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# THE PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE OF AMULETS IN TIBETAN BUDDHIST TANTRA

## Wearing, Analyzing, and Recognizing Your Way to Liberation

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*Abstract: Buddhist amulets have been a topic of academic research for decades. But scholarly presuppositions that amulets have circulated primarily in popular Buddhist milieus, related only tangentially to the pursuits of elite practitioners, has limited our appreciation of how amulets have inflected philosophical and contemplative concerns. This article aims to challenge this lopsided perspective by showing how Buddhists in Tibet integrated analytic contemplation into the practice of writing down, wearing, and putting into practice short tantric scriptures that claim to liberate through wearing. The discussion argues that carving out a place for analysis in amulet-tantra use can be traced to the revelations of the thirteenth century visionary scholar Guru Chöwang's commentarial glosses on the phrase "liberation-through-wearing." This discussion contextualizes the change of emphasizing analysis in amulet-tantra practice as a transition between the earlier Heart Essence of Vimalamitra revelations and the later Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī revelations in response to ongoing criticisms of the Great Perfection. This article concludes that the Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī's tantra-amulets drew from Guru Chöwang's revelation to harmonize analytic inquiry with the earlier Vimalamitra dispensation in ways that blur the boundaries between embodied tantric practice and discursive philosophical inquiry. This blurring of boundaries has ramifications for how we study Buddhist Tantra and philosophy.*

## INTRODUCTION

The practice of wearing texts as amulets has been a ubiquitous feature of Buddhist societies from antiquity to the present. So fundamental to Buddhist traditions is the custom of carrying small books or written formulas on the body that it might have originated before the middle of the first millennium, not long after Buddhists first began recording scriptures in writing and traveling with portable volumes.<sup>1</sup> Given the prevalence of amulets in Buddhist societies, scholars have considered them from a variety of perspectives and across a range of traditions and geographical regions.<sup>2</sup> However, Buddhist philosophical reflections relevant to the nature and function of amulets have by and large escaped scholarly attention. This relative neglect is arguably because scholars have typically assigned amulets to the realm of popular Buddhist practice, where the aims are generally thought to be only pragmatic or apotropaic in thrust and therefore related only tangentially to so-called elite doctrinal or soteriological concerns.<sup>3</sup>



This article questions this assumption by showing how in Tibet the range of efficacy granted to Buddhist amulets has sometimes extended well beyond the pragmatic sphere into the soteriological dimension of Buddhist doctrine and practice, prompting tantric Buddhist visionaries and scholars to use scriptural amulets as focal points for contemplative reflection and instruction. Indeed, since as early as the eleventh or twelfth century, Buddhists in Tibet have revealed and promoted the copying or printing of scriptures in the form of portable amulet-booklets that promise not only pragmatic or apotropaic benefits but liberation itself to anyone who wears them.<sup>4</sup>

Such “liberation-through-wearing” (*btags grol*) amulets, as they came to be called, first appeared in the form of tantras that have served as foundational texts for the Great Perfection Heart Essence (*rdzogs chen snying thig*) tradition belonging to the Nyingma or Old School of Tibetan Buddhism. These tantras contain terse contemplative practice instructions, often framed by cosmological formulations and self-referential passages directing readers to copy the tantras in gold ink on blue paper to craft miniature portable volumes to be worn on the body. The tantras gave birth to a considerable body of commentaries and associated texts, which further addresses the pragmatics of how to craft the tantras into amulets, wear them, and recite them. This corpus also expands on doctrinal themes in the tantras to probe questions concerning the fundamental nature of the mind, body, and world; what delusion about these ultimate matters entails; and the means and results of gaining freedom from delusion.

Liberation-through-wearing tantras have also come under attack. Tibetan doctrinal scholars periodically wrote polemical treatises rejecting the claim that wearing amulet-tantras can hasten liberation from *samsara*. Criticisms prompted apologetic responses in kind, thus giving rise to a diverse repertoire of perspectives on amulets in addition to the amulet-tantras themselves and their commentaries.

This article builds on my previous research into one such polemical exchange prompted in the sixteenth century by a text attributed, probably falsely, to the Eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorjé (1507–1554).<sup>5</sup> Its author questioned what, if any, Buddhist doctrinal rationales there might be behind the claim of “liberation through wearing,” particularly given the traditional Buddhist emphasis on the inalienability of karmic cause and effect and the priority of mind training in achieving progress on the Buddhist path. Here, I trace this argument and the liberation-through-wearing tantras that prompted it back to the formative period of this amulet literature, between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, to understand what it may have meant for the Tibetans who promoted and rejected it. By analyzing this issue, I hope to show how these amulet-tantras served as important focal points of philosophical reflection and argumentation for Tibet’s Great Perfection adherents as well as its detractors in ways that potentially challenge the boundaries of what has typically counted as philosophy in contemporary Buddhist Studies circles. In this vein, I aim to demonstrate that these small tantric scriptures do not only promise to liberate anyone who wears them, pure and simple; more fundamentally, they articulate and embody the Great Perfection Heart Essence tradition’s theoretical and contemplative frameworks in ways that deliberately entangle material and discursive registers to achieve a range of effects.

The discussion ahead is divided into four parts. First, I lay out in broad strokes what we know about the putative origins of and historical relationships between the Heart Essence’s liberation-through-wearing tantra-amulets discussed in this study. I then delve deeper into the earliest strata of liberation-through-wearing tantras, touching on what their self-referential statements might tell

us about how amulet-tantras have formed and functioned. I next survey the different and sometimes conflicting opinions regarding the efficacy of amulet-tantras beginning in the thirteenth century, starting with criticisms and followed by rebuttals. Finally, I track changes that took place in amulet-tantras from the thirteenth century on to show how the polyvalence of the phrase “liberation-through-wearing” and the homophony of the Tibetan term “wearing” (*btags*) with other terms led Old School visionaries to incorporate analytic contemplation more fully into amulet use. This final section charts developments in the language and imagery of liberation-through-wearing tantras through targeted comparisons between the amulet-tantras and commentaries revealed by the visionary scholar, Guru Chöwang (1212–1270), and those included in the later Heart Essence of the Dākinī revelation.

The discussion suggests that closely attending to the language of this tantric amulet literature can tap previously unexplored reflections about the nature of language, embodiment, cognition, and the possibilities of human freedom that weave together philosophical analysis, contemplative practice, and material culture in ways that both intersect with more mainstream Buddhist philosophical currents and depart from them into novel directions. As we will see ahead, this rich reservoir of reflection about amulet practice in Tibet calls into question the sharp distinction between elite philosophical discourses and popular tantric practices in Buddhist societies.

## **HEART ESSENCE TANTRA-AMULETS: SOURCES AND EARLY DEVELOPMENTS**

Before we delve into the tantras and consider the different viewpoints about their claim to liberate, a few remarks are in order about their putative origins. Owing to Tibet’s tradition of revelation known as the treasure (*gter ma*) tradition, which continues to this day, tantras that claim to liberate through wearing are numerous in the Old School.<sup>6</sup> When liberation-through-wearing tantras surfaced in the eleventh or twelfth century, Buddhist lineages in Tibet that would come to be known collectively as the Old School were presenting themselves as heirs to Buddhist teachings first brought to Tibet in the late eighth to early ninth centuries by Indian Buddhist teachers such as Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra, and others active in Tibet at the invitation of the Tibetan emperor Tri Songdetsen (742–c. 800).<sup>7</sup> As the tradition would maintain, while serving as tantric gurus to the Tibetan imperial court and thereby transmitting teachings that were to be practiced and passed on in an unbroken lineal succession, they also worked, sometimes in collaboration with Tibetans, to conceal numerous texts and *sacra* throughout the natural landscape and temples of Tibet for future generations of prophesied treasure revealers to excavate and promote anew when the time is right for their propagation and practice.<sup>8</sup>

Tantras that liberate through wearing are part of this tradition of ongoing revelation. Their periodic discovery in Tibet over the course of centuries is highly significant for understanding their nature, use, and transformations over time. According to the tradition, the periodic revelation of such time capsules sealed and distributed throughout Tibet results in a greatly shortened or compressed lineage, connecting Vimalamitra or Padmasambhava with later treasure revealers through the mediation of the Tibetan environment, thus bypassing the ordinary channel of person-to-person transmission, sometimes by centuries. This dynamic, as the tradition has it, ensures that each treasure revelation is perfectly suited to its unique sociohistorical context. This combination of timeliness and direct lineage lends the treasures an air of heightened authority, power, and

efficacy. However, as we will see below, not all Tibetans have accepted the authenticity of treasure revelations, even as the popularity of treasures has earned them a place in every Tibetan Buddhist school that survives to the present.

The first instances of the genre of liberation-through-wearing tantras appear to have surfaced with the revelation of the earliest Heart Essence dispensation, which came to be known as the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra after the Indian master Vimalamitra, who was credited with translating this treasure cycle into Tibetan and concealing it for future treasure revealers. The primary examples I will consider in this early corpus are the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra*, presented as the main tantra among the Seventeen Tantras of the Heart Essence;<sup>9</sup> the *Only Child of All Buddhas* or the *Only Child of All Teachings*, among several other names, which claims to be the foundational scripture of not just the Heart Essence dispensation but all Buddhist teachings;<sup>10</sup> and the *Threefold Testament of the Buddhas*.<sup>11</sup>

Although the precise origins of the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra are murky, it likely formed during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.<sup>12</sup> In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the reputation of Padmasambhava gradually eclipsed that of Vimalamitra as the preeminent treasure concealer in Tibetan history and, more broadly, as the defining figure in the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet. With this development, there surfaced liberation-through-wearing tantras that were cognate or nearly identical with the earlier Heart Essence of Vimalamitra tantras and newly attributed to the activities of Padmasambhava instead of Vimalamitra. The earliest such instance known to me is a set of tantras revealed in 1233 by Guru Chökyi Wangchuk, more commonly known as Guru Chöwang, as part of his Great Perfection treasure cycle Union of the Buddhas.<sup>13</sup>

Around eighty years later, a set of six tantras, individually titled but typically grouped together under the rubric of Six Tantras that Liberate-through-Wearing, were said to surface as the foundational scriptures of the Heart Essence of the Dākinī.<sup>14</sup> This treasure cycle, whose transmission and concealment in Tibet is attributed to Padmasambhava, is most commonly regarded to have been excavated in 1313 by the treasure revealer Pema Ledrel Tsel (d. 1319), otherwise known as Tsultrim Dorjé. Other roughly contemporaneous figures were also credited with its revelation and redaction, giving the appearance that there was something of a competition around its revelation and legacy.<sup>15</sup> Whoever was truly responsible for its revelation, the Heart Essence of the Dākinī represents itself as a continuation of the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra but with Padmasambhava replacing Vimalamitra as the Indian master responsible for its transmission to Tibet and concealment for future generations.

These amulet-tantras have had extremely fluid textual lives, appearing in some form or another throughout the revelatory cycles of the most prominent visionaries in Tibetan history. For instance, although the *Only Child of All Buddhas* most famously appears in the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra and the Six Tantras that Liberate through Wearing appears in the Heart Essence of the Dākinī—often referred to collectively as the twofold Heart Essence (*Snying thig rnam gnyis*)—the same tantras, or excerpts and variations thereof, also appear in the revelations of Sangyé Lingpa (1340–1396), Rigdzin Gödem (1337–1408), Karma Lingpa (b. fourteenth c.), Ratna Lingpa (1403–1479), Pema Lingpa (1450–1521), and Jatson Nyingpo (1585–1656), among several other of Tibet's illustrious treasure revealers.<sup>16</sup> These tantras, moreover, have also given birth to a considerable body of commentaries and associated texts. Longchenpa Drimé Özer's (1308–1363) fourteenth century collection the *Heart Essence in Four Parts* (*Snying thig ya bzhi*), which brings

together versions of the twofold Heart Essence (minus the Seventeen Tantras) with Longchenpa's own commentarial writings, contains at least thirty-six individual texts that present themselves as liberation-through-wearing tantras or otherwise center on this theme.<sup>17</sup> And this is not counting Longchenpa's copious citations of these texts in his own compositions.

Most salient for the present discussion is that examination of the intertextuality between a select group of these tantras and commentaries shows that liberation-through-wearing texts revealed by Guru Chöwang in 1233 mark a transition between the earlier amulet-tantras of the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra and the Padmasambhava amulet-tantras of the Heart Essence of the Dākinī. This transition, as I will discuss ahead, is characterized by the greater incorporation of an analytic contemplative approach into amulet practices that intersects with and departs from more mainstream Buddhist philosophical currents in novel ways. But before we get ahead of ourselves, allow us to first chart the early development of the theories and functions unique to these amulet-tantras.

## FORM AND FUNCTION IN LIBERATION-THROUGH-WEARING TANTRAS

We can best discern emergent statements about what liberation-through-wearing amulet-tantras are, how they should be used, and what their effects include by identifying them in the tantras themselves. It is important to understand at the outset that the early Heart Essence tradition traces its origin to liberation-through-wearing tantras. Put more precisely, we find repeated claims in early Heart Essence literature that a “self-arisen text”—that is, a text spontaneously emanated and unauthored by anyone—appeared as the offspring of all awakened beings and served in turn as the generative seed from which the entire Heart Essence dispensation would subsequently emerge. This claim is made most insistently in self-referential passages in the amulet-tantra known as the *Only Child of All Buddhas*, as illustrated by the following verse:

By radiating forth from this undeluded ground,  
at the very beginning,  
it is an emanated tantra;  
just as effects naturally arise from a cause,  
all expressions have arisen from just this, within a nonconceptual state,  
without having been formed.<sup>18</sup>

Elsewhere, the *Only Child of All Buddhas Tantra* refers to itself as a “self-arisen statement” (*rang byung tshig*), which emerged spontaneously at the beginning of time prior to the bifurcation of existence into saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, purity and impurity, happiness and suffering, wisdom and ignorance, and all other dualities. This time before time, as we see the tantra state here, was also before all thoughts. The merging of the cosmogonic and the epistemic implied in this formulation—that the tantra self-appeared before the bifurcation of manifest existence *and* before the emergence of dualistic thoughts—is a core feature of the philosophy of liberation-through-wearing tantras.<sup>19</sup> As I will touch upon below, this correlation of cosmogonic and epistemic frameworks links with understandings of language and embodiment in ways that imply a

multiplicity of forms and functions for Heart Essence amulet-tantras, ranging across discursive and embodied registers.

The *Only Child of All Buddhas Tantra*'s merging of the cosmogonic and the epistemic is particularly pronounced in the following verses. Here, "awareness" (*rig pa*) refers to timeless and intrinsic nondual cognition, while the emergence of basic conscious awareness and the proliferation of its discursive thoughts—both of which are idiosyncratically conveyed by the Tibetan term *drenpa* (*dran pa*) below—is construed to mark the presence of the tantra in our world:

Because this teaching primordially self-arose  
as the basket of Dharma teachings itself,  
it has been the basis of conscious awareness from the beginning.

Thus, until all discursive thoughts have disappeared,  
this whole teaching will continue to manifest,  
but when discursive thoughts vanish, so does this teaching—  
this is called "*vajra*;"  
because all its words  
are free from the conditions of the elements,  
it is *vajra*, the source of all, the secret mantra.<sup>20</sup>

These and other verses in the tantra point to intrinsic nondual cognition's first moment of self-misrecognition. Here misrecognition is portrayed as an event that happened in the distant past, as the primordial ground mistook the nascent self-expressions of beginningless and dynamic gnosis to be other than itself. This misrecognition gave birth to worlds, beings, and the karmic cycle of repeated birth, death, and rebirth, suffused with suffering. At the same time, however, this misrecognition is also something happening each moment on the personal level as well, as we continue to misrecognize phenomenal experience as other than the dynamic self-expression of our own nondual awakened cognition and thereby perpetually give rise to the dualistic experience of a karmically driven world. Further, on the level of cosmogony, the ground of gnosis unfolds to sediment in the form of the subtle-body matrix of beings, thereby interlinking mind-body, language and text, and cosmos. As the first linguistic expression of the ground, prior to the ground's misrecognition, the role of the tantra is to put an end to discursive thought by both embodying and pointing out the enduring presence of nondual cognition.

The *Only Child of All Buddhas* in this vein is also referred to as the self-resonance of reality (*chos nyid*). As such, it claims to serve as the basis of all other Buddhist teachings. Nonetheless, it does not single out the derivative nature of other Heart Essence Tantras. And indeed, other Heart Essence Tantras, the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* chief among them, make the very same claim to occupy the privileged position as the original tantra. However, such claims to be the Ur-scripture of the Buddhist tradition never implied a unitary sacred language or denied the viability of translation to spread the tantra in other versions or languages. Indeed, the Tibetan texts of the *Only Child of All Buddhas* and the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* both claim to be translations from Sanskrit, while some versions of the *Only Child of All Buddhas* claim additionally to be translated from the language of Uḍḍiyāna, the homeland of Padmasambhava, often taken to be in present day Pakistan. This points to an important aspect of the *Only Child of All Buddhas*' self-conception of scripture

as emerging in multiple languages from the outset, which was expanded upon in the tradition's later developments. As I will show below, this formulation implies that in reading the tantra, or just holding it, one can partake of the self-resonance of reality in any language it finds expression. This aspect extends this tradition's penchant for collapsing the cosmogonic and epistemic into a theory of sacred language. It implies that as the natural reverberation of reality, the tantra, even in the Tibetan language—or in the English language, for that matter—is nonetheless a fusion of form and content, steeped in nondual wisdom.

The idea that the sound of reality finds expression in multiple linguistic formulations theoretically enables us to partake of that reality through more than just reading and comprehending the tantra's content; it implies that beyond whatever its message might conceptually convey the written or auditory form of the scripture in and of itself will also have potent effects when copied, recited, and, most importantly, worn. In this, the tantra bridges the discursive and performative functions of language, enabling its words to work on the body of the reader, listener, or wearer on multiple registers, in multiple languages even as it aims to quell discursive thought.

It is important to emphasize that the potency of the material forms of tantra-amulets, in and of themselves, and their aim of transcending or doing away with discursive thought did not entail they were not meant to be read for content. Indeed, the content of the *Only Child of All Buddhas* and the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* are alike in claiming to constitute the entirety of the Heart Essence tradition, including its origin and theoretical grounding, its contemplative path, and its fruition of awakening. They are quite distinct, however, in scope and form. Whereas the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* is comprehensive and written in relatively clear language, the *Only Child of All Buddhas Tantra* is shorter and written in language that is frequently arcane and difficult to parse. Despite these differences, both were clearly meant to be comprehended, contemplated, and taught, not simply copied and worn on the body like most other amulets in Tibet.

Nowhere in the *Only Child of All Buddhas Tantra* do we read the expression “liberation-through-wearing.” The conception of the *Only Child of All Buddhas* as a liberation-through-wearing tantra is only made explicit in another tantra, titled *Determining the Key Points of Timing*, which is framed as an explanatory tantra to be transmitted together with the main tantra of the *Only Child*.<sup>21</sup> This explanatory tantra, cast as a teaching delivered by the Buddha Vajradhara, stipulates how to make the text into a small portable booklet and wear it, and the astrological, environmental, and sociological conditions—the key points of timing—when reciting it would be most effective, including funerary uses. The designation of the *Only Child of All Buddhas* as a liberation-through-wearing tantra is also made clear in a commentary on the tantra that has been attributed to the seventh or eighth century Indian master Garab Dorjé but is more likely a twelfth or thirteenth century production.<sup>22</sup> Despite its absence of the precise phrase “liberation through wearing,” the *Only Child of All Buddhas* gestures toward its use as an amulet in a few verses. Early in the tantra we find this passage:

If yogis with great fortune who hold this  
recite all its words three times  
with their vajra tongue,

without adding or omitting anything,  
they will also become equal to them (i.e., buddhas)—  
of this there is no doubt.<sup>23</sup>

Here, it is not just “holding” the tantra that brings awakening but reciting it three times.

A similar idea is expressed toward the end of the tantra, but the minimum requirement instead seems to be simply having the tantra in one’s possession.

Beings who have this are buddhas.  
This path of the great secret for seeing beyond  
is not something with mentation, but an emanation—  
it unties the pervasive knot of saṃsāra.<sup>24</sup>

Here the tantra, or more precisely the path it embodies and describes, is “an emanation”—or in other words, an emanated awakened form or *nirmāṇakāya* much like the Buddha is described as in Mahāyāna Buddhism. So potent is its form that simply “having it,” whatever this is intended to mean here, suffices to untie the knot of saṃsāra and make one a buddha too. Buddhahood, to take this account at face value, would seem to be contagious and communicable through physical contact alone.

The *Unimpeded Sound Tantra*, framed as the main tantra of the group of Seventeen Tantras that came to constitute the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra’s scriptural core, contains verses that appear to be a subtle development on the verses presented above from the *Only Child of All Buddhas*. Like the *Only Child of All Buddhas*, nowhere does the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* include the precise phrase “liberation through wearing.” But it does use the term “wear/fasten” (*btags*) and “hold” (*'dzin*, *'chang*) to echo the material directives found in the *Only Child* and thereby expands on this motif. At the same time, however, emphasis is placed on its recitation, in addition to simply its wearing:

Therefore, if, having written down well on the color of the teacher (i.e., blue)  
the blessed key points  
from the emanation of awakened speech  
and fastened it under the left armpit,  
one was to carry it, reading it out occasionally,  
one would surely, without doubt, become awakened.  
Whoever constantly reads aloud this tantra,  
will through that too become as [mentioned] above (i.e., awakened).<sup>25</sup>

Yet another tantra that emerged with the Heart of Essence of Vimalamitra, called the *Threefold Testament of the Buddhas*, presents itself as a liberation-through-wearing tantra as well. It too is missing this precise phrase but includes numerous passages that directly call for it to be written down, worn, recited, and revered, with awakening and a range of other soteriological results promised from doing so. Its language mirrors that of the *Only Child* and the *Unimpeded Sound* tantras but develops them to give a more fulsome account. It states at the conclusion of part 1:

For anyone who writes this down in the color of the teaching (i.e., gold) and wears it on their body, their body will transform into rainbow light in the intermediate state, dissolve into the cluster [of deities there], and they will actualize the *sambhogakāya* (complete enjoyment body) in a single lifetime.<sup>26</sup>

The conclusion of part 3 goes on to outline in more detail the kinds of results that can be expected from different levels of engagement with the tantra. It also echoes the theory of language present in the *Only Child of All Buddhas* and the *Unimpeded Sound* tantras by referring to itself as “self-occurring”:

Write down this self-occurring text on molten beryl in the color of the teaching (i.e., gold); any child of good family who wears it will be awakened. Any child of good family who hears it will approach awakening. Any child of good family who sees it will acquire faith. Any child of good family who encounters it by writing it down, reciting it, or holding it will be free from all the sufferings of the lower realms and become awakened.<sup>27</sup>

These passages echo similar remarks found in Mahāyāna sūtras and *dhāraṇīs*—that is, magical spells—about the special advantages of interacting with them. But distinctive here is the resolutely soteriological register of the range of benefits. Indeed, among these benefits only freedom from the lower realms stands out as an only slightly more provisional postmortem result.

The explanatory tantra of the *Only Child of All Buddhas* called *Ascertaining the Key Points of Timing* is, as introduced above, devoted primarily to stipulating precise instructions for how to use the *Only Child* as a physical amulet. Importantly, it also outlines an even broader range of benefits, depending on the qualities of the wearer and the astrological timing of the wearing, as illustrated in the following verses:

How wonderful!  
When anyone attains the fruition of awakening in any world,  
this astounding great self-occurrence  
flies up and its natural radiance of five colors appears.  
At that time, it should be recited three times—  
one will become their equal.

Through only wearing this,  
one will reach awakening—  
what need is there to doubt it.

When this is fastened around the neck,  
even animals are liberated,  
let alone human beings.

How wonderful!  
When this self-arisen text  
is used for the benefit of other beings,

there is no need to mention  
that when it is fastened on the head or around the neck of the deceased,  
they will be liberated.

Even those who have committed the five deeds of immediate retribution  
will become equal to hearers (*śrāvaka*, *nyan thos*).  
Beings who have not been prophesied  
will become equal to bodhisattvas on the levels.  
Even those who cleave to tenet systems fixed on concepts  
will indeed become equal to Vajradhara.

The fortunate who encounter this,  
who have signs of actual awareness  
of the heart-like only-child of mind,  
need not recite it or be cremated [with it]—  
they will be accomplished by just encountering it.

They needn't concern themselves with [the timing of] dispersion, integration, and so on.<sup>28</sup>

In these verses we see a clear hierarchy of effects depending on the wearer, until we get to those “who have signs of actual awareness of the heart-like only-child of mind,” that is, experience with their own nondual cognition. For them, a simple encounter with the amulet-tantra will do, without regard for astrological windows of heightened efficacy indexed here by the terms “dispersion” (*byer*) and “integration” (*zug*). This allowance for a broad spectrum of effects, which depends on the nature of the wearer and other factors, receives greater elaboration in later apologetic responses to critics of amulet-tantras that claim to liberate through wearing. We will survey some of these opinions below.

It is difficult to know for certain which of the above tantras appeared first, but their shared liberation-through-wearing rhetoric suffices to demonstrate that the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra*, the *Only Child of All Buddhas Tantra*, its explanatory tantra *Ascertaining the Key Points of Timing*, and the *Threefold Testament of the Buddhas Tantra* came out of the same milieu in close conversation with one another. More specifically, the cursory comparison above of the passages that prescribe possessing, wearing, and reciting the tantras suggests that the passage in the *Unimpeded Sound* could have developed in close connection to the analogous passage in the *Only Child of All Buddhas*, perhaps inflecting the nascent influence of the *Only Child of All Buddhas'* explanatory tantra, *Determining the Key Points of Timing*, and/or the *Threefold Testament of the Buddhas Tantra*, each of which offers more detail about how to use the tantras as amulets and the benefits to be expected from interacting with them.

It is important to acknowledge that this brief foray into the earliest strata of liberation-through-wearing discourse has only scratched the surface. Several other of the Seventeen Tantras also include passages that directly prescribe or indirectly gesture toward liberation-through-wearing practice, referring to themselves too as amulet-tantras. And many instruction manuals in the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra collection likewise promote themselves as such, even without claiming to be tantras. The selection of passages presented above suffices to show that liberation through wearing or otherwise interacting with texts is a defining feature of the early Heart Essence

tradition. We have focused here on only three examples because the tradition regards these as among the fundamental tantras of the tradition.

The benefits these amulet-tantras promise and the seeming ease with which these results could be acquired (simply through wearing!) became a focal point of controversy in the decades and centuries following their revelation. Polemical attacks prompted amulet-tantra advocates to better account for them in terms of more mainstream Buddhist doctrine. Understanding historical changes in the theory and practice of liberation through wearing thus hinges in no small measure on coming to terms with the criticisms that were waged against them and the apologia composed in response. We will therefore take a brief detour to consider these critiques before returning to the tantras to chart later developments.

### **CONTENDING WITH EFFICACY: ARGUING OVER THE CLAIM OF LIBERATION THROUGH WEARING**

One of the earliest criticisms of liberation-through-wearing tantras appears in a polemical text attributed to the renowned translator Chak Lotsāwa Chöjé Pel (1197–1264).<sup>29</sup> The passage in question singles out in passing the Vimalamitra Heart Essence tradition in the context of a broader polemic against the authenticity of the Great Perfection. The argument implies, with opening reference to another allegation that immediately precedes this passage, that the fabrication of the Heart Essence dispensation stemmed in some sense from earlier Great Perfection apocrypha:

Based on this, innumerable Great Perfection cycles, such as teachings with the names of precious substances like gold and so forth, liberation-through-wearing [amulet-tantras], and others were composed.<sup>30</sup>

This is a blatant charge of apocryphal authorship. The allegation that Tibetans wrote these tantras in Tibetan, rather than helped translate them from Indic source texts so they could be revealed later from among Vimalamitra’s or Padmasambhava’s caches of hidden texts and sacra, as the Old School treasure tradition claims, was an enduring theme in anti–Old School polemics over the centuries.<sup>31</sup> The reference to “teachings with the names of precious substances such as gold” is a pointed barb likely intended for the core scriptures of the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra, including the *Only Child of All Buddhas Tantra*, which came to be classified according to a rubric whose internal divisions were named after precious substances, such as the Golden Letters, Bronze Letters, Lapis Lazuli Letters, Conch Letters, and Turquoise Letters.<sup>32</sup>

Another criticism of liberation-through-wearing amulet-tantras, which can be dated to the middle of the thirteenth century, is reported in the *Mañi Kabum* of Guru Chöwang.<sup>33</sup> The vignette describes how a “rigid and jealous teacher of dialectics” approached Guru Chöwang while he was staying overnight at Gyangdönmo Mountain (*Rgyang don mo ri*) on his way to Latö, in Tsang (*Gtsang la stod*), to consecrate a temple and give Dharma teachings there.<sup>34</sup> The monastic scholar seized on the claim of liberation through wearing with this biting interrogation:

What lineage do you hold? Which Dharma lineage have you founded? It is said you may have a Dharma teaching called liberation through wearing. What about that is reasonable to anyone?<sup>35</sup>

The scholar's inquisition about the authenticity of Guru Chöwang's lineage and the legitimacy of his liberation-through-wearing teachings set the stage for Guru Chöwang to deliver a spirited lecture in verse about the significance of liberation through wearing on the external, internal, and secret registers. We will revisit this episode to consider Guru Chöwang's reply more closely below when we track the developments in amulet practice prompted in part by such critiques.

More sustained criticisms of the claim of liberation through wearing can only be found in polemical texts composed from the late fourteenth century on. Although these later critiques would of course not have influenced the language of the amulet-tantras revealed in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, their tenor nonetheless probably echoes the misgivings of previous generations. Peldzin's circa 1400 polemical treatise, likely the most extensive anti-Old School polemic ever composed, provides a case in point.<sup>36</sup> Peldzin had this to say on the topic:

If [as you say] one will be liberated in this very lifetime  
 through only wearing a text or a *yantra* circle (i.e., "magical diagram"),  
 well then, fasten one to a dog, a pig, a donkey,  
 and yourself and then see!

If you say that liberation happens after a long time,  
 well, such exists in the dialectical vehicle too,  
 so, it is not a special feature of mantra at all,  
 and you therefore cannot authenticate [the tantras through this idea].

It is wrongly said: "If the liberation through wearing were not known by the Buddha,  
 then he would not be omniscient."

Well then, he should also have known about  
 Liberation through the cause of eating shit.  
 If not, he would not be omniscient.

If you assert as much, then dogs, pigs, asses,  
 and the maggots inside shit would be liberated,  
 even with no other cause.

Just by writing down, holding, or reading aloud  
 one gains a distant cause of liberation,  
 but who other than a fool would say,  
 "One is liberated in this lifetime through wearing."<sup>37</sup>

Peldzin's verses target what he construes to be the exaggerated nature of the claim of liberation through wearing. Although, he concedes, it is consistent with much Mahāyāna scripture that physical and vocal interactions with scriptures can indeed create a distant cause for awakening, Peldzin takes specific issue with the idea that the promise of liberation through wearing constitutes a special feature of the Old School's tantras. As exalted tantras, Peldzin contends, their wearing

ought to enable liberation in a single lifetime, but no evidence is forthcoming and, by his account, the Buddha never taught such a formulation.

Along the way, Peldzin appears to take jabs at the associated claim of liberation through tasting (*myong grol*) consecrated pills composed of transgressive substances, a practice the Old School had become associated with for centuries well before the late fourteenth century.<sup>38</sup> We learn in a note that appears in Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyaltzen's (1552–1624) apologetic response to an Old School polemic attributed to Karmapa Mikyö Dorjé that the celebrated fountainhead of the Geluk tradition Tsongkhapa Lobzang Drakpa (1357–1419) was said to have rejected the efficacy of liberation-through-wearing amulets along with that of liberation-through-tasting pills. As the story goes, Tsongkhapa's misgivings dissolved after he personally witnessed miracles appear when an amulet and a pill were administered to a dying dog.<sup>39</sup>

Although the details of his critique, if it ever in fact took place, are unknown, Tsongkhapa was active in the same intellectual circles as one of Peldzin's main teachers, Nyawön Künga Pel Zangpo (1285–1379), who played some role in inspiring Peldzin's anti-Old School polemic.<sup>40</sup> This connection suggests that Peldzin's criticisms reflect an opinion on such claims that was relatively commonplace among fourteenth century Tibetan scholars who were less than sympathetic to the Old School and its scriptures.

These criticisms of liberation through wearing, and liberation through tasting, were developed further in the polemic attributed to Mikyö Dorjé, alluded to above. Since I have discussed this polemic at length elsewhere, I will only introduce the opinions attributed to the Eighth Karmapa piecemeal as I summarize the main criticisms reviewed above.<sup>41</sup>

When taking stock of the polemical field, two main points of contention surface: (i) The texts in question are apocryphal tantras composed in Tibet by Tibetans, resolutely lacking any Indian Buddhist pedigree, as we saw in Chak Lotsāwa's allegation. This line of criticism was part of a broader critique of the Old School tantras in general that has been a constant theme in Tibetan polemical literature from the late tenth century on.<sup>42</sup> (ii) Extending from the charge of apocryphal authorship is that tantra-amulets simply lack the potency to liberate through wearing. This was the gist of Peldzin's criticism, and it found greater elaboration in the critique attributed to Mikyö Dorjé. As Peldzin argued, wearing Buddhist scriptures might serve as a distant cause for liberation in some future lifetime. And as Mikyö Dorjé later conceded, they might also function as props for the recollection of doctrinal values or tantric commitments (*samaya*). But in this latter case, Mikyö Dorjé points out, it would be the introduction (*ngo sprod*) to their content and its contemplative integration that would be the efficacious element, if there were any efficacy at all to them, and not their physical contact with the body—simply wearing them could not even function to minimally reduce the delusion of wearers, let alone liberate them from *saṃsāra*.

A strong implication of this position, articulated most robustly in the polemic attributed to Mikyö Dorjé, is that any authentic scripture that promises “liberation through wearing” should by no means be taken literally. Further along these lines, as Peldzin argues, that amulets might produce a distant cause for liberation is already a staple feature of *sūtra* discourses. By pointing this out he implies that if Old School proponents were to concede that liberation-through-wearing tantras only produce a distant cause for liberation, it would compromise their status as high-level tantras, whose *sine qua non* is to hasten awakening in a single lifetime. To compromise this more immediate and potent sense of efficacy through such a concession would then bring us full circle,

entailing that the tantras are not in fact genuine Buddhist tantras, as claimed, but Tibetan compositions only falsely presented as such.

## IN DEFENSE OF EFFICACY: OLD SCHOOL THEORIES OF LIBERATION THROUGH WEARING

Turning now to the rebuttals of these criticisms, the default position for anyone belonging to the Old School tradition who inherited these amulet-tantras has of course been that they indeed do work, as claimed, to liberate through wearing. But in defending against polemical attacks, Old School apologists fleshed out the claim of liberation through wearing considerably. Three different opinions emerged that attempt to account for this radical claim in slightly different ways. As I argue below, these shifts in understanding came to be reflected in the amulet-tantra revelations of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In the interest of delving deeper into these transitions, I summarize the main positions here rather than go into detail.

i. One prevalent position on such amulets-tantras is that they are indeed intrinsically powerful, as claimed, but their power is ambivalent in nature, depending on the positive or negative actions and orientations of wearers. The idea is that wearing amulet-tantras exponentially amplifies the effects of both virtue and vice, thus calling for extraordinary caution while wearing. This position is articulated in a citation attributed to Padmasambhava that appears most famously in Karma Lingpa's funerary *Liberation-through-Wearing for Self-Liberation of the Corpse*, part of his revelation *Liberation-through-Hearing in the Intermediate State*, otherwise known as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.<sup>43</sup> However, the text is not entirely consistent on this point; immediately after a passage that warns wearers to exercise extreme caution, lest they commit any negative deed while wearing the amulet, it does an about-face and promises wearers that just encountering it will ensure freedom from rebirth in the lower realms, *even for heinous sinners* who have committed the five deeds of immediate retribution.<sup>44</sup>

We find more pronounced equivocations on this perspective in Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Tayé's (1813–1899) late nineteenth century *General Practice of Liberation-through-Wearing* instruction manual.<sup>45</sup> When explaining how to wear the amulet, Kongtrül paraphrases how “some lamas” maintain that since liberation-through-wearing amulets increase both virtue and vice, they are unsuitable to be worn even by those who have embarked on the path, let alone ordinary beings whose afflictions are rampant.<sup>46</sup> Rather, as Kongtrül summarizes their claim, this kind of amulet is really intended to be fastened to beings on the verge of death, specifically in the interval “when their sensation has stopped, while their outer breathing has ceased, and their inner breathing has not yet ceased.”<sup>47</sup> The timing here is key, lest the negative karma of the dying cause the amulet to contribute to future suffering rather than purify it.

Kongtrül paraphrases the position of his teacher and associate Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo (1820–1892), who claims to the contrary that liberation-through-wearing amulets are unilaterally positive. As such, they are not for exalted noble beings, whose minds are already steeped in virtue, but for ordinary beings and those who have just entered the path to grant them instantaneous awakening—we will review this position in greater detail below.<sup>48</sup> Kongtrül, while acknowledging that Khyentsé Wangpo's position is “more profound,” nonetheless takes issue with it, arguing instead that they should be worn only when the wearer has faith and confessed their previous

misdeeds, thereby at least severing the continuous flow of negative deeds.<sup>49</sup> Toward the end of the text, when explaining the tantric commitments incumbent upon those who have been initiated into liberation-through-wearing amulet use, Kongtrül reiterates his position with recourse to citations that caution wearers to be especially vigilant to avoid nonvirtue in body, speech, and mind while they wear their amulets; to remove their amulets when prostrating and otherwise physically lowering themselves to others, lest they create negative karma by disrespecting their amulets; and to show respect to whoever wears them or wherever they are stored.<sup>50</sup> Kongtrül's position on the topic seems to have held some sway; in the liberation-through-wearing entry of a 2010 Tibetan collection of amulet images and their doctrinal rationales, Kongtrül's opinion is repeated, citing his instruction manual and enlisting the same passages he used for scriptural support.<sup>51</sup>

One problem with this position, especially as we encounter it in Karma Lingpa's revelation, is that it runs counter to the language and ethos of the early tantras themselves and their commentaries, which are by and large consistent that wearing them is unequivocally positive, regardless of who the wearer is or what they are doing while wearing it. Khyentsé Wangpo, as Kongtrül represents his opinion, draws attention to this disparity by urging wearers to follow the early tantras to the letter. And indeed, despite Kongtrül's different opinion on the topic, the final section of his manual explaining the "benefits" of wearing them is rife with citations from the early tantras that directly contradict his position.

ii. This brings us to the second major position on the topic, already broached in the above discussion of Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo's opinion, namely, that such amulets have an intrinsic power that is unilaterally positive in nature, no matter the actions or identity of the wearer. This of course stands in stark contrast to the claim of ambivalent potency. According to this view, liberation-through-wearing amulets unequivocally destroy the power of evil and expand the power of virtue within the mind-body of beings. And yet, here too the range of this positive efficacy nonetheless depends on the actions and qualities of manufacturers and wearers, as well as on the broader astrological contexts of usage. Passages reviewed above from the *Ascertaining the Key Points of Timing Tantra* illustrate this concept clearly in their insistence that "even those who have committed the five deeds of immediate retribution will become equal to hearers" and "even those who cleave to tenet systems fixed on concepts will indeed become equal to Vajradhara." This position also links up better with the funerary use of liberation-through-wearing amulets viewed above, as emphasized in *Ascertaining the Key Points of Timing* and still practiced today, in which liberation-through-wearing tantras are fastened to the corpse of the deceased to "liberate" from rebirth in the lower realms or even ensure passage to a buddha's pure-land. An important implication here is that unlike in the previous position, precisely timing the fastening of the amulet on the body of the dying would theoretically be unnecessary.

Exegetes have traced the Indian pedigree of this position to the *dhāraṇī* called the *Great Amulet*.<sup>52</sup> Pawo Tsuklak Trengwa (1504–1564/1566), Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyaltsen, and Jamgön Kongtrül, probably among others, cite the *Great Amulet* as a commonly accepted scriptural precedent that ascribes the achievement of immediate spiritual advancement, even, according to Kongtrül, to the point of reaching the "path of preparation" (*prayogamarga*, *sbyor lam*), the second of the five bodhisattva paths, to simply wearing the text of the *Great Amulet* on the body.<sup>53</sup> This scripture also dwells on positive postmortem affects, like delivery from the lower realms, even in the limited cases of animals and criminals.<sup>54</sup> The key hermeneutic for Tibetan exegetes enlisting

this text has been the parsing out of different levels of “liberation” (*grol ba*): the amulet might free from adverse circumstances in this lifetime, the lower realms after death, the lower levels of the Buddhist path, or *samsāra* as a whole, depending in large part on the qualities of the wearer.<sup>55</sup>

iii. The third position we find is an extension of the second position regarding the modes by which amulet-tantras are utilized. According to this view, liberation can take place not only through wearing the tantra as an amulet but also through reciting it or even through comprehending the language of the tantra and integrating it into one’s experience. We saw that this multimodal sensory dimension of amulet-tantra interaction—through seeing, hearing, touching, and so on—was prevalent in several of the tantras cited above. Elsewhere in this literature, we find that the tantra’s import must ideally be first “introduced” by a spiritual teacher and “recognized” by a student in a breakthrough epiphany of their intrinsic nondual cognition for its full impact to take effect. In this, contemplative practice can work in combination with *or as an alternative to* physically wearing the tantra as an amulet. As I outline below, this approach ended up enlisting the polyvalence of the Tibetan verb I have been rendering as “wear” (*btags*) and its homophony with the Tibetan verb “analyze” (*brtag*) to newly carve out a space for analytic meditation in amulet-tantra practice that shares features with more mainstream Mahāyāna philosophical inquiry. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to tracing these changes.

## **POLYVALENCE AND HOMOPHONY IN THE REINTERPRETATION OF “LIBERATION THROUGH WEARING”**

Changes in the form and function of amulet-tantras that promise liberation through wearing emerged hand-in-hand with linguistic shifts from descriptions of the process of liberation through wearing, as shown above, to their formalization into a single compound noun phrase: liberation-through-wearing amulets. This change from process to substantive item would emerge only after the initial Heart Essence of Vimalamitra Tantras.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps the first major treasure revelation including tantras that refer to themselves overtly as “liberation-[through]-wearing” tantras is the Union of the Buddhas, revealed by Guru Chöwang. As described above, Guru Chöwang had a run-in with a monastic scholar sharply critical of his liberation-through-wearing texts in what stands out as one of the earliest instances of the term being used to describe a discrete item. When we revisit this passage, along with Guru Chöwang’s response and the tantras that the argument concerns, what is particularly striking is that the term I have been rendering as “wear” (*btags*) up to this point is alternatively spelled throughout as a nearly homophonous term that means “analyze” (*brtags*). This minor detail, which gives the appearance of a simple scribal error upon cursory consideration, is anything but. Instead, I will argue, it signals the changing course of amulet-tantra practice in the centuries that followed.

Before we explore the language of the Union of the Buddhas tantras and what Guru Chöwang had to say about them, it is time to acknowledge that I have been rather reductive in using the term “wear” to render the Tibetan word *tak* (*btags*) in *takgröl* (*btags grol*) or “liberation-[through]-wearing.” The Tibetan term rendered here as “wearing” is a perfective form of a verb (pr. *’dogs*, p. *btags*, f. *gdags*, imp. *thogs*) whose semantic range more precisely includes the related senses of (i) to tie to, fasten, or bind; (ii) to name, or designate; (iii) to blame; (iv) to impute, or superimpose; and (v) to benefit.<sup>57</sup> The two discursive senses of designate and impute are clearly related, as are

their material correlates, the senses of to tie to, adorn, fasten, and bind. Taken as a whole, the verb spans material, linguistic, and mental registers and operations.

It is worth noting, moreover, that the linguistic and discursive senses of designate and impute feature prominently in mainstream Buddhist philosophical discourse, where *dok/tak* renders a spectrum of Sanskrit terms with a broadly similar range of valences, such as *bandhana*, “binding” or “tying”; *avasakta*, “suspended from,” or “attached to”; *upacāra*, *aupacārika*, and *gaṇa*, in the sense of meaning attribution (i.e., “figurative or metaphorical language,” “ornament,” “custom or matter of speech,” “attribution of qualities,” and so on); *prajñāpti* and *samjñā*, in the sense of “designation,” “name,” or “verbal convention”; and by extension, even *parikalpita*, which means “imputed” or “imagined.”<sup>58</sup>

All these senses of the term amply appear throughout the Seventeen Tantras and the other scriptures of the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra. Starting, it would seem, with Guru Chōwang, the polyvalence of this verb and its homophony with another verb, also pronounced *dok/tak* but instead more narrowly meaning “to analyze,” “investigate,” “scrutinize,” or “reflect” (pr. *rtog*, p. *brtags*, f. *brtag*, imp. *rtogs*), became highly productive.<sup>59</sup> For one, it enabled Old School scriptures to begin integrating the language of discursive reflection and analysis into Great Perfection tantras in ways that might help address the criticisms leveled against the radical claim of “liberation through wearing.” Enhancing this more discursive, analytic dimension also ushered in changes to the practice of wearing amulets, allowing them to more fully serve as multilayered philosophical and contemplative devices to think with and through along the path of the Great Perfection practice, in addition to serving as potent accoutrements to wear oneself or attach to the bodies of the dying.

This combination of material and discursive features comes into focus when looking at the language of the tantras themselves. Guru Chōwang’s Union of the Buddhas includes several tantras and commentaries that draw from the liberation-through-wearing amulets of the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra but exhibit significant linguistic slippage between “wearing” and “analyzing” to push amulet-tantra language into new directions. But not all these tantras depart far from the earlier amulet literature. One of the tantras, titled the *Tantra of Self-Emergent Awareness*, consists exclusively of chapter 6 of the *Only Child of All Buddhas Tantra*, framed with a new opening title section and closing treasure colophon.<sup>60</sup> The colophon makes its continuity with the *Only Child* explicit:

Through just seeing, hearing, or touching the *Tantra of Self-Emergent Awareness*, the *Only Child of the Buddhas*, one will reach complete awakening at the time of death and emerge as an emanation body for the benefit of beings.

*ithi guhya*

May this meet with a wise and compassionate one!  
Seal of entrustment. Seal of entrustment. Seal of secrecy.

This is a liberation-[through]-wearing [amulet] (*brtags grol*).<sup>61</sup>

Another of the Union of the Buddhas liberation-through-wearing tantras, entitled the *Tantra of the King of Awareness of Higher Perception*, has a treasure colophon that draws from language and

directives we find in the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* and the *Ascertaining the Key Points of Timing Tantra* but frames them quite differently:

This complete text of crucial points is like this: by writing in gold and wearing around the neck this text composed of its own accord from blessings—the text of [the master of] Uḍḍiyāna and the ḍākinī, in the language of Kalaviṅka—one will reach accomplishment.<sup>62</sup>

We can observe here the specification of gold ink and the claim of self-authorship from the Vimalamitra-concealed tantras newly enlisted for a treasure text whose concealment is attributed to Padmasambhava, the master of Uḍḍiyāna, and his ḍākinī, the Tibetan princess Yeshé Tsogyel. We see that the issue of source language comes to the fore—although the tantra bursts forth naturally in a particular language, the language of Kalaviṅka, its Tibetan translation nonetheless shares in its source’s power.

Perhaps the most distinctive liberation-through-wearing tantra in Guru Chöwang’s Union of the Buddhas revelation is a tantra titled *Knowing the One that Liberates All* but to which is also ascribed four different titles, including this one, allegedly translated into Tibetan from four different languages.<sup>63</sup> As the tantra presents itself, it is known alternatively as *Knowing the One that Liberates All* in the language of Uḍḍiyāna; *Quintessence, The Single Golden Syllable* in the language of Yangdak;<sup>64</sup> *Only Child of the Buddhas, The Tantra of the Seed that Resolves Secrets, The Single Word of the Self-Emergent Reality* in the language of Kalaviṅka-jhoni [em. yoginī?]; and *Liberation-through-Wearing* in the language of Bhurtartaka [em. Buddhaḍākinī?]. Here, the tendency toward linguistic diversification witnessed in the *Only Child of All Buddhas Tantra* is accentuated further to include four different source languages.

Remarkably, four of these titles are nearly identical to the titles of four of the Six Tantras that Liberate-through-Wearing. This set of six tantras was fundamental to the Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī treasure cycle said to be revealed in 1313, a full eighty years after Guru Chöwang’s revelation of the Union of the Buddhas in 1233.<sup>65</sup> A fifth title of the Six Tantras is titled the *Tantra of Self-Emergent Awareness*, which is identical to the tantra title in the Union of the Buddhas that consists of chapter 6 of the *Only Child of All Buddhas Tantra* from the Vimalamitra treasures. However, among the Six Tantras that Liberate-through-Wearing of the Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī, chapter 6 of the Vimalamitra *Only Child of All Buddhas* comprises instead the sixth and final tantra of the set, titled the *Tantra of the Great Perfection of the Fruition*. This stands out as the only title among the six that does not appear in currently available Union of the Buddhas collections. The Six Tantras of the Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī expands even further on the linguistic diversity of the Union of the Buddhas, as each of the six is attributed its own different source language.<sup>66</sup>

More remarkable still is that there is significant intertextuality, well beyond the titles, between Guru Chöwang’s Union of the Buddhas liberation-through-wearing revelations and the later Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī revelations, particularly with respect to the commentaries revealed along with the tantras. So not only did the Union of the Buddhas draw material from the Vimalamitra liberation-through-wearing tantras. It also included revelations that could have served as source material for the later Heart of the Ḍākinī collection connected to Padmasambhava.

A complete analysis of the intertextuality between the Union of the Buddhas and the Heart Essence of the Dākinī is beyond the scope of this article. For the present purposes, I will only compare the treatment of “analysis” as it relates to “wearing” across two commentaries, one belonging to each revelation, before considering Guru Chöwang’s own reflections on the role of analysis in the use of amulet-tantras, comparing these to other passages in the Six Tantras that Liberate-through-Wearing and their commentaries to track pertinent changes.

From the Union of the Buddhas revelation, the commentary that concerns us is an instruction manual (*khrid gzhung*) that “teaches the meaning of the *Tantra of Knowing the One that Liberates All*,” titled the *Luminous Lamp of Wisdom*.<sup>67</sup> The commentary begins by “introducing the meaning” of the four titles of the tantra that are listed at the tantra’s opening. Reversing the sequence of the tantra’s order, the commentary begins with the fourth title, *takgröl*, spelling *tak* as “analyze” rather than “wear.” It would appear at first glance that the homophony between the two words allowed for a scribal error. However, what we find upon reading this section is instructions for an analytic contemplative practice and nothing whatsoever related to wearing or fastening. The passage reads:

The introduction to the title of the tantra, “liberation-through-analysis/wearing” (*brtags grol*), is as follows: The root from which afflictions in the mind stream expand to 84,000, and the root of existence, the subtle level of fixation to a self, is to be analyzed (*brtags*) as long as it persists. Through analyzing (*brtags pas*) the outer and inner worlds, from head to tail, and in other ways, of the external environment and the bodies that are its internal inhabitants—asking yourself where they come from, where they disappear to, and how they remain—[it is discovered that] they do not come from anywhere at all, do not disappear to anywhere at all, do not remain anywhere at all, and are not observed in any way whatsoever. Then, just analyzing as before the cognition itself that observes such yields that there is nothing that exists. Due to being empty of its own nature, fixation on “I” is liberated in its own state. When such is thus liberated in its own state, it is certain that all 84,000 afflictions born from the root of fixation to “I” are [also] liberated of their own accord. For instance, it is like how a population is vanquished once the prince is imprisoned. Just so, the welter of thoughts is introduced as liberated-through-analysis (*brtags grol*).<sup>68</sup>

This practice is clearly an iteration of the analytic meditation well-known today as the “triad of arising, remaining, and passing” (*byung gnas ’gro gsum*). It is often taught nowadays as a preliminary practice to prepare students for the guru to introduce them to the nature of mind, otherwise known as the “breakthrough to primordial purity” (*ka dag khregs chod*).<sup>69</sup> Old School scholars have also incorporated it into exoteric writings, as evinced by Khenpo Künzang Palden’s (1862–1943) enlistment of the practice in his *Entering the Way of the Bodhisattva* (*Bodhicāryāvatāra*) commentary.<sup>70</sup>

The *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* contains an earlier, more rudimentary version of this kind of analytic meditation, as illustrated in this verse:

If you investigate threefold  
the mind’s first place of origin,

its remaining in the interim, and its final passing,  
the mind will become supple, and you will understand its mode of being.<sup>71</sup>

During and perhaps before Guru Chöwang’s time this practice seems to also have been particularly well developed in the Pacifying (*zhi byed*) tradition that formed from the legacy of Padampa Sangyé (d. 1117).<sup>72</sup> There it served as an extension of perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) inspired contemplative practice tailored to the taste of tantric meditators in language that overlaps considerably with the Heart Essence tradition. This points to a nexus of traditions that the Union of the Buddhas could have drawn from for the analytic contemplative practice of the triad of arising, remaining, and passing.

The commentary’s emphasis on analytic meditation does not stop here. It goes on to present a multistage program of analytic inquiry, enlisting standard Buddhist philosophical terminology, including not only the term “analyze” but also the rhetorical sense of the verb I have been rendering as “wear” in a compound meaning “superimpose” (*sgro brtags/brtags*), to describe the workings of the deluded dualistic mind. After having introduced the four titles of the tantra, the commentary devotes a whole three-part section to “how to analyze the self” (*bdag ji ltar brtags pa*) titled “the teaching on knowing through analyzing the self that the root of phenomena is the single sole drop of self-arisen wisdom.”<sup>73</sup> The three subsections are titled: (i) how to analyze the self, (ii) how to introduce the single sole drop of self-arisen wisdom, and (iii) introducing the self-perfected fruition.<sup>74</sup> The first subsection delineates a slightly more thorough form of analytic inquiry into the arising, remaining, and passing of phenomenal experience, first, and then the mind, second.<sup>75</sup> Subsections two and three bring us into closer touch with our innate nondual cognition, beginning in subsection two with an appreciation for the “groundlessness” and “baselessness” resulting from the rigorous inquiry into the nonexistence of a self and culminating at the end of subsection three with the “self-perfected fruition of the breakthrough to intrinsic awareness.”<sup>76</sup>

It should be kept in mind that despite the commentary’s felicitous enlistment of the homophony between wearing and analyzing to emphasize the former, this did not entail that wearing would be neglected. As part of Guru Chöwang’s reply to a critical scholastic monk, who, as presented above, took issue with the authenticity of his amulet-tantras, Guru Chöwang delivered his clearest statement yet on how liberation through wearing and analyzing could be practiced in tandem. He did so by outlining amulet practice according to external, internal, and secret levels of significance, exploiting the homophonous terms for “wearing” and “analyzing” to great rhetorical effect. Here we have our clearest indication yet that the shifts between wearing and analyzing were a deliberate strategy, inspired at least in part by the amulet tradition’s detractors:

By analyzing one’s own mind (*rang sems brtags pas*), the ground-basis of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa is liberated.

Amazing is liberation-through- wearing/analyzing (*brtags grol*), the true Dharma of the Great Perfection.

The continuum of blessings of the perfect apex (*ati*) of secret mantra—  
whoever writes it in gold and wears (*btags*) it around the neck  
is liberated from the lower realms and attains the *nirmāṇakāya* in the womb.

This is the external liberation-through-wearing/analyzing (*phyi'i brtags grol*), the supreme method of the secret mantra.

Suffering perfected, the continuum of the five poisonous afflictions—  
by nakedly analyzing the moment anything arises  
the five poisons are naturally liberated and the sambhogakāya of great bliss is attained.  
This is the internal liberation-through-wearing/analyzing (*nang gi brtags grol*), wisdom  
fully realized.

The continuum of mind, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa unfabricated—  
by analyzing with lucid insight its mode of abiding to the limits,  
abandonment and realization are naturally liberated, and appearance and existence are  
perfected as the *dharmakāya*.

This is the secret liberation-through-wearing/analyzing (*gsang ba'i brtags grol*), *knowing  
the one thing that liberates all*.<sup>77</sup>

Notable here is that the phonological and orthographical ambiguity between “wearing” and “analyzing” in the Tibetan language allowed Guru Chöwang to harmonize the funerary use of amulets with their use as both analytic contemplative aids and Great Perfection instruction manuals—these tantras could be worn and recited or used as aids for analysis, contemplation, and instruction, depending on what was needed. Also at play in this passage is the multivalence of the term *gyü* (*rgyud*), rendered above as “continuum,” which can also mean “lineage” and “tantra.” Guru Chöwang cleverly exploits this term’s multivalence in response to its more constricted use in the accusatory questions of his detractor, introduced above in the discussion of amulet polemics: “What lineage (*rgyud pa*) do you hold? Which Dharma lineage (*chos rgyud*) have you founded? It is said you may have a Dharma teaching called liberation-through-wearing. What about that is reasonable to anyone?”<sup>78</sup> Moreover, Guru Chöwang’s final evocation of “knowing the one thing that liberates all” is a clear reference to his amulet-tantra by the same name that we have been discussing here. Calling out this tantra by name in his retort to the qualms of his interlocutor gives the appearance of a tacit acknowledgment of its centrality in his revelatory effort to graft to the popular practice of wearing amulet-tantras an analytic contemplative component that could be squared with Great Perfection practice.

When we turn to consider how the emphasis on analysis in the above passage from the commentary of the *Tantra of Knowing the One that Liberates All* compares with analogous passages in the *Tantra of the Essence of Liberation-through-Wearing* and its commentary from the Heart Essence of the Ḍākinī, several observations come to the fore. First, we can notice that the passages from the respective tantras are quite distinct. One of the opening lines of the *Tantra of the Essence of Liberation-through-Wearing*, which is the first tantra in the collection of the Six Tantras that Liberate-through-Wearing, is as follows: “The root of existence is exclusively fixation to a self.”<sup>79</sup> This opening line is unremarkable as a Buddhist statement. It is also very different from the opening of the *Tantra of Knowing the One that Liberates All*, which, we may recall, begins with the alternative titles of the tantra. As we will see below, however, the commentary’s remarks on this line closely reflect those from the Union of the Buddhas commentary.

Unlike the Union of the Buddhas, the commentaries of the Six Tantras that Liberate-through-Wearing are labeled as *ṭīkā*, transliterating the Sanskrit term for “commentary,” and thereby framing themselves with reference to Indian Buddhist doctrinal discourse. But just like the commentaries of the Union of the Buddhas, this and the other five *ṭīkā*s also claim, along with the “root” tantras on which the commentaries are based, to be authorless revelations. The *ṭīkā* comments on this line as follows:

This means that while the essence of mind of all beings is empty and not established as anything whatsoever, and the nature of this emptiness is a subtle luminous glow, which arises as a multiplicity, from not knowing this emptiness-luminosity there is a subtle fixation to a self, through which the 84,000 afflictions develop in one’s mind stream thus forming the root of existence, by which one circulates throughout the three realms and wanders throughout the six classes [of beings].<sup>80</sup>

Here the commentary locates the fixation to a self in the misrecognition of emptiness-luminosity, a misrecognition from which all the afflictions and existence itself originates. This reiterates in shorthand form the foundational Heart Essence metaphysics pertaining to the merging of ontological and epistemic dimensions.

The next line of the tantra is as follows: “Outer and inner *fully analyzed*, it (i.e., belief in a self) is primordially empty, liberated.”<sup>81</sup> In the commentary’s remarks on this line, the intertextuality with the analogous passage from the *Tantra of Knowing the One that Liberates All* becomes even more pronounced. It states:

This means that the root of afflictions, the subtle level of the fixation to a self, is to be analyzed (*brtags*) as long as it persists. Just through analyzing (*brtags*) the outer and inner worlds, from head to tail, and in other ways, of the external environment and the bodies that are its internal inhabitants—asking yourself where they come from, where they disappear to, and how they remain—[it is discovered that] they do not come from anywhere at all, disappear to anywhere at all, remain anywhere at all, and are not observed in any way whatsoever. Then, just looking into the cognition itself that observes and dissects such yields that there is not even a mere iota there that exists according to its own nature. By thus witnessing [cognition itself] as empty of its own nature, fixation to a self is liberated in its own state. When fixation to a self is thus liberated in its own state, it is certain that all 84,000 afflictions that branch off from the root of fixation to a self are [also] liberated of their own accord. For instance, it is like how the leaves naturally fall on a tree whose root has been cut.<sup>82</sup>

To allow the dense intertextuality between these passages from the two commentaries to come into sharper focus, we will review the passage from the Union of the Buddhas presented above, but this time with the shared words in bold typeface:

The introduction to the title of the tantra, “liberation-through-wearing/analyzing” (*brtags grol*), is as follows: **The root from which afflictions in the mind stream expand to 84,000, and the root of existence, the subtle level of fixation to a self, is to be analyzed**

*(brtags)* as long as it persists. Through analyzing (*brtags pas*) the outer and inner worlds, from head to tail, and in other ways, of the external environment and the bodies that are its internal inhabitants—asking yourself where they come from, where they disappear to, and how they remain—[it is discovered that] they do not come from anywhere at all, do not disappear to anywhere at all, do not remain anywhere at all, and are not observed in any way whatsoever. Then, just analyzing as before the cognition itself that observes such yields that there is nothing that exists. Due to being empty of its own nature, fixation to “I” is liberated in its own state. When such is thus liberated in its own state, it is certain that all 84,000 afflictions born from the root of fixation to “I” are also liberated of their own accord. For instance, it is like how a population is vanquished once the prince is imprisoned. Just so, the welter of thoughts is introduced as liberated through analysis (*brtags grol*).<sup>83</sup>

We can see here that the passages are nearly identical aside from the opening lines, rooted to their respective tantras, and the closing analogies. The *Luminous Lamp of Wisdom* commentary on the Union of the Buddhas’ *Tantra of Knowing the One that Liberates All* also shares several passages and, at times, underlying structural logic with the *ṭīkā* on the identically titled tantra from Heart Essence of the *Ḍākinī*.<sup>84</sup> This raises the question of how many more passages the Heart Essence of the *Ḍākinī* might share with the Union of the Buddhas, and if there could be a third or fourth source they both drew from.<sup>85</sup> In the interest of space and time, however, investigation into these matters will have to await future research.

Subtly noticeable in the above textual comparison, but far more conspicuous elsewhere, is that the Heart Essence of the *Ḍākinī* differs from the Union of the Buddhas primarily in terms of explicitly drawing more language and imagery from the Seventeen Tantras and other tantras of the earlier Vimalamitra-related revelations. Aside from enlisting the title of the *Only Child of All Buddhas* and extracting its sixth chapter to newly serve as a stand-alone tantra—a reuse of the earlier Vimalamitra treasures that the Union of the Buddhas tantras and the Six Tantras that Liberate-through-Wearing have in common—the *ṭīkā*s on the Six Tantras repeatedly cite several of the Seventeen Tantras in their explanations. Moreover, as illustrated by the opening passage about the misrecognition of emptiness-luminosity in the *ṭīkā* on the *Essence of Liberation-through-Wearing*, which does not appear in the Union of the Buddhas’ *Luminous Lamp of Wisdom*, the Heart Essence of the *Ḍākinī* amulet-tantras and commentaries make repeated and overt reference to Heart Essence ontological and epistemological theory. These differences combined give the Heart Essence of the *Ḍākinī*’s Six Tantras the appearance of greater continuity with the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra.

This attempt to form greater continuity with the earlier Vimalamitra collection is expressed also in a more systematic account of how “wearing” and “analyzing” can work in tandem. This rapprochement begins with the *ṭīkā*’s gloss of the title itself, “Liberation-through-Wearing”:

This [title] teaches that one is liberated when, having analyzed (*brtags*) the nature of one’s own mind, one correctly realizes its reality. Or, alternatively, it teaches that one is liberated by writing down the tantra of precisely this in book form and just wearing it (*bcangs*) on the body.<sup>86</sup>

The *ṭīkā*'s conclusion offers another series of glosses on the phrase “liberation-through-wearing” that lift it into the nondiscursive and visionary framework of Heart Essence theory's threefold wisdom, while still retaining some role for analysis. The passage is framed as an explanation of the following two lines from the tantra:

The triad of essence, nature, and compassion  
is awakened as liberation-through-wearing itself.<sup>87</sup>

The commentary offers the following explanation:

This means that wearing (*btags*) the above three [modes of wisdom] through skillful means, one is awakened into self-liberation (*rang grol*): the essence is awakened as awakened forms, the nature is awakened as light, and compassion is awakened as rays.<sup>88</sup>

Perhaps it goes without saying that the term “wearing” here, appearing as it does in the context of the standard threefold wisdom of Heart Essence parlance but mapped to luminous forms, their light, and its rays, does not at all easily lend itself to an understanding of the term as a scribal error for “analysis.” This observation is significant for understanding how the *ṭīkā* comments on the final lines of the tantra just below. Before we can get there, however, the *ṭīkā* elaborates on the sense of “liberation” with a three-verse citation from the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* that offers an extended evocation of different kinds of liberation according to the rhetorical flavor of effortlessness, nonmeditation, and noncontrivance so typical of the Vimalamitra revelations:

Since one is liberated by means of the key points, effort is exhausted.  
Since one is liberated primordially, there is no need for repetition.  
Since one is liberated of their own accord, there is no antidote [to apply].  
Since one is liberated nakedly, vision vanishes in its own state.

Since one is liberated thoroughly, one is purified in their own state.  
Since one is liberated in a timely manner, there is no need to meditate.  
Since one is liberated naturally, it is uncontrived.  
“Liberation” is simply a convention.

Who could contrive its understanding or misunderstanding?  
Who could perceive “liberation” as such?  
How would it be possible to reenter the three realms?  
It is the ultimate reality free of the limits of existence.<sup>89</sup>

Finally, the *ṭīkā* turns its sights on the final lines of the tantra:

Through holding the **liberation-[through]-wearing** (*btags grol*)—this seven-line quintessence of tantras—samsāra will be emptied.<sup>90</sup>

However, the *ṭīkā*, in reproducing this line from the tantra, gives the following instead:

By **analyzing and** (*brtags shing*) holding this seven-line quintessence of tantras, saṃsāra will be emptied.<sup>91</sup>

Here we can see in the bolded section that the root tantra and its commentary give different readings—the former has the nominalized “liberation-[through]-wearing,” which functions as the object of the verb “holding,” while the latter has the verbal process “analyzing and,” rendering “holding” as part of a twofold sequence of action. Lest we imagine this to be a simple scribal error for the two homophonous terms, the *ṭīkā* insists on its reading with the following exegesis:

By analyzing (*brtags*) and understanding the meaning of this seven-phrase tantra, or by just writing it down and holding (*bcangs*) on to it, one is liberated.<sup>92</sup>

Here, in the commentary, the homophony and close spelling between “wearing” (*btags*) and “analyzing” (*brtags*) provide an opportunity to have it both ways. To achieve liberation, one can either analyze the tantra or wear it affixed to the body. The commentary thus exploits the close similarity of these terms, and their fluidity in the tantra and its citations, to carve out a more prominent role for analytic contemplative practice. Yet the tantra itself, as well as the rhetorical emphasis of the commentarial passages and citations immediately preceding it, appear to convey instead the primacy of wearing or holding the tantra physically. Moreover, these passages also emphasize effortless ease of liberation in ways that square with the rhetorical style and contemplative emphasis of earlier Heart Essence theory, in which analysis most certainly does not take center stage.

Interestingly, the Tibetan term rendered as “holding” (*bcangs*) also carries the discursive sense of “memorizing,” just as the term for “fixate” in the phrase “fixate to a self” above carries the physical sense of “hold” or “carry,” along with the more figurative senses of “apprehend,” “construe,” “hold to be,” or even “memorize.”

The Tibetan term “liberation” (*grol*), which can render the Sanskrit *mokṣa*, is more restricted in its meaning. But as we saw above, the early Heart Essence tantras expanded this term’s semantic range through demarcating multiple levels of liberation. Owing to the ambiguity of the object—that is, what wearing or contemplating such a tantra might liberate us *from*—liberation becomes open to interpretation. As explained when reviewing different Old School positions on this issue, liberation has thus been variously construed as freedom from difficult circumstances in this lifetime, negative rebirths in the next, earlier stages of the Buddhist path to complete awakening, or saṃsāra, depending in large part on the wearer but other conditions as well.

Here, most importantly, it is not just wearing the tantra that is prescribed but analyzing and comprehending it, or rather, following the analytic contemplative course it prescribes until reaching freedom from all dualistic discursive concepts. The channeling of this analytic current into the environment of the earlier Heart Essence tradition, set in motion and accentuated in the revelations of Guru Chöwang, finds herein a more nuanced harmonic rapprochement with earlier Heart Essence themes. The Heart Essence of the Dākinī systematically integrates analytic contemplation as a basic prelude for the direct experience with the emptiness-luminosity of one’s own mind nature by drawing on the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra material. But ambiguities over whether “wearing” or “analyzing” is meant in specific instances, owing to their proximity in spelling and pronunciation, remains a productive tension for speculation.

## CONCLUSION

Before we rush to conclusions, I would like to first reiterate what should probably already be very clear by now: liberation-through-wearing tantras have been construed as an integral part of the Heart Essence tradition and all the many revelatory cycles influenced by it. They have also figured as their scriptural foundation—the very first Buddhist scriptures to emerge—and, as such, the generative matrix for the entire Buddhist dispensation and all other forms of language. This metaphysical claim of the tantras’ origin at the fount of the expressive power of the Dharma and all language—the very resonance of reality itself—entailed that a fluid diversity of linguistic forms, appearing in and translated from multiple different source languages, could be equally effective in introducing beings to the ultimate nature of their mind-body complex and transform them accordingly. Steeped in this ultimate source, the power of these tantras to both embody and transmit awakening entails entanglement between the material and the discursive, the linguistic and the nonconceptual. And indeed, it is precisely the proliferation of such bifurcations—which the tantras characterize as discursive deviations from the fundamental gnostic ground of being—that the use of these tantras aims to collapse.

Toward this goal, the tantras and their commentaries reviewed above combine the aesthetic, embodied, and enacted practice of writing these tantras out, crafting them into amulet-booklets, reciting them out loud, and wearing them fastened to the body (of both the living and the deceased) with the contemplative dimension of being introduced to their content, comprehending their meaning, cultivating their aim, and integrating this into experience through a process of recognizing and training in intrinsic nondual cognition. This combination of features is mirrored in the multivalence of the terms for their treatment, whose meanings straddle physical and discursive registers.

The emphasis in this combination of physical and discursive features changed over time as the tantras and commentaries that emerged with Guru Chöwang’s revelation of the Union of the Buddhas in 1233 enlisted the homophonous relationship between the Tibetan verbs “wear” and “analyze” to integrate an analytic approach into their practice. This approach, known today as analysis into the “triad of arising, remaining, and passing,” was already present in germinal form in the Vimalamitra Heart Essence tantras. But never before had the phrase “liberation-through-wearing” itself been glossed as “liberation-through-analyzing.” Likely driven by the polemical attacks of thirteenth century monastic scholars, whose criticisms reverberated well into the fourteenth century and beyond, this interpretation newly placed rational inquiry at the very heart of amulet-tantra practice. In tandem with this shift, the Union of the Buddhas’ analysis-laced amulet-tantras and commentaries also mark the first known instance in which Heart Essence revelations were attributed not to Vimalamitra but to Padmasambhava. Although Guru Chöwang’s revelation, the Union of the Buddhas, does not overtly present itself as a continuation of or a departure from the earlier Vimalamitra Heart Essence tradition, or even include the phrase “Heart Essence” in its title, it nonetheless reflects some awareness of its place vis-à-vis the Vimalamitra tradition by having the colophon in the *Luminous Lamp of Wisdom* commentary eulogize the treasure cycle as “the *heart essence* of all subterranean treasure teachings throughout India and Tibet.”<sup>93</sup>

While the rationalization of amulet-tantras that we find introduced in the Union of the Buddhas might have helped allay concerns about the authenticity of the claim of liberation through wearing, it did not exactly square well with the overwhelming emphasis in the Vimalamitra tantras on nondiscursive contemplative practice and understanding. Consequently, the rationalization of the practice of liberation through wearing underwent further changes. The Heart Essence of the Dākinī, revealed in 1313, or around that time, drew language, including text titles and the names of source languages, from Guru Chōwang’s revelation (or another, as yet unknown source) to better systematize its analytic approach with the cosmogony, metaphysics, and epistemology of the earlier Vimalamitra tradition, reviewed briefly above. It also followed the Union of the Buddhas in attributing itself to Padmasambhava instead of Vimalamitra but, unlike Guru Chōwang’s cycle, overtly presented itself as a continuation of the earlier Heart Essence tradition.

You may recall from the above summary that the Vimalamitra tradition’s basic premise is that nondual cognition is intrinsic to the mind-body complex of beings but remains unrecognized as such due to the obscuring force of discursive thoughts; the intrinsic intimacy of nondual cognition entails that sensory contact with awakened emanations (such as *nirmāṇakāya* tantras) can mirror or resonate this reality for beings, inducing recognition by momentarily dispelling discursive thoughts in a breakthrough epiphany, or “introduction,” to intrinsic nondual knowing.

To square a graded course of discursive analysis and philosophical inquiry more coherently with the overwhelmingly immediate and nondiscursive emphasis of the earlier Vimalamitra corpus, the Heart Essence of the Dākinī reused the language from the Union of the Buddhas but interwove it with citations from the Seventeen Tantras and doctrinal theories found in the earlier Vimalamitra tantras to alternately present wearing and analysis as either an integrated approach *or* as separate but equally viable options. Amulet-tantras that liberate through wearing and/or contemplating, as the case may be, could then be used not only as power objects to deliver the dead to better rebirths. They could also be enlisted as philosophical devices to think through and contemplate with, thus bridging a ubiquitous feature of popular practice with the highest aspirations of tantric Buddhism. Wearing liberation-through-wearing tantras can thus be viewed as a thoroughgoing tantric Buddhist spiritual-philosophical exercise aimed at cultivating in the mind-body complex—indeed, throughout all its sensory and cognitive channels—dispositions conducive to iterative breakthrough experiences with innate nondual cognition, the stabilization of which is the *sine qua non* for awakening, the “highest good” in the life of the Great Perfection contemplative and an ideal preparation for the opportunity presented at death.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gergely Hidas, *Mahāpratisarā-Mahāvīdyārājñī: The Great Amulet, Great Queen of Spells; Introduction, Critical Editions and Annotated Translation*, Śāta-piṭaka Series: Indo-Asian Literatures 636 (International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 2012), 21–23. The use of such protective amulets has been so prevalent among Buddhists in Tibet through the ages that it might have influenced the advent of Muslim amulet use in the twelfth century; see Johan Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 104–116.

<sup>2</sup> The sustained study of Buddhist amulets was inaugurated in earnest by Nik Douglas, *Tibetan Tantric Charms and Amulets* (Dover Publications, Inc., 1978), Tadeusz Skorupski, *Tibetan Amulets* (Bangkok: White Orchid Books, 1983) and Stanley Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge University Press, 1984). Notable entries that followed include Gergely Hidas, “Remarks on the Use of the *Dhāraṇīs* and Mantras of the *Mahāpratisarā-Mahāvīdyārājñī*,” in *Indian Languages and Texts through the Ages: Essays of Hungarian Indologists in Honour of Prof. Csaba Tóttösy*, ed. Csaba Dezső (New Manohar, 2007), 187–208; Gergely Hidas, “*Mahāpratisarāvīdyāvidhi*: The Spell-Manual of the Great Amulet,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 63, no. 4 (2010): 473–484; Hidas, *Mahāpratisarā-Mahāvīdyārājñī*; Paul Copp, *The Body Incantatory: Spells and the Ritual Imagination in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Columbia University Press, 2014); and Heidi E. Fjeld and Inger K. Vasstveit, “Amulets as Infrastructure: Enabling the Ordinary for Children in Mugum, Western Nepal,” *Himalaya* 43, no. 1 (2023): 20–41.

<sup>3</sup> A notable exception is Stanley Tambiah’s (*Buddhist Saints of the Forest*) pioneering work on Thai Buddhist amulets, which, although it does not examine Buddhist philosophical understandings of amulets, does treat the dynamic interplay between soteriological, pragmatic, and apotropaic orientations. Copp (*Body Incantatory*, 41–44) cites Peter Brown (*The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* [University of Chicago Press, 1981]) to overtly critique the “two-tiered” approach of viewing Buddhist practices in terms of a strict division between “popular” and “elite” practices and discourses, but Copp nonetheless reinstates this dichotomy by insisting, often contrary to the evidence he presents, that the ultimate Buddhist goal of “awakening” had little if any role to play in the *dhāraṇī* literature under examination.

<sup>4</sup> For more on “liberation-through-wearing amulets,” whose material I draw from for the present study, see James Gentry, *Power Objects in Tibetan Buddhism: The Life, Writings, and Legacy of Sokdokpa Lodrö Gyeltsen* (Brill, 2017), 236–259; and James Gentry, “Liberation through Sensory Encounters in Tibetan Buddhist Practice,” in “Tibetan Religion and the Senses,” ed. James Gentry, special issue, *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 50 (June 2019): 102–108. The dating of the initial emergence of this genre of amulet-texts to the eleventh and twelfth century is, as I show below, premised on the dating of the first revelatory cycle of which they form a core part, the Heart Essence of Vimalamitra. On the dates of this cycle, see David Germano, “Dzogchen,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., Lindsay Jones (Macmillan, 2005), 4:50.

<sup>5</sup> Gentry, *Power Objects*, 236–259.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the Tibetan treasure tradition and its origins, see Janet Gyatso, “The Logic of Legitimation in the Tibetan Treasure Tradition,” *History of Religions* 33, no. 2 (1993): 97–134; Janet Gyatso, “Guru Chos-dbang’s gTer ’byung chen mo: An Early Survey of the Treasure Tradition and Its Strategies in Discussing Bon Treasure,” in *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Sixth International Association of Tibetan Studies Seminar*, ed. Per Kvaerne (The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1994), 1:275–287; Janet Gyatso, “Drawn from the Tibetan Treasury: The Gter-ma Literature,” in *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezon and Roger R. Jackson (State University of New York Press, 1996), 147–169; and Robert Mayer, “gTer ston and Tradent: Innovation and Conservation in Tibetan Treasure Literature,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 36/37 (2015): 227–242; Robert Mayer, “Rethinking Treasure (Part One),” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 52 (October 2019): 119–184; Robert Mayer, “Indian *nidhi*, Tibetan *gter ma*, Guru Chos dbang, and a *Kriyātantra* on Treasure Doors: Rethinking Treasure (Part Two),” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 64 (July 2022): 368–446.

<sup>7</sup> Early historiographical examples are Nyang ral nyi ma ’od zer’s (1124–1192) late twelfth-century *History of the Dharma* and his *Copper Colored Mountain* hagiography of Padmasambhava; see Lewis Doney, *The Zangs gling ma: The First Padmasambhava Biography* (IITBS GmbH International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist

Studies, 2014); and Daniel Hirschberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born: Padmasambhava in the History of Tibet's Golden Age* (Wisdom Publications, 2016). For a discussion of these and other source materials for the emergence and early history of the terms *rnying ma* and *gsar ma*, see Kadri Raudsepp, “Rnying ma and Gsar ma: First Appearances of the Terms during the Early Phyi dar (Later Spread of the Doctrine),” *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 22 (2011): 25–45.

<sup>8</sup> Revelation of treasures likely began in Tibet as early as the late tenth century; see Dan Martin, *Unearthing Bon Treasures: Life and Contested Legacy of a Tibetan Scripture Revealer* (Brill, 2001). Treasures revealed not from the landscape and temples of Tibet, but from the minds of Tibetan treasure revealers, only came later in the tradition, perhaps in the fourteenth century or thereafter; see Andreas Doctor, *Tibetan Treasure Literature* (Snow Lion, 2005, 21–23); and Daniel Hirschberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born*, 132–133n249.

<sup>9</sup> *Rin po che 'byung bar byed pa sgra thal 'gyur chen po 'i rgyud*, in *Rnying ma 'i rgyud bcu bdun*, vol. 1 (Sanje Dorje, 1973–1977), 1–205.

<sup>10</sup> *Sangs rgyas sras gcig*, or *Bstan pa bu gcig*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi* (Sherab Gyaltzen Lama, 1975), 3:37–72. Khenpo Yeshe and I are currently preparing an English translation and study of this important tantra.

<sup>11</sup> *Sangs rgyas kyi 'das rjes gsum*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 3:287–304.

<sup>12</sup> David Germano, “The Shifting Terrain of the Tantric Bodies of Buddhas and Buddhists from an Atiyoga Perspective,” in *The Pandita and the Siddha: Tibetan Studies in Honor of E. Gene Smith*, ed. Ramon N. Prats (Amnye Machen Institute, 2007), 50.

<sup>13</sup> Gu ru chos kyi dbang phug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor lcags smyug ma*, 2 vols. (Ugyen Tempai Gyaltzen, 1980); Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor* (Buddhist Digital Resource Center, W3PD988-v89, n.d. [Khams sde dge rdzong sar bla ma lha khang du bzhugs pa 'i dpe rnying]). For the date of the Water Snake year of 1233 (*chu 'brul lo*) as the year of its revelation and its inclusion of *btags grol* tantras, see details from the description of Guru Chöwang's first revelation, at Lhodrak Namkechen (Lho brag Nam skad chen), in Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Gter 'byung chen mo*, in *Gu ru chos dbang gi rang rnam dang zhal gdams* (Ugyen Tempai Gyaltzen, 1979), 2:121.2, 132.3–4, 133.1–2, 139.1, and 144.2–3). A likely precedent for Guru Chöwang in this regard, Nyangrel Nyima Özer (Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer, 1124–1192), whom Guru Chöwang patterned much of his revelatory career after, even to the point of claiming himself to be his reincarnation, does not seem to mention liberation-through-wearing in his *History of Buddhism*. He does, nonetheless, seem to include therein a short lineage history of the early Heart Essence tradition; see Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer, *Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi 'i bcud* (*Nyang ral chos 'byung*) (Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 1988), 492. I thank Khenpo Yeshe for this reference.

<sup>14</sup> *Btags grol gyi rgyud drug*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 10:16.6–25.4; and in *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo* (Ngodrup and Sherab Drimay, 1976–1980), 67:133–152. Another tantra, the *Klong gsal 'bar ma 'i rgyud*, which has circulated outside extant *Mkha' 'gro snying thig* collections, is copiously cited therein as an important source for the cycle. Elaine Lai, “Heart Essence Literature through Time: A Close Study of the Secret Tantra of the Sun: Blazing Luminous Matrix of Samantabhadri,” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2024) sheds welcome light on this important but little-studied tantra and its place in the broader Heart Essence tradition.

<sup>15</sup> On the life of Pema Ledrel Tsel, the controversy surrounding who precisely revealed the Heart Essence of the Dākiṇī, and what this implies about its peculiar reception history, see Stéphane Arguillère, “A King of Dharma Forgotten on the Jewel Island: Was Me ban Chos rgyal Rin chen gling pa Rig 'dzin rGod ldem's rDzogs chen Master? (How Half of the *mKha' 'gro snying thig* Got Included in the *dGongs pa zang thal*),” *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 68 (January 2024): 69–147.

<sup>16</sup> Select examples include *Sangs rgyas gling pa*, *Rdzogs rim man ngag snying po gser gyi yang zhun gyi btags grol dkar po gcig thub bstan pa thams cad kyi yang snying gsang ba cod pan sa bon gyi rgyud*, in *Bla ma dgongs 'dus*, 13 vols. (Sonam Topgay Kazi, 1972), 10:311–340; Rig 'dzin rgod ldem, *Bstan pa bu gcig pa 'i rgyud*, in *Dgongs pa zang thal gyi chos skor*, *Rig 'dzin rgod ldem 'phru can*, 4 vols. (S. W. Tashigangpa, 1979), 4:235–266; Karma gling pa, *Zab chos zhi khro dgongs pa rang grol las btags grol phung po rang grol gyi don bsodus rang grol snying po* (*zhi khro btags grol*), in *Zhi khro dgongs pa rang grol*, (Mani Dorji, 1979), 1:233–249; Ratna gling pa, *Btags pas grol ba 'i man ngag*, in *Snga 'gyur rgyud 'bum phyogs bsgrigs*, 59 vols. (Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, Dpal brtsegs bod yig dpe rnying zhib 'jug khang, 2009), 44:429–439; Padma gling pa, *Sangs rgyas thams cad kyi sras gcig po 'i rgyud*, in *Kun bzang dgongs pa kun 'dus*, *Rig 'dzin pad+ma gling pa 'i zab gter chos mdzod rin po che*, 22 vols. (Kunsang Tobgay, 1975–1976a), 15:357–376; Padma gling pa, *Snying thig yang gsang rgyud bu chung las: Bstan pa thams cad kyi bu gcig po*, in *Rig 'dzin pad+ma gling pa 'i zab gter chos*

*mdzod rin po che*, 22 vols. (Kunsang Tobgay, 1975–1976b), 6:579–607; *Sangs rgyas thams cad kyi sras gcig bu gsang ba gcod pa sa bon gyi rgyud*, in *'Ja' tshon pod drug*, 6 vols. (Konchhog Lhadrepa, n.d.), 4:29–38.

<sup>17</sup> *Snying thig ya bzhi*, vol. 2 (*Bla ma yang thig*, part II, e), 29–63; vol. 3 (*Bi ma snying thig*, Part I), 37–72, 73–272, 273–344, 287–304; vol. 6 (*Bi ma snying thig*, Part I); 1–10.3, 10.3–14.5, 14.5–18.5; vol. 9 (*Mkha' 'gro yang tig*, part III, *hum*), 353–364; vol. 10 (*Mkha' 'gro snying thig*, part I, e), 16–17, 17–19, 19–20, 20, 20–21, 21–25, 25–32, 32–45, 45–48, 48–53, 53–57, 57–69, 82–106; vol. 11 (*Mkha' 'gro snying thig*, part II, *wam*), 267–268, 268, 268–269, 269–270, 270, 270–273, 297–305, 305–307, 307–308, 309–313, 313–315, 315–320, 320–322; vol. 12 (*Zab mo yang tig*, part I, e), 437–445.

<sup>18</sup> *Sangs rgyas sras gcig*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 3:41.5–6. This and the subsequent passages in this paper from the *Only Child of All Buddhas Tantra* were rendered into English through my collaboration with Khenpo Yeshe.

<sup>19</sup> This is also a pronounced feature of the Heart Essence tradition more broadly. For more on the linkages between theories of cosmogony and epistemology in Heart Essence literature, along with related theories of language, embodiment, and eschatology, see Germano, “Dzogchen,” 2547. For another instance of a cognate amulet tradition that follows this pattern, see Katarina Turpeinen, “Luminous Visions and Liberatory Amulets in Rig 'dzin rgod ldem's Great Perfection Anthology,” *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 50 (June 2019): 140–143.

<sup>20</sup> *Sangs rgyas sras gcig*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 3:41.1–3.

<sup>21</sup> *Dus gnad nges pa*. The full title of this explanatory tantra is *Rdo rje 'chang gis gsungs pa mchod 'os rang bzhin gyi tshig dus gnad nges pa*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 3:273–287.4.

<sup>22</sup> *Btags pas grol bar bstan pa bu gcig gi gsang 'grel slob dpon dga' rab rdo rjes mdzad pa*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 3:73–271.

<sup>23</sup> *Sangs rgyas sras gcig*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 3:39.4–5.

<sup>24</sup> *Sangs rgyas sras gcig*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 3:70.2–3.

<sup>25</sup> *Sgra thal 'gyur*, in *Rnying ma'i rgyud bcu bdun*, 1:39.

<sup>26</sup> *Sangs rgyas rjes gsum gyi rgyud*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 6:10.1–2.

<sup>27</sup> *Sangs rgyas rjes gsum gyi rgyud*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 6:18.1–4.

<sup>28</sup> *Rdo rje 'chang gis gsungs pa mchod 'os rang bzhin gyi tshig dus gnad nges pa*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 3:282.1–283.1.

<sup>29</sup> *Sngags log sun 'byin gyi skor* (Kunsang Tobgyel and Mani Dorji, 1979), 2–18.2. For an argument that the putative Chak Lotsāwa polemic is falsely attributed to him, see Kadri Raudsepp, “Dating and Authorship Problems in the Sngags log sun 'byin Attributed to Chag lo tsā ba Chos rje dpal,” in *Contemporary Visions in Tibetan Studies*, ed. Brandon Dotson et al., 281–297 (Serindia Publications, 2009), 209 and 296n70.

<sup>30</sup> *Sngags log sun 'byin gyi skor*, 10.2–3.

<sup>31</sup> On treasure polemics see Matthew Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 121–137; Martin, *Unearthing Bon Treasures*; and Andreas Doctor, *Tibetan Treasure Literature: Revelation, Tradition, and Accomplishment in Visionary Buddhism* (Snow Lion, 2005), 31–71.

<sup>32</sup> *Snying thig ya bzhi*, vols. 3 and 4.

<sup>33</sup> Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Maṇi bka' 'bum chen mo* (Kunsang Topgey, 1976a), 406.2–409.4; Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Maṇi bka' 'bum chen mo* (Kunsang Topgey, 1976b), 169.2–170.5; Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Maṇi bka' 'bum chen mo* (Urgyen Tempai Gyaltzen, 1981), 331.3–334.4.

<sup>34</sup> Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Maṇi bka' 'bum chen mo*, 1976a, 406.3–6; 1976b, 169.2–3; 1981, 331.3–8.

<sup>35</sup> Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Maṇi bka' 'bum chen mo*, 1976a, 406.6–407.1; 1976b, 169.3–4; 1981, 331.8–332.1.

<sup>36</sup> For more on the figure of Peldzin (Dpal 'dzin), his teachers, and the broader milieu that likely inspired his anti-Nyingma polemic, see James Gentry, “Rumblings of Thunder: Notes on the Identity and Intellectual Milieu of the Old School Critic Peldzin,” in *Histories of Tibet: Essays in Honor of Leonard W. J. van der Kuijp*, ed. Kurtis Schaeffer, Jue Liang, and William McGrath (Wisdom Publications, 2023), 323–337.

<sup>37</sup> Dpal 'dzin, *Chos dang chos ma yin pa rnam par dbye ba'i rab tu byed pa* (Buddhist Digital Resource Center, WICZ885, n.d.), 11b.1–5; Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan, *Collected Writings of Sog-bzlog-pa Blo-gros-rgyal-mtshan*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Sanji Dorji, 1975) (s), 1:317.6–318.1, 318.4–6, 319.3–4.

<sup>38</sup> For more on “liberation-through-tasting” and the seven-times-born Brahmin flesh and other transgressive substances associated with it, see Holly Gayley, “Soteriology of the Senses in Tibetan Buddhism,” *Numen* 54 (2007): 459–499; Gentry, *Power Objects*; James Gentry, “Why Did the Cannibal King Fly? Tantric

Transformations of an Indian Narrative in Tibet,” in “From Khyung Lung to Lhasa, A Festschrift for Dan Martin,” ed. Jonathan Silk and Leonard van der Kuijp, *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 64 (July 2022): 84–135; James Gentry, “‘May It Meet with a Karmically Destined Mahākāruṇika Yogin!’—Ratna Lingpa’s Renewal of the *Maṇi*-Pill Tradition in Fifteenth Century Tibet,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 66 (April 2023): 94–229; and James Gentry, “Changing Bodies Seven Times: Padampa Sangyé’s Pacifying Tradition and the Birth of the *Maṇi* Pill,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 67 (October 2023): 69–153.

<sup>39</sup> Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan, 2:126.6–127.1. For more on this polemical text, its questionable attribution to the Eighth Karmapa, and the writings that Sokdokpa and others composed in reply, see Gentry, *Power Objects*, 171–290; Gentry, “Why Did the Cannibal King Fly?” 111–121; and Leonard W. J. van der Kuijp, “The Bird-Faced Monk and the Beginnings of the New Tantric Tradition, Part Two,” *Journal of Tibetology* 19 (2018): 86–127.

<sup>40</sup> Gentry, “Rumblings of *Thunder*.”

<sup>41</sup> Gentry, *Power Objects*, 171–290; “Why Did the Cannibal King Fly?” 111–121.

<sup>42</sup> James Gentry, “Tracing the Life of a Buddhist Literary Apologia: Steps in Preparation for the Study and Translation of Sokdokpa’s *Thunder of Definitive Meaning*,” in “Exploring Buddhist Traditions in Literature,” special issue, ed. Vesna Wallace, *Religions* 12 (October 2021) 933; and Gentry, “Rumblings of *Thunder*.”

<sup>43</sup> *Btags grol phung po rang grol*, in Karma gling pa, *Bar do thos grol chen mo* (Padma ’phrin las, 2003), 227.2–4.

<sup>44</sup> Sokdokpa (Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan, 2:126.2–3) seems to have noticed this inconsistency when citing this passage in his apologia in response to the polemic attributed to the Eighth Karmapa; he chooses to leave out the line about heinous sinners. It reads instead that only ethical amulet wearers can avoid the lower realms.

<sup>45</sup> ’Jam mgon kong sprul, *Btags grol spyi’i lag len*, in *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo* (Shechen Publications, 2007–2008), 42:385–422.

<sup>46</sup> ’Jam mgon kong sprul, *Btags grol spyi’i lag len*, 408.1–2.

<sup>47</sup> ’Jam mgon kong sprul, *Btags grol spyi’i lag len*, 408.2–3.

<sup>48</sup> ’Jam mgon kong sprul, *Btags grol spyi’i lag len*, 408.3.

<sup>49</sup> ’Jam mgon kong sprul, *Btags grol spyi’i lag len*, 408.4–6.

<sup>50</sup> ’Jam mgon kong sprul, *Btags grol spyi’i lag len*, 418.5–419.1.

<sup>51</sup> A bu dkar lo, *Nad gdon rims yams bsrung ba’i man ngag gces bsgrigs ’dod ’jo nor bu’i bang mdzod* (Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2013 [2010]), 209–210.

<sup>52</sup> *Phags pa rig sngags kyi rgyal mo so sor ’brang ba chen mo* (*Mahāpratisarāvīdyārājñī*), in Bka’ ’gyur (dpe bsdur ma) (Krung go’i bod rig pa’i dpe skrun khang, 2006–2009), Toh 561, *rgyud, pha*, 355–420. For a Sanskrit critical edition, complete English translation, and study of this text, see Hidas, *Mahāpratisarā-Mahāvīdyārājñī*. An English translation is provided in James Gentry, with Dharmachakra Translation Committee, trans., *The Great Amulet* (*Mahāpratisarā*, Toh 561) (84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2024), <https://read.84000.co/translation/toh561.html>. Scholarship centering on this scripture includes Copp, *Body Incantatory*, 59–140; Hidas, “Remarks on the Use of the *Dhāraṇīs* and Mantras” and *Mahāpratisarāvīdyāvīdhi*; and Todd Lewis, *Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal: Narratives and Rituals of Newar Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 119–164.

<sup>53</sup> dPa’ bo gtsug lag ’phreng ba, *Chos ’byung mkhas pa’i dga’ ston*, 2 vols. (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1986), 1:546; Sog bzlog pa blo gros rgyal mtshan, 1:118.4–120.2; ’Jam mgon kong sprul, *Btags grol spyi’i lag len*, 398.6.

<sup>54</sup> Hidas, *Mahāpratisarā-Mahāvīdyārājñī*, 218–222; 231–234, 246.

<sup>55</sup> For description of this hermeneutic with recourse to the *Mahāpratisarā*, see Gentry, *Power Objects*, 243–249.

<sup>56</sup> The commentary of the *Only Child of All Buddhas Tantra* enlists the phrase “liberation-[through]-wearing” repeatedly as a compound noun to refer to the tantra as an amulet, but the commentary of the *Unimpeded Sound Tantra* does not; it refers instead to the *process* of “liberation through wearing,” but only seldomly. In any event, these commentaries do not seem to have circulated with the tantras themselves; this, coupled with text-internal evidence, strongly suggests they were later creations.

<sup>57</sup> Krang dbyi sun et al., *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1998 [1993]), 1413, under “’dogs pa”; Blo mthun bsam gtan et al., *Dag yig gсар bsgrigs* (Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1994 [1989]), 299–300, under “’btags.”

- <sup>58</sup> J. S. Negi, *Tibetan-Sanskrit Dictionary*, 16 vols. (Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1993–2005), 5:1732–1734, under “*btags pa*”; 6:2599–2600, under “*’dogs pa*.”
- <sup>59</sup> Krang dbyi sun et al., *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*, 1077, under “*rtog pa*”; Blo mthun bsam gtan et al., *Dag yig gsar bsgrigs*, 306–307, under “*rtog pa*.”
- <sup>60</sup> *Rang byung rig pa’i tan tra*, in Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor, cha*, 59–63; Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor lcags smyug ma*, 2:7–12.
- <sup>61</sup> Gu ru chos kyi dbang dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor, cha*, 62.6–63.2; Gu ru chos kyi dbang dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor lcags smyug ma*, 2:12.2–5.
- <sup>62</sup> *Mngon shes rig pa rgyal po’i rgyud*, in Gu ru chos kyi dbang dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor, ca*, 58.4; Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor lcags smyug ma*, 2:137.1.3.
- <sup>63</sup> *Rgyud cig shes kun grol*, in Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor, ja*, 65–70; Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor lcags smyug ma*, 2:13–19.
- <sup>64</sup> Yang dag skad might refer to the language of Paiśāci.
- <sup>65</sup> *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 10:16–25. The six are titled there as follows: the *Tantra of the Essence of Liberation-through-Wearing* (*Btags grol snying po’i rgyud*), *Tantra of Knowing the One that Liberates All* (*Gcig shes kun grol gyi rgyud*), the *Tantra of the Quintessence, the Single Golden Syllable* (*Yang tig gser gyi ’bru gcig pa’i rgyud*), the *Only Child of the Buddhas, the Tantra of the Seed* (*Sras gcig sa bon gyi rgyud*), the *Tantra of Self-Emergent Awareness* (*Rang byung rig pa’i rgyud*), and the *Tantra of the Great Perfection of the Fruition* (*’Bras bu yongs rdzogs chen po’i rgyud*).
- <sup>66</sup> In the Heart Essence of the *Ḍākinī*, *Liberation-through-Wearing* is rendered into Tibetan from the language of Uḍḍiyāna; *Knowing the One that Liberates All* is translated from the language of buddha ḍākinīs; the *Quintessence, the Single Golden Syllable* has its source text a text written in the language of Yang dag; the *Only Child of the Buddhas* is rendered from the language of Kalaviṅka-’dzo yo gi ni[=yoginī]; the *Self-Arisen Awareness* is from the language of Yang dag gsang ba; and the *Great Perfection of the Fruition* is rendered from Sanskrit.
- <sup>67</sup> Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor, tha*, 89–118; Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor lcags smyug ma*, 2:20–56.
- <sup>68</sup> Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor, tha*, 91.3–92.1; Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor lcags smyug ma*, 2:20.9–21.8.
- <sup>69</sup> Jamyang Khyentsé Chökyi Lodrö, *Recognizing the Nature of Mind*, trans. Adam Pearcey (Lotsawa House, 2020), <https://www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/jamyang-khyentse-chokyi-lodro/recognizing-nature-of-mind>.
- <sup>70</sup> Kun bzang dpal ldan, *Byang chud sems dpa’i spyod ’jug rtsa ba dang ’grel ba* (Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1990), 351–353, 366–367.
- <sup>71</sup> *Sgra thal ’gyur*, in *Rnying ma’i rgyud bcu bdun*, 1:60.5–6.
- <sup>72</sup> Dam pa sangs rgyas, *Zhi byed snga phyi bar gsum gyi chos skor phyogs bsgrigs*, 13 vols. (Ding ri glang skor gtsug lag khang, 2012–2013), 3:536.1–537.5.
- <sup>73</sup> Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor, tha*, 94.7–95.1; Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor lcags smyug ma*, 2:25.5–6.
- <sup>74</sup> Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor, tha*, 95.1–2; Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor lcags smyug ma*, 2:25.6–7.
- <sup>75</sup> Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor, tha*, 95.2–7; Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor lcags smyug ma*, 2:25.7–26.9.
- <sup>76</sup> Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor, tha*, 95.7–96.3, 96.3–5; Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor lcags smyug ma*, 2:26.9–27.4, 27.4–8.
- <sup>77</sup> Emphasis mine. Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Maṇi bka’ ’bum chen mo* 1976a, 408.1–409.1; 1976b, 170.1–170.3; 1981, 333.1–334.1.
- <sup>78</sup> Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Maṇi bka’ ’bum chen mo*, 1976a, 406.6–407.1; 1976b, 169.3–4; 1981, 331.8–332.1.
- <sup>79</sup> *Btags grol snying po’i rgyud*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 10:17.3.
- <sup>80</sup> Emphasis mine. *Btags grol snying po’i ti ka*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 10:27.3–5.
- <sup>81</sup> *Btags grol snying po’i rgyud*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 10:17.3.

<sup>82</sup> *Btags grol snying po'i ti ka*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 10:27.6–28.4: *nyon mongs pa'i rtsa ba bdag 'dzin phra mo 'di ji srid du brtags te% phyi snod nang bcud lus kyi phyi nang mgo mjug la sogs pa'i gnas gang nas byung % gang du 'gro% ji ltar gnas par 'dug brtags pas kyang de dag gang nas kyang ma byung % gar yang ma song % gang du yang mi gnas% ji ltar yang ma mthong bas na% de lta zhing gzhig byed kyi rig pa nyid la ltas kyang % rang bzhin du grub pa rdul tsam yang mi 'dug ste% rang bzhin gyis stong par 'dug pas bdag 'dzin rang sar grol% de ltar bdag 'dzin rang sar grol tsa na rtsa ba bdag 'dzin las gyes pa'i nyon mongs pa brgyad khri bzhi stong la sogs pa thams cad rang zhig tu grol bar nges te% dper na rtsa ba bcad pa'i sdong po la% lo 'dab ngang gis 'gyel ba ltar ro%*

<sup>83</sup> Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor* (A), *tha*, 91.3–92.1; Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor lcags smyug ma* (B), 2:20.9–21.8: *rgyud kyi mtshan brtags grol ces bya ba ngo sprad pa ni% 'di ltar sems rgyud la nyon mongs pa brgyad khri bzhi stong du 'phel cing % srid pa'i rtsa ba bdag du 'dzin pa phra mo 'di ji ltar srid[A bsring] brtags te% phyi snod% nang bcud% lus phyi nang mgo mjug la sogs pa'i% gnas gang nas byung % gang du 'gro% ji ltar gnas par 'dug brtags pas% phyi nang snod bcud la sogs pa'i gnas gang nas kyang ma byung % gar yang ma song % gnas gang na yang[A 'ang] mi gnas% ji ltar yang ma mthong na% de ltar lta byed kyi rig pa nyid la gong ltar brtags pas kyang sngar bzhin grub pa mi 'dug ste% rang bzhin gyis stong par 'dug pas ngar 'dzin rang sar grol% de ltar grol tsa na% rtsa ba ngar 'dzin las skyes pa'i nyon mongs pa brgyad khri bzhi stong la sogs pa yang rang bzhin du grol bar nges te% dper na% rgyal[A+bu] btson du zin pas% dmangs[B rmangs] cham la phebs pa ltar% rtog tshogs brtags grol du ngo sprad do%.*

<sup>84</sup> Compare, for instance, the section from the *Luminous Lamp of Wisdom* titled “the teaching on becoming adept in all dharmas and reaching liberation through knowing the one thing,” (96–100) to corresponding passages in the *ṭīkā* on *Knowing the One that Liberates All* (34–44).

<sup>85</sup> It can also be observed that the *Luminous Lamp of Wisdom* shares nearly identical passages with Ratna gling pa's later *Rtsa gsum* revelation, suggesting reuse of sections of one and the same revelation for two different treasure collections. See especially *Rtsa gsum 'bras bu'i don khrid kyi them byang*, in *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo* (Shechen Publications, 2007–2008), 4:523–606.

<sup>86</sup> *Btags grol snying po'i ti ka*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 10:26.3–4.

<sup>87</sup> *Btags grol snying po'i rgyud*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 10:17.4.

<sup>88</sup> *Btags grol snying po'i ti ka*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 10:30.4–5.

<sup>89</sup> *Btags grol snying po'i ti ka*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 10:30.5–31.2.

<sup>90</sup> *Btags grol snying po'i rgyud*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 10:17.4–5.

<sup>91</sup> *Btags grol snying po'i ti ka*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 10:31.2–3.

<sup>92</sup> Emphasis mine. *Btags grol snying po'i ti ka*, in *Snying thig ya bzhi*, 10:31.3–4.

<sup>93</sup> Emphasis mine. Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor*, *tha*, 116.7; Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor lcags smyug ma*, 2:55.10–56.1: *rgya bod sa 'og gi gter chos thams cad kyi snying tig.*