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Conclusion

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The present collective volume is the result of a comprehensive and meticulous examination of the religious tradition known as the Northern Treasures (*Byang gter*), which played a pivotal and significant role in the history of Tibet. Focusing primarily on the life and works of Rigdzin Gödem (1337–ca. 1401), alongside the rule of the successive Gungthang Kings, our research project on this lineage first introduced the milieu in which what was to become the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism gradually took shape in the post-dynastic era (late 10th century or early 11th century). Despite the numerous conjectures that affect the vision that the academic world has of the historical roots of this tradition in the 8th century, there are elements that clearly indicate that it evidently did not spring out of nowhere during the post-dynastic era. It is concretely rooted in the original spread of Buddhism during a period of religious kings who favored its diffusion and laid the foundation for a sustainable implementation that would shape the entire cultural heritage of Tibetans. All subsequent developments of this ancient lineage are anchored in this foundational context. Retrospectively, this period became known as the Early Spread (*snga dar*) of Buddhism in Tibet, spanning from the late 7th or early 8th century to the collapse of the Yarlung dynasty in Central Tibet, either in 842 or 942 AD. It was followed by a brief “Age of Fragmentation” (*bsil ba’i dus*) during which the embers of this early diffusion gradually ignited the conditions for its revival. Concurrently, the misinterpretation of some crucial tantric points by Tibetan lamas served as a cause for the invitation of Indian paṇḍits during the so-called Later Spread (*phyi dar*), which started in the early 11th century. It is during this later phase (and probably even before) that references to rich and complex narratives connected to the imperial period and the Early Spread were elaborated, either on patent historical bases or on what some believe to be merely legendary accounts. Central to the present research project are figures such as Padmasambhava, Trisong Detsen, Nanam Dorjé Düdjom, and other prominent religious individuals of the dynastic period (8th–9th centuries) whose emanations were to play a decisive role in the later history of Tibet.

Following the collapse of the Yarlung dynasty, Buddhism experienced a period of decline until the advent of the Later Spread. However, it did not disappear entirely in the interim. While the monastic tradition indeed lost its royal support and was completely disbanded, some lay masters and practitioners were actively engaged in the task

of collecting the remnants of the early teachings, whose transmissions were supposedly maintained in an uninterrupted manner. These teachings are referred to as the “Kama” (*bKa’ ma*), namely complex systems of instructions based on texts and cycles whose redaction is believed to date back to the golden age of the 8th century. Over time, this tradition was enriched and completed by a system of treasure revelations called “Terma” (*gTer ma*), i.e., individuals works or collections, as well as artefacts and other religious items said to have been hidden in sacred places in the 8th century and whose discoveries were announced in prophetic guides. The origins of this revelatory tradition generally trace back to Padmasambhava who was assisted by some of his disciples. According to the traditional narratives recounting the origins of the lineage that is the focus of the present research, Padmasambhava is said to have played a key role in hiding some books in a sacred sanctuary atop Mount Zangzang Lhadrak, “The Divine Rock of Zangzang.” Subsequently, in 1366, these scriptures were unearthed by an individual predestined for this task, named Rigdzin Gödem. He was also regarded as an emanation of Nanam Dorjé Düdjom, one of Padmasambhava’s main disciples. As we have seen, because of the location of the discovery, in the district region of Jang (“North”) Ngamring, the corpus that was revealed there came to be regarded as making up the early tradition of the “Northern Treasures” (*Byang gter*).

Investigating the pre-history of this lineage has proven crucial to understanding the later developments essentially discussed in the present volume. From this perspective, exploring the rich and complex narratives of this pre-history provided a solid foundation for generating significant insights into the later, post-dynastic tradition itself. Hence, these accounts linking back the lineage to the early days of the pre-Nyingma school effectively bridge the gap between what some see as the mythic past of this lineage and its more documented and datable history, underscoring the fluidity between legendary narratives and historical events in a manner so characteristic of the post-dynastic Tibetan culture.

From this angle, Rigdzin Gödem’s life story unquestionably portrays him as a seminal figure for the whole Nyingma tradition. His contributions to this lineage through the revelation of numerous scriptures have enriched it to such an extent that the Northern Treasures could very well be considered *ab initio* as a self-sustaining, fully-fledged system centered upon Mahā, Anu, and Atiyoga teachings. Later contributors, both authors and tertöns, added to the original corpus of works, gradually modelling this tradition into a school in its own right. Thus, the system of the Northern Treasures progressively shaped its destiny, evolving over time from a lay foundation—most evidently relying on small hermitages—to the building of sizable

monastic institutions such as the famed establishment of Dorjé Drak (rDo rje brag), founded in 1632 AD by Rigdzin Ngakgi Wangpo (1580–1639).

Thus, by the 12th century, grand narratives such as that of Padmasambhava were clearly established, weaving together real historical elements into a cohesive story. In all likelihood, during its elaboration, this complex account combined together a wide variety of sources and stories, and inevitably incorporated blatant anachronisms. Blurring the lines between facts and embellishments, the strict chronological accuracy was eventually obscured into a unified discourse in which pivotal figures started to appear in a light that probably outshines their original features. A good example of this happens to be Nanam Dorje Düjom who plays a seemingly excessive role in this narrative.

In contrast, Nubchen Sangye Yeshe emerges as a personage of far greater significance than previously acknowledged by both traditional and academic historians. His influence clearly extends beyond the Anuyoga tradition with which he is often nearly exclusively associated, or that of the Yamāntaka systems as preserved in the Nyingma tradition.

Another crucial element that should definitely be taken into account in reviewing the early formation of what was to become the Nyingma School was the importance of the teachings received in India in the 10th century by Zurpoche's father (Zur Shérab Jungné). It is evident that the early diffusion of these teachings had a deeper impact on the legacy of this tradition at the time it started to elaborate its own history and to establish its doctrinal tenets on a firmer ground.

In this perspective, it would not be superfluous to reassess the role played by lesser-known tertöns that got lost in a nearly-total historical obscurity but may possibly have not been insignificant in their own time. Among those who could warrant a definite reappraisal of their literary contributions are Sarben Chokmé, Tseten Gyeltsen (about whom more will be said in vol. 2), and evidently Rinchen Lingpa whose role has been oddly undermined in later sources. On this topic, the intrigue surrounding the cycle of the *Khandro Nyingthik* deserves a closer examination to trace out how it was eventually transcribed and codified. The biographical material associated with great contemporaries of Gödem, such as Sangyé Lingpa, Dorjé Lingpa, and later on Ratna Lingpa, are also sources that would deserve in-depth researches in their own right.

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The period in which Gödem lived and the patronage he expected from the Gungthang kings—according to several prophetic statements—do

not accurately mirror the state of affairs as it unfolded in 8th century Tibet when king Trisong Detsen officially supported the diffusion of Buddhism. Rather, Gödem was confronted with repeated difficulties and a limited patronage which eventually led him to concretely move his religious activities towards the southern border of Tibet. Nonetheless, his spiritual legacy flourished through the active diffusion of the early teachings he had revealed. The Northern Treasures system, like probably all other lineages of the Nyingma tradition, can be thought of as a tree, with its seeds firmly grounded in the royal period, its roots and main trunk developing into a remarkably coherent corpus from the mid-14th century onwards, and its branches and leaves continuously growing to this day, providing the tradition with an abundant and lush leafage that ensures its long-term survival.

His immediate heirs and spiritual descendants played a considerable role in the development of his tradition, with five early specific lineages that branched out, including *inter alia* those of the son, of the nephew, and so on. A century later, with patriarchs such as Setön Pema Wangchen (15th c.), the Northern Treasures can be regarded on the religious scene of Tibet as an already perfectly organized school with its own history, its own canon, and so on. These particular themes will be the focus of the next volume of our research project.

