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# Nyang-ral Nyi-ma 'od-zer's Theory of the Three Vehicles

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## 1. Introduction

Nyang-ral Nyi-ma 'od-zer (1124-1192) is one of the most important masters of the rNying ma school of Tibetan Buddhism. He is called “*gTer ston* (Treasure Revealer) like the sun” and “one of the five kingly Treasure Revealers”.<sup>1</sup> His works such as *Zang gling ma* (Life Story of Padmasambhava) and *Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud* (A History of Buddhism and its Development in Tibet during the Royal Dynastic Period) are old and important documents that are often referred to by modern scholars.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, one of his major treasures, *sGrub pa bka' brgyad* (Eight Transmissions of Realization), is a huge and influential collection of scriptures that is necessary to understand the spirituality of the early rNying ma school. However, it has yet to be sufficiently studied.<sup>3</sup>

The *sGrub pa bka' brgyad* is known to consist of eight esoteric teachings; ① *'Jam dpal sku* (Mañjuśrī Body), ② *Padma gsung* (Lotus Speech), ③ *Yang dag thugs* (Viśuddha Mind), ④ *bDud rtsi yon tan* (Nectar Quality), ⑤ *rDo rje phur pa* (Kīlaya Activity), ⑥ *Ma mo rbod gton* (Liberating Sorcery of Mother Deities), ⑦ *dMod pa drag sngags* (Maledictory Fierce Mantra), and ⑧ *'Jigs rten mchod bstod* (Mundane Worship). Generally speaking, these are entirely practice- and ritual-oriented, and include many tantric oral instructions.

But *sGrub pa bka' brgyad* has also some historical and doctrinal works such as *Lung thams cad kyi rgyal po chen po lnga*, *gSangs sngags lung gi bang mdzod*, *gSang sngags bka'i tha ram*, *gSang sngags bka'i lde mig*, and *gSang sngags lung gi bka' mgo*. These deal with a wide range of Buddhist themes, from exposition of its basic vocabulary up to enumeration of tantras.

This paper will focus on Nyang-ral's doctrine in order to clarify its unknown aspects, mainly through an exegesis of *gSangs sngags lung gi bang mdzod* (Treasure House of Scriptural Transmission of Esoteric Buddhism), because it summarizes his

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<sup>1</sup> Concerning his life, see Dudjom 1991: 755-759 and Dargay 1977: 97-103.

<sup>2</sup> See Pema 2004, Lijenbergh 2009, Meinert 2006a, and Meinert 2006b.

<sup>3</sup> See Dargay 1977: 31-38 and Tenzin 2008.

doctrine most orderly and most comprehensibly.

## 2. Nine vehicles

Generally speaking, the rNying ma school divides all Buddhist systems of thought into nine categories:

1. Śrāvaka vehicle
2. Pratyekabuddha vehicle
3. Bodhisattva vehicle
4. Kriyā vehicle
5. Upaya vehicle
6. Yoga vehicle
7. Mahāyoga vehicle
8. Anuyoga vehicle
9. Atiyoga vehicle

This scheme is famous as the orthodox division of Buddhism by the rNying ma pa. But not all rNying ma documents follow the nine-vehicle system. One Dunhuang manuscript, likely from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, for example, describes only seven vehicles, deleting the Pratyekabuddha and Upaya vehicles.<sup>4</sup> In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, there is an excerpt by the famed treasure excavator, O rgyan gling pa (ca. 1323-?). He proclaims that there are twelve vehicles, that is to say, nine vehicles plus *sPyi ti* (the Crown Pith), *Yang ti* (the Ultra Pith), and *mTha' chen* (the Great Limit), which are all superior to Atiyoga.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, some researchers have already found out that even Nyi-ma 'od-zer himself establishes *sPyi ti* and *Yang ti* in his some treasures.<sup>6</sup> However, neither *sPyi ti* nor *Yang ti* are mentioned at all in the *sGrub pa bka' brgyad*, and he instead declares:

Nine-step vehicles were shown and spoken in accordance with people of nine kinds of ability.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore Nyi-ma 'od-zer seems to have accepted the orthodox nine-vehicle system, at least in the *sGrub pa bka' brgyad*.

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<sup>4</sup> See Dalton 2005: 148-149.

<sup>5</sup> See Achard 1999: 56-59.

<sup>6</sup> See Achard 1999: 54-55 and Germano 2005: 21-27.

<sup>7</sup> *gSang sngags lung gi bang mdzod* 121.2-3: gang zag dbang po rab 'bring dgu la theg pa rim pa dgur bstan cing gsungs pa yin te /.

### 3. Definition of the three vehicles

Then, how does he define the three vehicles, Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga, which are unique to the rNying ma school? His definitions are based on five outer and six inner criteria. The five outer criteria are defined by 1. the teacher who teaches each vehicle (*ston pa*), 2. the teaching found in the texts of each vehicle (*bstan pa*), 3. the place where the teaching is taught (*gnas*), 4. the audience who listens to teaching of each vehicle (*'khor*), and 5. the collector who gathers teachings of each vehicle (*sdud pa po*). Here I quote his explanation about Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga.

As for Mahāyoga vehicle, that is to say, tantra, the teacher is Vajrasattva. The teaching is six-sections of secrets and nine-sections of tantras. The place is the pure womb of the goddess. The audience is the group of fifty eight fearful [deities].<sup>8</sup> The collectors are the buddhas of the four clans.

As for Anuyoga vehicle, that is to say, oral teaching, the teacher is Glorious Great Bliss (*bDe ba chen po*). The teaching is six-sections of magical displays (*sGyu 'phrul*), and seventy textbooks of precepts. The place is the sphere of reality. The audience is forty two buddhas.<sup>9</sup> The collector is Vajrasattva.

As for Atiyoga, the teacher is Samantabhadra (*Kun tu bzang po*). The teaching is twenty one tantras, eighteen marvels of mind (*sems rmad bcwo brgyad*),<sup>10</sup> etc. The audience is the buddhas of five clans. The place is a spiritual level called cloud mass wheel of syllables (*yi ge 'khor lo tshogs chen gyi sa*). The collector is glorious Vajrasattva.<sup>11</sup>

To my current knowledge, the meaning of the teachings of Mahāyoga and Anuyoga are not entirely clear.

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<sup>8</sup> Taking below-mentioned forty two buddhas into consideration, here we have to have fifty eight fearful deities. Concerning the one hundred peaceful and wrathful deities transmitted by the rNying ma pa, see Tanaka 2000: 97-117 and 175-194.

<sup>9</sup> Forty two buddhas are *Sangs rgyas zhi ba bzhi bcu rtsa gnyis* (Forty two peaceful deities). These deities are found in *bCom ldan 'das bde bar gshegs pa thams cad 'dus pa* 28.4-31.2, *Zhi ba bzhi bcu rtsa gnyis kyi bsgrub thabs*, and *Zhi ba bzhi bcu rtsa gnyis kyi bsgom rim*.

<sup>10</sup> See Lijenbergh 2009.

<sup>11</sup> *gSang sngags lung gi bang mdzod* 119.4-120.1: rgyud Ma hā yo ga'i theg pa'i / ston pa ni rDo rje sems dpa'o / bstan pa gsang ba sde drug / tantra sde dgu'o / gnas yum gyi mkha' glong (sic, read klong) nram par dag pa'o / 'khor 'jig (sic, read 'jigs) tshogs drug (sic, read lnga) cu rtse brgyad do / sdud pa po ni rigs bzhi'i sangs rgyas kyis btus so /

lung A nu yo ga'i theg pa la / ston pa dpal bDe ba chen po / bstan pa sgyu 'phrul sde drug / lung gi yi ge bdun cu'o / gnas chos kyi dbyings / 'khor bhu (sic, read bu) dha (sic, read ddha) bzhi bcu rtse gnyis so / sdud pa po rDo rje sems dpa'o /

A ti yo ga'i ston pa ni Kun tu bzang po'o / bstan pa ni rgyud nyi shu rtse gcig / sems smad (sic, read rmad) bcwo brgyad la sogs pa / 'khor ni rigs lnga'i sangs rgyas so / gnas ni yi ge 'khor lo tshogs chen gyi sa'o / sdud pa po ni dpal rDo rje sems dpa'o btus so /

Now let us investigate the six inner criteria: 1. entrance (*'jug sgo*), 2. conduct (*spyod pa*), 3. commitment (*dam tshig*), 4. view (*lta ba*), 5. meditation (*sgom pa*), and 6. result (*'bras bu*). Here I quote his explanation about Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga.

Mahāyoga, that is to say, development (*bskyed pa*), has six [aspects]. The entrance is the gate of the unity of means and insight (*thabs shes rab zung 'brel*). The means is the great and unceasing compassion, and the insight is the uncontaminated selflessness. The conduct is tana and gana. Tana is the liberation to the unbornness. Gana is the sexual intercourse without love either hatred. There are twenty eight commitments to be upheld; three commitments of body, speech, and mind of Buddha, five to be practiced, five to be received, five not to be kept away, five to be understood, and five to be accomplished. Thus twenty eight are to be kept. The viewpoint to be realized is to see the five clans as the very same. The method of meditation is to meditate clearly on one's personal deity. The ultimate result is Vajrasattva replete with all marks...

Anuyoga, that is to say, perfection (*rdzogs pa*), has also six [aspects]. The entrance is the gate of unity of basic space and wisdom. The conduct is undertaken through the four kinds of gates. The commitments to be upheld are the four roots. The viewpoint to be realized is to see all appearances as a mandala of seals (*phyag rgya'i dkyil 'khor*). The method of meditation is to meditate on circles of inexhaustible accessories of buddha-body, -speech, and -mind. The ultimate result is to reach the spiritual level of the lotus of non-attachment (*ma chags padma can gyi sa*)...

Atiyoga, that is to say, great perfection (*rdzogs pa chen po*), has also six [aspects]. The entrance is the effortless gate. The conduct is [thinking of] three worlds as great bliss. The commitments to be upheld are non-existence, omnipresence, spontaneous presence, and uniqueness. The method of meditation is to meditate on reality itself as enlightened mind in situations of non-meditation. The ultimate result is the spiritual level of cloud mass wheel of syllables (*yi ge 'khor lo tshogs chen gyi sa*) that is from the very beginning spontaneously present.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *gSang sngags lung gi bang mdzod* 167.1-168.5: bskyed pa rgyud Ma hā yo ga la drug ste / 'jug pa'i sgo ni thabs shes rab zung 'brel gyi sgo nas 'jug / de yang thabs thugs rje chen po mi 'gag pa dang / shes rab bdag med pa ma bslad pa gnyis kyi sgo nas 'jug go / spyod pa'i 'phrin las ni / ta na 'ga' na gnyis la spyod do / de yang ta na skye ba med par sgral ba / gha (sic) na chags sdang med par sbyor ba gnyis la spyod do / bsrung ba'i dam tshig ni nyi shu rtsa brgyad bsrung ngo / sku gsung thugs kyi dam tshig gsum dang / spyad par bya ba'i dam tshig lnga dang / dang du blang ba'i dam tshig lnga dang / mi spang ba'i dam tshig lnga dang / shes

#### 4. Nyi-ma 'od-zer's idea about the interrelationship among the three vehicles

Lastly, we will analyze the kind of interrelationship that Nyi-ma 'od-zer establishes among the three foremost vehicles. First, each vehicle has a distinctively different definition, as we have seen above. Furthermore, Nyi-ma 'od-zer says:

Mahāyoga is spoken of as a sphere of activity for the excellent-lesser mind. It is also superior to the three outer vehicles, [that is to say, Kriyā, Upaya, and Yoga vehicle], and was explained to subdue [the evils] through its profundity.<sup>13</sup>

Anuyoga, the oral teaching, was explained as a sphere of activity for the excellent-middle mind, and to subdue [the evils] through equality. It is also superior to Mahāyoga.<sup>14</sup>

Atiyoga, the secret instruction, was explained for the excellent-excellent mind, and to subdue [the evils] through its profundity.<sup>15</sup>

Here Nyi-ma 'od-zer confirms that the three vehicles differ in accordance with degree of practitioner's mind. Therefore the “independence” of each is dependent upon the relationships among the three vehicles Nyi-ma 'od-zer establishes. However, his idea is not simple. Why? This is because we find Nyi-ma 'od-zer speaks from a viewpoint that stresses “unity” among them. This can be confirmed in three ways. First, relying upon the practical necessity of understanding the inseparableness of the three vehicles, he says:

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par bya ba'i dam tshig lnga dang / bsgrub par bya ba'i dam tshig lnga dang / de ltar nyi shu rtso bgyad  
bsrung ba'o / rtogs pa'i lta ba ni rigs lnga tshul cig bar blta'o / bsgom pa'i thabs ni / yi dam gyi lha gsal ba  
bsgom / mthar phyin pa'i 'bras bu ni rDo rje ni (sic) sems dpa' mtshan yongs su rdzogs pa'i...

rdzogs pa A nu yo ga la yang drug ste / 'jug pa'i sgo ni dbyings ye shes gnyis su med pa'i sgo nas 'jug / spyod  
pa'i 'phrin las mnam bzhi'i sgo nas spyod / bsrung ba'i dam tshig rtso ba bzhi bsrung / rtogs pa'i lta ba snang  
srid phyag rgya'i dkyil 'khor du lta / bsgom pa'i thabs sku gsung thugs mi zad pa bgyan gyi 'khor lo bsgom /  
mthar phyin pa'i 'bras bu ni ma chags padma can gyi sa non par 'dod do /...

rdzogs pa chen po A ti yo ga la yang drug ste / 'jug pa'i sgo ni bya rtso dang bral ba'i sgo nas 'jug / spyod  
pa'i 'phrin las ni kham gsum bde ba chen por spyod / bsrung ba'i dam tshig ni / myed (sic) pa dang / phyal  
ba dang / lhun grub dang / cig bu dang / bzhi bsrung ngo / bsgom pa'i thabs ni chos nyid byang chub sems  
bar bsgom med kyi ngang la bsgom / mthar phyin pa'i 'bras bu ni ye nas lhun gyis grub ste / yi ge 'khor lo  
tshogs chen gyi sa non par 'dod do /...

<sup>13</sup> *gSang sngags lung gi bang mdzod* 123.2-3: Ma hā yo ga'i theg pa ni / blo rab kyi tha ma'i spyod yul du  
gsungs pa yin te / de yang phyi'i theg pa gsum las 'phags ste / zab mo (sic, read mos) 'dul ba'i ched du  
gsungs so /.

<sup>14</sup> *gSang sngags lung gi bang mdzod* 123.4-5: lung A nu yo ga'i theg pa ni / blo rab kyi 'bring gi spyod yul  
du gsungs te / mnyam pas 'dul ba'i ched du gsungs so /.

<sup>15</sup> *gSang sngags lung gi bang mdzod* 123.6: man ngag A ti yo ga'i theg pa ni / blo rab kyi yang rab kyi don  
du gsungs ste / zab mos 'dul ba'i ched du gsungs /.

Development, perfection, [and great perfection] are the children of one person, and a true family. The understanding of development, perfection, [and great perfection] on the single inseparable level is called “the secret teaching of getting the point of esoteric Buddhism”. Therefore if we don’t separate view and activity, and understand the three, that is to say, development, perfection, [and great perfection] as one, we will not be afraid of anything as garuda flying in the sky.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, concerning how to evaluate the *sGrub pa bka’brgyad*, he says:

In Mahāyoga, that is to say, development (*bskyed pa*), there are Eight Transmissions of Realization.<sup>17</sup>

This is the normal and traditional evaluation of the *sGrub pa bka’brgyad* in the rNying ma school. However, he says at the same time:

The essence of the Eight Transmissions of Realization is [identical with] the ultimate essence of the three, that is to say, development, perfection, [and great perfection].<sup>18</sup>

Here he unifies the three vehicles by stressing the greatness of his own treasure. Lastly, relying upon his distinguishing idea that each vehicle includes aspects of the other two, he says:

Mahā[yoga] of Mahā[yoga] develops gradually the deity mandala.

Anu[yoga] of Mahā[yoga] is the spontaneous presence of the natural mandala.

Ati[yoga] of Mahā[yoga] is the unbornness of ultimate reality.

Mahā[yoga] of Anu[yoga] develops instantly the deity mandala.

Anu[yoga] of Anu[yoga] is the deity mandala in relative reality, but pure basic

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<sup>16</sup> *gSang sngags lung gi bang mdzod* 177.1-3: bskyed rdzogs gsum po ‘di ni / gcig gi bu / gnyen cig gis (sic, read gi) dngos / bskyed rdzogs ya ma khyad par cig gi ngang du shes pa la gsang sngags gnad du chud pa’i man ngag ces bya’o / ... des na lta spyod ya ma bral bar / bskyed rdzogs gsum po cig tu shes na / khyung nam mkha’ la lding pa dang ‘dra ste / gang la yang nyam nga med do /.

<sup>17</sup> *gSang sngags lung gi bang mdzod* 115.5-6: de yang Ma hā yo ga la bsgrub pa bka’brgyad ste /.

<sup>18</sup> *bskyed rdzogs gsum gyi gdams pa* 424.1-2: bsgrub pa bka’brgyad kyi bcud phyung ba / bskyed rdzogs gsum gyi yang snying ‘di /.

space of phenomena in ultimate reality.

Ati[yoga] of Anu[yoga] is the non-dual self-knowing [wisdom].

Mahā[yoga] of Ati[yoga] is originally the deity mandala.

Anu[yoga] of Ati[yoga] is one's mind as the deity mandala.

Ati[yoga] of Ati[yoga] is the essence of one's mind with no certainty, which is naturally born and spontaneously present.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore this “unity” is also the interrelationship among the three vehicles that Nyi-ma ‘od-zer establishes.

## 5. Conclusion

The *sGrub pa bka' brgyad* revealed by Nyang-ral Nyi-ma ‘od-zer is not only oriented toward practice and ritual with many tantric instructions, but also has doctrinal works. The *sGrub pa bka' brgyad* is supposed to have accepted the orthodox nine-vehicle system of the rNying ma school. Nyi-ma ‘od-zer orderly and comprehensibly defines the three foremost vehicles, that is to say, Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga, by five outer and six inner criteria. He has two ideas concerning the interrelationship among the three vehicles at the same time, namely, independence and unity.

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### Abbreviation

KGDD: *bKa' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa'i chos skor*, 13 vols., Paro: Ngodrup and Sherab Drimay, 1979-80.

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*bsKyed rdzogs gsum gyi gdams pa*, KGDD, vol. 12, 423.1-444.3.

*bCom ldan 'das bde bar gshegs pa thams cad 'dus pa*, KGDD, vol.1, 13.1-83.6.

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<sup>19</sup> *bsKyed rdzogs gsum gyi gdams pa* 426.3-427.1: Ma hā'i Ma hā ni / lha'i dkyil 'khor rim gyis bskyed pa'o / Ma hā'i A nu ni rang bzhin gyi dkyil 'khor lhun gyis grub pa'o / Ma hā'i A ti ni don dam pa (sic, read par) ma skyes pa'o /

A nu'i Ma hā ni / lha'i dkyil 'khor cig char bskyed pa'o / A nu'i A nu ni / kun rdzob lha'i dkyil 'khor te / don dam par chos kyi dbyings nram par dag pa yin / A nu'i A ti ni rang rig pa gnyis su med pa yin /

A ti'i Ma hā ni / lha'i dkyil 'khor ye nas yin pa'o / A ti'i A nu ni / lha'i dkyil 'khor rang sems yin pa'o / A ti'i A ti ni / rang sems kyi ngo bo la nges pa med de / rang byung lhun gyis grub pa'o /.



*Zhi ba bzhi bcu rtso gnyis kyi bsgrub thabs*, KGDD, vol. 6, 109.1-131.5  
*Zhi ba bzhi bcu rtso gnyis kyi bsgom rim*, KGDD, vol. 6, 133.1-161.6.  
*Lung thams cad kyi rgyal po chen po lnga*, KGDD, vol. 4, 57.1-96.1.  
*gSang sngags bka'i lde mig*, KGDD, vol. 4, 333.1-451.6.  
*gSang sngags bka'i tha ram*, KGDD, vol. 4, 181.-332.1.  
*gSang sngags lung gi bka'mgo*, KGDD, vol. 4, 501.1-565.7.  
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