 'di gnyis gnad gal po che'o.

practices—seems to differ from the contemporary expression of the phenomenon—during which the master offers a teaching interspersed with a sudden intervention—I showed that they share the goal of activating our mind's meaning-making mechanisms by provoking confusion. More specifically, introductions use language to set up a framework of meaning, only to then provoke a moment of confusion intended to break up the fixed mental structures. In some ways then, the very same language that imprisoned the Great Perfection becomes the force behind its emancipation. In examining the metaphors and images transported in the introductions, I showed that they are revivifications of previous contemplative experience. In this sense, language can transport us back into the world of visions in the blink of an eye.

This profound appreciation for the vitality that we can draw from our past experience, further, is balanced with a powerful thrust that tends towards growth. Indeed, the symbiotic relationship between allegories, symbols, or examples written down in a text and the experiential engagement with them is not one-sided but rather reciprocal in nature. Starting with Longchenpa, writing about visionary experience and experiencing visionary writing stand in a mutually reinforcing relationship. The experiences that mark the Great Perfection tradition need to be "lived through" before they can be communicated in allegorical and symbolic language. This "communication," in turn, becomes the origin of new experiences that foster new insights and new writings.

This has important consequences for our conception of freedom. Plasticity, in the Great Perfection, is not primarily a change that comes about by focusing on the present-moment, but rather a spiraling movement of growth according to which our yogi repeatedly returns to a field of selfhood—in which he is embedded in networks of meaning that are pre-individual—to draw energy for new self-creations. The introductions use artistic, metaphorical, and poetic language to lead our yogi in and out of contemplative experiences, thus constantly deconstructing and reconstructing the boundaries of his self.

By speaking of the introductions as an "enterprise of reprise," I not only suggested that they bring the reader/meditator back into a past experience, but also that this return to the past can be meticulously planned with an eye towards future growth. Ultimately then, this final part of the dissertation reinforced our understanding of the underlying logic of Dzogchen by expanding it onto the realm of language. Language, like so many other "grounds" that found our yogi's meditation

practice, moves in between the tyranny of internment and the miracle of emancipation. In line with the tradition's deeply engrained dialectical logic, freedom from the bondage of conceptual language comes only about when we give ourselves over to the imprisoning force of language itself.

Conclusion

Nearly seven hundred years ago, on the side of a peak in the great Himalayas, in a place called White Skull Snow Mountain, there sits a bearded yogi staring into the rays of the sun. Effortlessly sitting there, without moving for many hours, he perceives a sequence of four astonishing visions before finding himself in the midst of a magnificent universe filled with gods. As the visions swirl into the expanse of the blue horizon, evaporating just as miraculously as they appeared, his body itself dissolves into the light of the sky.

The Base of the Mountain: New Perspectives on Method, History, and Meditation

Who amongst you has not fantasized about just following him, leaping over the crest of the mountain into the open space of the blue sky? Alas, the journey we traveled was a different, but certainly not less rewarding one. In following our yogi's actual life as a meditation practitioner, we performed a shift in perspective. The yogi's life, in fact, did not take place within a realm of sky-like freedom but rather on the solid and contested ground that lies below his feet.

Shifting our focus from the peak of the mountain to its base, our interdisciplinary exploration allowed us to represent this new perspective on three distinct yet interrelated maps, namely the one used to develop consilience approaches to religion, the one laying out the history of the Great Perfection, and the one drawing the contours of the emergent field of contemplative science.

As for the history of the Great Perfection, my research made an important contribution to our understanding of this mystical religious tradition by highlighting the importance of trauma for its development. Although Dzogchen might be a tradition that has much to say about what it is like to obtain glimpses of the open sky from atop of a mountain, its most precious insights were forged in the ravines at the base of it. By contextualizing our yogi's sky-gazing practice within its historical context, I argued that marginalization and persecution inevitably shaped its contemplative system. As a consequence, my study paid much attention to the identity-formation through collective myths of civilizational crisis, the psychological symptoms associated with meditation practice, or the contradictory tendencies in Longchenpa's philosophy of freedom.

In terms of my approach, I have shown that scholars in the humanities can benefit from research in the cognitive sciences as it can help us gain a more nuanced

perspective on what it means to be human. While many of us excel at flying in the sky-like realm of culture, it is sometimes necessary to return to the ground of our biological bodies. Longchenpa himself made a rather similar experience himself. On the one hand, as Dzogchen gradually overcame the foundational trauma, he articulated an independent religious vision that resembled the meditative process' emergence of Buddhas out of our hearts, their flowing through our bodies, and their stepping into our awareness in the form of light. On the other hand, just as the shackles of socio-political oppression fell away and the tradition achieved the highest instantiation of its ethos of freedom, our yogi realized the inherently apprehending nature of our conscious and unconscious minds, thus finding himself trapped in a prison made of iron bars he could not bend so easily.

Finally, in terms of the study of meditation, my dissertation took the ri contemplative system of the Great Perfection as an opportunity to look at some overlooked dimensions of meditation practice. More specifically, it offered a counterpoint to what are arguable five of the most important traits of contemporary understandings of meditation: 1) its aim is the liberation of the self; 2) it is a positive practice that leads the individual to a happier life; 3) it is a relaxing practice; 4) it is a skill that can be learned; and 5) it works by focusing on the present moment. By showing that meditation begins at the base of the mountain and not at its peak, I demonstrated that yogis are 1) embedded within history and socio-cultural identities, 2) enmeshed in historical trauma and universal existential suffering involved in being human, 3) placed within physical bodies that are teeming with energy and vitality, 4) confined to operating within the meaning-making structures of our conscious and unconscious minds, and 5) encapsulated within a philosophical architecture that run the risk of blocking off contemplative experience altogether.

The View from the Peak: The Dialect of Freedom

Although the perspectival shift towards the base of the mountain has revealed that meditative journeys follow a different itinerary that we usually think, this is not the end of our campaign. In fact, we did not return to the base of the mountain in order to replace or deconstruct the three-dimensional model that we can gain through a view from its peak. The mountain is such a powerful place because it is liminal, it allows for an ascent into realms where air becomes purer, forests thinner, and vistas more expansive.

The reason why this dissertation might offer us a new map for meditation research is not because it explored its dimensions from the base or from the top of the mountain, but rather because it retraced the journey of our yogi in between those two places. Thus, our yogi's journey does not end in the confining ravines located at the base of the mountain, but leads him towards White Skull Snow Mountain, where we find him meditating in his old age.

More specifically, I submit that our yogi's climb is not taking a straight route upward towards the top. Just like the trails forged by the little linked lambs grazing on the Tibetan mountainside, the Great Perfection's model of growth is not linear in nature. Just as there is not ever-lasting imprisonment within the ravines below the Himalayas, so there is no such thing as a one-time emancipation from the confinement of the ground to the fluidity of the open space.

Reconstructing a map of meditation in the Great Perfection requires us to understand that the only way that we can even begin to grasp the freedom of the blue sky—including its attributes of self-liberation, happiness, relaxation, skillfulness, and present-centeredness—is by tirelessly moving in between the base and the peak of the mountain below. This repeated movement from the base to the peak, which perfectly describes the rhythm of this study, gives us insight into what I called the dialectical logic of meditation practice in the Great Perfection.

According to such a dialectical understanding, the pursuit of freedom through meditation does not need to be abandoned, but rather rearticulated: the freedom of the self comes about when we insert ourselves deeply enough within the social context that inevitably confines us; the freedom of happiness is achieved when we acknowledge the inevitability of painful experiences that mark our human existence on earth; the freedom of relaxation is attained when we actively engage with the full range of bodily energies, many of which require arousal and stimulation; the freedom of conscious thought is realized when we gain full awareness of the myriad ways in which we are biologically predisposed for confining modes of cognition and action; the freedom of being present is won when we recognize that even this seemingly spontaneous act depends on strategic planning and cultivation.

It is in this dialectical understanding of freedom that my dissertation might reveal its greatest gift for future research on meditation. If my findings are legitimate and the most emancipatory dimensions of contemplation are actually a direct result of a confrontation with confinement, then existing studies in the cognitive sciences could be missing one of the most effective means to empirically ascertain the existence

of neuroplasticity. In other words, if the overcoming of imprisonment is the best way to increase our freedom, then we should start studying meditation less on top of snow-capped mountains and more in contexts where confinement, structure, and repression still reign supreme.

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NZK – The Kissing of the Sun and Moon Tantra (*nyi zla kha sbyor ba chen po gsang ba'i rgyud*; vol. 3, 152-233)

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RCS – The Lamp of the Precious Great Differentiation of the View Root Tantra (*lta ba la shan chen po rin chen sgron ma rtsa ba'i rgyud*) (sde dge edition; vol. 1: 108b-117b).

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