



History of Science in South Asia

A journal for the history of all forms of scientific thought and action, ancient and modern, in all regions of South Asia

Special issue:

*Transmutations: Rejuvenation, Longevity, and
Immortality Practices in South and Inner Asia*

Edited by Dagmar Wujastyk, Suzanne Newcombe,
and Christèle Barois

Reflections on Rasāyana, Bcud len and Related
Practices in Nyingma (Rnying ma) Tantric Ritual

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MLA style citation form: Cathy Cantwell. "Reflections on Rasāyana, Bcud len and Related Practices in Nyingma (Rnying ma) Tantric Ritual." *History of Science in South Asia*, 5.2 (2017): 181–203. DOI: 10.18732/hssa.v5i2.17.

Online version available at: <http://hssa-journal.org>

HISTORY OF SCIENCE IN SOUTH ASIA

A journal for the history of all forms of scientific thought and action, ancient and modern, in all regions of South Asia, published online at <http://hssa-journal.org>

ISSN 2369-775X

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History of Science in South Asia

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The electronic versions were generated from sources marked up in \LaTeX in a computer running GNU/LINUX operating system. PDF was typeset using \XeTeX from \TeX Live . The base font used for Latin script and oldstyle numerals was \TeX Gyre Pagella developed by [gust](#), the Polish \TeX Users Group.

Reflections on Rasāyana, Bcud len and Related Practices in Nyingma (Rnying ma) Tantric Ritual

Cathy Cantwell

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1. INTRODUCTION

REFERENCES TO *RASĀYANA*, and its equivalent Tibetan term, *bcud len*, abound in Tibetan Buddhist tantric traditions, so much so that it is not altogether straightforward to sum up the range of meanings of these terms.¹ The Tibetan term, *bcud len*, is sometimes used entirely metaphorically; the life story and songs of a great eighteenth-century lama, for instance, entitled, “Mentally imbibing the essence juice of [the Buddha] Samantabhadra’s theatrical display”.² The second part of the term, *len*, is from the verb, *len pa*, which in everyday language is the most common word for *to take*. Thus, in this context, *taking the essence juice* can imply incorporating essences into oneself, and also the practice of taking or extracting essences from a substance. Non-metaphorical usages of the term *bcud len* in tantric contexts generally draw on both these senses of the term, and indicate the yogic practice of subsisting on nutritional essences, and especially the practice of making and consuming pills of such essences as part of such a yogic regime. In my translation, *imbibing the essence juice*, I emphasise the aspect of bodily incorporation which is a central feature of the tantric practice. The term *rasāyana* in Tibetan transliteration, in contrast, does not seem to have such frequent metaphorical usage, but can refer to tantric transmutation in various contexts, especially where material substances such as liquids and pills are involved.

¹ See the discussion of Fenner (1980: 59–83), which focuses mainly on early Indo-Tibetan tantric sources, although also includes consideration of a Tibetan commentarial text by the fourteenth to fifteenth-century Bodongpa (*Bo dong phyogs las rnam*

rgyal), who treats the spiritual exercises focused on the tantric channels and airs within the body (*rtsa rlung*) as an inner type of *bcud len*.

² *kun tu bzang po'i zlos gar yid kyi bcud len*, Ngawang Tsering 1978.

In fact, it is used in a broad sense to apply to Medicinal Accomplishment (*smān sgrub*) practices which are widespread in Tibetan monastic temple settings, and not restricted to virtuoso meditators. Such communal practices for compounding and consecrating sacred medicinal pills are integrated into large-scale Major Practice Sessions lasting for many days, and culminating in public blessings and distribution of sacred pills and other items.

In this article, I consider two case studies, the first of which is a specifically *bcud len* text, deriving from a fourteenth-century source, but integrated into a twentieth century collection of longevity rituals. The second case study is a Medicinal Accomplishment (*smān sgrub*) ritual, based on a textual manual which explicitly describes the process as *rasāyana* transcribed into Tibetan. For both examples, I will refer to works by the late Dudjom Rinpoche (1904–1987), and their associated ritual practices, so I introduce him first.

Dudjom Rinpoche was a prominent and important twentieth century lama and scholar, who drew on many different Nyingma traditions in his writings and teachings; Nyingma being one of the major ‘divisions’ of Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Nyingma practices stem from the heritage of the early or ancient tantric transmissions to Tibet from the eighth century, as well as further revelations linked to these sources. Unlike many of the later transmissions from India, the early tantras did not become the basis for a school with a single organisational structure. Nyingma monasteries were in contrast loosely integrated through their common heritage, while Nyingma transmissions also frequently passed through high status lamas of the more hierarchically structured schools. As a principal lineage holder of most of these separately transmitted teachings, Dudjom Rinpoche was a key figure in bringing some coherency and integration to the Nyingmapa in the twentieth-century. He took a central role in salvaging the Nyingma religious and textual heritage in the mid-twentieth-century, following the Chinese invasion of Tibet, and became the first Head of the Nyingmapa, when a more modern structure was created in exile. He is renowned both for his own textual revelations, and for contributing manuals and commentaries for a large number of the lineages he held; his collected works amount to twenty-five volumes.

2. A TEXT FOR IMBIBING THE ESSENCE JUICE

FIRST, WE SHOULD CONSIDER practices associated with the translated word, *bcud len*, “imbibing the essence juice”. There are a great many Buddhist tantric texts on *bcud len*, since each tradition and even each cycle associated with a specific tantric deity might require its own version compatible with the specific meditation training. The early history of tantric *bcud len* practices has not yet

been well researched,³ but it is clear that short *bcud len* practices occur in some early transmitted texts, such as Drakpa Gyaltsan's (*grags pa rgyal mtshan*, 1147–1216) *smān chen po'i bcud len*.⁴ These practices became particularly established in the Nyingma revelatory literature and were included in the twelfth-century medical classic, the Four Tantras (*rgyud bzhi*), whose sources included Nyingma tantric texts (see Gerke 2012). I have not identified any specifically *bcud len* type text in the works of the twelfth-century Nyingma ancestral forefather, Nyang-ral Nyima Özer (*Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer*).⁵ By the time of Nyang-ral's thirteenth-century successor, Guru Chöwang (*Gu ru chos dbang*), the various techniques were presumably well-known. Thus, Guru Chöwang presents a classification of *bcud len* into fourteen types, and proceeds to give recipes and instructions for each of them, as well as producing a separate text on a different type of *bcud len* from any of the fourteen.⁶

Essentially, *bcud len* practices in the Nyingma system are integrated with the inner tantras, of Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga (different but complementary tantric techniques for gaining liberation), and designed to support meditation and yogic practices aiming at Enlightenment. The Nyingma inner tantras assume that buddhahood is primordially fully developed, and the practitioner needs only to actualise this through the spiritual training. The *bcud len* practices are subsidiary rather than self-sufficient components of this training, always dependent on the wider meditation system being practised, and often serve as an optional extra which can be added in. This is even the case when complete enlightenment is predicted as the result of a single *bcud len* practice, since such a practice is always to be integrated with the yogic training and could not be performed by a person who had not been initiated into the tantric path.

It is clear that there are some contrasts in this respect between the medical traditions for creating “precious pills” (*rin chen ril bu*) and pills for “rejuvenation” (*bcud len*) on the one hand (see Gerke, this volume), and these tantric traditions for “imbibing the essence juice”, as well as the Medicinal Accomplishment practices described below on the other hand. There is no doubt that the medical and the tantric ritual traditions share much of the same historical heritage, and have much in common. Their intertwined histories represent an important and

3 Jamyang Oliphant (2016) includes some discussion of a few early *bcud len* practices, but makes no attempt at an historical assessment of the early Tibetan sources.

4 Drakpa Gyaltsan 2007; on this text, see Oliphant 2016: 53, 74, 92–94.

5 This is not to say that there are no extant *bcud len* passages amongst his many works, simply that I have not identified them; and

there may also be texts no longer extant. Nyang-ral's *Key to Secret Mantra terms* (*gsang sngags bka'i lde mig* (Nyang ral, Nyi ma 'od zer 1979–1980b: v. 4: 333–451)) gives a gloss on the word *bcud* (Nyang ral, Nyi ma 'od zer 1979–1980d: v. 4: 420–422) that is very much in line with *bcud len* practices.

6 Guru Chöwang 1976–1980a: 287–314.

currently under-researched topic. But over many generations, the medical traditions of Sowa Rigpa became increasingly secularised, even before the modern era (see Gyatso 2015), with more emphasis on the mix of ingredients, and less on the spiritual status of the person compounding the pills. Moreover, for Sowa Rigpa, the primary aim of treatments or remedies is the physical well-being of the physician's patients, rather than any spiritual benefits, even though the physical and spiritual aspects may be seen as complementary, both by "medical" and "religious" specialists. In Nyingma practice, the compounding of the substances takes place within the context of the tantric ritual and meditations, the spiritual dimension is central, does not simply represent an additional consecration or blessing, while the benefits are as much for the practitioner as for those to whom they may pass on the pills.

Given their integration into the tantric training, Nyingma *bcud len* texts are frequently rather short, unless they include a number of recipes and practices, which may be suitable for different circumstances, or unless standard practice (*sādhana*) sections are included together with the *bcud len* instructions. These practices are considered appropriate especially for individual yogic training and retreat contexts rather than communal rituals,⁷ and they also have the practical purpose of enabling the hermit to subsist on very little food, since the meditations and concentrated sacred pills are considered able to sustain the practitioner.

Sometimes *bcud len* texts may consist simply of recipes giving lists of ingredients and/or the processes for preparing or compounding them, but often, the associated meditation/visualisation practices will also be included, and there are even practices of subsisting on the inner or outer elements, without consuming any substances at all. Such a means of "imbibing essence juice" may be obliquely referred to in tantric manuals which are not specifically concerned with *bcud len*.

For example, Dudjom Rinpoche's Guru Rinpoche revelation known as the *Lake-Born's Heart Creative Seed* (*mtsho skyes thugs thig*) has a longevity practice which has some succinct instructions on transforming the body through meditating on imbibing the essence juices of conditioned and unconditioned existence, and although the specific word, *bcud len*, is not used explicitly, it was explained to me that this represented a kind of *bcud len* practice:⁸

... in the ultra-profound longevity practice, either with the elaboration of the deity mantra, or without it, one's own body, empty yet radiant, free of grasping, rests in equanimity in the state like the sky.

⁷ Sometimes there are some hints that the practice may be performed in a group, or at least that it is to be done for the benefit of others, with an empowerment as part of the practice (e.g., Rigdzin Gödem 1980b: v. 3 Ga: 23–24).

⁸ Indeed, the same phrasing of "consuming the sky as food" (*nam mkha' zas su za ba*) is found in *bcud len* texts such as Guru Chöwang's *Rin chen gter mdzod* (Guru Chöwang 1976–1980b: 314).

All samsara and nirvana's essence juice (and) vibrant lustrous appearance is drawn in, liquid blue, (like) the nature of the sky. Through collecting it in the abdomen, stabilize the meditation of the pure awareness holder (Skt. *vidyādhara*) of immortal life; and through training in (this) yoga of consuming the sky as food, it is taught that gradually, the adamantine (Skt. *vajra*) body is accomplished.⁹

As a brief example of a tantric *bcud len* text, I have selected one from Dudjom Rinpoche's corpus of texts for Zilnön Namkhai Dorje's (*zil gnon nam mkha'i rdo rje*) early twentieth-century longevity revelation cycle of the *Immortal Life's Creative Seed* ('*chi med srog thig*). When Dudjom Rinpoche was compiling this collection, which takes up one volume in his *Collected Works*, he added in a short *bcud len* practice from the Jang Ter (*byang gter*) tradition,¹⁰ since he wanted to create a complete set of texts, and the original revelation had no *bcud len* section. The text he used is in fact a short section from a longevity practice text within the fourteenth-century Rigdzin Gödem's (*rig 'dzin rgod ldem*, 1337–1408) Guru Drakpo-tsal (*thugs sgrub drag po rtsal gyi chos skor*) revelation.¹¹ Rigdzin Gödem produced more substantial *bcud len* texts, including a lengthy text found within the same revelatory cycle,¹² but it seems that Dudjom Rinpoche chose instead to use a short extract from the longevity practice since it is succinct and suitable to use as an insert for a different deity practice.¹³

The text begins with preparatory instructions, which concern the physical and spiritual health of the practitioner – he/she is to modify the diet and drink boiled water to clean out the system, and also to save animal lives and give out medicines, practices which are considered to create auspicious conditions for

9 *khyad par yang zab kyi tshe sgrub la lha snags kyi spros pa'ang dor nas rang lus stong gsal 'dzin med nam mkha' lta bu'i ngang la mnyam par bzhag bzhin pas/ 'khor 'das kyi dwangs bcud thams cad nam mkha'i rang bzhin du sngo mer gyis drangs te lto bar bskyil bas 'chi med tshe'i rig 'dzin brtan par bsam zhing nam mkha' zas su bza' ba'i rnal 'byor la bslab pas rim gyis rdo rje'i lus su 'grub par gsungs so/, from Accomplishing Longevity (through) the profound path (of) the Lake-Born's Heart Creative Seed (cycle), the Quintessential Manual (of) Pith Instructions (zab lam mtsho skyes thugs thig gi tshe sgrub man ngag gnad byang) (Dudjom Rinpoche 1979–1985g: 576); here and below, all the translations from Tibetan are mine.*

10 Dudjom Rinpoche 1979–1985f: 513–17.

11 The extract is within the *tshe sgrub lcags kyi sdong po las: phyi sgrub rin chen bum pa*, (Rigdzin Gödem 1980c: 517–520).

12 Rigdzin Gödem 1980b.

13 Since this four-volume collection of Rigdzin Gödem's Guru Drakpo-tsal *Heart Practice* was edited by Dudjom Rinpoche and published in Sikkim in 1980 (Rigdzin Gödem 1980a), it is probable that Dudjom Rinpoche had been working on it during the same period in which he was compiling and writing texts for the Zilnön *Immortal Life's Creative Seed* cycle (mostly in Kalimpong in the late 1970s), and perhaps it was in the context of his editorial work that the Rigdzin Gödem passage came to the forefront of his attention and he decided to reuse it.

generating longevity in oneself. The main practice starts with the recipe, the principal ingredients of which constitute two groups of substances considered by Tibetans to provide natural vitality. These groups, of the five vital essences (*dwangs ma*) and four elixirs (*bdud rtsi*) are found also in the geriatric chapter of the *rgyud bzhi*, and used in the medical tradition. Gerke (2012: 347) identifies this group in the medical texts as most probably related to the Buddhist ritual rather than Ayurvedic sources of the medical classics. The final section of the text waxes lyrical about the benefits to be achieved by the practice and the consumption of the *bcud len*, which include longevity equal to that of the sun and moon, the recovery of youthful vigour and mental clarity, and disappearance of the signs of ageing, as well as recovery from disease, and divine protection.

The vital essence of earth is mineral pitch (*brag zhun*) exuded from rocks in the Himalayas or other high mountains, equivalent to *śilājatu* in Ayurvedic medicine. Such *śilājatu* is frequently included in Ayurvedic longevity recipes (*rasāyana*). The vital essence of stone is a specially prepared form of calcite called *cong zhi* in Tibetan; I have been told that a good source is stalactites or stalagmites found in caves in Bumthang in Bhutan, and similar sites elsewhere.¹⁴ The text claims that these substances will help to generate new teeth and strengthen the bones.¹⁵ The vital essence of wood or trees is *bu ram*, which is usually taken to be raw sugar or molasses, although Lopen P. Ogyan Tanzin suggested to me that maple syrup or other tree syrups would be most appropriate for this category. The vital essence of vegetation is butter from a female yak (*'bri mo*); the idea is that the yak consumes good quality grasses and the richness is concentrated in her butter. These two vital essences are said respectively to increase strength,¹⁶ and spread the essence juices through the body. The vital essence of flowers is honey.

¹⁴ Lama Kunzang Dorjee of Jangsa Monastery, Kalimpong (personal communication. According to Dagmar Wujastyk (personal communication 23/08/2017), calcite does not feature in the *rasāyana* sections in Ayurvedic literature, but there may be a link with the Indian Siddha traditions.

¹⁵ See also Rigdzin Gödem's longer *bcud len* text (Rigdzin Gödem 1980b: v. 3: 26): calcite and mineral pitch augment the flesh and bones (*cong zhi dang ni brag zhun gyi: sha dang rus pa rgyas par 'gyur:*). This appears to be a reversal of the perhaps rather more intuitively logical associations given in the medical tradition, where *brag zhun* is given first, and restores the flesh, while *cong zhi* restores the bones (see Gerke 2012: 348). Perhaps at

some stage, there was a scribal error with a reversal of *brag zhun* and *cong zhi*. On the other hand, it is also possible that the medical tradition might have tidied up an apparent discrepancy in the tantric literature, which has little need to be presented in a consistent or logical manner. The consultation of further sources would be necessary to clear up this point.

¹⁶ See also Rigdzin Gödem's longer *bcud len* text (Rigdzin Gödem 1980b: v. 3: 27): molasses brings great bodily strength (*bu ram gyis ni lus stobs che:*). For the medical tradition, see Gerke 2012: 348, where the two enhanced qualities are given as as physical strength (*stobs*) and radiance/lustre (*mdangs*).

Lopon Ogyan Tanzin commented that in this case, the honey should have been produced by bees which have fed exclusively on flowers.¹⁷ The text notes that this will help to restore the glistening luster of the complexion. This category of five vital essences found in *bcud len* texts, is closely related to a list of five essences (*snying po lnga*) found widely in other Nyingma ritual contexts.¹⁸

The four elixirs are collected from plants, possibly all evergreen, and considered to have good fragrance; it is perhaps noteworthy that they are also burnt as incense. The text gives annotations in small writing, supplying the information about when the plant sources should be gathered. It is not clear whether these notes on the timing are part of the original revelation; they are not marked by the revelation punctuation, but nonetheless occur within the Rigdzin Gödem revelation text. The first elixir is juniper (*shug pa*), which should be gathered when the leaves are spreading out. In Rigdzin Gödem's longer *bcud len* text in the corpus, the timing is specified as when the fruits – presumably, in this case, the seed cones or berries – are ripening. Here, there is no indication of the part of the plant to be collected, but some other sources specify the seed cones.¹⁹ The second elixir is *ba lu*, which is a fragrant dwarf rhododendron species (perhaps *Rhododendron capitatum Maxim*), to be collected when the flowers are open. Thirdly, *mkhan pa*, a Himalayan species of artemisia, is gathered when the leaves are green, while fourthly, ephedra (*mtshe*), is collected when the greenish colour and the fragrance is fading. The text continues with a short instruction on how specific amounts of the ingredients are to be mixed and processed, boiling them down and condensing them into a syrup.

The next section moves to the ritual and visualisation practices to be performed: the mixture is to be put into five skull-cups with auspicious characteristics, and placed on the mandala. The male and female deities of the five buddha families are invited, and offerings are made to them. The main mantra is to be recited – instead of the appropriate mantra from the original revelation context, in Dudjom Rinpoche's presentation, the root mantra for the *Immortal Life's Creative Seed* would be recited here. The accompanying meditation is very similar

¹⁷ See also Rigdzin Gödem 1980b: v. 3: 4. This specifies “unadulterated” (*lhad med*) honey, which may have the same implication.

¹⁸ For instance, see the version given in Magsar's ritual commentary: “The essence of water is sea-salt; the essence of flowers is honey; the essence of wood/trees is molasses; the essence of vegetation is butter or milk; the essence of medicines is myrobalan fruit, or alternatively, the essence of grain juice is beer” (*chu'i snying po*

lan tshwa/me tog gi snying po sbrang rtsi/shing gi snying po bu ram/ rtsi thog gi snying po mar ram 'o ma/sman gyi sning po a ru'i 'bras bu'am/ 'bru bcud kyi snying po chang du byas kyang rung/ (Magsar 2003: 153)).

¹⁹ Guru Chöwang's separate text for a *bcud len* based on juniper speaks of gathering the seeds: “when it is the time for carefully gathering the juniper seeds...” (*shug 'bru legs par 'thu ba'i dus...* (Guru Chöwang 1976–1980b: 307))

to that used in Medicinal Accomplishment practices (see below): the five visualised male and female buddhas unite and the fluids produced from their union rain down as elixir, filling the skull-cups. After seven days of intensive practice, the “siddhis” are to be imbibed. The “siddhis” (Skt. *siddhi*, Tibetan *dnogs grub*) are tantric spiritual accomplishments, and here indicate the *bcud len* substances, some of which are to be ceremonially eaten. Here, Lopon P. Ogyan Tanzin elaborated that the regular practice of the *Immortal Life’s Creative Seed* would be performed on the final siddhi-imbibing day, such that the section on “Imbibing the Siddhis” would be reached as the dawn is breaking, and mixture from the skull-cups would on this occasion be consumed to transmit the siddhis. He added that when the practice is performed by an individual in retreat, they would not need the skull-cups fully filled, since they will only need a small quantity, but where the *bcud len* is being performed for distribution to others, a large quantity can be made, and after the practice, the substances can be made into pills.

This concise example of a *bcud len* text perhaps covers the main components of *bcud len* in the Nyingma tantric context. First, the practice is integrated into the wider spiritual and yogic training, and the visualised tantric consecrations are a central and necessary aspect of the practice. Secondly, with the exception of a number of specialised yogic practices such as those focused on the vital airs, generally, there is a physical support to the practice – real ingredients are used, mostly substances considered to constitute natural essences or naturally to have medicinal value or life-enhancing qualities. The substances are processed and concentrated, and after the accompanying meditations and consecrations, they are considered actually to possess real potency to bring about longevity and other benefits, and this potency will continue beyond the practice context. Much the same could be said of other Nyingma rituals such as Medicinal Accomplishment rituals (*smān sgrub*) and Longevity Accomplishment rituals (*tshe sgrub*) during which “sacred elixir dharma medicine” (*dam rdzas bdud rtsi chos smān*) or longevity pills (*tshe ril*) respectively are produced.

3. MEDICINAL ACCOMPLISHMENT (SMAN SGRUB) AS RASĀYANA

MEDICINAL ACCOMPLISHMENT RITUALS are tantric practices which are generally performed communally by trained, often monastic or full-time practitioners, supported by sponsorship for the event. They involve intensive meditations and rituals over a number of days, the primary purpose of which is the accomplishment of the tantric deity and spiritual realisation. As a part of these complex rituals, medicinal substances are consecrated and compounded into pills which are distributed at the end of the session to the entire congregation. On the final day, the gathered assembly may run into hundreds or even thousands of lay

people. A store of the pills will also be retained and can be given away at later times. The distribution of these highly valued pills may have some similarities to the commodified production and distribution of precious pills (*rin chen ril bu*) by medical institutions,²⁰ but with one important difference. In this Buddhist production, the tantric practice and any purchase of ingredients are funded by sponsorship and the pills must be given away, not sold. The pills may be seen, especially by devoted followers, as panaceas which may help to promote health or dispel disease, but perhaps particularly in today's world when Buddhist monasteries would not wish to be brought under the purview of modern regulations of "medicines," it is their spiritual qualities which tend to be emphasised.

I have written about these ritual practices at length elsewhere.²¹ According to important Nyingma sources, these entire rituals, and especially the manufacture of the tantric medicinal pills, can be seen as a process of *rasāyana*. Dudjom Rinpoche uses the term, *rasāyana*, in this broad sense, to apply to the Medicinal Accomplishment practice as a whole, such as in the final words of his opening eulogy to his *Medicinal Accomplishment text for the Meteoric Iron Razor* (*gnam lcags spu gri*) tradition, i.e., "I hereby joyously set out the methods for accomplishing sacred substance *rasāyana* in this celebration of wondrous elixir"²² and in similar vein at slightly greater length in introducing the sections of his Medicinal Accomplishment text for Dudul Dorje's Enlightened Intention Embodied (*dgongs pa yongs 'dus*) cycle:

There are seven general sections in this clarification of the methods for absorbing the profound accomplishment of the *vajrayāna samaya* substance *rasāyana*, while relying on the guru, the mandala circle of the three roots.²³

Here, the notion of *rasāyana* is linked to a fundamental feature of Buddhist tantra or *vajrayāna*, that is, the *samaya* (Tibetan *dam tshig*) or tantric bond linking the practitioner with the guru, the deity and the community of practitioners. Thus, imbibing the sacred substances is a way of connecting the practitioners with the sacred tantric vision, and transforming everyday experience. This usage is not

20 See Gerke's paper in this volume (Gerke 2017).

21 Cantwell 2015.

22 "dam rdzas ra sā ya na sgrub pa'i tshul/ ngo mtshar bdud rtsi'i dga' ston 'di na spro'" (Dudjom Rinpoche 1979–1985d: 306–7).

23 *gu ru rtsa ba gsum gyi dkyil 'khor gyi 'khor lo la brten nas rdo rje theg pa'i dam tshig gi rdzas ra sā ya na'i sgrub pa zab mo ji ltar*

nyams su len pa'i tshul gsal bar 'chad pa la spyi don rnam pa bdun te/ (Dudjom Rinpoche 1979–1985b: 367). Dudjom Rinpoche was considered a reincarnation of Dudul Dorje (*bdud 'dul rdo rje*, 1615–1672); he took on responsibility for Dudul Dorje's heritage and wrote many practice texts for his tantric revelations.



Figure 1: Ritual grinding of the medicinal ingredients at the mid-point of the ritual.



Figure 2: Mixing of the ground medicinal ingredients. Note the face masks to avoid breathing on and polluting the substances.

idiosyncratic; we see, for instance, the same characterisation in a text on Medicinal Accomplishment in the twelfth-century cycle of the *Eightfold Buddha Word, Embodying the Sugatas*, of Nyang-ral Nyima Özer (*nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer*, 1124–1192).²⁴ The specific reference is in the section on the signs of success, where the quantity of collected *rasāyana* is said to increase greatly.

²⁴ Nyang ral, Nyi ma 'od zer 1979–1980d "ra sa ya na 'dus pa la mang du 'phel ba 'by-

ung;," Nyang ral, Nyi ma 'od zer 1979–1980c: v. 8: 416.5.



Figure 3: Placing the dish of unground medicinal ingredients at the top of the maṇḍala construction.

To sum up, sacred medicinal pill production is integrated into a full mahāyoga tantric practice connected with realising all physical, verbal and mental phenomena as enlightened body, speech as mind, led by an accomplished lama and a team of specialised meditation masters and ritualists. Special ingredients, including sacred tantric substances and substances considered to have natural medicinal potencies, are prepared and installed in a three-dimensional tantric mandala, which becomes the focus of the practice. In the first half of the ritual, a proportion of the raw ingredients are set out in a prescribed arrangement at the top of the mandala (see Figure 3), while further sacks of ingredients are placed lower within the mandala. Half-way through the practice session, on day 4 or 5 of the ritual, the now consecrated ingredients are ceremonially removed, ground up and compounded into medicinal pill pieces (see Figures 1 and 2), which are then installed within special medicinal containers, placed back into the mandala (see Figure 4) and ritually sealed.²⁵



Figure 4: Maṇḍala with the large and small medicinal containers of ground and mixed ingredients, for the second half of the ritual session.

Following several further days of tantric practice, the medicinal pills become one of the key sacred substances to be ingested as *siddhi* substances, and distributed in the public blessings. The remaining store of pill pieces may be dried and further processed at this stage, creating a large supply for further use and distribution (see Figure 5).

The significance of these tantric pills should not be underestimated – as Dudjom Rinpoche sums up the benefit of consuming them:

“... if you eat them, the qualities are indescribable. You will attain the qualities of the five buddha bodies. Outwardly, illnesses and evil forces afflicting your body will be vanquished; inwardly, the emotional afflictions and five poisons will be purified; degenerated and broken tantric vows (*samayas*) will all be restored; secretly, self-arisen primordial wisdom will be realised.”²⁶

It is not only that many kinds of spiritual accomplishments and physical healing and life extending qualities are attributed to the substances. Equally significantly, they are considered to be a vital embodied aspect of the tantric transmission from master to student, and of the tantric community, binding together

²⁵ Again, this ritual is more fully explained in Cantwell 2015.

²⁶ /zos pas yon tan brjod mi lang/ /sangs rgyas sku lnga'i yon tan thob/ /phyi ltar lus kyi

nad gdon 'joms/ /nang du nyon mongs dug lnga 'dag /dam tshig nyams chag thams cad skong/ /gsang ba rang byung yes shes rtogs/ (Dudjom Rinpoche 1979–1985c: 340).



Figure 5: Putting the medicinal pills into small bags for distribution to individuals.

the generations of practitioners descending in specific lineages of tantric practice. Thus, they are known as *samaya* substances (*dam tshig gi rdzas*). That is, by partaking of these substances, the bonds linking the tantric community are created, embodied and repaired. And this is not only a matter of specific occasions when the pills are made. Each time, a small amount of concentrated pills will be retained by the lama for use in future batches, so that the stream or continuity of the sacred “fermenting agent” (*phab gta’* or *phab rgyun*) never runs out. Indeed, The Head Lama of the Jangsa Monastery in Kalimpong told me that the late Dudjom Rinpoche used to tell his students that while there were many different specific lines through which the *phab gta’* had been passed, all Nyingmapa lamas are connected since some component of everyone’s dharma pills ultimately stems back to the mass ceremonies performed in the seventeenth-century by the great lama, Terdak Lingpa (*gter bdag gling pa*, 1646–1714). I have no way of assessing the accuracy of this claim, but the circulation of this story encapsulates well the notion of a spiritual bonding enacted and maintained through the consumption of *rasāyana* tantric pills.



Figure 6: Medicinal Cordial offering (*smān mchod*): the Head Lama takes up a little liquid and flicks it as the offering to the tantric deities is recited.

More specifically, within the Major Practice session rituals, there are two sections where the term *rasāyana* may be explicitly used, and it is interesting to reflect on what might connect these two sections. My current hypothesis is that while most of the *mahāyoga* meditations and rituals for actualising buddha body, speech and mind within these practices have a distinctly Tibetan flavour, both the contexts in which the term, *rasāyana*, occurs, are picking up on specifically Indian tantric precedents. The first is during lengthy recitations for the medicinal cordial offering (*smān mchod*) (see Image 6). This offering is a standard part of all *mahāyoga sādhanas* liturgies, and here, the *rasāyana* is not the tantric pill production of the Medicinal Accomplishment rite, but the offering of liquid elixir in a skull-cup, generally of white, clear or light coloured alcoholic drink, along with consecrated medicinal pills, made to the tantric deities as one of the three elements of the inner offerings. The medicinal cordial offering, then, is made not only in elaborate rituals, but as part of the regular everyday tantric practices (*sādhana*s) of different deities, performed by individuals as well as temple communities. It has various symbolic connotations; one is that it is to be equated with the or the male wrathful deity's (Heruka's) sexual fluid, in this tantric con-

text seen as the ambrosia of life, and as the white *bodhicitta* or the substance of enlightened mind, and linked in a pair with the inner offering of blood (*rakta*) (red *bodhicitta*), connected with the female deity.

The verses of recitation do not always equate the medicinal cordial offering with *rasāyana*, but where the word occurs, it seems that it is linked to a classic line relating to the varieties of medicine, which occurs in early Nyingma sources, including root tantras of the Elixir Qualities (*bdud rtsi yon tan*) class. The line runs:

medicines compounded from the eight principal and thousand (varieties)²⁷

and then sometimes the rest of the verse or a subsequent verse continues with a reference to the liquid as a *rasāyana* elixir, in some cases elaborating that it embodies the five samaya substances and represents the five poisons transformed.²⁸ Here, *samaya* substances imply the five substances considered most polluting in Indian thinking – human flesh, excrement, urine, semen and menstrual blood – which through the tantric practice, actually come to embody the five Buddha wisdoms.²⁹ Thus, this inner offering of medicinal cordial is in tantric Buddhist terms an offering of the inner saṃsāric defilements – attachment, aversion, delusion, jealousy and pride – while recognising and enjoying their flavour as the five buddha wisdoms.³⁰ And note that the practitioner, or in the case of a communal ritual, the presiding lama, not only visualises offering the elixir to the various deities in turn, but then, visualising himself as the deity, actually partakes of some of the elixir at the end of the offering verses.

The second instance in the Major Practice session rituals in which the term, *rasāyana*, may be used explicitly is within the central part of meditations for the Medicinal Accomplishment practice, which is repeated each day before the recitation of the main mantra for consecrating the medicines. It is made up of

²⁷ *rtsa brgyad stong la/las sbyar ba'i sman*. For more on this classic line and its connotations, see Cantwell 2017; as well as Pema Lingpa 1975–1976.

²⁸ Amongst many examples, see in Dudjom Rinpoche's works, his *Ritual Manual for the Meteoric Iron Razor Vajrakīlaya* (Dudjom Rinpoche 1979–1985d: 114) and that for his *Razor Disintegration-on-Touch Vajrakīlaya* (Dudjom Rinpoche 1979–1985e: 489). In his *Guru Accomplishment* (*bla sgrub*) text, these elements all occur without the word, *rasāyana* being drawn upon (Dudjom Rinpoche 1979–1985a: 15). See also Terdak Lingpa's

Ritual Manual for Guru Chöwang's Ultra Secret Razor Vajrakīlaya cycle (Terdak Lingpa 1998b: 288v).

²⁹ Note that there is a discussion of the connotations of the five *samayas*, linked to a discussion of the *rasāyana* medicines, given in a commentarial work within Nyang-ral Nyima Özer's *Eightfold Buddha Word, Embodying the Sugatas* (Nyang ral, Nyi ma 'od zer 1979–1980b: 288).

³⁰ The corresponding wisdoms: discriminating, mirror-like, spatial field, accomplishing, and sameness.

consecutive sections leading up to the mantra. The first is known in the Dudjom Meteoric Iron Razor cycle as, *Inviting the Medicinal Guardians* (*sman srung spyan 'dren pa*) and the second as, *Clearing the Thoughts* (*rtog pa bsal ba*). At this stage, the main deity visualisation for the medicinal sections has already been set up. The medicinal substances have been generated as elixir personified, the deity Amṛtakunḍalī with his consort. Now, an Invocation is recited (Dudjom Rinpoche 1979–1985c: 317), calling upon the medicinal guardians, who are described in terms of Indian categories, *brahmā*, seers (*ṛṣis*), *nāgas*, and goddesses of herbal medicines.³¹ They are reminded of the mythology of how they became guardians of *rasāyana*. They are requested to pay heed in accordance with their former vows and to grant the siddhis of *rasāyana*. As this recitation ends, music is played, the incense censer is carried around the hall, and the principal practitioners wave coloured streamers, bringing down the presence of the deities. These deities are then visualised gathering above the medicinal palace mandala containing the medicinal substances, which has been constructed in the temple.

The section on Clearing the Thoughts follows immediately, and is accompanied by the flicking of medicinal cordial, as in the inner offerings, but here as a way of bringing consecration. The recitation for this section is particularly interesting because it draws on a passage found in root tantras and early Nyingma tantric manuals. It would seem that a variant of these verses is generally integrated into Medicinal Accomplishment practice manuals of any length,³² constituting a kind of basis for the ritual and symbolic transformations. The passage appears, then, to represent a root tantra citation significant for the entire Nyingma Medicinal Accomplishment literature, expressing key values which summarise the approach of this tantric meditative practice. It draws on the Indian religious theme

³¹ For *tsak li* initiation cards which give depictions of such medicinal guardians, see *Himalayan Art Resources*, <http://www.himalayanart.org/items/53351968/images/primary#-458,-1331,1465,0>, and <http://www.himalayanart.org/items/53351946/images/primary#-441,-1331,1482,0>. These cards are for a quite different deity cycle, the *gYu thog snying thig*, but they are nonetheless illustrative of Tibetan styles of depicting Indian seers etc.

³² Since I am not extensively familiar with this literature, I cannot be certain how ubiquitous the passage is: I may have overstated the point here. The passage is found in the fifth *bam po* of the rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum's *thams cad bdud rtsi lnga'i rang bzhin nye ba'i snying po'i bdud rtsi mchog gi*

lung bam po brgyad pa (rnying ma rgyud 'bum, mTshams brag 1982: 40, gTing skyes 1973: 177). Terdak Lingpa's Medicinal Accomplishment manual identifies his source as the *bam brgyad* (written in small letters; Terdak Lingpa 1998a: 125r). A version is also found in the probably early tenth-century *bSam gtan mig sgron* of Nubchen Sangyé Yeshé (see Nubchen Sangyé Yeshé ca. 1990–2000: 376); (thanks to Dylan Esler, who is working on the *bSam gtan mig sgron*, for drawing my attention to this source); in Nyang ral's *bKa' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa*, in the *bdud rtsi sman sgrub thabs lag khrid du bsdebs pa* (Nyang ral, Nyi ma 'od zer 1979–1980a: v. 8: 445–6); and in Guru Chöwang's *zhi khro bka' brgyad las bdud rtsi sman bsgrub* (Guru Chöwang 1979: 283–4).

of the opposition between the pure and the impure, and not simply a Buddhist opposition between a defiled *saṃsāra* and pure *nirvāṇa*.

Here, the imagery is more classically Indian: Brahmā, seers (Tibetan *drang srong* = Skt. *ṛṣi*), *nāgas*, brahmans, and cows are said to eat pure foods. Dudjom Rinpoche's (and also the thirteenth-century Guru Chöwang's) version adds in an explicit opposition with dogs and pigs eating impure foods. In any case, the refrain with each of the examples is that we would not say that they are liberated as a result of their "purity" (or "impurity"). The text continues that in contrast, liberation is brought about by transcending the opposition between the pure and the impure, and recognising that the single ultimate body of the Buddha (*dharmakāya*) is displayed variously, its natural qualities the five buddha families. Thus, the genuinely "pure" or consecrated potent substances³³ are to be consumed non-dualistically, bringing alchemical transmutation and accomplishment.³⁴

This section is concluded with a request for the gathered *vidyādhara*s of *rasāyana* to bestow consecrations upon the substances and practitioners. The following section for the mantra recitation opens with a recited visualisation which includes the medicinal deities raining down elixir into the mandala, so that the supreme alchemical transmutation takes place – and again, the transliterated word, *rasāyana*, is used.³⁵

It seems likely that the passage on the Medicinal Guardians and their consecrations of the sacred medicines derives from an Indian source; in the Tibetan case, tantric transformation is more usually concerned simply with the sameness of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and realising ordinary body, speech and mind as buddha body, speech and mind, and in any case, caste rules and ideas about cows as sacred or pure are not a prominent feature of Tibetan life. It seems that transcendence of Indian caste purity rules is particularly played on in the ritual traditions focusing on producing transformative elixir with key ingredients classed

³³ That is, the arranged medicinal substances, which feature the tantric five fleshies and five elixirs, the most polluting of all substances from a classically Indian viewpoint, yet constitute potent consecrated elixir, partaking of Amṛtakunḍali's nature, from the tantric pure-vision perspective, already developed in the earlier practice.

³⁴ Törzsök (2014) discusses the ritual use of impure substances in various strands of Hindu tantras, and their differing ontological connotations. This Buddhist inner tantra context is more similar to the later

groups described by Törzsök which upheld a non-dual ontology, although of course, the philosophical implications were somewhat different in the Buddhist tantras. Garrett (2010: 302 ff.) traces the usage of impure substances in Tibet from the *Nyingma Elixir Qualities* (*bdud rtsi yon tan*) tantras and (*ibid.*, 316–321) contextualises the uses and adaptations of the consumption of body parts and waste products etc. in the Tibetan case where Indian notions of purity and pollution are less central.

³⁵ Dudjom Rinpoche 1979–1985c: 319.

as “polluted” substances,³⁶ and perhaps this is why we find the transliterated Sanskrit term in this context rather than a Tibetan translation.

4. CONCLUSION

THE PRACTICE OF MAKING AND CONSUMING sacred pills and other substances in the tantric contexts of rituals of Medicinal Accomplishment (*sman sgrub*), Longevity Accomplishment (*tshe sgrub*) and Imbibing the Essence Juice (*bcud len*) are clearly variations on the same theme, and closely connected in both their conceptualisation and practice. Each type of practice has its own specific emphasis, and in the case of Imbibing the Essence Juice, the main preoccupation is the distillation of naturally occurring concentrated substances which can become nutritional essences sustaining the yogi. On the other hand, while some of the same substances might also be included in the more complex recipes for Medicinal Accomplishment pills, the central theme in that case is a transmutation process termed *rasāyana*, focused on powerful substances which become tantric elixir.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I WOULD LIKE TO ACKNOWLEDGE the support of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg in the Center for Religious Studies at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum during my fellowship year (2015–2016), which enabled me to write this paper. Study of the rituals and ritual texts discussed here owe much to research projects at the Oriental Institute University of Oxford, funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), particularly the project entitled, Authorship, originality

³⁶ The imagery also sometimes occurs in the Tibetan tantric feast (*tshogs*) rite. Many *tshogs* texts include an exchange between the Vajra Master and the Master of Offerings at the point where the food is to be consumed and the Master of Offerings presents a plate to the Vajra Master. The Master of Offerings says one verse as he offers the food: “Hoḥ! See, these are supreme dharmas, beautiful! It is not right to doubt this. Partake, with the meditation that brahmans and untouchables, dogs and pigs, are one in their natural qualities!” (*hoḥ: gzigs shig mdzes ldan dam pa’i chos: ‘di la the tshom byar mi rung: bram ze gdol pa khyi dang phag: rang bzhin gcig tu dgongs te rol;*; the exchange occurs in many

texts; here I cite Terdak Lingpa’s compilation of Guru Chöwang’s *Bla ma gsang ’dus*, (Terdak Lingpa 1998c: 11v.) The Vajra Master accepts the *tshogs* foods with a verse recognising their total purity and abandoning dualism. Interestingly, the exchange is also referred to by the same term that we find here: Clearing the thoughts (*rtog pa bsal ba*). Both cases involve the consumption of consecrated tantric substances: the *tshogs* also needs to contain the fleshs and elixirs, embodied in the sacred Dharma medicinal pills. There is also the element of creating the tantric community through commensality, during which everyone becomes part of the divine display, no matter what their worldly status.

and innovation in Tibetan Scriptural Revelations: A case study from the Dudjom Corpus (2010–2015), and an earlier project at Cardiff University (Longevity Practices and Concepts in Tibet, 2006–2009). I must also thank Lama Kunzang Dorjee, Lopon Lhundrup Namgyal, and the lamas and practitioners of the Jangsa Dechen Choling Monastery, Kalimpong, West Bengal, and Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelegphu, Bhutan, who welcomed me at their Major Practice Sessions (*sgrub chen*) in Kalimpong (2009) and Gelegphu (2013), enabling me to appreciate the richness of these traditions of spiritual practice and of making sacred medicinal and longevity pills. Thanks are also due to Lopon P. Ogyan Tanzin, who acted as a Consultant to the Cardiff and Oxford projects, and who read many of the sources with me, and helped to answer my many questions. Any errors remain my own.

All photos were taken at the Medicinal Accomplishment practice held at Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelegphu, Bhutan, November 2013 and are © the author.

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