

## **Reflections on Pema Lingpa's *Key to the Eight Principal Tantric Medicines*, and its relevance today\***

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### **Abstract**

The category of the Eight Principal Tantric Medicines (sman rtsa brgyad) is ubiquitous in tantric sources, such as the regular medicinal cordial offerings (sman mchod) found in many tantric sādhanas. These substances form some of the key ingredients to be included in medicinal accomplishment (sman sgrub) practices, when sacred medicinal pills are compounded and consecrated in the course of a Major Practice Session (sgrub chen), conducted over a number of days. The category is referred to in early sources, such as in the works of the

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ancestral forefathers of the Nyingma school, the twelfth century Nyang ral Nyima özer (nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer) and the thirteenth century Guru Chöwang (gu ru chos dbang). In the revelations of the national saint of Bhutan, Pema Lingpa (padma gling pa, 1450-1521), we find a short pithy text relating to this classification: "A Key to the Eight Principal and Thousand Varieties of Medicines" (rtsa brgyad yan lag stong gi lde mig), which reiterates a revelation of the earlier Ratna Lingpa (ratna gling pa, 1403-1479). This article explores the text, and the themes which live on in later works and contemporary practice.

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This article introduces a short text, which was revealed by Pema Lingpa (*padma gling pa*, 1450-1521) [see *image 1*] in Bumthang and is presented at the beginning of his medicinal accomplishment (*smān sgrub*) cycle in the Dudjom edition of his *Collected Works*.<sup>1</sup>



*Image 1: Pema Lingpa, Early 20th century painting from Bhutan, Collection of Ariana Maki Photographic Archive, Himalayan Art Resources Item No. 43737.*

It is in fact almost identical to a text revealed earlier by one of Pema Lingpa's famous predecessors, Ratna Lingpa (*ratna gling pa*, 1403-1479), who similarly had a lasting impact on Bhutan's religious heritage. However, for this article, I

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<sup>1</sup> A Key to the Eight Principal (Medicines) and Thousand varieties (rtsa brgyad yan lag stong gi lde mig).

focus primarily on Pema Lingpa's version, which includes a few annotations not found in Ratna Lingpa's revelation.<sup>2</sup> Ratna Lingpa's text has a longer version of the title, but both include the element of "*The Key to the Eight Principal and Thousand varieties*" (*rtsa brgyad yan lag stong gi lde mig*, hereafter, *The Key*; Pema Lingpa's version referred to as PL, Ratna Lingpa's as RL).

It is worth adding briefly here that the recurrence of a virtually identical text in a new revelation is not considered to represent a later compilation or reworking of the earlier text, but a fresh presentation stemming from the revealer's buried memories of Guru Rinpoche's teachings in his previous life, and carrying Guru Rinpoche's direct blessings, as well as those of the revealer. Thus, even though a teaching may carry the same content as previous texts, it will be valued for its special place in the new cycle of revelations, and in effect, may be given a new lease of life and expanded range of influence.

The text is a small commentary on the category of the "Eight Principal Medicines and the Thousand varieties" (*smān rtsa brgyad yan lag stong*). Now, this classification appears to be unknown in Tibetan and Himalayan medical sources, yet it is ubiquitous in Nyingma tantric sources. It occurs widely in the regular medicinal cordial offerings (*smān mchod*) found in many tantric sādhanas [see *image 2*].



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<sup>2</sup> The content of the two texts is largely the same, apart from minor scribal variants. They differ also in their titles; in the ḍākiṇī symbolic script (*mkha' 'gro brda' yig*) with which they both open; and in their revelation colophons, which identify the different *gter stons*, and the separate revelation sites and occasions. As mentioned here, Pema Lingpa's version also adds some annotations, at least one of which is marked by the revelation punctuation.

*Image 2: The elixir offering; performed by the Head Lama and the Master of Offerings, facing the mandala within the temple, Major Practice Session, Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelegphu, Bhutan, 2013 (copyright Cathy Cantwell)*

A classic offering formula is typically used, with a verse line, "medicines compounded from the eight principal and thousand (varieties)" (*rtsa bgyad stong la/las sbyar ba'i sman*). The twelfth century ancestral forefather of the Nyingma school, Nyang ral Nyima Özer (*nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer*) [see image 3] includes some discussion of this line in a commentary on tantric terms (*gsang sngags bka'i tha ram*), within his *Eightfold Buddha Word* (*bka' bgyad*) cycle (Volume 4: 287), and he also gives it within recitations for his medicinal accomplishment practice (in particular, see: *bdud rtsi sman bsgrub thabs lag khrid du bsdebs pa*, Volume 8: 483, 506).



*Image 3: Nyang-ral Nyima Özer (nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer, 1124-1192), Himalayan Art Resources, Detail of Item 9*

Similarly, the line is given and the eightfold category discussed in the medicinal accomplishment section of the *Eightfold Buddha Word (bka' brgyad)* cycle of Nyang ral Nyima Özer's recognised rebirth and successor, the thirteenth century Guru Chöwang (*gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug*, 1212-1270).<sup>3</sup> [See *image 4*] Moreover, this class of eight principal medicines and a thousand varieties is referred to in other early sources, including root tantric texts for the Elixir class of Mahāyoga, such as the *Eightfold Division (bam po brgyad pa)*.<sup>4</sup>



*Image 4: Guru Chöwang (gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, 1212-1270), Himalayan Art Resources, Item 73029.*

The classification is not purely a ritual category without specific content: these "Eight Principal Medicines" form some of the key ingredients to be included in sacred medicinal pills which are compounded and consecrated in the course of a medicinal accomplishment (*sman sgrub*) session.

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<sup>3</sup> Guru Chöwang 1979, Volume 3: 280, 290.

<sup>4</sup> The text's full title is: thams cad bdud rtsi lnga'i rang bzhin nye ba'i snying po'i bdud rtsi mchog gi lung bam po brgyad pa. For this reference, see the mtshams brag edition of the rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum, "... rtsa ba brgyad dang yan lag stong du 'dus shing sbyar dang/ bskul tshig 'di brjod do/", Volume 34 Ngi: 56. Note also that this important text is not only found in editions of the rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum, but also in editions of the mainstream bKa' 'gyur.

So, what exactly *are* these eight principal medicines, how do they connect with the thousand varieties, and how should we understand their purpose? This doubly revealed short text gives us a clear outline of different levels for understanding these tantric medicines. *The Key* structures discussion of the eight into the standard tantric levels of outer, inner and secret. The outer level refers to eight natural substances considered to have medicinal qualities. Yet the opening phrase of the list, as well as the associations given for each ingredient reference, is the tantric myth of the Elixir tree. In this origin story, medicinal substances pervaded the world thanks to the tantric deity's subjugation of the personification of evil, Rudra. When Rudra's body disintegrated, the parts were scattered throughout the universe, so that elixir seeds took root and became a wish-fulfilling tree. Various versions are found in different Nyingma texts, in the hagiographies (*rnam thar*) of Guru Padma, and in root tantras of the Elixir Qualities class (*bdud rtsi yon tan*). *The Key* refers to the eight medicines comprising, "the serpent heart sandalwood (tree)" (*tsandan sbrul gyi snying po*), a term for the wish-fulfilling elixir tree found in the *Padma bka' thang*. To cite that source, when Rudra was subjugated:

A terrifying voice reverberated:  
(Your) corruptions are finished,  
Fallen into the nāga ocean abode,  
And the wish-fulfilling tree, the *serpent heart king sandalwood*, has sprouted.  
The roots of the tree have been planted in the nāga land:  
The leaves have become dense in the asura land:  
The fruits are ripening in the land of the gods:  
The name of the tree is Elixir Amṛta.<sup>5</sup>

In *The Key*, each part of the tree is then identified with one of the eight medicines, which are rather loosely but not systematically connected with the parts of each plant used. For example, saffron is the elixir tree's flowers, while nutmeg is its fruit. Moreover, several items on the list are specified in other versions of the Rudra story, although not necessarily linked to the elixir tree. Sometimes, different parts of Rudra's body dropped in different places, producing specific elixir substances, and these may include several of outer medicines listed in *The Key*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 'jigs pa'i sgra ni rab tu 'byin par byed: zag pa tshar gcig rgya mtsho klu gnas lhung: dpag bsam shing rgyal tsandan sbrul snying skyes: shing gi rtsa ba klu yi yul du zug: lo 'dab lha ma yin gyi yul du 'khrigs: 'bras bu lha yi yul du smin par 'gyur: ming ni bdud rtsi a mṛ ta zhes bya:, O rgyan gling pa 1985: 72-73.

<sup>6</sup> One root tantra specifies four of the eight: Rudra's hair, scattered on the earth, became ghandapa tra (= ghandabhadra); Rudra's liver blood became the supreme medicine of saffron (gur kum), which protects the whole country of Kashmir; his testicles were scattered, falling as elixir, and producing nutmeg ('dza ti), with good smell and potency; from scattering Rudra's spleen blood, cloves (li shi) were generated, known as spikes of

It is not entirely straightforward to identify the whole list given in *The Key*, and it seems likely that at least two have been understood to refer to different substances at different times. The first item is the wish-fulfilling tree's roots, "mulapati" (*rtsa ba mu la pa ti* in PL; *mu la bha ti* in RL), which is presumably equivalent to the Sanskrit loan word, *mūlapatra*, which we find explicitly in later sources (Terdak Lingpa Volume Ta 9: 111r). However, Pema Lingpa's text gives an annotation specifying it as, white sandalwood (*tsandan dkar po*), which as we shall see below, is different from the understanding of *mūlapatra* found in some later texts, such as Terdak Lingpa's (Volume Ta 9: 111r) or Dudjom Rinpoche's medicinal accomplishment works (e.g. Volume Tha: 309). *The Key's* second item is the trunk, maroon sandalwood (*tsandan smug po*), while third, the branches are cloves, and fourth, the leaves are *gandha pa tra* (*gha la pa tra* in RL), presumably equivalent to the Sanskrit loan word, *gandhabhadra*, meaning, "good fragrance". This item also seems not to have a consistent identification: Pema Lingpa gives an annotation suggesting white gentiana (*spang rgyan dkar po*).<sup>7</sup> The final ingredients are straightforward: fifth is the flowers, saffron (*gur gum*); sixth is the fruit, nutmeg (*dza ti*); seventh is the bark, cinnamon (*shing rtsa* in PL, surely intending *shing tsha*, given in RL); and eighth is the sap, camphor (*ga bur*).

The next section of *The Key* lists the eight inner principal medicines, again linking them to the parts of the wish-fulfilling elixir tree. These consist of human body parts,<sup>8</sup> and connect to the tantric offerings. For instance, the flowers are the five senses (*me tog dbang po lnga*), which are one of the wrathful tantric offerings. Although they do not seem quite to line up with the specific associations in the Rudra stories of the origin of elixir, it seems that the list here are intended as Rudra's body parts, and there is some relationship between some of the items and the associated part of the tree. Thus, the limbs are the branches, and the skin is the bark.

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blood, warming, with the post-digestive potency of spreading heat, and praised for (treating) spleen diseases. thams cad bdud rtsi lnga'i rang bzhin du 'khrungs shing skye bar byed pa'i 'bras bu rin po che'i 'od ltar bstan pa'i rgyud, mtshams brag edition of the rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum, Volume 34 Ngi: 727ff.; the extracts here are from 744-746.

<sup>7</sup> Drungtso and Drungtso [2005: 252] give gentiana algida, which would seem appropriate here. Tshul khriims skal bzang gives as gentiana kurroo, but then gives a photo which seems to be of a white variety of the plant. We cannot, of course, be certain in any case that Pema Lingpa's use of the plant name corresponds to contemporary understandings of the name.

<sup>8</sup> The roots are the navel; the trunk the flesh and bones; the branches, the two legs and two arms; the leaves, the fingers and fingernails, hair and body hairs (PL gives kha spu, moustache, in place of ba spu, but this is probably a scribal error); the flowers, the five senses; the fruit, the five inner organs; the essences, marrow, brains, bone grease, fat; the bark, the skin.

The text then gives the eight secret or private principal medicines, which relate to the sexual fluids and processes within the body, four male and four female, and presumably imply the potencies generated by tantric sexual practices.

The next section of *The Key* complicates the category of the eight principal medicines, in part by explaining how they connect to the thousand varieties, and thus introducing further interpretations of the eight. The first explanation is that each of the eight has one hundred and twenty-five assistants, making a total of one thousand. But then, the text explains that the eight principal medicines can also be understood in terms of eight sets of five substances, which are then sub-divided to create the thousand varieties. The first set of five consists of the five tantric elixirs, excrement, urine, rakta, human flesh, and bodhicitta, while the second set are the five essences (*snying po*), which are the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and heart. The third set is the five fruits (*'bras bu*), consisting of different groups of sentient beings, and the fourth is the five qualities (*yon tan*), which are important substances also in Tibetan and Himalayan medicine, the three types of myrobalan, as well as bamboo pith, and cloves.<sup>9</sup> The fifth and sixth sets also consist of medicinal substances, which are commonly used, in making tantric pills,<sup>10</sup> but the seventh and eighth sets are quite different types of items. The seventh set is of the five roles or tasks (*dgos don lnga*), which are key roles in the tantric performance, such as the vajra master, and the regent.<sup>11</sup> The eighth is five of the necessary articles (*dgos ched = dgos chas*) for conducting a practice session, such as the mandala and coloured sands.<sup>12</sup> [See *image 5*] The final section of the text discusses the

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<sup>9</sup> a ru ra; ba ru ra; skyu ru ra; cu gang; li shi.

<sup>10</sup> The fifth set (*sdud pa lnga*): camphor (*ga bur*), saffron (*gur gum*), sandalwood (*tsandan*), musk (*gla rtsi*), amṛta fermenting agent (*a mṛ ta'i phab*). The sixth set (*dul ba lnga*): aloe wood (*a ga ru*); agarwood resin (*du ra ka*); himalayan marsh orchid (*dbang lag*); *li ga dur* (PL gives *lig dur*, presumably in error); uncertain identification; Drungtso and Drungtso [2005: 467] give *Geranium pratense*; it may refer to the root; my notes from Gelegphu *sman sgrub* 2013 suggest that it resembled a small red bean, but I am entirely uncertain of the species of plant); cardamom (*sukmel = sug smel*). Note that we cannot necessarily be confident about identifications, even with contemporary understandings of identification, let alone in the case of substances given in Ratna Lingpa's and Pema Lingpa's works. Note also that in these lists, there is one item, which is not simply the name of a medicinal substance deriving from a specific plant. *Amṛta fermenting agent (a mṛ ta'i phab)* is considered a crucial or even *the* crucial ingredient in medicinal pills, consisting of consecrated medicinal pills from earlier batches, made or passed on by lineage lamas.

<sup>11</sup> The five roles/tasks: the master (*slob dpon*); the regent (*rgyas thebs = rgyal thebs*); the ritualist (*karma*); the *ging* deity (*ging pa*); the *dharaṇī* consort (*yum gzungs ma*).

<sup>12</sup> The five necessary articles: mandala and coloured sands, coloured threads and threads for the (maṇḍala) lines, a kapāla with the right characteristics.

various ways in which the eight sets can be expanded to create the thousand varieties.



*Image 5: The two-dimensional mandala of coloured sands being prepared for the Major Practice Session, Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelephu, Bhutan, 2013 (copyright Cathy Cantwell).*

I conclude with a few short reflections on this text in relation to our theme of twenty-first century perspectives, and continuity and change. The first is that for the increasing numbers of Vajrayāna followers who need and expect some intellectual explanation of the tantric mandala categories, we have plenty here to think about. The second is that even in principle, in this system there is room for multiple understandings and layers of interpretation. The third is a little more complicated. The category of these eight principal tantric medicines incorporate assumptions about the natural potencies of certain species of plants, which feature in the outer list of the eight medicines, a list which is given prominence at the beginning of the text. Some of these lists occur also in the other broader interpretation of the list of eight, which gives three sets of five plant based ingredients. At the same time, what is striking is that these medicines are not simply lists of organic substances. Their potencies owe as much to their symbolic framing as to their natural qualities. The first list is conceptualised not so much according to any schema of natural attributes, but in accordance with their varied connections to the symbolism of Rudra's subjugation. The inner and secret levels of understanding are even more clearly referencing tantric symbolism. But perhaps most interesting of all is the alternative understanding of the eight medicines in terms of the eight sets of five. At the head of the list, we have the set of five tantric elixirs, a group which

is fundamental in Nyingma Mahāyoga practice, yet which would not otherwise seem to fit with the eightfold classification. The next five sets feature both tantric items and natural ingredients. However, the final two sets have moved to an entirely different type of list. Instead of anything which one would normally define as "medicinal", we have the roles played by the principal tantric practitioners in the ceremonies for Major Practice Sessions, and the tantric ritual paraphernalia required for the performance. These are items, which can only be seen as "medicine" by the broadest possible definition of *sman* or "medicine" as something beneficial. What is drawn attention to here is the necessity of placing the eight principal medicines within the context of a Major Practice Session (*sgrub chen*), or an elaborate communal ritual conducted over a number of days, in which tantric medicines are compounded and consecrated.

Very briefly, I would like to broach two subjects arising from these reflections on Pema Lingpa's text. First, there is the question of the efficacy of such tantric medicines, and here I would like to suggest that we might heed *The Key's* framing which emphasises the tantric spiritual dimension, as well as the plant-based ingredients. In a global context in which there is interest in the real physiological effects, for instance, of placebos and other manipulations of the whole body/mind complex, it may be that it is crucial to take account of the Vajrayāna ritual context in understanding Tibetan and himalayan medicinal substances, a context which has perhaps been rather neglected in some modern academic studies of Tibetan and Bhutanese medicines, which have often focused primarily on the rather more secular medical traditions of *gso ba rig pa*, as practised today. Second, on the issue of continuity and change, it is clear that there is considerable continuity between Ratna Lingpa's and Pema Lingpa's texts and contemporary practice. Most of the themes of *The Key* are reflected in the subsequent literature, such as the extensive commentarial manual on medicinal accomplishment rituals written by the seventeenth century Terdak Lingpa (*gter bdag gling pa*, 1646-1714). He also has the three categories of outer, inner and secret, with largely the same content. His outer list differs slightly in ordering, and two of the items are identified differently in the accompanying annotations,<sup>13</sup> but we find the same link to the story of the

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<sup>13</sup>Items 1 and 2, and items 7 and 8, are in reversed position in Terdak Lingpa's list (Volume Ta 9: 111r). Terdak Lingpa gives the annotation, ma nu, for mū la pa tra, and rgya shug lo ma for gandha bha dra. This order and the annotations are given also in Dudjom Rinpoche (Volume Tha: 309). Ma nu seems to indicate the roots of a species of inula, most probably, *inula racemosa* (*Inula racemosa* Hook f.), while Indian juniper needles (perhaps ideally, *Juniperus indica* Bertoloni, Misc. Bot., but I am uncertain of the exact species, or the extent to which usage is consistent) are used for rgya shug lo ma. Note that Dudjom Rinpoche's Medicinal Accomplishment text for Nyang ral's Eightfold Buddha Word (*bka' brgyad*) cycle gives a slightly different version of the list (*tsandan dmar po/ ma nu'am ru rta/ li shi/ rgya shug lo ma/ kha che'i gur gum/ dzā ti/ ga bur/ shing tsha*, Volume Za: 134). This version agrees with Pema Lingpa's ordering of

origin of the elixir tree. This tradition is then reflected in the medicinal accomplishment rituals of the twentieth century Dudjom Rinpoche, which are thriving in Bhutan today. [See images 6, 7, 8] On the question of their viability in the future, I have heard the sceptical comment that such elaborate, lengthy and labour-intensive rituals are not likely to find a niche in the world's ever busier modern urban environments. I am not so sure. In fact, tantric Major Practice sessions, which pack a huge amount of communally generated spiritual energy into a ten day period, and open up access to the most profound levels of tantric accomplishment to practitioners who are not able to follow a full-time contemplative life, can even be seen as a short intensive course which can act as an alternative to the traditional three year retreat.<sup>14</sup> And an annual attendance at such an event can act to re-charge the batteries and to re-connect with the spiritual community for those who have graduated from a monastery or tantric training college, and integrated into householder life.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it may transpire that these practices have long-term viability in Bhutan and elsewhere in the world.

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items 1 and 2, it confirms the identification of *mūlapatra* as *inula racemosa* (*ma nu'am ru rta*), and replaces *gandhabhadra* with the interpretation of Indian juniper needles (*rgya shug lo ma*), found only in an annotation elsewhere. The text goes on to give a different listing of the thousand varieties from those discussed here, including items related to the six different tastes, types of precious stones, rocks and minerals, medicines sourced from the different parts of trees, herbal medicines sourced from the different parts of plants, the white substances, such as milk, types of seeds, water sources, and medicines deriving from different geographical locations, such as India, China, Nepal, Bhutan, different parts of Tibet etc.

<sup>14</sup> According to Lama Kunzang Dorjee of the Dudjom communities of Jangsa Dechen Choling Monastery, Kalimpong, West Bengal, and Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelegphu, Bhutan, this was one of the reasons motivating Dudjom Rinpoche to promote the regular practice of Major Practice Sessions in his communities of practitioners (personal communication, March 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Lama Kunzang Dorjee (see note above) informed me (personal communication, November 2013) that he requires the graduates of his training programmes, who may return to their own villages in Eastern Bhutan following completion of the three-year retreat, to attend one of the annual Major Practice Sessions, as a condition of retaining their association with the Jangsa Monastery community.



Images 6, 7, 8: Medicinal Accomplishment (*smān sgrub*), practised in the context of a Major Practice Session (*sgrub chen*). Final preparation of the medicinal containers, and their placement to the sides of the mandala. Pema Yoedling Dratsang, Gelegphu, Bhutan, 2013 (copyright Cathy Cantwell).

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Note: The TBRC reference numbers refer to the electronic texts made available by the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (TBRC), Cambridge, MA, USA (<http://www.tbrc.org>).

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