

# A Roll Of Thunder From The Void

*Vajrakīla texts of the Northern Treasures Tradition*

*Volume Two*

annotated translations

by

Rig-'dzin rdo-rje



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## ITI SAMAYA

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**R**efuge in the Triple Gem, it is said, should be taken with the attitude of an ill person seeking health and wellbeing. The Buddha is the great physician, the Dharma is his medicine, and the Sangha actively supports and assists the patient in every way that it can. The reader should be aware that the teachings contained in this book consist of very potent medicine indeed, compounded of various poisons. And, as with all pernicious poisons, the novice should keep away and avoid making contact, while those who have some knowledge should uproot those poisons and apply the antidote, for only the skilled master physician can be trusted to take the essence of those poisons and utilise them in the preparation of medicine. Intended for lions (i.e. bodhisattva sons and daughters of the Buddha), this medicine is available only on prescription. It to be utilised by Vajrayana initiates only and is not available over the counter, on demand. Should this book reach the hands of one who lacks the proper authorising empowerment, bestowed by a competent master of the lineage, please put it to one side.

Long ago, in ancient times, the demon Rudra (epitome of ego-grasping ignorance) attained his condition of dreadful power through misuse of the sacred teachings. The enlightened Buddhas consequently took on the demonic appearance of Rudra as a subterfuge and, following the demon's inevitable overthrow, his bodily form, accoutrements and palatial home were all adopted by the victorious Buddhas as their playground, the joyful abode of naturally blissful wisdom.

The story of the subjugation of Rudra indicates that all beings, no matter how morally reprehensible they may be, do not lack the potential for salvation, and, furthermore, the appearance of the demon to be subdued actually provided an historical occasion for

the manifestation in this world of the wrathful Mahayoga tantras. His subjugation is thus to be celebrated both inwardly, as the enlightenment of our own defiled consciousness, and outwardly, as the occasion for the revelation of the teachings.

The yogic process of utpattikrama, as taught in this book, involves recreating the world from the seed of compassion within the essential sphere of voidness. The vajra world, thus produced, is the actual mandala of Rudra as seen through the enlightened eyes of the fully awakened Buddhas. Anyone who lacks this pure vision, however, entering the mandala without the pure intention of the Buddhas, sets himself firmly upon the downward path of returning to Rudra. Meditating upon the lustful and angry nature of the demon is very dangerous for those whose wisdom minds were not made clearly manifest at the time of empowerment. As it is said: "Meditating upon the perverse form of Rudra, one becomes Rudra in all his depravity." Such a calamity is to be avoided at all costs. May the Lords of Wisdom, Compassion and Empowerment protect us from downfall!

Orgyan Rig-'dzin rDo-rje  
Oxford, March 2008

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# INTRODUCTION

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This present volume, incorporating eight texts associated with the deity Vajrakīla according to the tradition of the Northern Treasures (Byang-gter), is predominantly the work of Rig-'dzin padma 'phrin-las, the 17th century incarnation of the 14th century revealer of those treasures, and their foremost historical authority. Our opening chapter, the *sādhana* or means of accomplishment of the deity, entitled *A Sharp Weapon which Conquers Māra's Unruly Armies*, follows his personal arrangement, and many of the verses contained within it are his own composition. But it is not his own invention. As Padma 'phrin-las himself writes, "This is the liturgy for the ritual activities taken from the original old texts and arranged in clear reading order in accordance with received tradition." In his commentary, *Clear Elucidation of the Essence*, he explains, "With regard to this ritual, it never actually existed in the form of a written book. The so-called *rDo rje phur pa dril sgrub kyi phrin las* is really made up of the medium *Kīla Razor* meditation in combination with an extensive portion of ritual activity." The basic treasure texts of this system, then, are the *Black Razor Tantra*, in which the divine *maṇḍala* unfolds, and the ritual *rDo rje phur pa thugs kyi 'phrin las*. The former text was published earlier, together with the '*Bum nag*, in *A Bolt of Lightning from the Blue*,<sup>1</sup> and the latter is included as our Chapter Two, below.

It is intended that the present work be of practical value for meditators and, with that in mind, I have transcribed the original Tibetan text of much of the liturgy designed for formal recitation and juxtaposed it with its English translation, throughout.

All the recensions of these texts to which I could gain access were brought in manuscript form by Tibetan refugees fleeing the Chinese

<sup>1</sup> *A Bolt of Lightning from the Blue*, edition khordong, Berlin 2002, in which the higher rites leading to enlightenment and the lower rites leading to the eradication of evil are extensively discussed. re-publ. 2010, Wandel Verlag



communist invasion of their country in the middle of the last century.<sup>2</sup> From these same mss, useful clear copies were made of two of our texts, and these were published by sTag-lung-rtse-sprul Rinpoche from his exile home of rDo-rje-brag monastery in Simla, North India, in 1997, in a five-volume collection of the prayers and ritual practices of the Northern Treasures Tradition (*Byang gter chos spyod*).<sup>3</sup> Born in 1926, sTag-lung-rtse-sprul Rinpoche was recognised by the ninth Rig-'dzin chen-po of rDo-rje-brag, Chos-dbang mnyam-nyid rdo-rje, and enthroned as the *sprul sku* of sTag-lung-rtse Monastery at the age of five. When he was eight years old, he was invited to take his Dharma seat at the mother monastery of rDo-rje-brag, where he quickly gained proficiency in all the religious arts and rituals of that tradition. In 1941 he sat with the newly-enthroned tenth Rig-'dzin chen-po of rDo-rje-brag, Thub-bstan 'jig-med rnam-grol rgya-mtsho (born in Lhasa in 1936), and received with him the empowerments and transmissions of the Northern Treasures. Despite the overthrow of Tibet by the communist Chinese, rNam-grol rgya-mtsho has remained in Tibet where he has lately been active in the rebuilding of his monastery which was almost completely devastated during the 'cultural revolution.' Thus, even though the present holder of the throne of rDo-rje-brag is rNam-grol rgya-mtsho, the tenth Rig-'dzin chen-po, the lineage prayers in our texts generally do not go beyond Rig-'dzin chen-po IX, mNyam-nyid rdo-rje, who died in 1932. The single exception to this is to be found in the opening section of the first chapter where the name of my teacher, *bla ma 'Chi-med rig-'dzin*, the '*Khor gdong gter chen sprul sku*, and reference to his teacher, U-rgyan bstan-'dzin, the *sprul sku* of Ba-gnas-dgon, are included. Bowing my head, I humbly dedicate this work to them.

My previous study of the '*Bum nag*, Tibet's most authoritative literary overview of the entire tradition of Vajrakila, revealed the history of the Vajrakila doctrines and analysed their twofold purpose. The present work goes directly to the essential core and offers the reader those very meditations by means of which such twofold purpose may be accomplished. As stated in the ritual text, "Padmasambhava studied

<sup>2</sup> The only xylograph among them is the *Phur pa thugs kyi 'phrin las*.

<sup>3</sup> *sNga 'gyur byang gter chos skor las 'don cha'i skor*. Volume three: Ritual for the suppression of Sri demons, entitled Vajra Mountain (*rDo rje'i lhun po*), pp.231-270, A Sharp Weapon Which Conquers Māra's Unruly Armies (*Phur pa dril sgrub*), pp.589-636, and The Heart Activity of Vajrakila (*Thugs kyi 'phrin las*), pp.637-666 (xylograph).

the hundred thousand sections of the *Kīlavidyottama-tantra* and then practised for twelve years in the rock cavern of gYa'-ri-gong. The ritual form of his practice is exactly the one given here." The amazing results of the great guru's meditation in gYa'-ri are well known. As it is written in the *gSol 'debs bar chad lam sel*:<sup>4</sup>

*At the time when you introduced the jina's doctrines [to Tibet]  
 You accomplished your practice in the forest around gYa'-ri.  
 The kila of your ritual service rose up to the vault of the sky  
 And you caught it with a vajra gesture.  
 Rolling it between the palms of your hands,  
 You threw it into the sandalwood forest  
 And the resulting blaze even dried up the lake.  
 Thus the abode of wicked heretics was completely destroyed  
 And the evil spirits [that they served] were annihilated.  
 As the destroyer of Māra, you have no equal!*



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Scope & Structure

Thus, for those who have studied the *'Bum nag* and wish now to absorb themselves in such powerful meditation for the destruction of Māra, this book is offered. For his generous help in providing the opportunity to write it, I give thanks to Reg Milne.

When meditating upon this ritual text according to the instructions of Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las, one should always begin with the *Seven Line Prayer* and general introductory verses, such as those to be found at the beginning of the *Daily Practice* (the final chapter of the present work). Presenting, as it does, a sequence of meditations not intended for beginners, the ritual sections of 'going for refuge' and 'developing *bodhicitta*' are taken for granted in the *sādhana* and referred to as 'the preliminary practices according to rule.' By this is meant that we are dealing here with a mahāyāna Buddhist practice. The mark of a Buddhist is one who has taken refuge in the three jewels and the characteristic of the mahāyāna is *bodhicitta* or great compassion. These texts are manuals for both personal and community use, through which individuals may be ritually trained in skilful altruism. They are designed as methods for overcoming the instincts of egotistic self-interest, so that the mind may become focussed on the general welfare of the world,

<sup>4</sup> A translation of which is to be found in Ngawang Zangpo, *Guru Rinpoche: His Life and Times*, Snow Lion Publications, NY, 2002, pp.260-267. Also, Padmasambhava, *The Seven Chapters of Prayer*, edition khordong, 2008, pp.240-271



and beneficial changes of great social value will be brought about in both thought and behaviour. Having become empowered to do so within the *maṇḍala* of Vajrakīla by a master *guru*, trainees may use these skilful esoteric techniques to develop a profound experiential certainty of the true nature of reality, so that they may live fearlessly in the face of worldly vicissitudes with confidence in their own ability to bless those less fortunate than themselves, and ease their suffering. Indeed, the vows of the trainee, articulated on a daily basis, state, quite unambiguously: “I engage in the great deeds of *guhyanmantra* in order to bring all living beings to maturity.”

The *sādhana* makes explicit that the ten *krodha* kings of the Vajrakīla *maṇḍala* annihilate the ten non-virtues and that the four goddesses who guard the palace gates embody ‘the four immeasurables’ (*catuḥ aprameya*) — altruistic states of mind otherwise known as ‘the stations of Brahmā’ (*brahmavihāra*). Such equivalents are ubiquitous in vajrayāna theory and practice, which recreates the world as a purified construct of Buddhist Dharma, traditionally codified in numerical lists. Thus, in the opening verse of his *Clear Elucidation of the Essence*, Padma ‘phrin-las praises the *maṇḍala* of Vajrakīla as the means to the accumulation of virtue and the eradication of vice. Such personal defects as the twenty *upakleśa* (secondary afflictions), viz: *krodha* (anger), *upanāha* (enmity), *mraṅka* (hypocrisy), *pradāsa* (outrage), *irṣyā* (jealousy), *mātsarya* (avarice), *śāṭhya* (fraud), *māyā* (deceit), *mada* (pride), *vihimsā* (violence), *ahriḥ* (lack of shame), *anapatrapa* (indecenty), *styāna* (inertia), *auddhatya* (agitation), *aśrāddhya* (lack of faith), *kausīdya* (indolence), *pramāda* (negligence), *muṣitasmr̥titā* (forgetfulness), *vikṣepa* (distraction), and *asani-prajanya* (lack of proper introspection), he says, are brought under control by the devourers and killers who patrol the ten directions in search of trouble. These wild anthropomorphic creatures with the heads of animals and birds are the active messengers of the ten wrathful kings and it is due to their ceaseless vigilance that the awakened mind of buddhahood remains undisturbed by the demonic influences of Māra. Similar in many ways to the animal-headed Sri demons which cause much grief to religious and lay folk alike, these restless retainers were converted to a higher purpose and incorporated into the *maṇḍala* of divinities when their masters, the old gods of ignorance who formerly held sway over the ten directions, were overthrown.

Liturgy for the worship of the protectors, also, is not seen in the *sādhana* text because there are so many variations from which to choose and, to a large extent, the choice is based on location. The pre-Bud-

dhist sacred topography of Tibet, whose local spirits successively became tamed and elevated to the status of 'protectors of the Buddhist teachings and those who uphold them,' is quite different for example in Ladakh and Sikkim, each location being unique and local spirits tending to become the guardians of sites and traditions in their own neighbourhood.

Among the particular protectors of the Vajrakila doctrines, we encounter bands of male and female demons whose designated task became, upon their subjugation and conversion, the assistance of all those engaged in the difficult rites of the Kila. Chief among these are the 12 Mother Goddesses who appeared to Padmasambhava when he himself had accomplished mastery of this rite in Nepal. Appearing in groups of four, in the evening, at midnight, and at dawn, the last group to arrive were the four sisters who control the earth (*bhūmipati*) and who gave their secret names (those by which they are addressed in their *mantra*) as Jayā, Vijayā, Ajitā and Aparājītā. Known to outsiders as the sisters (consorts) of Tumburu, these goddesses are spoken of in the earliest tantric texts of the *vāmasrota* (left-hand stream) followed by the heterodox worshippers of Rudra. Since the eighth century, these goddesses have become part of the Buddhist world and their wrathful forms are described in meditation texts, such as those included in the *Sādhanamālā*. Following a recently published study by Miranda Shaw (*Buddhist Goddesses of India*), it is interesting to note that the earth sister Aparājītā can be identified as the wrathful aspect of the Māra-defeating Earth Goddess Pṛthivī.

All of these protectors are described in detail, for the purpose of their invocation and worship, in the commentary by Padma 'phrin-las, in a manner which is typical of his erudite scholarship. Typical in this regard, too, are his illuminating essays on the subjugation of Sri demons, which are included in the present volume (Chapters Six & Seven) and discussed below.

Although the *Sharp Weapon* (Chapter One) is derived, to a certain extent, from the *Heart Activity* (Chapter Two), there are some significant differences in approach. Generally speaking, the *Sharp Weapon* expands upon the contents of the *Heart Activity*, adding extra sections and embellishing those features already present. Thus, for example, the meditation in which one generates oneself as the deity is very brief in the *Heart Activity* compared with the same section in the *Sharp Weapon* and, while the *Sharp Weapon* establishes an outer boundary, an inner boundary and a secret boundary around the sacred *maṇḍala*, the





establishment of an inner boundary alone serves for all boundaries in the *Heart Activity*. Such minor differences between the two texts are legion. It is in the section dealing with meditation on the three *samādhi*, however, that we encounter a truly significant difference of approach. These three *samādhi* arrange the conditions for the arising of the manifest *vajra* world. The text of the *Black Razor Tantra*, which is utilised in the *Sharp Weapon sādhana*, propounds the big bang theory of *mahāyoga-tantra* origination, in which a condensed drop (*thig le chen po, mahābindu*), within which all possibilities are latent, is all that is seen to exist within primordial empty space. This condensed drop then explodes to permeate all-encompassing universal emptiness with the fundamental elements of existence: earth, water, fire and air, out of which living beings arise by an evolutionary series of transformations. The *Heart Activity*, on the other hand, describes this creation according to the steady-state theory of the *atiyoga* texts in which essence (*ngo bo*), nature (*rang bzhin*) and compassion (*thugs rje*) are always and everywhere present.

The structural outline of the *sādhana* can be seen in the table of contents, above, and for a detailed study of the esoteric theory underlying its sequential meditations, I refer the reader to the '*Bum nag*.

Chapter Three of the present volume is the *Clear Elucidation of the Essential Branches of Ritual Practice in which are analysed the full series of activities for the great attainment of the blessed Vajrakumāra Medium Razor (bCom ldan 'das rdo rje gzhon nu 'bring po spu gri'i sgrub chen gyi chog khrigs lag len snying po rab gsal)*, by Rig-'dzin Padma 'phrin-las. This most valuable commentary discusses, in Part One, how to take the *sādhana* meditation practice out into the wilderness for a period of intense isolation. First of all, one should carefully select a suitable site for retreat, where one makes offerings to the Earth Goddess and to the local gods and spirits, and then one contemplates the establishment of the *maṇḍala* upon that site through dance gestures and *mantra*, so that all evil is ritually banished from the land. In Part Two, the *maṇḍala* rites are applied to the retreat hut and an extended series of boundaries is established. These include a ring of stone cairns for the four Great Kings, to be erected around the outside of the meditation hut, and a pit of suppression in front of the doorway, within which the *dam sri* demons are buried in order that they be trodden down every time the yogin goes outside to answer the call of nature. This fascinating topic is discussed in detail in Chapters Four, Five, Six & Seven of the present volume. Within the meditation hut, practical instructions are given for

the construction of a material *maṇḍala*, and these complement the instructions for visualisation given in the liturgy of invocation. Thus, lines are drawn, colours are applied, and the offerings and ritual items are set down in their proper places. Through the proper performance of the subsequent rituals, then, it is said that the yogin gains the power to destroy the triple world of *samsāra* with his body, speech and mind in a single instant and the meditation on the dissolution of the *maṇḍala* at the end of the rite, followed by its sudden reemergence from the void like a fish leaping out of water, is intended to protect the mind of the meditator from the extreme views of eternalism and nihilism. Thus the liberated yogin, with all false notions of *samsāra* destroyed, is free to assume forms in the world suitable for the benefit and guidance of others.



This final verse, together with those forming the concluding prayers of aspiration (*praṇidhāna*) and auspiciousness (*maṅgalam*), were composed by the Great Fifth Dalai Lama, whose family lineage had been traced back to the bygone rulers of Tibet.

A significant feature of the Northern Treasures tradition is its historical link with the ancient lineage of Tibetan kings, and many of its secret rites are known to have been taught at the end of the eighth century to the warrior emperor Khri Srong-lde'u-btsan by Guru Padma himself. Later revealed as a treasure by Rig-'dzin rgod-ldem in 1366, this cache of mystic doctrines is considered crucial to the preservation of the royal line and to the welfare of the Tibetan subjects. The rule of the kings, however, had long since been overthrown by a popular uprising, which brought an end to the feuds for succession to the throne following the assassination of gLang-dar-ma in 842, and the empire had fragmented and collapsed. Nevertheless, among the writings of the great master of the Northern Treasures, bKra-shis stobs-rgyal dbang-po'i-sde (1550-1607), is to be found a prophesy concerning a future treasure-revealer whose destiny it would be to become king of all Tibet in his fifth incarnation:

*Twenty-five [treasures] and five special treasures of mind  
 Will be revealed, through pure aspirations,  
 By your fifth incarnation,  
 Oh present king of the black-headed race.<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, pp.822-823.