



## 6 ***Rang rig* and the Soteriological Breakthrough**

**Summary** 6.1 Gnosis and Soteriology in the rNying-ma Tradition. – 6.2 Distinctive Features of rDzogs-chen *Rang rig* in Contrast with Other Tantric and Māhāyanic Traditions. – 6.3 How *Rang rig* Makes the (Soteriological) Difference.

### **6.1 Gnosis and Soteriology in the rNying-ma Tradition**

The pre-Dignāga Buddhist sources mentioned in the first part of this research (ch. 2) associate the idea of self-awareness primarily with soteriological concerns, mostly in relation to omniscience. Then, at the time of its technical formulation within Buddhism's epistemological turn, this notion takes on a notably epistemological orientation. In addition to the intersections between its soteriological and epistemological aspects, its ontological framework also plays a crucial role in the development of the notion of self-awareness.

This chapter aims to shed light on selected interpretations of *rang rig* that are considered representative of its key dimensions, particularly with regard to the role it plays on the path to liberation, both in terms of yogic practice and soteriological breakthrough. To this end, certain sources from the rNying-ma tradition more broadly

and from the rDzogs-chen perspective in particular<sup>1</sup> will be examined as emblematic of these aspects of the discourse.

The relevance of this school for the present inquiry lies primarily in the specific gnoseological dimension it develops and with which it engages. In this chapter, the term ‘gnoseology’ will be employed to denote discourse on ‘gnosis’ (SKT *jñāna*; TIB *ye shes*), that is, the high-level mind at the stage of a *buddha* or at other advanced stages along the path to enlightenment. This stands by contrast with ‘epistemology’, which will refer here to the analysis of ordinary mind (SKT *citta*; TIB *sems*).<sup>2</sup> Gnoseology thus represents a more elevated counterpart to epistemology and, as will become evident, this terminological distinction reflects and is rooted in the philosophical framework of the rNying-ma tradition.

Davidson (2004, 235) remarks that the Indian emphasis on gnosis was amplified to develop an indigenous gnoseology, particularly by figures such as Rong-zom Chos-kyi-bzang-po (1012-1088) and other rNying-ma scholars. In fact, the rNying-ma ‘spiritual culture’ is typified by its focus, especially in the rDzogs-chen view, on an account of philosophy of mind in which the ‘gnoseological’ aspect plays a crucial role. The level of *rig pa*, or primordial gnosis (TIB *ye shes*), as opposed to that of ordinary consciousness (TIB *rnam shes* or *sems*), is the key-element of the whole system. In terms of the difference between these two dimensions, Germano and Waldron explain:

It is a distinction between distorted and optimal experience, as well as the corresponding unconscious matrices. More typically, the focus is on the ordinary mind (*sems*) or ordinary consciousness (*rnam shes*) contrasted to pure awareness (*rig pa*) or primordial cognition (*ye shes*). The discussions are straightforward in terms of buddhology – namely, models of consciousness for Buddhas in contrast to sentient beings, or, in epistemological terms, the contrast of global, holistic, and reflexive modes of awareness to [...] dualistic, and non-reflexive modes of awareness. (Germano, Waldron 2006, 53)

<sup>1</sup> Teachings classified as rDzogs-chen are common to the rNying-ma school of Buddhism and the pre-Buddhist Bon tradition; the present volume considers only the former system of thought. For a detailed historical and philosophical overview of rNying-ma rDzogs-chen, see Germano 1994; for a study of the obscure regions in which the rDzogs-chen scriptures were created, see Van Schaik 2004b. For a systematic overview of Bon rDzogs-chen philosophy, see Rossi 1999.

<sup>2</sup> For further clarification of this usage of the terms ‘gnoseology’ and ‘epistemology’ as well as their implications, see Wangchuk 2007, 43.

This specific tradition of Tibetan Buddhism holds particular significance for a universal philosophical discourse on consciousness, as the fundamental *sems-ye shes* distinction carries profound implications. The richness of this specifically gnoseological account has yet to be properly analyzed by modern scholarship and highlights

the absence of any systematic appraisal of rNying-ma views on the nature of mind that traces their evolution and complex relationships with other Indian Buddhist philosophies of mind such as Cittamātra, Madhyamaka, Pramāṇavāda, and Vajrayāna. The rNying-ma views merit attention not only because of their intrinsic interest and relevance to contemporary philosophies of mind but also because they provide an invaluable key to understanding the tradition's distinctive doctrines and practices. (Higgins 2012b, 441)

Thus, at the core of the rDzogs-chen (and rNying-ma) system and as its formative element is the differentiation between dualistic mind and primordial gnosis. This distinction emerges as a key component of the entire system, deemed indispensable for understanding its philosophy and meditation practice, as well as the soteriological discourse of the path to liberation. This tight link between gnosis and soteriology becomes clear with further consideration of the implications of the *sems-ye shes* distinction.

Primordial gnosis refers to a mode of knowledge that is considered genuine and primordial by contrast with normal cognition, which is adventitious, transient, and derivative. In his “Mini-Encyclopedia of Great Perfection Terminology”, Germano depicts the rDzogs-chen technical understanding of the term *rig pa* as indicating the “‘aware-ing’ dimension of the Universe itself in its pure undiluted intensity” (Germano 1992, 829). On the other hand, what characterizes the ordinary cognitive activity of *sems* is a “distorted derivative” (Germano 1992, 829) of that very radiation of intense awareness. It is a dualistic distortion of the dimension of *rig pa* as it is considered in the rDzogs-chen tradition, namely, “ever-present awareness in its unrestricted openness and undefiled purity” (Higgins 2013, 84). For Higgins, the *sems-ye shes* distinction is:

first systematically presented in the seventeen Atiyoga tantras (*rgyud bcu bdun*) that make up the Heart Essence (*snying thig*) subclass of the Esoteric Guidance Class (*man ngag sde*) of rDzogs-chen teachings. These teachings often take the form of personal instructions advising the practitioner to discern within the flux of adventitious thoughts and sensations that characterize dualistic mind (*sems*) an invariant pre-representational structure of awareness known as primordial knowing, open awareness or the nature of Mind (*sems nyid*) from which this turmoil arises. The idea

is to directly recognize (*rang ngo shes*) and become increasingly familiar with this abiding condition without confusing it with any of its derivative and distortive aspects. (Higgins 2012b, 442)

Numerous esoteric instructions (TIB *man ngag*) on distinguishing mind from primordial gnosis are preserved in rNying-ma collections – such as, for instance, the *Bai ro'i rgyud 'bum* – and constitute some of the earliest evidence of deep gnoseological works where a rich and nuanced vocabulary specifies the mode of awareness of primordial gnosis. In various formulations, this is referred to as *rig pa*, *rang rig*, *byang chub kyi sems 'bodhicitta'*, and *sems nyid* ('Mind'). By contrast, dualistic mind is understood within the rDzogs-chen gnoseological system through an integrated analysis that draws upon both Cittamātra and Madhyamaka sources.

Given this framework, what is the meaning and importance of such a structural division in relation to the path toward liberation? How does the gnoseological dimension intersect with soteriology? To address these questions and unpack the straightforward claim Higgins makes about the “rDzogs-chen philosophy of mind [as] inseparable from its distinctive soteriology” (Higgins 2012b, 443), it is necessary first to clarify how a rDzogs-chen practitioner progresses along the path to liberation.

What is, then, the soteriological model of the Great Perfection view? It has an underlying

inclusivist schematization of the Buddhist path in terms of the progressive disclosure of primordial knowing – a clearing process (*shyong byed*) that seamlessly integrates elements of Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna and rDzogs-chen – that lays the doctrinal and hermeneutical foundation for all the subsequent rNying-ma treatments. (Higgins 2012b, 443)

In fact, the nature of Mind, or *buddha*-nature, is available to both enlightened beings and sentient beings; however, it remains inaccessible to the latter owing to the obscuring influence of dualistic distortions. In other words, the rDzogs-chen model of enlightenment does not adopt the approach of ‘abandonment and obtainment’, whereby unwholesome tendencies are discarded and wholesome qualities cultivated – a model typically associated with the *sūtra* tradition. Nor does it align with the tantric dynamic of ‘transformation’, which emphasizes the process of converting ordinary consciousness into the enlightened one.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it proceeds

**3** In this respect, cf. Germano's (1992, 87-8) words relating to Klong-chen-pa's thought of enlightenment.

through a dynamic of “recovery or retrieval”, a process of “disclosure” (Higgins 2012b, 448) or unveiling of what is otherwise obscured and concealed beneath layers of afflictive distortions.

On this account, the Buddhist path is construed not as a developmental process of accumulating merits and knowledge that serve as causes and conditions leading to goal-realization (as in Mahāyāna gradualist paradigm), but as a disclosive process of directly recognizing and becoming increasingly familiar with primordial knowing as the mind’s objectifications and their obscuring effects subside. (Higgins 2012b, 445)

More generally, following Seyfort Ruegg, as further developed by Wangchuk (2007, 38-41), two principal soteriological approaches to attaining Buddhahood can be identified within the Mahāyāna tradition:

what I call the ‘generation model’ and the ‘revelation model’, which, borrowing from Seyfort Ruegg [1989, 3], could also be termed the ‘nurture model’ and the ‘nature model’, respectively” (Wangchuk 2007, 39)

Whereas the former entails the two accumulations of merit and wisdom in order to ‘generate’ the *buddha* bodies (SKT *kāyāh*), the latter implies spiritual practices that ‘reveal’ the (*buddha*)-nature that every being already possesses. In rDzogs-chen, the latter model is adopted,<sup>4</sup> with the specification that it is not a gradual approach but, rather, one in which the ontological-soteriological ground (TIB *gzhi*), path (TIB *lam*) and goal (TIB *bras bu*) are conceived as a singular point.<sup>5</sup>

In light of what has been discussed, the close connection between soteriology and gnoseology in the Great Perfection quickly becomes evident. In distinguishing between *sems* or *rnam shes* and *ye shes*, as seen in certain Mahāyāna and rDzogs-chen texts, gnosis is ranked higher than ordinary mind or cognition. This is clearly indicated in the Buddhist doctrine of the four types of ‘reliance’

<sup>4</sup> Cf. this very distinction depicted by Klong-chen-pa (1999e, 1169.4-1170.5) and Rong-zom-pa (1999c, 32.6-8).

<sup>5</sup> This is an idea also proposed by Rong-zom-pa in 1999a, 94.11-13 and, more explicitly, also 201.24-202.3, where it is said: “*sangs rgyas sa’i chos thams cad kyang ‘di’i gnas skabs su gzhi dang lam dang ‘bras bu’i chos rnam rang bzhi bye brag tu gyur pa med de | gzhi nyid lam du byas pa yin la | ‘bras bu gzhi las khyad par ‘phags pa med pas | ‘di ni sangs rgyas thams cad kyi gsang ba’i man ngag nges pa’i don mthar thug pa yin no zhes bstan no ||*” (Even all the phenomena of the Buddha ground, in this context, are not differentiated as ground, path, and fruition phenomena in their own nature. The ground itself is taken as the path, and the fruition is in no way superior to the ground. It is taught that this is the ultimate, definitive meaning of the secret instructions of all *buddhas*).

(SKT *pratisaraṇa*; TIB *rton pa*).<sup>6</sup> For a practitioner this is of utmost importance, given that the actual spiritual breakthrough is a deep cognitive event “inasmuch as a direct cognitive insight is called for, not a physiological or emotional one” (Wangchuk 2007, 43).<sup>7</sup> The salvific value of understanding and knowing, a hallmark of Indian philosophical thought, finds its fullest expression in rDzogs-chen. The discovery and recognition of the gnoseological dimension of *rig pa*, together with the process of becoming increasingly familiar with it, corresponds directly to soteriological praxis.

Given the close connection between the two dimensions mentioned above, it is now necessary to turn directly to the notion of *rang rig* itself. What, then, is the soteriological role it plays in the rDzogs-chen path to liberation? How is it conceived within the framework of the *sems-ye shes* distinction? The following sections will show that, in the rNying-ma tradition, the term *rang rig* is associated with the gnoseological dimension of *rig pa*. It is used synonymously with expressions such as *rang byung (gi) ye shes* ‘self-occurring gnosis’,<sup>8</sup> *rang byung rig pa* ‘self-occurring awareness’, and ‘*od gsal*’ ‘luminosity’.<sup>9</sup> By further exploring the implications of the view of self-awareness and

<sup>6</sup> See Fukuda, Ishihama 1989, nos. 1548-51, s.v. “rton pa bzhi'i ming la”; Sakaki [1916] 1987, nos. 1545-8, s.v. “rton pa bzhi'i ming la”. In particular, see the fourth one: “*ye shes la rton par bya'i rnam shes la rton par mi bya ba*” (Fukuda, Ishihama 1989, no. 1551; Sakaki [1916] 1987, no. 1548; One has to rely on gnosis (*ye shes*), and not on ordinary consciousness (*rnam shes*)).

<sup>7</sup> See for instance Rong-zom-pa (1999a, 198.5-10) and especially the passage where he claims that “it is commonly known that from the basis of the *śrāvaka* vehicle to the culmination, that is Great Perfection, when one sees the correct reality, one is liberated” (“*di ltar nyan thas kyi theg pa nas gzhi bzung nas | rdzogs pa chen po'i mthar thug gi bar du | gang zhig yang dag pa'i don mthong na rnam par grol lo zhes thun mong du grags pa yin la*”) (Rong-zom-pa 1999c, 32.6-8).

<sup>8</sup> On the notion of *rang byung gi ye shes* see, for instance, Almogi 2009, 206: “The notion of self-occurring gnosis (*svayambhūjñāna*: *rang byung [gi] ye shes*) in the sense of intrinsic gnosis is central to the philosophy of the rNying-ma school, particularly in connection with the rDzogs-chen tradition. The term *svayambhūjñāna* as such occurs in earlier Indian literature, although in most cases not in the sense of intrinsic gnosis, but in the original meaning of the term, namely, the ‘gnosis of a self-occurring one’, where *svayambhū* is a term for *buddhas* and *pratyekabuddhas*, one expressive of the fact that they attain awakening without the help of others; or, along the same lines, when *svayambhū* is taken as qualifying gnosis, ‘autogenous gnosis’, that is, gnosis that has come about independently of external influence” (square brackets in the original).

<sup>9</sup> See Higgins 2013, 86. Davidson (2004, 236-7) notes that, in its technical use in translations from Sanskrit, *rig pa* sometimes appears as a shortened form of the more common expression ‘self-awareness’ (*rang gi rig pa*). On the other hand, Van Schaik 2004b suggests instead a different source for the use of the term *rig pa* in the Great Perfection texts: some of the earliest rDzogs-chen texts use ‘*bodhicitta*’ (*byang chub kyi sems*) as a synonym for the primordially enlightened mind, and the phrase ‘*bodhicitta* awareness’ (*byang chub kyi sems kyi rig pa*) can also be found. “Since, then, the term ‘*bodhicitta*’ bridges the gap between the Mahāyoga *sādhana*s and the early Great Perfection texts of the Mind Series, we should seriously consider the term ‘*bodhicitta* awareness’ as a source of the Great Perfection’s ‘awareness’” (Van Schaik 2004b, 16).

pointing out the specificities of certain rDzogs-chen understandings of *rang rig*, its soteriological relevance will be outlined.

## 6.2 Distinctive Features of rDzogs-chen *Rang rig* in Contrast with Other Tantric and Māhāyanic Traditions

In order to outline some specific aspects of the notion of *rang rig* within the Great Perfection perspective, it may be useful to consider some rDzogs-chen sources where this concept is formulated and contrasted with Yogācāra and tantric interpretations. To begin with, the complex relationship between the Yogācāra and the Great Perfection accounts cannot be described as following a unidirectional trajectory of development.<sup>10</sup>

If the provenance of the rDzogs-chen *rang rig* and the extent and specifics of its indebtedness to Yogācāra conceptions of self-cognition (*svasamvedana*) remain far from transparent, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that rDzogs-chen scholars were inclined from early on to distinguish their own understanding of self-awareness from Yogācāra and Mahāyoga interpretations. (Higgins 2013, 93)

In fact, the Yogācāra idea of self-awareness is explicitly criticized, for instance, in a passage of the *Khu byug gi lta ba spyod pa'i 'khor lo*, taken from the collection of old *tantras* and instructions with the title *Bai ro'i rgyud 'bum*,<sup>11</sup> which says:

Followers of Cittamātra meditate on suchness, that is, experience luminous self-awareness. [...] Pratyekabuddhas, followers of Cittamātra, and Mādhyamikas, in so far as they practice non-conceptual meditation, are wrong: they sink into the darkness of non-thought, the appearances stop, gnosis does not arise, and the [process of] causes and effects [involved in] arising collapses.<sup>12</sup>

rNying-ma scholars tend to deny any connection between rDzogs-chen and the Yogācāra-Cittamātra concept of *rang rig* (Higgins 2013, 93). Among others, Klong-chen-pa Dri-med-'od-zer (1308-64), who received

<sup>10</sup> On this topic, see Germano, Waldron 2006; Van Schaik 2004, 78-84; 2018.

<sup>11</sup> See also Higgins 2013, 93.

<sup>12</sup> *Khu byug gi lta ba spyod pa'i 'khor lo* 1971, 349.2-350.1: "sems tsam rang rig pa gsal ba nyams su myong ba'i\* ji bzhin pa la bsgom | [...] rang rgyal sems tsam dbu ma gsum mi rtog pa sgom pas skyon yin te | mi rtog pa'i mun thim pa dang | snang ba 'geg pa dang | ye shes mi skye ba dang | skye ba'i rgyu 'bras log pa'o |" (\* Author's correction of *mongs pa'i* to *myong ba'i*).

the *sNying thig* tradition and elaborated a refined philosophy based on it, explicitly distinguishes its view of *rang rig* from the Yogācāra one. He rejects the Yogācāra understanding of self-awareness as he advances toward a broader and ontological critique of its main tenet, namely, the reality of mind. This position is untenable if, according to the *sNying thig* tradition, *sems* is regarded as distorted, samsaric, and derivative. Consequently, any notion of *rang rig* as possessing true essence is totally refuted, along with the view of it as mere 'self-illumination' (TIB *rang gsal*), which is based on the model of a lamp that illuminates itself.<sup>13</sup> Thus, by negating any idealistic position that asserts the true reality of mind, and consequently also of self-awareness, Klong-chen-pa defends a rDzogs-chen view of *rang rig* as a process devoid of true existence, whose description is not meant

**13** See Klong-chen-pa Dri-med-'od-zer (1999c, 1111.5 ff.; 1999d, 772.2-775.1). Note, in particular, the similarity between the dGe-lugs criticism of *rang rig* and the passage in 1999d, 772.4-5: "blo rdzas gcig dus gcig la rig bya dang rig byed gnyis rdzas 'gal ba'i phyir | rang gis rang rig pa'ang mi srid de | ral gris rang gi rtse mo gcod pa'am reg par mi nus pa bzhin no |" (Because, in a single moment of a single mental instance, the substances of the knower and the known are mutually contradictory, it is impossible for something to know itself. It is like a sword that cannot cut or touch its own tip).



to denote anything real.<sup>14</sup> Alongside the ontological issue central to Klong-chen-pa's argument, there is also a historical reason for his firm rejection of the Yogācāra conception of *rang rig*: the growing marginalization of Yogācāra doctrine during his time. In the period of the 'early propagation' (TIB *snga dar*) of Buddhism in Tibet, during the eighth and ninth centuries, Śāntarakṣita's presentation of Buddhist thought was dominant. His interpretation of the Madhyamaka view, known in early Tibetan doxographies as Yogācāra-Madhyamaka, was widely regarded as the highest form of Buddhist metaphysics. Then, in the period of the 'later dissemination' (TIB *phyi dar*), spanning the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Śāntarakṣita's system began to face increasing scrutiny following the translation of Candrakīrti's major works into Tibetan.<sup>15</sup> Largely as a result of the translation efforts

**14** Klong-chen-pa Dri-med-'od-zer (1999a, 321.1-322.3): "*gang la gzung ba dang 'dzin pa med par rtogs pa'i rig pa de'i ngo bo la ni rang byung gi ye shes su tha snyad btags kyang | rang rig rang gsal lo zhes rnal 'byor sems tsam pa ltar mi 'dod de | phyi nang med pas nang gi sems su ma grub pa dang | rang gzhan med pas rang gi rig pa kho nar ma grub pa dang | gzung 'dzin yod ma myong bas de nyid dang bral bar ma grub pa dang | tshor rig gi yul na med pas myong ba gnyis med du ma grub pa dang | sems dang sems byung med pas rang gi sems su ma grub pa dang | gsal mi gsal du med pas rang gsal du ma grub pa'i phyir ro | rig ma rig las 'das pas rig pa tsam du'ang gdags su med pa 'di ni | mtha' bral yongs su rdzogs pa chen po zhes bya ste | mtshon tshig gi tha snyad rang byung gi ye shes dang | byang chub kyi sems dang | chos sku dang | dbyings lhun grub chen po dang | rig pa rang gsal rjen pa zhes brjod kyang | brda shes pa'i phyir btags pa tsam las rang ngo brjod med chen por rtogs par bya'o | de ltar ma yin par ming la don du zhen na sems tsam pa'i rang rig rang gsal gzung 'dzin gnyis med kyi shes pa dang khyad par mi rnyed do |*". In the Author's translation: "Concerning the essential nature of that awareness realized as free from perceived and perceiver: although it is labeled as 'self-occurring gnosis', it is not asserted – as some Yogācārins do – that it is 'self-cognizing' or 'self-luminous'. In fact, since there is no outside or inside [with reference to it], it is not established as an internal mind. Since there is no self or other, it is not established as uniquely one's own awareness. Since the existence of perceiver and perceived has never been experienced, it is not established as separate from that. Since it does not exist in any objective field of sense or cognition, it is not established as a non-dual experience. Since there is no mind or mental factors, it is not established as one's own mind. Because it is neither luminous nor non-luminous, it is not established as self-luminous. And because it transcends both knowing and not knowing, it is not designated as merely 'knowing'. This is what is referred to as the 'Great Perfection, free from all extremes'. Although, for the sake of illustration, we use terms such as 'self-occurring gnosis', '*bodhicitta*', '*dharmakāya*', 'the great expanse spontaneously present', and 'the naked self-luminosity of *rig pa*', these are mere labels meant for communicative purposes. One should realize its essential nature, however, as one of great ineffability. If, on the contrary, one clings to these names as the actual referent, then there is no difference from the Yogācāra school's [notion of a] consciousness that is self-aware, self-luminous, and free from the duality of perceived and perceiver". See also Van Schaik 2004, 80-4.

**15** For the importance of Śāntarakṣita in Tibetan Buddhism, see Seyfort Ruegg 1981, 89; for a discussion on the introduction of Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka into Tibet, see Lang 1990. It should be noted here that, two centuries after sPa-tshab, Tsong-kha-pa further advanced the Prāsaṅgika view, articulating it with his own nuanced understanding. Since then, this perspective has come to represent the dominant philosophical position in Tibet: "Since the time of Tsong-kha-pa, it has been his Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka system to which all rival positions in Tibet have had to answer" (Blumenthal 2004, 28).

of sPa-tshab Nyi-ma-grags's (1055-?), the Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka view started to spread and gain prominence while Śāntarakṣita's position increasingly faced serious opposition. Therefore, at the time when Klong-chen-pa was active, the tendency to marginalize the Yogācāra view might have influenced his discourse against the Yogācāra position on *rang rig*.

To compare rDzogs-chen with other tantric interpretations of *rang rig*, Davidson's (2004, 237) observations are particularly helpful in tracing the historical development of the notion. He notes that while *svasaṃvedana* was initially established by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti as a kind of perception, later tantric traditions – most notably, it appears, within the rNying-ma school – reoriented the concept entirely, assigning it a purely gnoseological function.

Whereas the epistemologists posited self-referential perception in all cases of the perceptual event, Vajrayāna authors focused on the perception of the awakened individual. The shift in emphasis was significant: instead of concentrating on the means of knowledge of the ordinary individual [...], the Vajrācāryas concentrated on the gnostic perception of the yogin – thus, “pure awareness” – in terms of the ground of being, the soteriological path, and the goal to be realized. (Davidson 2004, 237)

Therefore, if the tantric assimilation of *rang rig* already signals a significant shift from the epistemological to the gnoseological level of discourse, one may further ask whether the rDzogs-chen view of self-awareness introduces a distinctively soteriological nuance, one that sets it apart from its broader tantric application. Are there specific features of *rang rig* as understood in rDzogs-chen that can be clearly identified? Given the wide range of perspectives within the multifaceted and diverse Great Perfection tradition, no definitive answer can be given to such general questions. Nonetheless, the following sections will offer a few reflections and preliminary considerations.

One pivotal work by gNyan dPal-dbyangs (eighth century AD), a renowned master learned in Mahāyoga *tantras*, entitled *sGron ma drug*, includes a long text, *Thugs kyi sgron ma*,<sup>16</sup> that lists a few features of *rang rig*. It includes, on the one hand, gNyan dPal-dbyangs's injunctions concerning Mahāyoga, and, on the other, his portrayal of the realization of reality as unmediated, beyond any dichotomization or reification, and articulated through apophatic expressions woven throughout the text. By embodying these two tendencies, the work may be regarded as a valuable guide not only

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed work on the main topics of the text, see Takahashi 2018.

to Mahāyoga but also to the emerging spirit of the Great Perfection view that was beginning to take shape in Tibet at that time.<sup>17</sup> gNyan dPal-dbyangs's recommendations allude to visions or experiences that are luminous, natural, spontaneous, and free from any reification of extremes. Furthermore, the apophatic use of language, along with the meaning it conveys, anticipates resonances with the later rDzogs-chen tradition. Alongside these apophatic formulations, the text also features passages that emphasize luminosity and primordial gnosis, thus laying the ground for the specific doctrinal and experiential features that will flourish fully in the Great Perfection discourse. *sGron ma drug* serves as a paradigm for the emergence of early rDzogs-chen scriptures, as gNyan dPal-dbyangs appears to be among the first masters to begin articulating rDzogs-chen doctrines (Karmay 2007, 68).<sup>18</sup> In gNyan dPal-dbyangs's *Thugs kyi sgron ma* (1999), one finds multiple descriptions of *rang rig*. To mention just a few, it is described as follows: devoid of any object and therefore devoid of the apprehending-subject ("yul med de la 'dzin med", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1027.2); accomplishing all aspirations ("smon pa kun rdzogs", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1027.4); the Lord of all results ("bras bu kun bdag", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1031.1) because there is nothing to be obtained ("thob bya'i chos med", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1031.1); non-conceptual ("rtog med", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1040.1); totally pure ("rnam par dag", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1009.1); with no aspects ("rnam pa med pa", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1011.5); luminous and transparent as a crystal ("od gsal shel ltar dag pa", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1011.5); and free from extremes ("mtha' [...] bral", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1025.5). This description of *rang rig* thus reveals nuances that may be seen as resonating with both Mahāyoga and Great Perfection perspectives, without any explicit attempt by gNyan dPal-dbyangs to draw a clear distinction between the two. This approach is consistent with the broader intent of the text, which encourages drawing inspiration from Mahāyoga tantric instructions while deliberately avoiding adherence to any specific tenet system, favoring instead a direct approach that seeks to cut through conceptual reification.

**17** On the relationship between Mahāyoga and rDzogs-chen, see Van Schaik 2008. In brief, the main point may be stated thus: "we find both Mahāyoga and Great Perfection being interpreted by Tibetans in the tenth century in very close association with each other. [...] Dunhuang manuscripts show that Mahāyoga was from an early stage approached through the view of Great Perfection understood as a mode (*tshul*) of Mahāyoga practice, and that the hardening of doxographical categories which separated Anuyoga and Atiyoga from Mahāyoga as vehicles per se was not itself generally accepted until at least the eleventh century" (Van Schaik 2008, 5).

**18** For further discussions and references related to gNyan dPal-dbyangs's identity, see Dalton 2005; Kapstein, Dotson 2007, 266 fn. 104; Karmay 2007, 67 ff.; Van Schaik 2004b.

However, it is in the work of one of gNyan dPal-dbyangs's presumed students, gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes (832-942), that *rang rig* is explicitly described in terms that distinguish between the Mahāyoga and rDzogs-chen views. Considerable uncertainty still surrounds the life and education of this important rNying-ma scholar from the formative period of Tibetan Vajrayāna as well as the dating of the *rNal 'byor mig gi bsam gtan*, more commonly known as the *bSam gtan mig sgron*, the text on which the following discussion will focus.<sup>19</sup> Certainly, gNubs-chen was actively involved in the translation of new texts into Tibetan, held a prominent position within subsequent Tibetan lineages and was recognized as the final recipient of tantric transmissions that laid the foundation for later rNying-ma developments (Germano 2002, 252). He is regarded as the earliest Tibetan author to offer a coherent exposition of various Buddhist doctrines (Karmay 2007, 142), and it is largely thanks to his efforts that, by the tenth century, rDzogs-chen had become established as a well-defined philosophical system. The text explored here, the *bSam gtan mig sgron*, is considered "the earliest surviving substantial exegetical work on the Great Perfection attributed explicitly to a Tibetan author" (Germano 1994, 219). It is also the *locus classicus* for the nine-vehicle classification system later adopted by the rNying-ma school, thereby offering valuable insight into early formulations of *rang rig* at the inception of the Great Perfection. In this text, *rang rig* is identified as a key notion of the Mahāyoga tradition, where all phenomena are held to be luminous self-awareness. In the same work, gNubs-chen also articulates a distinct interpretation of *rang rig* within the rDzogs-chen context, where it denotes that through which the vast and kaleidoscopic luminosity of diverse appearances is revealed.

In fact, gNubs-chen explains that, in the tantric view, suchness of phenomena is the all-pervasive luminosity of non-dual self-awareness ("*rang rig gnyis med kun tu 'od gsal ba*", gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 491.4). In other words, the insight gained through the method of Mahāyoga is a non-dual non-conceptuality ("*gnyis su med pa'i mi rtog pa*", gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 197.1-2), where non-dual suchness entails that the *dhātu* and its gnosis ("*dbyings kyi ye shes*", gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 197.2) are nothing other than mere self-awareness. This formulation characterizes the relationship between *dbyings* and its *ye shes* as reflexive: gnosis does not take *dhātu* as an object of observation. This implies that *dhātu* is not treated as an object ("*dbyings yul du byed pa'i rig*", gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 197.2) of any thematically directed gnostic cognition.

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed examination of his life and the dating of his works, along with additional references, see Esler 2014; see also Germano 2002, 252-5; Baroetto 2010, 1: 7-15; Higgins 2013, 37; Meinert 2003, 175-6 fn. 2.

On the other hand, as gNubs-chen explains, the rDzogs-chen view is that suchness is understood as ultimate and spontaneously perfected (“*lhun rdzogs de bzhin nyid mthar thug*”, gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 491.4). In the spontaneously present<sup>20</sup> great non-conceptuality (“*lhun gyis grub pa'i mi rtog pa chen po*”, gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 60.2-3), the whole phenomenal world is inherently, perfectly, primordially and naturally luminous in the completely pure sphere of primordial gnosis. In fact, within this dimension of spontaneity, everything is luminous or clear (“*thams cad lhun gyis grub pa'i ngang du gsal ba*”, gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 293.1-2). In this primordially luminous self-awareness, which is non-established, not-moving, not contaminated, and not dwelling, what is there to meditate on or reflect upon? Nothing. All there is, is this actual absence (“*med pa'i don de nyid kho na yod*”, gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 60.4-5). What is highlighted here is that, within the primordial great non-conceptuality, the manifestations are not blocked (“*snang ba bkag pa yang med*”, gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 60.5). Yet, it should be borne in mind that even the notion of “non-conceptuality” is employed merely as a figurative expression (“*rtogs pa med de nyid kyang bla dwags so*”, gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 60.5-6). Therefore, in view of the rDzogs-chen perspective as presented in this text,

we may label it as the insight into “dynamic emptiness”, which is in its empty aspect “nonexistence” [...] beyond duality and at the same time in its luminous aspect “intrinsic awareness” (*rang rig pa*) allowing the kaleidoscope of manifestations arise. Therefore, in rDzogs-chen meditation the real issue is not simply a non-referential (*mi dmigs pa*) situation [as in Mahāyoga], but innate and luminous awareness itself. (Meinhert 2003, 189)

Thus, by contrast with the Mahāyoga tantric standpoint, gNubs-chen (gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 291.2-3) articulates what appears to be the earliest rDzogs-chen interpretation of self-awareness, centering on its innate luminosity as the horizon within which the manifold display of appearances unfolds. In opposition to any form of conceptual discrimination, he explicitly posits *rang rig* as the faculty

<sup>20</sup> Within the tradition, the term *lhun gyis grub* ‘spontaneous presence’ can be found associated with the notion of the enlightened state as pre-existent and independent of any intentional effort to attain it (Van Schaik 2008, 12). It also connotes the ‘absence of effort’ or striving (TIB *brtsal med*). Van Schaik observes that *lhun gyis grub* appears in several *sūtras* and tantric sources, especially within the Māyājāla *tantra* group; however, in later Tibetan literature, its meaning was overshadowed by its popular use in Great Perfection texts, where it typically refers to non-striving (12). Importantly, Van Schaik explicitly challenges Karmay’s (2007, 119) claim that *lhun gyis grub* “may be considered as rDzogs-chen’s own terminology”.

that enables the practitioner to internalize the actuality or aim (TIB *don*) of the Great Perfection and as that which allows the effulgence of appearances to unfold.<sup>21</sup>

### 6.3 How Rang rig Makes the (Soteriological) Difference

The crucial soteriological function of reflexivity in rDzogs-chen is particularly evident in the philosophical perspective elaborated by Klong-chen-pa, especially as it draws upon the Seminal Heart (*sNying thig*) tradition. Within this framework, self-awareness is presented as the decisive factor that determines whether one follows a path leading to *nirvāṇa* or remains entangled in the cycle of *saṃsāra*. In other words, soteriological transformation hinges on the presence or absence of reflexivity. To grasp fully the significance of this point for the path to liberation, one must consider the broader soteriological architecture of the tradition. In this regard, Germano and Waldron offer the following characterization of *buddha*-nature:

While presented as a cosmogonic ground which ontologically precedes cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*) and transcendence (*nirvāṇa*), [...] is also explicitly located within the human interior as an ongoing, deeply unconscious dimension. This dimension is engaged in a constant efflorescence that gives rise to both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, leading to the stock formulation of a single ontological ground leading to two paths, that is, interpretative trajectories resulting in a bifurcation of life-worlds. (Germano, Waldron, 2006, 58)

From a single 'ontological ground' (TIB *gzhi*),<sup>22</sup> two paths extend: one to liberation and one to *saṃsāra*. The distinction between the two conditions lies in the fact that the former is as such due to "the cognitive capacity recognizing the appearances as self" (58), that is, due to the infusion of ontological ground with reflexivity. By contrast, the latter is as such "by means of a lack of such recognition" (58). Here, 'recognition' refers precisely to the reflexive dimension involved in the manifestation of reality. To summarize the modality of liberation: "Buddha-nature is the cosmogonic ground, and the Reality Body [*dharmakāya*] is its transformation with reflexive self-awareness" (59).

<sup>21</sup> To be sure, within the broader and still largely unexamined transformation of terminology from Mahāyoga to rDzogs-chen contexts, as Higgins (2013, 95) comments, "All this goes to show how little is yet known about the assimilation and transformation of Yogācāra ideas within Tibetan Mahāyoga and rDzogs-chen traditions".

<sup>22</sup> For the four-fold formulation of *gzhi* offered by Klong-chen-pa, see Germano, Waldron 2006, 53 ff.; Karmay 2007, 51 ff.

This also resonates with gNubs-chen's account of the soteriological aim as something "internalized through the direct perception of self-awareness" (1974, 291.2-3). As Karmay explains, within the rDzogs-chen framework, it is indeed possible for *sems*, the ordinary mind, "to recognise its own reality again (*sems kyi chos nyid ... rang gi rig pa*) from which it strayed and which it has forgotten for so long" (Karmay 2007, 175).

Here, an aspect of memory (TIB *dran pa*) or recollection is implied in what is primarily an act of recognition (TIB *rang ngo shes*) in which reflexivity plays a crucial role in enabling the recognition of appearances as self. The self-presencing or self-appearance (TIB *rang snang*) of *rig pa* may thus be characterized as follows:

the Ground as experiencing its own self-lighting-up in full self-consciousness and self-awareness (*rang rig*) of itself, which is why an Awakened One's experience is always *rang snang* ['appearance as self'], while other living beings' experience of his/her presence is *gzhan snang* ['appearance as other'], i.e. experienced as intertwined with the illusory specter of the other. (Germano 1992, 826, s.v. "Appearances")

In the rDzogs-chen tradition, reflexivity and memory are intimately connected.<sup>23</sup> Depending on the context, memory may signify various forms of disclosure, such as the reflexive unveiling of the meditator's awareness upon a genuine realization of the 'introduction' (*ngo sprod*) or what Kapstein (1992, 187) refers to as "the reflexive recovery of the pristine gnosis of the ground-of-all": the noetic version of *dharmakāya*, in which awareness presents itself as *dharmakāya*. It is important to note that the only resemblance to conventional memory, understood as an intentional act directed toward the past, lies in the notion of recovery. What emerges, more generally, is that memory is rather conceived as "the mnemonic engagement of the *dharmakāya* and thus standing outside of time" (Kapstein 1992, 195). Casey encapsulates this idea as follows:

I ultimately remember (myself as) the Buddha. But if this is so, then I also ultimately remember everything – everything that matters, or, in the language of the Great Perfection, the ground

**23** As for the vast topic of memory in the Great Perfection, it is worth mentioning Kapstein's (1992) thoughtful and inspiring study of the various understandings of mnemonic engagement in the Great Perfection practice.



of self-presenting awareness. Or else I remember the emptiness of everything. (Casey 1992, 290)<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, there is a strong contrast between the gnoseological dimension of “global, holistic, and reflexive modes of awareness” and the epistemological one, characterized by “dualistic, non-reflexive modes of awareness” (Germano, Waldron 2006, 53). The reflexivity of this process of recognition enacts the very shift from a dualistic mode of knowing to a non-dualistic mode. In this light, as Van Schaik (2004a, 56) points out, delusion arises from awareness’s “nonrecognition of its own nature (*rang ngo ma shes pa*)”, which then gives rise to dualistic conceptual elaboration. The reflexivity by which awareness recognizes itself as itself constitutes the central axis of the literature’s dyadic framework, marking the soteriological distinction between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. This is evident in the ontological pair of ‘universal ground’ (TIB *kun gzhi*)<sup>25</sup> versus *dharmakāya*, as well as the gnoseological distinction of *sems* versus *ye shes* (Karmay 2007, 57).

Thus, the rNying-ma literature’s stock perspective holds primordial self-occurring gnosis (*rang byung ye shes*) or awareness (*rig pa*) to be empty, luminous, and cognizant, at least intransitively and pre-reflectively aware of itself. Here reflexivity enables the transition from the epistemological to the gnoseological mode of cognizing. Summarizing this general framework, it could be said that

primordial knowing[...]is presentational (the pre-reflective occurring of experiencing itself) while dualistic mind is representational (the reflective grasping or singling out and thematic elaboration of particular instances thereof). So self-occurring primordial knowing (*rang byung gi ye shes*) is nothing other than the as yet undifferentiated taking place of appearing itself while mind consists in a complex variety of transitive (object-oriented) and reflexive (subject-oriented) differentiations within the stream of experience that thematize it in terms of self and other, ‘I’ and ‘mine’. (Higgins [2011] 2012a, 32 fn. 3)

With regard to the importance of overcoming or clearing dualism, Klong-chen-pa’s thought offers explicit guidance. As the primary systematizer of the extensive Seminal Heart (*sNying thig*) tradition, Klong-chen-pa articulates the structural foundations of the

<sup>24</sup> Kapstein has also addressed the pivotal role of reflexivity in rDzogs-chen meditation in other works (1993; 2000), where he discusses the ‘introduction’ of disciples to the nature of their mind as an act of *rang rig* (according to Mi-pham’s view). Cf. Griffiths 1992, where Buddhist practice is depicted as concerned with ‘attention’ rather than ‘memory’.

<sup>25</sup> For the conception of *kun gzhi* in rDzogs-chen and Klong-chen-pa’s specific view of it, see Karmay 2007, 178 ff.; Waldron, Germano 2006, 52 ff.



rDzogs-chen view as it would come to be defined from the fourteenth century onward. In his perspective, the soteriological shift may be described as follows:

becom[ing] aware of consciousness simpliciter to the extent that the reifying and distorting self-identifications with its contents subside. This radical *clearing of dualistic tendencies* and attendant familiarization with the implicit awareness from which they have arisen is known as the path. (Higgins [2011] 2012a, 43; italics added)

Within the Great Perfection tradition, particularly through the contributions of Klong-chen-pa and others, the *sems-ye shes* distinction undergoes various exoteric and esoteric formulations. On the exoteric side, there is a need to identify Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna sources that attest to and support this distinction. On the esoteric side, this entails identifying Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna sources that affirm and support such a distinction. On the esoteric side, moreover, a diverse *corpus* of teachings provides specific contemplative and soteriological instructions, most notably concerning practices such as *khregs chod* and *thod rgal*, the elicitation of the four gnostic lamps (*sgron ma bzhi*) and the yogic engagement with *rtsa*, *rlung*, and *thig le* (the ‘channels’, ‘winds’, and ‘drops’). Despite the complexity of its historical development, the heart of the *sems-ye shes* distinction contains a transformative gnoseological and soteriological process: the clearing of dualistic tendencies. In this light, awakening entails both “de-identifying with superimpositions” and “disclosing the implicit mode of being and awareness that they conceal” (Higgins [2011] 2012a, 51). As Klong-chen-pa (1999a, 495.3-5) emphasizes, what must be clearly understood is the fundamentally distorted nature of the world and cognition in which sentient beings remain entangled:

Moreover, from the mind [oriented toward the] apprehended [object], the absence of any apprehended object manifests as the five [sensory] objects (forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile objects); from the apprehending[-aspect of the] mind, actions and their effects, along with cognitive-emotional defilements, manifest without limit. Thus, *saṃsāra* consists in grasping at an object where there is no object, and grasping at a mind where there is no mind. It appears to sentient beings like a dream, and this originated from the emergence of the mind’s apprehending and apprehended aspects.<sup>26</sup>

**26** Klong-chen-pa Dri-med-'od-zer 1999a, 495.3-5: “*de'ang gzung ba'i sems las gzung yul med pa gsal snang gzugs sgra dri ro reg lngar snang la | 'dzin pa'i sems las las dang rnam smin nyon mongs pa dpag tu med par snang ste | yul med yul du 'dzin pa dang | sems med sems su 'dzin pa'i 'khor ba sems can la rmi lam ltar snang ba sems gzung 'dzin gyi rnam par shar ba las byung ba'o |*”.

In light of the framework outlined thus far, it becomes evident that while the *sems-ye shes* or *saṃsāra-nirvāṇa* distinction shapes the soteriological and philosophical core of the rNying-ma and rDzogs-chen views, equal emphasis is placed on the immanent presence of one mode or display within the other. In other words, overcoming dualistic cognition does not require reaching somewhere else but, rather, returning to the mind's own implicit *ye shes*, thereby directly encountering one's own *buddha*-nature, which underlies all derivative forms of distortion. Enlightenment is thus conceived as a return to the soteriological aspect of the ground (TIB *grol gzhi*); one arrives back to where one originally was, already enlightened and free from the beginning (TIB *ye grol*). This dynamic tension between the fundamental *saṃsāra-nirvāṇa* distinction, on the one hand, and their immanence, on the other – where *ye shes*, the nirvanic awareness, is immanent in and essential to all sentient beings – is already deeply rooted in the *sNying thig* tradition. It is precisely in the transition from samsaric to nirvanic awareness that the necessity of reflexivity emerges.

To bridge the gap, so to speak, within the two poles of this tension, Van Schaik (2004a, 63) observes that Rong-zom-pa explicitly uses the theory of *buddha*-nature. Indeed, he appears to be the first rDzogs-chen thinker to do so. Later, Klong-chen-pa follows Rong-zom-pa's understanding in this respect. *Buddha*-nature, in this view, is what remains when dualistic superimpositions have subsided, and corresponds to a gnoseological mode of cognizing. It is characterized by the indivisibility of gnosis and its domain (TIB *dbyings dang ye shes 'du bral med pa*), as well as by the inseparability of luminosity and emptiness (TIB *snang stong dbyer med*). However, this pivotal notion of *buddha*-nature, as well as the indivisibility of *dbyings* and *ye shes*, must be examined in light of the specific philosophical commitments of each thinker within the tradition. Given the intricacy of the issue, broad generalizations should be avoided.

An illustrative example of how the non-duality of *dbyings* and *ye shes* may be conceived within the thought of a representative figure of the tradition is provided by Rong-zom Chos-kyi-bzang-po. His interpretation is particularly worthy of consideration as the complexity of his philosophical position finds full expression in his understanding of the indivisibility of *dbyings* and *ye shes*. This is a subtle and critical point since *buddha*-nature is said to remain once all dualistic structures have entirely dissolved. Rong-zom-pa, who is identified, along with Klong-chen-pa and Mi-pham, as one of the rNying-ma's "archetypical intellectual figures" (Wangchuk [2004] 2005, 173), devoted his work to the articulation and defense of the rDzogs-chen view (Karmay 2007, 124-5). Before turning to his specific interpretation of the indivisibility of *dbyings* and *ye shes*, it is important to note that Rong-zom-pa characterizes *rang rig* as

devoid of cognitive features (TIB *shes rig gi chos*) and as primordially luminous; it is also referred to as *rang byung ye shes* (Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999a, 174.14-16). Regarding the equivalence between *rang rig* and *rang byung ye shes*, he states (Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999d, 65.20-23):

Self-occurring gnosis, moreover, is merely the mind that is awareness of itself; other-cognitions are delusive. [...] Self-awareness itself is empty of its essential nature, and therefore it is self-occurring gnosis.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, in his view (Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999c, 117.13-15), *rang rig* is directly connected to *ye shes*:

In any consciousness, in the very moment in which apprehended- and apprehending-aspect arise, it is established that it is merely self-awareness itself, devoid of both [those aspects]. Self-awareness itself is called ‘gnosis’, for it is not mistaken with respect to reality.<sup>28</sup>

The full complexity of Rong-zom-pa’s ontological and philosophical commitments becomes especially evident in his elaboration of the indivisibility of *ye shes* and *dbyings*. As Almogi notes:

for Rong-zom-pa, self-occurring gnosis is not a cognitive phenomenon in any sense of the term, [...] whereas for Mi-pham it is the ultimate valid cognition. In view of Rong-zom-pa’s rejection of any cognitive feature within self-occurring gnosis or the *dharmadhātu*, it will be worthwhile to examine how he understands the notion of the ‘non-duality of the sphere and gnosis’ (*dbyings dang ye shes gnyis su med pa*), which he clearly seems to profess. (Almogi 2009, 232)<sup>29</sup>

On the one hand, Rong-zom-pa maintains that the purified *dharmadhātu* or *tathatā* constitutes the sole content of soteriological realization. He thus denies the presence of gnosis in the *buddha* state (Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999d). On the other hand, he simultaneously affirms the non-duality of *dharmadhātu* and *ye shes*, asserting that the gnosis

<sup>27</sup> Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999d, 65.20-23: “*rang byung gi ye shes kyang sems rang rig pa tsam yin pa dang | gzhan rig pa rnam kyang ‘khrul ba yin pa’i phyir | [...] rang rig pa nyid kyang ngo bo nyid kyi stong pa’i phyir | rang byung gi ye shes so |*”.

<sup>28</sup> Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999c, 117.13-15: “*shes pa gang la gzung ba dang ‘dzin pa’i rnam par snang ba de’i tshe nyid na gnyis pos stong pa’i rang rig pa tsam nyid yin par grub pa’o | rang rig pa de nyid ye shes zhes bya ste | don la phyin ci log pa med pa’i phyir ro |*”.

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999b, 143.20 and 150.7-8.

of a *buddha* is *rang rig*: *gnyis su med pa'i ye shes*, that is, non-dualistic gnosis – the cognitive subject of *tathatā*, its gnosis (TIB *de bzhin nyid kyi ye shes*). Underlying this intricate articulation of the indivisibility of *dbyings* and *ye shes* is Rong-zom-pa's theory of manifestation and dependent origination. As he explains (1999a, 130.21-2), appearances and perceptions lack any actual basis (TIB *gzhi*), root (TIB *rtsa ba*) or *substratum* (TIB *rten*). Further, he (1999a, 132.16-18) distinguishes between samsaric phenomena as *sems rang snang* and nirvanic phenomena as *ye shes rang snang*. Finally, upon attaining buddhahood, he (1999a, 43.3-4) asserts that all residual imprints and negative propensities are exhausted, and thus all appearances come to an end. How is this cessation explained? Rong-zom-pa appeals to the principle of dependent origination: if causes and conditions are present, their results arise; if they cease, so do their results. Therefore, when a *buddha* is free from all latencies and defilements, the resultant appearances also cease. This formulation of the indivisibility of *dbyings* and *ye shes* presents a philosophical challenge that is not easily resolved. In the end, as Wangchuk (2019) suggests, it might be argued that a gnostic, non-dual cognition ultimately underlies Rong-zom-pa's position, as indicated by his usage of the phrase "*dbyings dang ye shes gnyis su myed pa'i rig pa*" ('*rig pa* in which *dbyings* and *ye shes* are not divisible', Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999d, 502.15).<sup>30</sup>

To conclude, having explored the principal dimensions of the multi-faceted understanding of self-awareness within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition, this rich doctrinal heritage may now be brought into conversation with contemporary reflections on consciousness and reflexivity, the focus of § 7.2 of this volume. In light of the growing interest in the phenomenological and first-person dimensions of experience, particularly as a response to the prevailing materialist and reductionist paradigms in the philosophy of mind, Buddhist perspectives offer a meaningful and much-needed counterbalance. Furthermore, the soteriological orientation of the Buddhist tradition calls into question the modern neglect of those aspects of experience that are regarded, within the framework of liberation, as ethically significant, wholesome or instrumental to inner awakening. These dimensions are often underrepresented or ignored in contemporary discourse. Given that the entire Indo-Tibetan philosophical project is rooted in the pursuit of liberation and that this aspiration forms its foundational rationale, its insights prompt deeper reflection on the motivations underpinning modern investigations into the nature of consciousness – investigations which have, for the most part, been severed from any soteriological concern.

**30** For further studies on Rong-zom-pa's life and contributions, see Almogi 1997; 2009; Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo 2017.