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Chapter 2: The Teachings of the Dzogchen Zhangzhung Nyengyü System and Their Transmission

Abstract: The collection of *tsakalis* that are the subject of this volume are related to a system of Tibetan meditation known as the Dzogchen Zhangzhung Nyengyü, the ‘Oral Transmission of the Great Perfection from Zhangzhung’. In the Bon religion, as in certain branches of Tibetan Buddhism, the ‘Great Perfection’ (Dzogchen) is regarded as the supreme class of teachings and meditation. There are three systems of Dzogchen in the Bon religion: Atri, Dzogchen (used here in a specific sense) and Zhangzhung Nyengyü. The first two are classed as ‘treasure’ texts or *terma* (*gter ma*), believed to have been composed and buried many centuries ago in an era when Bon was under threat, and revealed at a more propitious time. The Zhangzhung Nyengyü, by contrast, is not a rediscovered treasure but an unbroken master-to-disciple oral transmission that is believed to have originated as a teaching bestowed by the Supreme Buddha named the ‘Ever-Excellent One’, Küntu Zangpo, and transmitted down generations of earthly masters to the present day. It is principally this lineage whose members are depicted on the cards. Following a presentation of the main principles of the Zhangzhung Nyengyü system of Dzogchen, this chapter will offer brief accounts of the members of the lineage who are depicted in the *tsakalis*, based on the biographical section of the cycle.

1 Introduction

The collection of *tsakali* considered here represents the transmission lineage of the teachings of an esoteric system known as Dzogchen, the ‘Great Perfection’, which is found in both Bon and certain schools of Buddhism. Bonpos believe that all the doctrines contained in their religion, generally referred to as Yungdrung (‘Eternal’) Bon to distinguish it from other, more marginal Tibetan religious beliefs and practices, were taught by their founder, a quasi-mythical figure known as Shenrab Miwo, who is considered to have lived many thousands of years before the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. Of the different schemes that Bonpos use for the classification of Shenrab’s teachings, the best known is a nine-tiered categorisation of ‘vehicles’ or ‘ways’, known as the ‘Nine Ways of Bon’. The ways are subdivided into three sets: four so-called ‘lower’ or ‘causal’ vehicles, consisting of

rituals that are probably largely of indigenous Tibetan origin; four ‘higher’ vehicles, or ‘ways of result’, containing teachings that are significantly cognate with, if not demonstrably derived from, Buddhist concepts; and finally, a single vehicle known as the ‘supreme way’, which consists entirely of teachings related to the Great Perfection.

Bon has three different traditions of Great Perfection teachings. These are, first, the Dzogchen Yangtse Longchen (Yang rtse klong chen), which is more commonly referred to simply as Dzogchen; secondly, Atri (A khrid), ‘Instructions according to the Letter A’; and finally, the Dzogchen Zhangzhung Nyengyü, the ‘Aural Transmission from Zhangzhung’. The first is believed to have originated from a threefold set of teachings that were given by a celestial incarnation of Shenrab Miwo named Chime Tsukphü (‘Chi med gtsug phud). These foundational teachings, known as the Three Proclamations, derive their name from the belief that Chime Tsukphü promulgated them among the gods, serpent spirits and humans. According to the transmission narrative, the teachings were brought to Zhangzhung – a land situated in the west of Tibetan and parts of Central Asia and regarded as a sacred land by Bonpos – by a saint named Nyachen Lishu Taring (sNya chen Li shu stag ring), who then went on to introduce them to Tibet proper. This coincided with the period when Buddhism was being established as the official religion of Tibet, and the emperor at the time, a convert to the new religion, was persecuting Bon. To save his teachings from destruction, Lishu Tagring concealed them with the intention that they be rediscovered at a more propitious time for Bon. The rediscovery occurred in the eleventh century, when they were revealed by a certain Zhötön Ngödrub Dragpa (gZhod ston dNgos grub grags pa) – considered to be Lishu Tagring’s reincarnation – from their place of concealment in southern Tibet.

Unlike the Dzogchen line, the Atri tradition makes no claim to having originated in an ancient era or a sacred land, but was a scholarly composition from the eleventh century, and is therefore contemporary with the Dzogchen cycle that is classified as a ‘revealed treasure’ (*terma*). The author of the Atri was a remarkable figure called Gongdzö Ritröpa (dGongs mdzod ri khrod pa, 1038–1096) of the Meu (rMe’u) lineage, one of the six main Bonpo families in central Tibet. The original form of the teaching was organised into eighty practice sessions, but in the thirteenth century a certain Gyalwa Yungdrung of the Dru family (Bru rGyal ba g.yung drung, 1242–1290), a disciple of Gongdzö Ritröpa’s main spiritual heir, restructured it into fifteen sessions. The Atri came to be closely associated with the Dru family and was especially practised in Menri (sMan ri), the main monastic seat of the Bonpos in central Tibet that would be founded by a member of the Dru family in the fifteenth century.

The third of the Bonpo Dzogchen traditions, the Zhangzhung Nyengyü, is – as its name indicates – regarded as an unbroken master-to-disciple transmission. In this respect it differs from the Dzogchen Yangtse Longchen, which is classified as a ‘treasure’ cycle (*terma*) since it is believed to have been brought to light after three centuries of concealment. The system is considered originally to have been conceived and taught by the Buddha Küntu Zangpo (Kun tu bzang po), the ‘Ever-Excellent One’, who corresponds to the figure of Samantabhadra of the Buddhist tradition. Through a process of mind-transmission it passed to another set of enlightened beings known as the ‘nine blessed ones’, and from there to another series, the ‘twenty-four saintly masters’, in the land of Zhangzhung. Gyerpung Nangzher Löpo (Gyer spungs sNang gzher lod po), an eighth-century figure, is credited with subsequently committing it to writing in the Zhangzhung language.

The philosophical system known as the Great Perfection has a long and intricate history that is still the subject of extensive discussion among scholars, and its underlying concepts are complex and often elusive. While this is certainly not the place to undertake a detailed exposition of the system and its tenets, in view of the fact that the figures depicted on the cards that formed the subject of this book represent the transmission of its most important development in the Bon religion, the first part of this chapter will present a general introduction to central premises and the procedures that are followed in order to achieve its goals. The second part will set out the main stages in the transmission of the Zhangzhung Nyengyü down to the last lineage-holder represented in our collection of *tsakali*.

Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in the number of works related to Dzogchen intended both for the scholarly community and also for Western followers of Buddhism and Bon. Since the purpose of this chapter is not to engage in the complexities of Dzogchen philosophy or the details of its historical developments, but to provide a general outline of the system that was perpetuated by the lineage depicted on the *tsakali*, this overview will be based on a limited number of studies that deal with the system’s main features, especially those relating to the Zhangzhung Nyengyü, and on works concerned with the hagiographies of the masters. The outline of the doctrine given here is based mainly on the relevant sections of the studies by Samten G. Karmay, Donatella Rossi, John Myrdhin Reynolds, Jean-Luc Achard and Loel Guinness,¹ while the structure of the lineage itself is indebted to Karmay, Reynolds, Henk Blezer and Yongdzin Lopön Tenzin Namdak.² For the intricacies of the interconnections between the different

1 Karmay 2007; Rossi 1999; Reynolds 2005; Achard 2008; Guinness 2021.

2 Karmay 1998; Reynolds 2005; Blezer 2009–2010; Yongdzin 2010.

branches of the transmission the reader is referred to the chart in Blezer's article and especially to the lineage tree diagram in Yongdzin's 2010 volume.³

2 The basic concepts of Dzogchen

One of the fundamental ideas in the teachings of the Great Perfection is the 'base' (*gzhi*), of which the natural state, *neluk* (*gnas lugs*), is essentially pure (*kadak, ka dag*). The base is also expressed as the primordial base, *döme zhi* (*gdod ma'i gzhi*), or the base of all, *künzhi* (*kun gzhi*). The identity between the primordial base and the base of all is disputed by certain Tibetan commentators because the latter term is also used in a different way in the context of certain Mahāyāna schools in relation to the 'storehouse consciousness' (Tib. *kun gzhi rnam shes*, Sk. *ālaya-vijñāna*). The primordial base is personified in the Great Perfection as the primordial Buddha Kuntu Zangpo (Tib. Kun tu bzang po), who is represented on the first *tsakali* in the series – no. 1 – to feature an anthropomorphic figure.

The system accords great importance to the mind. The natural state, the primordial base, is understood not as the actual mind, *sem* (*sems*) but as the *nature* of the mind, *semnyi* (*sems nyid*). A fundamental feature of the human condition is that the mind is disengaged from its own nature, and the moment at which this slippage occurs is understood as nothing less than the inception of *samsāra* ('cyclic existence'). The moment of disjunction is evocatively expressed in a text entitled *The Vast Expanse of the View* (*lTa ba klong yangs*).⁴ The work is classed as a treasure text, *terma* (Tib. *gter ma*) that was discovered by Dorje Lingpa (rDo rje gling pa, 1346–1405). Although it is considered to be a Buddhist treatise on the Great Perfection, it may be noted that Dorje Lingpa also discovered several important works belonging to the Bon religion, and is accordingly sometimes known by the Bonpo name of Yungdrung Lingpa (gYung drung gling pa).

The immovable moved slightly,
The unquivering quivered slightly,
Although there is no motion of the Basis,
The motion comes out of the versatility of the Intellect.
The versatility is called the Mind.
It is also that of spontaneous compassion.
Just like the wind of the breath of a small bird.

³ Blezer 2009–2010, 74–77; Yongdzin Lopön Tenzin Namdak 2010, 36. For an extensive list of primary sources relating to the Zhangzhung Nyengyü, see Blezer 2011.

⁴ Karmay 2007, 228.

Or the movement of the unborn cock.
 Or one hundredth part of the hair from a horse's tail split into a hundred.
 Such is the quivering which joins intellect to mind.
 This is called the Innate Nescience.⁵

The purpose of spiritual practice in the Great Perfection is for the mind to recover its lost identity with its own nature, a reunion that is referred to as ‘the child being reunited with its mother’.⁶ While this disengagement is characterised by ignorance, *marikpa* (*ma rig pa*), the reunion of the mind and its nature is synonymous with awareness, *rikpa* (*rig pa*). The primordial base may be ineffable, but it is said to be characterised by three features: emptiness, clarity and energy.

2.1 Ground, Path and Fruit

The concept of the ‘ground’ or ‘base’, *zhi* (*gzhi*) is the point of departure for a process of self-liberation that Dzogchen texts present as having three stages of which the second and third are, respectively, the ‘path’ and the ‘fruit’. Tantric practice in both Buddhism and Bon requires neophytes to undergo a period of preliminary practice – which may in certain cases last for several years – both in order to ensure the efficacy of the techniques that are to be applied during the main engagement and also to protect them from harm that may rise from the potentially dangerous transformations that follow. In this respect, the Great Perfection is no different. In the case of the Zhangzhung Nyengyü, the preliminary practice followed is based on a set of procedures formulated by a pivotal figure in the transmission of the system, Dru Gyalwa Yungdrung (Bru rGyal ba g.yung drung, 1242–1290), who was also responsible for systematising another of the main Bon Dzogchen systems, the Atri. The text in question, entitled *rGyal ba phyag khrid* (‘[Dru] Gyalwa [Yungdrung]’s Manual of Instruction’), stipulates nine practices, organised into three sets of three.

- a. Practices that are valuable in general (*spyir gces pa'i sngon 'gro gsum gyis 'dul ba*)
 1. *Initiation*. Like tantra, the Great Perfection is an esoteric system in which the figure of the master is all important. Without the conferral of empowerment by a qualified teacher it is considered that any attempt at following the subsequent procedures would be pointless.
 2. *Meditation on impermanence*. In Bon and Buddhism alike, the fundamental impediment to any kind of spiritual progress is an individual’s at-

⁵ Karmay 2007, 189.

⁶ Karmay 2007, 176.

tachment to *samsāra* ('cyclic existence'), and the purpose of this particular practice is to generate awareness of the evanescence of worldly life. This second practice is subdivided into nine sections, each representing a different aspect of samsaric impermanence (life, material possessions and so forth).

3. *Confession of sins.* The act of admitting to and confronting one's misdeeds is seen as an unburdening of oneself and hence an essential step in the process of detachment.
- b. Purifying the mental continuum by means of the three preliminary practices that are in harmony with everything (*kun dang mthun pa'i sngon 'gro gsum gyis rgyud shyong ba*).
 4. *Generating the thought of enlightenment.* This is a commitment to the principle that whatever spiritual practice one undertakes is intended primarily for the benefit of others, not oneself.
 5. *Taking refuge.* As is well known, in early forms of Buddhism the place of refuge is the Triple Gem – the Buddha, the Dharma, and the monastic community. The Great Perfection shares with tantric Buddhism the difference that the principal refuge is one's own master, who is superior even to the Buddha. In the Zhangzhung Nyengyü, the meditator visualises the master as Künzang Shenlha (Kun bzang gshen lha), a manifestation of the divinity Shenlha Ökar (gShen lha 'od dkar). While Künzang Shenlha – one's own master – may be the focus of this exercise, he should be visualised as being surrounded by all the other classes of divinities – meditational deities, *dakinis* and so forth – as well as all the lineage masters, notably those that feature in this collection of cards that make up the divine assembly of the Zhangzhung Nyengyü.
 6. *Mandala offering.* This procedure, which signifies the offering of both oneself and the universe to the divinities and saints in the assembly invoked in the preceding practice, is generally enacted symbolically: the disciple repeatedly creates and dismantles a model of the universe consisting of a set of three vertically arranged metal discs that are filled with grain, emptied out, wiped clean, and again reassembled. Ideally, the sequence should be performed 100,000 times.
- c. Purifying the mental continuum through three especially exalted preliminary practices (*khyad par 'phags pa'i sngon 'gro gsum gyis rgyud dag par bya ba*).

7. *Mantra recitation.* This entails the repetition of a set of prescribed sacred formula – as in the previous case, ideally 100,000 times – while performing the appropriate visualisations.
8. *Offering one's body.* The procedure that constitutes this component is in fact a ritual that is often performed as a 'stand-alone' meditation, and almost has the status of a subsidiary school of Tibetan Buddhism. Literally translated as 'cutting-off', the practice is classically undertaken in terrifying settings, strewn with human remains, such as battlefields or, most commonly, charnel grounds, where the sense of impermanence is particularly acute. Using instruments made of human body parts (such as thighbone trumpets and skull drums) the practitioner invites 'guests' from the different realms of *samsāra* to dismember and consume his or her body. The dramatic visualisations are considered to be a physical manifestation of the true purpose, which is the cutting off of ego-clinging.
9. *Prayer for blessings.* In this final discipline, the practitioner prays to his or her own master and to all the lineage masters. More than just the passive reception of blessings, the procedure entails a visualisation whereby one is integrated with the lineage in such a way as to become a vessel suitable for the transmission of the masters' qualities.

The Zhangzhung Nyengyü system entails a second set of preliminary practices known as 'distinctions', *rushen* (*ru shan*). This set is divided into an outer, an inner and a secret stage. The first is intended to instil in the practitioner a profound aspiration to achieve detachment from *samsāra* by successive identification with the denizens of each of its realms (gods, titans, humans, animals, hungry ghosts and hell-beings), thereby effecting a separation between the samsaric and nirvanic realms.

In Buddhist depictions of the Wheel of Life, each of the six samsaric realms features an image of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, who represents the possibility of liberation from that realm. In the Bonpo Wheel of Life, the same role is played by a set of divinities known as the 'six subduing *shen*', all considered to be manifestations of Shenrab Miwo, the Bon equivalent of Shakyamuni. In the second – the inner – *rushen*, practitioners undertake visualisations in which they identify with each of the subduing *shen* in succession in order to liberate the inhabitants of the respective realms under their tutelage. In the final phase of purification, the secret *rushen*, the practitioner develops concentration by focusing on an image of the Tibetan letter A. The practice, known as Atri, 'Instructions according to the Letter A', is also the name of the one of the other two systems of Great Perfection.

These preliminary exercises are often supplemented by yogic techniques that are not intrinsic to the Great Perfection but also feature in tantric training. The exercises fall under the general category known as ‘channels and winds’, *tsalung* (*rtsa rlung*), since they involve the activation of the anatomical components of a subtle body, requiring regulated breathing techniques in combination with appropriate visualisations. The exercises are believed to have noticeable physical manifestations, as in the practices known as *tummo* (*gtum mo*), the generation of bodily heat, and ‘essence-extraction’, *cülen* (*bcud len*) which enables the adept to live for protracted periods without conventional nutrition.

The preliminary practices and the three *rushen* are followed by two important steps that, although not unique to the Great Perfection, are very characteristic of it. In early sources – notably the thirteenth-century practice manual by Dru Gyalwa Yungdrung mentioned above – these are referred to as essential purity, *kadak* (*ka dag*) and *ösel* (*’od gsal*), ‘clear light’, but Bon later came to adopt the corresponding terms for these that were used in the Buddhist Dzogchen tradition, *threkchö* (*khregs chod*) and *thögal* (*thod rgal*). The former is variously translated as ‘cutting through’ or ‘cutting off rigidity’, and refers to the practitioner’s severance of bonds to samsaric habits and the ability to abide effortlessly in the awareness, *rikpa*, of the natural state. *Thögal*, which may be translated as open ‘leaping over’, is an advanced practice that can only be undertaken on a foundation of proficiency in the preceding stage, since it involves encountering visions which, without this secure base, would be nothing more than meaningless illusions. One of the three main procedures used in *thögal* is the dark retreat, where the practitioner remains in complete darkness for a period of forty-nine days. This duration is a reference to the length of time an individual is considered to spend in the intermediate state, the *bardo* (*bar do*) between death and the subsequent incarnation, and is explicitly regarded as being a preparation for this post-mortem condition, which itself offers a vantage point for liberation from cyclic existence. The dark retreat is the first of three steps, the other two being sky-gazing, in which the meditator faces the blue sky with open eyes, and sun-gazing, in which he or she stares not directly at the sun, but at a point below it, for extended periods.

The onset of visions marks the beginning of the last stage in the practice of the Great Completion. The visions take the form of lights of different shapes, sizes and colours that arise and develop in a sequence of recognised stages, and although they are considered to be manifestations of the primordial base, they are essentially symptomatic of the practitioner’s progress, and are themselves illusory. The later manifestations are an indication that the awareness is flowing through the subtle channels without impediment. At the conclusion of the sequence of transformations, the visions and accompanying sounds disappear altogether in the

stage called the ‘open vision of exhaustion in the ultimate state of existence’ (*bon nyid zad pa'i snang ba*), leaving only the awareness unencumbered emptiness that is the final achievement of the Great Perfection. This attainment may itself have certain physical manifestations, most notably the dissolution of the practitioner’s physical form into light, in a condition referred to as ‘rainbow body’.

3 The main content of the transmission

Before turning to the transmission lineage of the Zhangzhung Nyengyü, whose members are represented in the cards in the collection, a few words may be said about the content of what was transmitted. The legacy that has been passed down is classified in two different sets: the ‘transmission of experience’ (*nyams rgyud*) and the ‘transmission of the word’ (*bka' rgyud*). The former consists of precisely that – accounts by past masters of their personal experience following their application of the methods of the teachings. A more formal treatment of the system is given in the teachings that make up the transmission of the word. These comprise four sets of texts representing successive stages in the practice of the Great Completion, as follows:

1. The external teachings that are a general summary of the view (*phyi lta ba spyi gcod*), consisting of nine texts dealing with the general concepts and the basic practices that form the foundation of the Great Perfection.
2. The inner teachings that are the direct instructions (*nang man ngag dmar khrid*), a set of five works concerned primarily with the practice of meditation, with particular attention to the procedure called ‘cutting through’ (*threkchö*) described above.
3. The secret teachings for seeing [existence] in its nakedness (*gsang ba rig pa gcer mthong*). The five texts that make up this group guide the practitioner in the more advanced stages of meditation, and notably the techniques for undertaking the stage called ‘leaping over’ (*thögal*).
4. The ultra-secret teachings for attaining the final resolution that is the natural state (*yang gsang gnas lugs phug chod*); five texts that explain the method of attaining the fruit that is the ultimate achievement in the Great Perfection. The teachings contained in this quartet are believed to have been passed down orally until they were committed to writing by Yangtön Sherab Gyaltsen (Yang ston Shes rab rgyal mtshan, 1077–1141; no. 52), about whom more will be said below.

4 The lineages of the Zhangzhung Nyengyü

The divinities and masters depicted in the cards, the successive holders of the teachings of the Zhangzhung Nyengyü, are conventionally grouped into a number of subsidiary lineages, not all of which are represented in the set that is the subject of this volume. The main grouping consists of two sets, known respectively as the ‘long’ or ‘distant’ transmission (*ring rgyud*) and the ‘near’ or ‘recent’ transmission (*nye rgyud*).

This ‘long transmission’ is divided into several subsidiary sets. The first group is known as the ‘mind transmission of the blessed ones’ (*bder gshegs dgongs rgyud*) (nos 1–9). These nine figures are all transcendental beings of whom the first, Küntu Zangpo (Kun tu bzang po), is the personification of the natural state itself. The name of the group derives from the belief that the doctrines of the Zhangzhung Nyengyü were passed from each holder to the next by direct mind-to-mind transmission.

These nine are followed by a group called the ‘twenty-four men of the oral transmission’ (*gang zag nyi shu rtsa bzhi*). From the beginning of this stage, the teachings were communicated orally by a master to a single disciple, and the lineage is therefore referred to as a ‘single transmission’ (*chig rgyud*). It is said that, in order to ensure that there was no leakage, so to speak, the essential teachings were spoken directly into the disciple’s ear by the master through a bamboo tube.

The twenty-four masters in this part of the lineage are further subdivided into four groups:

1. Five transcendent lamas (*la zla ba’i bla ma lnga*), nos 11–14 (no. 10 is missing).
2. The sixfold awareness transmission of the knowledge-holders (*rig ’dzin rig pa’i rgyud pa drug*), nos 15–20.
3. The ninefold transmission through the ears of men (*gang zag snyan rgyud kyi rgyud pa dgu*), nos 21–29.
4. The fourfold transmission of the scholar-translators (*mkhas pa lo paṅ gyi rgyud pa bzhi*), nos 30–33.

In contrast to this unbroken succession of master-to-disciple transfers, known as the ‘uninterrupted transmission’, there are further branches known as the ‘three interrupted lineages’. The interruptions in this case refer to a number of lacunae in which the transmission was received in a vision from a master of an earlier age:

1. The seventeen who were descended from Chime Tsukphü (no. 8), who was born from warmth (*drod skyes ’chi med gtsug phud nas brgyud pa cu bdun*).
2. The nine who were descended from Sangwa Düpa (no. 9), who was magically born (*rdzus skyes gsang ba ’dus pa nas brgyud pa dgu*).

3. The eight who were descended from Yeshe Tsukphü, who was born from an egg (*sgong skyes ye gshen gtsug phud nas brgyud pa brgyad*). Yeshe Tsukphü, who is believed to have received the teachings directly from Küntu Zangpo, is not represented in the collection.

All these lineages culminate in the person of Nangzher Löpo (sNang bzher lod po, no. 35), to whom we shall come presently, but, since none of their other members feature in our collection of *tsakali*, we need not give them any further consideration here. The ‘long transmission’, which comes to an end with Dawa Gyaltsen (Zla ba rgyal mtshan, no. 33), is followed by the ‘near transmission’, initiated by two particularly important figures: Tapi Hritsa (Ta pi hri tsa, no. 34) and his disciple, Gyerpung Nangzher Löpo (Gyer spungs sNang bzher lod po, no. 35), who form a pair known as the ‘two dear emanations of the close transmission’ (*nye brgyud kyi sprul sku drin can gnyis*). Until this point the Zhangzhung Nyengyü had been first a mind-to-mind and subsequently an oral transmission, but the particular significance of Tapi Hritsa is that he authorised his disciple Nangzher Löpo to commit it to writing in the language of Zhangzhung.

From Nangzher Löpo the teaching passed to a succession of six masters known as the six meditators of Zhangzhung Mar (*zhang zhung smar gyi grub chen drug*). The last of these six, Pönchen Tsenpo (dPon chen btsan po), is another important node in the transmission since he is the gateway through which the teachings crossed from Zhangzhung into Tibet after he translated them into the Tibetan language. The fact that the *tsakali* representing him is one of the few that is missing from the collection may be a reflection of his pivotal position: we do not know why the card is missing, but we may speculate that it was due to its particular importance – for example, with a view to being placed on a domestic shrine or borrowed to be used as the model for a copy and never returned.

After Pönchen Tsenpo, the lineage bifurcated into one branch called the ‘five lamas of the lower transmission’, through whom only the ‘transmission of experience’ (*nyams rgyud*) was passed down, and another, the ‘six lamas of the lower transmission’ who perpetuated the ‘transmission of the word’ (*bka’ rgyud*) that is, the four main doctrinal cycles. The two branches were reunited in another watershed figure, Yangal Sherab Gyaltsen (1077–1141, no. 52), often known by his title Yangtön Chenpo (Yang ston chen po), ‘the great teacher from the Ya ngal clan’, about whom there is still a rich oral tradition in the Nepalese district of Mustang, which he visited in his youth, and in Dolpo, where the Yangal clan continues to flourish. If Yangtön Chenpo is revered in the tradition of Bon followers as the point of convergence of the upper and lower transmissions, he is also accorded a

position of special importance in Western scholarship on the Zhangzhung Nyengyü for nothing less than being ‘probably [...] the only historical figure in [the] exalted company of saints and scholars in the lineage up to this point’.⁷ Henk Blezer further underlines the probable importance of Yangtön Chenpo in committing the tradition to writing:

He is a figure of paramount importance for the codification of the Zhang zhung snyan rgyud and its narrative. He and his teacher, ‘Or sgom kun ‘dul, were the first to write things down from the *Nyams rgyud*, by way of mnemonic notes, on Yang ston chen po’s request [...]. In spite of the copious narratives on the legendary sNang bzher lod po, this may in fact be the first time that anything has been preserved in writing.⁸

Both the upper and lower transmissions are represented in our *tsakali*, with six members of the former (nos 42–47) preceding the five who constitute the latter (nos 48–52) before converging in the figure of Yangtön Chenpo (no. 52). Lomting Lhagom Karpo, who should figure between Shengyal Lhatse (no. 49) and Ngödrup Gyaltsen Ringmo (no. 50), is missing from the collection. The numbering on the verso is continuous (from 49 to 50), but on the recto the alphabetical ordering passes directly from *ri* to *shi*, signifying that the intervening *li* is absent.

The northern branch – which is in fact generally less well known – is not represented at all in the *tsakali*, and the collection ends partway through the southern branch. The penultimate individual to be depicted is Cikchö Depa Sherab (no. 57), the fifth in this group of eleven. He is followed by Lama Rangdröl Gyaltsen, the last figure in the collection. The number given on the verso of the former is 57, while the final *tsakali* has no number. On the recto these two *tsakali* are marked respectively as *ngu* and *chu*, indicating that the card between them – which should be *cu* – is missing. However, Rangdröl Lama Gyaltsen is the eighth member of this group, meaning that two members, not one, are missing between him and Cikchö Depa Sherab. The masters in question are, respectively, Druchen Gyalwa Yungdrung (Bru chen rGyal ba g.yung drung) and Latö Riwa Sherab Lodrö (La stod Ri ba Shes rab blo gros) – the sixth and seventh members of this group – and unfortunately we have no way of knowing which of these was intentionally omitted by the creator of this set of cards. Druchen Gyalwa Yungdrung is an especially important figure in the domain of Bonpo Dzogchen. In addition to being the author of one of the main practice manuals for the Zhangzhung Nyengyü, he was also a key figure in the reorganisation and transmission of another of the main

⁷ Blezer 2009–2010, 87.

⁸ Blezer 2009–2010, 87–88.

Dzogchen systems, the Atri. Since he does feature on a card in the Atri subset of this *tsakali* collection, he may have been omitted here on the grounds that the card could be inserted at the appropriate place in the Zhangzhung Nyengyü subset if it were ever needed there for an initiation.

The relationship between the different biographical accounts of the Zhangzhung Nyengyü masters has been carefully analysed by Henk Blezer.⁹ The most widely cited source, and the one that was used for the studies by Samten Karmay and John Reynolds, is entitled *rGyud pa'i bla ma'i rnam thar* ('The Biographies of the Lineage Lamas [of the Zhangzhung Nyengyü]'), which was composed in 1419. The author was Patön Tengyal Sengge Pal Zangpo (sPa ston bsTan rgyal seng ge dpal bzang po). Patön was the eleventh member of the southern transmission, and his account of the lives of the masters ends with his immediate predecessor, Kartsa Sonam Lodrö (Kar tsa bSod nams blo gros). He perpetuated both the southern and northern transmissions, and a later account by Kyangtrul Namkha Gyaltsen (sKyang sprul Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan) adds a further eight generations.

This raises the question: why does our collection of cards conclude three generations before the end of the first stage of the southern transmission? One obvious possibility is that any cards there may have followed featuring the successors of Rangdröl Lama Gyaltsen have been removed or lost. Another possibility is that the most recent members of the lineage were simply omitted by the painter or whoever commissioned the work – after all, the entire northern transmission descending from Yangtön Chenpo, most of whom would have been contemporaries of Rangdröl Lama Gyaltsen and his predecessors in the southern transmission, is absent. In support of this last argument is the fact that even though the set of cards illustrating Yongdzin Lopön Tenzin Namdak's exposition of the tradition is clearly a modern creation it ends with Lomting Lhagö Karpo (Lom ting lha sgom dkar po) of the transmission of experience, two generations *before* even Yangtön Chenpo, and omits the masters of the transmission of the word.

While both of these explanations are entirely plausible, it is worth considering another possible reason for the collection ending at this point. Henk Blezer refers to a collection of hagiographies of Zhangzhung Nyengyü masters that antedates that of Patön by three generations. This text, entitled *Bla ma'i rnam thar lo rgyus rnam rgyas pa* ('Extensive Biographical Accounts of the Lamas [of the Zhangzhung Nyengyü]'), was composed by Rangdröl Lama Gyaltsen, the last line-

9 Blezer 2009–2010, esp. 89–139.

age-holder to feature in our collection. Rather than constituting an incomplete representation of the lineage it may instead be a *complete* record of the masters who are known to have lived up to that time: while the art-historical analysis in the next chapter suggests that the collection was created around a century after this time, the presence of archaic features may be explained by the *tsakali* having been copied from an earlier set that was created during or soon after the lifetime of the last master to be depicted, and therefore early in the fifteenth century.