# WHAT COLOR IS YOUR BUDDHAHOOD? VISION AND VACUITY IN TIBETAN OLD SCHOOL ACCOUNTS OF AWAKENED COGNITION[1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers Buddhist conceptions of what a buddha's state of awakening is like by bringing to light a previously unstudied current of interpretation from the *Heart Essence* (*sNying thig*) tradition of Great Perfection (rDzogs chen) theory and practice belonging to the Old School (rNying ma) of Tibetan Buddhism. It presents evidence that contrary to contemporary Buddhist Studies and Old School *Heart Essence* depictions of the moment of awakening as presaged by the dissolution of all perceptual appearances at the culmination of four visionary phases, there was another strain of thinking on this issue in Tibet which was once prevalent but has nearly been expunged from the Old School historical record. According to this little-known account, awakening involves not the final dissolution of visionary experience, but rather its final refinement and stabilization – the ongoing immersion in one's own innate, nondual knowing, in the form of luminous and colorful buddhas and their mandalic purelands. The discussion traces this strain of interpretation from questions posed by Ratna Lingpa in the 15th century to responses offered by Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyeltsen in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. It then compares Sokdokpa's opinion to the position of the 14th century figure Longchenpa, with whom Sokdokpa explicitly took issue on this point. It then interrogates the interpretive possibilities of their common scriptural source, the *Seventeen Tantras*, and the related reflections of the late 12th and early 13th century *Heart Essence* figure Nyima Bum, before turning to the 17th century attempt by Lhatsün Namkha Jikmé to reconcile these two positions

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in proposing his own idiosyncratic account. In conclusion, it asks what the implications of this disagreement could be for Longchenpa's reception in the 16th and 17th centuries, and when and how Longchenpa's opinion finally eclipsed its counterpoint. It also suggests that the *Heart Essence* disagreement over the status of visionary experience in awakened cognition and embodiment could be a continuation, in the contemplative visionary idiom of this Tibetan tradition, of a broader Mahāyāna Buddhist conundrum over how a buddha can transcend the conditionality of samsaric existence while nonetheless remaining cognizant of and active within it to bring benefit to beings.

*How does one view that which comes out of thusness?*
*Is it appearing or not appearing?*
*Moreover, is it buddhahood or not buddhahood?*
*Does buddhahood exist separate from it or not?*
*By discussing in this way, one should decide how it is.*
rNal sbyor grub pa'i lung[2]

*If you are afraid of appearances,*
*then join your palms in reverence*
*for the meditative absorption of cessation.*
Lhatsün Namkha Jikmé (1597–1650)[3]

## Introductory Remarks

What is it like to be a buddha, or an "awakened one"? This is one of the most perennial questions in the history of Buddhist thought. Formulations of the goal of Buddhist practice, that is, how an awakened being feels, perceives, and acts in the world, lie at the heart of what Buddhists

[2] This title is as cited in gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes, *rNal 'byor mig gi bsam gtan* (49.6–50.2) and translated by Dalton and van Schaik (2003: 164): *de bzhin nyid las gang 'dir ji ltar lta/ /de nyid snang ba yin nam mi snang ba/ /'on te sangs rgyas yin nam sangs rgyas min/ /de las gzhan na sangs rgyas yod dam med/ /'di ltar cir bzhag gros kyis chod par bya/* The *rNal 'byor grub pa'i lung* is better known as the *dGongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo*. In available *Kangyur* collections which include a *rnying rgyud* section, this verse appears in chapter fifty-six with a few variations as follows (Tōh. 829, *bKa' 'gyur*, *dpe bsdur ma*, vol. 101, 544): */de bzhin nyid la gang 'dir ji ltar lta/ /de nyid snang ba yin nam mi snang ba/ /'o na sangs rgyas yin nam sangs rgyas min/ /de las gzhan na sangs rgyas yod dam med/ /'di ltar cir bzhag gros kyis chod par bya/* For more on this scripture, see Dalton 2016.

[3] Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med, *'Od gsal rdo rje snying po sprin gyi thol glu'i lo rgyus rin po che nyin byed kyi mdangs zhal 'od zer stong gi phreng ba*, in *rDo rje snying po sprin gyi thol glu*, vol. 1, 173.2–173.3: *khyed cag snang ba la skrag na 'gog pa'i ting nge 'dzin la thal mo sbyor cig/*

ostensibly strive for when embarking on the Buddhist path. Conceptions of what it means to awaken thus extend beyond mere abstract doctrine to impact Buddhist ways of living, rippling into Buddhist approaches to contemplation, embodiment, ethics, models of sociality, and institution building, even for Buddhists who do not explicitly aim for this ultimate goal in their immediate lifetimes.[4]

From a Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrinal perspective, what the cognitive and bodily states and modes of activity are like for a buddha lies beyond the purview of the ordinary intellect. "Awakening" theoretically entails the transcendence of the afflicted states and cognitive obscurations that typify ordinary existence and its limited capacities of reasoning and embodiment, even as buddhas continue to engage in the quotidian world for the benefit of beings. Owing in part to this conundrum over how to construe in thought and language what transcends ordinary thought and language, Buddhist traditions have been far from unanimous in their appraisals of this fundamental question.

Contemporary Tibetan Buddhist Old School (rNying ma) accounts of the event of complete awakening emphasize the dissolution of all phenomenal appearances – impure, and pure – into the state of basic emptiness at the culmination of a sequence of four visionary experiences. This progression through four visionary stages is construed by present-day Old School adherents in terms of the emergence, intensification, and dissipation of visual cognitive contact with a nondual knowing intrinsic to the subtle physiology of the mind-body complex. Contemplative practice manuals describe these experiences with innate nondual cognition in terms of its emergence in the visual field in the form of colorful flashes, squiggles, floaters, and other basic visual percepts; their gradual coalescence into luminous buddha bodies; the organization of these colorful buddha bodies into *maṇḍala* patterns and surrounding pureland paradises; and the final dissolution of this fully immersive visual tapestry into the "expanse of reality." The practice manuals prescribe how to initiate

[4] In this I approach the notion of complete awakening, or buddhahood, with a spirit akin to Steven Collin's aspirations with respect to the Pāli imaginaire, "to see nirvana not as an example of a free-floating, ahistorical ideal, but as one aspect of a congeries of Buddhist felicities imagined by flesh-and-blood human beings in the material-historical world" (1998: 94).

this visionary sequence through the manipulation of external light sources, oblique staring into a sunlit sky, and complete isolation in visual sensory deprivation enclosures, cut off entirely from any light source whatsoever. These practices also call for the stimulation of internal light sources, aptly termed "lamps," through the observation of special techniques of gazing and the application of pressure to the optic nerves, coordinated with specific physical postures, breathing techniques, and contemplative practices.

Buddhist Studies scholars and contemporary Old School adherents alike have generally assumed that there has been historical unanimity among Old School scholars and practitioners concerning the dissolution of visionary experience at the culmination of this four-fold sequence (Dudjom 1991: 339; Germano 1992: 227; Germano 2007: 64; and Hatchell 2014: 63). In the 15th century, however, the Old School visionary scholar Ratna Lingpa (Ratna gling pa, 1403–1479) broached the question of whether the emergent state of awakening might actually entail the stabilization and perdurance of visionary experience, rather than its dissolution into emptiness. This question seems to have continued to reverberate among Old School scholars until at least the 16th and 17th centuries, when Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyeltsen (Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan, 1552–1624) picked it up to argue vehemently in favor of the subsistence of visionary experience, as against its dissolution. In so doing, Sokdokpa characterizes the position of its dissolution as extreme and attributes it disparagingly to none other than the 14th century polymath Longchen Rabjam Drimé Özer (Klong chen rab 'byams Dri med 'od zer, 1308–1364), otherwise known as Longchenpa.

This paper revives Ratna Lingpa's pressing question to consider some of the various positions staked out on this issue. The discussion begins by examining Ratna Lingpa's question, Sokdokpa's response, and the development of Sokdokpa's thinking on the topic in his later writing. It then examines Sokdokpa's characterization of Longchenpa's position by comparing it to what Longchenpa himself had to say about this issue. It turns next to consider the possible precursors of these positions in the Great Perfection *Heart Essence* tradition's main scriptural source, the *Seventeen Tantras*, and in the considerations of the early *Heart Essence* adept Shang Nyima Bum (Zhang Nyi ma 'bum, 1158–1213). The discussion

finally returns to the 17th century to touch on the position of Lhatsün Namkha Jikmé (Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med, 1597–1650), who openly addressed this divergence of opinion in an attempt to reconcile two perspectives and propose his own.

In explicating these divergent currents of interpretation, this paper attempts to illustrate that contrary to scholarly opinion, Longchenpa's position on this issue was not always the exclusive and most authoritative one within Old School circles. As I will attempt to show, by as late as the middle of the 17th century, and perhaps later, Old School *Heart Essence* adherents had reached no general consensus about the visionary dimension of awakened cognition. Rather, it was an enduring topic of debate and sometimes a point of controversy, in which Longchenpa came to serve as a lightning rod for suspicions about proposing an excessively negative portrayal of awakening. In conclusion, I argue that the contention over the question of what buddhahood looks like is a continuation in the visionary idiom of Tibet's Old School of an issue that has probably occupied Buddhist thinkers since they first struggled to account for Buddha Śākyamuni's state of awakening.

## Visionary Experience in Theory and Practice: The *Heart Essence* of the Great Perfection

Before delving into the issue of different Old School positions on the status of visionary experience, some general background is in order to help contextualize the role visions play in Old School theory and practice.

The visionary practices briefly outlined above began to feature prominently among Old School contemplative techniques only with the full flowering from the 11th century on of its *Heart Essence* tradition of Great Perfection theory and practice (Germano 2007: 63). The contemporary Old School tradition construes the *Heart Essence* as the pinnacle of its many Great Perfection teachings, classifying it as the "esoteric instruction class" (*man ngag sde*), the final among the three-fold typology of mind, space, and esoteric instructions (*sems klong man ngag sde gsum*) (Dudjom 1991: 538 and 554).

The precise historical origins of the *Heart Essence* remain obscure, but the tradition traces itself to the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra

(Tib. Kun tu bzang po), and marks its initial transmission among humans to the revelation of a set of seventeen *tantra*s.[5] The *Seventeen Tantras* are said to have reached the human realm through the visionary experience of a 7th century Indian adept, Garab Dorjé (dGa' rab rdo rje), whose historicity is shrouded in mystery. Although lineage histories differ in their details, *Heart Essence* lineage accounts generally hold that Garab Dorjé received these *tantra*s directly from the buddhas Vajrasattva and Vajrapāṇi in a visionary encounter. Tradition has it that Garab Dorjé transmitted them to Mañjuśrīmitra, who passed them on to Śrī Siṃha, before Śrī Siṃha transmitted them in turn to the Indian scholar Jñānasūtra, from whom they reached the Indian scholar Vimalamitra. It was Vimalamitra, tradition maintains, who brought the *tantra*s to Tibet and translated them into Tibetan in the 8th century. Vimalamitra then concealed them in Tibet to eventually be rediscovered by Tibetans – first by Dangma Lhungyi Gyeltsen (lDang ma Lhun gyi rgyal mtshan, circa 10th–11th c.), who recognized that the time was not quite right and reconcealed them; and finally, in the 12th century, by a figure known as Shangtön Tashi Dorjé (Zhang ston bKra shis rdo rje, 1097–1167), who passed them on to his son Nyima Bum, from whom the transmission continued, above ground, as it were.[6]

By the 14th century, the *Seventeen Tantras* had developed an extensive commentarial literature and ritual repertoire, with commentaries on the main *tantra* alone, the *Penetrating Sound* (*sGra thal 'gyur*), counting around one thousand pages in length in some editions.[7] Moreover, the popularity of the *Heart Essence* extended well beyond the confines of interpretative work with the *Seventeen Tantras* themselves to become one of the major currents of theory and practice among Old School adherents as a whole. During the 14th century the *Heart Essence* inspired voluminous revelatory scriptural production, as a wave of visionary treasure revealers

[5] Additionally, the *Seventeen Tantras* are described as eventually accompanied by four volumes (*po ti bzhi*) and one hundred and nineteen esoteric instructions (*man ngag brgya dang bcu dgu*), mostly composed by later adepts and scholars.

[6] For a more detailed account of the *Heart Essence* lineage, see Nyoshul Khenpo Jamyang Dorjé 2005. For more on Shangtön Tashi Dorjé and his pivotal role in the formation of the *Heart Essence* tradition, see Achard 2012.

[7] Vimalamitra, *Paṇchen dri med bshes gnyen gyi dgongs nyams sgron ma snang byed 'bar ba'i gsang rgyud*, Kaḥ thog version (Kt) and Namkhai Norbu version (Nn).

brought forth multi-volume collections of theory and practice strongly inflected by, or directly derived from the *Heart Essence tantra*s and their commentaries.[8]

To briefly summarize the *Heart Essence*'s main features, the *Heart Essence* and its derivations are alike in combining a naturalistic rhetorical flavor emphasizing effortlessness and spontaneity with elements from late mainstream Indian tantric traditions, such as the *mahāyoga tantra*s and *yoganiruttara tantra*s, to forge a number of innovative associations (Germano 2007). Most saliently, we see in the *Heart Essence* tradition a reinterpretation of deities, *mantra*s, *mudrā*s, *maṇḍala* palaces and the other standard components of tantric practice as expressions of intrinsic nondual awareness, which serves as the foundation of the dualistic universe, and crystalizes in the very core of the subtle psychophysical organism of beings (Germano 2007).

To be clear, the interiorization of tantric elements was already well underway in Indian Buddhist tantric traditions long before (Dalton 2004, Germano 2007). Where the *Heart Essence* Great Perfection integration is unique is that it frames this in terms of theories of cosmogony, language, embodiment, and eschatology that place nondual knowing and its dynamic creativity as the driving force behind all of phenomenal existence (Germano 2005: 2547). In this, the *Heart Essence* and related traditions share the assumption that intrinsic nondual awareness, rather than ignorance, is the fundamental creative energy of the universe. So rather than

[8] The influence of the *Heart Essence* on 14th-century treasury revelation extended well beyond the sphere of doctrinal and contemplative inspiration. Also witnessed is textual borrowing, sometimes with entire revelations and compositions from the *Heart Essence* literature included among the treasure revelations of other treasure revealers and sometimes newly associated with Padmasambhava (instead of Vimalamitra, for example). Instances of such textual borrowing can be observed in the treasure revelations of the 14th century treasure revealers Rigdzin Gödem (Rig 'dzin rgod ldem, 1337–1409) and Sangyé Lingpa (Sangs rgyas gling pa, 1340–1396), among others, although knowledge of the full extent of this textual practice awaits further research. For an analysis of how Rigdzin Gödem in particular incorporated Nyima Bum's Great Perfection treatise, *Eleven Words and Meanings*, to be discussed below, in his own revelation, *Great Aural Transmission of Vimalamitra*, *Instructions for the King*, *A Commentary on the Unsurpassed Utmost Secret Great Perfection*, *The Self-Illuminating Gnosis* (*Bi ma mi tra'i snyan brgyud chen po rgyal po la gdams pa yang gsang bla na med pa rdzogs pa chen po'i 'grel pa ye shes rang gsal*), see Yeshi 2017. For a full English translation of this text as it appears in Ridzin Gödem's treasure revelations, see Smith 2016.

propose that the universe and beings are produced by karmic processes, driven by ignorance, attachment, and aggression, as is common in most forms of Buddhist doctrine, the *Heart Essence* has it that everything in phenomenal existence is an expression of innate awareness.

Given the awakened basis of phenomenal reality, the *Heart Essence* tradition presents our current delusional, dualistic situation as a result of innate awareness – framed in terms of an originally pristine and undivided ground of being – misrecognizing its own dynamic expressions as other than itself. This event of self-misrecognition is ambiguously described in cosmogonic, ontological, and epistemological terms. On the cosmological level, this act of misrecognition is narrativized as an event that happened in the primordial past, as the originally pure ground mistook the nascent self-expressions of beginningless and dynamic innate awareness to be other than itself, thereby giving rise to the dualistic world of birth, death, and suffering. This cosmogonic unfolding is specifically described in terms of an originary rupture in which, prior to the emergence of the dualities of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, buddhas and ordinary beings, the "seal" of a "youthful body within a vase" (*gzhon nu bum pa sku*) – a phrase that signals the ground of being, pregnant with the potentiality of manifest phenomena (*gzhi snang*) – was "rent asunder" (*rgya ral*), thereby harkening the exteriorization of the inner potentiality of manifest being (Germano 1992: 60–68, 963–964; Germano 2007: 73–78). And yet, on a personal epistemic level, this misrecognition is also portrayed as something happening each moment, as we continue to misrecognize phenomenal experience by construing it to be other than the dynamic expression of our own nondual awakened awareness. This perceptual misrecognition is what creates our dualistic experience of a karmically driven world, rife with conflict and exploitation.

One catch with this theory is the difficulty of explaining the pristine ground's original self-misrecognition (Germano 1992: 65). What occasioned this primeval rupture? Indeed, how could innate awareness become alienated from itself if that is all there is? How, moreover, could innate awareness be a causal condition for karma, even indirectly, when it is by definition unconditioned? And what about the final realization of awakening? Does this signal a return to the primal ground or a new awakened beginning?

The *Heart Essence* tradition grapples with these questions, or at least brings critical attention to them, by placing all conditioned and contrived techniques on the Buddhist path under erasure – that is, it is careful to acknowledge the role of techniques on the path, and even incorporate them, but in so doing, it either reinterprets, critiques, or even negates their true efficacy to invoke unconditional nondual awareness.[9] The *Heart Essence* thus emphasizes that the natural, the spontaneous, and the simple, as opposed to the contrived, the gradual, and the elaborate, are the only truly efficacious dimensions of the path of Buddhist practice, as only these aspects are most directly rooted in the unconditioned cognition of the pristine ground, beyond the superficial workings of karmic cause and effect.

Toward this end, the *Heart Essence* tradition combines specially adapted forms of two doctrinal notions prevalent in earlier Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, namely, buddhanature theory, and pureland theory, to frame its two main contemplative techniques.[10] These two techniques can be translated as "breaking through" and "direct transcendence" (Germano 1992: 841–846). "Breaking through" is often understood as the foundation for "direct transcendence," with the final aim of recognizing their fundamental unity. But it would also seem they can sometimes be presented as two distinct approaches, suitable for different types of individuals, and in other possible relationships as well.[11]

"Breaking through" involves the sudden "breakthrough" epiphany of one's own intrinsic nondual cognition, or buddhanature, which is commonly described in Great Perfection traditions as "innate awareness," construed as identical with the pristine original ground (Germano 1992: 842–844; Germano 2007: 64). Breaking through often occurs through a master "introducing" (*ngo sprod*) it directly in a highly idiosyncratic

[9] It would be remiss not to mention that the *Heart Essence* tradition offers a doctrinal account of how ignorance emerges in the midst of nondual knowing that invokes the standard set of perceptual causes and conditions from mainstream Indian Buddhist epistemology, but specially adapts them to the *Heart Essence* doctrinal and contemplative context. For more on this, see Germano 1992: 68–76.

[10] Germano 2005: 2547. For a study of pureland strands of doctrine and practice in Tibet, several of which are related to *Heart Essence*-inspired approaches, see Halkias 2013.

[11] David Germano, personal correspondence.

dialogue or encounter tailored to the student's proclivities, sometimes featuring the use of symbolic didactic hand gestures or props, such as holding up a crystal (Germano 1992: 121, 898). The second practice, "direct transcendence," most often presented as deepening one's participation in the innate awareness of the ground introduced in "breaking through," involves stimulating its expression to induce encounters with translucent buddha forms and their pureland paradises (Germano 1992: 844–845). This is where visionary experience enters the scene.

The direct transcendence contemplative practice of the Great Perfection, with its doctrinal emphasis on nondual awareness as the foundation of the phenomenal universe, extends Mahāyāna buddhanature theory to the body (Germano 2007: 67–70). The *Heart Essence* tradition maintains that our innate awareness is concentrated in or near the heart of the physical body within a subtle energy node, or *cakra*, sometimes depicted in the form of a very subtle luminous energy drop comprised of lights in the five colors of yellow, white, red, green, and blue (Germano 2007: 76). This luminous five-color drop, the subtlest expression of innate nondual knowing, is presented also as the generative matrix of all embodiment and experience, the subtler corollaries of the five physical elements – earth, water, fire, wind, and space – and all they combine to form.[12] The practice of direct transcendence aims at recognizing and deepening immersion in nondual knowing by projecting the radiance intrinsic to its germinal drop from the heart through the eyes to unfold in the field of vision as luminous streaks and pixels, and eventually as buddha forms and their complete purelands, culminating in a colorful visionary tapestry populated by one hundred pacific and fierce buddhas (Germano 1992: 900–901, Germano 2007: 64). Moreover, because this dynamic and luminous visionscape is intrinsic to every being's subtle physiology, its manifestation also naturally occurs during the post-mortem intermediate state (*bar do*) between death and rebirth (Germano 2007: 70–73).

[12] See, for instance, *Nyi zla kha sbyor*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 3, 190.6–191.4. For more details on Old School conceptions of the fundamental embodiment and subtle materiality of nondual knowing, including how across a range of scriptural sources a five-fold organizing rubric correlates pure physiological essences, shapes, colors, functions, elements, female deities, modes of primordial knowing, and more, see Almogi 2009b.

*Heart Essence* contemplative practice manuals outline how to initiate this visionary sequence while still alive through a combination of manipulating external light sources, staring into a cloudless and sunlit sky, and complete isolation in visual sensory deprivation enclosures, cut off entirely from any light source whatsoever (Germano 2007: 64). In coordination with these different ways of manipulating external lighting and ambience, which are often combined in succession, the deliberate stimulation of internal light sources, aptly termed "lamps," is also stipulated. Typically, there are four such lamps.[13] These internal lamps are wired into the subtle physiology of the body's networks of subtle channels – sometimes termed "light channels" (*'od rtsa*) in *Heart Essence* parlance – and their main hubs, the five nexuses where the main channels converge along the central channel of the body: the crown, throat, heart, navel, and genitals (Germano 2007: 67). The key channel in this network is, as mentioned just above, the one extending from the heart to the eyes. By stimulating the lamps through the application of pressure to the optic nerves at the corners of the eyes, in conjunction with the observation of special techniques of gazing, postures, breathing techniques, contemplative techniques, and material specifications, such as the application of special medical ointments to the eyes and the observation of dietary restrictions, the practitioner guides the manifestations of nondual intrinsic awareness, concentrated in the heart in the form of the five-color drop of light, up this luminous channel to flow through the eyes and gradually coalesce in the visual field in the form of rainbow-color visionary encounters with buddhas (Germano 2007: 67–68). During this process, the initial efforts are intended to lead toward effortlessness as the visual sensations deliberately produced through this combination of techniques eventually give way to the spontaneous emergence of innate nondual cognition in the visual field (Germano 1992: 846). This progression of experiences, which affords the practitioner heightened opportunity for

[13] These are usually listed as: (1) the far-reaching-lasso water lamp (*rgyang zhags chu'i sgron ma*), (2) the self-arisen insight lamp (*shes rab rang byung gi sgron ma*), (3) the empty drop lamp (*thig le stong pa'i sgron ma*), and (4) the pristine expanse lamp (*dbyings rnam par dag pa'i sgron ma*). For more details on the four lamps and their links with subtle physiology and visionary experience, see Germano 1992: 95–108, and Hatchell 2014: 63–69.

immersion in their own intrinsic awareness, constitutes the *Heart Essence*'s unique path of practice.

The details of the four visionary stages that structure this process differ slightly according to different accounts.[14] Here I will only paint in broad strokes their general features based on the account given by Lhatsün Namkha Jikmé in one of his *Heart Essence*-inspired instruction manuals related to a text that will be discussed below.[15] According to this manual, the first stage, called "the direct perception of reality" (*chos nyid mngon sum*), includes everything from the initial visionary expressions induced through effort, up to the initial stirrings of luminous drops comprised of five-color lights, the first "spontaneous" visions. The second stage, called "the heightening of experience" (*nyams snang gong 'phel*), is the subsequent development and organization of these visions into limitless buddha images and associated seed syllables. The third stage, called "the optimization of awareness" (*rig pa tshad phebs*), involves the dissolution of the impure dimension of everything throughout existence, such that the practitioner recognizes everything to be indivisible from the visions of buddha images and surrounding purelands that have formed through the practice, and can remain in this recognition without being disturbed by any discursive dualistic mental activity. This entire visionary sequence is to be suffused with the resolute recognition, based on the guru's direct instructions, that in witnessing this visionary progression practitioners are in fact deepening their participation in intrinsic nondual awareness itself.

Finally, there is the fourth stage, called "the exhaustion of reality" (*chos nyid zad pa*). What, precisely, occurs as one crosses into this final visionary stage is where we find a divergence of opinion among Old

[14] The four visions schematically appear most famously in the following two verses from chapter one of the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, the main *tantra* of the *Heart Essence Seventeen Tantras*: */de la snang ba bzhir 'gyur te/ /chos nyid mngon sum snang ba yis/ yid dpyod 'dzin pa'i tshig las 'das/ /gong du 'phel ba'i nyams snang gis/ /'khrul pa'i snang ba nub par byed/ /rig pa tshad pheb snang ba yis/ /sku gsum rtogs pa'i lam snang 'das/ / chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba yis/ /khams gsum 'khor ba'i rgyun thag bcad/* (*sGra thal 'gyur*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 91.3–91.5).

[15] Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med, *Yang gsang gi sgrub pa mun khrid 'ja' lus zang thal*, in *rDo rje snying po sprin gyi thol glu*, vol. 1, 281–298; and *Rig 'dzin srog sgrub*, vol. 1, 401–418.

School scholars and adepts. While all agree more or less on the three initial visionary stages, and that progression through the exhaustion of reality signals the attainment of complete awakening, the culmination of the Buddhist contemplative path of practice, different opinions formed over the precise junctures between these stages and what the final state actually looks like for those who realize it. Moreover, as we will see below, differences of opinion on the issue of what awakening looks like are complicated by the cosmogonic framework of manifest reality – the backdrop of the ground's originary self-misrecognition that rent asunder the "youthful body within a vase" to give rise to dualistic phenomena in the first place. The close association between this cosmogonic backdrop and the personal epistemic transformation resulting from contemplative practice came to entail in *Heart Essence* theory and practice an eschatological reabsorption, or a coiling-up of manifest phenomena back into the primeval "youthful body within a vase" from which it first emerged, on the occasion of the practitioner's culminating realization (Germano 1992: 60–68). In sum, by this account the primordial cosmogonic unfolding and eschatological reabsorption of worlds and beings correlates with the momentary personal straying from and contemplative re-recognition of intrinsic nondual cognition.

With this general background in mind, allow us to delve now into the different Old School positions about what happens to visionary experience at this culminating phase – what this reabsorption implies with respect to the cognition of an awakened being. Does this reabsorption leave a perceptual vacuum for the emerging awakened one? We shall begin with Ratna Lingpa's framing questions.

## Ratna Lingpa's Questions

In the 15th century Ratna Lingpa composed a short text entitled *The Exquisite Palace of Vaijayanta*: *Questions about the Dharma*, in which he poses a series of particularly thorny doctrinal issues of Buddhist and Old School relevance, ordered hierarchically according to their relative scope and difficulty.[16] Ratna Lingpa refrains from supplying his own

[16] Ratna gling pa, *Chos kyi dri ba rnam par rgyal ba'i khang bzang*.

answers to these questions. His aim in drafting this text seems rather to have been to elicit others to contemplate these questions as particularly productive issues through which to think, and to challenge and humble those who might think themselves to be learned, but in fact have further to go.[17]

Toward the end of the text, after moving hierarchically from issues of general Buddhist concern to those specific to the Old School, we encounter the following questions pertaining to the role of visionary experience in Old School depictions of awakening:

> Do yogins who practice the Great Perfection
> claim that the visions of spontaneously present luminosity,
> ranging from direct perception and heightened experience,
> to optimization and the exhaustion of appearance,
> are purified and disappear during the exhaustion of reality?
> Or do they remain as is?
>
> How do the awakened bodies and [the varieties of] primordial knowing coil back into the sheath of primordial spontaneous presence?[18]

In Ratna Lingpa's questions, the "visions of spontaneously present luminosity" refer to the four-fold sequence of visionary experiences of direct transcendence outlined above as an integral part of the *Heart Essence* tradition's particular approach to Buddhist contemplative practice. "Direct perception," "heightened experience," "optimization," and "exhaustion of appearance," or "exhaustion of reality," refer here to these four visionary stages in turn. More typically, as delineated briefly above, these are listed as "reality's direct perception" (*chos nyid mngon sum*), "heightened experience" (*nyams pa gong 'phel*), the "optimization of awareness" (*rig pa tshad 'phebs*), and the "exhaustion of reality" (*chos nyid zad pa*). The

[17] *Chos kyi dri ba rnam par rgyal ba'i khang bzang*, 155. The colophon of this text records that Ratna Lingpa composed it in the year of the dragon, on the 22nd day of the second Hor month (*'brug lo yos zla nyer gnyis*). Ruling out 1412, when Ratna Lingpa would have been only nine years old, this dragon year in Ratna Lingpa's life corresponds to 1424, 1436, 1448, 1460, or 1472.

[18] *Chos kyi dri ba rnam par rgyal ba'i khang bzang*, 158–159: *rdzogs chen spyod pa'i rnal 'byor rnams/ /mngon sum dang ni nyams gong 'phel/ /tshad phebs snang ba zad pa'i bar/ /'od gsal lhun grub snang ba 'di/ /ji ltar chos nyid zad pa'i dus/ /'di dag dag cing zad 'dod dam/ /'on te 'di ka bzhin du gnas/ /gdod ma'i lhun grub sbubs nyid du/ /sku dang ye shes 'khyil tshul gang/*

culminating phase of the "exhaustion of reality," or as Ratna Lingpa leadingly calls it, the "exhaustion of appearance," signals passage into the state of perfect awakening, or buddhahood.

The term translated here as "visions" – pronounced *nangwa* (*snang ba*) in Tibetan – has a semantic range that includes "light," "illumination," "vision" (as in the "four visions" here), "perception," "phenomenal content," and, more generally, any external "manifestation" whatsoever. Its verbal form can similarly mean "to arise" and "to illuminate," signaling the externalized appearance and radiation of light from sources like the sun, moon, stars, lightning, lamps, etc.; "to see" or "to perceive," either specifically within the visual perceptual field, or through any of the other senses; and "to exist" or "to remain," referring more broadly to the coming into presence and subsistence of any entity, not just visible forms or other objects given to the senses. The term *nangwa* thus pivots between subjective and objective poles, partaking of photic, phenomenological, perceptual, and ontological registers (Krang dbyi sun, et al. *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*, vol. 1, 1589).

In the *Heart Essence* literature this multivalence is enlisted to great effect. *Nangwa* comes to additionally mean the luminous "self-presencing" or "self-manifestation" (*rang snang*) of intrinsic nondual cognition – or buddhanature. This is the manifest aspect, or "path presencing" (*lam snang*), of the cosmic and personal "ground presencing" (*gzhi snang*), as it is brought into experience through the contemplative practice of the four visionary stages (*snang ba bzhi*). Recognition of this identity between manifest path appearances and latent ground appearances – between the purelands perceived in visionary practice and the intrinsic nondual cognition of buddhanature – is what occasions the fruition of final awakening. As discussed above, this can entail, in turn, the reabsorption of manifest appearance back into the primeval ground, thus returning to its original latency. In this the *Heart Essence* tradition uses the term *nangwa* to correlate cosmogonic and eschatological transitions with the epistemic transitions of contemplative practice from misrecognition to recognition of intrinsic nondual knowing.

The term "spontaneous presence" (*lhun grub*) plays a similarly ambiguous role in both questions to signal intrinsic awareness's dimension of radiance, or, in *Heart Essence* parlance, its "radiant nature" (*rang bzhin*

*gsal ba*) – both in its manifest visionary aspect on the contemplative path, as in the first question; and in its return to latency, as in the second question, when its manifest visionary expressions of awakened bodies and modes of primordial knowing "coil back" into their primeval latent state, here termed "the sheath of primordial spontaneous presence." The terminology of coiling back into a sheath stands out as a clear reference to the eschatological return of manifest phenomena into the original ground occasioned by the personal epistemic shift of awakening.

Reading these two questions together, it is tempting to interpret Ratna Lingpa to be asking whether Great Perfection *Heart Essence* practitioners maintain that visionary experience vanishes or remains at the culmination of the path of contemplative practice; and, based on the position (*'dod*) practitioners takes on this key perceptual issue, how we might then account for the ontological and eschatological event of the reabsorption of the visionary "self-presencing" of intrinsic awareness back into the primeval ground of being. Put more simply, could Ratna Lingpa's questions concern how the *Heart Essence* assumption of a final return to the primordial ground impacts perceptual content during the transition of final awakening? Seen in this light, can we read the gist of Ratna Lingpa's first question – whether these visions vanish or remain at this final stage of the "exhaustion of reality" – as tantamount to asking what kind of experience an emergent buddha has, i.e., whether it constitutes an open vacuity devoid of phenomenal experience, or a vivid kaleidoscope of colorful rainbow buddha forms brilliantly shining forth in their mandalic purelands? I believe we can. Indeed, as we will see below, this is precisely how Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyeltsen would seem to understand these questions over one hundred years after Ratna Lingpa posed them.

To be clear, however, the *Heart Essence* literature with which Ratna Lingpa would have been familiar contains rich discussion of what happens at the fruition; it describes a dynamic effulgence of awakened forms and modalities of primordial knowing radiating out to benefit infinite beings, and resolutely not an utter vacuity.[19] Yet the abundant presence of such descriptions of the fruition in *Heart Essence* literature might give

[19] See for instance Longchenpa's elaborate discussion in *Treasury of Words and Meanings* (*Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1496.3–1538.5), which cites copiously from the *Seventeen Tantras*.

further credence to the suggestion that Ratna Lingpa's pointed queries presented above do not simply pertain to what happens at this final stage, but rather, more precisely, what the awakened state looks like for emergent awakening beings as their perceptual capacity transitions into its new frequency, and further, how this perception squares with the eschatological *Heart Essence* framework of a putative final reabsorption of manifest phenomena.

The nearly intractable nature of this *Heart Essence* conundrum raises the additional question of whether Ratna Lingpa ever in fact intended his colleagues to venture systematic responses. But whatever his actual intentions may have been, that Ratna Lingpa posed these questions at all suggests at the very least that this issue was open for consideration and debate during his lifetime in the 15th century. The later circulation of Ratna Lingpa's questions would also give occasion for subsequent generations of Old School figures to articulate their own opinions. Let us turn now to how these questions were received and responded to in the late 16th and early 17th centuries by Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyeltsen, a figure who would come to be known as the greatest apologist in Old School history (Gentry 2017).

## Against the Vacuity of Awakened Cognition

Over one hundred years after Ratna Lingpa penned his questions, probably in the years leading up to 1599, Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyeltsen composed *The Fount of Scripture and Reasoning*: *Replies to the Questions Posed by Ratna Lingpa in "The Exquisite Palace of Vaijayanta*."[20] In it he reproduces Ratna Lingpa's questions and responds to each in turn, citing liberally from a range of scriptural sources while presenting the reasoning behind his and others' positions on each topic. When reaching

[20] The versions consulted are as follows: (D) *Dri ba rnam par rgyal ba'i dris lan lung rigs 'byung gnas*. In Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan, *Collected Writings of Sog-bzlog-pa Blo-gros-rgyal-mtshan*, vol. II, 145–189; (T) *Dri ba rnam par rgyal ba'i dris lan lung rigs 'byung gnas* (Thimphu, Bhutan: National Library of Bhutan, 1985); and (N) *Dri ba rnam par rgyal ba'i dris lan lung rigs 'byung gnas*. In *Rje 'dren mchog dam pa skad gnyis smra ba mkhas grub blo gros rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po'i gsung 'bum* (Library of Rnam rgyal lha rtse Monastery, Namchi, Western Sikkim, India). Pagination in notes follows the New Delhi (D) edition.

Ratna Lingpa's questions about the disappearance or continuation of luminous visionary experiences, Sokdokpa reproduces the first of the two related questions as follows:

> Do yogins of the luminous Great Perfection
> claim that the visions of spontaneously present luminosity,
> ranging from direct perception and heightened experience,
> to the exhaustion of reality,
> are absent and disappear during the exhaustion of reality?
> Or do they remain as is?[21]

Then, in a striking rebuke of the presumed position of Longchenpa and other lamas, Sokdokpa immediately launches into his opinion on the topic:

> The Great Omniscient One [Longchenpa] and some previous lamas have claimed (*'dod*) that, like a coiled-up tent-rope, appearances dissolve into the primordial ground and disappear. They cite as scriptural support the phrase, "unmanifest, invisible, and not illuminating."
> But my lama maintains (*bzhed*) that according to *tantra*, "Externally, gross fixation is exhausted. Internally, the heaps of the four elements are exhausted. Secretly, intensification and dissipation (*'phel 'grib*) are exhausted."
> In other words, this is merely designated as "exhaustion of reality" because externally apprehended objects, internally apprehending thoughts, and the secret characteristics of the intensification and dissipation of lights, orbs, and purelands are exhausted. This is not claimed to be like empty space, in which the lights, awakened bodies, orbs, and purelands vanish. Rather, it is said to be buddhahood, in which the primordial knowing of the empty nature is the luminous emptiness beyond the phenomena of objects and characteristics; the primordial knowing of the luminous nature is the inexhaustible wheel of the adornments of lights, awakened bodies, orbs, and purelands; and the primordial knowing of all-pervading compassion benefits beings by manifesting in whatever way can tame [them].

[21] *Lung rigs 'byung gnas*, 172.6–173.1: */rdzogs chen 'od gsal rnal 'byor rnams/ / mngon sum dang ni nyams gong 'phel/ /chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba'i bar/ /'od gsal lhun grub snang ba 'di/ /ji srid chos nyid zad pa'i dus/ /di dag med cing zad 'dod dam/ /'on te 'di ka bzhin du gnas/ /zhes pa la/* Comparison of Sokdokpa's citation of Ratna Lingpa's question and Ratna Lingpa's question itself, as both appear in currently available versions, reveals a few significant variations. First, we can recall that in Ratna Lingpa's question, the term "exhaustion of appearance" is used in the list of the four visionary phases, whereas Sokdokpa uses the more typical "exhaustion of reality." Second, Sokdokpa's version adds the term "luminous" to describe the "Great Perfection." And finally, Ratna Lingpa's question has "purified" rather than Sokdokpa's "exhausted."

The Vidyādhara Pema Lingpa has also taught:

> The vast sky of the primordial expanse
> is endowed with the identity of the three modes of primordial knowing –
> unchanging awareness, as a sphere of five lights,
> in the youthful vase of the expanse.[22]

Sokdokpa's opening characterization of the position of Longchenpa and "some previous lamas" – for whom "appearances dissolve into the primordial ground and disappear" – hinges in part on the image of the "coiled-up rope" and in part on the scriptural support of "unmanifest, invisible, and not illuminating" (*mi mngon mi snang gsal byed min*). The image of the "coiled-up rope" is likely drawn from the *Tantra of Self-Arisen Awareness*.[23] The term rendered here as "rope" (*thag*) appears in the *tantra* in a phrase that more specifically denotes the "external rope used to erect a yak-hair tent."[24] Coiling it up would therefore entail the collapse of the whole tent, in addition to the winding up of the rope into a neat little pile. We are thus presented with two associated images apropos of the dissolution of appearance – both imply a return to manifest potentiality and an attendant dissolution of perceptual content.

The scriptural citation that follows this is found in the Tibetan translation of the important Indian *tantra*, the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*, particularly the

[22] *Lung rigs 'byung gnas*, 173.1–175.1: *kun mkhyen chen po dang / snga rabs kyi bla ma kha cig ni snang ba rnams ba thag bsdus pa ltar gdod ma'i gzhi la thim nas mi snang bar 'dod de/ mi mngon mi snang gsal byed min/ zhes sogs kyi lung 'dren yang mdzad / bdag gi bla ma'i bzhed kyis*[D,N=*kyi*] */ phyi ltar gdos*[N,T=*brdos*] *bcas 'dzin pa zad/ /nang ltar 'byung bzhi'i phung po zad/ /gsang ba nyams kyi 'phel 'grib zad/ /ces rgyud*[N=*brgyud*] *las gsungs*[N=*gsung*] *pa ltar/ phyi rol yul gyis bzung ba'i dngos po dang / nang du sems 'dzin pa'i rtog pa dang / gsang ba 'od dang thig le zhing khams 'phel 'grib kyi mtshan ma zad pas chos nyid zad pa zhes gtags pa tsam yin te/ 'od dang sku dang thig le zad pa'i stong pa nam mkha' lta bu la mi 'dod de/ ngo bo stong pa'i ye shes dngos po dang mtshan ma'i chos las 'das pa'i gsal stong/ rang bzhin gsal ba'i ye shes 'od dang sku dang thig le zhing khams mi zad pa rgyan gyi 'khor lo thugs rje kun khyab kyi*[N=*gyi*; T=*gyis*] *ye shes gang la gang 'dul du*[T=*gyis*] *sprul pas don mdzad pa'i sangs rgyas la bya ba yin gsungs*[N,T=*gsung*]*/ rig 'dzin pad+ma gling pas kyang / /gdod ma dbyings kyi mkha' rgya ru/ /ye shes gsum gyi*[T=*gyis*] *bdag nyid can/ /rig pa mi 'gyur 'od lnga'i klong*[D=*glongs*]*/ /gzhon nu*[T=*nu'i*] *dbyings kyi bum sku la/ /zhes gsungs ba*[T-*ba*]*/*

[23] *Rig pa rang shar*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 538.4: */dper na sbra'i chon thag bsdus pa lta bu'o/*

[24] Krang dbyi sun, et al., *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*, vol. 1, 825: *chon thags*: *sbra gur 'bubs byed kyi phyi yi thag pa/*

rendering found in the *Collection of Old School Tantras* (*rNying ma rgyud 'bum*).[25] Moreover, the wording of this phrase as it appears cited by Sokdokpa and in the *Collection of Old School Tantras* is quite close to what appears in the manuscripts discovered at Dunhuang and in the later translation or revision attributed to Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po, 958–1055) and found in the Phukdrak (Phug brag) *Kangyur*.[26]

Sokdokpa clearly takes issue with the interpretation depicted in this first paragraph, despite the authoritative status of the scriptural source which he claims had been used to buttress it. Instead, he prefers the

[25] *'Phags pa dpal gyi mtshan yang dag par brjod pa*, in *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* (gTing skyes edition), vol. 15, 108.7; and in *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* (mTshams brag edition), vol. 21, 339.4–339.5. both versions read */mi mngon mi snang gsal byed min/* The Sanskrit source phrase, which forms part of verse 97 in available editions, was likely *avyakta nirābhāso nirañjanaḥ* (Davidson 1981: 56). Davidson (1981: 30) renders this phrase as "indistinct, invisible and spotless." For the purposes of my argument in this paper, I attempt to render this and other citations according to how Sokdokpa and other Tibetan exegetes used and likely understood them.

[26] Dalton and van Schaik 2006: 99, 114–116. IOL Tib J 381 (IDP5233, scan number 0010) reads: */myI mngon myI gsal snangs byed myin/* IOL Tib J 382 (IDP5234, scan number 0005) reads nearly the same, except for *snang ba*, instead of *snang byed*, and a final *myed* instead of *myin*. Significantly, *snang byed* and *snang ba* here both differ from the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* versions' *gsal byed*. Phug brag *bKa' 'gyur* (F410), *rgyud*, *ka* (vol. 99), f. 11a.5. reads: */mi mngon mi snang bsal byed min/*, as does the recently rediscovered Khor chags edition (Orofino 2007: 111). The vast majority of Tibetan *Kangyur* collections contain instead an even later translation or revision (Tōh. 360), attributed to Shong lotsāwa Lodrö Tenpa (Shong lotsāwa Blo gros brtan pa, b. 1276), otherwise known as the Second Sthiramati (Blo brtan gnyis pa). He was the nephew of the more famous Shongtön Dorjé Gyeltsen (Shong ston rDo rje rgyal mtshan, b. 13th c.), who was also known as Shong Lotsāwa. This later rendering reads: */gsal min mi snang gos pa med/* This accords more closely to the Sanskrit texts as we currently have them, which read: *avyakta nirābhāso nirañjanaḥ* (Davidson 1981: 56), with some editions containing *niranvayaḥ* or *anāsravaḥ* in place of *nirañjanaḥ*. Interestingly, as Davidson observes (1981: 13), it was the earlier Rinchen Zangpo translation, which more closely reflects one of the two still earlier Tibetan imperial period renderings found at Dunhuang, that was used when translating into Tibetan the Indian commentaries on this text. See Orofino 2007 for more details on the translation and transmission history of this important scripture in Tibet, including an excellent analysis and diplomatic edition of the recently rediscovered Khor chags version of the Tibetan translation, annotated with variant readings from the Tibetan versions found at Dunhuang, the Phug brag *Kangyur* edition, two manuscripts found in the collection of Gondhla monastery in Lahul, Himachal Pradesh, the sDe dge *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* edition, Shong lotsāwa Lodrö Tenpa's revision preserved in the Peking *Kangyur*, and the Zhwa lu extracanonical edition preserved at the Tucci Tibetan Fund in the library of Is.I.A.O in Rome.

position of his own lama. Sokdokpa refrains from naming which of his teachers he has in mind here, but judging from the rest of his letter and subsequent lineage records, he is probably referring to the treasure revealer Shikpo Lingpa (Zhig po gling pa, 1524–1583).[27]

To summarize the position that Sokdokpa puts forth here in the wake of refuting Longchenpa and other previous lamas: it is dualistic experience, the physical body, and fluctuations in the visionary experiences invoked in the practice of direct transcendence that subside at the exhaustion of reality – not the visionary appearances themselves. Sokdokpa is unambiguous that for himself and his teacher the awakened state of a buddha entails not a mere vacuity, but a rich fullness, consisting of effervescent, luminous, and colorful awakened buddha bodies amidst their mandalic pureland paradise. His primary argument for this position is to thread the common *Heart Essence* trope of the union of three different aspects of primordial knowing through the cosmogonic and epistemic frames of theory and practice to seamlessly connect the original ground, the visionary contemplative path, and the final fruition of awakening vis-à-vis the ongoing profusion of empty yet luminous expressions of awakening and their diverse impact on beings. Sokdokpa thus invokes the *Heart Essence* typology of primordial knowing's empty dimension, termed its "empty essence" (*ngo bo stong pa*), beyond phenomenal attributes; its "luminous" or manifest "nature" (*rang bzhin gsal ba*); and its "all-pervasive compassion" (*thugs rje kun khyab*), signaling the active, world-engaging

[27] Throughout Sokdokpa's correspondence with Garwang Ösal, the viewpoints of Shikpo Lingpa come up repeatedly as points of contention. Moreover, in Lhatsün Namkha Jikmé's "record of received teachings" for the *Seventeen Tantras* (*rDzogs chen rgyud bcu bdun gyi thob yig gser gyi yang zhun*, in Nam mkha' 'jigs med, *gSung 'bum*, vol. 4, 193–214), Shikpo Lingpa is mentioned a few times as Sokdokpa's immediate lineage guru. Nonetheless, based on the closing quote from the famed treasure revealer Pema Lingpa (Padma gling pa, 1450–1521), Sokdokpa might instead be referring here to Pema Lingpa's son, Tuksé Dawa Gyeltsen (Thugs sras Zla ba rgyal mtshan, 1499–1587), with whom Sokdokpa was quite close throughout his early adult years (Gentry 2017: 76–78, 82–86). It could also refer to another of Sokdokpa's teachers, Tuksé Dawa Gyeltsen's associate Yongdzin Ngawang Drakpa (Yong 'dzin Ngag dbang grags pa, 1520–1580), who initiated Sokdokpa into the *Black Quintessence* (*Yang ti nag po*) contemplative system, which reflects considerable *Heart Essence* influence and explicitly relates *Heart Essence*-inspired visionary practice with the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*. For more about Shikpo Lingpa, see Gentry 2017: 56–75.

attribute of primordial knowing, which flows naturally from the primordial fusion of its empty essence and radiant nature. These three aspects, or modes of "primordial knowing" (*ye shes*) as Sokdokpa calls them, form the core defining attributes of intrinsic awareness, and the core attributes of the three awakened bodies, or *kāya*s, that manifest with the fruition of awakening.[28] On this note Sokdokpa would seem to be following standard *Heart Essence* practice of correlating the empty essence to the *dharmakāya*, the radiant nature to the *saṃbhogakāya*, and all-encompassing compassion to the *nirmāṇakāya*.

Key to Sokdokpa's interpretation is his reading of the phrase "intensification and dissipation" or "increase and decrease" (*'phel 'grib*), whose absence, or exhaustion will be discussed below as a major theme in the *Seventeen Tantras*. That Sokdokpa takes this to refer to the stabilization and perdurance of visionary experience in awakened cognition is clear. What is less clear is how this perspective might square with the *Heart Essence* emphasis on the dissolution of phenomenal experience in the perception of awakening. His closing citation of Pema Lingpa, which reads like a standard iteration of the three modes of primordial knowing, does little to advance Sokdokpa's unique perspective on this issue.

Sokdokpa turns next to Ratna Lingpa's related follow-up question. Sokdokpa reproduces the question as follows:

> How do the awakened bodies and modes of primordial knowing coil back into the sheath of primordial spontaneous presence?[29]

It should seem that this question would provide Sokdokpa the ideal occasion to address the discrepancy left in his previous account concerning how awakened visionary experience and final dissolution might be resolved. And indeed, he treats this question as a continuation of the previous one concerning what awakening looks like and thus takes the opportunity to elaborate further on his and his teacher's opinion on the topic. In so doing, he offers another iteration of the triadic external, internal, and

[28] For more details on Old School treatments of the three-fold primordial knowing, see Deroche and Tasuda 2015.

[29] *Lung rigs 'byung gnas*, 174.1: *gdod ma'i lhun grub sbubs*[T=*'bubs*] *nyid du/ /sku dang ye shes 'khyil tshul gang/*

secret rubric. This time, however, he subsumes more into this three-fold typology by connecting external, internal, and secret levels to the essence, nature, and compassion typical of the three modes of primordial knowing (i.e., its empty essence, radiant nature, and all-encompassing compassion, respectively). He connects these in turn to three modalities of luminous visionary appearances (i.e., awakened bodies, light, and rays, respectively) and to three layers of exhaustion (i.e., the exhaustion of fixation, conceptuality, and any transition or change in the full self-illumination of primordial knowing, respectively) that these appearances signal.

Sokdokpa closes his discussion by affirming that this point about the luminous identity of the three modes of primordial knowing is so subtle that even bodhisattvas with high levels of spiritual mastery might miss it. Finally, he buttresses this concluding claim by citing from the *Hevajratantra*, and, more pointedly, by revisiting the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*, referenced in his opening argument, to cite from the very verses that include the line he claimed had been misinterpreted by Longchenpa and other previous lamas. A translation of the passage is as follows:

> By thus awakening to the identity of the three modes of primordial knowing – awakened bodies in essence, light in nature, and rays in compassion – the obscuration of habitual traces is exhausted. Since all afflictions are thus purified in their own state, there is no fixation on lights and orbs externally; the continuity of conceptuality is brought to cessation internally; and secretly one abides in the state of unchanging self-illuminating primordial knowing, without fluctuation or change.
> Such a nature of the three modes of primordial knowing is so exceedingly subtle that it is difficult to realize even for bodhisattvas on the tenth level.[30]
>
> Therefore, it is taught in the *Two Kalpas* (i.e., *Hevajratantra*):
>
> > This knowledge is very subtle,
> > like the essence of vajra and the center of space,

[30] *Lung rigs 'byung gnas*, 174.1–174.3: *de ltar ye shes gsum gyi bdag nyid/ ngo bo sku/ rang bzhin 'od/ thugs rje zer du sangs rgyas pas bag chags kyi sgrib pa zad/ nyon mongs pa thams cad rang sar dag pas phyi ltar 'od dang thig le zer du 'dzin pa med pa la/ nang ltar rnam par rtog*[N=*rtogs*] *pa'i rgyun 'gags*[T=*'gag*]*/ gsang ba ltar ye shes rang gsal 'gyur ba med pa'i ngang du 'pho 'gyur med par gnas pa lags/ de lta bu'i ye shes kyi rang bzhin de shin tu phra te sa bcu pa'i byang sems kyis*[N,T=*kyi*] *kyang rtogs dka' bas*[T-*bas*] *na/ brtag*[T=*rta*] *gnyis las/ ye shes 'di ni ches 'phra*[D=*phra*] *zhing/ /rdo rje nam mkha'i dkyil lta bu/ /rdul bral mthar phyin zhi ba ste/ /khyod rang yang ni de yi pha/ /zhes gsungs shing/*

stainless, absolute, tranquil –
you yourself are its father.[31]

The same point is also made in the *Recitation of the Names* (i.e., *Mañjuśrī-nāmasaṃgīti*):

Unmanifest, invisible, and not illuminating,
unchanging, universal, and all-pervading,
subtle, immaculate, seedless.

Stainless, free of defilements, and devoid of blemishes,
divested of faults, devoid of errors,
wide awake, the epitome of awakening,
omniscient, universally knowing, and supreme.

Beyond the nature of consciousness,
knowledge, embodiment of nonduality,
devoid of conceptuality, spontaneously present,
enactor of the deeds of the buddhas throughout the three times.

Buddha, without beginning or end,
primordial buddha, without cause,
stainless with his eye of knowledge,
knowledge embodied, the Tathāgata.[32]

[31] *Lung rigs 'byung gnas*, 174.3–174.4: *brtag*[T=*rta*] *gnyis las/ ye shes 'di ni ches 'phra*[D=*phra*] *zhing/ /rdo rje nam mkha'i dkyil lta bu/ /rdul bral mthar phyin zhi ba ste/ / khyod rang yang ni de yi pha/ /zhes gsungs shing/* This citation from the *Hevajratantra* roughly corresponds to *kalpa* I, chapter xii, verse four. This verse appears in *Kangyur* collections (*Kye'i rdo rje zhes bya ba rgyud kyi rgyal po* (Tōh. 417), in *bKa' 'gyur*, *dpe bsdur ma*, vol. 80, 74) as follows: *ye shes 'di ni ches phra zhing/ /rdo rje nam mkha'i dkyil lta bu/ /rdul bral thar*[Stog=*mthar*] *sbyin*[Lhasa, Narthang=*pa*; Stog=*phyin*] *zhi bas te/ / khyod rang yang ni de yi pha/* Sokdokpa's citation of the versions that include *mthar phyin* ("absolute") instead of *thar sbyin* ("bestower of liberation") or *thar pa* ("liberation") is clearly a scribal error, as the Sanskrit source term is *mokṣadaṃ* ("bestower of liberation"). In this respect, Sokdokpa's citation accords with the Stog Palace *Kangyur* (*rgyud*, vol. *ga*, f. 148b), which records the same scribal error. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this paper, I render the verse here as Sokdokpa cites it. For Sanskrit and Tibetan editions and an English translation, see Snellgrove (1959: 100, 101, and 119), although in his English translation Snellgrove appears to mistake the Sanskrit term *mahāsūkṣmaṃ* (Tib. *ches phra*, Eng. "very subtle"), which appears in his Sanskrit edition, for the similar looking *mahāsukhaṃ* ("great bliss"). For another Sanskrit edition and English translation, see Farrow and Menon 2001: 294.

[32] *Lung rigs 'byung gnas*, 174.4–175.1: */mtshan brjod las kyang/ mi mngon mi snang gsal byed min/ /mi 'gyur kun 'gro*[T=*'phro*] *khyab*[T=*bya*] *pa*[T=*ba*] *po/ /phra zhing zag med sa bon bral/ /rdul*[T=*sdul*] *med rdul bral dri ma med/ /nyes pa spangs pa skyon med pa/ /shin tu sad*[D=*bsad*] *pa sad*[D=*bsad*] *pa'i bdag/ /kun shes kun rig dam pa po/ /rnam*

The gist of these final verses from the *Hevajratantra* and *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* is that what the final state of awakening actually looks like for a buddha is exceedingly difficult to fathom, even for well-advanced bodhisattvas. That Sokdokpa attempts to support this point with recourse to the very verses in the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* that include the line "unmanifest, invisible, and not illuminating" gives a glimpse into his alternative interpretation, one that does not signal the final dissolution of appearances, but only the inconceivability of what that fully awakened state might be like, even as he resolutely promotes his own teacher's opinion that it surely involves an ongoing immersion in luminosity.

Particularly significant here is that the interpretation of a line from the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* is a point of contention at all, given that it seems to have developed in a milieu quite different from that of the *Heart Essence*. Yet, as Anthony Tribe observes, a remarkable feature of the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* is that it simply comprises verse descriptions of the qualities, attributes, and modes of embodiment of the awakened state, without explicitly promoting any particular doctrinal position or school of practice (Tribe 1997: 113). This core feature, Tribe proposes, has historically made it amenable to multiple interpretations and allowed it to be anchored to a diversity of contexts and usages, ranging from Mahāyāna Buddhist liturgical chanting to *yogatantra*, *mahāyogatantra*, *yoginītantra*, and *Kālacakratantra* contemplative practice. In Sokdokpa's argument we catch a glimpse of its further use among Tibetans as a lens through which to reflect on and argue over the Great Perfect *Heart Essence*'s visionary contemplative practice of direct transcendence. In some senses, the interpretive elasticity that this ambiguous scripture permits – with the very same line allowing for

*par shes pa'i chos nyid 'das/ /ye shes gnyis med tshul 'chang ba/ /nam par rtog med lhun gyis grub/ /dus gsum sangs rgyas las byed pa/ /sangs rgyas thog ma tha ma med/ /dang po'i*[NG-Tb, NG-Tk=*po*] *sangs rgyas rgyu med pa/ /ye shes mig gcig dri ma med/ /ye shes lus can de bzhin gshegs/ /ces gsungs so/* Sokdokpa's citation corresponds nearly verbatim to verses in *'Phags pa dpal gyi mtshan yang dag par brjod pa*, in *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* (gTing skyes edition, NG-Tk), vol. 15, 108.7–109.3; and in *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* (mTshams brag edition, NG-Tk), vol. 21, 339.4–340.1. These verses, which correspond to part of verse 97, and verses 98–100 in full, are rendered here according to how they appear in Sokdokpa's citation and not how they appear in currently available Sanskrit editions of the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*. For the Sanskrit verses and an English translation, see Davidson 1981: 30 and 56–57.

both the vacuity and the fullness of awakening – mirrors the similar rhetorical fluidity we will witness below in the *Seventeen Tantras*. Moreover, as we will also have occasion to witness below, the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* and its interpretation had become inextricably intertwined with the *Kālacakratantra* and its visionary contemplative tradition by the time Tibetans inherited the latter in the early 11th century. This set of connections seems to have compelled Old School exegetes to see in this abstruse line from the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* a statement about the nature of visionary experience in the state of awakening.

Significantly, in his reply to Ratna Lingpa's second question, Sokdokpa conspicuously refrains from confronting precisely how his and his lama's take on awakened perception connects with the eschatological underpinnings of *Heart Essence* theory. It would not be until years later that Sokdokpa would return to this theme in his writings to venture an account of how this position might square with the reabsorption of manifest phenomena into the ground.

## Refining the View of Buddhahood's Kaleidoscopic Fullness

In 1612, over ten years after Sokdokpa composed his reply to Ratna Lingpa's queries, a lama by the name of Garwang Ösal (Gar dbang 'od gsal) from Gonjo, in eastern Tibet, sent Sokdokpa a letter to relay some of the criticisms he was facing from his eastern Tibetan Old School peers and teachers regarding Sokdokpa's positions on a cluster of issues (Gentry 2017: 131). Sokdokpa's interpretation of the status of visionary experience was central among them. It seems Garwang Ösal was seeking Sokdokpa's erudite explanation to resolve his own doubts on the matter and to supply him with a credible response to detractors.[33] Sokdokpa wrote Garwang Ösal back in reply, reiterating the opinion he first publicly expressed in his answer to Ratna Lingpa's questions on the issue of what happens at the exhaustion of reality, but with more elaboration and from

[33] Versions consulted are as follows: (D) *Ma bsgom sangs rgyas kyi rtsod spong bla ma go 'jo'i dris lan*. In Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan, *Collected Writings of Sog-bzlog-pa Blo-gros-rgyal-mtshan*, vol. II, 191–212; (N) *Ma bsgom sangs rgyas kyi brtsod spong bla ma go 'jo'i dris lan*. In *Rje 'dren mchog dam pa skad gnyis smra ba mkhas grub blo gros rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po'i gsung 'bum* (Library of Rnam rgyal lha rtse Monastery, Namchi, Western Sikkim, India).

a slightly different perspective. It would seem that Sokdokpa took the occasion of this exchange to address the lacuna left in his reply to Ratna Lingpa concerning how to account for the *Heart Essence*'s eschatological framework in light of his position on the continuity of visionary experience in awakened cognition.

From this correspondence, which survives now as a short text called *Abandoning Objections to* "*Buddhahood Without Meditation:*" *Responses to Lama Gonjo's Questions*, we learn not only more about Sokdokpa's evolving position on this question. We also get the distinct impression that it attracted considerable controversy in some early 17th century Tibetan Old School circles. Garwang Ösal writes addressing Sokdokpa as follows:

> In a conversation I had with Lama [Padma] Gyeltsen, he said in your opinion it is taught that in the Great Perfection, during the exhaustion of reality, luminous appearances are not exhausted. How is that the case? Previous lamas have maintained: "When reality is exhausted, all external luminous appearances vanish, like a coiled-up tent-rope."[34]
> Others have said: "Directly perceived luminous appearances are the chaff of experience, not genuine primordial knowing." Is this right?
> Since you are extremely renowned as a scholar of the Great Perfection, please deliver a credible reply.[35]

Sokdokpa answers Garwang Ösal's challenge as follows:

> Great Perfection practitioners call the fruition the "exhaustion of the intellect," and the "exhaustion of phenomena." The exhaustion of the intellect is as explained in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*:
>
> > The ultimate is not the purview of the intellect;
> > this is because the intellect is relative.[36]

[34] "Coiled-up tent-rope" here renders *ba thag bsdus pa*, in which *ba* seems to be a scribal error or regional variation for *sbra*, "yak-hair tent," discussed above.

[35] *Ma bsgoms sangs rgyas rtsod spong*, 208.2–208.5: *bla ma* [N+*padma*] *rgyal mtshan dang gleng mo byung ba la/ khyed kyi bzhed pa la/ rdzogs chen gyi chos nyid zad pa'i skabs su 'od snang rnams zad pa min gsungs*[N=*gsung bar*] *'dug zer ba ji ltar yin/ bla ma gong ma tsho*[D=*tshod*] *ni/ chos nyid zad pa na/ phyi'i 'od snang thams cad ba thag bsdus pa ltar yal 'gro/ zhes gsungs bda'/ gzhan dag zer ba la/ mngon sum 'od gsal gyi snang ba nyams kyi sbun pa yin/ ye shes mtshan nyid pa min zer ba e bden/ khyed rdzogs chen la mkhas pa'i grags pa shin tu che bar bda' bas/ blo bkal*[D=*bka'*] *chog pa'i lan gcig bskur dgos/ ces gsungs*[N=*gsung*] *pa*[N=*ba*] *la*

[36] Śāntideva (Zhi ba lha), *Byang chub sems pa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*, in *bsTan 'gyur, dpe bsdur ma*, vol. 61, 1017: */don dam blo yi spyod yul min/ /blo ni kun rdzob yin par brjod/*

> Since the intellect is the dimension of delusion, the fruition is called the "exhaustion of delusion."
> The "exhaustion of phenomena" is the "exhaustion of reality." To elaborate, through the exhaustion of the intellect internally, the expansion of its external expression is exhausted. Thus, there is no [further] intensification in the appearance of lights, purelands, awakened bodies, and orbs, and neither are there any concepts of fixating on their mere appearance.
> Once the material body of the four elements is ripened into light, it mingles with awareness, which has been present since the beginning as an awakened body of light. The exhaustion of external perceived objects and the internal perceiving mind brings about a severance of the continuity of delusion. Just as a candle inside a vase shines inside and not out, the primordial knowing of emptiness-bliss is present as unwavering self-illumination, through which one seizes the citadel of *dharmakāya*.
> Thus, its essence is present as awakened bodies. Its nature is present as light. Its compassion is present as light rays. Those luminous appearances do not disappear. This is the time when clinging to light is exhausted. It has been designated "the pureland of the youthful body within a vase."

It is said in the *Tantra of the Union of Sun and Moon*:

> The effulgence of awakened bodies, a coalescence of emptiness and radiance,
> whose essence is the aspect of original purity,
> is, in the manner of a statue, complete with face and hands, in a vase,
> a spontaneous presence abiding in a sphere of light,
> whose compassion radiates in different colors.[37]

Moreover, it is said:

> The natural maṇḍala of the supreme body of primordial knowing,
> is, like a full moon, devoid of complexity.[38]

This citation is identical to what we find in the Comparative Edition *Tengyur*, with the exception of the final *par brjod*, which is replaced in Sokdokpa's citation with *phyir ro*.

[37] This citation is drawn from the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound* (*sGra thal 'gyur*), and not the *Tantra of the Union of Sun and Moon* (*Nyi zla kha sbyor*), as Sokdokpa claims. It appears nearly verbatim in *sGra thal 'gyur*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 126.5–126.6: *ngo bo ka nas dag pa'i cha/ stong gsal 'dus pa sku yi gdangs/ /zhal phyag rdzogs pa bum sku'i tshul/ /lhun grub 'od kyi gong bur gnas/ thugs rje kha dog so sor gsal/* This citation will be discused below in this paper to illustrate the rhetorical strain of presence and fullness in the *Seventeen Tantras*.

[38] This citation – these two lines and the single line citation below – begins the famous "inexpressible confession" drawn from chapter eight of the *De bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi thugs gsang ba'i ye shes don gyi snying po khro bo rdo rje'i rigs kun 'dus rig pa'i mdo rnal'byor grub pa'i rgyud* (Tōh. 831), in *bKa' 'gyur*, *dpe bsdur ma*, *rnying rgyud*

Thus, taking as an example the full moon on the fifteenth day, which cannot grow any further, the intensification of appearances is exhausted during the exhaustion of reality. However, since its nature exists as light, it is also said:

> Yet compassion illuminates equally, like the shining sun.[39]

The intended meaning behind these statements in commentaries by the previous great learned and accomplished ones has been construed by those today with little insight to mean that no luminous appearances manifest at all. They cite "unmanifest, invisible, and not illuminating," and so forth. Yet, what this means is that even though there is no manifestation, appearance, or illumination outwardly, it is not the case that there is no appearance or illumination inwardly.

> It is said in the New School mantra [scriptures] as well:
> Just as when a vase breaks
> and the space [inside] does not,
> so it is that when the body demises,
> intrinsic knowledge does not.[40]

Moreover, it is also said:

(*kha*), vol. 102, 139; in *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* (gTing skyes edition), vol. 12, 158; and in *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* (mTshams brag edition), vol. 15, 518. These lines as they appear in the Comparative Edition *Kangyur* and two *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* editions consulted are as follows – the variant readings recording in brackets are the differences in Sokdokpa's citation: */ye shes sku mchog rang bzhin dkyil 'khor ni/ /zla rgyas bzhin du spros pa mi mnga' yang/ /thugs rje nyi gsal*[*'od*] *'od*[*gsal*] *bzhin snyoms mdzad lha*[*pa*]*/*

[39] This line follows immediately after the prior two in this prayer and in the *tantra* from which it is drawn. See the previous note.

[40] This citation is drawn from chapter three of the *Ṣaṭsāhasrikā Hevajrapiṇḍārthaṭīkā*, a *Kālacakratantra*-inspired commentary on the *Hevajratantra* attributed to the bodhisattva Vajragarbha, and one of three texts that came to constitute the famous "bodhisattva corpus" of *Kālacakratantra* commentarial literature. There it also appears as a citation, but unattributed. It seems this was not from the *Hevajratantra* as we have it now, but rather probably from the putative original *Hevajratantra*, long since lost. The verse appears as follows in the Tibetan *Tengyur* canonical collections (*Kye'i rdo rje bsdus pa'i don gyi rgya cher 'grel pa* (Tōh. 1180), in *bsTan 'gyur*, *dpe bsdur ma*, vol. 1, 809) – the variant readings recorded in brackets are the differences in Sokdokpa's citation: */ji ltar bum pa zhig gyur kyang / /nam mkha' la ni 'jig p*[*zhig*] *pa med/ /de bzhin lus ni zhig gyur kyang / /ye shes la ni 'jig*[*zhig*] *pa med/* For more on this commentary, see Sferra 2009a, Sferra 2009b, and Shendge 2004. For more on the "bodhisattva corpus" (*byang chub sems dpa'i skor*) or the "bodhisattva commentaries" (*byang chub sems dpa'i 'grel rnams*) – consisting of the *Ṣaṭsāhasrikā Hevajrapiṇḍārthaṭīkā* attributed to the bodhisattva Vajragarbha, the *Vimalaprabhā* attributed to the bodhisattva Puṇḍarīka, and the *Laghutantraṭīkā* attributed to the bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi – and its instrumental role in the formation and promulgation of the *Kālacakratantra* tradition, see Sferra 2005.

> Just as stains on copper
> are eliminated through the application of an elixir,
> while the copper's existence is not eliminated,
> but remains stainless,
>
> So too are the stains of mind
> eroded by the application of emptiness,
> while the presence [of mind] itself is not eroded,
> but remains stainless.[41]

Thus, it is taught that appearances do not disappear upon exhaustion. This point is also clarified in the *Tantra of the Unimpeded Great Perfection* with the following:

> The dharma teachings of the lower vehicles
> teach that the *dharmakāya* is empty and selfless.
> Only how to place the mind is taught;
> there is no chance of attaining buddhahood.
>
> If one wants to certainly attain buddhahood,
> the original buddha Samantabhadra
> is present replete with marks and attributes;
> the teacher of immutable light
> is present as a conflagration of luminous primordial knowing.[42]

Although such is the case, it is taught that if this is communicated in front of those with different doctrinal positions, they will give rise to misconceptions and end up in the lower realms. Thus, it is vital to keep it strictly secret. Whatever dharma talk is given, it is appropriate to give it only if it is

[41] This citation comprises verses 132 and 133 of the *Sekoddeśa* (*dBang mdor bstan pa*, Tōh. 361), specifically the translation attributed to Somanātha and Dro Sherap Drakpa ('Bro Shes rab grags pa). In Orofino's (1994: 100) critical edition, these verses appear as follows – the variant readings recorded in brackets are those in Sokdokpa's citation: *ji ltar zangs kyi dri ma ni/ /ro yi sbyor bas* [+*rnam*] *nyams par*[*-par*] *'gyur/ /de yi*[*yis*] *yod nyid nyams pa med/ /dri med nyid kyis*[*kyi*] *yang dag gnas/ de bzhin sems kyi dri ma ni/ / stong nyid sbyor bas rnam nyams 'gyur/ /de yi*[*yis*] *yod*[*ye shes*] *nyid nyams pa*[*-pa*] *med/ /dri med nyid kyis*[*du*] *yang dag gnas/* For more on this important text, which purports to be the only extant portion of the *Kālacakra* root *tantra*, see Orofino 1994. For a complete English translation, see the Vienna Buddhist Translation Studies Group, "Summary of Empowerment," https://read.84000.co/translation/toh361.html.

[42] This citation, which Sokdokpa attributes to a *tantra* called the *Unimpeded Great Perfection* (*rDzogs pa chen po zang thal gyi rgyud*), could not be located. The citation is as follows: *theg pa 'og ma'i chos rnams kyis/ /chos sku stong pa bdag med ston/ /sems kyi bzhag tshul bstan pa tsam/ /sangs rgyas thob pa'i bskal ba med/ /nges par sangs rgyas thob 'dod na/ /thog ma'i sangs rgyas kun tu bzang / /mtshan dang dpe byad ldan par yod/ /ston pa 'od mi 'gyur ba de/ /ye shes 'od kyi phung por yod/*

> something beneficial to the teachings. If it is not, it will be a cause of incinerating the mind-streams of others, so should not be uttered.[43]

Sokdokpa's rich explanation provides much to consider. I will focus on just a few features that are most salient for the present discussion. First, Sokdokpa remains consistent in his overall position. Rather than interpret the term "exhaustion of reality" as the final dissolution of all

[43] *Ma bsgoms sangs rgyas rtsod spong*, 208.5–211.1. The variant readings recorded here are from another version of Sokdokpa's composition (N) and the *sGra thal 'gyur tantra* (GTG) from which Sokdokpa cites: */rdzogs chen pas/ 'bras bu blo zad chos zad zhes zer/ blo zad pa ni/ don dam blo yi spyod yul min/ /blo ni kun rdzob yin phyir ro/ /zhes spyod 'jug tu bshad pa ltar/ blo ni 'khrul pa'i cha yin pas/ 'khrul pa zad pa la zer/ chos zad zhes pa chos nyid zad pa zhes/ de yang nang du 'khrul pa'i blo zad pas/ phyi ru nyams kyi 'phel zad pas/ 'od dang zhing khams sku dang thig le'i snang ba che ru 'gro rgyu med cing/ shar ba tsam du 'dzin pa'i rtog pa yang med/ lus 'byung ba*[N-*ba*] *bzhi gdos bcas 'od du smin nas/ rig pa 'od kyi sku ru ye nas gnas pa de dang 'dres/ phyi bzung ba'i yul dang nang 'dzin pa'i sems zad pas/*[N-/] *'khrul pa rgyun chad/ bum nang gi mar me nang du gsal yang phyir mi gsal ba ltar/ bde stong gi ye shes de rang gsal 'pho 'gyur med par gnas pas chos sku'i btsan sa zin pas/ ngo bo sku ru*[N-*ru*] *bzhugs/ rang bzhin 'od du*[N=*tu*] *bzhugs/ thugs rje zer du bzhugs pa yin/ 'od snang de dag yal 'gro ba ma yin/ 'od du 'dzin pa zad pa'i dus yin/ 'di la gzhon nu bum pa sku'i zhing khams zhes ming du btags pa yin te/ rgyud nyi zla kha sbyor las/ ngo bo ka nas dag pa'i cha/ stong gsal 'dus pa sku yi gdangs*[*or mdangs*]*/ /zhal phyag rdzogs bu*[GTG=*pa*] *bum pa'i sku*[GTG=*bum sku tshul*]*/ /lhun grub 'od kyi gong bur gnas/ thugs rje'i*[GTG=*rje*] *kha dog so sor gsal/ /zhes gsungs/ gzhan yang / ye shes sku mchog rang bzhin dkyil 'khor ni/ /zla rgyas bzhin du spros pa mi mnga' yang / / zhes pas/ tshes bcwo lnga'i zla ba nya gang ba'i*[N=*ba de*] *slar 'phel du med pa dpe ru mdzad nas/ chos nyid zad pa'i dus su snang ba'i 'phel zad kyang/ rang bzhin 'od du*[N=*tu*] *yod pa'i phyir/ thugs rje nyi 'od gsal bzhin snyoms mdzad pa/ /zhes gsungs pa yin no/ /'di dag gi dgongs don sngon gyi mkhas grub chen po rnams kyis dkral ba rnams la/ ding sang gi shes rab chung ba rnams kyis/ 'od snang ci yang mi mngon pa la byas nas/ mi mngon mi snang gsal byed min/ /zhes sogs lung 'dren byed de/ phyi ru mi mngon mi snang mi gsal ba yin kyang/ nang du mi snang mi gsal ba ma yin te*[N=*ste*]*/ sngags gsar mar yang / ji ltar bum pa zhig gyur kyang / /nam mkha' la ni zhig pa med/ /de bzhin lus ni zhig gyur kyang / /ye shes la ni zhig pa med/ /zhes dang / yang / ji ltar zangs kyi dri ma ni/ /ro yi sbyor bas rnam nyams 'gyur/ /de yis yod nyid nyams pa med/ /dri med nyid kyi yang dag gnas/ de bzhin sems kyi dri ma ni/ /stong nyid sbyor bas rnam nyams 'gyur/ /de yis yod nyid nyams pa med/ /dri med nyid du yang dag gnas/ /zhes pas/ zad nas med 'gro bar ma gsungs so/ /'di la rdzogs pa chen po zang thal gyi rgyud du'ang /theg pa 'og ma'i chos rnams kyis/ /chos sku stong pa bdag med ston/ /sems kyi bzhag tshul bstan pa tsam/ /sangs rgyas thob pa'i bskal ba med/ /nges par sangs rgyas thob 'dod na/ /thog ma'i sangs rgyas kun tu bzang / /mtshan dang dpe byad ldan par yod/ /ston pa 'od mi 'gyur ba de/ /ye shes 'od kyi phung por yod/ /zhes pas gsal ba lags/ /de ltar yin mod kyi/ grub mtha' mi gcig pa dag gi drung du brjod na/ de rnams log lta skyes nas ngan song du 'gro bar gsungs pas/ shin tu gsang ba gnad che zhing / chos skas gang byed kyang bstan pa la phan pa zhig 'dug na ni byed par rigs/ de min gzhan rgyud bsregs pa'i rgyur 'dug pas mi smra/*

phenomenal reality into the nature of emptiness, he interprets this stage as the dissolution of dualistic conceptuality, confusion, and fixation on phenomena. This is when the gross materiality of the body transforms into light and merges with the intrinsic light of primordial knowing. At this stage, explains Sokdokpa, the visionary experiences of buddha bodies and their purerealms reveals itself as the very expression of one's own intrinsic primordial knowing, now refined to the fullest extent possible. In the wake of this heightened experience, the luminous manifestations neither intensify, nor dissipate; rather, they stabilize as the enduring presence of this subtlest level of sensible reality.

Second, we can see in his argument that Sokdokpa continues to extend the three-fold rubric of essence, nature, and compassion – usually describing the three modes of primordial awareness's emptiness, radiance, and all-pervasive compassion – to the enduring appearance of luminous buddha bodies, lights, and light rays, at this most refined level of spiritual development. While the body thus dematerializes into the light of primordial awareness, primordial awareness – in its essence, nature, and capacity – manifests in the form of that selfsame radiance. This collapse of mind-body and subject-object dualities entailed in this series of "exhaustions" thus finds expression in an all-encompassing pureland of luminosity, populated only by radiant awakened forms.

Third, we witness Sokdokpa address the issue of how this luminosity of awakening manifests in perception by enlisting the contrast between external and internal dimensions of experience. He argues that the illumination of this "pureland of the youthful body within a vase" expresses itself inwardly rather than outwardly. This explains why it is only adepts who have the capacity to experience themselves and others as luminous bodies and their effulgence, but others do not perceive these radiant displays. According to this formulation, since "internal appearances" remain, it is not as if there are no appearances at all in awakened experience, even if less refined subjectivities are not privy to them "externally." Herein, it would seem, lies Sokdokpa's most full-throated attempt to reconcile his and his lama's position on the continuity of visionary experience in awakened cognition with the eschatological framework of the *Heart Essence* tradition as a whole.

Finally, Sokdokpa enlists his distinction between internal experiences and external expressions to explain why "those today with little insight"

cite the phrase "unmanifest, invisible, and not illuminating" from the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* to wrongly conclude that no luminous appearances manifest at all for awakened cognition. This passage appears immediately after two short citations from Old School *tantra*s – one verse, which will be analyzed below, from the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, the primary scripture among the *Seventeen Tantras*; and the other from a commonly chanted aspiration prayer, drawn from an early-translation *tantra* that lies outside the *Heart Essence* scriptural corpus. Both citations clearly imply an ongoing effulgence of luminosity, and not a vacuity, as one might be compelled to interpret the fragmentary line from the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* in isolation.

It remains unclear, however, who exactly Sokdokpa might have had in mind when criticizing "those today with little insight" for coming to the opposite conclusion based on their interpretation of what appears on the surface to be a fairly straightforward passage from the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*. Furthermore, Sokdokpa never spells out who the "previous great learned and accomplished ones" are, whose commentaries on the intended meaning of this passage his misguided contemporaries have gotten so wrong.

Sokdokpa's critical remarks about the incorrect interpretation of this key passage from the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* serves as a segue for him to launch into how the *tantra*s of New School provenance (i.e., those authoritative for Sakya, Kagyü, Jonang, and Geluk sectarian affiliations) more broadly support his formulation of awakening's ongoing fullness of experience. Notably here, Sokdokpa draws from two *Kālacakratantra*-related texts – the *Sekoddeśa*, which purports to be a section from the long-lost *Kālacakra* root *tantra*; and the *Ṣaṭsāhasrikā Hevajrapiṇḍārthaṭīkā*, a *Kālacakratantra*-inspired commentary on the *Hevajratantra* attributed to the bodhisattva Vajragarbha. That Sokdokpa enlists *Kālacakra*-related scriptural sources to support his position stands to reason given the *Kālacakratantra*'s doctrinal emphasis on intrinsic nondual knowing, and more so, given its analogous completion-stage contemplative practice, known as the six-branch yoga (*sbyor ba yan lag drug*, *ṣaḍaṅga-yoga*), which likewise entails eliciting a sequence of visionary experiences.[44]

[44] For a discussion of the six-branch yoga and its role in eliciting visionary experiences of "empty forms," see Wallace 2001: 203–208.

But the practice of inducing visionary experiences as a technique for realizing nondual cognition is not the only commonality between the *Kālacakra* and *Heart Essence* traditions. Comparisons have also been drawn between their mutual use of light and darkness to elicit these visions and how they integrate this visionary contemplative practice into cosmogonic and subtle-body frameworks (Germano 2007: 71–72; Hatchell 2014). It is important to recall in this connection that the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* had been enlisted early on by Indian *Kālacakratantra* adepts as integral to *Kālacakra* theory and practice.[45] Tibetan *Heart Essence* proponents were clearly aware of these connections as they appealed to the *Kālacakratantra* corpus, including the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* – as evinced here – to defend in the eyes of critics the authenticity and Indian Buddhist pedigree of the *Heart Essence* and their own respective positions about its unique visionary contemplative practice.

Sokdokpa, in his Old School apologia *Thunder of Scripture and Reasoning* composed in 1576, makes a direct comparison between the four visionary stages of direct transcendence practice and the visionary "ten signs" invoked in the *Kālacakratantra* completion-stage practice of the six-branch yoga.[46] He uses the occasion to cite numerous New School tantric works that describe visionary experience – the *Rigyāralitantra* (Tōh. 427), the *Vajrapañjaratantra* (Tōh. 419), the *Caryāmelāpakapradīpa* (Tōh. 1803), the *Guhyasamāja* commentary attributed to the tantric Āryadeva, the *Sekoddeśa* (Tōh. 361), the *Paramādibuddhodghṛta Śrī Kālacakratantra* (Tōh. 362), and the *Yogaṣaḍaṅg*a (Tōh. 1375), attributed to Śabarīśvara – to carefully map the four visionary phases to the visionary experiences discussed in these New School tantric scriptures. Remarkably, unlike Longchenpa, who, we will see below, also makes this comparison to argue that the New School *tantra* visionary experiences are qualitatively different from and inferior to their *Heart Essence* counterparts,

[45] Tribe 2016: 4; 14, n. 13; 38, n. 1; 38, n. 2; 396, and 400.

[46] *Lung rigs 'brug sgra*, 82.1–85.1. The *Kālacakra* visionary experiences of "ten signs" (*rtags bcu*) of progress in the six-branch yoga are listed in the *Sekoddeśa* (Tōh. 361), verse 26, as "smoke, a mirage, a firefly, a lamp, a flame, the moon, the sun, darkness, lightning, and the great drop – this luminous reflection of everything" (Orofino 1994: 62 and 63; Vienna Buddhist Translation Studies Group 2020).

Sokdokpa concludes his exercise by affirming that these two sets of visionary experiences are in fact identical.[47]

We might recall in this connection that Garwang Ösal recites the common notion that experiential signs of meditative progress such as visionary experiences are like chaff that must be discarded in order to arrive at the husk of genuine realization. This position on the dispensability of visionary experiences indeed seems to echo the majority of Old and New School views on the topic.[48] Sokdokpa voices in *Thunder of Scripture of Reasoning*, however, that such visions – for the *Heart Essence* and *Kālacakra* alike – are "the primordial reality, which naturally shines forth from the beginning as the self-effulgence of primordial knowing."[49] In other words, Sokdokpa understands the luminosity of primordial knowing as intrinsic to the nature of reality, and resolutely not something that can be discarded along the path. According to such a perspective, the four visions of direct transcendence signal a progressive deepening of experiential participation with primordial knowing, in the form of light, color, sound, and imagery. As such, these visions function as actual insights into ultimate reality. And the path toward full realization of ultimate reality consists of developing and refining these visionary glimpses until they reach peak vividness and detail.

Sokdokpa's characterization in his reply to Ratna Lingpa of Longchenpa's perspective, and his invocation there and in his reply to Garwang Ösal of earlier and contemporary figures who either contradicted or corroborated his and his lama's conception regarding the continuity of visionary experience, invites the question of who exactly these various references were intended to target and whether Sokdokpa in fact even gets Longchenpa's position correct on this score. To venture some answers to these questions, allow us to consider Longchenpa's position on the issue, before delving into the interpretative possibilities of their common scriptural source, the *Seventeen Tantras*, and how other *Heart Essence* figures have weighed in on the problem.

[47] For detailed comparison between *Heart Essence*, *Kālacakra*, and Bönpo treatments of visionary experience, see Hatchell 2014.

[48] See for example Gyatso 1999 and Martin 1992.

[49] *Lung rigs 'brug sgra*, 85.1–85.2: */ye gdod ma'i chos nyid ye shes kyi rang 'od du ye nas ngang gi gsal ba yin par* […]

## The Fullness of Dissolution in Longchenpa's *Treasury of Words and Meanings*, *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, and Other *Heart Essence* Great Perfection Writings

Sokdokpa's sharply critical portrayal of Longchenpa and others as positing that the transition to awakened cognition entails the dissolution of phenomenal experience and a subsequent perceptual vacuity raises the question of whether Sokdokpa's depiction accurately reflects Longchenpa's position on this issue and how the refinement of Sokdokpa's view presented above might also relate to that of Longchenpa. The discussion that follows attempts to account for Longchenpa's interpretation of this issue through considering his remarks on the topic in his two major *Heart Essence* treatises – the *Treasury of Words and Meanings*, and the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*. As a point of comparison, this section will also touch briefly on some of the *Heart Essence* writings attributed to Longchenpa that are found in his *Heart Essence in Four Parts* (*sNying thig ya bzhi*) collection.

It must be confessed at the outset that this foray into Longchenpa's *Heart Essence* works makes no pretense of being complete; neither does it attempt to trace the development of Longchenpa's thought on this single issue throughout his literary career.[50] Such lies beyond the scope of the present paper. Rather, this analysis of some of Longchenpa's reflections on the fourth and final vision of direct transcendence in his major *Heart Essence* writings is only intended to paint Longchenpa's position in broad stroke as a means to understand how and why Sokdokpa would come to characterize his interpretation of this stage in terms of the disappearance of all visionary experience, rather than its stabilization or continuation, as Sokdokpa argues.

In Longchenpa's discussion of the matter in *Treasury of Words and Meanings*, he starts by glossing the third visionary phase, the "optimization of awareness," before segueing into his reflections on the fourth and final visionary phase.

> Awareness is the manifestation of the awareness of the ground presence, such that it enters the pathway (*lam srol*), thereby appearing as awakened

[50] For helpful considerations concerning the relative chronology of Longchenpa's works, see Germano 1992: 10–38; Aguillère 2007: 140–176; and Wangchuk 2008.

bodies. Based on approaching the exhaustion of the path, the *maṇḍala*s become complete. The optimum is the complete *maṇḍala* of awakened bodies. Reaching it means that it fully appears, such that there is nothing beyond it. Those [appearances] are like the form of a full moon, in that any further increase is exhausted (*yar gyi 'phel zad*), and there is thus nothing of its own nature to be augmented further.

The vision of the exhaustion of reality is like the moon waning from that point [of fullness], in that the awakened bodies vanish, fuse into the orbs, and so forth, until it appears distinctly as its initial phase [of appearance again]…

Just as, when the moon has waned and there is nothing at all left in the empty sky, it may appear as though the appearance of the moon has waned, but it has neither waxed in the first place, nor waned. Likewise, when the appearance of awareness intensifies (*yar 'phel*), it has not grown, and when it diminishes (*mar zad*), it has not shrunk. It's just that the effulgence [of awareness] has naturally dissolved into the expanse, like the analogy of a crystal that has absorbed its light. This is called, "neither filling out nor depleting" (*gang ba med cing bri ba med pa*).

Moreover, since external appearances dissolve into the expanse, the qualities (*chos can*) that are appearances dissolve into their reality (*chos nyid*), and reality is utterly inconceivable and inexpressible – thus it is called the "exhaustion of reality." Based on there being no appearance, it is called "exhaustion," "empty," and "non-existence," terms that transcend convention.[51]

This way also appears in *sūtra*. In the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* it is said:

> The various signs, like seeing lights, lotus-like things, and rainbow-like designs in the sky, lead to the path of non-Buddhist extremists. They also confine one to the range of experience of śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas. When these have been abandoned and disappear, the buddhas

[51] *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1279.4–1281.2: */rig pa ni gzhi gnas kyi rig pa mngon du gyur te lam srol du tshud pas skur snang ba'o/ lam zad du nye ba las dkyil 'khor rdzogs pa rnams so/ /tshad ni sku'i dkyil 'khor rdzogs so/ phebs pa ni de las 'das pa med par rnam par snang ba'o/ de dag ni zla ba gang ba'i rnam pa dang 'dra ste yar gyi 'phel zad pas rang ngo la bcos su med pa'o/ /chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba ni de las zla ba mar 'grib pa ltar sku yal nas thig le la thug pa la sogs dang po'i sa la nges par snang ba ste/…zla ba mar bri nas gnam stong la ci yang med dus zla ba'i snang ba bri bar snang yang dang po las ches song ba dang chung du song ba med pa ltar rig pa'i snang ba yar 'phel dus cher ma song/ mar zad dus chung du ma song ste gdangs dbyings su rang thim la song ba ni shel 'od nang du bsdus pa'i cha tsam ste/ gang ba med cing bri ba med pa zhes bya'o/ /de'ang phyir snang dbyings su thim pas snang ba chos can cho nyid la thim pas chos nyid gang du'ang bsam brjod med pa la chos nyid zad pa zhes bya'o/ / snang ba med pa la ltos nas zad ces bya/ stong zhes bya/ med ces bya/ tha snad las 'das pa'i tshig go/*

> will lift their divine hands from the realms throughout the ten directions and pat you on the head. This is a sign that you will follow [their example].[52]

Based on this passage from *Treasury of Words and Meanings*, it would seem that Longchenpa is insistent that appearances vanish at the culminating level of the exhaustion of reality. Yet, in explaining where the visions vanish to, Longchenpa complicates his account considerably by invoking the striking image of the moon's waxing and waning, enlisting pairs of terms that figure both in common descriptions of the moon's phases and in teachings on the four visionary phases. Longchenpa thus analogizes the "intensification" (*'phel*) and exhaustion (*zad*) of the visionary experiences of direct transcendence to the "waxing" (*yar 'phel*) and "waning" (*mar zad*) of the moon. This lunar imagery, we might recall, is reflected also in Sokdokpa's more mature consideration on the topic voiced in response to Garwang Ösal.

Of particular note here is that Longchenpa's use of lunar imagery and language serves as a felicitous rhetorical strategy to maintain that, despite the seeming growth and diminishment of "awareness" in terms of the manifestation and disappearance of its luminous "effulgence" in the form of visionary experiences, it has in fact never either grown or shrunk from its original nature in the first place, much like the moon and its phases. This maneuver enables Longchenpa to make sense of seemingly paradoxical proclamations: awareness "neither fills out nor depletes," even as its appearances vanish and are no longer present. The image of the crystal and its light, also alluded to above, serves much the same rhetorical function. Longchenpa's reference to the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*'s resolutely negative appraisal of the ultimate value of visionary experiences stands

[52] *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1281.2–1281.5. The citation appears with minor variation in *Lang kar gshegs pa'i theg pa chen po'i mdo*, in *bKa' 'gyur*, *dpe bsdur ma*, vol. 49, 235. I reproduce it here with the variant readings from the *Kangyur* Comparative Edition master text (ostensibly the sDe dge edition) in brackets: */tshul 'di mdo las kyang 'byung/ lang kar gshegs pa las/ 'od dang pad+mo lta bu dang/ /ri mo nam mkha'*[*mkha'i*] *'ja'*[*me*] *'dra mthong/ /mtshan ma sna tshogs 'di*[*de*] *dag ni/ /mu stegs can lam khrid par byed/ /nyan thos dag dang rang rgyal gyi/ /spyod yul du yang*[*'ang*] *ltung*[*lhung*] *byed*[*bar*] *pas*[*byed*]*/ /'di dag thams cad rnam spangs shing/ /snang ba med par gyur pa na/ /de tshe sangs rgyas lha yi phyag/ /phyogs bcu'i*[*thams cad*] *zhing nas phyung*[*byung*] *nas*[*ba*] *ni*[*yis*]*/ /de yi mgo la nyug byas*[*mdzad*] *mdzad*[*de*]*/ /yang dag rjes su 'gro ba'i ltas/*

out as a forceful scriptural support to quell any remaining ambiguity that might remain on precisely where Longchenpa stands on this issue.

However, lest we attempt, based on this rhetoric of negation, to pigeonhole Longchenpa as a nihilist in his appraisal of the dimension of phenomenal experience, he takes precautions to counter related criticisms just on the heels of his previous remarks.

> On this point, some have claimed that empty forms are deluded appearances. While some have claimed that they are the ultimate dimension. However, they are neither. Since they are the natural effulgence of the element, the essence of the Sugata, they are not delusion. But since they are the reflections of awareness's effulgence arising externally, it is untenable for them to be the actual ultimate dimension. This is because, since they are the natural radiance of the essence, the crucial point of needing to exhaust external appearances is that the citadel of awareness must be seized in the essence of the internal expanse once awareness is free of the wind that agitates it. Thus, awareness abides like a crystal ball. First, awareness in the context of the ground is like a crystal existing in its own natural state. [Its] spontaneous presence, abiding in [awareness's] attribute of deep radiance, is then agitated by wind, through which the effulgence of spontaneous presence arises as radiance, just as five lights shine forth [from a crystal] due to the condition of the sun. By dissolving back into the internal expanse, just as the attribute of light vanishes back into the crystal ball when it is without sunlight, awareness, free of wind, returns awareness's effulgence back to the expanse – this is the context of seizing the citadel in the essence.
>
> Moreover, when the wind moves from awareness during the initial internal expanse, and [awareness] arises as its own effulgence, the wind creates the cause for the external appearance of the five elements and the five objects, by which [awareness] naturally appears as the body and locations. Internally, this serves as the vehicle for primary and derivative mental states, through which [awareness] appears in the form of the eight cognitions and the fifty-one mental states, thus following the flow of dualistic karma. Secretly, the agitation of the five lights, the effulgence of primordial knowing, creates the condition for the appearance of the luminosity of the essence, the manifestation of the ground (*gzhi snang*). Thus, it is said, "'wind' accomplishes all actions."
>
> When, through applying the crucial points of body, speech, and mind, all the movements of wind are purified in their own state, the radiant appearances too reach the vanishing point of reality (*chos nyid zad sar thug*) and are liberated into the essence, the *dharmakāya* of original purity. Thus, it is said, "all appearing forms are *nirvāṇa*."
>
> Moreover, since the radiant appearances dissolve into the sphere of *dharmakāya*, it is said, "buddha is awakening."

> Since *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* vanish into the expanse, it is said, "the delusion of good and bad is exhausted."[53]

In the opening paragraph of this passage, Longchenpa provides a counterpoint to what might be otherwise construed as resolutely negative portrayal of visionary experience by calling it the "natural effulgence of the element, the essence of the Sugata," or, in other words, the naturally luminous expression of buddhanature itself. This means, by Longchenpa's account, that the visions are neither delusional, nor the actual ultimate nature, but *expressions* of the ultimate nature, which must be reabsorbed into their source – buddhanature qua intrinsic awareness – through rendering intrinsic awareness "free of wind." In this way, Longchenpa fuses the cosmogonic and eschatological framework of the original manifestation and final dissolution of phenomenal reality with the epistemological transition of the contemplative practitioner's passage from delusion to awakening. Perceptual content, it would seem for Longchenpa, goes the way of the manifest universe itself, such that awakening signals its receding back into the original ground from which it first emerged, prior

[53] *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1281.5–1284.1: */de la kha cig stong gzugs 'khrul snang du 'dod pa dang/ kha cig don dam du 'dod pa gnyis ka ma yin te/ khams bde gshegs snying po'i rang gdangs yin pas ma 'khrul la/ rig gdangs phyir shar gyi gzugs brnyan yin pas don dam dngos su mi 'thad de/ snying po'i rang gdangs yin pas phyir snang zad dgos pa'i gnad ni rig pa g.yo byed kyi rlung dang bral nas ngo bo nang dbyings su btsan sa zin dgos pa'i phyir ro/ /des don la rig pa shel gong ltar gnas te/ dang po gzhi dus kyi rig pa shel rang ngo na yod pa ltar lhun grub gting gsal gyi char gnas pa de rlung gis g.yos pas lhun grub kyi gdangs phyir gsal du shar ba nyi ma'i rkyen gyis 'od lnga shar ba lta bu las slar nang dbyings su thim pas nyi zer med pas 'od shel gong du yal b altar rig pa rlung dang bral ba gdangs rig pa dbyings su log ste ngo bo la btsan sa zin pa'i dus so/ /de'ang nang dbyings dang po'i rig pa las rlung g.yos te rang gdangs su shar dus sur lung des phyir 'byung lnga yul lngar snang ba'i rgyu byas pas lus dang yul du rang snang/ nang du sems dang sems byung gi rta byas pas rnam shes brgyad dang sems byung lnga bcu rtsa gcig gi rnam par shar te gzung 'dzin las kyi kha brgyud/ gsang bar 'od lnga ye shes kyi gdangs bskyod pas gzhi snang snying po'i 'od gsal snang ba'i rkyen byas pa'i phyir na/ rlung zhes bya ba las kun byed/ /ces bya'o/ /de la lus ngag gi gnad gcun pas rlung rang sar dag nas phyi byung yul 'khrul snang gi cha dang/ nang 'khrul rtog sems sems byung rang 'gags te/ gsang ba 'od gsal gyi snang ba gong du 'phel bas rlung gi g.yo ba thams cad dag dus 'od gsal gyi snang ba yang chos nyid zad sar thug nas ngo bo ka dag gi chos skur grol te/ gzugs snang thams cad mya ngan 'das pa zhes bya'o/ /de'ang 'od gsal gyi snang ba rnams chos sku'i klong du thim pas sangs rgyas mya ngan 'das pa zhes bya ste/ 'khor 'das dbyings su nub pas bzang ngan gyi 'khrul pa zad pa zhes bya'o/*

to the bifurcation of the original ground into *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and the worlds with their inhabitants.

Also striking in this opening paragraph is Longchenpa's use of the phrase "empty forms" (*stong gzugs*) to describe the visionary experiences of direct transcendence. This phrase, which Longchenpa enlists throughout the *Treasury of Words and Meanings* in this sense, is also an oblique reference to the empty forms of the *Kālacakratantra*, specifically the visionary experiences elicited in its six-branch yoga completion-stage practice. Elsewhere in this treatise, Longchenpa clarifies his use of "empty forms" by directly comparing the *Kālacakra* completion-stage visions with their *Heart Essence* counterparts.[54] For Longchenpa, the visions elicited through the six-branch yoga are only "cognitive experiences" (*shes nyams*), characterized by "intensification and decline" (*'phel 'grib*), "instability" (*mi brtan pa*), and "change" (*'gyur ba*).[55] Whereas the "experiences" of direct transcendence are "visionary/luminous experiences" (*snang nyams*) proper, which "intensify further, in that they expand exponentially" (*gong 'phel ni rgya je cher song ba*).[56] Longchenpa is uncharacteristically terse on this point. Rather than explicate further his view on the topic he elects instead to buttress his comparison with a brief citation from the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, which invokes the image of the moon: "[Visions] intensify like the waxing of an autumn moon. For each vision there is an experience."[57] More to the point, Longchenpa's insistence on the final disappearance of the visionary experiences of direct transcendence takes some of the steam out of his effort to sharply distinguish between the "empty forms" of direct transcendence and the "empty forms" of the six-branch yoga.

As discussed above when considering Sokdokpa's analogous comparison, the status of the empty forms of the *Kālacakra*'s completion-stage practice, and how they relate to the visions of direct transcendence, continued to be a point of contention among Tibetan scholars long after Longchenpa. This is particularly so because lamas like Garwang Ösal's

[54] *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1264–1265.

[55] *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1264.

[56] *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1264.

[57] *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1264.5. This citation appears in *sGra thal 'gyur*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 161.2; I record it here as it appears in Longchenpa's citation, with the variant readings recorded in brackets: /*'phel ston zla ba yar ngo bzhin*/ /*snang ba de la nyams re'o*[*'ong*]/

critical associates discussed above construed empty forms resolutely as "signs" that appear on the path, which must subside to make way for genuine realization to dawn, and resolutely not pristine expressions of buddhanature, as Longchenpa, Sokdokpa, and other Old School scholars would have it. Indeed, here it is clear that in calling the visions of direct transcendence "empty forms" Longchenpa was not intending to relegate the visions to the ephemeral chaff of experience. Rather, his invocation of this phrase, which would have been immediately recognizable to most Old and New School scholars, may have been a way to convey this category of experience to a wider audience than *Heart Essence* practitioners alone, while at the same time lauding the "empty forms" of *Heart Practice* as more exalted than those invoked in the latest and greatest of New School later-translation *tantra*s. Notably, Longchenpa's appraisal of how "empty forms" compare with the visionary experiences of direct transcendence contrasts strikingly with that of Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyeltsen, who, as discussed above, presents them as absolutely identical.

Returning to the passage translated above, Longchenpa also extends the crystal imagery introduced elsewhere to explain the subtle relationship between awareness and its effulgence. More pointedly, this image segues into a coherent description of how the movement of wind in the subtle body operates in tandem with awareness, driving through its movement awareness's manifestation – it's "effulgence" – into luminous buddha bodies and their purelands. What's more, visionary experiences, by Longchenpa's estimation, are only the subtlest "secret" corollary of the manifestations of the physical body and location, on the external level, and mental events and their cognitive apparatus, on the internal level – all of which are stimulated into manifestation through the movement of internal wind and its agitation of intrinsic awareness. It is only with the natural purification of wind, Longchenpa insists, elicited through applying the physical, vocal, and mental crucial points of contemplative practice, that visionary appearances dissolve and the fruition of final awakening is attained.

On the heels of this passage, Longchenpa cites *The Tantra of Unimpeded Sound* to buttress his point:

> This appearance of the exhaustion of reality
> is when, once experiential appearances have emptied out,
> the body vanishes, and the sensory objects also vanish.

> Free from the deluded assemblage of thoughts,
> there is an absence of words as the basis of expression.[58]

Longchenpa goes on to venture his interpretation of this verse:

> Appearance gradually dissolves and is exhausted, reaching its initial phase [again]. This is evident in the formation and collapse of the external environment, and in the growth and decline of the lifespan of beings, its internal inhabitants. This is because if those were not exhausted, one would not be liberated from the three realms.
> Thus, through the exhaustion of the world of the external environment, there is no basis, making for the crucial point of there being no point of regression. Moreover, through the exhaustion of beings, its inhabitants, the continuity of births is severed, such that awareness itself is free of death. Therefore, appearance is devoid of any essence whatsoever, such that it is difficult to express as being "like this" or "not like that." It is thereby called "exhaustion of reality" – the ultimate fruition.[59]

Longchenpa punctuates his considerations on this point by offering a hermeneutic twist on the phrase "exhaustion of reality (*chos nyid*)" to gloss it instead as the "exhaustion of phenomena (*chos*)."

> Since, at this time, there is no perception of any phenomena whatsoever, it is called the exhaustion of phenomena.[60]

Longchenpa then goes into a brief presentation of two ways in which exhaustion can take place (*zad lugs gnyis*): there is a gradual mode of exhaustion, in which one progresses through the four visions until their culmination;

[58] *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1284.3–1284.4. This verse appears in *sGra thal 'gyur*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 194.1–194.2, with a few minor variations. I record it here as it appears in Longchenpa's text and record variant readings from the *tantra* in brackets: */chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba ni/ /nyams kyi snang ba stongs nas ni/ /lus zad dbang po'i yul yang*[*kyang*] *zad/ /rtog tshogs 'khrul pa las*[*rang*] *grol nas//brjod gzhi'i tshig dang dral ba'o/*

[59] *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1284.5–1285.3: *snang ba rim gyis thim zhing zad nas dang po'i sa la thug pa ni/ dang po ni phyi snod kyi chags lugs zhig pa dang / nang bcud kyi tshe'i tshad yar skye ba dang mar 'grib pa zad pa'i rtags so/ /de dag ma zad na bdag khams gsum las mi grol bas so/ /de ltar phyi snod kyi 'jig rten zad pas brten pa'i sa med bzlog pa'i gnas med pa'i gnad kyang bcud kyi sems can zad pas skye ba rgyun chad de rig pa 'chi ba dang bral ba'o/ /des na snang ba ci'i ngo bor yang grub pa med de/ 'di yin 'di min zhes brjod par dka' bas chos nyid zad pa zhes bya ste don gyi 'bras bu'o/*

[60] *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1286.1: */'di dus na chos tsam du yang dmigs pa med pas chos zad pa zhes bya'o/*

and there is an instantaneous mode of exhaustion, for "superior minds of a simultaneous bent" (*blo mchog cig car ba*), in which one sees reality's direct perception, the first vision, and through becoming familiar with it alone, reaches exhaustion without having to experience the second and third visions of heightened experience and optimization.[61]

While these observations about Longchenpa's presentation of the exhaustion of reality only scratch the surface of his extensive treatment of the topic in the *Treasury of Words and Meanings*, they suffice to show that in this masterpiece of Great Perfection theory and practice he maintained that the fourth visionary stage of direct transcendence signals the dissolution of all appearances into the expanse of emptiness as the manifestations of buddhanature, the perceptual basis of visionary practice, recede back into their primeval source. Nonetheless, however, his precise position on what this dissolution might entail for awakened cognition is nuanced considerably by the return to potentiality this entails, which works with Longchenpa's image of the waxing and waning of the moon to imply the ongoing dynamism of manifest awareness, despite its apparent movement of radiation and reabsorption.

In the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, which stands out alongside the *Treasury of Words and Meanings* as Longchenpa's other major *Heart Essence* Great Perfection work, Longchenpa gives a slightly more schematic treatment of the topic. In chapter eighteen of this text, Longchenpa offers this different explanation:

> Even though one may have optimized the appearance of awareness, if it does not transform into something else, it would be no different from claiming the three awakened bodies to be the fruition, in that it would be no different from the ordinary hopes that the ultimate fruition is the phenomena of appearing objects and characteristics. Based on this, experiences and appearances dissolve into the ground, meaning that fixation on subtle and course appearances disappears, and one partakes of the originally pure exhaustion of phenomena, through which the appearance of the exhaustion of reality emerges.[62]

[61] *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1286.2–1286.3.

[62] *Theg mchog mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 6, 1452.1–1452.3: */rig pa'i snang ba tshad la phebs kyang de las gzhan du mi 'gyur na sku gsum 'bras bur 'dod pa dang khyad med la/ dngos snang mtshan ma'i chos la don gyi 'bras bu re ba thun mong ba rnams dang khyad med las/ snang nyams gzhi la thim ste/ phra rags kyi snang 'dzin nub nas/ kha dag chos zad la spyod pas chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba byung ba'o/*

Longchenpa thus frames the dissolution of visionary experiences in terms of the mandate to avoid, at all costs, fixation on phenomenal attributes as the ultimate fruition, no matter how refined such appearances might be. And yet, even as he qualifies this visionary stage as the disappearance of fixation on phenomena, he nonetheless interprets it to also signal the disappearance of visionary experience itself.

In the "brief teaching on the mode of exhaustion" (*zad lugs mdor bstan pa*) that appears later in this chapter, many of the same points he made in the *Treasury of Words and Meanings* are reiterated with greater clarity and elaboration. He states, for example:

> From the full moon-like appearance of optimization previously, the natural effulgence [of awareness] dissolves into the expanse. The manner in which it does so is as follows: just as a moon wanes from that point [of fullness], the awakened bodies vanish, fuse into the orbs, and so forth, until it distinctly appears as the initial phase [of appearance].
> On that point, the purification process of the four visions can be sequentially glossed in terms of the stages of how the environment and its contents form, remain, perish, and become vacuous. For it is also like the exhaustion of development in [the process] of birth, old-age, sickness and death; and it is evident in how the external environment forms and collapses; as well is in the growth of the lifespan of beings who are its internal inhabitants, and in their gradual decline and exhaustion. This is because if those were not exhausted, one would not be liberated from the three realms.[63]

Here Longchenpa not only extends the analogy of planetary formation and dissolution, and the human life-cycle. He also repeats, in a slightly clearer form, the image of the moon's cycles of waxing and waning. Longchenpa continues in the same vein to repeat in a slightly more elaborate form many of the same points he made in the analogous passages from the *Treasury of Words and Meanings*.[64]

[63] *Theg mchog mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 6, 1483.5–1484.4: */sngar tshad phebs zla ba nya ba lta bu'i snang ba las/ rang gdangs dbyings su thim pa'i tshul ni/ de las zla ba mar 'bri ba ltar/ yang sku de yal nas thig le la thug pa sogs pa dang po'i sa la nges par snang ba'o/ /de ni snod bcud chags gnas 'jig stongs bzhi'i rim pas snang ba bzhi'i dag tshul la go rim kyis sbyar te/ skye rgas na 'chi bzhi'i 'phel zad pa dang yang mtshungs shing/ phyi snod kyi chags lugs zhig pa dang / nang bcud kyi sems can gyi tshe'i tshad yang skye ba dang / mar 'grib pa zad pa'i rtags so/ /de dag ma zad na bdag khams gsum las mi grol bas so/*

[64] The passage continues as follows in *Theg mchog mdzod*, *mDzod bdun*, vol. 6, 1484.4–1485.2: */de ltar phyi snod kyi 'jig rten zad pas/ rten sa med pas/ ldog pa'i sa med*

A little later in chapter eighteen, Longchenpa schematically treats the "essence," "etymology," "nature," "reality," and "junctures" of each of the four visionary phases in turn. When he reaches his discussion of the "essence" of the exhaustion of reality, he offers the following remarks, which clarify his view of what dissolves at this stage and what the state of awakened actually looks like:

> The essence of the exhaustion of reality is as follows:
> The external appearance of the five lights, along with the awakened bodies, is exhausted. Internal physicality, along with the assemblage of thoughts, is exhausted. The objects of experiential appearance are exhausted, such that awareness settles in the state of the space-like appearance of original purity.[65]

The "appearance" of the exhaustion of reality is, by Longchenpa's account here, "space-like." In other words, it is the "appearance" of no appearance whatsoever – utter vacuity. Longchenpa follows this discussion by reiterating the same verse from the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound* that he uses in the *Treasury of Sounds and Words*, as presented above.[66]

This verse provides Longchenpa with a segue into his treatment of the "etymology" of the phrase "exhaustion of reality" (*chos nyid zad pa*):

> [Its] etymology is as follows: "phenomena" (*chos*) means the phenomena of the assemblage of body, speech, and mind, together with their afflictions. "Essence" (*nyid*) is the luminous appearances of the path that purifies them, along with the aspect of meditating on radiance. Whereas "exhaustion" (*zad pa*) means vacuity, in that mental meditation, together with its

*pa'i gnad/ nang bcud kyi sems can zad pas rkye rgyun chad pas/ da rig pa nyid 'chi ba dang bral ba'o/ /de nas snang ba ci'i ngo bor yang grub pa med de/ 'di yin 'di min gyis brjod par dka' bas/ chos nyid zad pa zhes bya ste don gyi 'bras bu'o/*

[65] *Theg mchog mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 6, 1487.1–1487.2: *chos nyid zad pa'i ngo bo ni/ phyi 'od lnga'i snang ba sku dang bcas pa zad/ nang rdos bcas rtog tshogs dang bcas pa zad/ nyams snang gi yul zad de/ ka dag gi snang ba nam mkha' lta bu'i ngang la rig pa gnas pa ste/*

[66] *Theg mchog mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 6, 1487.2–1487.4: The appearance of the exhaustion of reality / is when, once experiential appearances have emptied out, / the body vanishes, the sensory objects also vanish, / and, free from the deluded assemblage of thoughts, / there is an absence of words as the basis of expression (*chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba 'di/ /nyams kyi snang ba stongs nas ni/ /lus zad dbang po'i yul yang zad/ /rtog tshogs 'khrul pa las grol nas//brjod gzhi'i tshig dang dral ba'o/*).

> appearing objects, naturally recede and are no longer present; i.e., "they are not perceived."[67]

Notable in this passage is that visionary experiences appear to be relegated to the status of the "appearing objects" of "mental meditation." This seems on the surface at least to be a far cry from the natural effulgence of intrinsic buddhanature that we witnessed in the *Treasury of Words and Meanings*. Taken as a whole, however, Longchenpa's remarks in the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle* are quite similar to analogous passages in the *Treasury of Words and Meanings* in their shared emphasis on a specifically Buddhist cosmogonic and eschatological vision of the coiling-up of manifest phenomena back into its original, primordially latent potentiality. Longchenpa, in this way, relates the contemplative path of visionary experience to the cyclical formation, perdurance, decay, and vacuity of the universe, and to the cyclical birth, growth, decay, and death of beings, in addition to the waxing and waning of the moon. He thereby suggests a correspondence of cosmic and contemplative frameworks, which seemingly leaves little room for the perceptual continuity of visionary experience in awakened cognition, even as he acknowledges the ontological continuity of awakened manifestation.

Despite the many nuances throughout these two major *Heart Essence* treatises attributed to Longchenpa, there is nonetheless a striking consistency of interpretation concerning what the exhaustion of reality entails. When comparing these formulations to analogous considerations in some of the writings attributed to Longchenpa from his *Heart Essence in Four Parts* collection, we find a similar insistence that visionary experiences dissolve at the fourth stage, but voiced in different images, and sometimes with significant nuances that similarly complicate a straightforward characterization of Longchenpa's view on the topic.

For instance, in the *Sun, Moon, and Planets: A Background Text on Direct Transcendence*, from the *Quintessence of the Guru* (*Bla ma yang tig*), in the *Heart Essence in Four Parts* (*sNying thig ya bzhi*) collection,

[67] *Theg mchog mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 6, 1487.4–1487.5: *nges tshig ni/ chos zhes pa lus ngag sems kyi tshogs pa'i chos nyon mongs dang bcas pa yin la/ nyid ni de sbyong byed lam gyi snang ba 'od gsal bsgom pa'i cha dang bcas pa ste/ zad pa ni stongs pa ste/ blo'i sgom pa yul snang dang bcas pa rang log nas med la/ mi dmigs pa zhes bya ste/*

Longchenpa articulates what amounts to the same position using an entirely different set of images:

> Through the dissolution of the gateway of impure *saṃsāra* into the gateway of pure primordial knowing, it coalesces into a single unitary drop, like the coiled-up tent-rope. Through the dissolution of the gateway of pure primordial knowing into the essence, its own site is seized in the site of originally pure reality, like a glacier clutched by a lion. The appearances that arise in that way, moreover, are primordially present in the manifestation of the ground (*gzhi snang*), but their external appearance dissolves internally in the state of the primordial expanse.[68]

Perhaps most striking in this passage regarding the final presence or absence of appearance is the image of a coiled-up tent-rope. As discussed above, Sokdokpa and his interlocutors seize precisely on this image, drawn from the *Tantra of Self-Arisen Awareness*, as a key point of departure for construing, or misconstruing, as the case may be, the exhaustion of reality as the vanishing point of visionary appearance. Importantly, although this image might give the impression that the luminous visions subside, as Sokdokpa's strawmen take it, Longchenpa adds considerably more nuance by casting the rope-coil trope as the latent originary state of manifest radiant appearance, which is ever present in the ground as the "ground's manifestation" even when its "external appearance" seems to have dissolved. In this Longchenpa is quite clear that he in no way intends to relegate the appearances of direct transcendence to the labile domain of typical meditative experiences, even as he refuses to grant them a stable and enduring status in awakened awareness. On this point, Sokdokpa's characterization of Longchenpa appears skewed.

Moreover, the *Golden Garland*: *A Precious Instruction Manual*, attributed to Longchenpa and found in the *Quintessence of the Ḍākinī* (*mKha' 'gro yang tig*), adds still more complexity to this position by remarking that although phenomenal appearances subside, so does the mind that

[68] *Thod rgal gyi rgyab yig nyi zla gza' skar*, in *sNying thig ya bzhi*, vol. 2, 15.3–15.5: *ma dag pa 'khor ba'i sgo dag pa ye shes kyi sgo la thim pas sbra'i chon thag bsdus pa ltar thig le nyag gcig la 'dus/ dag pa ye shes kyi sgo ngo bo la thim pas/ seng ges gangs zin pa ltar chos nyid ka dag gi sa la rang sa zin pa'o/ /de ltar shar ba'i snang ba yang gzhi snang rang la ye yod yin la/ phyi'i snang ba nang du dbyings gdod ma'i ngang du thim pa yin no/*

fixates on either appearance or disappearance. This formulation, moreover, allows that the fingers can remain, but nothing more:

> The vision of the exhaustion of reality is that the external heightening of experiences and appearances is exhausted. The internal illusory body is exhausted. And all words and delusion self-exhaust, such that the mentality that clings to appearance and disappearance is exhausted, and then only the fingers appear in light, but one is free of any conception of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* – appearances are utterly non-existent in essence.[69]

Finally, in a similar vein, we can find in the *Great Aural Lineage*: *The Directly Self-Appearing Definitive Meaning*, found in the *Quintessence of the Guru* (*Bla ma yang tig*) in Longchenpa's *Heart Essence in Four Parts* collection, the following passage, which invites comparison with Sokdokpa's more mature formulation outlined above:

> The teaching on the manner of liberation at the fruition is as follows: the superior [way] is in this lifetime, second best is in the intermediate state [between death and rebirth], and the worst [way] is in another lifetime. But whenever one is liberated, luminosity, or the appearances of awakened bodies and modes of primordial knowledge, shine forth externally, then they dissolve into the state of primordial reality, such that they shine forth internally, remaining as the primordial knowing of omniscience, the three awakened bodies, and the five-fold primordial knowing. Thus, although the awakened bodies and purelands of complete liberation are **invisible, unmanifest, and do not illuminate** externally, they are free of transition and change internally, and thus forever remain as the sole sovereign.[70]

Considering this passage in light of Sokdokpa's position brings several notable features to the fore. Most remarkable is that Longchenpa here

[69] *Khrid yig rin po che gser gyi phreng ba*, in *sNying thig ya bzhi*, vol. 7, 368.4–368.6: *chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba ni/ phyi nyams snang gi 'phel zad/ nang sgyu lus kyi chos zad/ gsang bar rtog tshogs kyi sems zad/ tshig dang 'khrul pa thams cad zang zad de/ snang ba dang mi snang du 'dzin pa'i blo zad nas/ 'od kyi nang nas sor mo tsam snang ba las 'khor'das kyi 'dus shes bral/ snang ba ci'i ngo bor yang ma grub po/*

[70] *sNyan brgyud chen mo nges don mngon sum rang snang*, in *sNying thig ya bzhi*, vol. 2, 409.4–410.1: *'bras bu'i grol tshul bstan pa ni/ rab tshe 'di/ 'bring bar do/ tha ma skye ba gzhan de gang du grol yang 'od gsal lam sku dang ye shes kyi snang ba phyir gsal te de dag chos nyid gdod ma'i ngang du thim pas/ nang gsal thams cad mkhyen pa'i ye shes sku gsum ye shes lnga ldan du bzhugs pas/ rnam par grol ba'i sku dang zhing khams mi snang mi sngon mi gsal yang / nang du pho 'gyur med pas rtag par khyab bdag gcig pur bzhugs pa ni/*

parses internal and external radiance, which entails an interpretation of the line "invisible, unmanifest, and do not illuminate" from the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*, to allow for a continuation of visionary experience internally, but not externally. Recall that this maneuver – the citation and the interpretation – is nearly identical to what Sokdokpa offers on the issue in his reply to Garwang Ösal outlined above. Moreover, Longchenpa buttresses the passage presented here by citing immediately thereafter a longer passage from the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* which includes this line and overlaps with the longer selection that Sokdokpa cites in his reply to Ratna Lingpa's questions.[71] Both Longchenpa and Sokdokpa would thus seem to be in agreement that the awakened bodies and purelands of visionary experience "forever remain" "free of transition and change internally," even as they are "'invisible, unmanifest, and do not illuminate' externally." What this implies for the perceptual capacities of awakened cognition, however, remains an open question.

Of course much more could be said about Longchenpa's position on the exhaustion of reality. Indeed, variations on this theme are scattered throughout his voluminous corpus of writings. However, this sampling is perhaps sufficient to confirm the general understanding that for Longchenpa, the culminating experience of awakening entails the dissolution of all phenomenal experience into the expanse of emptiness. However, notable in Longchenpa's interpretation, particularly as voiced in the *Treasury of Words and Meanings*, is that the final dissolution of the visions of direct transcendence entails that the visions are neither directly equivalent to the ultimate, nor mere delusion. Even while, Longchenpa argues, they are "empty forms," comparable to those invoked in *Kālacakra* completion-stage practice, and must therefore finally be let go into the expanse of emptiness, they are nonetheless also superior to *Kālacakra* visions as "pure" expressions of the "effulgence of awareness," intrinsic to the mind-body complex of beings, and rooted in primordial knowing.

Furthermore, on several occasions Longchenpa voices the notion that it is clinging and fixation to appearance, rather than appearance itself,

[71] *sNyan brgyud chen mo nges don mngon sum rang snang*, in *sNying thig ya bzhi*, vol. 2, 410.2: */mi mngon mi snang gsal byed min/ /mi 'gyur kun 'gro khyab pa po/*

that dissolves at this stage. Thus, while Longchenpa seems resolute that the cognition of final awakening is space-like after all appearances dissolve back into the expanse, he complicates this formulation considerably at every turn by invoking the images of the waxing and waning of the moon, by correlating the contemplative path to the cyclical formation and dissolution of worlds and beings, and by suggesting that it is the intellectual seizing on either appearance or disappearance that dissolves; he also allows for the fingers, now luminous, to still appear to the fully awakened, thus ensuring that they can retain some contact with the world, however effervescent and translucent.

To thus sum up Longchenpa's position on this topic as articulated in several of his most comprehensive treatments of the visionary practice of direct transcendence: the visionary experiences are indivisible from the primordial ground as the radiant attribute of primordial knowing – the ground presencing. The visions are the self-manifestation (*rang snang*) of this basic latent radiance, purposely invoked and then allowed to naturally develop in contemplative practice for the sake of realizing the nondual reality of intrinsic awareness – the path presencing. With the full realization of this reality in complete awakening, the visions return to their latent state and awakened awareness becomes "pristine," purified of manifest content, even as the radiant aspect of awareness remains, intrinsically indivisible from its empty aspect, the pure expanse of space. Here the cosmogonic and eschatology framework of the *Heart Essence* merges with its visionary path of contemplative practice. But what picture this implies for the perceptual experience of the contemplative practitioner as it transitions into awakened cognition nonetheless still remains somewhat opaque. Resolution of this seeming paradox – that radiance dissolves in a buddha's experience, yet forever remains inseparable from innate awareness, the full reality of which epitomizes a buddha's experience – is gestured toward in Longchenpa's acknowledgements that it is the dualistic mind, which would fixate on either appearance or disappearance, presence or absence, or any other dyad, which vanishes at the exhaustion of reality, rather than appearance, per se.

It is only when considering Longchenpa's rich description of the awakened fruitional dynamics that follows in the wake of this transitional reabsorption of visionary experience at the culmination of the contemplative

path that we can observe how overwhelmingly positive Longchenpa's portrayal of awakening in fact was. In his *Treasury of Words and Meanings*, for instance, he opens his depiction of the fruition with the following remark:

> At the time in which intrinsic awareness is free of all its adventitious defilements, the *dharmakāya* of the pristine nature manifests. Having thus fully awakened in the expanse in which the awakened forms and modes of primordial knowing are beyond merging and separation, a lamp is arrayed in the world extending throughout the reaches of space, such that without wavering from the *dharmakāya*, the *saṃbhogakāya*s and *nirmāṇakāya*s, along with their activity, spontaneously accomplish the two-fold benefit [of self and others] – this is this [path's] final fruition.[72]

This passage is followed by pages of elaborate description of the diverse modes of knowing and embodiment that spontaneously flow from this state to bring untold benefit to beings.[73] Taken as a whole, the reabsorption of all the awakened forms and modes of primordial knowing into the youthful body within a vase during the culmination of the fourth vision, followed immediately by the re-emanation of awakened forms and modes of primordial knowing at the subsequent moment of complete awakening, paints the image of an undulating dynamism, in which pristine forms of knowing and embodiment rhythmically ebb and flow between pregnant latency and manifest effulgence. This picture also makes crystal clear that for Longchenpa the state of awakening was anything but a vacuity, as Sokdokpa's caricature seems to imply, but only a contemplative return to the original ground as a stage from which to spontaneously project infinite forms of embodiment and knowledge for the welfare of others.

Longchenpa's nuanced interpretation of this issue might reflect his attempt to venture a systematic interpretation of the various rhetorical strains on this theme in the *Seventeen Tantras* themselves, the ostensive scriptural source of the *Heart Essence* tradition as whole. With Sokdokpa's

[72] *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1497.1–1497.4: *gang du rig pa glo bur gyi dri ma mtha' dag dang bral dus rang bzhin rnam dag gi chos sku mngon du gyur te/ sku dang ye shes 'du 'bral med pa'i dbyings su mngon par byang chub nas phyogs mtha' gtugs pa'i 'jig rten du sgron ma rnam par bkod de chos kyi sku las ma g.yos bzhin du longs spyod rdzogs pa dang sprul pa'i sku 'phrin las dang bcas pas don gnyis lhun gyis grub par mdzad pa ni 'di'i mthar thug gi 'bras bu'o/*

[73] *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1497.4–1538.5.

and Longchenpa's distinct but overlapping interpretations as background, allow us to turn our attention next to the *Seventeen Tantras* to ask how the different positions charted thus far square with this fundamental *Heart Essence* scriptural source.

## The Issue of Visionary Experience's Culminating Phase in the *Seventeen Tantras*

The points of view outlined above about what the exhaustion of reality looks like for the emergent awakened one – a colorful and luminous mandalic pureland, a vacuous emptiness, or something else altogether – hinge, at least rhetorically, on divergent interpretations of key terms and verses in the *Seventeen Tantras*. The interpretive divergence witnessed in the later *Heart Essence* tradition thus raises the question of whether the *Seventeen Tantras* themselves might emphasize one perspective over another, or are sufficiently ambiguous to draw two, or perhaps more different conclusions.

A preliminary review of where the *Seventeen Tantras* stand on this issue suggests that there is no real consensus. Rather, at least three basic viewpoints surface:

(1) Appearances are inexhaustible, as they are primordially in union with emptiness at the level of the ground, path, and fruition.
(2) Appearances disappear into the expanse of emptiness at the level of ultimate awakened cognition.
(3) Ultimate awakened cognition is beyond both appearance and disappearance.

That at least three different positions are derivable from the *Seventeen Tantras* can be attributed in large part to the juxtaposition throughout of two polarized sets of terms. On the one hand, we find negative statements emphasizing "dissolution" (*thim*), "exhaustion" (*zad*), "decrease" (*'grib*), "diminishment" (*'bri*), "vacuity/emptiness" (*stong*), and the like. While on the other hand, we find positive statements that emphasize "appearing" (*snang*), "arising" (*'char*), "increase" (*'phel*), "filling" (*gang*), "radiating" (*'phro*), and other such terms. The *Seventeen Tantras* additionally contain a crucial third strain of terminology. This third type emphasizes the "absence of increase and decrease," the "absence of confluence and separation," and other similar expressions of the nonduality of these sets of polarized pairings.

When we pan out to consider the *Heart Essence* as a whole, we can recall that this articulation of two opposing terms, reconciled in a third term, is a prominent feature throughout this tradition. On one pole we find space, expanse, original purity, emptiness, simplicity, singularity, and so on. Whereas on the other pole is awareness, spontaneous presence, appearance/illumination/vision, elaboration, multiplicity, and the like. Insistence on their ultimate nonduality or indivisibility, a union that often figures a third term, such as all-pervasive compassion, for instance, in the case of the union of emptiness and radiance, is a consistent theme throughout the *Heart Essence* literature.

The terminology around the visionary experiences of direct transcendence follows a similar pattern with its undulating rhetoric of presence, absence, and reconciliation. This structure is reflected foremost in the key term of this contemplative tradition: *nangwa*. As outlined above, the Tibetan word *nangwa* (*snang ba*) has a wide semantic range that pivots between subjective and objective poles, partaking of phenomenological, photic, and ontological valences. The peculiar multivalence of this term is enlisted in *Heart Essence* theory to thread together its cosmogonic/eschatological framework of the initial emergence and final reabsorption of phenomenal "manifestations," flowing from and returning back into the original ground of being – a concept expressed in the phrase ground presencing (*gzhi snang*) – with its contemplative framework of the "manifestations" of intrinsic buddhanature in the form of "visions" of "luminosity" – a concept expressed in the phrase "path presencing" (*lam snang*).

Which, if any among the three positions outlined above is proposed thus turns on which set of terms, and which sense of *nangwa*, one foregrounds in one's interpretation, in the case of positions (1) and (2); or whether one strives to reconcile the two, as in position (3).

## Position 1: Vacuity

As Sokdokpa suggests in his caricature of the position of Longchenpa and others, and as Longchenpa, on the face of it, also implies in his own statements on the topic, there is ample support in the *Seventeen Tantras* to draw the conclusion that they propose the fourth and final visionary stage as the vanishing point of all phenomenal appearances into the

expanse of emptiness. Perhaps one of the most compelling verses in favor of this interpretation is the verse from chapter five of the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, chief among the *Seventeen Tantras*, part of which Longchenpa cites to support his interpretation:

> This appearance of the exhaustion of reality
> is [when], once experiential appearances have emptied out,
> the body vanishes, and the sensory objects also vanish.
> Free from the deluded assemblage of thoughts,
> there is an absence of words as the basis of expression.[74]

This citation, it would seem on the surface, strongly suggests that the final vision of the exhaustion of reality entails the disappearance of all visionary experiences.

In both the *Treasury of Words and Meanings* and the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, Longchenpa also cites another verse, from chapter four of the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, which conveys much the same impression about the status of the visionary experiences at the culminating state of awakening. Here it is quite clear that it is not just defilements and afflictions that dissolve, but also the pristine awakened bodies and modes of primordial knowing of visionary experience:

> The reality of cause and fruition is as follows:
> once the source of coarse conceptuality has subsided,
> then in the continuum of self-purified thought as well,
> comes dependent origination, the pristine wind itself –
> this is the reality which comes from the cause [i.e., wind].
>
> In the nature of original purity,
> the enumerations of one and many are exhausted;
> the absence of awakened bodies and modes of primordial knowing,
> and the culmination of the exhaustion of phenomena
> is held to be the reality of the fruition.[75]

[74] *sGra thal 'gyur*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 194.1–194.2; *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 98; *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1284.3–1284.4; and *Theg mchog mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 6, 1487.2–1487.4: *chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba ni*[*'di*]*/ /nyams kyi snang ba stongs nas ni/ /lus zad dbang po'i yul kyang*[*yang*] *zad/ / rtog tshogs 'khrul pa rang*[*las*] *grol nas//brjod gzhi'i tshig dang dral ba'o/* The variations in parentheses are as cited by Nyima Bum and Longchenpa.

[75] *sGra thal 'gyur*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun* [Ny], vol. 1, 172.3–172.5; *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1285.4–1286.1; and *Theg mchog mdzod* [TCD], in

In the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, Longchenpa emphasizes his position further with another citation from the *Seventeen Tantras*. He attributes this to the *Tantra of the Perfectly Dynamic Lion*, but in currently available collections of the *tantra*s, this passage appears instead in chapter four of the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*:

> At this point, the characteristic of exhaustion
> is freedom from actions, just like space.[76]

Chapter thirty-two of the *Tantra of Self-Arisen Awareness* elaborates on the theme of dissolution to explain eight discrete stages:

> One should recognize that,
> once one's own suchness has become potent as the appearances of spontaneous presence,
> and one has thus seen the truth,
> there are eight modes of dissolution:
>
> Compassion dissolves into compassion, like the rays of a setting sun.
> Primordial knowing dissolves into primordial knowing,
> like a child climbing onto its mother's lap.
> Light dissolves into light,
> like a rainbow fading in the sky.
> Awakened bodies dissolve into awakened bodies,
> like a statue in a vase.
> Nonduality dissolves into nonduality,
> like a river merging into [another] river.
> Liberation from extremes dissolves into liberation from extremes,
> like sky dissolving into sky.
> The gateway of pure primordial knowing dissolves into the originally pure essence,
> like a glacier clutched by a lion.

*mDzod bdun*, vol. 6, 1490.4–1491.1. Variant readings are recording according to the sigla (Ny, TCD) introduced here: */rgyu dang 'bras bu'i chos nyid ni/ /rtog pa rags pa'i khungs 'gags nas/ /dran pa rang dag rgyud la*[TCD=*las*] *yang*[TCD=*kyang*]*/ /rten 'brel rlung nyid rnam*[*rang*] *dag pa*[*pas*]*/ /rgyu*[Ny=*rlung*] *las byung ba'i chos nyid do/ /ka nas dag pa'i rang bzhin la/ /gcig dang du ma'i grangs zad de/ /sku dang ye shes med pa dang/ /chos rnams zad pa'i mthar*[TCD=*sar*] *phyin pa/ /'bras bu*[TCD=*bu'i*] *chos nyid yin par 'dod/*

[76] *sGra thal 'gyur*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 168.6; and *Theg mchog mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 6, 1488: */'di dus zad pa'i mtshan nyid ni/ /bya bral nam mkha' ji bzhin no/*

> The gateway of impure *saṃsāra* dissolves into the gateway of pure primordial knowing,
> like a coiled-up tent-rope.[77]

Particularly noteworthy in this verse is the final image of a coiled-up rope. This was surely Longchenpa's source for this image, among others, in the passage discussed above from his *Sun*, *Moon*, *and Planets*: *A Background Text on Direct Transcendence*. We also observed in Sokdokpa's criticism of Longchenpa that the image of a coiled rope had become by Sokdokpa's time the defining figuration of the position of the ultimate vacuity of visionary experience in the state of awakening.

There are plenty of other passages in the *Seventeen Tantras* that equally emphasize the dissolution, exhaustion, or vacuity of visionary appearances at the stage of awakening. These can be found by simply reading through the *tantra*s with an eye toward their rhetoric of negation, dissipation, and absence. These few verses probably suffice to illustrate that what Sokdokpa had construed to be Longchenpa's interpretation, guided perhaps by Longchenpa's own citations of these verses, is indeed one possible take on how the *Seventeen Tantras* present the issue.

## Position 2: Fullness

Perhaps equally prevalent in the *Seventeen Tantras* is a rhetoric of appearance, presence, fullness, and unobstructed radiance. For instance, in chapter two of the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound* can be found the following evocative stanza:

> The effulgence of awakened bodies, a coalescence of emptiness and radiance,
> whose essence is the aspect of original purity,

[77] *Rig pa rang shar*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 537.5–538.4: */lhun grub kyi snang ba la/ /rang gi de nyid stobs su gyur nas bden pa mthong ba'i tshe/ /thim lugs brgyad ngo shes par bya'o/ /de yang thugs rje la thugs rje thim pa dper na nyi ma nub pa'i zer lta bu'o/ /ye shes la ye shes thim pa ni/ /dper na ma pang du bu 'jug pa lta bu'o/ /'od la 'od thim pa ni/ /dper na 'ja' tshon nam mkha' la yal ba lta bu'o/ /sku la sku thim pa ni/ /dper na bum pa'i sku lta bu'o/ /gnyis med la gnyis med thim pa ni/ dper na chu bo la chu bo thim pa lta bu'o/ /mtha' grol la mtha' grol thim pa ni/ /dper na nam mkha' la nam mkha' thim pa lta bu'o/ /dag pa ye shes kyi sgo ngo bo ka dag la thim pa ni/ /dper na seng ges gangs zin pa lta bu'o/ /ma dag pa 'khor ba'i sgo dag pa ye shes kyi sgo la thim pa ni/ /dper na sbra'i chon thag bsdus pa lta bu'o/* For a slightly different translation of this passage, see Smith 2018a: 204.

> is, in the manner of a statue, complete with face and hands, in a vase,
> a spontaneous presence abiding in a sphere of light,
> whose compassion radiates in different colors.[78]

This verse explicates the three aspects of primordial knowing. To reiterate, these refer to its empty essence of original purity; its radiant nature of spontaneous presence in the form of luminous appearances; and their union, a profusion of all-pervasive compassion, which radiates different colors throughout all directions. This verse, appearing as it does in a discussion of how primordial knowing is wired into the subtle physiology of all beings, gives the distinct impression that it is the luminous effulgence of awakened forms that might be what the ultimate state of awakening looks like for a buddha, and not a vacant and pristine expanse. In emphasizing radiant presence, this stanza stands in contrast to the same *tantra*'s rhetoric of negation and absence elsewhere.

A verse even more suggestive of the continuation of visionary experience upon awakening can be found in chapter nine of the *Tantra of the Perfectly Dynamic Lion*, yet another of the scriptures among the *Seventeen Tantras*:

> When the secret awareness has appeared objectively,
> in the form of the meeting of the mother and child luminous five-lights,
> then when the mother luminosity dissolves into the child,
> all the appearances of the mind embroiled in activity are purified,
>
> The doubts of the crutch of confused concepts are severed,
> the sun rays of primordial knowing illuminate everywhere,
> and phenomenal characteristics and entities dissolve.
>
> When free from the doubts of conceptual mind,
> the wisdom of awareness becomes potent,
> and suchness thus issues from the state beyond thought.
>
> With the absence of [phenomenal] appearances, primordial knowing sees everything whatsoever.
> Then, the secret mantra becomes replete with the quintessential fruition,
> and the primordial knowing of awareness appears/shines/manifests endlessly.[79]

[78] *sGra thal 'gyur*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 126.5–126.6: *ngo bo ka nas dag pa'i cha/ stong gsal 'dus pa sku yi gdangs/ /zhal phyag rdzogs pa bum sku'i tshul/ / lhun grub 'od kyi gong bur gnas/ thugs rje kha dog so sor gsal/*

[79] *Seng ge rtsal rdzogs*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 2, 365.5–366.2: */gsang ba'i rig pa yul la snang gyur na/ /snang ba'i 'od lnga ma bu phrad pa'i tshul/ /ma yi snang ba bu la thim pa'i tshe/ /bya byed blo yi snang ba kun sangs te/ /'khrul rtog lung gi the tshom*

These verses appear to describe two levels of manifest appearance and dissolution. The initial disappearance of phenomenal characteristics and objects intertwined with conceptuality, and all its errors and doubts, gives way to the infinite luminosity of primordial knowing at the level of the final fruition of the path.

This sequence of appearance, dissolution, and final manifestation is reiterated in the following verse that appears later in chapter three of the *Tantra of the Perfectly Dynamic Lion*. Here, however, in stark contrast to the formulation above, it is the dissolution of primordial knowing into the expanse of emptiness which precipitates the radiation of light-rays, as yet another, still more rarified luminous appearance.

> Once mastery has been acquired, primordial knowing dissolves into the expanse.
> Once it has dissolved, light-rays radiate boundlessly.
> In the self-appearing ultimate *maṇḍala*
> the reality of awareness is distinct and complete.[80]

Significantly, passages such as these that portray an undulation between manifestation, absorption, and more refined manifestation echo Longchenpa's position outlined above concerning the transitional reabsorption of visionary experience at the end of the fourth vision, followed by the re-emanation of fully awakened modes of embodiment and knowledge at the subsequent stage of the final fruition.

The theme of the continuation of luminosity finds expression in countless similar formulations throughout the *Seventeen Tantras*. So prevalent is this theme of unobstructed and unbound radiance that we can see in its juxtaposition to the equally prevalent theme of dissolution, emptiness, and absence a rhetorical undulation between the two poles. This brings us to a third rhetorical strain present in this scriptural collection, the resolution or transcendence of this dyad in nonduality.

*chod gyur nas/ /ye shes nyi zer kun tu snang 'gyur zhing/ /mtshan ma dngos po rab tu dengs par 'gyur/ /rnam rtog blo yi the tshom bral ba'i tshe/ /rig pa'i shes rab stobs su gyur nas ni/ /bsam bral ngang las de bzhin rnam par 'byung/ /snang ba med pas ye shes cir yang mthong/ /de tshe gsang sngags 'bras bu bcud dang ldan gyur nas/ /rig pa'i ye shes thug pa med par snang/*

[80] *Seng ge rtsal rdzogs*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 2, 280.1: *'byongs nas ye shes dbyings su thim/ /thim nas 'od zer phyogs med 'phro/ /rang snang don gyi dkyil 'khor du/ /rig pa'i chos nyid ma 'dres rdzogs/*

## Position 3: Beyond Vacuity and Fullness

The third possible position outlined above which is prevalent throughout the *Seventeen Tantras* is the transcendence of both appearance and disappearance. This formulation finds expression in a number of passages that dwell on neither the continuation of appearance nor its final dissolution, but emphasize instead the dissolution, or exhaustion of dualistic conceptuality, along with the ordinary perceptual modalities and objects that characterize this delusional experience, such as the ordinary physical body, the five aggregates, the afflictions and defilements, and the rest of the apparatus that typifies *saṃsāra* and its endless rounds of suffering and exploitation.

Perhaps one of the boldest and most widely-cited references to the exhaustion of reality in this connection is the following verse, from chapter one of the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, which Longchenpa includes in his *Treasury of Words and Meanings*:

> Through the appearance of the exhaustion of reality
> the continuum of cycling through the three realms is severed.[81]

This passage completely sidesteps the issue of what might remain after this severance has taken place, but it does clearly indicate what the fourth visionary phase's main purpose is – to hasten complete awakening.

This rhetorical tendency also appears in chapter five of the *Tantra of the Perfectly Dynamic Lion*:

> Spontaneous presence dallies in absolute self-appearance,
> retains the nature of radiance, warmth, and coolness,
> transcends the conventions of it being like this or not like that,
> and is devoid of objective conceptions regarding appearance or disappearance.[82]

The first line's mention of "spontaneous presence" clues us into the fact that it is talking primarily about appearance. But the final three

[81] *sGra thal 'gyur*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 91.4–91.5; and *Tshig don mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 4, 1284.3: *chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba yis/ /khams gsum 'khor ba'i rgyun thag bcad*[*gcod*]*/*

[82] *Seng ge rtsal rdzogs*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 2, 313.1–313.2: *lhun grub rang snang mthar thug kun la rol/ /gsal dang dro*[=*drod*] *dang bsil ba'i bdag nyid 'dzin/ /yin dang min pa'i tha snyad kun las 'das/ /snang dang mi snang yul gi rtog pa med/*

lines, and especially the last line, conveys that although appearance retains qualities, it transcends efforts to label it as anything whatsoever, thus thwarting efforts to define this subtle domain of experience as either truly appearing or not. Clearly here it is ordinary dualistic language and conceptuality that is to be transcended, not appearances per se.

Another passage that appears in chapter five of the *Tantra of the Perfectly Dynamic Lion* brings this sense to bear on what it calls "the yoga of all buddhas:"

> The yoga of all buddhas
> culminates with settling into non-objectified emptiness-radiance.
> Nonduality is encompassed in this state.
> It is the appearance of the absolute realization
> of past, present, and future [buddhas].[83]

Here the nonduality of emptiness and radiant luminosity is the very epitome of all the buddhas' realization, thus leaving no place for an emphasis on either the dissolution of appearances or their continuation.

A final key aspect worthy of mention here, which on the surface might seem to belong most sensibly to the third possible position to be derived from the *Seventeen Tantras*, is the notion that the final state of awakening is "devoid of intensification or diminishment," "devoid of increase of decrease," and other similar expressions of immutability and stabilization. Such expressions abound throughout the *Seventeen Tantras* and are ambiguous enough to support any of the three positions outlined above, although they seem to most aptly support position three.

For example, chapter ten of the *Tantra of Self-Liberated Awareness* has the following verses suggestive of such an interpretation:

> Pristine primordial knowing has neither increase nor decrease.
> The body of primordial knowing has neither placidity nor movement.
> The appearance of primordial knowing has neither radiance nor lack of radiance.
> The path of secret mantra has neither closeness nor farness.

[83] *Seng ge rtsal rdzogs*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 2, 314.1–314.2: */sangs rgyas kun gyi rnal 'byor ni/ /stong gsal yul med bzhag pas zin/ de yi ngang du gnyis med 'ub/ /'das dang ma byon da ltar gyi/ dgongs pa dam pa'i snang ba'o/*

> One's own appearance has neither greatness nor smallness.
> The faculties of beings have neither acuity nor dullness.[84]

Here, not only is "pristine primordial knowing" beyond increase or decrease; its "appearance" too neither shines forth nor vanishes.

In chapter two of the *Tantra of The Mirror of Samantabhadra's Mind*, there is another passage that fits this general description. Here, however, we can notice the rhetoric tip slightly toward the pole of appearance's perdurance:

> The sun of radiant primordial knowing, unfabricated, neither rises nor sets.
> The field of pervasive emptiness is even, without being arranged.
> The path to unchanging primordial knowing, untrained in, is neither near nor far.
> The horse of unchanging awareness is not tired even from running.
> The stream of imperceptible awareness is uninterrupted.
> The seed of the primordial knowing of awareness has neither increase nor decrease.
> The primordial knowing of emptiness-radiance is indivisible.
> The primordial knowing of awareness devoid of fixation is free from the extremes of identification.
> The primordial knowing of non-conceptual awareness fully radiates without obstruction.
> The primordial knowing of all-radiating awareness is distinctly and fully complete.
> The primordial knowing of all-illuminating awareness shines, but is free of fixation.[85]

Interestingly, this final variety of expression – those conveying appearance's absence of both increase and decrease – could mean, as Longchenpa

[84] *Rig pa rang grol chen po*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 3, 69.6–70.1: */yang dag pa'i ye shes la 'phel 'grib med do/ /ye shes kyi lus la yang zhing g.yo ba med do/ /ye shes kyi snang ba la gsal ba dang mi gsal ba med do/ /gsang sngags kyi lam la nye ba dang ring ba med do/ /rang gi snang ba la che chung med do/ /sems can gyi dbang po la rno brtul med do/* For a slightly different translation of this passage, see Smith 2018b: 71.

[85] *Kun tu bzang po thugs kyi me long gi rgyud*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 246.2–247.3: *ye shes gsal ba'i nyi ma ni ma byas bar 'char nub med/ /stong nyid brdal ba'i thang ni ma bkod par cha snyoms/ /ye shes 'gyur med kyi lam ni ma sbyangs bar nye ring med/ /rig pa 'gyur med kyi rta ni rgyugs kyang chad pa med/ /rig pa dmigs med kyi chu rgyun la rgyun chad med/ rig pa ye shes kyi sa bon la 'phel 'grib med/ /rig pa stong gsal gyi ye shes ni dbyer mi phyed/ /rig pa 'dzin med kyi ye shes ni ngos bzung gi mtha' dang bral/ rig pa rtog pa med kyi ye shes ni ma 'gags par yongs su gsal/ /rig pa kun gsal gyi ye shes ni ma 'dres par yongs su rdzogs/ /rig pa kun snang gi ye shes ni gsal la 'dzin pa med/*

might likely take it, that although the visionary appearances look as if they intensify and dissipate through the four visionary phases, the radiant effulgence of awareness is ever-present, just as the moon seems to wax and wane according to its phases, but in fact neither grows nor diminishes. Nonetheless, though, on the surface these formulations could alternatively signal that visionary experience itself, after it has heightened and reached its optimization in the form of a *maṇḍala* of buddhas and their purelands, never dissipates, but instead stabilizes, beyond increase and decrease, to constitute the awakened cognition of a buddha. This seems to be how Sokdokpa and his trusted lamas would have understood such formulations. That both of these conceptions, and probably others, might sensibly derive from such scriptural statements serves to underscore how even one and the same verse of any one of the *Seventeen Tantras* could potentially lend itself to a diversity of interpretations.

When consulting the extensive commentary on the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, which is attributed to the Indian figure Vimalamitra but was more likely composed in Tibetan in the 12th century, we find that its author passes over the key verses presented above with little comment.[86] This could suggest at the very least that the author of this commentary did not notice any controversy surrounding the interpretation of these verses that would have been worthy of remark. Moreover, where the commentary does remark on the fourth vision, it seems to most closely reflect the third position outlined above – an indeterminacy of phenomenal expression – but only as modified significantly by the first position above – the vanishing of all phenomenal appearances whatsoever. For instance, in giving an etymology of the "exhaustion of reality" in chapter one, the commentary states:

> Once these [visions] are perfected, the vision of the exhaustion of reality arises: Phenomena (*chos*) means generally or specifically characterized phenomena. Essence (*nyid*) mean unfabricated. Exhaustion (*zad pa*) means that neither intellect nor cognition, self nor others, objects nor apprehending subjects,

[86] Vimalamitra, *Paṇchen dri med bshes gnyen gyi dgongs nyams sgron ma snang byed 'bar ba'i gsang rgyud*, Kt and Nn. In version Kt, commentary on the verses, or an absence thereof, is located, in the order the verses are discussed above, in vol. 2, 875.4–875.1; vol. 2, 793.6–795.4; vol. 2, 673.5–674.4; vol. 2, 650.1–650.3; unidentified; and vol. 2, 42.3. For the 12th century date of this commentary I rely on a personal correspondence with David Germano.

> awakened bodies nor modes of primordial knowing remain present even on the mere conventional level. At this juncture, appearance (*snang ba*) is not established as being or not being identifiable as anything whatsoever. Thus, it is not an object of experience for the mind.[87]

Clearly, as illustrated here, absolutely nothing, not even the pure visionary expressions of awakened forms and modes of primordial knowing, continues to appear at this stage, according to this commentator. And yet, complicating this negative formulation is the concluding suggestion that what this might signal is the rather more moderate claim that nothing can be predicated of phenomenal experience any longer.

When glossing the "reality of the fruition," moreover, the commentary reiterates this stance as follows:

> Since, in the reality of exhaustion, not even a single thing is established, nothing is established as an awakened body. Since awakened embodiment is thus non-existent, there is also nothing established as the knowledge of primordial knowing. Because all appearing and disappearing phenomena are thus exhausted, they have gone into their own state without any return. Thus, this is claimed to be called, "the reality of the fruition."[88]

Here, too, it would seem, the dissolution of even the pure visionary dimension of awakened embodiment and knowledge hails the exhaustion of the dualistic framework of manifestation and non-manifestation/appearance and disappearance. Additionally, in this instance, the stage is labeled the "reality of fruition," although the resolutely nondual framework of the *Heart Essence* tradition must be sure to place under erasure the notion of a "fruition" as distinct from a "ground" and a "path." On its surface, this argument is reminiscent of Longchenpa's interpretation

[87] Vimalamitra, *Paṇchen dri med bshes gnyen gyi dgongs nyams sgron ma snang byed 'bar ba'i gsang rgyud*, Kt vol. 2, 27–28.2; Nn vol. 1, 17.12–17.16.: */de dag rdzogs nas chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba 'char ste/ chos nyid ni spyi* [Kt=*phyi*] *dang rang gi mtshan nyid/ nyid ni ma bcos pa* [Kt=*mi thobs*] *pa/ zad pa ni blo dang / shes pa dang bdag dang gzhan dang / yul dang 'dzin pa dang chos dang / gang zag dang / sku dang ye shes dang / tha snyad tsam du yang med/ 'di'i dus na snang ba 'di yin min gang du yang ma grub pas/ sems* [Kt+*can*] *kyi spyod yul ma yin pa'o/*

[88] Vimalamitra, *Paṇchen dri med bshes gnyen gyi dgongs nyams sgron ma snang byed 'bar ba'i gsang rgyud*, Kt vol. 2, 674.2–674.4: *de ltar zad pa'i chos nyid gcig yang ma grub pas skur yang grub pa med/ de ltar sku med pas mkhyen pa ye shes su yang grub pa med do/ /de ltar snang ba dang mi snang ba'i chos rnams zad pa'i phyir na/ de'i sar ldog pa med par phyin pas/ 'bras bu'i chos nyid zhes bya ba yin par 'dod do/*

outlined above – at this stage all phenomenal appearance, even the visionary self-manifestations of intrinsic primordial knowing, must subside. And, most crucially, this finally entails the dissipation also of any trace conception of appearance or disappearance itself.

In light of the seeming ambiguities observed in the *Seventeen Tantras*, and the silence concerning any interpretative divergences on this issue in an important early commentary on the chief *tantra* among them, allow us to consider next how one of the earliest known systematic Tibetan treatises on the *Heart Essence* tradition construed the status of the fourth vision.

## Negotiating Words and Meanings in the Early *Heart Essence* Tradition

We find an early *Heart Essence* examination of the status of phenomenal experience in awakened cognition in the late 12th or early 13th century writing of Shang Nyima Bum (Zhang Nyi ma 'bum, 1158–1213) entitled *The Great Perfection*: *Eleven Words and Meanings*.[89] This text was one of the earliest coherent treatises about the *Heart Essence* tradition of the Great Perfection in Tibet (Yeshi 2017: 3). It also exerted a significant influence on the subsequent *Heart Essence* tradition. Longchenpa conceived the structure of his famous *Precious Treasury of Words and Meanings* based on Nyima Bum's treatise.[90] And it was also incorporated in revised form into the treasure cycles of the 14th century treasure revealers Rigdzin Gödem, Sangyé Lingpa, and perhaps others.[91]

[89] Nyi ma 'bum, *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*.

[90] Yeshi 2017; Yeshi and Dalton 2018: 257 and 259–260.

[91] For a comparison of how this text variously appears in its versions attributed to Nyima Bum and to the revelatory output of Rigdzin Gödem, respectively, see Yeshi 2017: 19–24. For a full English translation of this text, as it appears in Ridzin Gödem's treasure revelations, see Smith 2016. Nyima Bum's treatise also appears in Sangyé Lingpa's treasure revelation *The Gathering of the Guru's Realization* (*Bla ma dgongs 'dus*), as a major section (615.4–841.5; 413–575) in the text attributed to Padmasambhava called *rGyab chos spyi sdom dgongs don 'dus pa*, in Sangs rgyas gling pa, *Bla ma dgongs 'dus*, vol. 10, 551–852; and in Sangs rgyas gling pa, *Bla ma dgongs pa 'dus pa las rdzogs rim man ngag snying po gser gyi yang zhun gyi chos skor*, vol. 2, 369–583. Moreover, the opening section of this text (551–615.4; 369–413) includes a redacted version of the famous *Heart Essence* lineage history known more commonly as the *rDzogs pa chen po snying tig gi lo rgyus chen mo*, which appears in the *sNying thig ya bzhi*, vol. 5, 427–605.

Nyima Bum broaches the topic of the fourth visionary experience in his explanation of *Heart Essence* contemplative practice. In his initial definition of this final visionary stage, Nyima Bum writes that it is the "intensification" (*'phel ba*) of visionary appearances that is exhausted, not the visionary experiences themselves. He states:

> The fact that, with the exhaustion of their (i.e., the visionary appearances') intensification, there is no essence where those visionary experiences appear, is conventionally referred to as "the vision of the exhaustion of reality."[92]

To buttress his point, Nyima Bum cites the following verse from the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*. This is the very same verse, we may recall, which Longchenpa would later go on to cite in his *Treasury of Words and Meanings*.

> This appearance of the exhaustion of reality
> is when, once experiential appearances have emptied out,
> the body vanishes, and the sensory objects also vanish.
> Free from the deluded assemblage of thoughts,
> there is an absence of words as the basis of expression.[93]

This citation seems on the surface to suggest that visionary experiences subside at this final level, even as Nyima Bum maintained just above that it is their intensification that is exhausted, and not necessarily the visions themselves. In an explanatory comment on this citation, Nyima Bum is careful to add the following:

> When the four visions have culminated, the aggregates conjoined with defilement disappear and the fortunate one is sure to become awakened.[94]

[92] *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 98: */de dag gi 'phel ba zad pas snang ba'i nyams de dag gang du snang ba'i ngo bo med pa ni/ chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba zhes tha snyad du bya ba'o/*

[93] *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 98. This verse appears in *sGra thal 'gyur*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 194.1–194.2, with a few minor variations. I record it here as it appears in Nyima Bum's text and record in brackets variant readings from the above version of the source text: */chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba 'di*[*ni*]*/ /nyams kyi snang ba stongs nas ni/ /lus zad dbang po'i yul yang*[*kyang*] *zad/ /rtog tshogs 'khrul pa las*[*rang*] *grol nas/ /brjod gzhi'i tshig dang dral ba'o/*

[94] *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 98: */de ltar snang ba bzhi mthar phyin pa'i dus na/ skal ldan de zag pa dang bcas pa'i phung po mi snang par sangs rgya bar nges so/*

He concludes this brief section with another verse drawn from the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, followed by a citation from the *Tantra of the Blazing Relic*, another of the *Seventeen Tantras*.

> In the same source (i.e., the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*) it is said:
>
> > The continuity of the elements and body thus severed,
> > one will become awakened in this very lifetime,
> > with the defiled aggregates not appearing.[95]
>
> And in the *Blazing Relic* it is said:
>
> > Through this, in this very appearance,
> > the self-arisen elements will dissipate,
> > and there is no doubt one will attain the fruition,
> > without the defiled aggregates appearing.[96]

Taking this discussion as a whole, there seems to be some ambiguity over whether it is the visionary appearances that disappear, or just the defiled aggregates, along with their attendant elements and the physical body these comprise.[97]

This ambiguity persists to the end of his treatise, where Nyima Bum critically addresses the notion that visionary appearances ought to dissolve at the final stage of the exhaustion of reality. He does so at the very beginning of a series of hypothetical questions and objections, each placed in the mouth of "some people." This style of writing is a common polemical strategy to obliquely reference hypothetical formulations or the actual opinions of past scholars or contemporary interlocutors. Its presence

[95] *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 98: */de nyid las/ de ltar 'byung lus rgyun chad nas/ zag bcas phung po mi snang bar/ /tshe 'di nyid la sangs rgya'o/ zhes gsungs so/* This verse appears in *sGra thal 'gyur*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 116.2–116.3, with a few substantive variants, as follows: */de ltar lus 'byung rgyun chad pas/ / zag bcas phung po mi snang bar/ /'di la mngon par 'tshang rgya'o/*

[96] *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 98: */sku gdung 'bar ba las kyang / /'dis ni snang ba 'di nyi la/ 'byung ba rang shar dengs nas ni/ /zag bcas phung po mi snang bar/ /'bras bu thob la the tshom med/ zhes so/* This verse appears in *sKu gdung 'bar ba*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 129.5–129.6, as follows: */'dis ni snang ba 'di nyid la/ /'byung ba rang sar dengs nas ni/ /zag bcas phung po mi snang bar/ /'bras bu thob la the tshom med/*

[97] For an English translation of the analogous passage in Rigdzin Gödem's revelatory version of this text, see Smith 2016: 177–178. There are significant variations between the two, analysis of which lies outside the scope of the present paper.

here thus raises the question of whether Nyima Bum was targeting actual people or whether he was simply demonstrating the problematic consequences of holding any of the views he outlines. That he squarely contends first with the issue of appearance, before shifting to consider other issues, might reflect that for Nyima Bum, setting the record straight on this issue was of paramount concern. He states:

> Some people might say out of their misconception, "It is not reasonable for there to be appearance after the exhaustion of reality." This should be refuted by replying, "If that were the case, then how would the *bhagavān*, awakening, emptiness-luminosity, and the like also be reasonable."
> And if, as some say, "Nothing whatsoever appears," it would be a complete vacuity, in which causes have been exhausted, and conditions have been exhausted – this would make it a non-Buddhist extremist position. It would alternatively entail that mind is [utterly] empty.[98]

Nyima Bum goes on to draw out the problematic consequences of a number of other formulations about the final state of awakening. This series of hypothetical objections and counter-objections, couched as they are in the style of Buddhist doctrinal polemics, gives the impression that Nyima Bum's aim here might have been to expose the futility of making any formulation whatsoever about the state of awakening.[99] Nonetheless, by forcefully invoking at the onset the notion of "emptiness-luminosity," the problem of proposing a "complete vacuity," and other unwelcome consequences of such "misconceptions" regarding appearance, Nyima Bum implies that he could be coming from a position in which the inseparability of the expanse and awareness entails also the perdurance of visionary experience, "awareness's effulgence," even in the state of complete awakening. However we interpret these passages, they illustrate at the very least that Nyima Bum was concerned that his fellow *Heart Essence* practitioners might be adopting an excessively negative conception of what is entailed

[98] *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 127–128: *gang zag kha cig gis log par rtog pas/ chos nyid zad nas snang ba mi rigs so zhe na/ de ltar na sangs rgyas dang / bcom ldan 'das dang / byang chub dang / stong gsal la sogs pa yang ci la rigs zhes zlog par bya'o/ /yang kha cig nas cir yang mi snang zer nas rgyu zad rkyen zad kyi stong pa lhang*[=*lhag* ?] *ba med par 'gyur ba ni/ mu stegs par 'gyur la/ yang na sems stong du 'gyur ro/* For English translation of the Rigdzin Gödem treasure version of this passage, see Smith 2016: 216.

[99] I thank Khenpo Yeshi (personal communication) for sharing this observation with me.

in the fourth visionary phase of the exhaustion of reality. It is nonetheless difficult to determine based on these passages alone whether divergent or competing streams of interpretation were at issue in Nyima Bum's remarks.

Following Nyima Bum's portrayal of awakening to the conclusion of the passage, which marks the finale of the text as a whole, we see him provide a crucial citation from chapter seventy-seven of the *Tantra of Self-Arisen Awareness*. This passage maps progress through the levels, or *bhūmi*s – numbering sixteen here – to the gradual deepening of participation in the luminous forms of intrinsic nondual knowing – the very stuff of the visions of direct transcendence.[100] This citation might therefore reflect Nyima Bum's final position on what the emergent state of awakening looks like for the contemplative practitioner.

The *bhūmi* presentation Nyima Bum cites from the *Tantra of Self-Arisen Awareness* invokes and then subverts the standard Mahāyāna depiction by enlisting the typical terms for the ten first levels, while encoding them with dynamics exclusive to the faster and more direct contemplative path of the *Heart Essence*. For instance, the first level of "joyous" (*rab tu dga' ba*) is reached as soon as the practitioner is introduced to the nature of reality and "first sees the truth" (*dang po bden pa mthong ba'i dus*). Moreover, reaching the second level of "stainless" (*dri ma med pa*) occurs as soon as there's recognition that the truth so witnessed is in fact one's very own appearance. Thus, according to the logic of the *tantra*, and presumably Nyima Bum's understanding of the *Heart Essence* path of practice as well, the first and second levels can be reached nearly instantaneously, as soon as the student is introduced to reality and recognizes it.

Further in this vein, the third level of "illuminating" (*'od byed pa*) is reached once there is familiarity with this recognition. While the fourth and fifth levels – "radiating" (*'od 'phro ba*) and "difficult to master" (*sbyangs dka' ba*) – are reached when, respectively, seeing the appearance of light; and then, through having become familiar with that vision of innate

[100] *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 128–129. This passage appears in *Rig pa rang shar*, in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 778.2–780.4. For a complete English translation of the analogous passage in Rigdzin Gödem's treasure version, see Smith 2016: 217–219.

nondual cognition, the afflictions are all naturally purified, resulting in a more refined vision of nondual cognition.

The passage follows this logic to the end, such that ascending from the tenth level, the "cloud of dharma" (*chos kyi sprin*), to the eleventh level, "all illuminating" (*kun tu 'od*) signals the cessation of deluded appearances and the "dawning of appearances/illumination in clusters" (*tshom bu'i snang ba shar ba*). Reaching the twelfth level, called "endowed with unattached lotuses" (*ma chags padma can*), entails being unattached to that appearance/illumination and thus being unsullied by any external or internal phenomenon. Moreover, reaching the thirteenth level, the level of "the great circular aggregation of letters" (*yi ge 'khor lo tshogs chen*) is signaled when, "the light ray bands of nondual cognition dawn from one's heart center and become situated in the expanse of the sky in the form of a wheel composed of five clusters of light."[101] Reaching the fourteenth level is signaled by "settling into the appearance/light of nondual cognition" (*ye shes kyi snang ba la gnas pa*). The fifteenth is simply called, "the level of *vidyādhara*" (*rdo rje 'dzin pa'i sa*). Whereas the sixteenth level – "the level of highest primordial knowing" (*ye she bla ma'i sa*) – signals "manifesting in the primordial knowing of original purity," the great freedom of the final fruition.[102]

We can observe that nowhere in this schematic presentation of sixteen levels is it explicitly stated that appearance fades or subsides. Most significantly for the present discussion, however, the sixteenth level, with its invocation of "original purity," might very well signal a return of luminous visionary experiences to dissolve into their original ground. But the language of "manifestation," and, in another version, "arising," complicates this formulation to allow for manifest appearances within the ground, rather than a simple dissolution and vacuity.

We may recall, as presented just above, that similarly ambiguous are Nyima Bum's citations and interpretations of relevant scriptural sources

[101] *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 129: */rang gi thugs ka nas ye shes kyi zer thag shar nas/ nam mkha'i mthong nas 'od kyi tshom bu lnga 'khor lo'i tshul du gnas pa ni/*

[102] *rDzogs pa chen po tshig don bcu gcig pa*, 129: *ka dag gi ye shes la mngon du gyur nas/* Interestingly, in the *Rig pa rang shar* as we currently find it in *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1, 780.2, the passage reads differently as follows: *ka dag gi sa la ye shes lhug par shar*. This can be rendered as "primordial knowing arises effortlessly at the stage of original purity."

earlier in the treatise, particularly in light of his penultimate criticisms of the "misconceptions" of his *Heart Essence* peers in reckoning that visionary appearances vanish at the level of awakening. Considering these passages together, it is therefore difficult to determine precisely what Nyima Bum's position was on this issue. At the very least, it would seem that for him the state of complete awakening entails the disappearance of the defiled aggregates, and the exhaustion of any further intensification of visionary experience, but not necessarily the dissolution of the visionary dimension in its own right. Nonetheless, the ambiguity over whether awakened perception continues to partake of visionary experience remains unresolved in Nyima Bum's treatment, much as the *Seventeen Tantras* itself seems to allow for multiple divergent interpretations. In the section that follows, we will flash forward in time, back to the 17th century, to briefly consider in closing a reflection on this ambiguity voiced by the yogin Lhatsün Namkha Jikmé, who, like Sokdokpa, registered two distinct positions on the topic.

## Harmonizing Old School Visions by Illuminating the "Ultimate Crux"

Within fifty years after Sokdokpa's rejection of Longchenpa's position on this topic in his reply to Garwang Ösal's questions, the visionary yogin Lhatsün Namkha Jikmé weighed in on this issue with his own appraisal of Longchenpa's perspective vis-à-vis its counterpoint.[103] Lhatsün touches upon this disagreement of opinion in his short composition on the finer points of direct transcendence practice entitled *Holding the Introduction to the Quintessential Great Secret in Your Hands*: *The Udumbāra Flower Illuminating the Ultimate Crux*, which first emerged as part of his *Vajra Essence*: *Cloudbursts of Song* visionary cycle.[104] When addressing the

[103] Based on Lhatsün's brief history of his *Vajra Essence*: *Cloudbursts of Song* (*rDo rje snying po sprin gyi thol glu*, vol. 2, 1067.1–1071.6) and judging by the colophons of the texts included in this cycle, it seems to have emerged from visions which presented themselves over the course of several years, while Lhatsün was wandering throughout Tibet, India, and finally Sikkim. It seems to have eventually been committed to writing during Lhatsün's years in Sikkim sometime in the 1640s.

[104] Lha btsun Nam mkha' 'jigs med, *mThar thug gi gnad 'gag gsal byed u dum wa ra'i me tog gsang chen snying po'i ngo sprod lag bcangs ma/ mun khrid kyi bu*, in *rDo rje snying po sprin gyi thol glu*, vol. 1, 299–308; and in *Rig 'dzin srog sgrub*, vol. 1, 419–428.

dividing line between the third visionary stage, the optimization of awareness, and the fourth and final stage, the exhaustion of reality, Lhatsün offers the following analysis:

> As for appearances at the time of optimization, the essence of the three *kāya*s has the nature of awareness and awareness's glow, and is, in the manner of the sun and its rays, devoid of any elaborations of being singular or multiple. However, making it accord here with the intention of spontaneous presence, first you take hold of the full measure of the perceptions (*'char sgo*) of the expanse's manifestations, and awareness itself ripens directly within the primeval ground.
>
> Since awareness itself ripens, the external, internal, and secret dualistic experience become purified in their own right, and the taking into experience of the expanse and awareness reaches its destination directly within the ground. Thus, the elaborations of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* dwell as the nature of the *vajra* essence, identical to the realization of original purity, the awakened mind of all the conquerors of the three times, without any diminishment or enhancement, or transition or transformation.
>
> Regarding that point, the Great Omniscient One [Longchenpa] taught, without contradicting the intention of the *tantra*s, the way external, internal, and secret elaborations (*spros pa*) dissolve into the inner expanse of the youthful body within a vase.
>
> However, some scholars of previous generations maintained that clusters of awakened bodies manifest pervading the reaches of space and the expanse of reality. In sum, they maintain that the absence of clinging and fixation with respect to ordinary appearances, without even one hundredth of a hair from a horse's tail remaining, is the optimization of appearance; and that, by alternating the practice [between cutting through and direct transcendence?] and cutting through the conceptual constructs of the four confidences, the essence with respect to the originally pure ground is perfected in its dynamism with respect to spontaneously present appearance, such that optimized appearance is devoid of intensification and dissolution.
>
> I understand these two positions to be indistinct, aside from their difference of opinion regarding the ground in which realization manifests.
>
> Concerning this difficult to understand boundary [between the third and fourth visionary phases]: it is also similar to the teaching that during optimization, with the final cognitive obscuration at the end of the continuum [of the path], the initiation of the great light-rays of compassion from the tathāgatas is conferred and awakening is reached.
>
> After this, the dynamism of awakened bodies and purelands, the compassion of love, the activity of deeds, and the power of protection is completely perfected. Since, in this, one has reached the very core of the realization of all tathāgatas, it is the optimization of awareness.

> Once one has entered from this into the exhaustion of reality, there is the so-called "youthful body within a vase," in which reflections shine forth externally, from the expanse of luminosity internally, at the same time, like the moon in reflections arising from the moon in the sky. Thus, there is a difference [between optimization and exhaustion] in terms of whether the power to extend compassion to the entire range of disciples is present yet or not.
>
> I think the claim by some that there is no difference between the exhaustion of reality and optimization comes from slightly misunderstanding the essential point. These and other good qualities of the exhaustion of reality are similar to the scope of activity of the compassion of all conquerors.[105]

We can see from Lhatsün's remarks that the issue of what happens at the exhaustion of reality was still not settled during his lifetime. Lhatsün's characterization of the difference between the position of Longchenpa, on the one hand, and that of the unnamed previous scholars, on the other, is very much along the lines of what Sokdokpa voiced in his earlier

[105] *Ngo sprod lag bcangs ma*, 302.1–304.1: *tshad phebs dus kyi snang ba la sku gsum gyi ngo bo rig pa dang rig mdangs kyi rang bzhin can nyi ma zer gyi tshul du gcig dang du ma'i spros pas dben kyang / 'dir lhun grub kyi dgongs pa dang bstun te sngon la dbyings snang gi char sgo'i tshad bzung / rig pa nyid gdod ma'i gzhi thog tu smin pas/ phyi nang gsang ba'i gzung 'dzin rang dag la song ste dbyings rig gi nyams len gzhi thog tu 'khyol pas/ 'khor 'das kyi spros pa ka dag gi dgongs pa dus gsum gyi rgyal ba thams cad kyi dgongs pa dang mnyam nyid bri gang 'pho 'gyur med pa/ rdo rje snying po'i bdag nyid du bzhugs pa la/ mkhyen chen pos phyi nang gsang ba'i spros pa nang dbyings gzhon nu bum skur thim tshul rgyud kyi dgongs pa dang mi 'gal bar gsungs pa dang / yang sngon rabs kyi mkhas pa 'ga' zhig gis sku'i tshom bu nam mkha'i mtha' dang chos kyi dbyings khyab par gsal zhing / mdor na tha mal snang ba'i zhen 'dzin rta rnga brgyar gshag pa'i cha tsam yang ma lus pa ni snang bat shad phebs/ nyams len res 'jog dang gdeng bzhi'i spros pa chod de ka dag gzhi'i thog gi ngo bo lhun grub snang ba'i rang steng du rtsal rdzogs pa yin pas/ tshad phebs kyi snang ba la 'phel thim med par bzhed pa gnyis rtogs pa mngon gyur gyi gzhi la*[*G=ma*] *bzhes lugs kyi khyad par las dbye ba med par go ste/ rtogs dka' ba'i sa mtshams ni tshad phebs lyi skabs su rgyun mtha'i shes sgrib tha ma de bzhin gshegs pa'i thugs rje'i 'od zer chen po'i dbang bskur te 'tshang rgya bar gsungs pa dang dang yang mtshungs la/ 'di mar bgyab tu sku dang zhing khams brtse ba'i thugs rje mdzad pa'i phrin las/ skyob pa'i nus mthu thams cad kyi rtsal rdzogs pa yin te/ de bzhin gshegs pa thams cad kyi dgongs pa'i mthil tshad la phebs pas na rig pa tshad phebs su brjod pa yin/ 'di nas chos nyid zad pa la zhugs pa nas gzhin nu bum sku zhes nang gsal dbyings kyi zla ba lta bu de las phyir gsal gzugs brnyan gyi zla ba lta bu 'char bad us mnyam ste gdul bya'i mkha' dbyings thams cad la thugs rje 'jug pa'i nus pa yod med kyi khyad par yod do/ 'ga' zhig chos nyid zad pa dang tshad phebs dbye ba med par 'dod pa ni cung zad gnad ma go bar sems so//de la sogs pa chos nyid zad pa'i yon tan ni rgyal ba kun gyi thugs rje'i spyod yul dang mtshungs so/ /*

discussions of the matter. Namely, Longchenpa has it that the "elaborations" or "complexity" (*spros pa*) of visionary experience, and everything else for that matter, dissolves at the exhaustion of reality. Whereas previous scholars have maintained the contrary, namely, that visionary appearances of luminous buddha bodies and purelands radiate throughout space and stabilize, becoming devoid of "intensification and dissolution" in awakened cognition – it is attachment and fixation which dissolve, not visionary experience itself.

The care and precision with which Lhatsün elaborates on the view of previous scholars, as compared to his perfunctory remarks on Longchenpa's position, gives the distinct impression that Lhatsün may have been partial toward the opinion of the unnamed previous scholars; who, precisely, these figures could have been nonetheless remains a mystery. Seen in this light, Lhatsün's gesture toward reconciling these two positions, where he opines that he sees them as "indistinct" aside from their different interpretations of the ground of realization, is difficult to interpret. This is particularly so if we take this distinction to signal a difference of opinion about what serves as the basis of the visionary experiences of direct transcendence – innate nondual awareness itself, the neutral all-ground consciousness, or something else altogether. This difference would of course drastically impact formulations concerning the status of the visions and how they culminate at awakening. However, if we attend closely to the language of Lhatsün's formulation here and compare it to Nyima Bum's related citation of the *Tantra of Self-Arisen Awareness*, the "ground in which realization manifests" might be an oblique reference to the sixteenth and final *bhūmi* of the *Heart Essence* contemplative path – "the level of highest primordial knowing" (*ye she bla ma'i sa*) – which the *tantra* describes as "manifesting in the primordial knowing of original purity." If this is indeed the case, Lhatsün might be highlighting here that this difference of opinion has fundamentally to do with the issue of whether it can be claimed that perceptual content dissolves or continues with the return of primordial knowing to its original ground. In other words, does reaching this stage entail going full circle – from ground to manifestation and back to ground – as its cosmogonic/eschatology framing would clearly imply? Or could the dawning of awakened cognition within the contemplative practitioner entail a new beginning, experienced

in terms of an ongoing nondual, perceptual immersion in the colorful and luminous self-display of one's buddhanature *qua* mandalic purelands?

It is important to keep in mind that our review above of Longchenpa's position on this issue in the *Treasury of Words and Meanings*, the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, and other *Heart Essence* works revealed that his understanding was significantly more complex than suggested by Lhatsün's brief description here. Recall that for Longchenpa the visions of direct transcendence are the self-expression of primordial knowing, which entails, according to him, that they are neither the maturation into experience of pure habitual traces left on the all-ground consciousness, nor the unmediated ultimate dimension of primordial knowing itself. In this, Longchenpa assigns them to the category of "empty forms," which function as milestones on the path which must eventually subside, but are nonetheless important contemplative focal points rooted in intrinsic nondual cognition, even if, as the mere effulgence of nondual awareness, they do not entail unmediated access to nondual awareness itself.

Lhatsün's gesture toward reconciling the two opposing viewpoints takes on a slightly different hue when reviewing his "record of received teachings" (*thob yig*) for the lineage of the *Seventeen Tantras* and its associated corpus of texts and rituals.[106] Here Lhatsün records that he received this scriptural collection through a series of overlapping lineages that include Longchenpa, on the one hand, and Sokdokpa and his teacher Shikpo Lingpa, on the other. Lhatsün perhaps also inherited along with these lineages the two divergent streams of interpretation about the status of the fourth visionary phase of direct transcendence. This might help explain why Lhatsün's reductionist depiction of Longchenpa's view on this topic so closely reflects Sokdokpa's similar caricature in his reply to Ratna Lingpa decades before.

Finally, we can see in Lhatsün's avowed attempt to reconcile these two opposing opinions about what the state of final awakening looks that he subtly proposes a third position, which does not quite fit with either of the two previously presented. Lhatsün clearly implies in his discussion that it is at the optimization of awareness, the third visionary phase, and

[106] *rDzogs chen rgyud bcu bdun gyi thob yig gser gyi yang zhun*, in Nam mkha' 'jigs med, *gSung 'bum*, vol. 4, 193–214.

not at the exhaustion of reality, when visionary experiences would either vanish or stabilize. Lhatsün seems to understand that the exhaustion of reality is rather when the awakened adept newly acquires the power to extend compassion to all beings. Strikingly, he interprets this perfection of compassionate engagement with beings as the core feature of the "youthful body within a vase." This trope, as touched upon above, is *Heart Essence* imagery for the transition into the final fruition of complete awakening, as presaged by the dissolution of manifest phenomena back into the original ground – the *Tantra of Self-Arisen Awareness* likens the result of this process to a statue enclosed within a vase. Recall that this moment signals an eschatological return of apparent phenomena to latent potentiality, back to the indeterminate primeval origin, before the vase's "seal" was torn asunder in the cosmogonic act of primordial knowing's misrecognition of its ground-manifestation as other than its own dynamic expression. Here, quite unlike Longchenpa and Sokdokpa in his reply to Garwang Ösal, for whom the "pureland of the youthful body within a vase" expresses itself inwardly rather than outwardly, Lhatsün enlists the familiar Buddhist image of the moon's reflection on water to maintain that the youthful body within a vase signals the simultaneous appearance of radiance both internally, like the moon in the sky, and externally, like the moon's myriad reflections cast on every individual surface of water. For Lhatsün, then, the exhaustion of reality is fundamentally about how buddhas can act in the world to extend their compassionate influence to all, even while, as awakened ones, they have transcended the limitations that define ordinary dualistic experience. And yet, in presenting his formulation of this modality of action Lhatsün casts it resolutely in terms of the continuity of radiant dynamism, not only subjectively, within the mind-body of a buddha, but objectively too, as it shines forth to touch all beings.

## Concluding Reflections

This examination of Old School perspectives concerning the fourth and final visionary stage of direct transcendence has revealed that there was a genuine debate among *Heart Essence* practitioners and scholars about the role of visionary experience in awakened cognition and that in the

16th and 17th centuries Longchenpa was a lightning rod for suspicion about adopting an overly negative account. Reviewing some of the positions staked out on this issue has brought a number of observations to the surface. First, it is not at all clear when disagreement over this issue first emerged. While there seems to be no discernible sign of controversy in what was perhaps the earliest commentary on the *Tantra of Unimpeded Sound*, chief among the *Seventeen Tantras*, Nyima Bum, in the first comprehensive treatise of this tradition composed in the late 12th or early 13th century, might have referenced a difference of opinion on this issue when he delivered a rebuttal to the misconceived notion that visionary experience vanishes in the end. In the 15th century, Ratna Lingpa posed questions about the dissolution or continuation of visionary experience as a knotty theoretical issue to think through, suggesting perhaps that the matter was alive then too and open for consideration and debate. Moreover, both Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyeltsen and Lhatsün Namkha Jikmé contrast their image of Longchenpa's view, namely, that visionary appearance vanishes, to that of prior generations of lamas, who, they claim, maintained precisely the opposite. These references to prior generations could suggest that the opinion that visionary experience reaches peak vividness and stabilizes at this stage might have emerged as a recognizable current of interpretation among *Heart Essence* practitioners and exegetes sometime during the first several centuries of the *Heart Essence* tradition's existence in Tibet, even before Longchenpa's time. Nonetheless, without corroborating evidence more conclusive than Nyima Bum's ambiguous remarks analyzed above, it is difficult to interpret Sokdokpa's and Lhatsün's references to the prior prevalence of this strain of interpretation with any degree of certainty.

We do know that by Sokdokpa's time in the late 16th and early 17th century, or at least in his own Old School milieu, the view of the exhaustion of reality as an immersion in a visionary pureland attracted some controversy. Sokdokpa suffered criticisms vicariously through Garwang Ösal on this point and Sokdokpa himself acknowledged the difficulty that others might have with this position at the conclusion of his reply to this lama from Gonjo: "it is taught that if this is communicated in front of those with different doctrinal positions, they will give rise to misconceptions and end up in the lower realms." However, Lhatsün's mid-17th century reflections

on this difference of opinion are difficult to interpret along similarly stark lines. Lhatsün's remarks might reflect a slightly muted attempt to reconcile two conflicting and contentious interpretative communities. But they could just as easily voice, as Lhatsün himself explicitly claims, nothing more than a difference of opinion on a rather minor doctrinal point.

All these uncertainties notwithstanding, taken together the evidence suggests that the alternative stream of interpretation expressed by Sokdokpa concerning what awakening looks like for an emergent awakened one persisted until Longchenpa's actual position – beyond its mere caricature – eclipsed it sometime after the middle of the 17th century. Precisely when and how Longchenpa's reputation won out remains a mystery. His voice was certainly authoritative enough by the late-16th and mid-17th centuries to earn from Sokdokpa and Lhatsün the honorific epithet of "Omniscient One," even as they either openly disagreed with him, misrepresented his perspective, or portrayed the putative opposing viewpoint in flattering terms. Moreover, that in his mature reflection on the topic Sokdokpa shifts his opinion to reflect much closer how Longchenpa understood it invites the question of how familiar Sokdokpa was with Longchenpa's writings. Did Sokdokpa revise his formulation in consultation with Longchenpa's works? Were Longchenpa's writings even widely circulated and read in the 16th and 17th centuries? Or did his putative position circulate as mere hearsay, based more on his reputation as a great scholar than on serious engagement with his works?

Against this backdrop, perhaps the ascension of Longchenpa's actual view on the matter to something of an orthodoxy was set in motion by Jikmé Lingpa's ('Jigs med gling pa, 1729/1730–1798) popularization of Longchenpa through the revelation and widespread dissemination of the *Heart Essence of the Great Expanse* (*Klong chen snying thig*) visionary cycle in the 18th and 19th centuries.[107] Whatever the case may have been, two things are certain – Longchenpa became a focal point for *Heart Essence* exegetes such as Sokdokpa and Lhatsün in the 16th and 17th centuries to voice concerns about promoting an excessively negative portrayal of awakening; and sometime before the 20th century, this critical

[107] For more on Jikmé Lingpa and his famous *Heart Essence of the Great Expanse* (*Longchen Nyingtik*), see van Schaik 2015.

reception of Longchenpa's writings, or an idea of Longchenpa's position at the very least, had so receded from view that his perspective came to be understood among most Old School circles as the only position that was ever proposed on the topic.

We know from the passages analyzed above that crucial to this presumed disagreement is what precisely is meant by the absence of "intensification and dissipation," (*'phel 'grib*) or "intensification and dissolution" (*'phel thim*): whether it signals the stabilization of visionary experience in awakened cognition at the culmination of the path, the indissolubility of the latent capacity of manifest experience in primordial knowing occasioned by the return to the original ground at the stage of the fruition, or some other possibility. Recall, on this note, how Longchenpa seized on the absence of "intensification and dissipation" to explain not the stabilization of visionary experiences in awakened cognition, as Sokdokpa did, but the primordial union of radiance and emptiness in the ground of manifest appearances – the "ground presencing" – even after the final dissolution of visionary experience, and in spite of the visionary waxing and waning of luminous forms on the path – the "path presencing." Moreover, unlike Longchenpa, Sokdokpa applied to the term "exhaustion" from the "exhaustion of reality" the familiar rubric of external, internal, and secret to frame the final dissolution of fluctuations in visionary experience as the secret level of reality's exhaustion, which happens in tandem with the dissolution of dualistic concepts and the physical body on the external and internal levels, respectively. And yet, despite these seeming differences and Sokdokpa's critical caricature of Longchenpa's putative position on this topic in his reply to Ratna Lingpa's questions, Sokdokpa's more mature considerations, voiced later in response to Garwang Ösal, reflect nearly verbatim Longchenpa's perspective on the topic: appearances radiate internally, but not externally – even as Sokdokpa continued to call out others for misunderstanding the subtle point of appearances' perdurance in awakened cognition.

For Sokdokpa, and for Ratna Lingpa and Lhatsün as well, it would seem that the terms of the argument over whether or not the visionary experiences of direct transcendence remain for an emergent awakened one reflects more than just a concern over the status of visionary appearance itself. More fundamentally for them, I would argue, it is the continuation

in a new guise of a broader point of contention over questions with a venerable pedigree in Indian Buddhist circles: What is it like to be a buddha? How can buddhas, who have by definition transcended the conditionality of samsaric existence, nonetheless cognize and act in the conditioned world to benefit beings? Is perception so inextricably bound up with delusion and the other conditions of samsaric existence that to be free of these conditions necessarily entails the vacuity of experience? Or is there something pure that remains in the wake of this freedom, an unconditioned mode of nondual perception that nonetheless enables buddhas to perceive the conditions of beings to act in the world on their behalf? And if such nondual perception is what remains, how, without discrete subjects and objects, would it be meaningful to conceive of this kind of perception as any perception at all?

Longchenpa would seem to approach this set of questions by proposing an undulation of awakened modes of embodiment and knowledge between latency and manifestation – back and forth between the original ground and the manifest world and beings. Sokdokpa, Lhatsün, and perhaps Nyima Bum before them, however, seem to suggest that the phenomenal experience of the contemplative practitioner need not be voided first to usher in more refined expressions of awakened forms and modes of primordial knowing at the level of the fruition. Rather, they would seem to argue, the visionary experiences invoked on the contemplative path *are continuous* with those fully awakened expressions, once the subtlest traces of dualistic clinging dissolve, thereby enabling the self-manifestation of intrinsic primordial knowing to operate along its most potent and far-reaching frequency of pure spontaneous altruism.

As John Makransky has observed, this paradox of how the unconditioned cognition and embodiment of a fully awakened being can continue to operate in the conditional world gave rise to the Mahāyāna doctrine of "non-abiding nirvāṇa" (*apratiṣṭhita nirvāṇa*): according to this formulation, a buddha's awakening is "bound neither to the causal chain of conditioned existence, nor to the isolation of a quiescent (pre-Mahāyāna type) final nirvāṇa" (Makransky 1997: 11–12). This basic conundrum, moreover, has also generated a number of associated doctrinal quandaries, such as whether or not the awakened cognition of a buddha contains knowledge (*jñāna*) (Almogi 2009a); whether it contains any content

whatsoever (Tomlinson 2018 and 2019); how, if awakening entails an unconditioned vacuity of cognitive content, a buddha can nonetheless become embodied and act in ways that resonate with the conditioned experiences of ordinary beings (Makransky 1997); and whether we can apprehend at all this unconditioned state of awakening through ordinary conditioned modes of thought and language.

Tibet's *Heart Essence* Great Perfection tradition formed within this set of concerns. Indeed, David Germano has observed that historically Tibet's Great Perfection traditions have paradoxically been criticized for "erring on the side of too much *and* too little commitment, commitment to ontologies, to language, to human conventions" (Germano 1994: 286). Furthermore, Germano continues, the *Heart Essence* reinscribes this tension "in its central hermeneutic of potentiality (*nang gsal*) and actuality (*phyir gsal*)," or, in the language of luminosity, "external radiance" and "internal radiance." This central tension is further inflected in its contemplative pairing of "breakthrough" and "direct transcendence" meditations, and also in the clusters of terms that accompany each, such as original purity/spontaneous presence, expanse/awareness, emptiness/radiance, and so on.

Further along these lines, recall that the tension between positive and negative depictions of awakened cognition is endemic to the terminology of the *Seventeen Tantras*, the scriptural source of the *Heart Essence* tradition. This tension, moreover, is encapsulated in the semantic range of the key term *nangwa*, which conveys both the external "manifestations" of buddhas and their *maṇḍala* from the heart of every being, and the "luminous visions" of these in contemplative practice, among other senses. Scholastically speaking, questions about the status of *nangwa* in awakened cognition must further contend with the cosmogonic/eschatological framework of the *Heart Essence* tradition, which proposes, as we have seen, that manifest phenomena emerged from a primordial rupture, triggered by primordial knowing misrecognizing its own rippling dynamism as other than itself. The awakening event, on this account, must signal the coiling back of manifest phenomena back into the original ground, like a statue within a vase, only to hail immediately thereafter the spontaneous re-emanation of awakened forms of embodiment and knowledge from this dynamic latency for the benefit of all beings. But

the question remains: How does this speculative account square with the contemplative experience of *yogin*s?

Seen in this light, perhaps the difference of opinion on this issue can be attributed in part to the inflections of two divergent orientations – the scholastic and the yogic – typified here, on the one hand, by Longchenpa's intellectual imperative to square the cosmological/eschatological *Heart Essence* framework with the dynamics of its contemplative visionary practices; and, on the other hand, by Sokdokpa's and Lhatsün's penchant for construing contemplative visionary experience to thread through to the final fruition, without feeling the compunction to tidily account for an eschatological detour before its modes of embodiment and knowing can be fully operational for the welfare of beings.

When viewed from a broader perspective, moreover, the disagreement over whether the fourth visionary experience of direct transcendence entails full immersion in a colorful mandalic paradise, a complete voiding of all experiential content whatsoever, or an undulation between latency and manifestation, confronts us with yet another iteration, articulated in the visionary idiom of the *Heart Essence* contemplative tradition, of a basic tension between negative and positive formulations of awakening that has run throughout Mahāyāna Buddhism since its inception. The long life, through its many instantiations, of this central but intractable Buddhist paradox suggests that the issue of what awakening looks like for a buddha has been a particularly productive issue to think with for Buddhist theoreticians and practitioners through the ages. That Tibetan *Heart Essence* scholars and adepts were also wrestling with this issue, moreover, illustrates that for all its seeming innovativeness this Tibetan tradition of Buddhist theory and practice nonetheless inflects the very same tensions as its Indian Buddhist counterparts. In this sense, among others, we can see how the Tibetan *Heart Essence* of the Great Perfection remains grounded in an Indian Buddhist ethos and set of concerns, even as it articulates these concerns in terms of contemplative visionary practices and theories of embodiment and the cosmos whose precise relationships with Indian Buddhist (or non-Buddhist, or non-Indian) precedents remains little understood.

However, even if the tension driving this difference of opinion reflects some continuity with Indian Buddhist doctrinal theory, the socio-political

and theoretical implications of its Tibetan *Heart Essence* iteration in the 16th and 17th centuries nonetheless brings to light dynamics specific to the Himalayan Buddhist world. The Himalayan Buddhist millenarian movement of finding and "opening" utopian "hidden lands" (*sbas yul*) nestled in the Himalayas, where Tibetans could escape and settle during times of socio-political and environmental crisis in Tibet, suggests itself as a concrete, real-world corollary to espousing a view of ongoing visionary experience of purelands as the highest goal of Buddhist practice. Sokdokpa and Lhatsün Namkha Jikmé were both steeped in the "hidden land" tradition.[108] Lhatsün in particular writes extensively of his travels to reopen the hidden land of Sikkim, casting the landscape and the new tantric kingdom he would help found there precisely in terms of the rainbow-color *maṇḍala* imagery of his *Heart Essence* visionary practice.

I have argued elsewhere, moreover, that Sokdokpa's considerations on the topic of the fourth visionary experience throughout his writings form an integral part of a broader theory of embodiment and materiality with ramifications for construing how specialized material objects and ritual actions can work in tandem with contemplative practices to transform people, both physically and cognitively (Gentry 2017: 171–216, 284–290). Further along these lines, there is also the larger question, common to Himalayan Buddhist traditions wherever and whenever they have been practiced, of what these theories might imply about the transformation of the body of the contemplative adept upon awakening and death. What, more specifically, might divergent views of awakening entail for understandings of the partial or complete dematerialization of the dying adept's body, often into rainbow light – the famous "rainbow body" – and the materialization or re-materialization of relics from the bodily remains?[109]

For now, these and other implications of the *Heart Essence* debate over what awakening looks like for a buddha must await future analysis. The present discussion has been more narrowly focused on excavating a

[108] For more on the "hidden land" phenomenon of Himalayan Buddhism, see Garrett, McDougal, and Samuel ed. 2021. For details on the roles of Sokdokpa and Lhatsün Namkha Jikmé in either promoting or reopening such "hidden lands," particularly the "hidden land" of Sikkim, see Mullard 2012 and Gentry 2017: 55–56, and 415–418.

[109] For more on "rainbow body," see Kapstein 2004 and Tiso 2016. For details on the relationship between saintly death and relic production in Tibet, see Martin 1994.

little-known current of interpretation to illustrate that its perspective on awakening as final immersion in a utopian pureland could very well have been considered a viable understanding among *Heart Essence* practitioners until it was eclipsed sometime after the middle of the 17th century.

## Abbreviations

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|---|---|
| D | See Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan, *Collected Writings of Sog-bzlog-pa Blo-gros-rgyal-mtshan*. |
| GTG | *sGra thal 'gyur tantra*. See Ny. |
| Kt | See Vimalamitra, *Paṇchen dri med bshes gnyen gyi dgongs nyams sgron ma snang byed 'bar ba'i gsang rgyud*. |
| N | *Rje 'dren mchog dam pa skad gnyis smra ba mkhas grub blo gros rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po'i gsung 'bum*. Library of rNam rgyal lha rtse Monastery, Namchi, Western Sikkim. |
| NG-Tb | *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* (mTshams brag edition). |
| NG-Tk | *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* (gTing skyes edition). |
| Nn | See Vimalamitra, *rTsa rgyud sgra thal 'gyur gyi 'grel pa rin po che snang byed sgron ma*. |
| Ny | *rNying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*. |
| T | *Dri ba rnam par rgyal ba'i dris lan lung rigs 'byung gnas*. Thimphu: National Library of Bhutan, 1985. |
| TCD | *Theg mchog mdzod*, in *mDzod bdun*, vol. 6, 1490.4–1491.1. |

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*mDzod bdun* – See Klong chen pa rab ’byams Dri med ’od zer.

Nam mkha’ ’jigs med – See Lha btsun Nam mkha’ ’jigs med.

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