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**Portrait of an Unknown Adept:  
An Inscribed Scroll-painting of Bla ma Rin po che  
Sangs rgyas grags pa\***

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David Jackson and I both enjoyed the good fortune of studying with the great Sa skya pa master Dezhung Rinpoche Kunga Tenpai Nyima (1906–1987) and to have been nurtured in our studies by that teacher’s most noted American disciple, E. Gene Smith (1936–2010). It is therefore gratifying to be able to make a small gesture here to salute a distinguished brother in Dharma and scholarship, particularly in an area upon which he has shed so much light, the study of Tibetan painting.<sup>1</sup>

**I**

The magnificent thangka that is my topic belongs to the collection of Mr. Ulrich von Schroeder, to whom I owe thanks for the superb photographs of it that he has made available to me, together with his dossier of notes about the thangka itself.<sup>2</sup> The first and fullest of these is a description dated 7 May 2003 that attempts to identify several of the figures depicted on the basis of the inscriptions that accompany them and that attributes the painting to “Southern or Central Tibet; *circa*

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\* I wish to thank Dr. Volker Caumanns and Dr. Jörg Heimbels for their careful reading of this article, improving the final version and lending greater consistency to the conventions used within it.

- 1 In connection with the present essay, the methodological observations of Jackson 2003 and 2005 are especially pertinent.
- 2 All illustrations used in the present article are derived from those sent to the author by Mr. Ulrich von Schroeder, Weesen, Switzerland, and are the sole property of Mr. von Schoeder. They are reproduced here with his kind permission.

1450 AD.” The author of the description, who remains anonymous, regarded the thangka as representing “exponents of the *Shangs pa* tradition, one of the minor schools of the *bKa’ brgyud* sect.” As will be seen in what follows, none of these points, concerning provenance, date, and religious tradition, can now be accepted as correct. Moreover, with the exception of just one of the figures portrayed in the thangka, Thang stong rgyal po, the description did not succeed in establishing the identity of any of those who appear there. This said, there are aspects of the painting that still remain puzzling and further improvements upon the present small effort to advance our understanding of it will be welcome. This is very much a work-in-progress.

The painting (fig. 1), which measures 32.5 × 45 cm (or 35 × 76 cm including the surrounding cloth mounting), depicts six figures, whose names are helpfully noted in small captions written in gold in a neat, cursive *dbu med* script. The central figure, a wide-eyed meditator naked but for a single red garment with a finely realized, gold brocade floral design—perhaps an iconographic elaboration of the *ras gzán*, or cotton-cloak, worn by adepts—is identified as Bla ma Rin po che Sangs rgyas grags pa, the “precious guru Buddha-Fame” (fig. 2). Above his head, in the position of his “clan lord” (*rigs kyi bdag po*), or root-teacher, is Ngag gi dbang po, in the accoutrements of a *bKa’ brgyud* hierarch, his hands poised in the *dharmacakrapravartana* gesture (fig. 3). Above the right shoulder of the central figure we find Thang stong rgyal po (fig. 5), shown as a naked, goateed *siddha*, wearing only gold ornaments and holding a section of linked chain. Above the left shoulder is the long-haired gTer ston Kun skyong gling pa (fig. 6). He holds a ringed golden object in his right hand, perhaps a cord or lasso, and his left hand is raised, apparently in the gesture of protection (*abhayamudrā*). His brocade garments—a red robe and white outer cloak—are not properly monastic robes, but a variety of the *sngags pa’i cha lugs* (the garb of lay tantric specialists) frequently sported by *gter ston* figures. The remaining two personages, painted at the waist-level of Sangs rgyas grags pa and apparently behind him, are both depicted as *bKa’ brgyud* hierarchs. To his right, A rid dPal ’byor sits with his hands in the *dharmacakrapravartana* gesture (fig. 7), while dBon po dPal ’byor rgya mtsho, to his left,

holds what may be a book wrapped in a cloth cover or *kha btags* (fig. 8).<sup>3</sup>

The painting includes two lengthy inscriptions, besides the short labels identifying the figures. These are transcribed and translated in full below. On the front (fig. 4), beneath the throne of Bla ma Rin po che Sangs rgyas grags pa, is a prayer in seven stanzas addressed to the “peerless guru” (*mtshungs med bla ma*), allusively but clearly named in the first stanza as Sangs rgyas grags pa. The concluding stanza, dedicating the merit for his continuing longevity, suggests that the thangka was executed during his lifetime. On the back (fig. 9), we find an elaborate text calligraphed in the form of a stūpa and containing a series of mantras followed by an ornate poem of propitiation and prayer in roughly thirty stanzas.<sup>4</sup> This poem is dedicated to a teacher referred to as Ngag dbang grags pa or Ngag gi dbang phyug, who is to be identified with the Ngag gi dbang po depicted in the painting as Sangs rgyas grags pa’s own master. Their guru-disciple relationship is also confirmed by their successive inclusion in the series of mantras with which the inscription begins.

The thangka was reported to have come from a rNying ma pa monastery called Ro che situated several hundred kilometers to the northwest

3 The 7 May description contains errors with respect to the reading of both of these names. For no discernible reason, the unfamiliar designation ‘A rid’ in the first name is given there as Ārya. The inscriptions of the present thangka are scrupulously regular with respect to Sanskrit transcription, so there can be no justification for such guesswork here. A rid perhaps is to be interpreted as an otherwise unknown clan or place name, in which case it is used here in perfect accord with normal Tibetan onomastic conventions. Thus, we may read: dPal ’byor of A rid (clan or place). There is, however, some possibility that the final cursive *-d* of A rid is in fact the reversed *da*. If so, the name should in fact be A rigs, the “A clan,” though not likely referring to A rig, an important Amdo Mgo log tribal designation, at least in recent times. One final possibility is that A rid derives from a Khams pa form of familiar abbreviation of a proper name, as we find in A pad (from Padma) or A ’jam (from ’Jam dbyangs). Only further information can clarify the correct interpretation in this case, but Ārya may be confidently ruled out. In the second name, the final two syllables are transcribed in the 7 May description as “rGyal pa,” but the cursive abbreviated form of rGya mtsho is in fact quite clear. His title of *dbon po*, “nephew,” raises the possibility that he was thus related to one of the other figures depicted, perhaps A rid dPal ’byor or Sangs rgyas grags pa himself.

4 On stūpa-form thangka inscriptions, refer to the appendices of Jackson 2011. See also Quintman 2013, though in the present instance the explicitly biographical register of the inscriptions he studies there is not in evidence.

of Chamdo (Chab mdo).<sup>5</sup> In fact, this is no doubt the famous sTag lung bKa' brgyud monastery of Ma thang Ri bo che, located to the south of the old principality of Nang chen and to the northwest of Chamdo. Ri bo che is now often thought of as rNying ma pa, in accord with the rites and teachings that have become prominent there in recent centuries.<sup>6</sup> As will be seen below, the association of the painting with the tradition of Ma thang Ri bo che is an important key to its interpretation. The extreme refinement of the workmanship we find displayed in it, notably in the intricate gold work and treatment of textiles, certainly comports well with what is now known of sTag lung and Ri bo che artwork.<sup>7</sup>

As for the attribution of the portrait to the Shangs pa bKa' brgyud lineage, it may be supposed that the author of the 7 May description believed the presence of Thang stong rgyal po, among the persons illustrated, to justify this. This, however, was doubly incorrect. It is often the case that a given teacher is the heir to several lineages, as may have been true of Sangs rgyas grags pa, so that it is unwise to assign a sectarian

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5 This information was conveyed to me orally and did not form part of the unsigned 7 May 2003 description of the thangka that was forwarded to me by Mr. von Schroeder.

6 One not familiar with the phonological peculiarities of the Khams pa dialects might easily hear the local pronunciation of Ri bo che as *Ro che*, for what many Khams pa speakers actually say is, roughly, r<sup>o</sup>wətʃe.

7 A number of important early thangkas of the sTag lung/Ri bo che traditions have become important touchstones in the history of Tibetan painting. Among many discussions of them, see in particular Singer 1997, Kossak and Singer 1998, Jackson 2011 and 2012. It is of some interest that most of these paintings have been assigned to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. As I argue here for a sixteenth-century date for the present thangka, it appears to have been the work of a deliberately archaicizing artistic tradition. The implications of this for the dating of other paintings ascribed to the same tradition is an issue that I will leave to the side. Besides the treatment of fabrics, the depiction of the lions supporting Sangs rgyas grags pa's throne may be compared with the lions in the famous fourteenth-century depictions of Jñānatapa (Singer 1997: pl. 47; Kossak and Singer 1998: pl. 33; Jackson 2011: pl. 4.19) and of Marpa (Singer 1997: pl. 48; Jackson 2011: pl. 2.10). One curious detail in our painting is the treatment of the lotus petals beneath the throne: instead of the double petals, turning upwards and downwards, that we find in most sTag lung/Ri bo che paintings, here we see seven single petals all turning downwards. A similar convention appears in an early thirteenth-century portrait of sTag lung Thang pa with his footprints (Singer 1997: pl. 36; Jackson 2011: pl. 4.2).

identity on the basis of any one of his predecessors alone. Moreover, because the association of Thang stong rgyal po with the Shangs pa bKa' brgyud is itself problematic and can be affirmed in only some contexts, it is not clear that it has any particular bearing in the present case.<sup>8</sup>

## II

As mentioned above, all six of the figures portrayed in the thangka are explicitly identified by inscription. Of these, three prove to be well-known from readily available sources on the history of Tibetan Buddhism. These allow us to gain a clearer understanding of the lineages that concern us and, on this basis, to attempt to learn something of the apparently obscure central figure, Sangs rgyas grags pa.

In virtue of occurrence of the name Ngag dbang grags pa to designate the teacher to whom the long prayer on the back was directed, the painting's possible provenance as Ri bo che, and the apparent stylistic conformity with sTag lung/Ri bo che traditions, as described above, it is plausible to identify the figure of Ngag gi dbang po as the twelfth sTag lung khri thog (occupant of the sTag lung throne) Ngag dbang grags pa (1418–1496).<sup>9</sup> This identification is confirmed, in fact, in the first stanza of the lengthy prayer on the back of the thangka, where Ngag dbang grags pa is said to have been the “second emanation of Ratnākara,” referring to the incarnation line, at Ri bo che, of the seventh sTag lung khri thog Rin chen 'byung gnas (1300–1361), just as is stated, too, in the

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8 The Shangs pa tradition was just one of several that figured among the transmissions of Thang stong rgyal po. Others included, for instance, the Byang gter lineage of the rNying ma pa. Among Tibetan sectarian categories, Thang stong rgyal po is often considered as representing his own unique tradition, the lCags zam pa, loosely grouped among the rNying ma pa. The reason for which he came to be thought of in the West as Shangs pa was perhaps the inclusion of his Shangs pa-related writings under this rubric in the *gDams ngag mdzod* of 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899). On Thang stong rgyal po, his life and religious affiliations, refer to Stearns 2007.

9 The *sTag lung chos 'byung* is, of course, the standard source on the early succession of the sTag lung throne and the formation of the branch of the tradition at Ri bo che. The biography of Ngag dbang grags pa appears in *sTag lung chos 'byung*, pp. 421–446, followed by a brief account of his leading disciples, *sTag lung chos 'byung*, pp. 446–459.

*sTag lung chos 'byung*.<sup>10</sup> As he is depicted here, his robes and crown well accord with those of a *sTag lung* hierarch.<sup>11</sup>

There is no need to discuss at length the identification of Thang stong rgyal po (1385–1464), who is clearly designated in our painting both by name and iconographic attributes. What is perhaps less certain is whether his presence should be taken to indicate that the main figure, Sangs rgyas grags pa, was a direct disciple of the saint, or of one or another of his successors.

Similarly, the inclusion of the *gter ston* Kun skyong gling pa (1396–1477) must at least be taken to mark a lineage connection, but possibly direct discipleship as well. Though he is not so famous a figure today, Kun skyong gling pa was to be counted among the prominent revealers of “treasures” (*gter ma*) in his time; his teachings, which he transmitted to several important figures of the fifteenth century including 'Gos Lo tsā ba gZhon nu dpal (1392–1481), were among those considered authoritative by the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) and there is no reason to doubt his identity in our present context.<sup>12</sup> The reference, in the prayer on the front of the thangka, to Sangs rgyas grags pa as having been taken into the following of the “second Sage,” that is, Padmasambhava, possibly alludes to his association with the *gter ma* tradition.

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10 *sTag lung chos 'byung*, p. 422. On the incarnation of Ratnākara at Ri bo che, see *idem*, pp. 636–640. As Ngag dbang grags pa was the second Ratnākara of Ri bo che, he was actually the third in the line, though it does not seem that this was ever his formal hierarchical position.

11 In fact, most of the early *sTag lung* paintings depict the masters of the lineage without headdress. However, the few examples of crowned figures—e.g., a fourteenth-century painting of *sTag lung* Thang pa bKra shis dpal (Singer 1997: pl. 44; Jackson 2011: pl. 4.12) and a sixteenth-century portrait of 'Jig rten dbang phyug (Heller 1999: pl. 104; Jackson 2011: pl. 4.21)—offer useful points of comparison. Additional examples will be found in book illustrations from Ri bo che, to appear in Kapstein forthcoming, ch. 6.

12 The Great Fifth summarizes the teachings he received in the lineage of Kun skyong gling pa in his *gsan yig*, in *rGyal dbang lnga pa ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho'i gsung 'bum*, vol. 3, pp. 424–428. The prominence of Kun skyong gling pa's tradition may have begun to decline rather early, for, as Gu ru bKra shis (*Gu bkra'i chos 'byung*, p. 421) tells us, although one of his sons did much to promote his teachings, this was not sustained and by Gu ru bKra shis's time, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the familial line appears to have vanished altogether (*deng sang gdung brgyud yod pa mi snang ngo/*).

As these three masters were contemporaries, all active during the mid-fifteenth century, and Ngag dbang grags pa almost to the end of that century, it is likely that Sangs rgyas grags pa, who was their follower, flourished during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. If we assume that he was born around 1450, he may have even encountered the great Thang stong rgyal po during his youth, though there appears to be no mention of him in the biographies of the bridge-building saint. Assuming that he remained active for some time after his masters and given the probability that the painting was commissioned during his lifetime, as an offering for his continued longevity, we may be not far wrong in assigning it to *circa* 1525.

One further clue tends to support this dating. In the history of sTag lung, a certain Nang chen Sangs rgyas grags pa is named among the disciples of the thirteenth sTag lung khri thog rNam rgyal grags pa (1469–1530).<sup>13</sup> Nothing else appears to be known of him, but, because it is often the case that a given individual comes to be regarded as the disciple of his master's successor, particularly when the period during which he was active involves a lengthy overlap with the successor, it is possible that this is what has occurred here. In the sTag lung historical record, Sangs rgyas grags pa may have been transferred from his true master, Ngag dbang grags pa, to rNam rgyal grags pa, with whom he was almost perfectly contemporaneous.

Of the last two figures depicted in the painting, A rid dPal 'byor and dBon po dPal 'byor rgya mtsho, I have been able to learn nothing whatsoever. That they belonged to the sTag lung bKa' brgyud is clear from their attire and their position in the painting suggests that they were Sangs rgyas grags pa's disciples; perhaps they were even involved in commissioning the painting itself. Nothing more, however, can be said about them on the basis of the materials that I have been able to consult. Although the opulence and artistic finesse of the thangka might lead us to expect that it stems from a preeminent lineage—and in the general sense that it was produced within the sTag lung/Ri bo che tradition it surely does—the fact that the central figure and his two companions remain obscure is a puzzle. Perhaps this will be resolved someday with the appearance of previously unknown biographical or historical sources.

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13 See *sTag lung chos 'byung*, p. 486.

Reverse: *Stūpa-form consecratory inscription:*

1. om̐
2. āḥ
3. hūm̐
4. om̐ sarba
5. bid swā hā:
6. om̐ badzra garbhe
7. swā hā: om̐ dharmā dhātu:
8. garbhe swā hā: om̐ su
9. pratiṣṭha badzra ye swā hā: om̐
10. āḥ na mo rad na gu ru ngag dbang grags
11. pa hūm̐: om̐ āḥ na mo rad na gu ru
12. sangs rgyas grags
13. pa hūm̐: dus
14. gsum rgyal ba' i (?)
15. mam 'phrul las (?)
16. 'khrung shing// bka'
17. bgyud bstan pa phyogs
18. beur rgyas mdzad pa//
19. rad na ka ra gnyis sprul
20. chos kyi rje// ngag dbang grags
21. pa 'i zhabs kyi pad mor 'dud//
22. mkhyen brtse' i lha lam shun tu
23. yangs pa la// mdzad phrin bdud
24. rtsi yi char gyis 'gro kun
25. skyong// 'jig rten dbang
26. phyug zhabs la gsol ba 'debs// tshogs
27. gnyis lhun gyis grub par byin brlabs gsol//
28. // om̐ svāsti/ nyes pa thams cad rab zad cing//
29. yon tan kun gyi gzhir
30. gyur pa// 'bras bu thams
31. cad rdzogs mdzad pa // bla
32. ma mams la phyags 'tshal lo// chos nyid ngang las ma
33. g-yos kyang// 'bdag cag slob 'bang 'gro drug la// sngon gyi
34. dam bca' ma bsnyel bar// thugs rje chen po' i sprin bsdu te// bde
35. la zhen pa med pa 'i rnyams// gsal la 'dzin pa med pa 'i don// rgyun chad
36. med pa 'i bsam gtan mechoq// char pa chen po dbab tu gsol// skye med ngang

37. las ma g.yos kyang// bdag cag rjes ,jug sems can gyi// miam rtog  
bde sdug ,khrug pa kun// mnyam nyid byams pa 'i chut'o yis// 'tshe ba thams cad
38. rab zhi nas// bde ba chen por mnyam du gsol// snang med ngang la mnyam nas
39. kyang: bdag cag gsol ba 'deb pa 'i// gang dang gang gis 'dod pa 'i// don kun  
'grub par mdzad du gsol//
40. OM dam pa khyed kyi rogs pa yi// mshan  
AH dus gsum gsal bar mkhyen  
HUM zag mams// thugs kyi tsir gyis
41. pa 'i. bsgrub pa byed pa 'i gang  
42. bzung du gsol// rab zhi spros pa mams zad kyang// bdag cag
43. bka 'i ,khor 'bang mams// dran par gyur pa tsam gyi kyang// skyon dag yon
44. tan rdzogs mdzad gsol// bde sdug mnyam par mkhyen na 'ang// sdug bsngal
45. zag mgus non pa 'i// sems can bde la 'god mdzad cing// mya ngan zhi bar mdzad du gsol//
46. dus gsum ma lus thams cad du// g.yeng ba 'i, mshan ma zhi nas kyang// rjes su bsgrub pa 'i gang
47. cag sems can ma lus pa// sdug bsngal nad las, thar mdzad nas// thams cad mkhyen pa 'thob mdzad gsol//
48. phrad cing rang dhang thob mdzad gsol// ma mams bu la sems pa bzhim// khyed kyi thugs rje chen po yis// bdag
49. rje rin po che 'i byim rlabs kyi// bdag cag 'khor dang beas pa la// de bzhim gshes pa 'i, ye shes kyi// gang dang shin tu gang
50. ba dang: smin dang shin tu smin mdzad gsol// yi dam dkon mchog chos skyong gis// bdag cag bsgrub pa tyed pa la// bar chad
51. thams cad rab zhi nas// rtogs pa mchog nyid thob nas kyang// byin rlabs chen po mdzad du gsol// byams pa 'i chut'o mi good cing.
52. sning rje 'i, brise bas rab brlan ste// byangs sems bjon shing rab rgyas nas// nyams rogs me tog shar gyur te// don gnyis 'bras bu smin mdzad
53. gsol: bla ma yi dam dkon mchog dang// chos skyongs mkha' ,gro dkar phyogs kyi// bdag cag g.yeng bar gyur pa 'i tshe// dben
54. par dhang med 'khrid pa dang// phyi la zhen cing chags pa 'i tshe// rmi lam bzhin du go ba dang// nang la zhi cing chags pa 'i
55. tshe[ ] 'dod chags bde bar bsgyur mdzad gsol// sdang sems byung war gyur pa na// snying rjer gyur gyi ,gyur ba dang// mi shes
56. gnyid rnuug bying ba mams// 'od gsal snang med shes rab tu// msho la kha wa bab pa bzhim// ngang du gnas
57. par mdzad du gsol// dus gsum rgyal ba sras bcas thams cad kyi// mkhyen brise mdzad pa
58. cje tu bsdus pa las// mshunges med ngag dhang gres par mshan gsol ba 'i// dhal
59. ldan bla ma 'i zhaba la gsol ba 'debs// skye ba skye bar goms pa 'i stugs thob pas// mngon shes
60. sgyu ma la bu 'i ting 'dzin sog's// skyes thob nyid la lhun gyi grub par ldam// ngag gi dhang phyug
61. zhaba la gsol ba 'debs// ngon khyod gzhoon nu rol rtsed mdzad pa 'i tshe// snang wa thams
62. cad bden med sgyu ma ltar// mngon du gyur pa 'i mshan ma du ma bsten// ngag gi dhang phyug
63. zhaba la gsol ba 'debs// bka' rgyud gong ma 'i gdung tshob miam thar 'dzin// miam mang yi dam
64. lha yis rjes su bzung// bstan srung rgya msho bka' las mi 'da' ba 'i// ngag gi dhang phyug
65. zhaba la gsol ba 'debs// skye was thob dang mkhas mang bsten pa 'i mthus// blo mig
66. phyi nang shes bya 'i spyod yul can// mngon du gyur pas mkhas pa 'i dhang gyur pa// ngag gi dhang phyug zhaba la gsol ba 'debs// ting 'dzin yongs su
67. dag pa 'i me long la// dus gsum shes bya 'i dkyil 'khor gsal bar 'char// spyang dang mngon shes yon tan kun gyi mdzod// ngag gi dhang phyug zhaba
68. la 'god pa// ngag gi dhang phyug zhaba la gsol ba 'debs// mngon po khyod la gsol ba btob pa 'i mthus// bdag dang mkha' ,mnyam 'gro ba ma lus
69. pa. srid dang zhi ba 'i mlha' la mi gnas pa 'i// beu gsum rdo rje 'dzin pa 'i sa thob shog// bdag cag gzhan gyi mthong dang thos pa dang// dran dang reg gyur gdam dag
70. [bl]rjod kyang rung// de dag gso byas 'gro drug sems can mams// rtag tu bde ba dam pa 'thob par shog// phrin las miam dag sku g'sung thugs// ren yon lan ma
71. las rgya che wa// bzhangs pa mams la byin gyi brtobs// rten mchog tu gyur pa 'i bkra shis shog//
72. las rgya che wa// bzhangs pa mams la byin gyi brtobs// rten mchog tu gyur pa 'i bkra shis shog//
73. las rgya che wa// bzhangs pa mams la byin gyi brtobs// rten mchog tu gyur pa 'i bkra shis shog//
74. las rgya che wa// bzhangs pa mams la byin gyi brtobs// rten mchog tu gyur pa 'i bkra shis shog//
75. las rgya che wa// bzhangs pa mams la byin gyi brtobs// rten mchog tu gyur pa 'i bkra shis shog//

## Inscriptions

### Obverse

#### *Conventions*

- XXX = an effaced or illegible syllable. (The syllable count is assured by the prosody of the text.)
- Square brackets in the text of the inscription indicate effaced or illegible letters, the insertion of which seems nevertheless warranted.
- Questionable readings are signaled by a question mark in parentheses or within a bracketed insert.
- Abbreviations (not common in this text) are unpacked throughout without comment.
- Irregular spellings and grammatical forms (both of which are rare here) are left as they appear in the text.

#### *Obverse inscription beneath throne*

- 1 na mo gu ra we/ dpal ldan sangs rgyas kun gyi ngo bo nyid// grags pa gsal ldan lung rtogs chos kyi gter// 'phags tshogs 'dus pa rgya mtsho'i gtsor gyur pa// mtshungs med bla ma'i zhabs la gsol ba 'debs// XXX [perhaps = mgon]
- 2 khyod bla med byang chub mchog brnyes kyang// thugs rje'i dbang gi snyigs dus gdul bya'i phyir// rang rang skal ba dang 'tshams mdzad pa can// mtshungs med bla ma'i zhabs la gsol ba 'debs// srid (?) XXX XXX XXX [perhaps something like: pa'i gnas kun]
- 3 'bar ba'i me 'ob dang// tshe 'di'i phun tshogs klog phreng ltar gzigs te// bslab gsum nyes pa'i dri ma dang bral ba// mtshungs med bla ma'i zhabs la gsol ba 'debs// smig rgyu['i] (?) XXX XXX [perhaps = snang bas]
- 4 bying ba'i 'gro wa rnams// grangs med brtse was bskyangs pa'i ma yin zhes// bcos ma min pa snying rje'i gzhan dbang can// mtshungs med bla ma'i zhabs la gsol ba 'de[bs//] XXX [probably = rig]
- 5 'dzin thub dbang gnyis pas rjes su bzung// gdams pa'i bdud rtsis khyod thugs bum bzang bltam// bsgrub la brtson pas yon tan mchog brnyes pa// mtshungs med bla ma'i zhab[s] XXX XXX [= la gsol]

- 6 ba 'debs// 'khor dang mya ngan 'das pa'i chos rnams kun// nam  
mkha'i dkyil dang mig 'phrul ltar gzigs pas// re dogs rtsol ba'i rim  
nad las grol ba// mtshungs me[d] XXX XXX XXX [bla ma'i zhabs]
- 7 la gsol ba 'debs// zhing gi mchog gyur bla ma rje btsun la// cung zad  
bstod pa'i dge wa gang mchi 'dis// mgon khyod skyes dgu'i dpal du  
zhabs brten zhing// 'gro kun rdo rje 'chang dbang myur XXX XXX  
[perhaps = thob shog]

*Translation*

Homage to the guru!<sup>14</sup>

Essence of all the glorious *buddhas*,

Mine of scriptural and realized dharma, whose *fame*<sup>15</sup> is pristine,

And foremost of the oceanic assembly of the exalted—

To the feet of the peerless lama I pray.

Though you<sup>16</sup> have obtained unsurpassed and supreme awakening,

By<sup>17</sup> the power of compassion, for the sake of those to be trained in the  
age of corruption,

You act in accord with each and every one's fortune—

To the feet of the peerless lama I pray.

Seeing the [whole] world to be a blazing conflagration

And all the goods of this life to be like a lightning flash,

[You have practiced] the three lessons without taint of sin—

To the feet of the peerless lama I pray.

14 The care with which the text has been produced is at once evident in the use here of the correct Sanskrit form *gurave*, "to the guru," which is almost always mis-transcribed in Tibetan works as *gu ru we*.

15 "Buddha-fame" (*sangs rgyas grags pa*) is the proper name of the lama here petitioned, who is the central figure of the thangka.

16 The one syllable missing at the end of line one is modified by the second person pronoun and thus, in the present context, must be a term of respectful address, such as *mgon*, "lord."

17 Read here *gis* for *gi*.

You are known as a maternal protector, with limitless love,  
 Of beings bound by mirage-like [appearances?];  
 You have forsaken your freedom for uncontrived compassion—  
 To the feet of the peerless lama I pray.

Taken into the following of the [knowledge?]-holder who is the second  
 Sage [Padmasambhava],  
 So that your mind, like a treasure vase, has been filled by the nectar of  
 instruction,  
 You have attained supreme qualities by striving for attainment—  
 To the feet of the peerless lama I pray.

Seeing all phenomena of samsara and nirvana  
 To be like the circle of the sky and optical illusions,  
 You have freed yourself from the plague of efforts [motivated] by hope  
 and fear—  
 To the feet of the peerless lama I pray.

By whatever virtue is gained by this little praise  
 Of the venerable Lama, the best field [of merit],  
 May you, Lord, remain firm of feet, the glory of creatures,  
 So that all beings swiftly [attain the realization of] lord Vajradhara!

### **Reverse**

#### *Translation*

Lines 1–13, opening mantras

NB: I reproduce the mantras here in the normal IAST transcriptions, without, however, correcting the Sanskrit grammar. The Tibetan forms of transcription are followed in the entire text as given above.

*oṃ āḥ hūṃ.*

*oṃ sarvavid svāhā: oṃ Omniscient One! svāhā!*

*oṃ vajragarbhe svāhā: oṃ Vajra-matrix! svāhā!*

*oṃ dharmadhatugarbhe svāhā: oṃ matrix of the expanse of reality!  
svāhā!*

*oṃ supraṭiṣṭha vajraye svāhā: oṃ vajra well-set-in-place! svāhā! [the  
mantra of consecration]*

*oṃ āḥ namo ratnaguru ngag dbang grags pa hūṃ:*

*oṃ āḥ! homage to the precious guru Ngag dbang grags pa! hūṃ!*

*oṃ āḥ namo ratnaguru sangs rgyas grags pa hūṃ:*

*oṃ āḥ! homage to the precious guru Sangs rgyas grags pa! hūṃ!*

ll. 13–21

Born from the magic of the Conquerors of the three times,  
Promulgating the bKa' brgyud teaching throughout ten directions,  
Lord of Dharma, second emanation of Ratnākara—  
Before your lotus feet, Ngag dbang grags pa, I bow!

ll. 22–27

In the broadest sky of knowledge and love,  
You protect all beings with the shower of enlightened deeds—  
I pray to your feet, Lokeśvara,  
And pray for your blessing to effortlessly accomplish the two  
provisions.

ll. 28–32

*oṃ svāsti!*

All faults completely exhausted,  
Foundation for all qualities,  
Bringing all fruit to perfection—  
To the gurus I give salutations.

ll. 32–34

Though you never stray from way of the real,  
 For us, your disciples, adherents, and for the six classes of beings,  
 Your former vow has not faltered  
 And so gathers into clouds of great compassion.

ll. 34–36

I entreat you, then, to bring down the deluge  
 Of supreme contemplative absorption unceasing,  
 In which there is experience of bliss without craving,  
 The objective clear without subjective grasping.

ll. 36–39

Though you never depart from the unborn way,  
 With a river of impartial love  
 May you pacify all the injuries,  
 All the rambling thoughts, pleasures and pains, and disturbances  
 Among us, the creatures who have entered your fold,  
 So that together we achieve great bliss.

ll. 39–41

Though you abide in equipoise in the state without appearance,  
 I pray that you fulfil all the purposes  
 Desired by each and every one  
 Of us who offer our prayers.

Note: the syllables OM̐, ĀḤḤ, HŪM̐, in lines 41–43 are not part of the text, but pertain to the consecration of the main figure depicted on the thangka, Bla ma Rin po che Sangs rgyas grags pa.

ll. 41–44

Though your realization, o sage,  
 Is such that all determinate entities have dissolved,

By knowing clearly the three times,  
May you firmly grasp in mind  
Those persons who strive for attainment.

ll. 44–46

Though, in perfect peace, elaborations are exhausted,  
We, followers and subjects of your command,  
Pray that by recollection alone  
Faults be finished and qualities perfected.

ll. 46–47

Though you know pleasure and pain to be equivalent,  
May you establish in happiness sentient beings,  
Who are tormented by pain,  
And bring them to peace in nirvana.

ll. 48–50

Though the marks of distraction have subsided,  
Throughout all the three times,  
May your followers encounter you and achieve autonomy,  
Adhering to solitary wilderness retreat  
And gazing without distraction  
Upon the very essence of mind itself.

ll. 50–51

Like a mother thinking on her child,  
May you, with great compassion,  
Free all us sentient beings, none excepted,  
From the disease of suffering,  
And cause us to attain omniscience.

## ll. 52–53

By the blessings of the precious master  
 May we, with all our adherents,  
 Be fulfilled, utterly fulfilled,  
 And matured, utterly matured,  
 In the tathāgata's gnosis.

## ll. 53–54

By the meditational deities, the Precious Jewels, and the dharma pro-  
 tectors,  
 May all obstacles subside  
 For us, we who aspire to attainment,  
 And, when we have obtained supreme realization,  
 May you still grant us your great blessings.

## ll. 54–56

Not interrupting the river of loving kindness,  
 Moistened with compassionate love,  
 May the rich tree of the enlightened mind flourish,  
 Producing flowers of spiritual experience and realization,  
 Ripening the fruit of the two aims [of self and other].

## ll. 56–58

When we turn to distraction,  
 May the lama, meditational deity, Precious Jewels,  
 Dharma protectors and ḍākinīs of the pure [lit. "white"] side,  
 Lead us, powerless to resist, to solitude, where,  
 When we hanker after external things,  
 We understand them to be like dreams,  
 And when we hanker internally,  
 May that desire be transformed into bliss.

ll. 58–60

When hateful thoughts arise  
 May they be transformed into compassion,  
 And unknowing, torpor, dullness and withdrawal  
 Into luminosity, discernment without appearance,  
 So that we are brought to abide in the essential disposition,  
 Wherein [thoughts, etc.] become like snow falling on a lake.

ll. 60–62

I pray before the feet of the glorious guru  
 Known by the name of peerless Ngag dbang grags pa,  
 Who combines in one the knowledge, love and deeds  
 Of all the Conquerors of the three times with their sons.

ll. 62–64

With the power born from practice throughout successive lives  
 You were spontaneously born with innate attainments  
 Of telepathy, apparitional samādhi and more—  
 I pray before the feet of Ngag gi dbang phyug!

ll. 64–66

Lord! When you acted as a playful child  
 All appearances became as untrue illusions;  
 You disclosed many such characteristics—  
 I pray before the feet of Ngag gi dbang phyug!

ll. 66–68

Seizing the career of the heir of the bKa' brgyud forebears,  
 Taken into the following of numerous meditational divinities,  
 Never transgressing the commands of the ocean of the teaching's  
 protectors—

I pray before the feet of Ngag gi dbang phyug!

ll. 68–69

By the force of inborn ability and reliance on many scholars  
The eye of your intellect, ranging over outer and inner knowledge,  
Is manifest so that you have become a lord among scholars—  
I pray before the feet of Ngag gi dbang phyug!

ll. 69–71

In the pure mirror of samādhi  
The mandala of the knowable throughout the three times clearly arises;  
You are the storehouse of all qualities, clairvoyance and telepathy—  
I pray before the feet of Ngag gi dbang phyug!

ll. 71–72

When you have practiced the swelling conduct of enlightenment  
By the power of planting ten million prayers,  
You have established in benefits and bliss those who have seen, heard,  
thought of or touched [you]—  
I pray before the feet of Ngag gi dbang phyug!

Lord! By the force of these prayers to you,  
May I and all beings to the extent of space, none excepted,  
Without remaining in the limits of worldly existence or peace,  
Attain the thirteenth level of the vajra-bearer.

ll. 73–74

May we and others, sentient beings of the six classes,  
Above all those who have seen or heard,  
Thought of, touched, or even mentioned [you],  
Always attain holy bliss!

ll. 74–75

Bless those who created as a pure enlightened deed  
 [This] shrine [painting], with all extensive qualities,  
 Of body, speech and mind!  
 May it be propitious, becoming a supreme shrine!

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Fig. 1 Portrait thangka of Bla ma Rin po che Sangs rgyas grags pa, identified by the inscription in the central red lotus petal of his throne.



Fig. 2 Bla ma Rin po che Sangs rgyas grags pa.



Fig. 3 Upper center: Ngag gi dbang po. Note the abraded inscription above his crown.



Fig. 4 Obverse inscription, beneath the throne of the central figure.



Fig. 5–8 (reading left to right, beginning above): Thang stong rgyal po, gTer ston Kun skyong gling pa, A rid dPal 'byor, dBon po dPal 'byor rgya mtsho.



Fig. 9 The inscribed back of the thangka, in the form of a stupa.

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Department of Indian and Tibetan Studies, Universität Hamburg



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*His Holiness  
The Gongma Trichen*  
SUPREME HEAD OF THE SAKYAPA ORDER  
OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

#### FOREWORD

I am very pleased that this commemorative volume is being compiled in celebration of David Jackson's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.

I have known Ngawang Kalden, as we know him in Tibetan, for a very long time and in one instance, we received teachings from Chogye Trichen Rinpoche together. We have always maintained contact throughout the years.

David's grasp of the Tibetan language is truly remarkable, certainly placing him among the most accomplished Tibetan-speaking westerners. Likewise, his knowledge of Tibetan literature and of the Tibetan Buddhadharma is pre-eminent, while his translations of the same are of exceptional precision.

He is a scholar in the true sense of the word, and it is befitting that this former students at Hamburg University show their gratitude to his accomplishments by dedicating this Festschrift to him.

With blessings,

The Sakya Trichen

3<sup>rd</sup> February 2021

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White Tārā, Artist: Tsechang Penba Wangdu (brTse byang sPen pa dbang 'dus).



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