

An Uncommon Narrative Opening: Five Perfections in *Tantra of the Sun*¹

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ABSTRACT

Shifting *nidānas* in Buddhist scripture signal different possibilities for what it means to embody the time of liberation, in short, buddhahood. This paper provides a close reading of the *nidāna* of an important, never-before studied Dzogchen Heart Essence (Tib. *Snying thig*) tantra called *Secret Tantra of the Sun: Blazing Luminous Matrix of Samantabhadri* (Tib. *Kun tu bzang mo klong gsal 'bar ma nyi ma'i gsang rgyud*). I contextualize *Tantra of the Sun* and its transmission history and then provide a section-by-section translation and analysis of its *nidāna* with cross-citations from other chapters of the tantra to clarify key terminology, such as the meaning of “matrix” (Tib. *klong*). I argue that Samantabhadri’s awakened speech is so powerful that it catalyzes the primordial ground to manifest as ground appearances

1. This article was originally presented at the Buddhism Unit of the 2022 American Academy of Religions (AAR) annual meeting in a panel that I organized called “Performing Time in Buddhist Literature: Creative Reimaginings of Past, Present, and Future.” Deep-felt thanks to my fellow panelists Shayne Dahl, Sinae Kim, Adam Miller, our presider Chenxing Han, and our respondent Natalie Gummer for the conversation and exchange. Thank you to my advisor James Gentry for the generous feedback over the last few months and to Kathryn Gin Lum who encouraged me to split the original paper into two. Thank you to Khenpo Yeshe, a dear friend and teacher who encouraged me to translate *Tantra of the Sun* in the first place. Thank you to my extended old and new sangha—Tulku Tenzin, Khenpo Guru, and Khenpo Tenzin—for all of your support and conversations. I also want to extend my appreciation to Devin Zuckerman and Thomas Calobrisi for encouraging me to continue the conversations from AAR through *Pacific World Journal*. Finally, thank you to the anonymous reviewers for your insights and to editor Natalie Quli for guiding me throughout this entire process.

(Tib. *gzhi snang*), demonstrating that awakened speech has the potential to disrupt samsaric time. *Tantra of the Sun* repeats and varies the five perfections in creative ways that explicitly perform the mirroring of text, to cosmos, to body that we find in tantric literature more generally, illustrating that the time of liberation is pervasively entextualized into the subtle body through Samantabhadri's speech.

Keywords: five perfections, five excellences, *nidāna*, Dzogchen, Heart Essence, seminal heart, time, narrative

INTRODUCTION: FIVE PERFECTIONS

Do not consider the place where the Dharma is being taught, the teacher, the teachings, and so on as ordinary and impure. As you listen, keep the *five perfections* clearly in mind: The perfect *place* is the citadel of the absolute expanse, called Akaniṣṭha, “the Unexcelled.” The perfect *teacher* is Samantabhadra, the dharmakāya. The perfect *assembly* consists of the male and female Bodhisattvas and deities of the mind lineage of the Conquerors and the symbol lineage of the Vidyādhara.

...Whatever the case, the *teaching* is that of the Great Vehicle and the *time* is the ever-revolving wheel of eternity.

These visualizations are to help us understand how things are in reality. It is not that we are temporarily creating something that does not really exist.²

When I first started attending Great Perfection (Tib. *rdzogs chen*) Dharma teachings, the rinpoche I was studying with would begin the teaching session by requesting that all the attendees bring to mind the five perfections (Tib. *phun sum tshogs pa lnga*): (1) the perfect place, (2) the perfect teacher, (3) the perfect time, (4) the perfect retinue, and (5) the perfect teaching. The five perfections are roughly comparable to the English “who, what, where, when, and how” scenario. Specifically, I was instructed to visualize the teacher before me as the perfect teacher, the embodiment of the buddhas of the three times; the other students around me as the perfect retinue in the form of male and female bodhisattvas; and the location of our teaching as the

2. Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1999), 9.

perfect place, a pure realm. Following this visualization was always an invitation to generate *bodhicitta* while listening to the Dharma.

This rinpoche's instructions are very much in line with the writings of the nineteenth century Dzogchen master Patrul Rinpoche cited above. Patrul Rinpoche goes on to present several versions of the five perfections to visualize for the student who is about to hear the Dharma. Although Patrul Rinpoche discusses the five perfections in the context of hearing the Dharma, this framework is also applied to initiations settings in Vajrayāna Buddhism. The exact form of the perfect teacher, perfect retinue, etc. varies depending on the perfect place that is being visualized for the particular teaching or initiation—the Glorious Copper-colored Mountain, the Eastern Buddha-field of Manifest Joy, or the Western Buddha-field of the Blissful—and the specific characters commonly associated with these locations. However, regardless of whatever version of the five perfections the hearer of the teaching chooses to visualize, the key point is that they must regard all parts of their surrounding as uncommon or extraordinary (Tib. *thun mong ma yin pa*). Moreover, as Patrul Rinpoche has emphasized, these visualizations shouldn't be regarded as mental fabrications or imagination in a negative sense. Rather, the practitioner's capacity to realize the true nature of reality is incumbent upon their ability to experience the entire setting of the Dharma teaching through these five perfections and to generate a sense of confidence in that narrative setting being present.

Although not yet explicitly theorized as the “five perfections,”³ in the *nidānas*, or narrative settings of earlier forms of Buddhist scripture that proclaim to be words of the Buddha (Skt. *buddhavacana*), they open with a temporal and spatial situatedness akin to the convention

3. I have not been able to find the exact origin to the coinage of the term “five perfections,” but in a search on Tibetan Manuscript Project Vienna, “Resources for Kanjur and Tanjur Studies,” n.d., <http://www.rkts.org>, I found two instances of “five perfections” in the Kanjur and twenty-nine in the Tenjur. In the Kanjur, the first citation is in the *Śrī-jñānavajrasamuccaya* (Tib. *Dpal ye shes rdo rje kun las bsdu pa*), and the second comes from an important Dzogchen mind series text titled, *Sarvadharmamahāśāntibodhicittakulaya-rāja* (Tib. *Chos thams cad rdzogs pa chen po byang chub kyi sems kun byed rgyal po*). The Tanjur citations are mostly treatises on tantras. In a recent conversation with Khenchen Tsewang Gyatso Rinpoche at the Namdroling monastery, I was told that the five perfections are specific to Vajrayāna Buddhism.

of the five perfections.⁴ In the case of the conventional sutra *nidāna* opening—“Thus have I heard at one time,” or “Thus have I heard. At one time...”—the meaning changes depending on whether the punctuation comes before or after the adverbial phrase “at one time.” In Tibetan manuscripts, which follow the former punctuation, the “I” usually refers to some disciple of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. “I heard” signals that said disciple narrating the sutra was present during a teaching from the Buddha Śākyamuni and later recounting the contents—usually orally, hence, “I heard”—to others. The hearing aspect of this kind of *nidāna* framing thus explicitly performs an unbroken connection of oral transmission stemming from Śākyamuni Buddha. Moreover, “at one time,” followed by a description of the particular location of the teaching, suggests that the where and when of the preaching is located in a particular place and time, usually during the lifetime of Śākyamuni Buddha.⁵ For example, in many sutras associated with the Tipiṭaka, the location of the preaching is situated in an identifiable place in India such as Varanasi, Sāvattḥī in Jeta’s Grove, etc. The main interlocutors of the Buddha range from monk disciples, to laypeople, to wandering ascetics, or even kings. It is important to note that even within the earlier Buddhist sanghas, the authenticity of Buddhist scripture was not always restricted to direct speech; disciples, usually monks, who possessed insight into the reality that the

4. Take, for example, the *Dhammachakkappavattana sutta*: “Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Baransi in the Deer Park at Isipatana. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five thus.” In Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., “SN 56.11. Dhammacakkappavattanasutta: Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma,” Sutta Central, <https://suttacentral.net/sn56.11/en/bodhi?reference=none&highlight=false>.

5. There is a vast amount of commentarial literature that offers different interpretive frameworks for what it means to say, “At one time,” and how to parse this *nidāna*. See Brian Galloway, “‘Thus Have I Heard: At One Time...,’” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 34, no. 2 (April 1991): 87–104. See also Sinae Kim’s article, “The Synchronicity of Preaching-Hearing-Enlightenment: Buddhist Preachers’ Performing ‘One Time’ (Yishi 一時) in Late Medieval China” in this issue of *Pacific World*.

Buddha Śākyamuni had realized were also qualified to expound upon the Dharma.⁶

In general, in the *nidānas* of Mahāyāna sutras there is a marked shift in the location of the preaching and in the audience listening. In the *Heart Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra*, for example, the Buddha Śākyamuni is now dwelling at Rājagrha at Vulture Peak Mountain and speaking to an audience of not only ordained monks and nuns, but countless bodhisattvas, too. Moreover, insight derived from visionary experiences or deep *samādhi* is now more frequently the source of inspiration for the preaching.⁷ In tantric Buddhist traditions, the boundaries between historical and mythical locations become even more porous. For example, the Kālacakra tradition purports that its *mūlatantra*, called *Paramādibuddha tantra*,⁸ was taught by Śākyamuni Buddha to the king

6. See Ronald M. Davidson, “An Introduction to the Standards of Scriptural Authenticity in Indian Buddhism,” in *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, ed. Robert E. Buswell (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 291–325.

7. For example, the *Heart Sutra* famously begins: “Thus did I hear at one time. The Transcendent Victor was sitting on Vulture Mountain in Rājagrha together with a great assembly of monks and a great assembly of Bodhisattvas. At that time the Transcendent Victor was absorbed in a *samādhi* on the enumerations of phenomena called ‘perception of the profound.’ Also at that time, the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara was contemplating the meaning of the profound perfection of wisdom and he saw that those five aggregates are empty of inherent existence.” Donald S. Lopez, *The Heart Sūtra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries*, SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 19.

8. Vesna Wallace, who has produced a prolific amount of scholarship on the *Kālacakra tantra*, posits that *Śrī Kālacakra tantra* is an early eleventh-century treatise belonging to the class of Niruttara Yoga tantras (the highest class of yoga tantras) and was most likely the last Niruttara Yoga tantra to appear in India. See Vesna A. Wallace, *The Inner Kālacakratantra: A Buddhist Tantric View of the Individual* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Based on chap. 1, v. 27 of the *Laghu tantra*, Orofino’s study argues that the tantra can be dated to the year 1026 CE. See Giacomella Orofino, *Sekoddeśa: A Critical Edition of the Tibetan Translation, with an Appendix by Raniero Gnoli on the Sanskrit Text* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medico ed Estremo Oriente, 1994), 15–16. In Newman’s study, the *Śrī Kālacakra* and its related commentary *Vimalaprabhā* (VMP) is dated to 1012 CE. See John Newman, “A Brief History of the Kalachakra,” in *The Wheel of Time: The Kalachakra in Context*, ed. Geshe Lhundhub Sopa, Roger Jackson, and John Newman (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1985), 65.

of Shambhala, named Sucandra, at the Dhānyakaṭaka *stūpa* located in the present-day village of Amarāvātī in Andhra Pradesh.⁹ While the location of the Dhānyakaṭaka *stūpa* accords with a conventional understanding of an existing geographical place, the kingdom of Shambhala does not. In Buddhist tantras, too, the main narrator takes the form of buddhas other than Śākyamuni, sometimes paired with consorts, for example Śrī Heruka and Vajravārāhī in the *Cakrasaṃvara tantra*, Hevajra and Vajrayoginī in the *Hevajra tantra*, or Acala/Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa and Vajradhātviśvarī in the *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa tantra*.

David Gray's "Disclosing the Empty Secret: Textuality and Embodiment in the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*"¹⁰ is one of the few articles I am aware of that offers a comparative study of Buddhist *nidānas* from sutra to tantra. Gray argues that these shifting *nidānas* reflect evolving understandings of what an embodied buddha can mean. While the earlier Buddhist scriptures tended to associate buddhahood with the historical Śākyamuni Buddha, Mahāyāna sutras expanded the Buddha's embodiment to incorporate three or two different bodies (Skt. *kāyas*). In terms of three-body or *trikāya* theory, a buddha came to be understood as the reality body (Skt. *dharmakāya*), the enjoyment body (Skt. *saṃbhogakāya*), and the emanation body (Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*). And in terms of two-body theory, a buddha could manifest in a form body (Skt. *rūpakāya*) or a reality body (Skt. *dharmakāya*). In the *Lotus Sutra*, for example, the Buddha is no longer identified with a human body but with the *dharmakāya*, allowing them to manifest in multiple locations at the same time. Mirroring this shift in bodily signification is a shift in Mahāyāna sutras' narrativity more generally, stretching out notions of space and time in extremely imaginative ways.¹¹

Gray continues that whereas the earlier Buddhist canon derived its scriptural authority from purporting to be a direct oral transmission heard by a disciple of the historical Buddha, a distinguishing feature of early Mahāyāna was the sudden emergence and proliferation of Buddhist texts, all of which suggested a burgeoning writing

9. Wallace, *The Inner Kālacakratāntra*, 3.

10. David Gray, "Disclosing the Empty Secret: Textuality and Embodiment in the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*," *Numen* 52, no. 4 (2005): 417–444.

11. See Natalie Gummer, "Sūtra Time," in *The Language of the Sūtras: Essays in Honor of Luis Gómez*, ed. Natalie Gummer (Berkeley: Mangalam Press, 2021), 293–337.

culture associated with the Mahāyāna movement,¹² which was further reflected in the content of the sutras themselves. Even as these Mahāyāna sutras opened in the same way as earlier sutras, offering an homage to the oral tradition—“Thus have I heard...”—they simultaneously emphasized the inexpressible merit that is accumulated through acts of *writing*, sometimes even just a *gāthā*.

According to Gray, Buddhist tantras play with space-time even more, relocating the preaching of the Dharma to other realms like

12. See Donald S. Lopez, “Authority and Orality in the Mahāyāna,” *Numen* 42 (1995): 21–47. Lopez argues that early Mahāyāna movements and the Vedas did not immediately commit their oral texts into written ones. In fact, there was a tension in terms of where authority was most vested: was it in the written word or the testimony as to what had been heard? See also Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*, Studies in the Buddhist Traditions (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997). Schopen proposed the thesis of a “cult of the book” in early Mahāyāna, as evidenced by the famous refrains in the Perfection of Literature sutras stating that unimaginable merit is accumulated through “copying, reciting, and venerating the book.” However, for Schopen, early Mahāyāna sutras express animosity toward the *stūpa* cult—they wanted new centers of worship, not new teachings. The book or text could function as a stand-in for the absent founder. Nevertheless, these written scriptures continued to maintain a semblance of having a *nidāna* verse, thus authorizing the scripture as *buddhavacana*.

Akaniṣṭha,¹³ or even into the wombs of *yoginīs*.¹⁴ Likewise, the primary narrator is no longer restricted to the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, but rather encompasses a broad range of Buddha *saṃbhogakāya* figures associated with different pure realms, or even *dharmakāya* figures like Samantabhadra, who becomes particularly important in Dzogchen tantras. Moreover, an explicit mirroring of text to body to cosmos comes to the fore. Gray writes:

For esoteric Buddhists, the universe is a text; and the text is a microcosm of a universe, even when the text is as short as a single syllable, such as *a* or *hūṃ*. Hence the complete gnosis of the Buddha, the direct realization of the nature of reality, is always accessible provided that one knows how to perceive it. This methodology is what esoteric Buddhist traditions claim to be able to provide; praxical efficacy

13. Place name, however, is not always so easy to understand. See Orna Almogi, “Akaniṣṭha as a Multivalent Buddhist Word-Cum-Name with Special Reference to RNYingma Tantric Sources,” in *Archaeologies of the Written: Indian, Tibetan, and Buddhist Studies in Honor of Cristina Scherrer-Schaub*, ed. Vincent Tournier, Vincent Eltschinger, and Marta Sernesi (Napoli, Italy: UniorPress, 2020). Almogi has traced the different definitions of Akaniṣṭha through Longchenpa’s commentary on the *Guhyagarba tantra*, known as *Phyogs bcu’i mun sel*, and also Sūryasiṃhaprabha’s typology in the *Guhyagarbhatantravyākhyāna*. Longchenpa, who claims to be basing his typology on Buddhaguhya’s, provides a list of six possible locations/meanings for Akaniṣṭha. Furthermore, on some occasions, Akaniṣṭha is portrayed as distinct from Ghanavyūha, while at other points it is identical to it. Almogi concludes that because the employment of the word-cum-name Akaniṣṭha found in these scriptures is ambiguous, it has contributed to many discrepancies within the commentarial literature. All of this demonstrates that even when there are different variations on *nidānas*, it is not easy to say what exactly it means when a text relocates us to another time-space for the unfolding of a teaching. Buddhists themselves have theorized and debated on the multiple valences of word-cum-name.

14. Gray notes the diversity of *nidāna* openings in esoteric Buddhist texts. While some earlier esoteric works, such as the seventh-century *Sarvatathāgatattvasaṃgraha*, maintain the conventional *nidāna* opening verse but locate the text in transmudane locations such as Akaniṣṭha, the highest heaven in Indian Buddhist cosmology, other texts like the *Guhyasamāja tantra* begin with the Blessed Lord residing in the vulvae of Adamantine Ladies. Still others like the *Cakrasaṃvara tantra* begin merely with *atha*, “and then,” which the commentarial tradition analyzes as a mark of the ongoing and never-ending process of revelation. Gray, “Disclosing the Empty Secret,” 424–425.

rather than historical accuracy becomes the basis for their authority, and, ultimately the body becomes their text.¹⁵

If we return to the Indian Buddhist tantra cited before, *Kālacakra tantra*, this mirroring of text, cosmos, and body is explicit in its chapter organization into: (1) worldly realm or cosmos (Skt. *lokadhātu*), (2) inner realm or individual (Skt. *adhyātmadhātu*), (3) initiation (Skt. *abhiṣekha*), (4) practice (Skt. *sādhanā*), and (5) gnosis (Skt. *jñāna*).¹⁶ Within the *Kālacakra tantra*, too, references to an impending apocalyptic war reveal further plays with time. As John Newman writes, “the symbolic nature of Kalachakra’s history is due to a special correspondence set up between the historical drama occurring in the macrocosm of world history, and the spiritual drama unfolding in the microcosm of a person’s religious transformation.”¹⁷ This macrocosmic historical drama is told through the myth of Sambhala where it is prophesied that at the end of the Kaliyuga a great war will erupt where the army of Sambhala will fight and ultimately triumph against evil barbarians and demons. The last Kalkī, Raudra Cakrī, will defeat the barbarian forces of Islam, ushering in the Age of Perfection (Kritayuga). In chapter 2 of *Kālacakra tantra*, Cakrī is further homologized to the *vajrī*, or the gnosis that is innate to the human body. Implied is that the external battle at the end of Kaliyuga is also an internal one whereby the *yogi* conquers ignorance through the union of method and wisdom, or *vajrayoga*. In the tantra’s self-organization as outer, inner, and other, it is the Other Wheel of Time—characterized by initiation into the *vajra* family, followed by generation and completion stages practices—which provides the path to purify and to destroy the external and internal demons who create the suffering of samsaric existence.

It’s important to note that this homologization between text, universe, and body is not unique to Buddhist tantra, but rather characteristic of pan-Asian tantric traditions overall. Gavin Flood, in his book *Tantric Body* (2006), uses the word “entextualization” to describe this process wherein “the body becomes cosmography, a writing of the cosmos.”¹⁸ In the Pañcarātra and Śaiva tantric texts that Flood stud-

15. Ibid, 423.

16. Orofino, *Sekoddeśa*, 14.

17. In Newman, “A Brief History of the Kalachakra,” 51–52.

18. Gavin D. Flood, *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris and Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 28.

ies, liberation takes the form of a journey, via the body, back to the source prior to an entanglement with matter, through ritualized forms of practice that mirror the tantric metaphysics of each text-specific tradition.

Dzogchen Heart Essence (Tib. *Snying thig*) literature, associated with the Nyingma (Tib. *rnying ma*)¹⁹ school of Tibetan Buddhism, builds upon the *nidāna* innovations that are found within Buddhist tantra and Mahāyāna literature even more. In Dzogchen Heart Essence literature, two kinds of *nidānas*—common (Tib. *thun mong*) and uncommon (Tib. *thun mong ma yin pa*)—are distinguished. This convention of layering the *nidāna* as common and uncommon appears several times in the Tibetan Kangyur (Tib. *bKa' 'gyur*) and Tengyur (Tib. *bstan 'gyur*), especially in the commentarial literature associated with tantras such as the *Hevajra tantra*, *Samputa tantra*, and *Cakrasaṃvara tantra*. In the Tengyur, there is even a Mahāyāna Perfection of Wisdom (Skt. Prajñāpāramitā) commentary that uses the phrase “uncommon *nidāna*.”²⁰ Heart Essence literature seems to be building upon these pre-existing Indian references to the “uncommon *nidāna*” and theorizing upon them in novel ways. In Dzogchen Heart Essence literature, the common *nidāna* is associated

19. Nyingma, roughly translated to the “Ancients” or “Old School,” claims to trace its lineage back to the dynastic period of Tibetan history (600–842 CE). Nyingma is named in contradistinction to the Sarma (Tib. *gsar ma*), translated as the “Modernists” or “New Schools.” These two categories signified two different periods of the translation of Buddhist texts into Tibetan. According to Germano, Nyingma denotes translation activities from Vairocana (late eighth century) up to Paṇḍita Smṛti(jñānakīrti) (late tenth to early eleventh centuries). Sarma refers to the translation activities of Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po, 958–1055) and onwards. See David Germano, “Architecture and Absence in the Secret Tantric History of the Great Perfection,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 17, no. 2 (1992): 203–204.

20. In a search on the e-Kanjur and e-Tenjur, there were zero results for the Tibetan “*thun mong ma yin pa'i gleng gzhi*” in the Kanjur and four results in the Tanjur: (1) *Śrīguhyasamājatantrarājavr̥tti* (Tib. *Rgyud kyi rgyal po dpal gsang ba 'dus pa'i 'grel ba*); (2) *Śātasāhasrikāvākyā* (Tib. *Stong phrag brgya p'i rnam par bshad pa*); (3) *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayārthaparījñāna* (Tib. *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i snying po'i don yongs su shes pa*); and (4) *Gambhīrasaṃdhinirmocana-sūtraṭīkā* (Tib. *Dgongs pa zab mo nges par 'grel pa'i mdo rgya cher 'grel pa*).

with the opening “Thus I have heard,” whereas the uncommon *nidāna* corresponds to “Thus I have taught” (Tib. *'di skad bdag gis bstan pa*).

Nyima Bum (Nyi ma 'bum, 1158–1213) authored an important treatise on the Dzogchen pith instruction series scripture set known as the *Seventeen Tantras* (Tib. *rgyud bcu bdun*).²¹ In his treatise titled *Eleven Words and Meanings* (Tib. *tshig don bcu gcig pa*) he discusses this distinction between the two kinds of *nidānas* in depth.²² Nyima Bum goes to

21. The *Seventeen Tantras* form the core of the Dzogchen pith instruction series (*man ngag sde*). Along with *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra*, they represent some of the earliest Heart Essence texts. Although they feature different buddhas, all of them are written in a question-and-answer format and framed as *buddhavacana*. Despite claiming Indian origins, there are no Sanskrit versions of the texts that have been found. *Seventeen Tantras* are found in the *Collected Tantras of the Ancients* (*rNying ma rgyud 'bum*), but occasionally they are also an independent set. The *Seventeen Tantras* are: (1) *Tantra Beyond Sound* (*sGra thal 'gyur*): the root of the *Seventeen Tantras*; (2) *The Self-Liberated Awareness* (*Rig pa rang grol*); (3) *Self-Arising Awareness* (*Rig pa rang shar*); (4) *Self-Arising Great Perfection* (*rDzogs pa rang byung*); (5) *Exquisite Auspiciousness* (*bKra shis mdzes ldan*); (6) *The Array of Inlaid Gems* (*Nor bu phra bkod*); (7) *Necklace of Precious Pearls* (*Mu tig rin po che'i phreng ba*); (8) *The Tantra without Letters* (*Yi ge med pa*); (9) *The Blazing Lamp* (*sGron ma 'bar ba*); (10) *The Heart Mirror of Samantabhadra* (*Kun tu bzang po thugs kyi me long*); (11) *The Union of Sun and Moon* (*Nyi zla kha sbyor*); (12) *Direct Introduction* (*Ngo sprod spras pa*); (13) *The Blazing Relics* (*Sku gdung 'bar ba*); (14) *The Heaped Jewels* (*Rin po che spung ba*); (15) *The Heart Mirror of Vajrasattva* (*rDo rje sems dpa' snying gi me long*); (16) *The Six Expanses of Samantabhadra* (*Kun tu bzang po klong drug*); (17) *The Perfect Dynamic Energy of the Lion* (*Seng ge rtsal rdzogs*).

22. Nyima Bum's treatise quotes from all *Seventeen Tantras* and from the root of the *Seventeen Tantras*, *Tantra Beyond Sound*, and the *Garland of Pearls* (*Mu tig phreng ba*) in particular. Nearly identical versions of his composition were authored by the treasure revealers Rigzin Godem (Rig 'dzin Rgod ldem 1337–1409) and Longchenpa. Rigzin Godem revealed a treasure cycle called *Unimpeded Thought of Samantabhadra/Pellucid Transcendent State of Samantabhadra* (*Kun tu bzang po'i dgongs pa zang thal*) from a treasure cache in Tsang Province in 1366. See Tibetan Manuscript Project Vienna, “Resources for Kanjur and Tanjur Studies,” n.d., <http://www.rkts.org>. According to Malcolm Smith, who has provided a translation of this commentary, Godem's treasure cycle is a collection of texts called the *Aural Lineage of the Self-Liberated Great Perfection*, and these aural lineages are represented by a total of eleven texts: five authored by Padmasambhava, four by Vairocana, and two by Vimalamitra, one of which resembles Nyima Bum's treatise. See

great lengths to justify the uncommon *nidāna* as a mark of authoritative Buddhist scripture, rather than a deviation from it. Khenpo Yeshe's MA thesis, "The Origins of the rDzogs chen Eleven Words and Meanings: Comparing Nyi ma 'bum, Klong chen pa, and Rig 'dzin Rgod ldem,"²³ provides a partial translation of Nyima Bum's treatise. As Khenpo Yeshe's translation shows, the fact that Nyingma tantras begin with the speaker rather than the hearer has been a point of criticism amongst Tibetans.²⁴ Critics claim that beginning with "I taught"

Vimalamitra et al., *Buddhahood in This Life: The Great Commentary by Vimalamitra* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications with Zangthal Editions, 2016). The full title, which heretofore will be referred to simply as *Great Commentary*, is *Great Aural Transmission of Vimalamitra, Instructions for the Kind, a Commentary on the Unsurpassed Utmost Secret Great Perfection, the Self-Illuminating Gnosis (Vi ma mi tra'i snyan bryud chen po rgyal po la gdams pa yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po'i 'grel pa ye shes rang gsal)*.

The other text that was also clearly influenced by Nyima Bum's treatise is Longchenpa's infamous treatise *Treasury of Words and Meanings* in which he groups the entire Heart Essence path into the same eleven topics as Nyima Bum. Although there are a few differences in the two compositions (as detailed by Khenpo Yeshe), the overall structure of the text coheres with Nyima Bum's treatise. Finally, there is one other work of a similar title, albeit shorter than *Treasury of Words and Meanings, Eleven Words and Meanings (Tshig don bcu gcig pa)*, that appears in the *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* and is attributed to Longchenpa. Yeshe suggests this work may have been written by Nyima Bum's father, Zhangton Tashi Dorje. Yeshe cites as evidence the fact that the opening in both versions of *Eleven Words and Meanings* by Longchenpa and Nyima Bum are almost identical: "To the Glorious Mahāvajradhāra, the *lama*, the *yidam* deities, and/The *ḍākinīs* who possess bliss/I prostrate with body, speech, and mind." Yeshe notes, "While it is possible that Klong chen pa copies Nyi ma 'bum's opening verse when composing his own shorter work on *Eleven Words and Meanings*, it may be that Nyi ma 'bum was copying from his father's earlier text. Perhaps also relevant is the fact that the colophon attributing the shorter work to Klong Chen pa appears only after an initial colophon stating that the work is, 'the quintessence of the heart of the scholar Vimala[mitra].'" See Khenpo Yeshe, "The Origins of the Rdzogs Chen Eleven Words and Meanings: Comparing Nyi Ma 'bum, Klong Chen Pa, and Rig 'Dzin Rgod Ldem" (MA thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2017), 18.

23. Yeshe, "The Origins of the Rdzogs Chen Eleven Words and Meanings."

24. There are many other examples of the polemics surrounding Tibetan tantras as *buddhavacana*. For an example of how sixteenth-century medical scholar Zurkharwa Lodro Gyelpo (Zur mkhar Blo gros rgyal po, 1509–1579) challenged

rather than “I heard” signals the absence of a lineage because there is no hearer or audience present in the formulation of the scripture. But in Nyima Bum’s commentary, both the common and the uncommon *nidānas* are justified as authoritative and, moreover, in harmony with one another. Nyima Bum authorizes the uncommon *nidāna* in Dzogchen Heart Essence scripture by reminding the reader that the same uncommon *nidāna* of “Thus have I taught” appears within the *Guhyagarbha tantra* (Tib. *Rgyud gsang ba’i snying po*),²⁵ which holds authoritative status for the Nyingmapas.²⁶

Without going further into these debates, I’d like to shift our attention to consider what kind of affect this novel twist on the common

the authenticity of the *Four Treatises* (Tib. *rGyud bzhi*) as *buddhavacana*, see Janet Gyatso, *Being Human in a Buddhist World: An Intellectual History of Medicine in Early Modern Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 171–172. For a discussion on different critiques of the *Guhyagarbha* implied through Rongzom pa’s (Rong zom chos kyi bzang po, 1012–1088) defense of this tantra, see Dorji Wangchuk, “An Eleventh Century Defence of the Authenticity of the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*,” in *The Many Canons of Tibetan Buddhism: PIATS 2000; Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Ninth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies*, ed. David Germano and Helmut Eimer (Leiden: Brill’s Tibetan Studies Library, n.d.), 269–287.

25. See Nathaniel Garson, “Penetrating the Secret Essence Tantra: Context and Philosophy in the Mahāyoga System of RNYing-Ma Tantra” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2004), 281–282.

26. I have reproduced Khenpo Yeshe’s translation (“The Origins of the Rdzogs Chen Eleven Words and Meanings,” 36) of the relevant passage from Nyima Bum’s treatise below. Note that Khenpo Yeshe uses “ordinary setting” to translate common *nidāna* (*thun mong gi gleng gzhi*).

Regarding the “Thus, have I heard,” [it] is the compiler’s words; the compiler, concerned that his followers might not believe in it, is saying there is no other lineage between him and the teacher. Thus “I myself heard these words” cuts through any uncertainties. Therefore, it is taught in order to generate belief in his own followers. This is also expressed in these words:

Within the ordinary setting,
The compiler teaches the followers
In order to create belief.
Arising out of the Ground of the disciple as instructions,
The teachings remain.

Regarding dispelling errors, suppose someone says teaching in these two ways is wrong: Are you saying that [writing either] “I taught” and “I heard” is contradictory, or that counting them as two is

nidāna intones with respect to narrative time. The fact that there has been so much variability in these opening *nidānas* demonstrates the vitality of the Buddhist tradition, that it is never a closed canon. I am interested in how the shifting *nidānas* in Buddhist scripture may signal different possibilities for embodying the time of liberation, in short, buddhahood. This paper will provide a close reading of the *nidāna* of an important, never-before studied Dzogchen Heart Essence tantra called *Secret Tantra of the Sun: Blazing Luminous Matrix of Samantabhadri* (Tib. *Kun tu bzang mo klong gsal 'bar ma nyi ma'i gsang rgyud*), hereafter referred to as *Tantra of the Sun*. As evidenced by the title, this tantra's primary buddha narrator is the *dharmakāya* Buddha Samantabhadri,

wrong? Regarding [the former, i.e.,] someone saying that [saying] "have I taught" is contradictory, [then you would be saying that] the **Guhyagarbha*, which says, "Thus have I explained at one time," is wrong. Suppose someone says that, while it may say, "Thus have I explained," it does not say, "heard." Is it correct or not for it not to be there? If it is [correct for it not to be there], then those [sutras] that do have "heard" would be corrupt and wrong. If it is not [correct for it not to be there], then you are directly contradicting that same [**Guhyagarbha tantra*]. Suppose someone says that this [scripture should be] asserted by means of [the statement,] "I heard." Because the tantra teaches "thus have I taught," here is also implied ["thus have I heard"]. Also, [in order to answer the idea that] if those [sutras] that have "heard" were correct, then those that do not have it would be incorrect, the following is correctly established: It is not contradictory here for the teacher who teaches also to have heard. If anyone says this is contradictory, they are clearly talking crazy-talk. Generally, if [we] speak truthfully, <8b> some sutras and tantras mention both "taught" and "heard," some mention [only] "heard," some mention both, and some mention neither. You should understand that there is no contradiction. You should understand that there is no contradiction. [12] If you say counting them as two is wrong, then you would be contradicting the [*Prajñā*] *pāramitā* which teaches samsara and nirvana as two and the two truths, as well as the common Secret Mantra which teaches the title and the scripture as two, and the Secret Mantra which teaches generation and completion as two and [distinguishes] skillful means and wisdom. So [it is okay for] them to appear as two. That concludes the explanation of the *tantra* in accordance with the outer by means of the excellences of the setting for those intellects that require elaboration.

whose significance and association with the ground (Tib. *gzhi*) in Dzogchen cosmogony I will highlight in a later section.

I first contextualize *Tantra of the Sun* and its transmission history and then provide a section-by-section translation and analysis of its *nidāna* with cross-citations from other chapters of the tantra to clarify key terminology, such as the meaning of “matrix” (Tib. *klong*). I argue that Samantabhadri’s awakened speech is so powerful that it catalyzes the primordial ground to manifest as ground appearances (Tib. *gzhi snang*), demonstrating that awakened speech has the potential to disrupt samsaric time. I then analyze how the structure of the *nidāna* as the five perfections is reproduced in other sections of the tantra, and to what ends. I argue that *Tantra of the Sun* repeats and varies the five perfections in creative ways that explicitly perform this mirroring of text to cosmos to body that we find in tantric literature more generally, illustrating that the time of liberation is continually entextualized into the body through Samantabhadri’s speech. Finally, I will conclude with some remarks about the connection between the outer guru’s speech and Samantabhadri’s speech as conditions for awakening.

INTRODUCTION TO OUR PROTAGONIST: TANTRA OF THE SUN

Today, Dzogchen is commonly known through three divisions: mind series (*sems sde*), expanse series (*klong sde*), and pith instruction series (*man ngag sde*). Within the pith instruction series there are four more divisions: outer, inner, secret, and utmost secret. *Tantra of the Sun*, along with the *Seventeen Tantras*, is considered to be part of the utmost secret category of texts within the pith instruction series of Dzogchen. *Tantra of the Sun*’s significance to the Heart Essence tradition is demonstrated by the fact that it is cited throughout a very important collection of texts known as *Fourfold Heart Essence* (Tib. *Snying thig ya bzhi*). *Fourfold Heart Essence* is comprised of hundreds of texts of varying length, attributed to different authors, and is heavily curated by its editor, believed to be Longchenpa (Klong chen rab ’byams pa, 1308–1364).

Though named “Fourfold,” the collection is actually divided into five parts. Represented within *Fourfold Heart Essence* are two very important Heart Essence traditions that have influenced the development of Heart Essence Great Perfection contemplative practices into the present: (1) *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* (Tib. *Bi ma snying thig*), attributed to the Indian Master Vimalamitra and other Great Perfection masters, such as Garab Dorje, Mañjuśrimitra, Śrī Siṃha, and Jñānasūtra;

and (2) *Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī* (Tib. *mKha' 'gro snying thig*), attributed to Padmasambhava²⁷ and Yeshe Tsogyel, who are particularly important for Nyingma identity. Within *Fourfold Heart Essence*, there are also three collections that function as commentaries of the two Heart Essence traditions: (1) *Quintessence of the Guru* (Tib. *Bla ma yang tig*); (2) *Quintessence of the Ḍākinī* (Tib. *mKha' 'gro yang tig*); and (3) *Profound Quintessence* (Tib. *Zab mo yang tig*). These three commentaries are attributed to Longchenpa, who was instrumental in harmonizing Great Perfection teachings with the New Schools (*gsar ma*) in Tibet. *Fourfold Heart Essence* thus occupies a pivotal role between its centuries-long formation of Heart Essence literature and its subsequent reception in Tibet, providing a critical snapshot into Heart Essence formations in fourteenth century Tibet.

Whereas the earlier Heart Essence tradition in *Fourfold Heart Essence*—*Heart Essence of Vimalamitra*—cites the canonical *Seventeen Tantras* as scriptural authority without any mention of *Tantra of the Sun*, *Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī* yokes our protagonist—*Tantra of the Sun*—to these *Seventeen Tantras* as scriptural authority by calling it the eighteenth member of this scriptural corpus. Not only that, but *Tantra of the Sun* appears to be elevated as the primary source text for *Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī* and its commentaries in *Quintessence of the Ḍākinī*, sometimes cited even more frequently than *Tantra Beyond Sound* (*sGra thal 'gyur*), which is regarded as the root tantra of the *Seventeen Tantras*. The fact that *Tantra of the Sun* is yoked to the canonical *Seventeen Tantras* and takes center stage in the tradition *Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī* is significant because it reflects the ways in which Nyingma practitioners in Tibet were actively reinventing tradition and simultaneously rewriting past histories to include new forms of awakened speech as sources of authority and legitimacy. Later treasure revelations (Tib. *gter ma*) of similar titles revealed by Ratna Lingpa (Rat+na gling pa, 1403–1478)

27. For a survey of different historical narratives associated with the formation and popularization of Padmasambhava's story, see Geoffrey Samuel and Jamyang Oliphant, eds., *About Padmasambhava: Historical Narratives and Later Transformations of Guru Rinpoche* (Schongau; Garuda Verlag, 2020). For a discussion of the treasure revealer Nyangrel Nyima Oser's (Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer, c. 1124–1192) role in introducing key hagiographies of Padmasambhava that link him to Tibet's imperial age, see Daniel Alexander Hirshberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born: Padmasambhava in the History of Tibet's Golden Age*, *Studies in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2016).

and Dorje Lingpa (rDo rje gling pa, 1346–1405) also mark *Tantra of the Sun's* enduring legacy.²⁸

28. I provide a more in-depth analysis of the contents of the different versions of *Tantra of the Sun* in “Heart Essence Literature through Time: An In-depth Study of *Secret Tantra of the Sun: Blazing Luminous Matrix of Samantabhadri* (*Kun tu bzang mo klong gsal 'bar ma nyi ma'i gsang rgyud*)” (PhD diss., Stanford University, forthcoming). In a nutshell, there are four main versions of *Tantra of the Sun* that I have found on BDRC. They are contained in the *Oral Precepts of the Ancients*, i.e., *Nyingma Kama* (*rNying ma bka' ma*) and the *Collected Tantras of the Ancients*, i.e., *Nyingma Gyubum* (*rNyingma rgyud 'bum*). As the colophons suggest, two versions are explicitly treasure revelations (KM1_DL, KM2_DL, NG_RL, NG1_RL, RL1, RL2, and RL3) and two are oral precepts or *bka' ma* (NG_24, NG1_24, KM1_113, and KM2_113). I use the terms “oral precepts” and “treasure” provisionally because I recognize that the boundaries between these categories are quite ambiguous and do not necessarily correspond with how tantras are catalogued. In my dissertation I provide a brief analysis of the contents in these other versions of *Tantra of the Sun*, but more detailed work will have to be done in the future. The four versions are as follows:

(1) Oral precept version in twenty-four chapters as found in the *Collected Tantras of the Ancients* (NG_24 and NG1_24), titled *Tantra of the Sun: Blazing Luminous Matrix of Samantabhadri* (*Kun tu bzang mo klong gsal 'bar ma nyi ma'i rgyud*). See NG_24: kun tu bzang mo, “Kun Tu Bzang Mo Klong Gsal 'bar Ma Nyi Ma'i Rgyud (NG_24),” in *Rnying Ma Rgyud 'bum* (*Sde Dge Par Ma*), BDRC: MW21939, 26 vols. (sde dge: sde dge par khang chen mo, n.d.), 25:361b–382. See NG1_24: kun tu bzang mo, “Kun Tu Bzang Mo Klong Gsal 'bar Ma Nyi Ma'i Rgyud (NG1_24),” in *Snga 'gyur Rgyud 'bum Phyogs Bsgrigs*, Gzan dkar, Thub bstan Nyi ma, and 'Gro 'dul rdo rje, Par gzhi dang po par thengs dang po, BDRC: MW1KG14783, 59 vols. (Pe cin: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2009), 33:504–560.

(2) Oral precept version in 113 chapters as found in *Snga 'gyur bka ma shin tu rgyas pa* (KM1_113 and KM2_113), titled *Heart Blood of All Dākinīs: Secret Tantra of the Sun; Blazing Luminous Matrix* (*Mkha' 'gro thams cad kyi snying khrag klong gsal 'bar ma nyi ma'i gsang rgyud*). This version is the one I have translated since it seems to be the version that is quoted throughout *Fourfold Heart Essence*. Throughout this article, KM2 refers to KM2_113. See KM1_113: kun tu bzang mo, “Mkha' 'gro Thams Cad Kyi Snying Khrag Klong Gsal 'Bar Ma Nyi Ma'i Gsang Rgyud (KM1_113),” in *Snga 'gyur Bka Ma'i Chos Se'i Glegs Bam Gcig Brgya Bcu Pa*, ed. Khenpo Munsel, BDRC: W23554, 110 vols. (Chengdu: Khenpo Munsel, 1997), 1:3–349. See KM2_113: kun tu bzang mo, “Kun Tu Zang Mo Klong Gsal 'bar Ma Nyi Ma'i Rgyud (KM2_113),” in *Snga 'gyur Bka' Ma Shin Tu Rgyas Pa*, ed. Tshe ring rgya mtsho, BDRC: MW1PD100944, 133 vols. (Chengdu: Si khron dpe skrun tshogs pa si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2009), 111:1–290.

(3) Treasure version in twenty-eight chapters revealed by Dorje Lingpa (rdo rje gling pa 1346–1405) found in *Snga 'gyur bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa* listed right after the 113-chapter version above. It is titled *From the Great Treasury of Key Points of the Secret Mantra: the Unsurpassed Cycle of the Secret Intermediate State: Secret Tantra of the Sun: Blazing Luminous Matrix of the Secret Essence of the Ḍākinīs* (mkha' 'gro ma'i gsang thig klong gsal 'bar ma nyi ma'i gsang rgyud/ gsang sngags gnad mdzod chen mo las/ bar do gsang skor bla na med pa'i skor). See KM1_DL: rdo rje gling pa, “Mkha' 'gro Ma'i Gsan Thig Klong Gsal 'Bar Ma Nyi Ma'i Gsang Rgyud Gsang Sngags Gnad Mdzod Chen Mo Las Bar Do Gsang Skor Bla Na Med Pa'i Skor (KM1_DL),” in *Snga 'gyur Bka Ma'i Chos Se'i Glegs Bam Gcig Brgya Bcu Pa*, ed. Khenpo Munsel, BDRC: W23554, 110 vols (Chengdu: Khenpo Munsel, 1997), 1:351–489. See KM2_DL: rdo rje gling pa, “Mkha' 'gro Ma'i Gsan Thig Klong Gsal 'Bar Ma Nyi Ma'i Gsang Rgyud Gsang Sngags Gnad Mdzod Chen Mo Las Bar Do Gsang Skor Bla Na Med Pa'i Skor (KM2_DL),” in *Snga 'gyur Bka' Ma Shin Tu Rgyas Pa*, ed. Tshe ring rgya mtsho, BDRC: MW1PD100944, 133 vols. (Chengdu: Si khron dpe skrun tshogs pa si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2009), 111:291–418.

(4) Treasure version in nineteen chapters revealed by Ratna Lingpa (rat+na gling pa, 1403–1478) titled *The Heart Quintessence of the Uncommon Terton Ratna [Lingpa]: Secret Tantra of the Sun: Blazing Luminous Matrix* (Klong gsal 'bar ma nyi ma'i gsang rgyud kun gyi thun mong ma yin pa getr ston rat+na'i snying bcud). These are available in three handwritten Ume versions (RL1, RL2, and RL3) and two block print Uchen versions (NG_RL, NG1_RL) in the *Collected Tantras of the Ancients*. See RL1: ratna gling pa, “Klong Gsal 'bar Ma Nyi Ma'i Gsang Rgyud Kun Gyi Thun Mong Ma Yin Pa Gter Ston Rat+na'i Snying Bcud (RL1),” in *Khams Sde Dge Rdzong Sar Bla Ma Lha Khang Du Bzhugs Pa'i Dpe Rnying*, BDRC: MW3PD988, 221 vols. (sde dge: dzong gsar bla ma lha khang, n.d.), 76: 263–328, <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW3PD988>. See RL2: ratna gling pa, “Klong Gsal 'bar Ma Nyi Ma'i Gsang Rgyud Kun Gyi Thun Mong Ma Yin Pa Gter Ston Rat+na'i Snying Bcud (RL2),” in *Bla Ma Nyi 'bum Gyis Nyar Tshags Mdzad Pa'i Dpe Rnying Dpe Dkon*, BDRC: MW4PD973, 38 vols. (n.p.: Lobsang Shastri, n.d.), 2:31–94, <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW4PD973>. See RL3: ratna gling pa, “Klong Gsal 'bar Ma Nyi Ma'i Gsang Rgyud Kun Gyi Thun Mong Ma Yin Pa Gter Ston Rat+na'i Snying Bcug (RL3),” in *Zhe Chen Mkhar Mdar Gsang Sngags Bstan Rgyas Gling Du Bzhugs Pa'i Dpe Dkon Phyogs Bsdus Gnyis Pa*, ed. kelsang lhamo, BDRC: W2PD17514, 140 vols. (n.p.: Kelsang Lhamo, n.d.), 1:129–192. See NG_RL: ratna gling pa, “Kun Tu Bzang Mo Klong Gsal 'bar Ma Nyi Ma'i Gsang Rgyud (NG_RL),” in *Rnying Ma Rgyud 'bum (Sde Dge Par Ma)*, BDRC: MW21939, 26 vols. (sde dge: sde dge par khang chen mo, n.d.), 25:344a–61. See NG1_RL: ratna gling pa, “Klong Gsal 'bar Ma Nyi Ma'i Gsang Rgyud Kun Gyi Thun Mong Ma Yin Pa Gter Ston Rat+na'i Snying Bcud (NG1_RL),” in *Snga 'gyur Rgyud 'bum Phyogs Bsgrigs*, ed. Gzan dkar, Thub bstan Nyi ma, and 'Gro 'dul rdo rje, Par gzhi

Treasure texts (*gter ma*),²⁹ according to Nyingma self-understand-

dang po par thengs dang po, BDRC: MW1KG14783, 59 vols. (Pe cin: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2009), 33:455–504.

29. For different perspectives on the origins and reasons for treasures, see Tulku Thondup and Harold Talbot, *Hidden Teachings of Tibet: An Explanation of the Terma Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1997); Janet Gyatso, “The Logic of Legitimation in the Tibetan Treasure Tradition,” *History of Religions* 33, no. 2 (November 1993): 97–134; Janet Gyatso, “Signs, Memory and History: A Tantric Buddhist Theory of Scriptural Transmission,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 9, no. 2 (1986): 7–35; Robert Mayer, “Scriptural Revelation in India and Tibet: Indian Precursors of the GTer Ma Tradition,” in *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 6th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies* (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1992), 533–544; and Robert Mayer, “GTer Ston and Tradent: Innovation and Conservation in Tibetan Treasure Literature,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, no. 1/2 (2015): 227–242. Gyatso’s articles attempts to look at what the treasure tradition itself may tell us about its logic. In “Signs, Memory and History: A Tantric Buddhist Theory of Scriptural Transmission” Gyatso emphasizes the presence of semiosis in treasures. Semiosis, according to Gyatso, ensconces the Dharma into a mode of transmission, a mnemonic device of sorts, that which is pointed to by the signifying symbols (*mtshon byed brda*) later employed by *ḍākinīs* who conceal or reveal the treasure. The treasure revealer then must decode the sign and unveil its content and practices and finally codify it into ritual and doctrine. This process usually involved sexual yoga. According to Gyatso, revelation here is a creative act of interpretation and of remembrance, a recollection of times past when the treasure tradition was transmitted by Padmasambhava, and a presencing of this past via the discoverer as a mediator. Gyatso speculates that there is something about a treasure revealer’s relationship to memory and time that has contributed to the autobiographical impulse (*rnam mthar* tradition) in Tibetan Buddhism. In “The Logic of Legitimation in the Tibetan Treasure Tradition,” Gyatso argues that the treasure revealer’s role in the production of treasure scripture functions to legitimize the treasures as authentic Buddhist scripture. Proof of the treasure revealer’s spiritual qualifications coupled with evidence that the treasure revelation had been predicted in the past are critical to creating a link between the past and the present, demonstrating that the original authorship of the treasure in question is a buddha.

While Gyatso’s articles attempt to honor the creative genius and logic of treasure revelation, Mayer (“gTer ston and Tradent: Innovation and Conservation in Tibetan Treasure Literature”) concludes that if we look at the actual content of treasure texts, they are actually quite conservative. That is

ings, were texts taught by Padmasambhava and then concealed by him and his Tibetan consort Yeshe Tsogyel (Ye shes mtsho rgyal) during the imperial period of Tibet (late eighth to early ninth centuries). These treasures are prophesied to be revealed by future treasure revealers (Tib. *gter ston*) when the appropriate times have arrived. Starting around the thirteenth century, Tibet's more conservative Buddhist authorities questioned the authenticity of treasure revelations, claiming that they were not authoritative scripture since they could not be connected to Indian source texts.³⁰ It is around this time that *Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī* first emerges in the form of a treasure revelation and our main protagonist—*Tantra of the Sun*—enters the stage. For these reasons, in order to trace the origins of *Tantra of the Sun*, it is imperative to trace also the origins of the treasure revelation *Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī*.

According to traditional histories (Tib. *lo rgyus*)³¹ about the origins of *Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī*, Padmasambhava received the transmission

to say, the treasure tradition, like most Nyingma tantric ritual literature, is modular in nature. We see the same modules shared between several genres whether treasure, transmitted literature (*bka' ma*), canonical tantric scriptures from the *Collected Tantras of the Old School* (*rnying ma rgyud 'bum*), etc. Mayer argues that the treasure revealer is a tradent, a person who claims not to invent new doctrine but merely to pass on established, ancient teachings. Mayer's approach is to move away from the ideological constructions of treasures and instead to look directly at the literature of the Dudjom corpus as a case study. Rather than a product of an individual genius, Mayer concludes that these texts are communally authored and closely resemble conventionally composed tantric manuals.

30. See Dan Martin, *Unearthing Bon Treasures: Life and Contested Legacy of a Tibetan Scripture Revealer, with a General Bibliography of Bon*, Brill's Tibetan Studies Library, vol. 1 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2001), 111.

31. The *Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī* contains two histories of its composition that can be traced to earlier dates according to the colophon attribution. One is by Chos grags bzang po Bya bral pa bzod pa (Longchenpa's primary biographer), and the second is by Gyalwa Yungton Dorje Pal (rGyal ba g.yung ston rdo rje dpal, 1284–1365 or 1296–1376). See Bya bral pa bzod pa and klong chen pa dri med 'od zer, "Mkha' 'gro Snying Thig Gi Lo Rgyu Rin Po Che'i Phreng Ba," in *Mkha' 'gro Snying Thig, Snying Thig Ya Bzhi*, reproduced from a 'dzom 'brug pa, 13 vols. (Kathmandu: dpal ri par khang, 1975), 11:465–507. See also Rgyal ba g.yung ston rdo rje and klong chen pa dri med 'od zer, "Lo Rgyus Rgyal Ba g.Yung Gis Mdzad Pa," in *Mkha' 'gro Snying Thig*, reproduced from a 'dzom 'brug

of the canonical *Seventeen Tantras* along with an eighteenth, *Tantra of the Sun*, which is described as the summation of all *Seventeen Tantras*, from the Indian Master Śrī Siṃha. He then organized these teachings into the cycle *Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī*. When King Trisong Detsen's eight-year-old daughter Princess Pema Sel (Lha lcam pad+ma gsal, c. eighth century) died suddenly, Padmasambhava revived the princess and transmitted *Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī* to her to be revealed again at a later date. Padmasambhava's consort Yeshe Tsogyel then concealed these teachings as treasures. Six centuries later, Princess Pema Sel took rebirth in the form of a young monk named Pema Ledreltsal (Pad ma las 'brel rtsal, 1231–1259 or 1291–1315). Pema Ledreltsal withdrew the treasure *Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī* from a rock at Daklha Tramo Drak in Dakpo and transmitted the teachings to three disciples: Gyalse Lekden (rGyal sras legs ldan, 1290–1366), the Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje (Rang byung rdo rje, 1284–1339), and Rinchen Lingpa. Longchenpa, the next reincarnation of Princess Pema Sel, received the *Heart Essence of*

pa, 13 vols. (Kathmandu: dpal ri par khang, 1975), 11:405–422. I compare these in greater depth in my dissertation, “Heart Essence Literature through Time.”

Albion Butters compares the story of Lhacam Pemasel in Bya bral pa bzod pa'i's biography of Longchenpa to O rgyal gling pa'i's hagiography of Padmasambhava in the *Padma bka' thang* to highlight differences. In these two versions, there is convergence upon the fact that Princess Lhacam Pemasel died at the age of eight, but they differ on a few other points. In the version of the history found in *Heart Essence of the Ḍākinīs* by Bya bral pa bzod pa, Padmasambhava first uses the princess's death as a way to explain to King Trisong Detsen the nature of karma. He then revives her from the *bardo* by inscribing the syllable NRĪ with vermilion on her chest, and after she reawakens, Padmasambhava gives her the full transmission of *Heart Essence of the Ḍākinīs*. After she dies, Padmasambhava then assigns Yeshe Tsogyel to conceal the text as a treasure. In the version of the story from the *Padma bka' thang*, Padmasambhava uses the princess's death to teach on karma, but there is no resurrection or mention of Heart Essence. However, Padmasabhava does predict the princess's future rebirth as Longchenpa. See Albion M. Butters, *Illuminating the Goal: Rdzogs Chen and Doxography in 14th-Century Tibet*, Studia Orientalia (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 2018), 25–27. See also Ron Garry, “Pema Ledrel Tsel,” *Treasury of Lives*, <https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Pema-Ledrel-Tsel/10301>.

the *Ḍākinī* from Gyalse Lekden (Pema Ledreltsal's former disciple) and codified it in the *Fourfold Heart Essence* along with his commentaries.

There are notable key differences between the canonical *Seventeen Tantras* and *Tantra of the Sun* that indicate the importance of *Tantra of the Sun* as a turning point in Heart Essence identity formation. *Tantra of the Sun* is written in lucid Tibetan verse, which suggests that it is an indigenous Tibetan composition rather than a translation of a text transmitted from India. However, there are many indications that suggest the *Seventeen Tantras* are also Tibetan compositions. Content-wise, *Tantra of the Sun* is much more comprehensive than any of the other *Seventeen Tantras*. While its 113 chapters systematically integrate earlier Heart Essence ideas and practices, *Tantra of the Sun* doesn't ever cite the *Seventeen Tantras*, whereas the *Seventeen Tantras* do cite from each other.³² Most interestingly, whereas the other *Seventeen Tantras* all feature a masculine buddha, *Tantra of the Sun* features a feminine buddha narrator named Samantabhadri speaking to a group of feminine non-human awakened energies known as *ḍākinīs*. This elevation of the feminine in both the narrator and audience of *Tantra of the Sun* is further reflected in the tantra's history of revelation, which goes back to Tibet's imperial age.

Tantra of the Sun thus marks a pivotal turning point in the indigenization of Heart Essence teachings in Tibet and sheds light on the overall reception history of Indian tantra in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. Because *Tantra of the Sun* co-emerges with treasure revelations concealed by Padmasambhava and the rising prominence of female figures linked to the Tibetan imperial court such as Yeshe Tsogyel and the Princess Pema Sel, this tantra also reflects Nyingma mediations between history, memory, and revelation, and the role that the feminine played in re-imagining the past to re-invent Heart Essence traditions in the present. I cite this brief historical background of *Tantra of the Sun* to show that the tantra's reception history, history of revelation, and its contents (discussed below) reflect a kind of

32. *Tantra Beyond Sound*, for example, lists all *Seventeen Tantras*. See Bi ma la mi tra, *Rnying Ma'i Rgyud Bcu Bdun*, BDRC: W1KG892, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Sanje Dorje, 1973), 197: 'od kyi yang zhun bcu bdun bshad/ rang shar ba rang rang grol dang/ rang byung nyid dang rtsal rdzogs dang/ mdzes ldan dag dang phra bkod dang/ mu tig 'phreng dang yi ge med/ snying dang thugs kyi me long dang/ nyi zla kha sbyor ngo sprod spras/ sku gdung 'bar ba rin chen spungs/ sgron ma 'bar dang klong chen drug/ de ltar bcu drug rim pa rnam/ thal 'guur las ni nges 'phros nas/

creative play with time that was integral to Nyingma identity formation at a time when Tibet was undergoing tremendous social and political changes.³³ Now to the contents of our protagonist.

TANTRA OF THE SUN: OPENING HOMAGE

When we juxtapose Nyima Bum's treatise on the *Seventeen Tantras* with Dzogchen's oldest lineage history *Great History*³⁴ or Heart Essence

33. Though I will not discuss this historical context in depth here, there are two important events to mention. First, there was a civil war in central Tibet in the mid fourteenth century when the Phagmodrupa Kagyud (Tib. Phagmo gru pa bKa' brgyud) order attempted to reinstate the large land grants that had been previously given to them by the grandson of Ghengis Khan, Mongke Khan, in 1254, but were subsequently absorbed by the Sakya school, Drigungpa ('Bri gung pa), and Yazang (g.Ya' bzangs) myriarchies. The civil war, which was led by a Phagmodrupa leader named Jangchub Gyaltzen (Byang chub rgyal mtshan, 1302–1364), culminated in a victory over Sakya rule and the founding of the Phagmodrupa dynasty, which replaced the Mongol-backed Sakya dynasty. During Jangchub Gyaltzen's rule as regent or *desi* (*sde srid*) from 1354 onwards, he fostered a new national consciousness in which Tibet's imperial past was continually glorified. A second event of importance in the fourteenth century involves a figure named Buton Rinchen Drub (Bu stong rin chen grub, 1290–1364). Buton headed an important effort to edit and expand the Old Nartang (*snar thang*) edition of the Kangyur and Tengyur that had been created at Nartang Monastery in the early fourteenth century. In Buton's new editions of the Tibetan canon, he excluded many Nyingma texts that he considered not to be *buddhavacana*. These trends and more undoubtedly contributed to the creative ways in which the history associated with *Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī* was construed and transmitted. See Butters, *Illuminating the Goal*, 28–33.

34. "The Great History of the Heart Essence of the Great Perfection: Pith Instruction 90 of 119" (Tib. *rdzogs pa chen po snying thig gi lo rgyus chen mo: man ngag brgya bcu dgu'i nang tshan dgu bcu pa*, hereafter referred to as *Great History*) found in the *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* details one of our oldest histories of the origins of Dzogchen. It calls itself the "history of sentient beings" (*sems can gyi lo rgyus*), a compliment to *Eleven Words and Meanings*, which calls itself a "history of buddhas" (*sangs rgyas nyid kyi lo rgyus*). In *Great History*, the latest datable Dzogchen master cited is Lce sgom nag po (eleventh to twelfth centuries). See Samten Gyaltzen Karmay, *The Great Perfection (RDzogs Chen): A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1988). Karmay argues that the text is by Zhangton Tashi Dorje (Zhang stong bkra shis rdo rje, 1097–1167), which suggests that *Great History* emerged around the twelfth century. Karmay, *Great Perfection*, 209n16, notes: "rDzog pa chen po

tantras like *Tantra of the Sun*, an underlying thematic motif quickly becomes evident: repeated references to a primordial ground are often synonymous with a kind of Ādibuddha in the form of Samantabhadra,³⁵ or in the case of *Tantra of the Sun*, Samantabhadri. While other sutric and tantric literature certainly kick off their Buddhist dramas with *nidānas* featuring different buddhas of varying dazzling embodiments, Heart Essence literature appears unique in the way that their *nidānas* enplace Samantabhadra/ī (or sometimes Vajradhara) within a larger cosmogonic creation narrative, one which details how the entire unfolding of samsara and nirvana emerges as a result of the primordial ground misrecognizing its own ground-presencing appearances as other.³⁶ Moreover, while Heart Essence literature intersects with other Buddhist scripture in its rhetorical emphasis on the pervasive

(*bi ma*) *snying thig gi lo rgyus chen mo* (from now on *Lo rgyus chen mo*) *Bi ma snying thig, sNying thig ya bzhi*, Vol. 7 (Part III), text No. 1, p. 165. The author's name is not given. It is simply stated 'by me' (*bdag gis*) in an obscure passage where it is a question of the master lCe-sgom nag-po (p. 177). It is therefore almost certain that he is Zhang-ston bKra-shis rdo-rje (1097–1167)."

35. In some of the earliest Dzogchen texts we have, Samantabhadra already makes an appearance. Karmay argues that in these early Dzogchen texts, Samantabhadra becomes a synonym of the *bodhicitta* of awareness (*rig pa byang chub kyi sems*). See Karmay, *The Great Perfection (RDzogs Chen)*, 46.

36. According to Dalton and Yeshi, Nyima Bum's *Eleven Words and Meanings* recounts the story of the entire arc of samsara, from beginning to end. It is a cosmogonic history, yet it is one that brings the cosmogony of the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra into the present moment of the reader/practitioner "as if they were being seen right now." Khenpo Yeshi and Jacob Paul Dalton, "Signification and History in Zhang Nyi Ma 'bum's RDzogs Pa Chen Po Tshig Don Bcu Gcig Pa," *Revue d'Études Tibétaines* 1, no. 43 (January 2018): 260–261. In a follow-up article, Dalton and Yeshi describe the *Eleven Words and Meanings* as a comprehensive roadmap to awakening, one that traces Dzogchen history from the primordial ground to the bifurcation of samsara and nirvana, and then documents the practices required to return again to the state of the primordial ground. They write: "The eleven topics thus offer a master narrative for Snying thig thought and practice, a structure that Klong chen pa and other later Rdzogs chen masters draw upon, making it one of the earliest most comprehensive codifications of Snying thig cosmology, philosophy, doctrine, and practice." Khenpo Yeshi and Jacob Paul Dalton, "Early Developments in Snying Thig Practice: The Eighth Topic of Zhang Nyi Ma 'bum's Rdzogs Pa Chen Po Tshig Don Bcu Gcig Pa," *Revue d'Études Tibétaines* 63 (April 2022): 98.

potentiality for awakening that resides within all sentient beings—what might be simply termed as buddha-nature, or *tathāgatagarbha*—Heart Essence literature characterizes awareness (Tib. *rig pa*), or the ground (Tib. *gzhi*) embodied by Samantabhadra/ī, as being endowed with the triad of empty essence (Tib. *ngo bo stong pa*), luminous nature (Tib. *rang bzhin gsal ba*), and all-pervasive compassion (Tib. *thugs rje kun khyab*).³⁷

Without ever wavering from the ground of awareness, Samantabhadra nevertheless gradually emanates increasingly grosser manifestations of awareness in the forms of lights, buddhas, and eventually worlds along with their resident sentient beings. The first appearances that emerge from the primordial ground of awareness are called ground appearances (Tib. *gzhi snang*), and they are activated by the dynamism (Tib. *rtsal*) of the ground that causes a stirring of the subtle winds and the manifestation of these diverse appearances. When the appearances that arise from this movement of the winds are misrecognized as something other than Samantabhadra’s own awareness, dualistic concepts begin to proliferate, and samsara and all its associated forms of suffering reproduce endlessly until the practitioner takes up the Heart Essence path of practice.

Matthew Kapstein argues that the Nyingmpas invoked the myth of Samantabhadra to resolve a triple tension that had been pervasive throughout Buddhism’s history—basically, how ignorance first arose. This tension came from three basic premises governing Buddhist thought: “(1) the world is lawlike through and through; (2) the world is such that there are ignorant beings who are subject to a continual round of trouble due to their ignorance; and (3) the world is such that these beings may possibly overcome their ignorance and the pain it

37. Within the three series of Dzogchen—mind series, space series, and pith instruction series—it is in the third, the pith instruction series closely associated with Heart Essence literature, that this threefold triad, sometimes known as the “three gnoses” (Tib. *ye shes gsum ldan*) is most fully developed. However, as Deroche and Yasuda show, Essence and Nature appear in the earlier mind series tantras such as the *Tantra of the All-Accomplishing King* (Tib. *Kun byed rgyal po’i rgyud*). See Marc-Henri Deroche and Akinori Yasuda, “The RDzogs Chen Doctrine of the Three Gnoses (Ye Shes Gsum): An Analysis of Klong Chen Pa’s Exegesis and His Sources,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaine* 33 (October 2015): 187n2.

brings, thus attaining nirvāṇa.”³⁸ Kapstein suggests that the myth of Samantabhadra directly maps onto this triple tension through three complimentary topics: “(i) how the ground became manifest in spontaneous presence (*lhun grub gzhi snang gi shar tshul*); (ii) how Samantabhadra was liberated (*kun tu bzang po'i grol tshul*); and (iii) how ignorant sentient beings became bewildered (*ma rig sems can gyi 'khrul tshul*).”³⁹

Below, I will examine how the initial setting of our story, the primordial ground of awareness, is first narrated through the opening homage and the subsequent uncommon *nidāna* of *Tantra of the Sun*. I will provide a close reading of how Samantabhadri uses the five perfections to narrate the conditions from which her exposition of *Tantra of the Sun* arises, and how her speech leads to the emergence of ground appearances. First, the homage that precedes our *nidāna* begins like this:

In the *dhātu* of unborn empty awareness, spontaneously present since the beginning, without any limits, not falling to any side, nothing whatsoever, is the ground from which anything whatsoever arises. Not awakened in the past, not awakening in the future, not abiding in awakening at present. Not wandering into samsara in the past, not wandering into samsara in the future, nor abiding in samsara at present, neither is it not displaying as anything whatsoever, [is] the vastness of all space, the matrix of the expansive *bhaga*. It is incorruptible, steadfast, indestructible, unconfused, unmoving, unchanging. Externally, the seal of clinging to [something as discreet] is not torn. Internally, the colors of the five lights are unobstructed. Externally, conceptual construction [to discrete objects] is unestablished. Internally, compassion is undistracted by mental activity. Without [conceptually] cognizing, it knows all. [Similarly] while being itself, there is no distinction between me and mine. Though endowed with all the operational powers of samsara and nirvana, [Samantabhadri]

38. Matthew Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 168, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=150126>.

39. Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism*, 168.

doesn't adhere to the dynamic energy of [these] powers. To only the pervasive *kāya* of the natural state (*rang bab*), I pay homage.

*Om ma hri ha ri ni sa ra ca hri ya. A tri nri tsitta dung dung ja ja.*⁴⁰

The setting of our story commences in the ground, that is, the *dhātu*, or the expanse of unborn emptiness. This ground is not subject to time and is thus free of the temporal markers of the time of awakening on one hand, and the time of samsaric wandering on the other hand—concepts that signify a movement in time either from ignorance (Tib. *ma rig pa*) to awareness (Tib. *rig pa*), or, in the case of straying from the primordial ground, a movement in the opposite direction, from awareness to ignorance. Then comes the description of a critical word that is embedded within the title of this tantra: *klong*, which I have translated as “matrix.”⁴¹ This matrix is located within the *bhaga*, a Tibetanized reproduction of the Sanskrit word for womb. The matrix is endowed with *vajra*-like qualities such as being indestructible (Tib. *mi 'jig pa*), not straying or unconfused (Tib. *ma 'khrul ba*),

40. KM2, pp. 2–3: *rig stong skye ba med pa'i dbyings/ ye nas lhun gyis grub pa/ rgyar ma chad pa/ phyogs su ma lhung ba/ gang yang ma yin pa/ gang du 'byung ba'i gzhi/ sngar yang sang ma rgyas pa/ da sangs mi rgya ba/ da lta yang sangs rgyas la mi gnas pa/ sngar 'khor bar ma 'khyams pa/ da 'khor bar mi 'khyams pa/ da lta 'khor ba na mi gnas pa/ gang du ma bstan pa'ng ma yin pa/ kun gyi mkha' rgya/ bha ga yangs pa'i klong/ sra ba/ brtan pa/ mi 'jig pa/ ma 'khrul ba/ mi g.yo ba/ mi 'gyur ba/ phyi der 'dzin gyi rgya ma ral ba/ nang 'od lnga'i kha dog ma 'gags pa/ phyi der rtog gi bzo ma grub pa la/ nang mkhyen spyod kyis thugs rje ma yeng bar/ dran pa med bzhin du rnam pa thams cad mkhyen pa/ kho rang yin [3] bzhin du bdag dang bdag gis ma phyas pa/ 'khor 'das kun gyi byed las kyis stobs dang ldan kyang/ stobs rtsal de yi rjes su mi 'brang bar/ rang bab gdal ba'i sku de kho na la phyag 'tshal lo/ Om ma hri ha ri ni sa ra tsa hri ya/ A tri nri tsitta dung dung dza dza/*

41. Other English translations of *klong* includes “space,” as in the space series (*klong sde*) of the Great Perfection, or sometimes “expanse.” According to the *Illuminator Dictionary*, *klong* corresponds to the Sanskrit *abhyantara*, which has two different meanings: (1) center or middle and (2) a contained space, like a sphere. *Illuminator* also notes that, like *klong*, two other words—*nam mkha'* and *dbyings*—are similarly used to connote “space,” though they have different meanings. In my conversations with Khenpo Yeshe, he advised against translating *klong* as expanse, since *dbyings* more closely aligns with the meaning of expanse. Moreover, “expanse” would be a misleading translation since *klong* signals a kind of directionality insofar as a middle, but without any sides. For example, the phrase *rgya mtsho'i klong* means “the middle of the ocean.”

and unmoving (Tib. *mi g.yo ba*). The matrix is connected to the perfect teacher Samantabhadri and is the ground of awareness from which all other vehicles of liberation blaze forth.

The all-pervasive and all-subsuming qualities of Samantabhadri's matrix are explicitly yoked to awareness, gnosis, and the vehicle of the Great Perfection throughout the tantra. For example, "Although the Dharma gateways that liberate are inconceivable, there aren't any which aren't subsumed under the matrix of awareness of the Great Perfection."⁴² And, "There isn't anything which isn't subsumed under the single matrix. Whoever sees the meaning of immediacy (*mngon sum*) is freed from the views of all biases. The unimpeded great gnosis itself is self-luminous, free from clinging to bias. Not straying from this, is the engagement in the display."⁴³

From these two quotes, it is evident that Samantabhadri's matrix is equated to the ground of gnosis whose dawning of spontaneous ground appearances is likened to the different Dharma gateways of liberation. Despite the multiplicity of these Dharma gateways, however, their source is one and the same—the matrix of Samantabhadri's *bhaga*, or the ground of awareness that is endowed with the dynamism that has the ability to give rise to these multiple pathways. The reference to "see[ing] immediacy" and subsequently being freed of dualism refers to the visions that dawn from the interior of the practitioner's subtle body during Dzogchen direct transcendence (Tib. *thod rgal*) practices. During direct transcendence practice, the practitioner gazes into an open blue sky, or sometimes darkness, and *vajra* chains of *bindus* begin to appear and slowly transform into full-blown mandalas. When these visions are recognized as spontaneous self-appearances (Tib. *rang snang*), no different than the practitioner's fundamental buddha-nature, it is akin to Samantabhadra/i recognizing the first cosmogonic appearances of the ground as her own self-display. Hence, "engagement in the great display" is another way of describing the liberation from subject-object dualism that results from recognizing that the visions that arise from

42. KM2, p. 6: *grol byed chos sgo bsam yas kyang/ rdzogs chen rig klong mi 'dus med/*
 43. KM2, p. 8: *nyag gcig klong du ma 'dus med/ mngon sum don "di sus mthong ba/*
phyogs ris kun gyis lta ba 'grol/ ma 'gag ye shes chen po nyid/ rang gsal phyogs ris
'dzin pa grol/ de las ma yengs rol par spyod/

the practitioner's subtle body network of wisdom channels are one and the same with the ground.

In chapters 37–45 Samantabhadri provides a doxography of the nine different insider vehicles in such a way that etymologizes the full title of this tantra and sheds light on the relationship between the matrix and the metaphor of the sun. “Insider” (Tib. *nang pa*) is a term used to distinguish Buddhists from non-Buddhists, and the nine vehicles are a classificatory scheme associated with the Nyingma, who place their own insider vehicle of Dzogchen or Atiyoga at the very top of the hierarchy. The nine vehicles are: (1) Śrāvakayāna, (2) Pratyekabuddhayāna, (3) Bodhisattvayāna, (4) Kriyā, (5) Ubhayā, (6) Yoga, (7) Mahā, (8) Anu, and (9) Dzogchen Ati.⁴⁴ For each chapter on the nine vehicles, Samantabhadri details the view, conduct, meditation, and fruition of practice for those with various faculties: high, middling, and low. At the end of each of these chapters, she describes how each insider vehicle emerges from within the matrix of her *bhaga*, which is likened to the sun. For example, in chapter 38, “Teaching on the Pratyekabuddhayāna,” Samantabhadri ends the chapter with: “In this way, the gradual paths dawn according to differences in faculties. They illuminate from my matrix, [the matrix] of Samantabhadri. Appearance is unceasing. How amazing!”⁴⁵ And at the end of chapter 45, on the ninth vehicle, “Teaching on the Dzogchen Ati Vehicle,” Samantabhadri concludes: “Each and everything is the dynamism of the manifestation of the spacious *bhaga* of Samantabhadri. In this, the retinue rejoices.”⁴⁶

The matrix of Samantabhadri's *bhaga* is the location from which all of the gradual Buddhist vehicles (Tib. *lam stegs*) blaze forth or dawn. The appearance of these gradual vehicles is described as the continuous adornment of the display of non-abandoning, arising as a result of the dynamism of the *bhaga* spontaneously expressing itself. Throughout these doxographical chapters, the dynamism of the *bhaga*

44. When exactly this nine-vehicle formulation developed has been a subject of debate. See José Ignacio Cabezón, *The Buddha's Doctrine and the Nine Vehicles: Rog Bande Sherab's Lamp of the Teachings* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

45. KM2, p. 134: *de lta bu'i lam stegs de/ dbang po'i khyad kyis rang la shar/ kun bzang nga'i klong nas gsal/ snang 'gag med pa E ma ho/*

46. KM2, p. 145: *kun bzang bhag ga'i yangs pa'i/thams cad thams cad rol rtsa yin/ 'khor de la spro bar gyis/*

“blazes as the light of the bliss-emptiness *bindu*”⁴⁷ and is described as “beautified through the ornaments of non-abandoning.”⁴⁸ Implied is that just as the sun’s light naturally blazes forth and illuminates diverse appearances, so too do these different vehicles naturally dawn in Samantabhadri’s matrix and appear differently according to individual perception. Since the metaphors in these chapters make a direct analogy between Samantabhadri’s matrix and the qualities associated with the sun, I have rendered the English title with a colon to clearly mark the analogy between the sun and Samantabhadri’s matrix. Hence, *Secret Tantra of the Sun: Blazing Luminous Matrix of Samantabhadri*.

TANTRA OF THE SUN’S UNCOMMON NIDĀNA

Returning to our text once again, the mantra *Om ma hri ha ri ni sa ra ca hri ya. A tri nri tsitta dung dung ja ja* marks the ending of the tantra’s description of the ground of primordial gnosis and the beginning of the *nidāna*, when Samantabhadri first speaks. Samantabhadri offers a kind of preamble to the whole tantra, framed through the five perfections.

In the time, I have thus taught. In the perfect place, the universal splendor of the expansive *bhaga*, there is the perfect teacher Samantabhadri, who is free from grasping to the sides of emptiness and appearance. Her heart is not an inert emptiness, but [rather] an aware emptiness. As a sign [of that], her heart is adorned with Vajrasattva who is [the size] of a full thumb joint. The time, free of calculations of past, future, beginning, and end times, is when the retinue of the group of five *ḍākinīs*, the self-dynamic energy of

47. In chap. 43, “Teaching on the Mahā[yoga] Vehicle,” Samantabhadri says: “In this way, the dynamism of the *bhaga* vehicle blazes as the light of the bliss-emptiness *bindu*. [It] is beautified through my, Samantabhadri’s, ornaments.” KM2, p. 142: *de ltar theg pa bha ga’i rtsal/ bde stong thig le ’od du ’bar/kun bzang nga’i rgyan du mdzes/*

48. In chap. 41, “Teaching on the *Upa* Vehicle,” Samantabhadri says: “The path of entry for [this] vehicle also blazes like the light of the sun [in] the great bliss of my, Samantabhadri’s, *bhaga*. [Everything is] beautified through the ornaments of the display that is without abandoning” (KM2, p. 138): *theg pa’i ’jug lam de nyid kyang/ kun bzang nga’i bha ga’i klong/ bde chen nyi ma’i ’od du ’bar/ ma spang rol pa rgyan du mdzes/*

self-luminous awareness, gathers. I taught this ultimate meaning that transcends cause and effect as an effortless teaching.⁴⁹

Beginning with “In the time I have thus taught” (Tib. *'di skad bdag gis bstan pa'i dus na*), the tantra immediately diverges from most authoritative Buddhist texts in reframing what constitutes *buddhavacana*. Whereas Buddhist sutras and mostly all tantras begin with the convention “Thus have I heard at one time,” Samantabhadri’s opening “In the time I have thus taught” marks a shift of narration from the hearer to the speaker. With the invocation of this opening, “In the time I have thus taught,” the narrator is no longer a disciple of the Buddha Śākyamuni but rather a buddha herself. Samantabhadri does not abide in the world realm of humans, nor is she confined to a particular time in samsara. The shift from “at one time (*dus gcig na*)” to “in the time (*dus na*)” suggests that there is no “one time” that Samantabhadri had preached *Tantra of the Sun*. Her speech, embodied by this tantra, cannot be restricted to the concepts of space-time. To even attempt to confine the teaching of *Tantra of the Sun* to a spatial-temporal location would be contradictory to what the tantra itself is telling us—that it is beyond concepts of past, present, and future.

After the invocation of “In the time I have thus taught,” Samantabhadri uses the structure of the five perfections to narrate the rest of the *nidāna*. The perfect place is the *bhaga*, which chapter 11, “Explanation on the Abiding Nature of the Five Kāyas,”⁵⁰ describes as the birthplace of all phenomena, the abode (Tib. *gnas*) of the secret mantra, the birthplace of all buddhas, and the source of great bliss and gnosis. The *bhaga* here also signals a quality distinctive to *Secret Tantra of the Sun*—the pervasiveness of reproductive language often associated with female-gendered⁵¹ bodies that shows up throughout the

49. KM2, p. 3: *'di skad bdag gis bstan pa'i dus na/ gnas phun sum tshogs pa 'khor 'das kyi spyi dpal bha ga yangs par/ ston pa phun sum tshogs pa kun tu bzang mo snang stong bzung ris dang bral ba'i thugs kar bem stong ma yin/ rig stong yin pa'i rtags su/ rdo rje sems dpa' tshon gang bas brgyan nas/ dus snga phyi thog mtha'i rtsis dang bral ba'i dus su/ 'khor rang gsal rig pa'i rang rtsal mkha' 'gro ma sde lnga la/ bstan pa rtsol med du/ rgyu 'bras las 'das pa'i don 'di bka stsal to/*

50. Chapter title in Tibetan is *sku lnga'i gnas lugs bshad pa*, KM2, pp. 34–33.

51. I use the term “gendered” here with hesitancy because in general I agree with Judith Butler’s argument that ultimately both biological sex and social gender are socially constructed. In *Gender Trouble*, first published in 1999, Butler writes: “The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains

tantra. Qualifiers of the *bhaga* are woven in throughout *Secret Tantra of the Sun*; for example, in chapter 11, a correlation between *bhaga* and women is explicitly drawn:

Ema! I am the Mother Samantabhadrī. All the buddhas of the three times self-emerge from the expanse of the *bhaga*. It is the birthplace for all phenomena. The *bhaga*, the place for all secret mantra, is the source for great bliss and gnosis. Without relying on this, there is no other method. This tantra of method is the [only] liberation. Relying on great bliss, one attains nirvana. From this emerges the authentic buddha. If one denigrates the *bhaga*, or departs from bliss, one [will] experience hell. Worship the *bhaga* through [good] methods. Without [these] accumulations one will not have authentic accomplishment.⁵²

From the above passage, *Tantra of the Sun* makes it clear that the expanse of the *bhaga* possesses characteristics that are typically associated with reproductive capacities.⁵³ The *bhaga* gives birth to all phenomena. It is a source of bliss. The caution against denigrating the *bhaga* resembles many other Buddhist tantras in their admonishment against disparaging women as a root downfall.⁵⁴ Similarly, the advice to “worship the

the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one.” Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Tenth Anniversary Edition* (New York & London: Routledge, 2014), 10.

52. KM2, p. 38: *e ma nga ni kun gyi yum/ dus gsum sangs rgyas thams cad kyang/ bha ga'i dbyings nas rang byung te/ chos rnams kun gyi 'byung gnas nyid/ bha ga gsang sngags kun gyi gnas/ bde chen ye shes 'byung ba yin/ 'di nyid ma brten thabs gzhan med/ thabs kyi rgyud kyi grol ba yin/ bde chen 'di brten myang 'das thob/ yang dag sangs rgyas 'di las byung/ bud med brnyas shing mkha la gshe/ bde dang bral na na rag spyod thabs kyi tshul gyi(s) bha ga mchod/ tshogs med yang dag 'grub mi 'gyur/*

53. The use of reproductive metaphors abounds in Buddhist literature, including in the Mahāyāna Prajñāpāramitā corpus, which in Tibetan is often referred to as the Great Mother (*Yum chen mo*).

54. For example, in the *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa tantra*, there is an entire chapter on praising and worshipping women and an emphatic statement that “Whoever should act otherwise, That evildoer will end up in hell.” See Dharmachakra Translation Committee, “The Tantra of Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa (Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇatantra),” 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha,

bhaga through methods” suggests also a nod to the centrality of sexual yoga practices associated with the Mahāyoga tantric scene.⁵⁵

Unlike the other Heart Essence tantras, the *Seventeen Tantras*, here the perfect teacher is also feminized. She is Samantabhadri, and not Samantabhadra or Vajradhara as other Heart Essence tantras would have it. Samantabhadri is described as endowed with the potentiality to manifest samsara and nirvana, and yet she doesn’t fall sway to this partiality. In *Tantra of the Sun*, Samantabhadri is also described as the space of the ground (Tib. *gzhi yi mkha*’), or the space of the Mother (Tib. *yum gyi mkha*’), the “seed of all dharmas,”⁵⁶ and that which “cognizes the ground of awareness,”⁵⁷ again, harkening to the reproductive

10.16, <https://read.84000.co/translation/toh431.html>. Whether or not the elevation of the feminine found in tantric texts actually translates to lived realities on the ground has been contested. However, Yael Bentor’s work shows that important Buddhist figures such as Candrakirti, Bhavabhadra, Tsong-kha-pa, and Mkhas-grub-rje cited the *Guhyasamāja tantra* to show that women Vajrayāna practitioners could indeed attain enlightenment. See Yael Bentor, “Can Women Attain Enlightenment through Vajrayāna Practices?,” in *Karmic Passages: Israeli Scholarship on India*, ed. David Shulman and Shalva Weil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 123–137.

55. For a discussion of some of the more transgressive characteristics usually associated with Mahāyoga tantras see Anthony Tribe, “Mantranaya/Vajrayāna—Tantric Buddhism in India,” in *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, ed. Paul Williams and Anthony Tribe (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), 235–242. However, as van Schaik has warned, we must be careful not to impute later doxographical categories into the earlier appearance of terms like Mahāyoga. In his work with Dunhuang manuscripts, van Schaik shows that the development of the ritual and theoretical content of Mahāyoga that characterizes the later Nyingma tradition was well under way by the tenth century. See Sam van Schaik, “A Definition of Mahāyoga: Sources from the Dunhuang Manuscripts,” *Tantric Studies* 1 (2008): 53–105.

56. The passage I’m citing from comes from chap. 17, “The Realization of the Buddhas of the Three Times,” (*dus gsum sangs rgyas kyi dgongs pa ngo sprod pa*). It reads: “The seed of all dharmas should be understood in the space of Samantabhadri. The magical emanation of all dharmas should be understood as the appearing vajra.” In KM2, p. 60: *chos rnams kun gyi sa bon ni/ kun bzang mkha’ ru shes par bya/ chos rnams kun gyi cho ’phrul ni/ snang ba’i rdo rje shes par bya/*

57. The passage I’m citing from comes from chap. 6, “Teaching on the Meaning of the Perfection of the View” (*lta ba mthar phyin pa’i don bstan pa’i le’u*): “Cognizing the ground of awareness is Samantabhadri’s space. It is untainted

metaphors that abound in this tantra and many other Mahāyoga and Yoginī tantras. Samantabhadrī is equivalent to the ground of primordial awareness that is beyond dualistic concepts. The perfect retinue or audience is the group of five *ḍākinīs* who are equivalent to the self-dynamism of self-luminous awareness, figured as no different from Samantabhadrī herself. “Self” or *rang* here is self-reflexively used to denote that the entire narrative framing is free of subject-object dualism, that the hearer, in this case the retinue of *ḍākinīs*, is no different from the speaker, the Buddha Samantabhadrī herself. Despite the appearance of a perfect audience of five *ḍākinīs*, Samantabhadrī is both speaker and hearer at the same time. The ground’s diverse manifestations are none other than its own self-display.

The perfect time is free of reference point to the past, present, or future; in other words, it is a timeless time characteristic of the *dharmakāya* realm, the universal ground. The perfect teaching is this very tantra, described as an effortless teaching, i.e., delivered without any action of “doing.” The “effortless” qualifier acts as another nod to the nondual nature of the tantra’s first emergence, which is free of subject, object, and action. In other words, without any agent or doing, awakened speech in the form of *Tantra of the Sun* spontaneously arises from the ground of primordial gnosis.

And yet, something changes the moment Samantabhadrī utters emphatically, “Ema!”⁵⁸ followed by a description of the ground.

“Ema! All of samsara and nirvana is foundationless ground, primordially empty. Mere, unobstructed appearance dawns as the path. The great primordial freedom is the attained fruit. There isn’t anything at all that isn’t subsumed in this [ground].”

As soon as she said this, the worldly realms, above, below, everywhere, expanded, full-blown, and rumbled. Through light rays, [the worlds] transformed in nature (*rang bzhin*). Teeming with rainbows, lights, sounds and rays, all [these world] natures illuminate as the

by conditional appearances. It is the culminating view of self-awareness. Its sign is a connection with compassion. This [connection] is the mandala of the five *kāyas*.” In KM2, p. 15: *gzhi shes rig pa kun tu bzang mo'i mkha'/snang ba rkyen gyis ma bslad pa/rang rig lta ba mthar thug ste/rtags ni thugs rjes 'brel thag yin/ de ni sku lnga dkyil 'khor yin/*

58. The *Tshig mdzod chen mo* defines the phrase *e ma ho* as an expression of wonder or awe: *ngo mtshar che zer ba'i brda/ e ma ho/ de 'dra'i khyad mtshar/ yul dus 'dir bde skyid 'dzoms pa E ma ho/*

great ground appearance. [The worlds then] become immutably and spontaneously even. This is chapter 1: “The *Nidāna* in the Treasury of Key Points of the Secret Mantra,” from the *Secret Tantra of the Sun: Blazing Luminous Matrix of Samantabhadri*.⁵⁹

Just as Samantabhadri describes the ground, path, and fruition, the worldly realms begin to rumble and then to transform in nature. Then, “Teeming with rainbows, lights, sounds, and rays, all [these world] natures illuminate as the great ground appearance (Tib. *gzhi snang chen por gsal la*.” Ground-presencing (Tib. *gzhi snang*), or rather, the dynamic energy of the ground, manifests as a result of Samantabhadri’s proclamation of attaining the fruition of the primordial ground. Her speech act is so powerful that it transforms the worldly realms, reorganizes them, and then activates the ground appearances.

There are two possible interpretations of the above that indicate different assumptions about the way time functions in *Tantra of the Sun*. The first interpretation is that Samantabhadri’s initial speech act activates the very first ground appearances to arise. This would suggest that the entire *nidāna* is taking place *prior* to the moment that samsara unfolds and that Samantabhadri’s narration of the tantra mirrors the unfolding of Dzogchen cosmogony. In this first scenario, Samantabhadri’s speech would act as the immediate cause for the ground to manifest its luminous nature in the form of ground appearances. The second interpretation is that Samantabhadri’s speech is so powerful—especially since she is speaking of the ground itself!—that it shakes the entire cosmos, activating ground-presencing. In this second scenario, Samantabhadri’s speech is already a part of the ground’s creative dynamism, but ground appearances will dawn regardless of whether or not she speaks. In this case, there isn’t a single moment in time when ground-presencing first begins to emerge. Similarly, there isn’t a single moment in time when samsara and nirvana come to be. Instead, the bifurcation into samsara and nirvana has always been, just

59. KM2, pp. 3–4: *e ma 'khor 'das thams cad kun/ ye stong rts bral gzhi yin te/ ma 'gag rtsl snang lam du shar/ ye grol chen po'i [4] 'bras bu thob/ 'di ru ma 'dus gang yang med/ ces gsungs pa tsam gyis/ 'jig rten gyi khams steng 'og thams cad/ mer mer por gyur to/ khyom khyom por gyur to/ 'od zer gyis rang bzhin du gyur to/ 'ja' dang/ 'od dang/ sgra dang/ zer gyis 'khrigs par gyur nas/ thams cad rang bzhin gzhi snang chen por gsal la 'pho 'gyur med par lhun gyis mnyams par gyur to/ kun tu bzang mo klong gsal 'bar ma nyi ma'i gsang rgyud gsang sngags gnad mdzod las/ gleng gzhi'i leu ste dang po'o/*

as the ground and the diverse illuminations of its nature have always been. This would suggest that the cyclic timeline of samsara's story co-exists with(in) the timeless ground. The layering of the five perfections throughout the tantra (see below) seems to substantiate this second interpretation.

For these reasons, I tentatively choose to interpret the above passage through the second lens. Samantabhadri's speech reverberates as a resonance of the primordial ground, creating a break in samsara's regular course. The impact of Samantabhadri's exposition of this tantra is so powerful that it creates a pulsating effect throughout the cosmos, stimulating the dynamic energy of the ground to bubble up. Her speech, and specifically her exposition of *Tantra of the Sun*, functions as another form of the ground's all-pervasive compassion, momentarily rupturing the status quo of samsara so that sentient beings may have the opportunity to re-recognize their own buddha-nature. Samantabhadri's speech effectively acts as the mediator between the ground, "the *dhātu* of unborn emptiness, spontaneously present since the beginning," and the fully manifest worlds and beings in their concretized forms. It is through Samantabhadri's speech that a fluid connection is established between the primordial ground of unmanifest appearances and the manifest samsaric world.

FIVE PERFECTIONS AS A STRUCTURING DEVICE FOR THE ENTIRE TANTRA

Importantly, *Tantra of the Sun's* structural adherence to the five perfections is not restricted to the mere opening *nidāna* of the tantra itself. That is to say, the entire cosmogonic narrative of samsara within the tantra is animated by the same structural format that governs its *nidāna*. The five perfections of the *nidāna* are explicitly theorized to the reader in chapter 18, when Samantabhadri announces that "Although compassionate teachers have taught many vehicles to tame beings, they can all be subsumed under the two *nidānas* of the ultra-secret great perfection: [that is,] the common and uncommon *nidānas*."⁶⁰ This framing into the common and uncommon *nidānas* directly recalls earlier Heart Essence *nidāna* theory developed on the basis of the *Seventeen*

60. KM2, pp. 60–61: *ston pa thugs rje chen po yis/ gdul byed theg pa mang gsung yang/ yang gsang rdzogs pa gleng gzhi rnam pa gnyis yin te/ thun mong thun mong ma yin pa/*

Tantras, such as Nyima Bum’s treatise *Eleven Words and Meanings* mentioned earlier in this article.⁶¹

As for Dzogchen’s uncommon *nidāna*, it is subdivided into four sections—the five perfections of (1) the ground, (2) the locus of the body, (3) the path, and (4) the fruition of practice. Importantly, these four groupings also correspond to the logic of the tantra’s overall organization of its 113 chapters into the *nidāna*, the ground (including the body as a support), the path of practice, and its fruition. This suggests that the five perfections is an umbrella structuring device for the tantra’s entire narrative arc and its overall internal logic.⁶² Regarding the

61. The last line of the passage that I have translated, “Because it is extraordinarily exalted, [more than] others, it is connected to the uncommon scripture and reasoning,” is particularly resonant of Nyima Bum’s writings as translated by Khenpo Yeshe. I’m thinking specifically of the line *rgyud de nyid las lung gi gleng gzhi rnam pa gnyis/ gzhan las khyad par ’phags pa’i rtags* in Yeshe, “The Origins of the Rdzogs Chen Eleven Words and Meanings,” 29.

62. While the tantra doesn’t provide an overall grouping of the 113 chapters, in my own thematic groupings of the chapters, I have found roughly five categories that correspond to *Tantra of the Sun*’s own internal logic. I’ve listed them below, along with a brief description of their contents.

1. NIDĀNA/THE SETTING (chaps. 1–2)

2. SUMMARY: of the tantra, view, meditation, conduct (chaps. 3–6)

3. GROUND:

i. NATURE OF THE GROUND: nature of the three to five *kāyas* (chaps. 7–11), teaching on gnoses, all-ground, ground of confusion, ground of liberation (chaps. 12–23)

ii. BODY AS SUPPORT: how body arises, path/gateways/field of gnosis; how letters, *prāṇa*, *bindu* abide in the body, faces, and arms of the gnoses *kāyas*; separation of mind and awareness (chaps. 24–35)

iii. PHILOSOPHICAL TENETS: *tīrthikas*, nine vehicles (chaps. 36–45)

4. PATH

i. PRELIMINARIES: proper student, guru, place, time, accumulation of substances, and the importance of generating faith through hearing the history (chaps. 46–60)

ii. MAIN PRACTICE: Four empowerments along with associated practices including Cutting Through and Direct Transcendence, up to the Four Visions (chaps. 61–109)

5. FRUITION: attainments, churning *samsara*’s depths, measures and signs of buddhahood (chaps. 110–113)

five perfections in these four sub-categories of the uncommon *nidāna*, Samantabhadrī says:

The uncommon *nidāna* is this: the ground of the five perfections; the five perfections of [those things that] abide in the body; the five perfections of the path; and the five perfections of fruition. First, the five perfections [of the ground]. The [perfect] place is *dharmadhātu* free of construct. The [perfect] teacher is self-arising gnosis. The [perfect] retinue are *kāyas* and gnoses. The [perfect] teaching is the unimpeded great bliss. The [perfect] time is free of beginning and end.

[Next, five] perfections of the body as a holding place. (1) Abiding in the body there is the [perfect] place of the *citta*, the conch chamber, the *cakras*, and three *nāḍīs*. (2) The [perfect] teacher is the primordially pure essence. (3) In that, the [perfect] retinue is the five *kāyas* and gnoses. (4) The [perfect] teaching is the *nāḍīs*, winds, and *bindus* that are bliss, clarity, and nonconceptuality. (5) [Perfect] time is free of the conditions of illness and so forth.

[Then] the five perfections of the path: (1) The [perfect] place is the outer and inner expanse. (2) The [perfect] teacher is the *vajra* chains. (3) The [perfect] retinue is the *kāyas* and *bindus*.⁶³ (4) The [perfect] teaching is being endowed with the four lamps. (5) The [perfect] time is the moment of gazing [at the lamps].

The perfections of the final fruition are: (1) The [perfect] place is the *dharmadhātu* of great bliss. (2) The [perfect] teacher is the awareness qua gnosis (awareness-gnosis). (3) The [perfect] retinue is the enjoyment of the display of [gnosis's] dynamic energy. (4) The [perfect] teaching is the undefiled bliss. (5) The [perfect] time is when [there is] direct realization of that [stainless bliss].

Because it is extraordinarily exalted, [more than] others, it is connected to the uncommon scripture and reasoning. The goodness

63. *Bindu* in Tibetan is *thig le*, one of the subtle body constituents along with the winds (*prāṇa*) and the channels (*nāḍī*). As Christopher Hatchell has analyzed, *thig-le* can mean various things. "In many cases, the term references physical 'semen' or 'seeds,' but at other times *thig-le* are simply circular patterns, drops, or spots, such as those seen in vision." Christopher Hatchell, *Naked Seeing: The Great Perfection, The Wheel of Time, and Visionary Buddhism in Renaissance Tibet* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 134. In the above passage from *Tantra of the Sun*, the *bindus* most likely refer to the circular patterns that emerge at the beginning of direct transcendence (*thod rgal*) visionary experiences.

is extracted from the dregs and gathered into the core essence [this tantra].⁶⁴

I have provided in table 1 (below) a simplified chart of the five perfections as they correspond to the *nidāna*, the ground, body, path, and fruition to help better appreciate the role of the five perfections as a structuring device for all parts of the tantra.

What does it mean for the five perfections that structure the *nidāna* to likewise structure the ground, the body as the basis for practice, the path, and the fruition of practice? On one level, the tantra seems to be actively creating associations between different parts of the tantra's teaching to show that they are narrativized by the same forces. That the uncommon *nidāna* repeats and varies perfect place, teacher, retinue, teaching, and time in these four different ways seems to be a continuation of the trend in tantric literature as discussed above where the body is entextualized in such a way that "the body becomes cosmography, a writing of the cosmos."⁶⁵ In the context of Dzogchen Heart Essence practice, the constituents of the ground are also embedded within the practitioner's subtle body.

From the below chart, it is suggested that the perfect place of the *nidāna*—Samantabhadri's *bhaga*—is synonymous with the perfect place of the ground, the *dharmadhātu*. Moreover, the ground, which the tantra also theorizes as buddha-nature within sentient beings, abides as the perfect place in the corporeal body, specifically, in the palace at

64. The following passage corresponds to table 1. In KM2, pp. 61–62: *thun mong ma yin gleng gzhi ni/ gzhi'i phun sum tshogs pa lnga/ gnas pa lus kyi phun tshogs lnga/ lam gyi phun sum tshogs pa lnga/ 'bras bu'i phun sum tshogs pa lnga/ dang po phun sum tshogs pa ni/ gnas ni chos dbyings spros bral la/ ston pa rang byung ye shes so/ 'khor ni sku dang ye shes so/ bstan pa bde chen 'gag pa med/ dus ni thog mtha' bral ba'o/ gnas pa lus kyi phun tshogs ni/ lus la gnas ni tsitta dang/ dung khang 'khor lo rtsa gsum mo/ ston pa ngo bo ka dag la/ 'khor ni sku dang ye shes lnga/ bstan pa rtsa rlun thig le ste/ bde dang gsal dang mi rtog dang/ dus ni nad sogs rkyen med do/ lam gyi phun tshogs lnga po ni/ gnas ni phi dang nang gi dbyings/ ston pa rdo rje lu gu rgyud/ 'khor ni sku dang thig le ste/ bstan pa sgron ma bzhi ldan la/ dus ni lta stangs gcig na'o/ mthar thug 'bras bu'i phun tshogs ni/ gnas ni bde chen chos kyi dbyings/ ston pa rig pa ye shes la/ 'khor ni rol rtsal spyod pa'o/ bstan pa zag med bde ba la/ dus ni rtogs pa mngon 'gyur ro/ gzhan las khyad par cher 'phags pas/ thun mong ma yin lung rigs sbyar/*

65. Flood, *The Tantric Body*, 28.

Table 1. Relationship between five perfections and the different parts of the tantra

	Perfect Place	Perfect Teacher	Perfect Retinue	Perfect Teaching	Perfect Time
<i>Nidāna</i>	the expansive <i>bhaga</i>	Samantabhadrī	the group of five <i>ḍākinīs</i>	the ultimate meaning that transcends cause and effect	free of calculations of past, future, beginning, and end times
Ground	<i>dharmadhātu</i> free of construct	self-arising gnosis	<i>kāyas</i> and gnoses	unimpeded great bliss	free of beginning and end
Body as the Support (<i>gnas</i>)	<i>citta</i> , the conch chamber, the <i>cakras</i> , and three <i>nāḍīs</i>	primordially pure essence	five <i>kāyas</i> and gnoses	<i>nāḍīs</i> , winds, and <i>bindus</i> that are bliss, clarity, and nonconceptual	free of the conditions of illness and so forth
Path	outer and inner expanse	<i>vajra</i> chains (these appear in the visionary practices of direct transcendence)	the <i>kāyas</i> and <i>bindus</i>	being endowed with the four lamps	the moment of gazing [at the lamps]
Final Fruition	<i>dharmadhātu</i> of great bliss	the awareness qua gnosis (awareness- gnosis)	enjoyment of the display of [gnosis's] dynamic energy	undefiled bliss	when [there is] direct realization of that [stainless bliss]

the heart center (*tsitta*), in the form of mandalas of pacific deities, and as ferocious deities in the conch chamber of the brain. Moving down in the chart, the subtle body physiology of the five perfections of the body directly influences the mode of the five perfections for the path of practice. For example, the perfect place for the path of practice is the inner and outer expanse—the tableau from where the visionary appearances of direct transcendence manifest, moving from the interior of the practitioner’s subtle body via wisdom channels and through the eyes into the sky.

Said in another way, these repetitions and variations of the five perfections explicitly perform the mirroring of the ground to the body, to the path, and to the fruition of buddhahood much in the same way that other tantras like *Kālacakra tantra* mirror text to cosmos, to body, to practice, and to gnosis in the organization and content of its chapters. The five perfections in this case act as the structuring device that connects all parts of samsara’s cosmogonic narrative into a coherent system, illustrating that the *nidāna* is the ground is the body is the path is the fruition. The tantra is training the reader to cultivate a felt sensibility that buddhahood, rather than being a goal that is temporally located in the future or located outside of the abode of the body in some primordial ground prior to the bifurcation of samsara and nirvana, is actually located in the immediate present, in this very body, right here. This immediacy or immanence of buddhahood is further substantiated by Samantabhadri’s preaching throughout *Tantra of the Sun* that buddha-nature abides in the subtle bodies of all sentient beings.

BUDDHA-NATURE AND THE GURU

In chapter 23, titled “Teaching on the Way Buddha-Nature Pervades All Beings,” Samantabhadri maintains that “The *tathāgatagarbha* that has the luster of empty luminosity abides in the self-continuum of all sentient beings in the same way that oil pervades sesame.”⁶⁶ Despite the pervasiveness of the *tathāgatagarbha*, however, Samantabhadri makes it clear that without gathering the adequate conditions, the fruition of buddhahood will not manifest. She describes the causes and conditions by invoking the analogy of milk and butter: “Even though milk is

66. KM2, p. 86: *bder gshegs snying po stong gsal mdangs/ sems can kun gyi rang rgyud la/ til la mar gyi khyab ltar gnas/*

the cause for butter, without churning, the potential is unrealized.”⁶⁷ In other words, while the cause for buddhahood, the *tathāgatagarbha*, awareness, the ground, etc. abides in the flesh forms⁶⁸ of all sentient beings, the immediate condition that will elicit its unmanifest potential is the guru’s speech.

The cause abides in all like this. The condition is elucidated through the guru’s speech. When the cause and condition are gathered, one sees awareness. In the emptiness that is luminous, empty, and relaxed, there is no grasping, nor is there confused partiality. Self-luminous, without grasping, and expansive, it is the realization of all buddhas. In the great expanse, Samantabhadri’s *bhaga*, appearances, *vajra* methods are enjoyed. Offerings of nondual dances of bliss are offered. Without abandoning samsara, one is freed in bliss and emptiness. If one wishes to perform great benefit for others, when characteristics arise, meditate on oneself as the five mothers of Samantabhadri.⁶⁹

The masculine and feminine pairings characteristic of tantric literature is present in the above passage. Specifically, within the great expanse, which is synonymous with Samantabhadri’s *bhaga* or womb, appearances, or *vajra* methods, are enjoyed. The language of “nondual dances of bliss” too is resonant of the language associated with feminine-masculine pairings in tantric methods of practice.

Although Samantabhadri is invoked as the ultimate guru to which the practitioner should pay homage, there are varying levels of the guru described throughout the tantra, namely, outer, inner, and

67. KM2, p. 86: *’o ma mar gyi rgyu yin kyang/ ma bsrub pa ru don mi nus/*

68. Samantabhadri describes the *tathāgatagarbha* in the following way; “The awareness-gnosis is like space, like the space that is maintained by a vase. It abides in this way in flesh forms. In the middle of the amassment of the five elements, the five constituents (*khams*), the *citta* abides on the beams of the crystal palace in the middle of the maroon-gem [colored] tent.” KM2, pp. 87–88: *rig pa ye shes nam mkha’ ’dra/ nam mkha’ bum pas bcad pa ltar/ sha gzugs rnams la ’di ltar gnas/ ’byung lnga khams lnga ’dus pa’i dbus/ tsitta mchong gur smug po’i dbus/ shel gyi kha bad can la gnas/*

69. KM2, p. 16: *rgyu ni kun la de bzhin gnas/ rkyen ni bla ma’i ngag la gsal/ rgyu rkyen ’tshogs na rig pa mthong/ stong nyid gsal stong lhug pa la/ ’dzin med phyogs lung ’khrul pa med/ rang gsal ’dzin med phyam bdal ba/ sangs rgyas kun gyi dgongs pa yin/ dbyings chen kun bzang bha ga la/ snang ba thabs kyi rdo rjer spyod/ gnyis med bde ba’i gar mchod ’bul/ ’khor ba ma spang bde stong grol/ gzhan gyi don chen byed ’dod na/ mtshan ma ’byung ba’i dus dag tu/ rang nyid kun bzang yum lnga bhaim/*

secret.⁷⁰ Regarding the importance of the outer guru, in chapter 47, “Teaching on the Importance of the Guru,” Samantabhadri likens the outer guru to a mirror who is able to reflect for the disciple how the empty essence characteristic of the ground manifests in multiplicity.

Listen retinues of the manifestation of awareness. [As for] the supreme great method for liberating oneself (*bdag nyid*) [it is important] to cherish the guru. The spontaneously present (*lhun grub*) sun of compassion dawns in the primordially pure (*ka dag*) sky. The empty essence (*ngo bo stong pa*) abides indivisibly. To teach the examples and meaning of that, an authentic guru is extremely important. The radiance of awareness, gnosis, is the spontaneously present *kāya*. Within the *tsitta*, it abides clustered. Its dynamism abides illuminating as the wrathful *kāyas* inside the conch chamber. Cherish the guru, who is the great key, the method to open that magical door. The path is like sunrays. Regarding the door, [the sunrays] shine through the eye faculty. The gnosis that is a mirror appears like a face. Through the power of conditions, they appear as multiplicity. Cherish the guru who is the mirror that teaches that.⁷¹

The above passage uses adjectives associated with the ground—primordially pure (Tib. *ka dag*), spontaneously present (Tib. *lhun grub*), and empty essence (Tib. *ngo bo stong pa*)—to describe the outer sky that becomes the basis for the visionary practices of Dzogchen direct transcendence. The outer guru is able to transmit profound teachings

70. In chap. 8, Samantabhadri says, “For those individuals with sharp faculties who wish to attain this meaning, first, they must have found a suitable guru. Then the history generates confidence and faith [in the practitioner]. Through the four empowerments the fortunate one should be ripened.” KM2, p. 22: *Gang zag dbang po yang rab kyis/ de don thob par 'dod pa na/ thog mar bla ma bcud ldan brtsal/ lo rgyus yid ches gding chos nas/ dbang ni nam pa bzhi yin yang/ skal bar ldan pa smin par bya/*. This kind of instruction to first find a suitable guru, then listen to the history of the transmission lineage, followed by receiving empowerments for practice is common in Heart Essence texts.

71. KM2, pp. 148–149: *nyon cig rig gdangs 'khor tshogs rnams/ bdag nyid grol ba'i thabs chen po/ mchog tu bla am shin tu gces/ ka dag nam mkha' lta bu la/ lhun grub thugs rje'i nyi ma shar/ ngo bo stong pa dbyer med bzhugs/ de nyid dpe don bstan pa'i phyir/ bla ma mtshan ldan shin tu gces/ rig gdangs ye shes lhun grub sku/ tsitta'i nang na tshom bu bzhugs/ de'i rtsal nyid dung khang na/ khro bo'i sk ru gsal bar bzhugs/ de'i 'phrul sgo 'byed pa'i thabs/ lde mig chen po bla ma gces/ lam ni rtsa de nyi zhur bzhin/ sgo ni dbang po'i mig la gsal/ ye shes me long byad ltar snang/ rkyen gyi dbang gyi du mar snang/ de ston me long bla ma gces/*

regarding that empty essence through examples and meanings. They are the great key that unlocks the magical door to the disciple's own inlaid awareness, gnosis, and *kāya* forms that abide clustered in the heart area and in the conch chamber. It is through the guru's teachings that the path of gnosis that emerges during the visionary experiences of direct transcendence is illuminated and shines through the disciple's eyes. The guru is thus likened to a mirror who reflects back to the disciple the mirror-like appearances of gnosis that shine forth during the visionary experiences associated with direct transcendence. Chapter 48, "Teaching on an Authentic Guru," expands on the notion of the guru for us by intimating other ways in which the guru principle may benefit the practitioner.

If one who possesses the characteristics of a guru administers an empowerment, [you] will be free of suffering. Through supplicating to such a guru, [all] desires and needs come to [you]. For example, it's like a jewel that grants whatever one wishes for. Since multiplicity is the dynamism of awareness, awareness is liberated in emptiness. It is like a powerful king. [Multiplicity/awareness] continually abides in the essence. Within the authentic reality, there is no movement. Through [liberation through] wearing, seeing, and hearing, one becomes a buddha. If one has wrong understanding of these characteristics [of a guru], it [becomes] the equivalent to supplicating trinkets as the Jewel, yet having no blessings.⁷²

If the outer guru is the flesh-form emanation of a human teacher who administers empowerments and so forth, then the inner guru is awareness itself, the "authentic reality" (*yang dag don*) described above. The above passage seems to imply that since the dynamism of awareness expresses itself in multiplicity, awareness pervades multiple forms. If this is the case, paying homage to awareness can take the form of worshipping an outer guru, but it can also take the form of liberation through "wearing, seeing, and hearing."

The Nyingma school in particular has promoted the idea that the capacity for certain objects to grant liberation upon sensory encounters

72. KM2, pp. 152–153: *mtshan nyid ldan pa'i bla ma ni/ dbang bskur bas na sdug bsngal grol/ de lta bu'i bla ma la/ gsol ba btab pas dgos 'dod 'byung/ dper na/ nor bu bsam 'phel 'dra/ sna tshogs rig pa'i rtsal yin phyir/ rig pa stong pa nyid du grol/ dbang ldan rgyal po ji bzhin no/ ngo bo nyid la rgyun du gnas/ yang dag don la g.yo ba med/ mthong thos bcangs pas sangs rgyas 'grub/ mtshan nyid de rnam's go log na/ nor bu mching bu dag dang mtshungs/ gsol ba btab kyang byin rlabs med/*

is a part of the Dzogchen repertoire of expedient means to buddhahood. As James Gentry's "Liberation through Sensory Encounters in Tibetan Buddhist Practice"⁷³ has detailed, the liberatory efficacy of these power objects can be traced back to the importance of "treasure substances" (Tib. *gter rdzas*) in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. These substances included everything from ritual objects and medicines to the flesh and clothes of Padmasambhava and other awakened beings of the past. Gentry goes on to explain that by the fourteenth century these objects were classified through a four-fold typology.⁷⁴ This four-fold typology emphasized liberation via the senses of seeing, hearing, wearing, or tasting these power objects.⁷⁵ Though our above passage doesn't explicitly use the term "secret," my reading is that

73. James Duncan Gentry, "Liberation through Sensory Encounters in Tibetan Buddhist Practice," *Revue d'Etudes Tibetaïnes* 50 (June 2019): 73–131.

74. To do justice to the range of power objects in the four-fold typology, I cite directly from Gentry's ("Liberation through Sensory Encounters," 78) description of said objects below.

We thus encounter objects such as 1) miniature statues, *stūpas*, or other images said to be crafted by the hands of past masters, as well as special *mantra* or *dhāraṇī* formulas that promise "liberation through seeing"; 2) a range of *mantra* or *dhāraṇī* textual formulas and instruction manuals that promise "liberation through hearing"; 3) instruction manuals, circular diagrams (*yantra*), *mantra* or *dhāraṇī* formulas that prescribe their manufacture into powerful amulets that can confer "liberation through wearing"; 4) especially potent pills made of the relics of past buddhas and other materials that can grant "liberation through tasting." Included in one or another of these categories is also a number of other items, such as ritual daggers, hats, vases, water, gems, garments, masks, and so forth, that similarly promise "liberation" to whomever comes into physical, sensory contact with them.

See also Katarina Turpeinen, "Luminous Visions and Liberatory Amulets in Rig 'dzin RGod Ldem's Great Perfection Anthology," *Revue d'Etudes Tibetaïnes* 50 (June 2019): 140–146.

75. Gentry is careful to note that there were also criticisms from Buddhist hierarchs over the potency of such objects to liberate through the senses. These criticisms in turn sparked Nyingma rebuttals that were so successful that the popularity of these sensory encounters with power objects proliferated through other Tibetan sectarian schools. Eventually the rubric of four modes of liberation—sight, sound, touch, taste—increased to six and eight modes of liberation, and by the nineteenth century Jamgon Kongtrul Thaye ('Jam mgon

the secret guru is the practice of liberation upon wearing, seeing, or hearing. However, the tantra warns us that if the disciple doesn't possess the right understanding of the characteristics of a guru, in other words, the view of Atiyoga or Dzogchen, then worshipping said guru, whether in the form of a flesh-teacher or liberation upon wearing, will not bring about their promised blessings.

CONCLUSION: BUDDHIST TEXTUALIZATION OF TIMELESS TIME

Inexpressible, timeless nirvana is a moment in the Buddhist textualization of time, the explicit or implicit closure-marker in its discourse of felicity. It is the motionless and ungraspable horizon, the limit condition that makes the Pali imaginaire a coherent whole. From within Buddhist ideology, one would need to add the proviso that nirvana exists beyond any historically specific imaginaire—the “Dispensation” (*sāsana*) of any Buddha which points towards it; although Buddhist doctrine is as much a direction arrow as a description of its destination, it certainly asserts that a destination exists. Nirvana is the object of Path-consciousness, a reality which can be attained by the Path, both during life as Enlightenment (*bodhi*) and as final (*pari*) *nibbāna* at “death,” in one sense of the word.⁷⁶

If, as Steven Collins has written, “inexpressible, timeless nirvana” is what “makes the Pali imaginaire a coherent whole,” I wonder, what would be the equivalent for the Dzogchen Heart Essence imaginaire? What creates coherence in this system? As this paper has attempted to show, Dzogchen Heart Essence literature is unique in the way that it theorizes the ground of awareness vis-à-vis the primordial, timeless *dharmakāya* Buddha Samantabhadra/ī, whose awakening is beyond the concepts of past, present, future, samsara, or nirvana. As the repetition and variation of the five perfections in the uncommon *nidāna* shows, the narrative setting of the ground and all the qualities associated with it are embedded within all parts of the Dzogchen Heart Essence

Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas) presents eleven modes of liberation. Gentry, “Liberation through Sensory Encounters in Tibetan Buddhist Practice,” 79.

76. Steven Collins, *Nirvana: Concept, Imagery, Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 185–186.

narrative. The ground is present in the *nidāna*, within the subtle body of the practitioner, the path of practice, and its ultimate fruition.

From this perspective, it isn't nirvana as "the object of path-consciousness" that makes the Dzogchen imaginaire cohere. Rather, it is the ground and its repeated entextualization through the five perfections that makes the Dzogchen imaginaire cohere as a whole. The time of awakening loops like a periodic sequence throughout the tantra's narrative, undercutting the notion that there is ever a single moment in time that one arrives at an objective goal of awakening in the first place. Rather than punctuating the end point of a goal, a "path-consciousness" objective, the ground of awareness is continually re-asserted as immanent within all parts of samsara and all parts of the practitioner's experience; the beginning of the tantra is the middle is the end. Praxical efficacy, as Gray describes, is immediate, so long as the practitioner meets the requisite condition of the guru's speech that is needed to reconnect with the ground.

I began this paper reflecting on how the five perfections are invoked before listening to Great Perfection Dharma teachings today as a way to presence the narrative setting related to the particular teaching being given. In such a setting the human teacher administering the teaching should no longer be perceived in their ordinary or common form-body. They are one and the same as the perfect teacher, which in the case of *Tantra of the Sun* would be Samantabhadrī herself. Time, place, retinue, and teaching likewise become extraordinary or uncommon through the presencing of the five perfections.

I then provided a translation of *Tantra of the Sun's* own uncommon *nidāna*, narrated by Samantabhadrī. As the reader might recall, when Samantabhadrī first utters "Ema!" followed by a description of how the ground of awareness subsumes all of samsara and nirvana, her speech enacts a profound rippling effect throughout all the world realms, transforming them through light rays, and then activating the ground appearances. These ground appearances emerge as a result of the dynamic energy of the ground's gnosis, in this case, Samantabhadrī's speech, expressing itself. It is through Samantabhadrī's speech that a portal between the timeless matrix of the *dharmakāya* realm and the time-bound form-world associated with the samsaric realm is opened.

We then jumped to chapter 18, where Samantabhadrī theorized for us how the five perfections structure not only the *nidāna* of *Tantra of the Sun*, but also the four different subcategories of Dzogchen's uncommon

nidāna: the ground, the practitioner's body, the path of practice, and the fruition of practice. The temporal effect that results from these repetitions and variations of the five perfections generates a kind of reading experience where even as the tantra appears to be moving us forward in a journey of practice towards buddhahood, the reader repeatedly finds themselves back at beginning, at the *nidāna*, again and again.

This use of the five perfections throughout the tantra accords with the tantra's own doctrinal view that buddha-nature and its synonyms—awareness, gnosis, the qualities of the ground, etc.—pervade all sentient beings in the same way that “oil pervades sesame.” However, without meeting the right condition—the guru—full realization is not activated. Just as Samantabhadri's speech in the *nidāna* activates the ground appearances, so too does the outer guru's speech, through examples and words, or through their transmission of the tantra, serve as the primary condition for the latent buddha-nature in the form of gnoses, and *kāyas* abiding within the disciple's heart, to arise as mirror-like visions during direct transcendence visionary practices. In the same way that Samantabhadri's speech establishes a portal between the worldly realms and the *dharmakāya* realm, the guru's speech rekindles the connection between the practitioner's gross form body and the buddha-nature within the practitioner's subtle body. But the efficacy of the outer guru's speech is dependent, in part, upon the disciple's ability to invoke the five perfections throughout all parts of their practice journey, beginning from the moment that they sit down to first receive a teaching or an initiation.

I recall many times when I have been instructed to call to mind the five perfections while receiving a Dharma teaching and feeling apprehension about my ability to do so with full, unremitting trust. I asked a rinpoche about this once, and in a very relaxed tone, rinpoche invited me to entertain the possibility that perhaps, on some level of experience, the five perfections constituted my reality proper. What would happen, they asked me, if I were to just momentarily suspend my disbelief? When rinpoche asked me this question, my doubts evaporated for a brief moment, and I felt a sense of joy and also relief, that maybe, just maybe, the world around me, and my own form, was so much more than I had perceived them to be.

In this paper I attempted to provide an appreciation for how narrative setting, the *nidāna*, from the perspective of Dzogchen Heart

Essence literature doesn't describe a time and a place far away or inaccessible to us. Rather, with the right conditions and a bit of trust, it may be possible to recognize that Samantabhadrī and the ground of awakening she embodies has always been right here with us, in us, and in all parts of our experience.

