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Tsongkhapa as Dzokchenpa: Nyingma Discourses and Geluk Sources¹

Roger R. Jackson *

1. Introduction: An interesting retreat

In May of 2018, I attended a five-day retreat in central Minnesota led by a respected Nyingma lama from Kham, Khenpo Sherab Sangpo. Somewhat to my surprise, the topic of the retreat was not a text by a Nyingma polymath like Longchen Rabjam (1308–63) or Mipham Gyatso (1846–1912) but rather the famous fourteen-verse poem, the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path* (*Lamgtso rnam gsum*) composed by the founder of the Geluk, Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa (or Jé Rinpoché, 1357–1419). As someone trained primarily by Gelukpa teachers, I was intrigued, and my intrigue only deepened during the retreat itself, as Khenpo-la delved into the text, its context, and the way he had come to know it.

He had received transmission of the text, he explained, from one of his principal teachers, the late Khampa master, Khenchen Jikmé Phuntsok (1933–2004). Jikmé Phuntok, in turn, had received the text, along with an explanation of it, from

¹ This article was originally delivered at the 15th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Paris, 2019. I would like to thank Matthew Kapstein, Tomoko Makidono, Alan Wallace, José Cabezon, John Dunne, Klaus-Dieter Mathes, and Jan-Ulrich Sobisch for their helpful reflections on the issues raised here. Throughout the article, Tibetan terms and names are rendered phonetically; a list of Wylie equivalents is found at the end. Parenthetically indicated Tibetan terms or text-titles, on the other hand, are transliterated into Wylie rather than rendered phonetically.

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Tsongkhapa himself, in a dream-vision. “And so,” Khenpo Sherab Sangpo informed us, “you are receiving a nearly-direct transmission, just two teachers removed Tsongkhapa himself.” I certainly couldn’t claim this about the transmissions I had received from my Geluk teachers! Khenpo-la went on to explain that Tsongkhapa had written the *Three Principal Aspects* as a way of expressing his realization of the true Madhyamaka view, which he attained after consulting his Nyingma teacher Namkha Gyaltsen, also known as Lekyi Dorjé or Lhodrak Drupchen (1326–1401). Although they had a guru-disciple relationship, in this instance, Lekyi Dorjé did not instruct Tsongkhapa directly, serving instead as a medium between Tsongkhapa and the bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi, who imparted to Jé Rinpoché a variety of teachings on view, meditation, and conduct, as well as other matters, many of them expressed in the idiom of Dzokchen, the great perfection. Shortly after this encounter, Khenpo-la explained, Tsongkhapa overcame his doubts and delusions, attained the correct view, and went on to forge his glorious career. With such a lead-in, it came as no surprise when, in his exposition of Tsongkhapa’s verses on ultimate reality, Khenpo Sherab Sangpo presented them in language that could indeed have come from Longchenpa or Mipham, in terms of primordial purity, the empty-yet-luminous nature of mind, and the difference between ordinary mind and primordial awareness.

This was, needless to say, a presentation of Tsongkhapa the likes of which I had never heard from my Geluk teachers, and it drove me to investigate more deeply (a) Nyingma discourse on Tsongkhapa and his relation to Dzokchen teachings and practices and (b) Geluk sources that might cast some light on Nyingma claims about the Geluk’s founding master—with an eye to determining what correspondence, if any, there might be between the Nyingma discourses and the Gelukpa sources. As I delved into the literature, it became clear that what seemed like an obscure corner of Tibetan cultural history was in fact a vast, largely-uncultivated field of study, containing far more material than I could possibly master in a short period of time. Indeed, Gelukpas and Nyingmapas have had a lot to say about each other over the past six hundred years. Some of it has been quite negative, from rejections of the Nyingma terma (“treasure”) tradition by various Geluk historians, to critiques of Geluk philosophy by such Nyingma scholars as Mipham and Bötrul Dongak Tenpei Nyima

(1907–59), to Phabongkha Rinpoché Dechen Nyingpo's (1878–1941) dismissal – and persecution – of the Nyingma early in the twentieth century, to persistent caricatures of each school by the other, in which Nyingmapas see Gelukpas as obsessed with scholastic hair-splitting and uninterested in meditation, while Gelukpas mock Nyingmapas for wanting to meditate but having no idea what they're meditating *on*.

Here, I want to accentuate the positive, by exploring Nyingma and Geluk perspectives on Tsongkhapa's relation to the Nyingma in general and Dzokchen in particular. To give the article greater focus, on the Nyingma side I will concentrate primarily (and in reverse chronological order) on three authors of relatively recent vintage: Dudjom Rinpoché Jikdral Yeshe Dorjé (1904–87), Getsé Mahapandita Gyurmé Tsewang Chokdrup (1761–1829), and Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangrol (1751–1851). On the Geluk side, I will focus primarily on (a) the relationship between Lekyi Dorjé and Tsongkhapa, (b) the question-and-answer text that purports to record Lekyi Dorjé's conversations with Vajrapāṇi on behalf of Tsongkhapa, the *Garland of Supreme Medicinal Nectar* (*Sman mchog bdud rtsi'i phreng ba*; hereafter, *Garland*), and (c) two disciples of Tsongkhapa who are said to have affirmed his affinity for Dzokchen: Tokden Jampel Gyatso (1356–1428) and Gungru Gyaltzen Sangpo (or Gungruwa, 1383–1450). By way of conclusion, I will attempt to compare and assess the Nyingma and Geluk sources and discourses, and reflect on their implications for our understanding of Tibetan cultural and religious history. In thinking through these matters, I have benefited greatly from the earlier research of such scholars as Robert Thurman, Matthew Kapstein, Franz-Karl Ehrhard, Matthieu Ricard, and Tomoko Makidono, and from Thupten Jinpa's definitive biography of Tsongkhapa, which was released late in 2019.²

2. Some Nyingma discourses

2.a. Dudjom Rinpoché

Dudjom Rinpoché's *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, first published in 1991, is a compendious and

² References to their works may be found in the bibliography, at the end of the article.

authoritative presentation of the tradition's "fundamentals and history," which actually consists of translations of two separate texts by Dudjom Rinpoché, one on the fundamentals of Nyingma tradition and one on its history. It touches not only on the Nyingma's ideas, practices, historical development, and major personages but also on the connection between the Nyingma and other Tibetan traditions. The "history" text, whose short title is *Thunder from the Great Conquering Battle-Drum of Devendra* (*Lha dbang g.yul las rgyal ba'i nga bo che'i sgra dbyangs*), includes a lengthy, mostly-polemical section entitled "Rectification of Misconceptions Regarding the Nyingma School," in which Dudjom Rinpoché defends various Nyingma texts, doctrines, and practices against their critics (Dudjom 1991: 887–940). It includes a chapter on "The Continuity of the Nyingmapa Tradition and Its Impact on the Other Schools (Dudjom 1991: 918–26)," which describes the influence of the Nyingma on such Tibetan traditions as the Kagyü, Sakya, and Geluk. Dudjom Rinpoche's discussion of the Geluk focuses primarily on Tsongkhapa and his relation to the respected Nyingma master variously known as Namkha Gyaltzen, Lekyi Dorjé, or Lhodrak Drupchen. As is typical in traditional Tibetan scholarly writing, Dudjom Rinpoché does not indicate the sources from which he has drawn. However, a comparison between the text of his section on Tsongkhapa and Getsé Mahapandita's early nineteenth-century *Catalogue of the Nyingma Tantra Collection* (*Rnying ma rgyud 'bum dkar chag*) makes it clear that most of Dudjom's account is taken verbatim from Getsé's *Catalogue*.³

According to this account, "[t]he venerable Tsongkhapa implored that great accomplished master to remove his doubts on the genuine, profound view,"⁴ so Lekyi Dorjé put himself in communication with his yidam, the bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi; his questions on behalf of Tsongkhapa, and the bodhisattva's answers, were transcribed in the *Garland of Supreme Medicinal Nectar*, a text found in the collected works of both Tsongkhapa and Lekyi

³ On Dudjom vis à vis Getsé, compare HNS 780–86 (trans. Dudjom 1991: 923–26), with CNT 360–67. See also Gyurme Dorje's comment about Getsé's *Catalogue* as a source in the translator's introduction to Dudjom 1991: 41. I am extremely grateful to Prof. Tomoko Makidono for pointing me to Dudjom's major source.

⁴ Dudjom 1991: 923; cf. CNT 361.

Dorjé.⁵ Following Getsé, Dudjom Rinpoché highlights a number of passages early in the dialogue that use distinctively Nyingma terminology. The instruction on how to “cut through to the roots of mind’s inner radiance,” for instance, is said by Vajrapāṇi to be “the intention of father Samantabhadra, the heartfelt advice of mother Samantabhadri.”⁶ This “empty essence of awareness,” Vajrapāṇi continues, “was not fabricated by anyone. It is without basis, uncaused, abiding from the very beginning... Without constructions and contrivances about it, let it be right where it is. Deviation then attains Buddhahood in the primordially pure expanse.”⁷ Furthermore,

This natural inner radiance is inseparable from original emptiness, and yet spontaneously present. Its radiant aspect is unobstructed spirituality. Know, too, that whatever arises, without attaining to substantial existence, is that great coalescence. In its inseparability [from emptiness] Buddhahood is attained...⁸

Dudjom Rinpoché continues to draw on Getsé by following up these citations from the *Garland* with a lengthy quotation from another Vajrapāṇi text, found in the collected works of Lekyi Dorjé but not of Tsongkhapa, the *Nectar Drops of the Generation and Completion [Stages] of Vajrapāṇi (Phyag na rdo rje'i bskyed rdzogs bdud rts'i'i thig pa*, hereafter *Nectar Drops*), which uses similar language to expound the nature of reality, and makes a special point of stressing that:

If emptiness be not freed from the intellect,
Doctrines appearing dualistically cannot liberate you...
Without words or expressions, freed from analytical grounds,
The analytical, apparent intellect is stilled in the expanse.
Refutation, proof, acceptance, and rejection vanish in
space....⁹

⁵ See the discussions in Ehrhard 1989 and Jinpa 2019 and the translation in Thurman 1982.

⁶ Dudjom 1991: 923; CNT 361; original at SMN 291: 1–2, trans Thurman 1982: 214.

⁷ Dudjom 1991: 923; CNT 361; original at SMN 293:6–294:1; trans Thurman 1991, 216.

⁸ Dudjom 1991: 923; CNT 361–62; original at SMN 294: 2–3; trans Thurman 1991, 216.

⁹ Dudjom 1991: 924; CNT 262–65; original at NDV 335.

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Vajrapāṇi concludes this poetic teaching with some advice on view, meditation, conduct, and result:

Make freedom from attachment and aversion your view;
Destruction of subjective intellectualizing your meditation;
Let freedom from deeds and craving be your conduct;
And your result the abandonment of the wish to attain
extrinsically
The buddha-body of reality, which is naturally within.¹⁰

“This,” says Dudjom Rinpoché, still quoting Getsé, “presents the doctrinal terminology of the Great Perfection without adulterating it with other philosophical systems,” and was the system through which Lekyi Dorjé himself became fully accomplished.¹¹

Dudjom Rinpoché goes on to follow Getsé in asserting that we have it on the authority of Jé Rinpoché himself – as well as Tokden Jamel Gyatso and other close disciples – that “except in the course of his presentations of the Madhyamaka and logical philosophies, the venerable Tsongkhapa conformed to the experiential cultivation of the Great Seal and Great Perfection.”¹² Experiential cultivation must be based on correct view, and although Tsongkhapa’s “discernment with respect to conventional topics was as vast as the illumination of the sun and moon,” his doubts on the view required resolution – a resolution brought about through the Dzokchen instructions transmitted from Vajrapāṇi to Lekyi Dorje and written down in the *Garland*.¹³ To seal the claim that Tsongkhapa was, in effect, a secret Dzokchenpa, Dudjom Rinpoché – for once departing from Getsé – cites a statement by Jé Rinpoché himself, which in fact is excerpted from a letter he wrote

¹⁰ Dudjom 1991: 924–25; CNT 362; original at NDV 335.

¹¹ Dudjom 1991: 925; CNT 365.

¹² Dudjom 1991: 925; CNT 366. Dudjom’s Tibetan text (HNS 784) reads: *rje gu ru dang / rtogs ldan jam dpal rgya mtsho sogs*, which Dorje and Kapstein reasonably translate as “Je Guru [Tsongkapa himself], Tokden Jampel Gyamtso and others.” Getsé’s text, however, reads *rje gung ru dang / rtogs ldan jam dpal rgya mtsho sogs*, meaning “Jé Gungru [Gyaltsen Sangpo], Tokden Jampel Gyatso and others.”

¹³ Dudjom 1991: 925; CNT 366.

to Lekyi Dorjé acknowledging receipt of the text of the *Garland*¹⁴ and poetically expressing his reaction to it:

The nectar-like speech of the Lord of Secrets
Fulfilled the hopes of my mind.
I overcame the sickness of defilement,
And thought I had reached Aṭkāvatī.¹⁵

As a coda to his discussion of Tsongkhapa, Dudjom Rinpoché follows Getsé in citing with approval the famous statement from the root verses on Mahāmudrā, the great seal, by the First/Fourth Panchen Lama, Losang Chökyi Gyaltzen (Panchen Chögyen, 1570–1662), to the effect that all the great Tibetan systems, including the Mahāmudrā, Dzokchen, and “the Madhyamaka teaching” (that is, Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka as understood by the Geluk), are seen by discerning scholars and yogis as coming down to a single intention, or the same idea (*dgongs gcig*),¹⁶ and he mentions, too, Panchen Chögyen’s contemporary, Khöntön Paljor Lhundrub (or Khöntönpa, 1561–1637), a Geluk master well versed in both Nyingma and Kagyü, who served as the principal Nyingma teacher of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Losang Gyatso (1617–82), and also wrote of the equivalency among Mahāmudrā, Dzokchen, and Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka.¹⁷

¹⁴ Dudjom 1991: 925; the translation there of the Tibetan quotation found at HNS 784 is slightly misleading as to who was writing down the *Nectar* – it was Lekyi Dorjé who had written it down and then sent it to Tsongkhapa, who simply acknowledges receipt of the text. Compare the translation found at Jinpa 2019: 144, which better accords with the sense of the Tibetan, and is reflected in my paraphrase.

¹⁵ Dudjom 1991: 925; cf. the translation in Jinpa 2019: 144. This passage is not found in CNT, but it is found in Shabkar’s *Emanated Scripture of Orgyen* (*O rgyan sprul pa’i glegs bam*): ESO 333; this may be Dudjom Rinpoche’s source. Aṭkāvatī is the heaven of Vajrapāṇi.

¹⁶ Dudjom 1991: 925–26; CNT 366. The Panchen’s claim may be found in context at Jackson 2019: 471. Panchen Chögyen is the first Panchen Lama in the sense that he was the first to be awarded the title non-posthumously, the fourth because he is regarded as in a line with three incarnate predecessors.

¹⁷ Dudjom 1991: 925; CNT 367. Khöntön’s text on the union of Dzokchen, Mahāmudrā and Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka is translated in Dalai Lama et al. 2011.

As we have seen, the primary source for Dudjom Rinpoche's discussion of Tsongkhapa was Getsé Mahāpandita's *Catalogue of the Nyingma Tantra Collection*, while a secondary source may have been Shabkar's *Emanated Scripture of Orgyen*. It is to these two early-modern luminaries, who would deeply influence subsequent Nyingma views of Tsongkhapa, that we turn next.

2. b. Getsé Mahapandita

Getsé Mahapandita was a Khampa master, associated with Katok Monastery, who is renowned as the editor of the Dergé edition of the collected Nyingma tantras, the Nyingma Gyubum, and as one of the great Nyingma thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Getsé wrote a variety of works on Buddhist philosophy and hermeneutics, in many of which he seeks to justify the Shentong, or other-emptiness, interpretation of Madhyamaka that was popular in Nyingma and Kagyü circles at the time, and remains so today. Apart from the *Catalogue of the Nyingma Tantra Collection* utilized by Dudjom Rinpoché, Getsé wrote two other major texts in which he seeks to align Tsongkhapa with the views and practices of Dzokchen: *Dispelling Doubts about the Great Perfection (Rdzogs chen dogs sel)* and the *Ornament of Buddha Nature (Bde gshegs snying po'i rgyan)*.

In his versified polemical text *Dispelling Doubts about the Great Perfection*,¹⁸ which tracks fairly closely with the *Catalogue* used by Dudjom Rinpoché, Getsé explains that when Tsongkhapa asked Namkha Gyaltzen/Lekyi Dorjé what the essence of the view is, the latter supplicated Vajrapāṇi, who delivered the discourses contained in the *Garland*. Getsé summarizes the bodhisattva's teaching as expounding the nature of reality in terms of essence (*ngo bo*), nature (*rang bzhin*), and compassionate energy (*thugs rje*), and distinguishing between flawed and virtuous modes of practice (Makidono 2016: 210). With regard to ground, path, and fruition, says Getsé, the *Garland* is presented purely in the language of Dzokchen – or read another way, shows Dzokchen language to be pure.¹⁹ He turns then to the *Nectar Drops*, covering the same set of verses as in his *Catalogue* (Makidono 2016: 211), and

¹⁸ For a summary, see Makidono 2016: 202–14.

¹⁹ Compare Dudjom 1991: 925 to Makidono 2016: 211. The Tibetan (Makidono 2016: 210n461) reads: *rdzogs chen rang skad gtsang mar bstan*.

concludes that the *Nectar Drops* reveals the full and final outlook of Dzokchen, which is, Getsé says, “the core of all practices” (Makidono 2016: 212). He goes on to assert that Tsongkhapa’s disciple Tokden Jampel Gyatso “expounded the pith instructions of Dzokchen exactly as they are” and that his “heart-son with regard to definitive meaning,” Gungru Gyaltsen Sangpo, explained Jé Rinpoché’s ultimate stance as that of Dzokchen (Makidono 2016: 212). Getsé concludes the section on Geluk by citing Panchen Chögyen’s aforementioned verses on the coalescence of the great Tibetan practice traditions, pointing to the deep engagement with Dzokchen by Khöntön Paljor Lundrup and his disciple the Fifth Dalai Lama, and insisting that the great seventeenth-century master Changkya Rölpai Dorjé (1717–86) did not, as was commonly asserted, attempt to refute Dzokchen in his works (Makidono 2016: 212–13).

In the *Ornament of Buddha Nature*, Getsé occasionally criticizes Tsongkhapa’s perspective on emptiness and other topics, referring to it as “coarse, outer Madhyamaka,” which is to be contrasted with the “subtle, inner Madhyamaka” of Shentong (Makidono 2018: 87–90). Later, however, in a section dealing with “the non-contradiction between Rangtong and Shentong,” he observes that Tsongkhapa received from Drupchen Chakdorpa – i.e., Lekyi Dorjé – a variety of stages-of-the-path (*lam rim*) teachings, hearing transmissions (*snyan brgyud*), and oral instructions, then wrote the master a letter bemoaning the state of Buddhist practice – where the oral traditions had been lost and scholars adopted extreme views on the basis attachment, anger, and over-reliance on words, texts, and debate – and requesting him to “cut off all [my] superimposition relating to the key points of the view” (Makidono 2018: 126). As a result, of course, Lekyi Dorjé interrogated Vajrapāṇi on Tsongkhapa’s behalf, with their dialogue being recorded in the *Garland* – a text that, Getsé notes, contains everything about the proper understanding and practice of the great perfection found in traditional Dzokchen instruction (Makidono 2018: 127). Getsé then quotes an unsourced verse to the effect that “Lekyi Dorjé is the best of masters, / Losang Drakpa is the best of students, / and the *Supreme Medicinal Nectar* is the best of teachings,”²⁰ and asserts that Tsongkhapa took on his teacher’s “innermost lineage,” along with his perspective on both the stages

²⁰ Makidono 2018: 127. The unsourced verse also is quoted by Shabkar (ESO 333).

of the path and the view. Lekyi Dorjé's view, continues Getsé, was "implicitly Shentong." Getsé does not claim that Tsongkhapa was a Shentongpa, but does insist that, having studied a range of teachings with masters of many traditions, including Dzokchen, he did not reject them out of hand. Getsé once again cites the authority of Gungruwa, this time to the effect that Tsongkhapa's ideas (*dgongs*) were "in accord" with Mahāmudrā and Dzokchen, and also mentions a number of other Geluk masters (including Tokden Jampal Gyatso and Khedrup Norsang Gyatso, 1423–1513) said to have asserted that Tsongkhapa's perspective on buddha nature is similarly in accord with Dzokchen and Mahāmudrā (Makidono 2018: 128). After briefly summarizing the sympathy for Dzokchen expressed by Panchen Chögyen (whose ecumenical verse is once again quoted), the Fifth Dalai Lama (who "made Dzokpa Chenpo his innermost practice"), and Khöntönpa (who taught Dzokchen to the Fifth Dalai Lama), Getsé concludes his section by expressing regret that latter-day Gelukpas have not carefully examined the teachings of their spiritual forebears. Thus,

Using logical intellect without engaging in practice, ...
They seek to praise themselves and deprecate others;
Even as they perceive the teachings of ... earlier masters,
Many ... beat a victory drum at having killed [their own]
father, whom they ignore. (Makidono 2018: 129–30)

Before moving on, we should note briefly one more claim Getsé makes about Tsongkhapa: that he was, if not a treasure-revealer (*gter ston*) per se, at least sympathetic to the general practice of discovering treasures. In a defense of Nyingma treasure traditions in his commentary on Sakya Pandita's *Ascertaining the Three Vows* (*Sdom gsum rab bye bstan bcos*), Getsé cites a dream reported by the fifty-fourth Ganden throne-holder, Ngawang Chokden (1677–1751), in which Tsongkhapa appeared to him in the guise of a boy of fifteen and prophesied that he could discover a treasure-text atop a stūpa at Jakhyung Monastery, the throne-holder's home institution in Amdo. Unfortunately, Ngawang Chokden could not travel there at the time, so the treasure was never found – but in Getsé's eyes that does not diminish the importance of the Ganden throne-holder's dream, or what it says

about Tsongkhapa's connections to, and resonance with, Nyingma tradition.²¹

2. c. Shabkar

Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangrol was a contemporary of Getsé Mahapandita, although from Amdo rather than Kham, and typically identified as a peripatetic poet-yogi rather than a scholar-philosopher – even though his scholarship was arguably as impressive as Getsé's. Although mainly considered a Nyingmapa, he received significant Geluk training early in life, and also was deeply conversant with Sakya and Kagyü traditions. Like Getsé, he was intent on promoting the idea that Tsongkhapa was in some way a Dzokchenpa, or at least highly sympathetic to Dzokchen; conversely, he himself shows both considerable knowledge of and deep devotion to Tsongkhapa, whom he takes to be part of a continuum of incarnations that includes, most prominently, Padmasambhava (8th century), Atiśa (982–1054), and Tsongkhapa himself.

Evidence of Shabkar's knowledge of Tsongkhapa's life and works and his profound respect for Jé Rinpoché is found in many places in his massive autobiography (*rang rnam thar*). In describing his studies, starting at age seventeen, with Jamyang Gyatso Rinpoché (d. 1800), a Gelukpa master with distinctly nonsectarian tendencies, he mentions receiving transmission of a number of texts by or related to Tsongkhapa, including the *Garland* and Jé Rinpoché's "song of experience" (*nyams mgur*), the *Condensed Stages of the Path* (*Lam rim bsdus don*) – and a number of Dzokchen traditions, as well (Ricard 1994: 21). Conversely, his major Nyingma teacher, Chögyal Ngakyi Wangpo (1736–1807), taught him not only the great perfection and various Nyingma tantra cycles, but also Tsongkhapa's *Lam rim chen mo* (Ricard 1994: 43). Elsewhere, Shabkar reports receiving transmission of Tsongkhapa's great poem, *Praise for Dependent Arising* (*Rten 'brel bstod pa*); spending a winter near Mount Kailash reading "the Kagyur, the Tengyur, and the collected writings of Lord Tsongkhapa and his spiritual sons" (*Yab sras gsung 'bum*); and later, at Tashi Lhunpo Moanstery in Tsang, being gifted with a

²¹ CAV 186; see also Makidono 2011: 234. Thanks to Tomoko Makidono for drawing this passage to my attention and corresponding with me about its meaning.

copy of those collected works by the reigning Panchen Lama himself.²² Shabkar not only studied Tsongkhapa's writings but taught them, as well: he mentions that during his Kailash sojourn he gave discourses on both the *Condensed Stages of the Path* and the *Three Principal Aspects of the Path* (Ricard 1994: 331–32).

Shabkar's appreciation for Tsongkhapa extended beyond the scholarly realm to words and acts of devotion. In the verses of homage at the outset of the autobiography, he describes "Losang" as "the second Buddha, / Manifestation of Lord Atiśa in this degenerate age," while elsewhere calling him "the unequalled king of Dharma."²³ On several occasions, Shabkar includes Tsongkhapa in an emanation lineage that begins with Śākyamuni, then extends through Samantabhadra, Vajradhara, Padmasambhava, Atiśa, and Jé Rinpoché himself.²⁴ Shabkar also reports that during his travels he made offerings of butter lamps and tea at Tsongkhapa's reliquary at Ganden monastery and then, during Ngamchö, the tenth-lunar-month festival commemorating Tsongkhapa's birth, awakening, and nirvāṇa, he offered "countless butter lamps" at Khardo hermitage of Sera monastery.²⁵ Most intriguingly, perhaps, Shabkar describes a dream-vision of Tsongkhapa that came to him at his hermitage on Heart of the Lake Island in Lake Kokonor. One night, after making offerings to Tsongkhapa, he fell asleep and dreamed of ascending a great crystal mountain, atop which, on a throne in a tent in a beautiful meadow, Tsongkhapa sat expounding the *Condensed Stages of the Path*. At the conclusion of the session, he presented his copy of the text to Shabkar, who then spread out his robes and flew down to the foot of the mountain (Ricard 1994: 138). This vision was given an interesting twist late in Shabkar's life, when, after many years, he belatedly achieved a vision of

²² Ricard 1994: 329 and 461, respectively. The Panchen at that time was the fourth/seventh, Palden Tenpai Nyima (1782–1853), whose lifespan overlaps almost exactly with that of Shabkar.

²³ Ricard 1994: 3, 228, respectively.

²⁴ Ricard 1994: 3, 229. Ricard mentions that Padmasambhava, Atiśa, and Tsongkhapa constitute "a triad of teachers who dominated Shabkar's life, practice, and teaching" (15). Elsewhere, Shabkar inserts Milarepa (1040–1123) between Atiśa and Tsongkhapa (120), and toward the end of the work, he adds Sakya Pandita (1182–1251), Milarepa, Phadampa Sangyé (d. 1117), and Machik Lapdrön (1055–1149) to the list (544); in neither case, however, does he specify that that he is describing an emanation-series.

²⁵ Ricard 1994: 266, 466, respectively.

Padmasambhava. As recounted by Matthieu Ricard, during the vision,

Shabkar [told] Guru Padmasambhava, “I have prayed to you all my life and have been blessed by visions of many other deities and spiritual masters, but only now do you appear to me.” Guru Padmasambhava replied, “Do you remember when on the island of the Heart of the Lake, you had a vision of Tsongkhapa, who gave you the teaching on the [*Stages of the*] *Path*? That was I.”²⁶

Shabkar’s most concentrated discussion of Tsongkhapa is found in his lengthy *Emanated Scripture of Orgyen (O rgyan sprul pa’i glegs bam)*,²⁷ which he composed at Tashikhyil hermitage around 1845, less than a decade before his death. After substantial discussions in the first two sections of (a) how the cosmos is an emanation of Padmasambhava, who is himself the symbol of primordial emptiness/awareness, and (b) why the Nyingma tantras are authentic, Shabkar turns in the third section to a detailed exposition of the importance of maintaining “pure vision” (*dag snang*), i.e., a non-sectarian outlook, toward all the great traditions of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism.²⁸ The keynote for this section is struck at the beginning, when Shabkar announces his aim to show “how Orgyen Rinpoché, Jowo Jé [Atiśa], and Jé Rinpoché – who illuminated for Tibet the Buddha’s teaching, that source of benefit and bliss – are of a single mental continuum” (*thugs rgyud gcig*).²⁹ He first makes his case through citing the ecumenically-oriented writings of masters of various traditions – including Atiśa’s praises of Padmasambhava, Tsongkhapa’s expressions of appreciation for his various gurus, and exhortations by later Gelukpa masters like the fifth and seventh Dalai Lamas and Shabkar’s own Geluk teacher, Jamyang Gyatso – not to disparage the ideas and practices of others.³⁰ He also cites a famous verse of the Second Dalai Lama (Gendun Gyatso, 1475–1542), which may mark one the earliest

²⁶ Ricard 1994: xv, 583. The source of this story is not mentioned.

²⁷ ESO; for an overview, see Ricard 1994: 583–85; for a more fine-grained study, see Ehrhard 1989.

²⁸ ESO 325–89.

²⁹ ESO 325. I have altered the phoneticization slightly.

³⁰ ESO 325–32.

attempts to establish the spiritual connection among the triad of Padmasambhava, Atiśa, and Tsongkhapa:

Awareness-bearer, lord of attainment Padmakara;
Crown-ornament of five hundred [siddhas], glorious Atiśa;
Mighty vajra-holder, Losang Drakpai Pal—
To the one who dances various emanations, I bow down.³¹

Shabkar also cites the writings of Barchungwa Tashi Gyatso (b. 1714), who asserts that Padmasambhava, Atiśa, and Tsongkhapa are “emanations of a single gnosis,” and should equally be regarded with “pure vision” and respected in a nonsectarian manner.³²

Shabkar then turns to the now familiar account of Tsongkhapa’s relationship with Lekyi Dorjé and the instructions he received from Vajrapāṇi through his Nyingma teacher’s mediumship. He begins by citing a song of praise of Tsongkhapa by the Kashmiri pandit Puṇyaśrī that describes how Jé Rinpoché received through Lekyi Dorjé “the special instructions of the hearing transmission of the Lord of Secrets and [teachings on] the stages of the path of Sūtra and Mantra.”³³ He next cites a song of praise of Vajrapāṇi composed by Tsongkhapa himself,³⁴ and goes on to describe how Tsongkhapa, in doubt as to the proper view, turned to Lekyi Dorjé, who interrogated Vajrapāṇi as transcribed his conversation with the bodhisattva in the *Garland*. Shabkar then quotes the same unsourced verse as Getsé, to the effect that Lekyi Dorjé is the best of masters, Tsongkhapa the best of students, and the *Garland* the best of teachings, noting that the verses were sung in the sky by ḍākinīs at the time Vajrapāṇi delivered his pronouncements. He also cites the same letter from Tsongkhapa to Lekyi Dorjé quoted by Getsé, in which Tsongkhapa, having received the teachings, expressed joy at having had his doubts dispelled, his hopes fulfilled, and his defilements destroyed,

³¹ ESO 326; cf. trans. Ricard 1994: 584. Ricard reads this quote as a demonstration that Atiśa and Tsongkhapa “both were emanations of Padmasambhava,” though whether Shabkar is arguing that point in this context is not entirely clear.

³² ESO 326–27.

³³ ESO 332.

³⁴ See Tsongkhapa 2001: 151–62

thinking surely he had reached Vajrapāṇi's paradise.³⁵ Shabkar then briefly summarizes the Dzokchen teachings transmitted in the early portions of the *Garland*, and follows with a long quotation from the *Nectar Drop*, which is described as expressing the unadulterated great perfection view – a view that, along with Mahāmudrā, is said by Tsongkhapa's disciples Tokden Jampel Gyatso and Gungruwa to express their master's understanding of the ultimate.³⁶

The third section of the *Emanated Scripture* then goes on to other matters, but does comment, later on, that Tsongkhapa had received and practiced teachings on Mahāmudrā and the dohās of Saraha (and, implicitly, Dzokchen), but chose not to transmit them because of the degeneracy of the times – a claim common in the literature of the Ganden Hearing Transmission (*dga' ldan snyan brgyud*) said to have been taught to Jé Rinpoché by Mañjughoṣa.³⁷ In the concluding verses to section three, Shabkar reiterates the major points he has made regarding Tsongkhapa's receipt of Vajrapāṇi's teachings, asserting once more that “Jetsun Lama's secret inner practice was / ... the instructions on Mahāmudrā, Dzokchen, and the dohās, / which he understood as the essential instruction of those with sharp faculties.”³⁸

2. d. Other Nyingma sources

I will not linger here over other, often earlier, Nyingma sources, which I have not had a chance to research deeply, but merely note that Geluk authors often find prophecies of Tsongkhapa in various termas said to have been left by Padmasambhava, including not only those revealed by Jé Rinpoché's contemporaries Dorjé Lingpa (1346–1405) and Ratna Lingpa (1403–78) but those unearthed by earlier masters such as Nyangral Nyima Öser (1124–92) and Chöjé Gönpo Rinchen

³⁵ ESO 332–33; cf. Dudjom 1991: 923, 925; Jinpa 2019: 144.

³⁶ ESO 333–36; cf. Dudjom 1991 923–25, which reproduces nearly all of Shabkar's text, though in a slightly different order, and Makidono 2016: 211, which draws on the Vajrapāṇi texts more sparingly.

³⁷ ESO 355–56. This tradition will be discussed in greater detail below. See also Jackson 2019: 161–62.

³⁸ ESO 387–88.

(1165–1249).³⁹ Needless to say, these texts, which deserve fuller study, help to cement the notion of a strong spiritual connection – if not a complete mental identity – between Padmasambhava and Tsongkhapa, and may, when read through a Nyingma lens, help to subtly advance the case for Tsongkhapa’s having been a Dzokchenpa or, at the very least, a master whose deepest understanding and practice was consonant with that of the great perfection and its first promulgator in Tibet.

3. Geluk sources

I now will turn to a few key Geluk sources that bear on the question of Tsongkhapa’s relation to the Nyingma in general and Dzokchen in particular. My approach will be to return to several of the Nyingma arguments for Tsongkhapa as a Dzokchenpa – but this time through the lens of Geluk tradition.

3.a. Lekyi Dorjé and Tsongkhapa

The Nyingma writers we have examined uniformly suggest that Lekyi Dorjé was Tsongkhapa’s most important teacher with regard to ascertainment of the view. The standard Nyingma narrative has Tsongkhapa approaching Lekyi Dorjé with his doubts about the ultimate nature of reality, Lekyi Dorjé conveying Tsongkhapa’s questions to Vajrapāṇi, Vajrapāṇi clearing up Tsongkhapa’s doubts through the medium of Lekyi Dorjé, and Tsongkhapa expressing joy and appreciation for the dispelling of his delusion. Nyingma writers typically acknowledge that Tsongkhapa’s other teachers helped make him a master of all conventional subjects but that he realized the ultimate only after receiving the hearing transmission of Vajrapāṇi, with its exposition of the essentials of Dzokchen.

There is no question that, from the Gelukpa perspective as well, Lekyi Dorjé was an important teacher – and disciple – of Tsongkhapa’s, with the two enjoying a karmic connection that stretched back many lifetimes.⁴⁰ In the summer of 1395, coming

³⁹ See Jinpa 2019: 338–47. Gelukpas also found prophecies of Tsongkhapa in early Kadampa texts such as the *Pillar Testament* supposedly discovered by Atiśa, as well as the *Book of Kadam*.

⁴⁰ Much of the material in this paragraph is drawn from Jinpa 2019: chapter 7.

out of a period of retreat in Ölkha, in southern Tibet, Jé Rinpoché and his disciples spent seven months at Lekyi Dorjé's retreat center in nearby Lhodrak. Lekyi Dorjé conveyed to Tsongkhapa Kadam oral transmissions related to Atiśa's teaching of the stages-of-the-path tradition⁴¹ – and conferred upon him a number of important empowerments, including that of Great-Wheel Vajrapāṇi. Lekyi Dorjé's renowned prophetic abilities are seen by Geluk biographers as a key to Jé Rinpoché's decision at that time not to travel to India to seek further teachings but to remain in Tibet so as to benefit beings in the Land of Snows. Lekyi Dorjé's special relationship to Vajrapāṇi produced not only such key texts as the *Garland* and the *Nectar Drop* but also advice to Tsongkhapa to compose a hymn to Maitreya that helped inspire him to undertake, in 1399, the repair of the Maitreya statue at Dzingchi temple – often counted as the first of Jé Rinpoché's four great deeds.⁴² Vajrapāṇi also prophesied that if Tsongkhapa traveled to Tsari, the sacred mountain of Cakrasaṃvara, it would be of great benefit to sentient beings, and predicted that he would finally come to understand emptiness through the text of an Indian master – this would turn out to be Buddhapālita, whom Tsongkhapa later encountered in a vision.

Unsurprisingly, while Nyingma writers tend to emphasize Tsongkhapa's indebtedness to Lekyi Dorjé, the Geluk sources emphasize the degree to which Lekyi Dorjé was astonished by the greatness of Tsongkhapa, and learned at least as much from him as he taught him. In any case, it is clear from the available sources that the relationship between the two men was close and mutually respectful: each imparted teachings and empowerments to the other, each wrote praises of the other, and each wrote friendly letters to the other for a number of years. The key text stemming from their encounters, the *Garland*, was almost certainly compiled by Lekyi Dorjé himself, then – perhaps as long as three years after the conversation it records – sent as a gift to Tsongkhapa, who acknowledges receipt of it in the letter cited by both Getsé and

⁴¹ See Jinpa 2019: 140, 143. Thurman (1982: 18–19) specifies that of the three major transmissions stemming from Atiśa – the Kadam textual lineage, the Kadam lineage of the stages of the path (originally stages of the doctrine, *bstan rim*), and the Kadam guideline instruction lineage, Tsongkhapa received the last two, having previously received the textual lineage.

⁴² The others are his convening of conference on monastic discipline (1403), his re-institution of the Great Prayer Festival (*smon lam chen mo*) at Lhasa (1409), and his founding of Ganden monastery (1409).

Shabkar. It is also clear, however, that for Geluk writers Lekyi Dorjé, vital as his role was, was less important than any number of Tsongkhapa's other teachers, most notably Rendawa Zhönu Lodrö (1348–1412), a Sakyapa master who was responsible for much of Jé Rinpoché's advanced training in both Sūtra and Mantra traditions. Even among teachers of Tsongkhapa with visionary abilities, Umapa Pawo Dorjé (14th–15th c.), who had studied with a Drukpa Kagyü master, is featured in Gelukpa accounts of Jé Rinpoché's life more prominently than Lekyi Dorjé. Umapa, after all, was to Mañjuḥoṣa as Lekyi Dorjé was to Vajrapāṇi, and it was primarily through his encounters with Mañjuḥoṣa – first with Umapa as medium, then on his own – that, from the Geluk perspective, Tsongkhapa came eventually to understand and directly realize the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka view that is, rather than Dzokchen, the acme of philosophy for Geluk tradition. As noted by Thupten Jinpa, from the Geluk standpoint, Tsongkhapa's search for ultimate truth was focused almost entirely on the classics of Indian Madhyamaka composed by such masters as Nāgārjuna, Buddhapālita, Bhāviveka, and Candrakīrti, rather than on any Tibetan tradition – and of Tibetan traditions, Nyingma is the one least evident in Tsongkhapa's own works and the biographies written by his disciples and their successors.⁴³ Furthermore, while for Nyingmapas, Lekyi Dorjé is unambiguously one of their own, for Gelukpas his sectarian identity is ambiguous or uncertain. The later Gelukpa scholar Thuken Losang Chökyi Nyima (Thuken 2009: 211) suggests that Lekyi Dorjé promulgated a distinctive Dharma system of his own that combined elements of Nyingma and Kadam, while Thupten Jinpa argues on the basis of an examination of Lekyi Dorjé's works that the extent of his exposure to Nyingma and

⁴³ Jinpa 2019: 148. Jinpa also notes (148) that Nyingma was not a major tradition in central Tibet during Tsongkhapa's lifetime, and that this may help explain the dearth of references to it in works by and about him. The designation of Nyingma as a "Tibetan" tradition would not, of course, be accepted by its proponents, who point to its Indian roots, and most modern scholars would concur. However, at the time of Tsongkhapa, the legitimacy of the Nyingma tantras was still much in dispute, as evidenced by their exclusion from the "standard" Kangyur edited in the early fourteenth century by Butön Rinchen Drup (1290–1364).

Dzokchen is open to question, and suggests that he is best classified a Kadam master.⁴⁴

3. b. The *Garland* and the *Nectar Drop*

As we have seen, for Nyingmapa writers, the *Garland* provides textual proof that Tsongkhapa imbibed Dzokchen teachings and gained his full appreciation for the view through the instructions of Vajrapāṇi conveyed in the text. Of a thirteen-folio text, however, Nyingma scholars typically only cite a few selected passages, mostly from an early, general exposition by Vajrapāṇi of Dzokchen ideas about essence, nature, and compassionate energy. These scholars also usually mention that Vajrapāṇi goes on to comment on various errors that may attend to view, meditation, and conduct, but they do not cite specific passages or perspectives on these matters that he conveyed to Tsongkhapa through Lekyi Dorjé.

This is not the place to outline the *Garland* in full.⁴⁵ I will, however, summarize it briefly. After a one-line salutation to Vajrapāṇi, the text immediately turns to Tsongkhapa's respectful requests to the bodhisattva – conveyed by Lekyi Dorjé – to clarify his doubts and help him attain realization.⁴⁶ In response, Vajrapāṇi states that, in line with the intention of Samantabhadra and the advice of Samantabhadri, he will cut through Tsongkhapa's confusion with regard to the luminosity that is mind-itself (*sems nyid 'od gsal*). Prompted by questions from Lekyi Dorjé, Vajrapāṇi goes on to discuss in general terms the primordially luminous, indivisible, empty awareness that is our true nature, and some of the ways in which we can err in appreciating its essence, nature, and compassionate energy.⁴⁷ It is from this section that the

⁴⁴ Jinpa 2019: 147. For more on the connection between Tsongkhapa and Lekyi Dorjé, see also Thurman 1982: 18–20, Ehrhard 1989.

⁴⁵ As noted above, it has been fully translated in Thurman 1982: 213–30, and ably discussed in Ehrhard 1989, 51–56. Ehrhard (1989, 52–56) notes that the *Garland* is somewhat similar in style, tone, and wording to an early fourteenth-century question-and-answer text in the Khandro Nyingthik tradition, the *Golden Garland of Nectar Drops* (*Zhu lan bdud rtsi'i gser phreng*). Rather than focusing on Tsongkhapa, who had not been born yet, it is concerned with Longchenpa. The similarity between the two texts is noted by Dudjom Rinpoché (1991, 925).

⁴⁶ SMN 289:2–290:5; trans. Thurman 1982: 213–14.

⁴⁷ SMN 290:5–294:3; trans. Thurman 1982: 214–16.

Nyingma writers we have surveyed most often draw. The next six-plus folios – the bulk of the text – systematically cover the errors attendant upon the view, meditation, conduct, and fruition, respectively.⁴⁸ In this section, Vajrapāṇi’s exposition is largely uninterrupted by Lekyi Dorjé’s questions, though the bodhisattva does regularly acknowledge his listeners by name. Without getting into all the divisions and subdivisions of the bodhisattva’s teaching, we can remark generally that the language of this section is somewhat more “standard” and less colored by Dzokchen than the discussion of essence, nature, and compassionate energy that preceded it. For instance, the brief subsection on the view⁴⁹ focuses on errors made by yogis in their choice of abode, companions, mental outlook, and so forth; the long section on meditation⁵⁰ focuses on such common concerns as scattering, sinking, and diffuseness; and the sections on conduct and fruition⁵¹ focus primarily on articulating the nature of proper practice and understanding the obstacles facing the practitioner.

The remainder of the *Garland*⁵² resumes the question-and-answer format used at the beginning, as Lekyi Dorjé poses – in no particular order – a series of questions to Vajrapāṇi about such matters as the past, present, and future qualities and attainments of Tsongkhapa, as well as his lifespan in the present life; the prospects for the flourishing of Buddhadharma in Tibet; and proper yidam practice. The most interesting of these final exchanges for our purposes⁵³ begins with Lekyi Dorjé asking Vajrapāṇi whether the Dzokchen view is pure (*rnam dag*) or not. The bodhisattva replies, “Dzokchen is indeed an elevated view, but with regard to the view, the exposition by masters Nāgārjuna and Candrikīrti is undeluded.”⁵⁴ The key grammatical particle here is *mod*, which if translated concessively as “but” or “although” – this is Thupten

⁴⁸ SMN 294:3–307:1; trans. Thurman 1982: 216–26.

⁴⁹ SMN 294:3–296:6; trans. Thurman 1982: 216–18.

⁵⁰ SMN 296:6–302:4; trans. Thurman 1982: 218–23.

⁵¹ SMN 302:4–307:1; trans. Thurman 1982: 223–26.

⁵² SMN 307:1–312:1; trans. Thurman 1982: 226–30.

⁵³ SMN 309:6–310:3; trans. Thurman 1982: 228.

⁵⁴ SMN 309:5–310:1. *rdzogs pa chen po yang lta ba mthon po yin mod / lta ba'i phyogs la slob dpon klu sgrub dang zla grags kyes bkral ba 'di 'khrul med yin.*

Jinpa's reading (Jinpa 2019: 146) – seems to imply that while Dzokchen is better than most approaches, the standpoint of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti – what Gelukpas would consider Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka – is best of all. It might, however, be possible – as Robert Thurman does – to read *mod* as a simple conjunctive “and,” so as to suggest that – as Nyingmapas believe – Dzokchen is identical to the view of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, or perhaps that both are equally valid. Vajrapāṇi does not, after all, explicitly assert that *only* the Nāgārjuna/Candrakīrti view is valid, so perhaps there is room for a less sectarian reading of the passage. This is the approach taken in the *Garland's* colophon,⁵⁵ likely written by Lekyi Dorjé himself, which insists that there is no contradiction between Dzokchen and the views of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti – though the very fact that the issue is raised seems to reflect concern that the *mod* might have troubling implications. Another piece of evidence in favor of a more ecumenical reading is a comment made by Vajrapāṇi in answer to an earlier question, about the destiny of the Dharma in Tibet. There, the bodhisattva remarks that when it comes to attainment of the experience of insight “the special methods are the uncommon mantra instructions on the six yogas of Kālacakra as well as the great perfection.”⁵⁶ This specific endorsement of Dzokchen would seem to be at odds with the concessive reading of *mod* and in line with the conjunctive interpretation. In short, it is not entirely clear what the *Garland's* stance on Dzokchen is, and this uncertainty throws into question the common Nyingma assertion that the *Garland* fully endorses the great perfection, and also casts doubt on the claim that Tsongkhapa was a crypto-Dzokchenpa.

Finally, it should be noted that, just as Geluk sources give Lekyi Dorjé less prominence as a teacher of Tsongkhapa than do Nyingma sources, in the same way Gelukpa writers pay far less attention to the *Garland* than they do to Tsongkhapa's more “standard” works – and they certainly do not feature it in their presentations of Tsongkhapa's life and thought to the degree that Nyingma scholars do.

⁵⁵ SMN 312:2–313:4.

⁵⁶ SMN 309:4. *lhag mthong gi myong ba thon pa'i thabs khyad par can gsang nga gi gdams pa thun mong min pa sbyor drug dang rdzogs chen yin.*

Although the *Garland* pretty much exhausts material from Tsongkhapa's collected works that bears explicitly on Dzokchen, Thupten Jinpa surveys a number of later Gelukpa writers who claim that there may have been works or comments on the great perfection by Jé Rinpoché that did not find their way into the official collected works. He writes:

Thuken [Losang Chökyi Nyima, 1737–1802] ... refers to a passage in a now-lost biography of Tsongkhapa by one of his immediate disciples, Joden Sönam Lhundrup [b. 14th c.], where, in response to a question about the authenticity of the Dzokchen view, Tsongkhapa is reported to have said, “Yes, it is pure, but adulterations fabricated by later ignoramuses have entered into it.” Thuken also states ... that his own teacher, Changkya Rolpai Dorjé, spoke of a similar story found in another biography of Tsongkhapa, written by Lhula Kachupa [fl. 15th c.]. Neringpa [Chimé Rabgye, 14th–15th c.] ... asserts that he himself had seen a guide on Dzokchen, as well as one on the Six Yogas of Nigumā, composed by Tsongkhapa himself.⁵⁷

This is intriguing, indeed, but in the absence of extant textual evidence, must be relegated to the realm of speculation.

The *Nectar Drops of the Generation and Completion* [Stages] of *Vajrapāṇi* is, as we have seen, cited nearly as often as the *Garland* by Nyingma writers. In terms of genre, it is of a piece with the *Garland* in being based on conversations between Lekyi Dorjé and Vajrapāṇi and utilizing Dzokchen terminology. It begins with Lekyi Dorjé's visualization of Vajrapāṇi and his request to the deity for instruction on the essential points of practice. Vajrapāṇi's reply, partly in prose and partly in verse, is primarily taken up with an explanation of generation-stage visualizations and rituals, but toward the end⁵⁸ he switches to a more “ultimate,” completion-stage level of discourse, describing emptiness, primordial awareness, the inconceivability and ineffability of true reality, and the deepest meaning of view, meditation, conduct, and fruition. It is this section that is quoted by Getsé, Shabkar and other Nyingma writers in their discussions of Tsongkhapa, their implication being that because the *Nectar Drop* is, like the *Garland*, a dialogue

⁵⁷ Jinpa 2019: 458n651. The specific page references given by Jinpa are found in the same footnote, but elided here.

⁵⁸ See especially NDV 853:7–854:7.

between Lekyi Dorjé and Vajrapāṇi that may have been known to Tsongkhapa, it serves as additional proof that Tsongkhapa was steeped in Dzokchen. As best I can ascertain, however, the *Nectar Drop*⁵⁹ does not ever mention Tsongkhapa or relate him to Dzokchen, nor, unlike the *Garland*, is it found in Tsongkhapa's collected works, so I will say no more about it here. It is, however, deserving of further study.

3. c. Tokden Jampal Gyatso and Gungru Gyaltzen Sangpo

The three main Nyingma writers we have surveyed all cite the works of two of Tsongkhapa's direct disciples, Tokden Jampal Gyatso and Gungru Gyaltzen Sangpo, for further proof that Jé Rinpoché was, in his heart of hearts, a either practitioner of or sympathetic to Dzokchen and/or Mahāmudrā.⁶⁰ I have not been able thus far to find any such claims in the works of either man, but must admit that my search has not been thorough, and that such claims may well lurk in texts I have not examined. Indeed, I would be grateful if anyone familiar with the works of these masters could point me toward such passages. Regardless of the presence or absence of literary evidence, a further word about each master seems in order, for in Geluk literature each of them is connected, to a greater or lesser degree, with Tsongkhapa's innermost experiences and most esoteric teachings.

Jampal Gyatso was a close contemporary of Tsongkhapa, and among his earliest major disciples. Although he received excellent scholarly training at Kagyü and Sakya monasteries, he was drawn above all to the ascetic life. He was one of eight disciples selected to accompany Jé Rinpoché on his retreats in southern Tibet in the 1390s, where he set an example for the others through his discipline and devotion. Like Tsongkhapa, he enjoyed a special connection to Mañjuḥṣa, and had visions of other deities, as well. He also was renowned as a healer and life-prolonger. He wrote little, but did compose a number of devotional songs and two short biographies of Tsongkhapa. Most importantly for our purposes, he was the first recipient (sometime in the 1390s) of a hearing transmission (*snyan brgyud*) – later called the Ganden or Ensa Hearing Transmission – that was vouchsafed to Tsongkhapa

⁵⁹ Or similar texts, like the *Vital Garland of Questions and Answers* (*Zhus lan gces phreng*); see Ehrhard 1989, 52.

⁶⁰ Dudjom 1991: 925; CNT 366; Makidono 2018: 28; ESO 335.

by Mañjuḥṣa, and transmitted not only through special oral instructions, but through an emanated scripture (*sprul pa'i glegs bam*). This transmission, which was not fully articulated until the time of Panchen Chögyen (around 1600), included teachings on such topics as guru yoga; severance (*gcod*); a combined practice of Guhyasamāja, Cakrasaṃvara, and Vajrabhairava; and, interestingly, Mahāmudrā.⁶¹ So far as I can tell, nowhere in his writings does Jampal Gyatso report being part of such a transmission, nor does he, in his biographies of Tsongkhapa, associate his teacher with Mahāmudrā, let alone Dzokchen – but he is reported by his own earliest biographer, his (and Tsongkhapa's) disciple Lodrö Gyaltsen (1390–1448), as having received unspecified special instructions (*gdams ngag*) from Tsongkhapa and having asserted the harmony between Mahāmudrā and the stages-of-the-path tradition. But that Jampal Gyatso considered Tsongkhapa a Dzokchenpa, I have found no evidence.

Gungru Gyaltsen Sangpo was a later student of Tsongkhapa, and in fact also studied with the two disciples of Jé Rinpoché most highly regarded by later Geluk tradition, Gyaltsap Darma Rinchen (Gyaltsap Jé, 1364–1432) and Khedrup Gelek Palsang (Khedrup Jé, 1385–1438).⁶² His writings, which were republished only in the mid-1990s, focus almost exclusively on the perfection of wisdom and Madhyamaka. As Michael Sheehy has noted, there are indications in some of Gungruwa's works that he may have been sympathetic to two ideas generally anathema to Gelukpas: other-emptiness, or Shentong, and the related view that, in some contexts, emptiness might be an affirming negation (*ma yin dgag*) rather than, as insisted by almost all Gelukpas, invariably a non-affirming negation (*med dgag*) (Sheehy 2009). The idea that emptiness (especially that of the awakened mind) may be an affirming negation is fairly common, if not universal, in Kagyü, Jonang, and Nyingma circles, and it may be for that reason that Khedrup Jé reports in his great biography of Tsongkhapa, the *Entryway to Faith* (*Dad pa'i 'jug ngog*), that Mañjuḥṣa was displeased with Gungruwa's standpoint.⁶³ Given the influence of Khedrup Jé on later Geluk thought and the consequent neglect of Gungruwa by

⁶¹ On this tradition, see Jackson 2019.

⁶² On the historical murkiness of this question, see Ary 2015.

⁶³ Jackson 2019: 162–63; cf. Thukten 2009: 379.

most Gelukpas, Getsé Mahapandita's description of Gungruwa as Tsongkhapa's "heart-son with regard to definitive meaning" reflects a minority opinion, to say the least.

At the same time, it is reputed in a number of Geluk sources, at least as far back as the seventeenth century, that Gungruwa received from Tsongkhapa a special Mahāmudrā teaching outside the Ganden Hearing Transmission. This teaching, which supposedly conceded that emptiness at times *is* an affirming negation, and perhaps even that Shentong was an appropriate view in certain circumstances, was said to have been received by Tsongkhapa not from Mañjuḥoṣa but from his visionary companion, Umapa, who in turn may have learned it from the Drukpa Kagyü master Barawa Gyaltsen Palsang (1310–91) (Jackson 2019: 162–63). If Gungruwa did hold such views, and hold such a transmission, it might indicate that Tsongkhapa was at times willing to concede philosophical possibilities not generally attributed to him – but this is not the same as saying, with Shabkar and other Nyingma writers, that his essential practice was Dzokchen – or even Mahāmudrā. On the other hand, if Gungruwa (or Tokden Jampal Gyatso) really did say that Tsongkhapa's main view and practice with regard to the ultimate was the great seal or – especially – the great perfection, that would be important to know, and would alter significantly our understanding of Tsongkhapa and the early history of the Geluk.

3. d. Later Gelukpa perspectives

Space considerations make it impossible for me to survey the many interesting perspectives on Tsongkhapa's relation to the Nyingma in general and Dzokchen in particular that were put forward by later Geluk writers. Suffice it for now to note the following: (a) Multiple Gelukpa biographers and historians – including Panchen Sönam Drakpa (1478–1554), the Fifth Dalai Lama, Desi Sangyé Gyatso (1653–1705), and Kharnak Lotsawa (17th c.) – cited Nyingma terms that seemed to prophesy the advent and activities of Tsongkhapa (Jinpa 2019: 339–46). (b) Several Gelukpa scholars – including the Second Dalai Lama and the author of the *Great Biography (Rnam thar chen mo)* of Tsongkhapa, Losang Trinlé (19th c.) – place Tsongkhapa in a rebirth or emanation lineage that includes, as earlier members, Padmasambhava and Atiśa (and sometimes other masters from

India and Tibet).⁶⁴ (c) A number of later Gelukpa scholars – including Panchen Chögyen, his contemporary Khöntön Paljor Lhundrup (1561–1637), the Amdo scholars Jampal Rölwai Lodrö (1888–1936) and Dongak Chökyi Gyatso (1903–57), and the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (1935–) – have insisted that, at the deepest level, there exists a profound harmony between the perspectives and practices of, on the one hand, Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka and unexcelled yoga tantra as taught by Tsongkhapa and, on the other, those of such non-Geluk traditions as Mahāmudrā, the Sakya Lamdré (path and its fruit) – and Dzokchen.⁶⁵

As interesting and even important as all this material is, it does little to advance the hard claim we are investigating here: that Tsongkhapa was a Dzokchenpa. At best, it helps uphold the softer claim that there is a fundamental harmony, or at least a lack of contradiction, between the central standpoints of the Nyingma and Geluk traditions.

4. Conclusions

My main conclusions should be evident by now. Stated directly, they are as follows:

1. Nyingma authors who focus on Lekyi Dorjé's (and Vajrapāṇi's) influence on Tsongkhapa's development of correct view, such as Getsé Mahapandita, Shabkar, and Dudjom Rinpoché, have indeed located a key element of Jé Rinpoché's biographical tradition, but Geluk biographers accord the Dzokchen master far less importance than they do Rendawa and Umapa – not to mention Mañjuḥṣa – in Tsongkhapa's spiritual breakthrough. Similarly, Gelukpa authors downplay the importance of Dzokchen in Jé Rinpoché's intellectual formation, emphasizing instead his reliance upon the writings of the Indian Madhyamaka masters.

2. The Nyingma writers who claim that Tsongkhapa was a Dzokchenpa when it came the ultimate view and practice base their assertions on a small number of texts by and about him, and they

⁶⁴ Jinpa 2019: 339–40, 346.

⁶⁵ For the First Panchen, see Dalai Lama and Berzin 1997, Jackson 2019; for Khöntön Paljor Lhundrup, see Dalai Lama and Cabezón 2011; for Jampal Rölwai Lodrö and Dongak Chökyi Gyatso, see Pearcy 2018; for the 14th Dalai Lama, see, e.g., Dalai Lama 2004.

are highly selective in their reading of those texts, the most prominent of which, of course, is the *Garland of Supremely Medicinal Nectar*.

3. A fuller and more context-sensitive reading of the *Garland* reveals that while it does indeed contain Dzokchen terminology and teachings, (a) it is not wholly given over to the great perfection, as it contains many passages on meditation, conduct, and fruition that could come from any Tibetan Buddhist tradition; (b) it may (depending on how reads a crucial grammatical particle in a crucial passage) reflect ambivalence toward the great perfection with its stipulation that Dzokchen is an elevated view, but not, perhaps as elevated a views as one based on the perspective of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti; and (c) it has never enjoyed the prominence in Geluk circles that it has assumed for Nyingma scholars seeking to appropriate Tsongkhapa.

4. Other textual sources cited by Nyingma writers either (a) are not well attested (as in the case of alleged lost writings on Dzokchen by Tsongkhapa or purported statements by Tokden Jampal Gyatso or Gunguwa Gyaltsen Sangpo about Jé Rinpoché's "ultimate" focus on Mahāmudrā or Dzokchen); or (b) are only indirectly relevant to Tsongkhapa (as in the case of the *Nectar Drop of Vajrapāṇi*). Hence, these sources are of limited probative value.

5. Further, we need to distinguish carefully among the sorts of claims actually being made, whether by Nyingma or Geluk writers. There is a subtle but significant difference between the strong claim that "Tsongkhapa was a Dzokchenpa" and such softer claims as "Tsongkhapa may have regarded Dzokchen as a pure view," "Tsongkhapa's teachings are harmonious with Dzokchen" or "Tsongkhapa's teachings are not in contradiction with Dzokchen." The Geluk sources most often cited by Nyingmapas do not, upon examination, seem to support the strong claim that Tsongkhapa was a Dzokchenpa. On the other hand, from the *Garland*, through the writings of Panchen Chögyen and Khöntön Paljor Lhundrup, down to early modern masters from Amdo like Thuken, we find considerable evidence of an ecumenical spirit that seeks to harmonize Nyingma and Geluk views and practices. This tells us little, however, about Tsongkhapa's actual perspective on the Nyingma in general and Dzokchen in particular.

6. The repeated claims, found in both Nyingma and Geluk literature, to the effect that Tsongkhapa shared a single mental

continuum with Padmasambhava, Atiśa, and perhaps other Indian and Tibetan masters, does not prove that – as Shabkar, for instance, claimed – Jé Rinpoché should be considered an emanation of Guru Rinpoché or a Dzokchenpa; it merely shows that some Nyingmapas and Gelukpas sought to establish that there was a spiritual bond between the two masters that went deeper than sectarian divisions. In any case, the claim begs the question of just what it means to share the same mental continuum. The present Dalai Lama, for instance, has suggested that he does not necessarily consider himself a “reincarnation” of his predecessor, so much as one of a number of teachers with whom he shares a connection to Avalokiteśvara.⁶⁶

7. The so-called prophecies of Tsongkhapa found in certain Nyingma termas, and cited with approval by many Geluk scholars, all seem to be found in texts that appeared either during or after Jé Rinpoché’s lifetime – and those that may date from before Tsongkhapa’s time are ambiguous enough in their phrasing that they can be read multiple ways. In any case, even if Tsongkhapa was prophesied in Nyingma literature, this tells us only that he was a great master, not that he was a practitioner of Dzokchen.

8. Finally, visionary encounters with Tsongkhapa, such as that reported to Khenpo Sherab Sangpo by Khenchen Jikmé Phuntsok, may, like mystical experiences more generally, be of earth-shattering importance to those who experience them and to their circle of disciples, but the visionary’s conviction does not typically carry much beyond their own sphere of influence, in part because visionary encounters are common, and the information conveyed in one such encounter may be wildly at variance with that conveyed in another. Just in the case at hand, it must be noted that any number of Gelukpa masters – Khedrup Jé and Dharmavajra/Chökyi Dorjé (15th–16th c.) are two of the most notable – encountered Tsongkhapa in visions, and took from them ideas and practices very different from those reported by Jikmé Phuntsok.

In short, the evidence available to us does not provide a strong basis for believing that Tsongkhapa was a Dzokchenpa. Absence of evidence is not, of course, evidence of absence, and it is possible that Jé Rinpoché nevertheless *did* take Dzokchen as his

⁶⁶ Laird 2007, 23.

essential view and practice; and it is possible, too, that further evidence will emerge to strengthen arguments to that effect. For now, however, we must concur with Thupten Jinpa's conclusion that "there is simply no adequate textual evidence on the basis of which to make any determination of Tsongkhapa's actual views on Dzokchen."⁶⁷

5. Coda

If we reflect on the broader question of why such "ecumenical" discourses emerged – in different ways – in both Nyingma and Geluk literature, we see two major cultural patterns in play. The first is what we might call the appropriation of charisma, whereby a tradition tries to assimilate into its narratives and sometimes even its doctrines the example and ideas of universally acknowledged culture heroes. Within Tibetan tradition, Padmasambhava and Tsongkhapa clearly have such status, as do Milarepa, Sakya Pandita, and a handful of other figures whose appeal transcends sectarian divisions. Thus, Nyingma scholars as far back as the fifteenth century – but most notably in the past two centuries in Amdo and other parts of eastern Tibet – sought to bring Tsongkhapa under their aegis by suggesting he was an emanation of Padmasambhava and a practitioner of Dzokchen. For their part, at least some Geluk scholars (again, many from Amdo⁶⁸) sought, over the same span, to strengthen the authority of their own, late-arriving tradition by associating Jé Rinpoché with his great Indian and Tibetan predecessors, including Atiśa, Milarepa, and Padmasambhava.⁶⁹ In the last case, rather than seeing their founding master as an emanation of Guru Rinpoché and a practitioner of the great perfection, they saw him as a perfect

⁶⁷ Jinpa 2019: 458n651.

⁶⁸ As noted by Matthew Kapstein (2000, 130), Amdo – located far from the political and religious intrigue of central Tibet – was, from the seventeenth century on, an especially fertile ground for inter-sectarian discussions, especially between Gelukpas and Nyingmapas; and, I would add, between Gelukpas and Kagyūpas, especially on questions relating to Mahāmudrā.

⁶⁹ Both the First Panchen Lama and Thuken address such matters: as noted earlier, the Panchen asserts the ultimate harmony of the views of all the major Tibetan practice traditions, while Thuken insists that pre-Geluk masters such as Marpa and Milarepa were, like Tsongkhapa, Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas (Thuken 2009: 135–38).

teacher who was anticipated and even prophesied by the siddha from Orgyen, somewhat as Jesus was anticipated by John the Baptist.

The second cultural pattern evident in the texts and contexts we have examined is that religious traditions of sufficient duration and sophistication inevitably must deal with internal tensions over how exclusive or inclusive of other traditions they ought to be in attempting to maintain their sense of identity, integrity, and community. To be solely one or the other is not generally wise: as the history of religions attests, a purely exclusive tradition can break down quickly when, as seems inevitable, its body-politic and conceptual web are “invaded” by external ideas and practices, while an excessively inclusive tradition may be so open to outside forces that it can easily lose its identity and integrity, and be erased from the map altogether. Traditions that stand the test of time generally manage to find a balance between exclusion and inclusion – and this is what we see at work in Nyingma and Geluk discourses on Tsongkhapa’s relation to Padmasambhava and Dzokchen. Given the political and ideological power of the Geluk, Nyingmapas found it impossible to ignore Tsongkhapa’s ideas and achievements, so they acknowledged his greatness by assimilating him to their own narratives, claiming him either to have been a Dzokchenpa or to have been strongly sympathetic to the great perfection. Similarly, Gelukpas enhanced the prestige of their own tradition by associating their own founder with the founding master of Tibetan Buddhism itself, insisting that Padmasambhava showed the way to the great summation of the Dharma that Tsongkhapa was able to forge in the fifteenth century, and which Geluk tradition carried forward, triumphantly, through the succeeding centuries. The question whether such inclusivism reflects a genuinely nonsectarian spirit or is actually a crypto-exclusivist form of cultural appropriation, I will leave unanswered for now – but I will say that religious traditions like the Nyingma and Geluk are complex and dynamic enough that legitimate arguments probably can be made to support either claim.

Tibetan Names and Terms

Amdo = a mdo

Amdo Geshé Jampal Rölwai Lodrö = a mdo dge bshes 'jam dpal
rol ba'i blo gros

Barawa Gyaltzen Palsang = 'ba' ra ba rgyal mtshan dpal bzang

Barchungwa Tashi Gyatso = 'bar chung bkra shis rgya mtsho

Bötrul Dongak Tenpei Nyima = bod sprul mdo sngags bstan pa'i
nyi ma

Butön Rinchen Drup = bu ston rin chen grub

Changkya Rölpai Dorjé = lcang skya rol pa'i rdo rje

Chögyal Ngakyi Wangpo = chos rgyal ngag gi dbang po

Chöjé Gönpö Rinchen = chos rje mgon po rin chen

Chökyi Dorjé = chos kyi rdo rje

Desi Sangyé Gyatso = sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho

Dongak Chökyi Gyatso mdo sngags chos kyi rgya mtsho

Dorjé Lingpa = rdo rje gling pa

Drukpa Kagyü = 'brug pa bka' brgyud

Drupchen Chakdorpa = grub chen phyag rdor pa

Dudjom Rinpoché Jikdral Yeshé Dorjé – bdud 'joms rin po
che 'jigs bral ye shes rdo rje

Dzingchi = rdzing phyi

Dzokchen/Dzokchenpa/Dzokpa Chenpo = rdzogs chen/rdzogs chen
pa/rdzogs pa chen po

Ensa = dben sa

Ganden = dga' ldan

Geluk/Gelukpa = dge lugs/dge lugs pa

Gendun Gyatso = dge 'dun rgya mtsho

Getsé Mahapandita Gyurmé Tsewang Chokdrup = dge rtse ma hā
paṇḍita 'gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub

Gungru[wa] Gyaltzen Sangpo – gung ru [ba] rgyal mtshan bzang po

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Guru Rinpoché = gu ru rin po che (= Padmasambhava)
Gyaltzap [Jé] Darma Rinchen = rgyal tshab [rje] dar ma rin chen
Jakhyung Monastery – bya khyung dgon pa
Jamyang Gyatso Rinpoché = 'jam dbyangs rgya mtsho rin po che
Jé Rinpoché = rje rin po che (= Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa)
Jetsun Lama = rje btsun bla ma (= Tsongkhapa)
Joden Sönam Lhundrup = jo ldan bsod nams lhun grub
Jowo Jé = jo bo rje
Kadam = bka' gdams
Kagyü = bka' brgyud
Kagyur = bka' 'gyur
Katok = kaḥ thog
Kham/Khampa = khams/khams pa
Khandro Nyingthik = kha' 'gro snying thig
Kharnak Lotsawa = mkhar nag lo tsā ba
Khardo = mkhar do
Khedrup [Jé] Gelek Palsang = mkhas grub [rje] dge legs dpal
bzang
Khenchen Jikmé Phuntsok = mkhan chen 'jigs med phun tshogs
Khenpo Sherab Sangpo = mkhan po shes rab bzang po
Khedrup Norsang Gyatso = mkhas grub nor bzang rgya mtsho
Khöntön[pa] Paljor Lundrup = khon ston [pa] dpal 'byor lhun grub
Lamdré = lam 'bras
Lekyi Dorjé = las kyi rdo rje (= Namkha Gyaltsen)
Lhodrak = lho brag
Lhodrak Drupchen – lho brag grub chen
Lhula Kachupa = lhu la dka' bcu pa
Lodrö Gyaltsen = blo gros rgyal mtshan
Longchen[pa] Rabjam = klong chen [pa] rab 'byams

- Losang Chökyi Gyaltzen = blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan (= Panchen Chögyen)
- Losang Drakpai Pal = blo bzang grags pa'i dpal (= Tsong kha pa)
- Losang Trinlé = blo bzang 'phrin las
- Machik Lapdrön = ma gcig lab sgron
- Milarepa = mi la ras pa
- Mipham Gyatso = mi pham rgya mtsho
- Namkha Gyaltzen = nam mkha' rgyal mtshan (= Lekyi Dorjé)
- Neringpa Chimé Rabgyé = ne ring pa 'chi med rab rgyas
- Ngamchö = Inga mchod
- Ngawang Chokden = ngag dbang mchog ldan
- Ngawang Losang Gyatso = ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho
- Nyangral Nyima Öser = nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer
- Nyingma = rnying ma
- Nyingma Gyubum = rnying ma rgyud 'bum
- Ölkha = 'ol kha
- Orgyen Rinpoché = o rgyan rin po che (= Padmasambhava)
- Palden Tenpai Nyima = dpal ldan bstan pa'i nyi ma
- Panchen Chögyen = paṅ chen chos rgyan (= Losang Chökyi Gyaltzen)
- Panchen Lama = paṅ chen bla ma
- Panchen Sönam Drakpa = paṅ chen bsod nams grags pa
- Phabongkha Rinpoché Dechen Nyingpo = pha bong kha rin po che bde chen snying po
- Phadampa Sangyé = pha dam pa sangs rgyas
- Rangtong = rang stong
- Ratna Lingpa = ratna gling pa
- Rendawa Zhönu Lodrö = red mda' ba gzhon nu blo gros
- Sakya[pa] = sa skya [pa]
- Sakya Pandita = sa sakya paṅḍita

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Sera = se ra

Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangrol = zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol

Shentong[pa] = gzhan stong [pa]

Tashi Lhunpo = bkra shis lhun po

Tashikhyil = bkra shsis 'kyil

Tengyur = bstan 'gyur

Terma = gter ma

Thuken Losang Chökyi Nyima = thu'u bkwan blo bzang chos kyi
nyi ma

Tokden Jampel Gyatso = rtogs ldan 'jam dpal rgya mtsho

Tsari = rtsa ri

Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa = tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa (=
Jé Rinpoché)

Umapa Pawo Dorjé = dbu ma pa dpa' bo rdo rje

Yabsé Sungbum = yab sras gsung 'bum

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