

Kindly Bent to Ease Us

Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa

Part One: Mind
Sems-nyid ngal-gso

from

The Trilogy of Finding Comfort and Ease
Ngal-gso skor-gsum

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Introduction

Kun-mkhyen (the 'all-knowing', 'all-understanding') Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa Dri-med 'od-zer, hailed as a second Buddha and certainly the greatest thinker in the Old Tradition (*rnying-ma-pa*), was born on the eighth day of the second lunar month of the Earth-Male-Ape year (i.e., Friday, 1st of March, 1308) at Gra-phu stod-grong in gYo-ru, the most eastern of the two parts into which dBus (Central Tibet) was originally divided. His father, the 'teacher' (*slob-dpon*) bTsan-pa-srung, could trace his ancestry back to Yeshe dbang-po-srung of the Rog clan, who is counted as one of the 'seven chosen ones' (*sad-mi bdun*), intelligent men who had been selected from the nobility at about 779 to be ordained as monks by Śāntarakṣita, the renowned Indian paṇḍita, during his stay in Tibet. His mother, 'Brom-gza'-ma bsod-nams-rgyan, was a descendant of the 'Brom clan, to which 'Brom-ston rgyal-ba'i 'byung-gnas (1005-1064), the famous disciple of Atīśa, also known as Dīpankara Śrījñāna (982-1054), belonged.

In 1319, Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa took up ordination at

bSam-yas in the presence of the 'abbot' (*mkhan-po*) bSam-grub rin-chen and the 'teacher' (*slob-dpon*) Kun-dga' 'od-zer, when he was given the name Tshul-khrims blo-gros. The next years were spent in intensive studies under the most famous teachers of the time. Apart from studying under those belonging to his own tradition, the rNying-ma, he also was a student of Rang-byung rdo-rje (1284-1339), the Karma-pa bKa'-brgyud-pa hierarch, and of the Sa-skya-pa bla-ma Dam-pa bsod-nams rgyal-mtshan (1312-1375), both of them representing the 'New (*gsar-ma*) Tradition' (the dGe-lugs tradition originated after Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa's time). Because of his knowledge he became known as Ngag-gi dbang-po of bSam-yas and as Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa, and he used these titles as signatures to some of his works.

When he was in his late twenties two events occurred that were to be of decisive importance for his intellectual and spiritual development. The one was a vision of Padmasambhava and his consort Ye-shes mtsho-rgyal, which resulted in his adopting the names Dri-med 'od-zer, as given him by Padmasambhava, and rDo-rje gzi-brjid, as conferred upon him by Ye-shes mtsho-rgyal, in his vision. At this time—and one experience may have led to another—he became deeply attracted to and involved in the *mKha'-'gro snying-thig*, mystical teachings connected with Padmasambhava, which he then developed in his own *mKha'-'gro yang-tig*. He also conceived the plan of founding or restoring the monastic settlements of Lha-ring-brag, O-rgyan-rdzong, and Zhva'i lha-khang. The last named had been founded by Myang Ting-nge-'dzin bzang-po, who was an important personage during the reign of Khri-srong lde'u-btsan (755-797) and his successors, and had been a supporter of the growing Buddhist movement. It was for this reason that he was executed, after 836, under Glang dar-ma (who was opposed to Buddhist ideas). In this temple Myang Ting-nge-'dzin bzang-po had concealed the *sNying-thig* teachings of Vima-

lamitra who had been one of the earliest representatives of rDzogs-chen thought in Tibet.

The second decisive event in the life of Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa was his meeting with the great mystic (*phyam-rdal rig-'dzin chen-po*) Kumaradza (gZhon-nu rgyal-po, Kumārarāja, 1266–1343), a Tibetan, who is most often mentioned under his Indian name. Kumārarāja was particularly connected with the teachings of Vimalamitra, whose embodiment he is believed to have been.¹ Vimalamitra's teachings, summed up in the *Bi-ma snying-thig*, had been rediscovered by lDang-ma lhun-rgyal and in course of time transmitted by Me-long-rdo-rje (1243–1303) to Kumārarāja and by the latter to Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa, who elaborated these teachings into his *Bla-ma yang-tig* and then fused the teachings of both the *mKha'-'gro yang-tig* and the *Bla-ma yang-tig* into his most profound *Zab-mo yang-tig*.

An unfortunate incident seems to have provoked the hostility of the powerful Tai-si-tu Byang-chub rgyal-mtshan (1302–1364) of Phag-mo-gru who in 1358 had formally taken over power from Sa-skya and who, almost immediately afterwards, believed Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa to be an ally of 'Bri-khung. In 1359 one of the 'Bri-khung monks, a fanatic (*sgom-chen*) Kun-rin, staged a revolt. Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa tried to mediate, but his effort was considered a support of this revolt. He was forced into exile in Bhutan and stayed at the monastery of Thar-pa-gling near Bum-thang where he had been in 1355.² Eventually he was reconciled with Tai-si-tu Byang-chub rgyal-mtshan through the efforts of his lay patrons, prince Si-tu Shākya bzang-po of dBus-stod and prince rDo-rje rgyal-mtshan of Yar-'brog, and was allowed to return.

Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa died on the eighteenth day of the twelfth lunar month of the Water-Female-Hare year (i.e., Wednesday, the 24th of January, 1364) at O-rgyan-rdzong in Gangs-ri thod-kar, the place he had loved most during his many travels and periods of seclusion in various caves.

In his relatively short life Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa was able to write an enormous number of works. His biographer, Chos-grags bzang-po,³ lists two hundred and seventy titles, unfortunately arranged according to subject-matter and not in chronological order so that we cannot trace Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa's intellectual development.⁴ Another unfortunate circumstance is that quite a number of his works seem to have been lost. Throughout his major writings he presents a unitary account of Buddhist thought which, long before his time, had tended to proliferate into, and even become stagnant in, highly specialized areas. rDza dPal-sprul O-rgyan 'Jigs-med chos-kyi dbang-po (b. 1808) has well brought out this unifying character of Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa's writings, when he says:⁵

They are *dBu-ma* (Mādhyamika), *Pha-rol-phyin-pa* (Pāramitā), *gCod-yul*, *Zhi-byed* (the calming of frustration and suffering), *Phyag-rgya-che* (Mahāmudrā),⁶ and the very essence of
rDzogs-chen.

All these interpretations gather here, and still (Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa's writings) are superior to all of them.

If you happen to be a follower of this all-knowing guru,
You must never become separated from this his wholesome
teaching;

It will be enough if you make it your companion in all your
thinking;

There is nothing like this to let your mind realize its aim.

The major works, about which this eulogy was written, are the "Seven Treasures" (*mdzod bdun*), each of them indispensable for an understanding of the profound and intricate teaching which is termed *rDzogs-chen* ('absolutely complete'), and which is based so much on direct experience rather than on speculative and representational thought.⁷ Of these "Seven Treasures," the *Theg-pa'i mchog rin-po-che'i mdzod* is the most comprehensive work, dealing with all aspects of the *rDzogs-chen* teaching in twenty-five chapters; the remaining six "Treasures" take up specific points.

Thus, the *gNas-lugs rin-po-che'i mdzod*, consisting of a short basic text in verse form and its detailed commentary, the *sDe-gsum snying-po'i don-'grel gnas-lugs rin-po-che'i mdzod*, discusses the four vectorial connections in what may be termed the 'experience of Being'—its ineffability, coherence, spontaneity and solitariness—as well as the person to whom this teaching can and may be imparted.

The *Man-ngag rin-po-che'i mdzod* is a summary in verse form of the essentials for practicing and understanding the tenets of Buddhism, and, through understanding, growing into the fullness of Being. It is arranged in sets of six topics.

The *Grub-pa'i mtha' rin-po-che'i mdzod*, in eight chapters, is the most exhaustive and critical treatment of Buddhist philosophy. The work begins with the history of the Buddha as both a spiritual and cultural phenomenon, then deals with the compilation and transmission of the teaching and the beginnings of the early schools after the demise of the Buddha. After a detailed presentation and trenchant critique of the tenets of the traditional four schools—Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Yogācāra and Mādhyamika—Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa elucidates the 'existential' experience culminating in 'absolute completeness' (*rdzogs-chen*).

The *Yid-bzhin rin-po-che'i mdzod*, in twenty-two chapters, consists of a relatively short basic text in verse form and a very lengthy and exhaustive commentary, the *Padma dkar-po*, and covers the whole of the Buddhist world-view with man as an integral part. It first considers the origin of the world in philosophical perspective, and then treats ontology (the problem of Being, not of some kind of being), cosmology (the rich unfolding of Being, as envisaged in the Avataṃsaka teaching, and not the more or less static arrangement of objects around us, as presented in the Abhidharmakośa),⁸ and anthropology (man as an open-ended task, not an essence or ego). It then turns to the spiritual growth of man in his predicament of being man, to his need for friends to help him along in developing ethically, and to the relationship

between teacher and disciple. This is followed by a detailed account of the various philosophical systems that had evolved in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist circles. The discussion aims at clarifying the student's task of coming to an awareness and understanding of Being, rather than remaining bound in mere doctrinal postulations.⁹

The *Tshig-don rin-po-che'i mdzod*, in eleven chapters, sums up the essentials of rDzogs-chen thought—the seeming loss of Being in the state of a human being, a loss which always presents itself as a challenge to find Being, and the inner experiences with their symbols through which man's development towards Being manifests itself. This work is intimately related to the *sNying-thig* teachings.

The *Chos-dbyings-rin-po-che'i mdzod*, consisting of a short basic text in verse form and a detailed commentary, the *Lung-gi gter-mdzod*, in thirteen chapters, deals with the primordial experience of the meaningfulness of Being. Essentially, it is an account of experience as experience, not of a particular experience of something.

In all these works Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa quotes from the vast literature that had developed during the early phase of Buddhism in Tibet, in support of his own brilliant exposition of a living and lived-through experience. He uses these quotations in an interpretative rather than dogmatic fashion. Thus throughout his works he reveals himself as an independent and original thinker.

Although the "Seven Treasures" are counted as Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa's crowning achievement, this does not mean that his other works are less important. As a matter of fact, Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa is so unique that a distinction between more important and less important works is not only not possible, but even meaningless. The "Seven Treasures" are as indispensable for understanding his other works as his other works are for the "Seven Treasures". Especially important in this respect are his two trilogies, the *Ngal-gso skor-gsum*, "The Trilogy of Finding Comfort and

Ease," and the *Rang-grol skor-gsum*, "The Trilogy of Freedom as Freedom."¹⁰ The fact that Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa himself seems to have considered these trilogies of primary importance may be gleaned from the number of works he wrote to bring out their significance in making Buddhist ideas a living experience.

The *Ngal-gso skor-gsum* consists of the following works:

- A 1. *rDzogs-pa chen-po Sems-nyid ngal-gso*, the basic work, written in verses and consisting of thirteen chapters, intricately interwoven as to content and practical guidance as to the meaning and significance of Mind-as-such.
 2. *rDzogs-pa chen-po Sems-nyid ngal-gso'i 'grel-pa Shing-rta chen-po*, a detailed commentary on the above work.
 3. *rDzogs-pa chen-po Sems-nyid ngal-gso'i 'grel-pa Shing-rta chen-po'i bsdus-don-gyi gnas rgya-cher dbye-ba Pud-ma dkar-po'i phreng-ba*, a structural analysis of each of the thirteen chapters.¹¹
 4. *rDzogs-pa chen-po Sems-nyid ngal-gso'i gnas-gsum dge-ba gsum-gyi don-khrid Byang-chub lam-bzang*, an analysis of the basic work into one hundred and forty-one contemplative topics, of which ninety-two belong to the common form of Mahāyāna, twenty-two to the Vajrayāna, and twenty-seven to the rDzogs-chen.
- B 1. *rDzogs-pa chen-po bSam-gtan ngal-gso*, the basic work, written in verses and consisting of only three chapters, dealing with the suitable places for contemplative attentiveness, the person engaging in this activity, and the process and purpose of contemplative attentiveness.
 2. *rDzogs-pa chen-po bSam-gtan ngal-gso'i bsdus-don Puṅḍarīka'i phreng-ba*, a structural analysis of the above work.

3. *rDzogs-pa chen-po bSam-gtan ngal-gso'i 'grel-pa Shing-rta rnam-par dag-pa*, a detailed commentary on the basic work.
 4. *rDzogs-pa chen-po bSam-gtan ngal-gso'i don-khrid snying-po bcud-bsdus*, a short guidance to contemplative experience.
- C 1. *rDzogs-pa chen-po sGyu-ma ngal-gso*, the basic work, written in verses and consisting of eight chapters, each of them dealing with the apparitional, fleeting, dreamlike character of what is usually believed to be steady and reliable.
2. *rDzogs-pa chen-po sGyu-ma ngal-gso'i bsdus-don Mān-darava'i phreng-ba*, a structural analysis of each of the eight chapters of the basic work.
 3. *rDzogs-pa chen-po sGyu-ma ngal-gso'i 'grel-pa Shing-rta bzang-po*, a detailed commentary on the basic work.
 4. *rDzogs-pa chen-po sGyu-ma ngal-gso'i don-khrid Yid-bzhin nor-bu*, a short guidance to practice.

The arrangement of the basic works together with their commentaries in this order A, B, C, is explained by Klongchen rab-'byams-pa in his *Ngal-gso skor-gsum-gyi spyi-don legs-bshad rgya-mtsho*. There¹² he says that, if a person is to set out on his quest for life's meaning, he must already have a conviction that life holds meaning and have a vision of its meaningfulness. At the same time meaningfulness is somehow a clue pointing back to the fundamental stratum on which the pursuit of meaningfulness is founded. The explication of this fundamental stratum is found in the *Sems-nyid ngal-gso*. Once this fundamental stratum has been understood one can 'travel the road' towards meaningfulness through attending to representational and non-representational forms of thinking. This is the theme of the *bSam-gtan ngal-gso*. Lastly, we tend to reify the contents into inflexible objects, into constant patterns somewhere 'out there' into

which we locate 'ourselves' as a new object—the ego. To prevent experience from turning into an objectified event and to safeguard the unique moment of knowing and valuing, perceiving and conceiving, before all this again congeals into rigid categories of representational thinking, some aid is needed. This aid is offered by the *sGyu-ma ngal-gso*. In other words, the first work explicates that all that is is the source material that serves as the highway towards life's meaning; the second, that all that is is spontaneously present in sheer lucency; and the third, that all that is is self-presenting without ever being something 'concretely' real.¹³

Throughout these three works experience is and remains the central theme. But experience is not an object nor a fact alongside other objects or facts. Therefore experience must never be confused with sentimentality and its attendant 'mannerisms'. These mannerisms are made possible through the projective character of experience which brings about the objectification of the emerging content and entails the loss of the dynamic aspect of experience. Experience as experience is a more ultimate factor, broader in range and scope and prior to even a 'mind'. And yet, without mind there would be no meaning to experience. However, mind (*sems*) as a noetic-noematic complex, determining the 'meaning' of world, of being, of experience and of whatever it takes notice, is a coming-into-presence made possible through the open and projective presence of Mind-as-such (*sems-nyid*), which is irreducible to object and fact, while constituting their configurative location.

The importance of experience as the seed from which perception, cognition, and valuation grow and as the upsurge that occasions its actualization, is emphasized by Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa in the analysis of the title *rDzogs-pa chen-po Sems-nyid ngal-gso*. He says:¹⁴

rDzogs-pa ('complete') indicates the whole of Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa. And when is this completeness found? From the very beginning it is complete in (or as) absolute (*chen-po*)

self-existing pristine cognition, and from it everything ('all meanings') originate. As is stated in the *Kun-byed*:¹⁵

One—complete; two—complete; as mind—complete;
Since (its) acts are excellent—bliss.

And in the *Dohā*:¹⁶

Mind-as-such alone is the seed of all;
From it the world of fictions and the world of quiescence
grow forth.

Praise to the mind which like the Wish-fulfilling Gem
Grants whatever one desires.

Mind-as-such (*sems-nyid*), in the narrower sense of the word, is the complex of the mind and the mental events (*sems* and *sems-byung*). Relaxation in comfort and ease (*ngal-gso*) is to indicate that in self-existing pristine cognition propositions no longer obtain. In a fundamental sense, Mind-as-such is, in its actuality, a sheer lucency; relaxation in comfort and ease is to indicate that proliferating reflective thinking has come to rest.

The distinction Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa draws between Mind-as-such (*sems-nyid*) and the noetic-noematic complex of the mind and its events (*sems* and *sems-byung*), clearly shows that he was well aware of the fact that experience has both a prereflective-nonthematic aspect (termed 'Mind-as-such' *sems-nyid*) and a reflective-thematic movement (termed 'mind', *sems*), and that the two structural features are so intricately interwoven that the one is not temporally prior or posterior to the other. This is important to note because it is merely our language that introduces a seeming serial time sequence by making use of the prefix 'pre'- in prereflective.¹⁷ Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa is spared this potential misunderstanding: Mind-as-such (*sems-nyid*) is mind (*sems*) and their distinctness is inseparable. To illustrate what this may mean, we may consider the image of a traveler. A traveler is a person who may proceed on his road and who may rest from time to time without losing his identity as a traveler. It is this image that Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa uses in defense of the title of his work against an

imaginary opponent (who may not have been quite so imaginary, because there are always literalists impervious to 'meaning' due to the fact that they are unable to recognize the meaning to be dynamic, vibrant with life, and not fossil-like). Thus he writes:¹⁸

Calling your treatise 'Relaxation in Comfort and Ease by Mind-as-such' is inadmissible, because Mind-as-such has nothing to do with relaxation or exhaustion. — Now, the term 'Mind-as-such' can be taken in a narrower sense and in a more fundamental sense. In the narrower sense, it is quite appropriate to speak of 'Relaxation in Comfort and Ease by Mind-as-such'; since the whole of mind and mental events are the concepts that set up the triple world which is the cause of Saṃsāra, they must come to rest in the continuum of experience into which no fictions enter. . . . Therefore, since the fictions due to mind and mental events are again and again wearing themselves out and grow tired in Saṃsāra which is their domain, they must relax on their walking-stick, a conceptless pristine cognition, the continuum of meaningfulness, the other shore reached by appreciative discrimination, the coming to rest of all propositions. For this reason I have deliberately used this title for the treatise about finding comfort and ease while proceeding on the road to the primordial experience of Being. . . . Also, in a more fundamental sense it is appropriate to speak of 'Relaxation in Comfort and Ease by Mind-as-such'. The host of concepts, the travelers who have become tired through having run around in circles (Saṃsāra) while for a long time having engaged in the deceptive appearance conjured up by the mind, simply sit down in the reach and range in which all propositions have come to rest and which is the resting-place of Mind-as-such relaxed in comfort and ease. Travelers who are exhausted and tired simply lean on their walking-stick and let body, speech, and mind come to rest, and this is like relaxing in comfort and ease. Therefore, when the escapades of the mind, having become tired by Saṃsāra kept up by actions in body, speech, and mind, have ceased on Mind-as-such which is relaxation in comfort and ease, this relaxation in comfort and ease is the entrance into real freedom.

Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa never loses sight of the dual character of experience. He notices that experience is directed towards what is then reflected on in experience, but he sees the latter taking place in experience and this avoids creating a gap between Mind-as-such and the mind of the experiencer—and he explores how this happens. Therefore, each chapter is based on a 'how'-question, not on a 'what'-question. 'How' is it that man finds himself in his predicament of being man, and 'how' is man to go about solving the problem he is? Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa does not quantify objectifiable features of experience: he interprets, and in his interpretations he opens up ways towards understanding—'how' man can understand himself and, in understanding himself, understand his world.

This explains why Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa is so careful in his diction, taking account of the 'weights' and overtones which he then takes up in his commentaries. *byang-chub* is a common word in Tibetan Buddhist writings and corresponds to the Sanskrit word *bodhi*, which is usually translated by 'enlightenment'. But Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa breaks this word down into its components *byang*, 'limpid clearness', and *chub*, 'consummate perspicacity', and gives it a very specific, dynamic meaning. And this he does with every other term. Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa is concerned with the exploration of lived-through experience, not with an intellectual parlor game of quantifications of fetish-words that have no longer any meaning because they have become divorced from experience.

Since Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa's primary concern is lived-through experience and its interpretation in terms of 'meanings' and 'values', many, if not the majority, of his works are written in poetry. A poem is a peculiar entity or occurrence that simultaneously embodies a world of its own and transports the reader or listener into its special world, enabling him to experience, whether in imagination or in real

life, a state of being which may otherwise have remained unknown to him.

In conclusion it may be stated that Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa exerted a tremendous influence on his successors, who had no hesitation in imitating him. Thus, 'Jigs-med gling-pa's (1729 or 30-1798) *Yon-tan rin-po-che'i mdzod dga'-ba'i char* is in every respect modeled after Klong-chen rab-'byams-pa's *Sems-nyid ngal-gso* and incorporates whole passages from it.