

## Communicating the Innate: Observations on Teacher-Student Interaction in the Tibetan Mahāmudrā Instructions

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Debates about the manifold doctrines connected to the bKa' brgyud pa Great Seal (*mahāmudrā*), especially its paths outside the mantra system, have considerably occupied both academic researchers and Tibetan scholars.<sup>1</sup> When examining the Tibetan Great Seal traditions, we certainly must analyse its terminology, doctrinal development, and systematisation. Indeed, doctrinal classification and apologetics were carried out extensively in the writings of, among others, Karmapa Mi bskyod rdo rje (1507–1554), bKra shis rnam rgyal (1512–1587), and 'Brug chen Padma dkar po (1527–1592).<sup>2</sup> But as meditation and realisation are often considered the heart of the matter, it may be difficult to pin the Great Seal down to any single doctrinal system. And, beyond doctrinal debates and systematisations, it is the teacher who often is mentioned as the necessary condition for any approach to the Great Seal—be it sūtra, tantra, or essence; dGe lugs or bKa' brgyud. Research into Great Seal traditions may thus benefit from a closer contextual analysis of the role of the guru in both instruction and practice.

It is surprising that—although the general importance of the guru has been duly noted—the soteriological significance of the teacher in the Great Seal traditions has been given comparatively little explicit attention in academic circles.<sup>3</sup> This presentation suggests that the focus on teacher-student interaction and guru-devotion is a perspective of research that allows for better explaining doctrinal variegations. Focusing on shorter Great Seal instructions (*khrid*) of the Eighth Karmapa Mi bskyod rdo rje, this paper consists of some observations that had emerged in my previous research, especially when encountering contradictory interpretations discovered in different instruction related texts. The paper first briefly discusses the varying Great Seal interpretations in general and those of Mi bskyod rdo rje in particular. Concluding that a definitive Great Seal categorisation of the Eighth Karmapa is difficult to locate in the examined material, it turns to the guru as crucial religious origin, means, and unifying spiritual element of the

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Roger Jackson for bringing up the often missing logical argument behind the guru's importance in a keynote speech at the *Mahāmudrā* Panel of the Eleventh Conference of the IATS, Bonn, August 2006. An earlier version of this paper was published 2009 in Russian (with English translation as 'Preliminary Reflections on Guru Devotion in Medieval Tibetan bKa' brgyu pa Great Seal').

<sup>2</sup> Only to mention some recent previous research: Schaeffer (2000) and Braitstein (2004) have focused on the Great Seal of the Indian *siddha* Saraha. In *Tantric Treasures*, Roger Jackson (2004) has translated and annotated important Apabhramśa-language spiritual songs (*dohā*) of Saraha, Kāñha and Tilopa. Mathes (2006, 2007, 2011) has begun breaking new ground in exploring Indian sources of the non-tantric Great Seal. D. Jackson (1994) has pioneered by investigating bKa' brgyud pa Great Seal and Sa skyā Paṇḍita's critique with a rich range of sources. Kragh (1998) focused on sGam po pa's Great Seal writings; Sherpa (2004) has examined both life and doctrine of sGam po pa. Roger Jackson (2001) has investigated the Great Seal manuals of Paṇ chen Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan and summarised key points of the Great Seal (2011). Schiller, on the basis of his excellent Master's thesis (2002), is currently researching the system of the 'four yogas' (*rnal 'byor bzhi*). Kapstein (2006a: 58-60) hinted at a systematisation of the siddha's teachings in Tibet, while Sobisch (2003) has examined the meditation manuals (*khrid yig*) of the five-fold Great Seal of the 'Bri gung pa. Mathes' recent and ground breaking *The Direct Path to the Buddha Within: Gö Lotsawas's Mahāmudrā Interpretation of the Ratnagotravibhāga* (2008) not only uncovers and analyses 'Gos Lo tsā ba's (1392–1481) Great Seal hermeneutics (see especially 367–406), but also examines in detail Indian and Tibetan contexts (Part I) (see also Mathes 2005). For further previous research on the bKa' brgyud pa Great Seal, see also Rheingans (2008: 28–30) and Jackson, R. (2001: 2), (2011).

<sup>3</sup> An exception is Jan U. Sobisch's 'Guru Devotion in the bKa' brgyud pa Tradition' (2011). For the general importance of the guru, see for example Jackson, R. (2004: 3–53), and notes below.

Great Seal and investigates the function of confidence (*dad pa*) and devotion (*mos gus*). It argues that an essential instruction is, according to circumstance, taught by a guru via either tantric or non-tantric means, and proposes to better approach the Great Seal instructions as a pragmatic heuristic rather than a fixed doctrine.

### bKa' brgyud pa Great Seal: a path outside tantra?

Among Buddhist traditions, those of Tibet perhaps stand out most for their blend of meditative systems, centred on various instructions (*gdams ngag*) and their lineages.<sup>4</sup> The Great Seal practised in the various bKa' brgyud lineages is one such meditative technique.<sup>5</sup> In essence, it contains immediate instructions for achieving Buddhahood by transcending conceptual thinking (Skt. *prapañca, vikalpa*) and directly perceiving the nature of mind.<sup>6</sup> The bKa' brgyud traditions in medieval Tibet believed that it was Nāro pa who was the main transmitter of the Great Seal within tantric practice and yogic exercise (later called tantra or mantra Great Seal), whereas they held that Maitrī pa and Saraha also taught the Great Seal outside tantric contexts. Such an approach was ascribed to sGam po pa (1079–1153).<sup>7</sup>

sGam po pa bSod nams rin chen, or, more specifically, the writings attributed to him, are crucial for understanding any of Tibetan bKa' brgyud pa Great Seal. The research conducted so far allows for the (albeit preliminary) conclusion that sGam po pa distinguished three paths: sūtra, mantra, and Great Seal, also known as the path of inference (*pāramitāyāna*), the path of blessing (*mantrayāna*), and the path of direct perceptions; the last one being termed ‘Great Seal’ and considered a direct path for those of superior faculties. This said, it remains difficult at present to ascertain sGam po pa's definitive position regarding this Great Seal as tantric or not.<sup>8</sup> The ‘Bri gung pa exegete Jig rten mgon po, for example, offers a system ‘where, in short, mahāmudrā is achieved

<sup>4</sup> The late nineteenth century masters of the non-sectarian movement, such as Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899), have distinguished eight instruction lineages (see Kapstein 1996, 2007: 116). Most of the lineages originating from the new translation period are based on instructional texts which have a mystic origin as oral ‘vajra verses’ (*rdo rje'i tshig rkang*) that were later put into writing. Davidson (2004: 149–151) has termed some of them ‘gray texts’. He has argued that they emerged from the collaboration of Indian scholars and Tibetan translators and present the unfolding of the esoteric traditions in a new environment.

<sup>5</sup> Mathes (2007: 1). A word definition by Kong sprul Blo gros mtha's yas (1813–1899) reads: ‘Because when experientially cultivating that to which one has been introduced through the esoteric directions of the guru, neither knowledge nor knowables surpass its radiance, it is a “seal” and because, besides that, there is no other gnosis of the Buddha to be sought out, it is “great”’ (trans. Kapstein 2006a: 54, n. 20).

<sup>6</sup> Beyer (1975: 148) has distinguished three kinds of Mahāyāna Buddhist meditation technique: standard (insight and calm abiding), visionary and ecstatic (the stages of tantric meditation) and spontaneous techniques. Among these, the Great Seal of the bKa' brgyud pa—or at least some facets of it—can be described as a ‘spontaneous’ technique of enlightenment. The most essential works in the Tibetan language are contained in the *Phyag chen mdzod* and *gDams ngag mdzod*, vols. 5–7. The history of the Great Seal is recounted the famed *Deb ther sngon po* (*Blue Annals*) translated by Roerich (1996: 839–867).

<sup>7</sup> For sGam po pa's Great Seal, see Kragh (1998: 12–26) and Sherpa (2004: 129–184).

<sup>8</sup> For the three paths system of sGam po pa, see Sherpa (2004: 130) and Jackson, D. (1994: 25–28). The three paths are, for example, depicted in sGam po pa bSod nam rin chen, *Tshogs chos yon tan phun tshogs*, pp. 527f. While the last path of the Great Seal is described as the one of direct perceptions (*mngon sum*), Sherpa (2004: 130), based on research on a range of texts, labels it ‘path of blessing’. Also the Eight Karmapa's Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII *Kam tshang phyag chen nyams len gvi khrid*, fol. 6b (p. 968), does so. Concerning the Indian sources for such assertions, Mathes (forthcoming b: 19) has concluded that the practices from the Indian Great Seal works do not need to be tantric; with regard to Tibetan interpretations he considers it reasonable to assume, that sGam po pa taught a ‘mahāmudrā beyond sūtra and tantra and something that was later called sūtra-based mahāmudrā’ (Mathes 2008: 44; see also ibid. 34–45). Sobisch (2011) argues that we cannot determine this matter with any certainty. Firstly, the ‘Great Seal’ that takes direct perception as the path can also be understood as mantra, since sGam po pa elsewhere precisely defines mantra as such. Furthermore the later bKa' brgyud pa traditions developed a variety of classifications (see the following note below).

outside of the “path of means” (*thabs lam*), but clearly within the tantric “path of liberation” (*grol lam*).<sup>9</sup>

Great Seal interpretations and categorisations thus differ even among the bKa’ brgyud pa schools and its categorisation became a point of continued debate. The later bKa’ brgyud master Kong sprul Blo gros mtha’ yas (1813–1899) for example, distinguished a generally accepted mantra Great Seal, a sūtra Great Seal, and an essence Great Seal.<sup>10</sup> Essence Great Seal then constitutes the sudden realisation of one’s ‘ordinary mind’ (*tha mal gyi shes pa*, sometimes translated as ‘natural mind’), which is the perfection inherent (Skt. *sahaja*, Tib. *lhan cig skye pa*) in any experience: after being pointed out (*ngo sprod*) by a qualified teacher, a practitioner of high capacity experiences the essence of mind directly. These teachings are often linked to the *dohā* literature of Saraha and the teaching-cycles attributed to Maitrī pa.<sup>11</sup> Karma bKra shis chos ‘phel, a nineteenth-century-born student of Kong sprul, conducted a similar analysis: he considers the Great Seal as such (synonymous here with essence Great Seal) a direct and quick path for those of highest capacity, dependent on neither the sūtras nor the tantras. However, it can be combined with the sūtra or tantra methods in order to be suitable for many. These were the two approaches Kong sprul Blo gros mtha’ yas designated ‘sūtra Great Seal’ and ‘mantra Great Seal’.<sup>12</sup>

The thirteenth century saw a crucial development in that the non-tantric aspects of bKa’ brgyud pa Great Seal became highly contested; especially Sa skya Paṇḍita’s (1182–1251) critique had a lasting impact.<sup>13</sup> The interpretations of the bKa’ brgyud pa Great Seal teachings following the thirteenth century can be regarded as a story of reception, commentary, apologetic and systematisation of the practices and writings of early Tibetan masters like sGam po pa, and Indian proponents such as Saraha and Maitrī pa.<sup>14</sup> In the sixteenth-century, Great Seal masters such as ‘Brug chen Padma dkar po (1527–1592) and bKra shis rnam rgyal (1512–1587) not only fervently defended their traditions but also contributed to more systematic manuals of progressive meditative practices. The Seventh Karmapa Chos grags rgya mtsho, (1454–1506) deserves mention for his role in compiling the Indian Great Seal works, whereas the First Karma ‘phrin las pa (1456–1539) composed the most significant direct commentaries on Saraha’s three *dohā* of sixteenth-century Tibet (*Do hā skor gsum gyi tīka*).<sup>15</sup> Among the Karma bKa’ brgyud pa, the Eighth Karmapa Mi bskyod rdo rje (1507–1554), whose works are the focus of this

<sup>9</sup> Sobisch (2011: 9).

<sup>10</sup> Kong sprul bLo gros mtha’s yas, *Shes bya mdzod*, vol. 3, p. 357; see also Mathes (2007: 1).

<sup>11</sup> Mathes (forthcoming b: 10).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. used Karma bKra shis chos ‘phel’s *gNas lugs phyag rgya chen po’i rgya gzhung*. The collection of Indian works on the Great Seal, *rGya gzhung*, was assembled by the Seventh Karmapa and later edited by the Zhwa dmar Mi pham Chos kiy blo gros (*Phyag chen mdzod*), who added works by later proponents of the Great Seal.

<sup>13</sup> Jackson, D. (1994: 72); see also Kragh (1998: 52) and van der Kuijp (1986). The critique was mainly expressed in Sa skya Paṇḍita’s *sDom gsum rab dbye* and the *Thub pa’i dongs gsal*; for his strategy and the textual occurrences and further texts, see Jackson, D. (1994: 85–90, 161–189).

<sup>14</sup> See especially Mathes (2008), for ‘Gos lo tsā ba’s interpretations.

<sup>15</sup> The Seventh Karmapa compiled the Indian Great Seal texts (*rGya gzhung*) (bKra shis chos ‘phel, *gNas lugs phyag rgya chen po’i rgya gzhung*, fol. 17a). His own commentaries on the Great Seal remain largely unexplored (see *Phyag chen mdzod*, vol. nya, pp. 377–416). For the importance of Karma ‘phrin las pa’s commentaries, see Schaeffer (2000: 9) and Rheingans (2004: 61–62, 182–186). The Great Seal is outlined and defended in Padma dkar po’s *Phyag chen mngan mdzod* (see Broido 1987). While Great Seal meditative techniques are intended to be transmitted orally by a qualified teacher, written meditation manuals became increasingly popular. bKra shis rnam rgyal’s and the Ninth Karmapa’s manuals mostly consist of three steps: (i) preliminary practice (*sngon ‘gro khrid yig*), (ii) main practice and (iii) perfection of practice (*dBang phyug rdo rje*, Karmapa IX (et. al.), *sGrub brgyud rin po che’i phreng ba*; Namgyal 1986: 132–138). Sobisch (2003: 10–13) assumes these more systematised stepwise guidances emerged due to the increasing number of disciples who engaged in such practices.

paper, was undoubtedly one of the most learned masters.<sup>16</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje was a prolific writer: his oeuvre filled more than thirty volumes.<sup>17</sup> Previous academic research on his doctrines has concentrated mainly on his well-known *Madhyamakāvatāra* commentary and his *rang stong* Madhayama philosophical position. His *gzhān stong* works, such as his *Abhisamayālamkāra* commentary and the *Gzhān stong legs par smra ba'i sgron me*, have also been taken into account. But his Great Seal instructions have been relatively neglected. A selection of few textual sources of this corpus forms the basis of the following reflection.<sup>18</sup>

### Basic distinctions of the Eighth Karmapa's Great Seal

In general, the Eighth Karmapa maintains that Great Seal instructions originate from Saraha. Saraha himself expounded on the Great Seal from the perspective of affirmation, whereas his student Nāgārjuna taught from that of negation.<sup>19</sup> In his *Madhyamaka* commentary, *Dwags pa'i sgrub pa'i shing rta*, the Eighth Karmapa stresses Maitrī pa's approaches as crucial for the Great Seal.<sup>20</sup> Maitrī pa's *Tattvadaśaka* and Sahajavajra's commentary *Tattvadaśakaṭīka*, along with Jñānakīrti's *Tattvāvatāra* and the songs of Saraha are employed to that end.<sup>21</sup> According to the Karmapa, Maitrī pa's understanding of *Madhyamaka* included the teaching of Saraha the elder and younger along with Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti.<sup>22</sup> Quoting the *Tattvadaśaka*, the Karmapa comments on the verse outlining the *pāramitāyāna* pith instructions, which are to be practised adorned with the words of the guru.<sup>23</sup> The Karmapa calls Maitrī pa's

<sup>16</sup> See Rheingans (2008: 95–164), for a more extensive summary and analysis of the Eighth Karmapa's life. For the problems with the two Karmapa candidates, see Rheingans (2010). From 1498 to 1518 the Rin spungs pa lords, who were supporters of the Seventh Karmapa and the Fourth Zhwa dmar pa, had ruled with an iron fist over Dbus and Gtsang (D. Jackson 1989a: 29ff.).

<sup>17</sup> mKhas pa'i dga' ston, p. 1313: bka' 'bum ni rje pakṣi la'ang da lta po ti bcu drug las mi bzhugs la rje 'di'i bka' 'bum po ti sum bcu lhag bzhugs. According to Kam tshang, p. 355 (completed 1715), about twenty volumes (pusti) made up the Eighth Karma-pa's works. Such a difference in volume numbers does not necessarily indicate a different number of texts. The 1984 catalogue of the Beijing Nationalities Library claims (Mi-rigs-dpe-mdzod-khang (ed.), Bod gangs can gyi grub mtha', p. 17.): "it is clear in the spiritual biography that there are twenty-eight volumes, however ..." (pod nyi shu rtsa brgyad tsam yod tshul rnam thar du gsal yang). However, this claim is not verified in any of the spiritual biographies. See Rheingans (2008: 57–71), for a more detailed analysis. In sheer number, the Karmapa's writings may be compared to the likes of Shākyā mchog-l丹 (twenty-four volumes) and, most importantly, 'Brug-chen Padma dkarpo (twenty-four volumes).

<sup>18</sup> Mullin (1978) and Richardson (1980) translated very short works. In 1980 a translation of the *Bka' brgyud mgur mtsho* edited by Mi bskyod rdo rje was published by the Nālandā Translation Committee, which also published very brief prayers in 1997. Karmay (1980) occasionally referred to polemics against the Rnying ma pa. Williams (1983 a and b) and Ruegg (1988, 2000) have dealt with the Eighth Karmapa's view on madhyamaka using the *spyi don* of the *Dwags brgyus grub pa'i shing rta*. Stearns (1999) has also used his *gZhān stong*, as did Brunnhölzl (2004), who offers the most extensive study of the Eighth Karmapa's *Madhyamaka*. Parts of the commentary have been translated (Mikyö Dorje, 2006). Brunnhölzl later translated a shorter commentary of the Eighth Karmapa (Brunnhölzl 2007). Mathes (2008) has, for his forthcoming publication, used the Eighth Karmapa's *Abhisamayālamkāra-* commentary along with his *rJe yid bzang rtse ba'i rgyud gsum gsang ba*. The only academic study of the Karmapa's life prior to my 2008 doctoral dissertation had been Verhufen (1995), whose main reference is Si tu and 'Be lo's Kam tshang. For further previous research on the Eighth Karmapa, see Rheingans (2008: 15–30).

<sup>19</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *gLo bur gyi dri ma*, fol. 1b (p. 1074).

<sup>20</sup> See Rheingans (2008: 143–145), for some conditions surrounding the composition of this important work. That he wrote it late in life (1544/45), and the high esteem it received in his traditions, points to it being the culmination of his scholastic enterprise.

<sup>21</sup> Mathes (2006: 225).

<sup>22</sup> *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, fol. 6a (p. 11).

<sup>23</sup> *Tattvadasaka* 92: na sākāranirākāre tathatām jñātum icchataḥ/ madhyamā madhyamā caiva guruvāganalaṅktā|. Mathes (2006: 209) translates: 'Somebody who wishes to know suchness for himself [finds it] neither in terms of *sakara* nor *nirakara*; Even the middle [path] (i.e., *Madhyamaka*) which is not adorned with the words of a guru, is only middling.' According to Mathes (2006: 213–216), the Eighth Karmapa interprets 'the words of the guru' here as those of Nāgārjuna, whereas 'Gos lo tsā ba comprehends it as the pith instructions of the guru, who embodies Prajñāpāramitā.

understanding *amanasikāra-madhyamaka* ‘non mentation Madhyamaka’, distinguishing three types:

- i. Practices focusing on Mantra-Madhyamaka
- ii. Practices focusing on Sūtra-Madhyamaka
- iii. And those focusing on the Alikakāra-Cittamātra-Madhyamaka.<sup>24</sup>

The first two (i and ii) were taught by Mar pa and Mi la ras pa, the second (ii) was emphasised by sGam po pa and the third (iii) is the one of the vajra songs (*dohās*) as propagated by Vajrapāṇi of India, A su of Nepal and Kor Ni ru pa.<sup>25</sup>

### Common strands and divergent interpretations

When examining texts of varied genres written by Mi bskyod rdo rje, comprehending conceptualisation as in essence *dharmakāya* could be identified as a central theme, although it may be explained in a more or less scholarly manner. This certainly bears similarity to sGam po pa’s material.<sup>26</sup> In the following, the Eighth Karmapa’s varied definitions of the Great Seal into tantric and non-tantric are briefly considered. In his Madhyamaka commentary, the Eighth Karmapa reasons that this meditational theory and practice (*lta sgom*) of the Great Seal is so significant because it is the effective antidote to subtle clinging and conceptualisation in meditation. It would be indeed important for removing latent tendencies of fabrication (*prapañcāmuśaya*) and badness (*dauṣṭulya*), when the experience of the gnosis of bliss and emptiness in tantric meditation appears. As such, it is taught because it removes all veils like the ‘single white sufficient remedy’ (*dkar po gcig thub*).<sup>27</sup>

When practising the mantra system, there would be the danger that the symbolic and actual (*dpe don*) ultimate awareness (*jñāna*) of the third and fourth empowerments, would not be able to remove all veils. This reminds one of the points made in the *gLing drung pa la 'dor ba'i dris lan* (*Answer to gLing drung pa*): There – in a ‘beyond-rhetoric’ that may be typical for the Great Seal and Great Perfection traditions – the Karmapa first asserts the *Kālacakratantras* superiority to common empowerments in order to then point out the Great Seal of sGam po pa as being beyond the *Kālacakra*.<sup>28</sup> The story employed as apologetic technique in the Madhyamka commentary bears similarities to the *gLing drung pa la 'dor ba'i dris lan* as well: the Karmapa uses the example of Phag mo gru pa, who, studying first with Sa skyā Pāṇḍita, made the energies enter the central channel and boasted of experiencing the innate joy (*sahajānanda*), the path of seeing. This still incomplete experience of the fourth empowerments was, then, enhanced upon receiving pith instructions from sGam po pa.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, fol. 6a (p. 11). See also Ruegg (1988: 124ff.); Brunnholzl (2004: 52); Sherpa (2004: 172).

<sup>25</sup> The Eighth Karmapa claimed to have emphasised the *dohās* as transmitted via Vajrapāṇi in his teaching of the Great Seal (see Rheingans 2008: 160–164, and *Mi bskyod rdo rje'i spyad pa'i rabs*, fol. 9b/p.367). Though the Karmapa in the Madyamaka commentary accepts this Madhyamaka type, he argues against the Alikakāra-Cittamātra (of Ratnākaraśānti) (Ruegg 1988: 1275).

<sup>26</sup> See Rheingans (2008: 219–223), for a brief account of this strand in the instructions of the Eighth Karmapa; see also Rheingans (2011). For the similarity to sGam po pa, see the Sherpa (2004: 188–293).

<sup>27</sup> *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, fol. 6b (p. 12).

<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed study of this *dris lan*, see Rheingans (2011). For the *Kālacakra*, see also Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *dPal ldan dwags po bka' brgyud kyi gsung*, fol. 45aff. (p.555ff.).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. fol. 7a (p. 13). The story of Phag mo gru pa meeting sGam po pa is told also in Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Phyag rgya chen po sgros 'bum*, fol. 181a (p. 361). Furthermore, the Karmapa uses the *Phag mo gru pa'i zhuz lan* (which is found in the *Dwags po bka' 'bum*) on the meeting of sGam po pa and Phag mo gru pa (Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Phyag rgya chen po sgros 'bum*, fol. 184b/p. 368).

The Eighth Karmapa then notes with Sahajavajras *Tattvadaśaka* (as summarised by ‘Gos lo tsā ba) that this path is ‘essentially pāramitā, being in accordance with Mantra and being called Mahāmudrā’.<sup>30</sup> The experiential instructions of this system are also given without tantric empowerment. This Great Seal system would implicitly teach the ordinary and extraordinary Buddha nature of both sūtra and tantra, wherefore the *Ratnagotravibhāga* was emphasised by sGam po pa, Phag mo gru pa, and ‘Bri gung ‘Jig rten gsum dgon.<sup>31</sup>

‘True nature Great Seal’ (*gnas lugs phyag rgya chen po*), and the Great Seal of bliss and emptiness, were differentiated but equal in value and it would not be right to distinguish sūtra and tantra and consider the sūtra-approach superior:

Therefore, though according to the Mantra there does not exist a Great Seal instruction aside (*zur du*) from Nāro pa’s six doctrines, the lineage masters, having seen the empowerment of meaning (*don gyi dbang gzigs nas*), distinguished (*so sor mdzad*) instructions called ‘six doctrines’ and ‘Great Seal’.<sup>32</sup>

This means he allows the possibility of teaching the Great Seal directly, without tantric empowerment, though he admits that the term stems from the tantras. The approach of sGam po pa as derived from Maitrī pa and (here subsumed under practices focusing on sūtra-Madhyamaka) is then distinguished from the sūtra-based Great Seal from Atiśa. In an instruction on the Great Seal of rGyal ba Yang dgon pa, the Eighth Karmapa explains that the common (*thun mong*) instruction from Atiśa’s *Bodhipathapradīpa* would be known as the ‘innate union’ (*lhan cig skyes sbyor*) of dGe bshes sTon chen and sGe bshes dGon pa ba. He remarks, almost ironically, that sGam po pa and Phag mo gru pa had merely given such teachings the name ‘Great Seal of innate union’ for those disciples of the dark age who find pleasure in ‘the highest’, or ‘high’ (*mtho mtho*) vehicle.<sup>33</sup>

In the Madhyamaka commentary, the Karmapa also mentions the transmission of Atiśa, noting that it is the same in purport but rests more on wisdom based on conceptual analysis, whereas in Maitrī pa’s system one finds out that the analysing knowledge itself is without root and base (*gzhi med rtsa bral*). As such, Atiśa’s system contains the danger of deviating from emptiness (*shor sa*).<sup>34</sup> The danger of deviating from emptiness recurs in

<sup>30</sup> This ‘quote’ does not express the actual text but is a condensation of it by ‘Gos lo tsā ba from his *Ratnagotravibhāga*-commentary as shown by Mathes (2006: 202, n. 4); see also ‘Gos lo tsā ba gZhon nu dpal, *Theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma*. Nevertheless, the examination of the actual text by Mathes has proven that Sahajavajra indeed uses the term Great Seal for describing the pith instructions (*ibid.* and *Tattvadaśakaṭīka* 190a).

<sup>31</sup> *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, fol. 8a (p. 16).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.: des na brgyud pa 'di pa dag sngags lugs ltar na chos drug las gzhan phyag chen gyi khrid zur du med kyang don gyi dbang 'di gzigs nas chos drug dang phyag chen zhes khrid so sor mdzad do*. Ruegg (1984: 1261, n. 52) has noted two textual variants: whereas the 1969 edition reads ‘previous tradition’ (*sngar lugs*), both the 1975 (and the 2004 *Collected Works of the Eighth Karmapa* used here) have ‘mantra tradition’ (*sngags lugs*).

<sup>33</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *rGyal ba yang dgon pa'i ngo sprod bdun ma'i khrid yig*, fol. 1b (p. 560): *snyigs ma'i gdul bya theg pa mtho mtho ma la dga' ba'i ngor*. Sherpa (2004: 174–176) has suggested on the basis of sGam po pa’s writings to differentiate the Great Seal methods taught by sGam po pa: (i) ‘metonymic’ publicly taught ‘Great Seal’ *lhan cig skyes sbyor* teachings which ‘designate a cause by naming its result’ (*ibid.* 170) and mainly derive from the bKa’ gdams pa. (ii) The actual Great Seal pith instructions transmitted by Maitrī pa (see *ibid.* 169–173). This seems to have parallels in the Indian material of Sahajavarja’s *Tattvadaśakaṭīka*, which clearly distinguishes the ‘practice of realising mahāmudra on the basis of pith-instructions from both Pāramitā- and Mantrayāna’ (Mathes 2006: 221).

<sup>34</sup> *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, fol. 9a f. (p. 17f); see also Brunnhölzl (2004: 58) and Ruegg (1984: 1263). Again, a story is told: sGam po pa, having previously studied with the bKa’ gdams pa masters, had risked still being fettered by this kind of meditation; only on meeting Mi la ras pa did he overcome these ‘golden chains’. In a later passage, the Karmapa distinguishes the luminosity (*'od gsal*) as taught in the sūtras from the one in the tantras, which are—though having a common purport—distinguished by its means (*Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, fol. 30a ff./p. 56ff). The

more minor Great Seal commentaries; as does the connected argument that Great Seal is the effective antidote to clinging.<sup>35</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje quotes Mi la ras pa, commenting on his advice to avoid the ‘three delaying diversions’ (*gol sa gsum*), relating to experiences from *śamatha* and the ‘four occasions for straying’ (*shor sa bzhi*) into a wrong understanding of *śūnyatā*, where he mentions the mantra methods.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, in the Eighth Karmapa’s answer to a question about Great Seal by a Bla ma sNe ring pa, the Karmapa defines the Great Seal as tantric, perfectly in line with Sa skya Pandita’s definitions: the way of progressing though the stages and paths (*sa lam bgrod tshul*) would consist of untying the blocks in the subtle energy system of the right and left channel, melting them into the central channel, and thereupon traversing the five paths and twelve *bhūmi*. The result would be actualised in being brought to maturity through the four empowerments, practising the two stages of tantric meditation, and applying the inner and outer Seals and three types of ‘innate conduct’ (*lhan cig spyod pa*).<sup>37</sup>

In temporary summary—though at this stage of research a final statement would be premature—the strands presented here allow the deduction of some striking characteristics and contradictions. The Karmapa continues blending the sūtra and tantra, like Maitrī pa, by emphasising the term *amanasikāra-madhyamaka*. In that context, he stressed the primary importance of Saraha, Maitrī pa, sGam po pa and the Third Karmapa. The Eighth Karmapa’s Great Seal contains key elements found in the works of sGam po pa and the Indian siddhas: the removal of any clinging to experiences resulting from empowerments or to emptiness, and, connected to it, the teaching of conceptualisation as *dharma kāya*. The Karmapa confirms Great Seal practice which focuses on sūtra-Madhyamaka as sGam po pa’s emphasis. But he differentiates this Great Seal of sGam po pa from Atiśa’s system which was called ‘Great Seal’ for pedagogical purpose. Though in his *Madhyamakāvatāra* commentary the Eighth Karmapa is at times opposed to considering sūtra Great Seal in any way superior to the tantric, in the reply to gLing drung pa the Karmapa taught the Great Seal as being neither sūtra nor tantra.<sup>38</sup>

It follows that there seems to be an essential instruction, an ‘essence Great Seal’, to be applied, which is not clearly categorised but is the key for overcoming clinging and conceptualisation. One may see here some similarity to the Eighth Karmapa’s contemporary, bKra shis rnam rgyal. bKra shish rnam rgyal, quoting the Indian siddha Saraha and sGam po pa, considers Great Seal an independent path which can nevertheless be linked to tantra. It would even be acceptable to connect it to the sūtras and tantras as

commentary continues to argue that Candrakīrti’s *Madhyamakāvatāra* professes only the *rang stong* view. See Williams (1983a) and Brunnholzl (2004: 553–597), for the Eighth Karmapa’s difference to Tsong kha pa’s Madhyamaka and the Eighth Karmapa’s concern for Madhyamaka being an effective antidote to mental fixation (*prapañca*) and a means to liberation. For a translation of part of the sixth chapter, see Mikyö Dorje (2006).

<sup>35</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *gLo bur gyi dri ma*, is concerned with explaining the correct understanding and cultivation of the ordinary mind. This text contains more interesting definitions (in part using terminology from both the *pramāṇa* and *phar phyin* treatises) and debates which cannot fully be presented here. It was requested by the scribe Bod pa rgya bo and was written by the Karmapa in Kong stod 'or shod. It is found in the *dKar chag* (fol. 9a/p. 17) of the Fifth Zhwa dmar pa but not in the title list of the Eighth Karmapa in *Mi bskyod rdo rje'i spyad pa'i rabs*. It could therefore have been composed after 1546.

<sup>36</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *gLo bur gyi dri ma*, fol. 3a (p. 1077). For the *gol sa* and *shor sa*, see also Namgyal (1986: 293–313) and Jackson, D. (1994: 181–85), who translates Sa skya Pañdita’s criticism in the *Thubs pa'i dgongs gsal* which maintains that precisely this teaching is not from the Buddha. As a strategy in the *gLo bur gyi dri ma*, Mi bskyod rdo rje refers Sa skya Pañdita’s critique from the *sDom gsum rab dbye* (*blun po'i phyag rgya chen sgom pa phal cher dud 'gro'i gnas su skye*) to the wrong understanding of *śamatha*, which pertains to the *gol sa*.

<sup>37</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Ne ring 'phags pa'i dris lan*, fol. 1b (p. 322).

<sup>38</sup> See Mi bskyod rdo rje’s *gLing drung pa la 'dor ba'i dris lan*, fol. 2f. and Rheingans (2011).

benefit appears for many.<sup>39</sup> This interpretation, in line with the nineteenth century scholar bKra shis chos ‘phel, highlights the pedagogical nature of the Great Seal systems.<sup>40</sup>

As the reply to gLing drung pa (like most of the instructions) was taught in a specific context, the textual evidence is still too thin to read the Karmapa’s final view into it—if there is one. That its classification of the tantras into mundane and supramundane was found elsewhere lends some credibility to this source’s assertions. Its direction would also fit with the Karmapa’s purported emphasis of the *dohā*, which figure also among one of the three basic distinctions outlined above.<sup>41</sup> But in other works the Great Seal was defined as clearly and only tantric.

Given the interpretations outlined above, it seems useful to, at this point, remember that traditions view the teaching of the Great Seal as in one way or another depending on guru-disciple interaction. The teacher or guru, under whose close guidance the Great Seal is to be taught, may in fact permeate most of the Great Seal approaches regardless of their doctrine. In the following, the guru’s role as source of instruction and example along with the function as method (through guru-devotion) and goal of realisation will be investigated. It constitutes a research-focus next to the ‘doctrinal route’ that may shed some light on the praxis dimension of the bKa’ brgyud pa traditions.

### The guru as origin and example in the Vajrayāna and Great Seal traditions

The guru is a common element in mystic traditions ranging from Christianity to Sūfism and the Indian religions.<sup>42</sup> According to the Buddhist Tantras, the divine became immanent with the Vajrayāna, where the guru was seen as the actual embodiment of all Buddhas and bodhisattvas. The chosen personal teacher is the source of empowerment and instruction and cannot be compromised.<sup>43</sup> Importance of the teacher can thus be considered a unifying element of the Tibetan Vajrayāna-traditions.<sup>44</sup>

The guru further takes the prominent role of introducing the student into the innate in the siddha’s songs, or the *sahajayāna*, which are cited as origins of non-tantric Great Seal.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Namgyal (1986: 110–112). This is found in the subsection on identifying the essence as path in the section which describes how the Great Seal embodies the deep meaning of both the sūtras and the tantras. The passage in the *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta* is on fol. 8b (p. 16). (See also Ruegg 1988: 1261). Jackson, R. (1994: 25, n. 59, n. 60) reads it that Karmapa objected to considering tantric Great Seal in any way inferior. Yet, one may also read it that he meant it to be not inferior to the sūtra Great Seal but to the essence Great Seal.

<sup>40</sup> See section two above.

<sup>41</sup> His spiritual memoirs and biographies maintain that he had, when teaching the Great Seal, particularly emphasised the meditation instructions on the bKa’ brgyud traditions, such as the one of Jo bo Mitra Yojin and the Great Seal of the *dohās* which was transmitted in India by Vajrapāni (Rheingans 2008: 155–163).

<sup>42</sup> For mysticism, see Moore (1978: 41); for the yogi in Indian traditions, see also the essays collected in Werner (1989); for mysticism in the discourses of the Buddha, see Harvey (1989). This section does not wish to discuss the intricacies of comparative mysticism but rather point to some striking themes in the Great Seal traditions. For understanding such aspects of religious experience, see, for example, Sharf (1996).

<sup>43</sup> See Snellgrove (1987: 176–180) who quotes *Guhyasamājatantra*, for the teacher in the Buddhist tantras; Brooks (1990: 71) considers the guru one of several elements typical for Tantrism, as does Padoux (2000: 42–45). For definitions of Tantra, see Padoux (2002) and White (2000, 2005). See also the ‘Celebration of the Guru’ as common elements of the siddha’s songs in the introduction of Jackson, R. (2004: 3–53).

<sup>44</sup> For the bKa’ brgyud traditions, see, for example, the famed short invocation of Vajradhara: ‘Devotion is said to be the head of meditation. A meditator constantly calls upon his lama as he is the one who opens the door to the treasury of profound instructions. Grant me your blessing so that non-artificial devotion may be born [within me]!’ (dBang phyug rdo rje Karmapa IX (et. al.), *sGrub brgyud rin po che'i phreng ba*, p. 117: *mos gus sgom gyi mgo bor gsungs pa bzhi / man ngag gter sgo 'byed pa'i bla ma la/ /rgyun du gsol ba 'debs pa'i sgom chen la/ /bcos min mos gus skye bar byin gyis rlobz*).

<sup>45</sup> Abhayadattaśrī, *Grub chen brgyad cu*, 172 (song of Tantipa), translated by Kapstein (2006a: 55). See also Tillipa’s *Dohākoṣa* 6 (Jackson, R. 2004; see also ed. and trans. Bhayani 1998: 14). Saraha’s songs portray the guru as someone who ‘has done with karma’ (*las zin pa yi skyes bu*) and at whose feet one should gain certainty about the nature of one’s

The bKa' brgyud pa Great Seal preliminaries usually contain a meditation on the teacher, which is, at times, considered the actual practice.<sup>46</sup> sGam po pa has stated:

It (Buddhahood) is acquired through the blessing of the guru, from one's own reverence and devotion, and by the power of meditatively cultivating through diligent effort, whereas otherwise it will not be acquired.<sup>47</sup>

The Eighth Karmapa is no exception in suggesting the teacher's significance. He, for example, explains that there is no more supreme 'reincarnate [lama]' (*sprul sku*) than the vajra-master who transmits the liberating and ripening (*smin grod*) empowerments and instructions. The meditation of those who do not truly discern the practice (*gdar sha gcod*) with the help of a supreme teacher, but instead practise not liberating their mind but pretending (*ltar 'chos*) greatness in the Great Seal, is likened to 'ascetic practice of pigs and dogs'.<sup>48</sup> The bad teacher is as dangerous to spiritual development as the authentic one is beneficial; pretense of spiritual development is regarded as a main transgression.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the Karmapa notes that false teachers abound<sup>50</sup> and complains about lamas these days, 'who give up a bit of drinking and start talking about accomplishment'.<sup>51</sup>

Why is the guru so important? The Great Seal would be a transmission of the meaning (*don brgyud*), and the one communicating its understanding should be called 'main lama' (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*).<sup>52</sup> The Eighth Karmapa's study and practice of the Great Seal mainly consisted of the transmission of blessing from his single most important teacher, Sangs rgyas mnyan pa.<sup>53</sup> The stories quoted so often, be it about Phag mo gru pa

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own mind: *Dohākoṣa* 43a (Jackson, R. 2004): *kye lags dbang po ltos shig dang / 'di las ngas ni ma gtogs* (*Advayavajra* reads: *mi rtogs*) *so /las zin pa yi skyes bu yi / drung du sems thag gcad par byos* (see also Scherer 2007). See also Jackson, R. (2004: 3–53).

<sup>46</sup> The Ninth Karmapa argues: '[The meditation on the teacher] is referred to as a "preliminary", however, it determines whether meditation takes place or not, since it is actually the main practice' (dBang phyug rdo rje, *Phyag chen nges don rgya mtsho*, fol. 48b: *de ni sngon 'gro ming btags kyang dngos gzhi rang yin pas sgom skye mi skye 'di la rag las so/*.) For the various Great Seal preliminaries see dBang phyug rdo rje Karmapa IX (et. al.), *sGrub brgyud rin po che'i phreng ba*; Namgyal (1986: 132–138); bKra shis rnam rgyal, *sNgon 'gro khrid yig thun bzhi'i rnal 'byor du bya ba*. See also the seventh-century work Ngag dbang bsTan pa'i nyi ma, *Phyag chen khrid yig*. In the fivefold Great Seal of the 'Bri gung pa the teacher is also one of the five elements of practice (Sobisch 2003). For the importance of the teacher in sGam po pa's Great Seal, see Sherpa (2004: 93), Jackson, D. (1994: 150), and Kragh (1998: 12–26); see also Namgyal (1986: 112).

<sup>47</sup> sGam po pa bSod nams rin chen, *rJe phag mo gru pa'i zhu las* (translation and Tibetan text in Jackson, D. 1994: 150–151).

<sup>48</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Phyag rgya chen po'i byin rlabs kyi ngos 'dzin*, fol. 6a (p. 745).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. The text paints drastic consequences for those pretenders, who are prone to find themselves in the hellish states of existence (*narakas*).

<sup>50</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Karma pa mi bskyod rdo rje'i rnam thar*, fol. 17b (p. 148). It was noted before, that the slightly tense political climate coincided with lamentations of spiritual degeneration, a theme which was also popular in the much later nineteenth century vivid descriptions of Dza dPal sprul (Patrul Rinpoche 1994: 102–103; *sNyung thig sngon 'gro'i khrid yig*). 'Blind faith' is thus not recommended, nor receiving the four empowerments, nor meditating on the teacher without having examined him. See also Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Po to ba'i chig lab ring mo la mi bskyod rdo rje 'grel pa mdzad pa'i bstan bcos*, fol. 73b (p. 70), where the Eighth Karmapa comments on a work by the bKa' gdams pa master Po to ba. The relationship and the question of who is a teacher and who is not is also explained in an instruction the Eighth Karmapa passed on to his fervent sponsors of the sKu rab pa family (Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *sKu rab pa'i sde pa khu dbon la bstsal ba'i khrid kyi rim pa*, fol. 8a ff./ pp. 209ff.).

<sup>51</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII *Kanj tshang phyag chen nyams len gvi khrid*, fol. 1b (p. 958). According to the colophon, this text consists of a note made by some students of the Eighth Karmapa, which they then showed to him for confirmation (ibid. fol. 20b/p. 996).

<sup>52</sup> The Eighth Karmapa defines quoting 'Gos lo tsā ba in *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, fol. 8a (p. 16).

<sup>53</sup> See Rheingans (2008: 118–125). What is more, the first recorded teaching of the Karmapa was the meditation instruction (*zab khrid*) on the guru yoga, imparted in 1513 in Ri bo che (A khu A khra, fol. 34b/p.100).

and sGam po pa, Khams pa sbad mchod and Phag mo gru pa, or Mi la ras pa and sGam po pa, in essence revolve around the students and their relationship to a teacher.<sup>54</sup>

The instructions analysed in previous research were either written by the Karmapa or (supposedly) a recorded word.<sup>55</sup> In the dialogues, the great devotion the Karmapa inspired helped the students get closer to highest insight. Thus, tradition views as origin of Great Seal instructions in both oral and written form the guru, who is legitimised by his transmission.<sup>56</sup> The Karmapa writes in a spiritual memoir that the teacher does not place the liberation in one's hand, but that one should see his qualities and practice like him.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the teacher is origin as well as example.

Philosophical argument for the teacher is rare in the examined material, so natural does appear the guru's primary role.<sup>58</sup> The implicit argument is rather one of transmission and experience; by invoking the authenticity of the lineage (*brgyud pa*), its power or blessing (Skt. *adhiṣṭhāna*), and the realisation of the guru.<sup>59</sup>

### Guru-devotion as method and goal in the The Eighth Karmapa's Great Seal instructions

This section turns to the teacher's role not only as origin or example but as means and goal of realisation in the Eighth Karmapa's Great Seal instructions that do not explicitly entail the tantric path of means.<sup>60</sup>

*Kam tshang phyag chen nyams len gyi khrid* (*Meditation Instruction for the Kam tshang Great Seal Practice*) explains the different paths for the different capacities, remarking that if a student endowed with 'fortunate residues' (*skal ldan*) meets a guru of the Dwags po tradition, not much elaboration is needed. On the basis of the deep wish to let go of attachment to cyclical existence (*nges 'byung*) and harmful actions, 'opening up' or 'invoking' (*gsol 'debs*) is considered essential, since the realisation of all paths only emerges from the three jewels and the lama. Through fierce invocation (*gsol ba phur tshugs su btab pa*), one could not avoid accomplishing *śamatha*, *vipaśyanā*, and the timeless awareness (*ye shes*) of the Great Seal.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>54</sup> For the story of Kham pa Sbas mchod, for example, see Mi bskyod rdo rje's *gLing drung pa la 'dor ba'i dris lan*, fol. 3a—3b and Rheingans (2011).

<sup>55</sup> See Rheingans (2011) and Rheingans (2008: Chapter Five).

<sup>56</sup> For example, in a dream vision of Mar pa, where he describes meeting the siddha Saraha (Kapstein 2006a: 51–52). The poem is studied in Kapstein (2003: 767–773).

<sup>57</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Karma pa mi bskyod rdo rje'i rnam thar*, fol. 17b, p. 148.

<sup>58</sup> Roger Jackson has brought up this issue in a keynote speech on Great Seal studies at the *Mahāmudrā* Panel of the Eleventh Conference of the IATS, Bonn, August 2006.

<sup>59</sup> Kragh (forthcoming) has pointed out with the example of the six doctrines of Nāro pa, how specific texts were only transmitted due to their authority but not necessarily due to their being used in practice. Davidson has argued that, in Tibet, the translator and his (sometimes self-styled) instructions (*gdams ngag*) constitute an important point of Tibetan tantric lineages, as do the clans for its transmission (Davidson 2004: 149–151).

<sup>60</sup> An important stanza for guru-devotion among the bKa' brgyud pa traditions is *Hevajratantra* I.viii.36 (especially the third line): 'That which is not expressed by others, the inborn; which cannot be found anywhere; is to be known through ...[a special kind of]... guru attendance; and through one's own merit' (translation by Sobisch 2011, who treats in detail the variant problematic readings and 'Jig rten dgon po's interpretation of *dus mtha'* (Skr. *parva*) as the final moment of attending the guru as *dharmakāya*). See also David Jackson's translation of the same verse and its context in sGam po pa's *rJe Phag mo gru pa's zhu lan* (Jackson, D. 1994: 150–152).

<sup>61</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII *Kam tshang phyag chen nyams len gyi khrid*, fol. 3b (p. 962). It is difficult to accurately translate the meaning of *gsol 'debs*. When it is used with an object following in the later part of the sentence, it can convey something like 'please' or 'I ask of you' ('please grant me innate gnosis/timeless awareness of the innate': *gsol ba 'debs so lhan skyes ye shes tsol*). Where it is used without an object following, 'to invoke' or 'open up' can convey the state to be achieved in phrases such as 'all beings open up to the precious lama': *sems can thams cad bla ma rin po che la gsol ba 'debs* (both examples from the guru-yoga in dBang phyug rdo rje Karmapa IX (et. al.), *sGrub brgyud rin po che'i phreng ba*, p. 117). 'To pray' would be an alternative, but 'prayer' often carries implicit

In other words, the idea of invocation, or opening up, is both vital entrance to practice and a form of training. The Karmapa then defines *gsol 'debs*: apart from eating, drinking, and sleeping, the practitioner's body (through attending the lama), speech (through pronouncing the qualities of the lama), and mind (contemplating only the manifold qualities), should be constantly focused on the teacher as opposed to invoking the teacher at set times and occasions only.<sup>62</sup> In an interlinear remark (*mchan*) a formal *guru-yoga* is outlined.<sup>63</sup>

The text continues with a description of the main body of practice (*dngos bzhi*), which consists of the practices of *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* meditation.<sup>64</sup> Again, the particular method of calm abiding and insight meditation of the Dwags po tradition is connected to contemplating one's teacher; after an outline of calm abiding practice, the Karmapa continues: 'in the tradition of the system of the bKa' brgyud doctor from Dwags po, which expounds all words [of the Buddha] (*bka'*) as an instructional precept (*gdams ngag*)',<sup>65</sup> one would sit in the seven-fold meditational posture, evoke the teacher as the Buddha Vajradhara, and fervently open up to him (*gsol 'debs*). *gSol 'debs* incites the state of devotion or openness (*mos gus*), which in turn acts as a means to let the mind rest one-pointedly on the wholesome (*dge ba*): a facilitator to calm the mind and experience the three qualities connected with it: clarity (*gsal ba*), joy (*bde ba*), and non-conceptuality (*rnam rtog med pa*).<sup>66</sup>

The teacher re-surfaces in the ensuing discussion on different objections to the bKa' brgyud method, where the Karmapa emphasises that in this tradition one should not over-analyse conventionally.<sup>67</sup> Instead, one should rest the mind in a way that is suitable for the Great Seal ultimate awareness to arise. How? By invoking (*gsol 'debs*) an authentic teacher, who is the essence of all Buddhas, and having his blessing affecting or entering (*bzhugs*) one's mind.<sup>68</sup> He then relates it to sGam po pa's three paths: (i) the one of analysis (*dpyod pa*), (ii) the one of direct cognition (*dngon sum*), and (iii) the one of blessing (*byin rlabs*). Here the path of blessing is not equated with the Vajrayāna (as is at times done in sGam po pa's writings), but with 'the tradition of this transmission' (*brgyud pa 'di'i lugs*).<sup>69</sup>

assumptions regarding the nature of religion (Gomez 2000: 1037). For the so-called 'Christian phase' in translating Buddhism, see Doboom (2001: 2f.).

<sup>62</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Kam tshang phyag chen nyams len gyi khrid*, fol. 3b (p. 962).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. One visualises the Buddha Vajradhara, being one with the First Karmapa and the root lama, e.g. the Eighth Karmapa. After a seven branch training (*yan lag bdun*), the guru dissolves in to a Great Seal *bindu* and then with oneself.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. fol. 4b (p. 964).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. fol. 5a (p. 965): *bka' brgyud dwags po lha rje'i lugs kyis bka' thams cad gdams ngag tu 'chad pa'i* [fol. 5b/p. 966] *srol la/*.

<sup>66</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Kam tshang phyag chen nyams len gyi khrid*, fol. 5a (p. 965). The work discusses these states and how they are connected to the sixth consciousness (*drug pa yid kyi rnam par shes pa*) in more detail. As this section analyses the roles of the teacher, the subtleties of *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* meditation are not discussed here in detail. A similar outline is found at a later stage of the work (ibid. fol. 8b/p. 972).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. fol. 6b (p. 968). An interlinear comment strikes one as similar to the *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, where the Karmapa is generally opposed to the reification of further *prapañca* through building a philosophical edifice (Brünnhölzl 2004: 555; Williams 1983a: 125).

<sup>68</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Kam tshang phyag chen nyams len gyi khrid*, fol. 6b (p. 968).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. This is certainly a very interesting point, which supports Sobisch's research on 'Jig rten dgon po's understanding of guru devotion as the single means to enlightenment (Sobisch 2011). The interlinear comment of the Eighth Karmapa here reserves this path to the individual with fortunate propensities (*skal ldan*) who, upon having the nature of mind directly pointed out (by a teacher), realises enlightenment. This would be the famed 'sudden' (*cig car*) approach (Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Kam tshang phyag chen nyams len gyi khrid*, fol. 6b/p. 968). For sGam po pa's three paths, see Rheingans (2008: 39–41); see also Sherpa (2004: 129–36), Kragh (1998: 29–39), and Mathes (2006: 2).

The work continues to explain both calm *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* meditation across ten folios; the details of which cannot be expounded here.<sup>70</sup> Again, the lama is employed as a means, while cultivating *samadhi* or profound absorption and the three ensuing qualities of joy (*bde ba*), clarity (*gsal ba*), and non-conceptuality (*mi rtog pa*); making the face (*zhal*) of the lama an object of mind is considered a skillful means for one-pointedness (*rtse gcig*) in this bKa' brgyud lineage.<sup>71</sup>

*Vipaśyanā* is at first introduced with the depictions of essencelessness (Tib. *bdag med*, Skt. *anātman*). After some discussions, the Karmapa argues for a particular way of insight meditation, which is summarised as ‘... [one] needs to settle the immediate mind (*de ma thag yid*) on all aspects of the mental formation (Skt. *samskāra*, Tib. *'du byed*) of the eight groups of consciousness.’<sup>72</sup> In other words, ‘immediate’ means also ‘moment’ and ‘settle’ is defined as ‘apprehending’ (*'dzin pa*), an approach attributed to sGam po pa and the Third Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje.<sup>73</sup>

The function of devotion (*mos gus*) in this work is thus an intense state of mind which is both a prerequisite of, and also a part of, the actual practice.<sup>74</sup> Connected or enhanced by the practice of *gsol 'debs*, it can be used to both concentrate the mind as well as to bring it to a state where conceptual states fade and the power (*byin rlabs*) enters the mind stream of the trainee. That does not exclude investigating the mind, which the instruction also professes to a great degree, but points to devotion’s crucial function next to understanding or insight *prajñā*.<sup>75</sup>

Other instructions indicate a similar usage for ‘confidence’ (Tib. *dad pa*, Skt. *śraddhā*). The first of seven sessions in the *Phyag rgya chen po bsgom pa la nye bar mkho ba'i zin bris* (*Note of the Prerequisites for Cultivating the Great Seal*)<sup>76</sup> advises:

Above one's head, on a lotus and moon[-disc], [one visualises] the Karmapa Mi bskyod rdo rje, having a black crown in a garuda wing [form] and with golden radiance, endowed with the three dharma robes. Then one does one-pointed prayer through the [praise entitled] *sKu bstod zla med ma*.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>70</sup> The discussions of insight meditation presented in this brief but informative source are themselves of considerable interest for the doctrinal aspects of Great Seal teaching. What concerns this section here, however, is the role of the teacher.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. fol. 8b (p. 972). Making ‘blind faith’ (*rmongs dad*) its cause, however, is not considered correct (*chog*).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. fol. 17a (p. 988).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. The interlinear comment specifies this as the intention of the Third Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje, as the defining characteristic (*rang gi mtshan nyid*) of whatever consciousness (*shes pa*) is apprehended. The text asserts the indispensability for understanding this subtle point because, on the basis of it, the ignorance about the ultimate awareness of the Great Seal is removed. After more descriptions of how the levels (*bhūmi*) of the Bodhisattvas are realised, this approach is once more ascribed to sGam po pa and the Third Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje (ibid. fol. 20a/p. 995). The wording may likely refer to Rang byung rdo rje’s *rNam shes ye shes 'byed pa'i bstan bcos* (see also the paraphrase by Sheehan 2005). The work concludes with an invocation of the transmission lineage of the Great Seal lamas from Vajradhara via Saraha to Sangs rgyas mnyan pa and the Eighth Karmapa. Thereby, it places the instructions in the continuity of the precepts passed from teacher to student (ibid. fol. 20b/p. 996).

<sup>74</sup> Other instructions directly make *mos gus* the central theme: Apart from the *Kam tshang phyag chen nyams len gyi khrid*, there are titles clearly indicating *mos gus* as the main factor. For example the *Mos gus phyag chen gyi khrid zab mo rgyal ba rgod tshang pa'i lugs*, the *Mos gus bdun ma'i khrid yig ghung 'grel ba dang bcas pa* (esp. fol. 31 a/p. 795), and the *Mos gus chen mo'i khrid* (*Kam tshang*, p. 364) which remains unidentified (all authored by the Eighth Karmapa).

<sup>75</sup> Analysis of the absence of self is carried out in for example Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Kam tshang phyag chen nyams len gyi khrid*, fol. 11a–13a/pp. 977–981).

<sup>76</sup> This text again consists of a note (*zin bris*) of the Eighth Karmapa’s teaching made by his student Bya bral Ratnanātha, who then later showed it to the Karmapa for confirmation (Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Phyag rgya chen po bsgom pa la nye bar mkho ba'i zin bris*, fol. 3b/p. 275).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. fol. 1b (p. 272): */de'ang phyag rgya chen po bsgom pa la nye bar mkho ba'i dmigs thun dang po ni/ rang gi spyi bor pad zla'i steng du rgyal ba karma pa mi bskyod rdo rje zhwa nag khyung gshog gser mdangs can chos gos rnam pa gsum ldan du gsal btab nas sku bstod zla med ma'i sgo nas gsol 'debs rtse gcig tu byed pa'o/*.

Session two defines the ‘three kinds of confidence’ (*dad pa gsum*) as centring on the teacher, deviating from the more standard description in sGam po pa’s *Thar rgyan*:<sup>78</sup>

2. Then, increasing the longing towards that very [lama] (*de nyid*), one mainly strives to accomplish the very trust of wishing; [and] while [doing so], the trust of conviction, [namely] to consider whatever [the lama] says true and valid,<sup>79</sup> comes about. And then, as the trust, where the two obscurations of one’s mind become removed, arises, one settles on that (*de*) one-pointedly.<sup>80</sup>

Here, confidence culminates in a state free from obscurations. This suggests that *dad pa* is not only prerequisite but also actual meditation, though the object in Great Seal practice is the guru rather than the teachings or the Buddha in more general terms.<sup>81</sup>

Additionally, it is vital to mention the practices or instructions, which are either explicitly designed as a meditation on the teacher (*guru-yoga*) or come very close to such practices, indicated by their content. One of the Eighth Karmapa’s instructions exemplifies a guidebook for meditation that passes on essential instructions for advancing one’s contemplation.<sup>82</sup> It contains condensed, and at times cryptic, advice for seven meditation sessions; ranging from *guru-yoga* and control of inner energies, to contemplations of loving-kindness and compassion.<sup>83</sup> But this ‘heart-essence of instructions’ clearly puts all practices into the framework of ‘becoming’ the teacher (presumably in its ultimate and metaphorical sense). It starts with the words: ‘further, those wishing to accomplish me myself’,<sup>84</sup> and closes with: ‘Those who wish to realise

<sup>78</sup> For a slightly diverging definition popular in the bKa’ brgyud lineage, see sGam po pa bSod nams rin chen, *Dam chos yid bzhin nor bu thar pa rin po che'i rgyan*, pp. 214–219. D. Jackson has observed that also graded teaching works of sGam po pa and Phag mo gru pa start out with the notion of confidence or trust (*dad pa*) as prerequisite, as do the ‘three [levels] of appearance’ (*snang ba gsum*) meditation manuals of the Sa skyapa (Jackson, D. 1995: 233; 242, n. 24).

<sup>79</sup> One may add a second ‘*dzin pa* for *tshad ma* here, or interpret the passage in a different way: from the *bden 'dzin* comes the understanding of *tshad ma*, ‘considering whatever [the lama] says as true, [he is] authentic/valid.’

<sup>80</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Phyag rgya chen po bsgom pa la nye bar mkho ba'i zin bris*, fol. 1b (p. 272): 2 /*de nas de nyid la 'dun pa cher btang ste 'dod pa'i dad pa nyid gtsobor sgrub pa la yid ches pa'i dad pa ci gsungs la bden 'dzin tshad ma skyes shing/ de nas rang rgyud kyi sgrib gnyis dwangs* [fol. 2a/p. 273] *pa'i dad pa 'byung bas de la rtse gcig tu 'jog pa'o/*.

<sup>81</sup> In different Buddhist traditions, confidence (Skt. *śraddhā*, Pāli: *saddhā*) sometimes translated ‘faith’, has a range of meanings and is not to be confused with the theological concept of belief. The idea of confidence as practice is not confined to the Great Seal traditions, though the main focus is not usually the guru in other contexts. Brassard (2000: 98–99) has argued that in Mahāyāna context of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, beyond mere preliminary value, *śraddhā* can be considered a practice itself. It is sometimes glossed as ‘trust or reliance on someone else’ (*parapratyaya*), further connotations are often subsumed under *prasāda* or the *prasannacitta*, which evokes the meaning of calm and serenity as well as conviction and trust (Gomez 2004: 278). In the sūtras, it is found among the ‘five faculties’ (*indriya* or *bala*) conducive to good practice or, in more scholastic works, among the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment (*ibid.*; Gimello 2004: 51). These are positive states of mind (*kuśala*), which often have the connotation of active engagement in practice, overcoming sluggishness and doubt (also expressed with the word *adhimukti* or *adhimokṣa*), and gaining the ability to trust or rely upon something (*Abhidharmakośa* VI. 29).

<sup>82</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *mNyams med dags* [sic!] *po bka' brgyud kyi gdam* [sic!] *pa'i srogi* [abbrv. for *srog gi*] *yang snying*, NGMPP, Reel no. E 12794/6, 9 fols., manuscript, *dbu med*, partly written in *'khyug yig* (*Heart Essence of the Life Force of the Instructions of the Uncomparable Dwags po bKa' brgyud*). It found entry into the Eighth Karmapa’s title list from 1546 (*Mi bskyod rdo rje'i spyad pa'i rabs*, fol. 8a/p. 365), and the colophon clearly indicates the Eighth Karmapa’s authorship.

<sup>83</sup> Informants from the Karma bKa’ brgyud tradition have maintained that this work was designed for advanced practitioners who had received guidance previously. They would know what certain cryptic lines would mean when doing their meditative practice (oral communication, Ma ni ba Shes rab rgyal mtshan Rin po che, July 2007; oral communication mKhan po Nges don, December 2006).

<sup>84</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *mNyams med dags po bka' brgyud*, fol. 1b: *de yang khoo (= kho bo) rang sgrub par 'dod pa rnams/*.

the state of me, Mi bskyod rdo rje, in one life and one body, should strive to accomplish what was taught [here] in this way.<sup>85</sup> Emulating the teacher is thus the fundamental goal of the path; and in that, the work is similar to the Eighth Karmapa's famed *Thun bzhi bla ma'i rnal 'byor*, which starts with: 'Now, those, who think only of me, Mi bskyod rdo rje...'.<sup>86</sup> This typical blend of oral and written transmission extends to the point where the text comes to life in meditation and could be termed 'the teacher as text'. Another *guru-yoga* instruction concludes with the remark that unless *mos gus* is stable, methods to increase trust (*dad pa*) towards the teacher should be applied.<sup>87</sup> This suggests *mos gus* also functions as goal.

On the whole, the concept of *dad pa*, or confidence towards the teacher, and the ensuing practices of *mos gus* and *gsol 'debs*, are a central pillar of the Great Seal as prerequisite, practice, and goal. One may even go so far as to say that devotion to the teacher is the means for realising the Great Seal next to insight. With this emphasis, these particular instances of bKa' brgyud pa Great Seal texts could be termed Vajrayāna, insofar as Vajrayāna has the guru and his transmission as a defining characteristic and insofar the guru is used as means: whether the yogic exercises of the path of means are employed or not.<sup>88</sup>

### Concluding Reflections

Although the Karmapa's interpretations of various Buddhist doctrines will engage researchers for years to come, these preliminary remarks allow for some temporary conclusions. This paper has portrayed a threefold basic differentiation of the Eighth Karmapa's Great Seal. Further investigating Great Seal categorisations in the instructions of the Eighth Karmapa, it has highlighted some distinct features: how the Karmapa differentiates between sGam po pa's innate union instructions and those passed on from Atiśa and how he uses stories and the rhetoric of removal of clinging for justification. Some question and answer texts define Great Seal as only tantric, some as beyond sūtra and tantra, whereas the Madhyamaka commentary maintains they should not be distinguished in purport.

Apart from the common strands, these contradictions suggest that at this stage of research it is hard to pin down the 'final' interpretation or hierarchy of the Eighth Karmapa's Great Seal. As it seems intrinsic to the study of Great Seal texts that it often evades classification, one must ask oneself, whether such a research avenue—albeit a necessary and important undertaking—does full justice to the material.<sup>89</sup> But the doctrinal variegations support the Great Seal's pedagogical significance, in which genre, teacher, and addressee play more than a secondary role. Viewing these different approaches as pedagogical helps make sense of these apparent contradictions. As does an investigation of the guru's significance.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. fol. 9a: *zhes bya ba 'di ni kho bo mi bskyod rdo rje'i go 'phang tshe cig lus cig gi grub par 'dod pa rnams kyi* (emend to *kyis*?) *'di bzhin sgrub par mdzod cig//*.

<sup>86</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Thun bzhi bla ma'i rnal shyor*, p. 269: *da ni kho bo mi bskyod rdo rje kho na min pa bsam rgyu med pa kun*.

<sup>87</sup> Mi bskyod rdo rje, Karmapa VIII, *Bla ma phyi nang gsang gsum kyi sgrub thabs mos gus gsol 'debs*, fol. 18b (p. 810).

<sup>88</sup> Sobisch (2011) has reached similar conclusions by investigating sGam po pa's and 'Jig rten dgon po's works. He has argued that the guru devotion is the single means for the arising of realisation, especially in the final phase, where the guru is understood to be the *dharmaśāya*. In the *guru-yoga* the realisation would—though not depending on the path of means—still be understood as tantra.

<sup>89</sup> Jackson, D. (1990: 59–63) has suggested that researchers trace each doctrine in the context of the Great Seal debates around Sa skyā Pandita and the bKa' brgyud pa. As was shown, doctrinal classification and apologetics were carried out extensively in the writings of the Eighth Karmapa, bKra shis rnam rgyal, and 'Brug chen Padma dkar po.

To sum up, three facets have become evident in the Eighth Karmapa's Great Seal interpretations at this stage of research. Firstly, there is a much needed instruction for understanding conceptualisation's true nature as Buddhahood and overcoming subtle clinging. Secondly, this instruction is taught differently: as directly letting go of artifice, on the basis of sūtra-related practices, or with the aid of the tantric path of means; different approaches are praised as superior in different texts. Finally, the common origin of these instructions is the guru. The guru is used in meditation practices as an aid, devotion to the guru in combination with understanding conceptualisation is a soteriological sufficient factor, and realisation of the guru's ultimate state represents the goal—whether employing the yogic exercises of the path of means or not.

In conjunction with the doctrinal flexibility outlined, this supports the suggestion that the Great Seal is not a set of readymade doctrines and practices but rather consists of, and lives in, the dynamic interaction between teacher and student. The teacher is—true to the Buddhist ideal of the 'best preacher'—depicted as the one who selects the appropriate method from the 'ocean of instructions'.<sup>90</sup> The main goal is then to actualise the innate, to find conceptualisation as in essence *dharma-kāya* and come to an experience. Experience and realisation are the ultimate goals against which any means is 'tested'.<sup>91</sup> This pragmatic approach bears similarities to traits of early Buddhism, as pointed out in the famous *Alagaddūpamasutta*.<sup>92</sup> Thus, the Great Seal of the Eighth Karmapa may be better understood as an adaptable and flexible pragmatic device, where experience is conceived of as superior to claims of ultimate truth.<sup>93</sup> It is to be hoped that such an approach will constitute a useful avenue for future research into the rich textual material of the Indo-Tibetan Great Seal traditions.

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<sup>90</sup> For the Buddha as the best preacher, see Deegalle (2006: 21–35).

<sup>91</sup> Realisation is achieved through training in meditative experiences (*myam*) and finally resting in the natural state (Martin 1992: 242). Sharf (1995) has—mainly on the basis of Japanese Buddhism—argued that the rhetoric of experience is not based on exact terms and experiences. Gyatso warns not to take this to the extreme (1999: 115f.) and shows that, unlike Japanese Buddhism, Tibetan traditions clearly have written about experience (*nyams myong*). She refers to the Great Seal, Direct Vision branch of the Great Perfection and the four empowerments of the *niruttara-tantras*.

<sup>92</sup> It compares the Buddha's teaching to a raft: 'You, O monks, who understand the Teaching's similitude to a raft, you should let go even (good) teachings, how much more false ones!' *Alagaddūpamasutta* 14 (*Majjhima Nikāya* 22), trans. Ñāṇāponika Thera (1974), quoted after Scherer (2006), who offers an excellent analysis of Buddhist andragogy.

<sup>93</sup> The contemporary Zhwa dmar pa, Mi pham Chos kyi blo gros (b. 1952), for example, reported that he is using the ultimate teaching from the Ninth Karmapa's guidebook for both pointing out the nature of mind directly, and as instruction on the completion stage (oral communication, July 2006).

## Bibliography

### General Abbreviations

HR	<i>History of Religion</i>
IATS	International Association of Tibetan Studies
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JIABS	<i>Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies</i>
JIATS	<i>Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies</i>
JIP	<i>Journal of Indian Philosophy</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of the Tibet Society</i>
LTWA	Library of Tibetan Works and Archives
NGMPP	Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project
PIATS	<i>Proceedings of the Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies</i>

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