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The Teaching Of Transference Of Consciousness In The Corpse (Pho-Wa Drong-Jug)¹ In Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism: An Overview

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Key words: Songtsan Gampo, Mahasiddhas, Nāropa, Maitripa, Marpa Lotsawa, *Guhyasamāja*, *Cakrasaṃvara, Hevajra, Mahamāyā, Catuḥpīṭha*

Introduction:

Buddhism was formally introduced in Tibet from India in the early 7th century AD during the reign of 33rd Tibetan King Songtsan Gampo (617-698 CE)² of Yarlung dynasty. The emperor sent his minister Thonmi Sambhota along with sixteen³ other young Tibetan students to India with the aim of introducing Buddhism in his empire. Only Thonmi Sambhota was survived among the group of students and he made his way to India enduring with numerous challenges. Some of them could not bear the scorching heat of plain India while others passed away on the way to India as the journey was extremely perilous during those days.

Thonmi returned back to his homeland Lhasa after his successful study in the field of Buddhist philosophy, Sanskrit grammar, Indian scripts under the tutorship of south Indian Pandit Deva Vidya Sinha and Brahmin Lipidatta or Lipikara. Upon reaching Tibet in the court of Emperor Songtsan Gampo (Wylie: Srong btsan sgam po), for the sake of translating Sanskrit Buddhist classics into Tibetan language he devised the new Tibetan script known as U-can on the model of Brahmi script⁴ followed by the composition of eight Tibetan grammatical texts in compliance with the eight Sanskrit grammatical texts namely i) *Indra vyākaraṇa*, ii) *Viśāla vyākaraṇa*, iii) *Śakauṭayana vyākaraṇa*, iv) *Pāṇini vyākaraṇa*, v) *Samantabhadra vyākaraṇa*, vi) *Patanjali vyākaraṇa*, vii) *Manujendra vyākaraṇa*, viii) *Sarasvati vyākaraṇa*.

Under the royal support of Emperor Songtsan Gampo (Wylie: Srong btsan sgam po) in the early 7th century AD, the first ever Sanskrit-Tibetan translation workshop began in Tibet led by his minister Thonmi

¹ Pho wa (Wylie: 'Pho ba) literally means "transference" and Drong jug (Wylie: Grong 'jug) literally means "to enter or transfer one's consciousness into the dead body".

² This date is widely accepted in most of the Tibetan historical sources namely *Choe-jung Khae-pae Ga-ton* (Wylie: *Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston*) of Pawo Tsuglag Threngwa whereas *Jam-ma* (Byams ma) of Bon chronicle, *Tun-huang* document, *The White Annals* of Gedun Chophel recorded the date of Songtsan as 617-650 CE.

³ This number of students is recorded in *The History of Buddhism in India and Tibet* of Bu-ston, *Choe-jung Khae-pae Ga-ton* (Wylie: *Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston*) of Pawo Tsuglag Threngwa whereas Sakya Sonam Gyaltsen asserted seven students in his work *The Clear Mirror History* (Gyal-rab Sel-wai Me-long).

⁴ Gedun Chophel maintains the model of Tibetan U-can script as the Gupta script.

⁵ Zhabs Drung, Tsetan. Sum rtags kyi bshad pa thon mi'i zhal lung, Sarnath: New Light Publications, 1989, p. 28

Sambhota along with Tibetan scholars Dharma Koṣa, Lhalung Dorjay Pal⁶ etc. and the Indian Pandita Kusara, Brahmin Śankara, Kashmiri Pandita Tanu, Nepalese Pandita Śīla Mañju, Chinese scholar Hwashang Mahādeva⁷. During this workshop, around ten *tantric* texts related to Avalokiteśvara were translated into Tibetan.

From 7^{th} to 9^{th} century, thousands of Sanskrit Buddhist classics chosen for translation into Tibetan were chiefly related to the area concerned with the Buddhist $S\bar{u}tra$ and Tantra, Buddhist Logic & Epistemology. This period is demarcated as the Early Spread of Buddhism in Tibet which is popularly known in Tibetan as Tan-pa Nga-dar (Wylie: bsTan pa lnga dar) in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. More than one hundred Buddhist tantric literatures were translated into Tibetan during the Early Spread of Buddhism in Tibet.

One of the great achievements during this period is the compilation of two very important Sanskrit-Tibeto Lexicography of Buddhist terminology in the 9th century namely *Mahāviyutpatti* that runs into 9565 lexical entries and *Madhyavyutpatti* which is a technical interpretation to 414 of the entries available in *Mahāviyutpatti*.

The long process of Sanskrit-Tibeto translation activity took place in the 7th century and last till 17th century eventually led to the production of voluminous corpus of Tibetan canonical literature known as *Kangyur* (108 Vols.) and *Tangyur* (225 Vols.) which consists of 4567 Sanskrit texts⁸ (including few indigenous Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist texts) in total. *Kangyur* and *Tangyur* includes the genre namely Buddhist *Sūtra* and *Tantra* literature, Buddhist Logic & Epistemology, Sanskrit Grammar, Sanskrit Poetry and Rheoric, Sanskrit Drama, Sanskrit Lexicography such as *Amarkoṣa*, Sanskrit *Nitiśāstra*, *Ayurvedic* medicine, Indian astrology, *Avadāna* literature, *Jātaka* literature etc.

After the collapsed of Tibetan Tsanpo dynasty in the 9th century and till the beginning of the Sakyapa rule in the 13th century is a period where a great deal of Tibetan Lotsawa⁹ (translator) appeared.¹⁰

The Buddhist Tantric literatures were directly brought to Tibet from India, Nepal and especially from Kashmir during the 11th and 12th century when the continuous and frequent visit of Indian Pandits and Tibetan Lotsawa to India and Tibet took place. The Later Spread of Buddhism in Tibet known as Tan-pa Chi-dar (Wylie: bsTan pa phyi dar) began in the 11th century. The *Tantra* tradition that propagated during the Early Spread of Buddhism in Tibet is refer to as Old *Tantra* Tradition whereas the *Tantra* tradition that disseminated during the Later Spread of Buddhism in Tibet is known as New *Tantra* Tradition. The New *Tantra* Tradition began during the reign of King Lha Lama Yeshe Hö (Wylie: Lha bla ma ye shes 'od, 947-1024) who sacrificed his life in order to bring Atīśa Dipańkara to Tibet to revitalize the Buddhism.

As the Tantric practitioners (sNgags pa) were seen indulged in the malpractice of *Tantra* such as the concept of liberation through intercourse (Tib. sByor sgrol) alarmed the King Lha Lama Yeshe Hö which caused him to send twenty-one young Tibetan students including Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo (958-1055) to India (especially Kashmir) for the pursuit of learning Buddhist *Sūtra* and *Tantra*. Out of twenty-one

⁹ This is derived from the Sanskrit term "lokacakşu" which literally means "the eye of universe". This technical term Lotsawa is exclusively refer to the professional Tibetan translators who were specifically trained in the task of Sanskrit-Tibetan translation of Buddhist texts and other Sanskrit literature.

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⁶ This name should not be confused with the one who assassinated the King Lang Darma in the 9th century.

⁷ This name should not be confused with the Chinese master who was defeated by Ācārya Kamalśīla in Samye debate in the 8th century AD.

⁸ This total number is as per the Derge edition of *Kangyur* and *Tangyur*.

¹⁰ Bu-ston in his work *The History of Buddhism in India and Tibet* recorded a total number of 192 Tibetan Lotsawa appeared during the 7th century till 13th century whereas 93 Indian Pandit was recorded as appeared during these period.

students, except Rinchen Zangpo and Legpai Sherab were survived and completed their studies. Nineteen of them died of unsuitable climate of India.

Under the royal patronage of Lha Lama Yeshe Hö, Rinchen Zangpo travelled thrice in Kashmir and invited many great Indian masters from Kashmir to Tibet in order to carry out the translation project. Over hundreds of *Tantric* texts are credited to his name. His translations covered all the Four Sets of Tantra (Tib. rGyud sde bzhi). His works also includes *Sūtra and Ayurvedic* text such as *Aṣṭāngahṛdayasaṃhita of Vāgbhaṭa*. In the history of Tibetan Buddhism, the *Tantric* literatures that were translated prior to Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo is refer to as Old Tantra Tradition (Tib. gSang sngags rnying ma) whereas the *Tantric* literatures that were translated after Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo is refer to as New Tantra Tradition (Tib. gSang sngags gsar ma).¹¹

While he was 85 years of age, Atīśa Dipaṃkara from Vikramśīla Vihāra arrived in Western Tibet at the royal invitation of Lha Lama Yeshe Hö (947-1019/1024) and his younger brother Lha Lama Jangchub Hö. Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo translated several *Tantric* texts into Tibetan in collaboration with Atīśa Dipaṃkara namely Śrī Cakrasaṃvara Sādhna, Vajra Yoginī Sādhna, Guhayasamaja, Avalokiteśvara Sādhna, Mahāgaṇapatitantra etc. Lha Lama Yeshe Hö also invited Pandita Smritijñāna Kirti and Thra-la Ring-wa (Sukṣma Dīrgha). Pandita Smritijñāna translated Śrī Catuḥpīṭhamahāyoginī-guhyasarvaantrarāja into Tibetan in his later part of life.

Pandita Thra-la Ring-wa performed Pho-wa Drong-jug (Wylie: 'Pho ba grong 'jug) i.e. transferred his consciousness into the dead body of Rongpa Choesang and henceforth Rongpa Choesang became well-versed in numerous *Sūtras* and *Tantras*.¹²

Drogmi Lotsawa Shakya Yeshe (993-1074) invited Pandita Gayādhara and translated Hevajra pañjara, Sampuṭa nāma mahā tantra, Rali, Arali belonging to the Mother class tantra. 13

Followed by him, another Lotsawa Goe Khugpa Lhae Tsae (11th century AD) received the teachings from seventy-two *Mahāsiddhas* during his three times visit in India. He translated the tantric texts related to *Guhyasamāja*, *Cakrasaṃvara*, *Catuḥpīṭha*, *Mahāmāyā*, *Hevajra* etc. 14

Lotsawa Gyi Jo (Co) Da-wae Hö-zer (11th century AD) translated *Kālacakra tantra*¹⁵, *Buddhakapāla*, *Vajra amṛta*, *Cakra saṃvara* etc. ¹⁶ Similarly, many subsequent Tibetan masters continued their travelling in India in pursuit of receiving tantric initiations and learning sutras and *tantras* etc.

In this process of receiving tantric initiations, oral instruction and teaching from Indian Mahasiddhas, Lhodrag Marpa Lotsawa (1012-1097) travelled thrice in India in pursuit of learning Buddhist *Sūtra & Tantra*. Marpa received *tantric* initiations and studied under the tutorship of Nāropa (956-1040)¹⁷, Maitripa, Phamthing, Śāntibhadra etc. and received the instructions (upadeśa) with regard to *Guhyasamāja*, *Cakrasamvara*, *Hevajra*, *Mahamāyā*, *Catuḥpīṭha* and so forth. He is also said to have obtained special

¹⁵ Kālacakra was introduced in Tibet in the year 1027.

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¹¹ Jungney, Koshul & Khedup, Gyalwa Lobsang. *Gangs can mkhas grub rim byon ming mdzod*, Xinhua: Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1992, p. 1670

¹² Drub, Buton Rinchen. *Bu ston chos 'byung gsung rab rin po che'i mdzod*, Xinhua: Krung go'i bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang, 1988, p. 202

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 203

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁶ Drub, Buton Rinchen. *Bu ston chos 'byung gsung rab rin po che'i mdzod*, Xinhua: Krung go'l bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang, 1988, P. 203

¹⁷ Wylie, Turell V. "Dating the Death of Naropa", L.A. Hercus (Ed.), *Indological and Buddhist Studies*, Canberra: Faculty of Asian Studies, 1982, Pp. 687-692

instructions from Atīśa Dipaṃkara in India. Hence, during the period between 11th to 12th century witnessed a huge number of translations of tantric texts which were jointly produced by Indian Panditas and Tibetan Lotsawa. This is the period when New Tantra Tradition was flourishing in Tibet. The oral instruction of Pho-wa Drong-jug was also introduced during this time in Tibet.

Pho-wa Drong-Jug (Transference of Consciousness into the Dead Body):

This technical Tibetan term Pho-wa Drong Jug is the combination of two words Pho-wa (Wylie: 'Pho ba) and Drong-Jug (Wylie: Grong 'jug) meaning "Transference of Consciousness" and "Transference of Consciousness into the Dead Body" respectively. These two practices are fall within the category of Six Dharma of Nāropa or Six Yogas of Nāropa (Tib. Na ro chos drug). These divisions are categorized into three roots and three branches respectively.

The three roots are namely;

- i) Candali (Tib. gTum mo), Inner Heat, (expounded in *Hevajra tantra & Cakrasamvara* of Mother Tantra)
- ii) Māyākāya (Tib. sGyu lus), Illusory Body, (expounded in *Guhyasamāja* of Father Tantra)
- iii) Prabhāsvara (Tib. 'Od gsal), Luminosity (expounded in *Guhyasamāja* of Father Tantra)

The three branches are namely;

- iv) Samkrānti, (Tib. 'Pho ba), Transference of Consciousness, (expounded in Catuhpītha of Mother Tantra)
- v) (Tib. Grong 'jug), Entering a Corpse (expounded in Catuḥpīṭha of Mother Tantra)
- vi) Antarābhava, (Tib. Bar do'i gdams ngag), Intermediate States 19

Pho-wa (Consciousness transference):

Pho-wa refers to the practice of transference of consciousness to a higher realm by means of rLung (energy). Highly realized Lama performs this practice while someone just passed away in order to transfer the consciousness of the dead person to a higher realm so that the dead person may be stopped from being born in the lower world. But one can perform the Pho-wa for oneself just before one passed away provided that one may have received Pho-wa initiation, teaching training from High Lama.

The Pho-wa or the transference of consciousness is performed by the highly realized master/yogi who knows the consciousness of a person in the Intermediate State (Tib. Bardo) to the person who is on the point of dying, or the being who is in the intermediate state. The yogi who performed the Pho-wa should have at least attained the Path of Seeing (Darśana mārga, one of the Five Paths). As the great yogi Milarepa says;

Unless one perceives the truth of Path of Seeing, Do not perform Pho-wa/transference for the dead one.

But one should know the right moment for performing the Pho-wa (transference of consciousness). That is when the outer breath has ceased and the inner breath is still functioning. This is the right time to perform

¹⁸ Waddell, L. Austine. *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism,* Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1999, p. 64

¹⁹ The names of six divisions vary depending upon different versions of the text.

Pho-wa if one has an experience in Pho-wa instruction so that he or she could save a person from being born in the lower world e.g. hell (Nārak), hungry ghost (Preta) and Animal (Paśu).²⁰

With regard to the training of Pho-wa, you should firstly receive the instruction of Pho-wa and then train yourself regularly until the signs such as itching, feeling of numbness, dripping/leaking of serum on the crown of the head (uṣṇ̄sa) etc. appear. If anyone of these signs occurs, then one should stop practicing Pho-wa or it will be a life risk. The actual practice of Pho-wa should be performed in the last hour of dying or before inflicted with severe fatal disease when you realize that your death is certain and the dissolution of your elements has already occurred. If you perform it any time or randomly, it would be equal to the killing of deities. As it says in the tantra;

Pho-wa should be performed at appropriate time.

Inappropriate time (of performance) will kill the deities.²¹

Marpa Lotsawa says;

You should perform your Pho-wa while you are dying, You should train Pho-wa over and over again, Then even though the signs of death occur, you will not fear, You will have confidence and understood it as a Completion Stage.²²

Interestingly, the great meditator Ven. Kyabje Choedan Rinpoche (1933-2015) recollects the incidents during his life time in Tibet when Communist Chinese invaded Tibet in 1959. Thousands of innocent Tibetans were imprisoned and brutally tortured especially lamas. There were several cases in 1959 or little later where many high lamas and Geshe in Tibet performed Pho-wa and passed away when they were certain that Chinese army would arrest them sooner or later. Ven. Choedan Rinpoche further says, his guru called Lama Lochoe was also one among many lamas who performed Pho-wa and passed away in 1960 when he was sure that he would be arrested by the Chinese. On that very night of passing away of Lama Lochoe, there appeared a straight white rainbow at Sera monastery.²³

Within the Drigung Kagyue tradition (sub-sect of Kagyue tradition) of Tibetan Buddhism, teaching of Phowa practice is one of the important traditions which is popularly known as Drigung Pho-wa Chenmo (lit. the great Pho-wa of Drigung). Every 12 years when the Monkey-year²⁴ begin, Drigung Kyabgon (the head of the Drigung order) used to offer the teaching of Pho-wa to thousands of devotees belongs to the followers of Drigung sect gathered from all over Tibet and from Ladhak at Mardo Gungkar near Lhasa in central Tibet.

A well-known Pho-wa master, Ven. Ayang Rinpoche (1942-2024) who belongs to both Drigung Kagyue and Nyinga traditions also offers Pho-wa teaching in India and abroad. I also had the occasion of receiving Pho-wa oral instruction from Ven. Ayang Rinpoche in 2003 in Bodh Gaya.

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²⁰ Wangpo, Kunkhyen Jigmey. *rDzogs pa chen po klong chen snying thig gi sngon 'gro'i khrid yig kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, Taiwan: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, Pp. 358-359

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 363

²² Tsetan, Namgyal (ed.). Bod ljongs zhib 'jug, Xinhua: mTsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2014, Pp. 30-31

²³ Rinpoche, Kyabje Choedan. *Zab lam na ro chos drug gi khrid yig bde chen dngos grub 'byung gnas kyi zab khrid bzhugs so.* sKyab rje Chos ldan rin po che'i dra mdzod rtsom sgrig khang, 2017, P. 84

²⁴ In the Tibetan lunar calendar, there are twelve animal signs which rotate every year.

Pho-wa practice belongs to the *Anuttara yoga tantra* which is taught in the *Hevajra Tantra*, *Cakrasaṃvara*, *Sampuṭa Tantra*, *Catuḥp̄ṭha* etc.

Drong-jug (Entering of Consciousness into Dead Body):

Drong-jug literally means entering of one's consciousness into the dead body of other being by the power of energy (rLung) and consciousness (Sems). The yogi who attained the certain stage through the practice of Anuttara yoga tantra could perform the Drong-jug under the circumstances that when he could not benefit much to the Buddha's teachings and other beings due to severe illness or aging; he realizes that if he could continue his service to the beings effectively, he would transfer his consciousness to other young person's dead body. There were cases where yogi performed Drong-jug for the benefit of sentient-beings for instance, Indian Pandita Sukṣma Dīrgha (Tib. Phra la ring ba) who accompanied Pandita Smṛti Jñāna Kirti to Tibet in the 11th century. Lotsawa Rongpa Choesang invited Pandita Sukṣma Dīrgha to Tibet in the 11th century CE. Rongpa Choesang was much younger than Pandita Suksma. While Rongpa Choesang passed away at the quite young age and Pandita Suksma performed Drong-jug in the dead body of Rongpa Choesang as the Pandita was quite advance in age at that time. Subsequently, it appears to the public that as Pandita passed away and Rongpa Choesang was alive. It says that Rongpa Choesang was earlier less intelligent who became genius all of a sudden after Pandita Suksma transferred his consciousness to Rongpa Choesang's dead body. The other instance of Drong-jug is the anecdote of Marpa Lotsawa's son Dar-ma Do-de. He fell down from the horse one day and got fractured his skull. At that point of time, he tried hard to find any fresh uninjured human dead body but he failed to find any. But finally he could find only one pigeon's dead body to which he transferred his consciousness. So that time with the clairvoyance of Marpa saw the dead body of 16 years old young boy at Sītavan charnel ground (Tib. bSil ba tshal gyi dur khrod) near Bodh Gaya in India. The pigeon was sent there at Śītavan and entered into the body of a young boy who subsequently became a great scholar by the name of Tiphu Sang-ngag kyi Dong-po (Wylie: Ti phu gsang sngags kyi sdong po). It is said that Lama Rechung pa²⁵ received teachings from Tiphu Sangngag kyi Dong-po. ²⁶ Similarly, Tong-khor Do-gyue Gyatso (1639-1683) is said to be the previous birth of Tong-khor Rinpoche Sonam Gyatso who performed the Drong-jug in the dead body of 8 years old boy.²⁷

Marpa Lotsawa received the teachings of Pho-wa Drong-jug from Naropa and Maitripa during his third visit to India. As it says in Marpa's *mGur* (Spiritual Song);

I the Marpa Lotsawa,

Visited three times in India,

Entrusted qualified gurus with devotion,

From Nāropa and Maitri,

Received the instructions of many tantra and its commentaries,

I was introduced with the significance of four-fold initiations,

Especially I received Pho-wa Drong-jug.²⁸

Naropa received the instruction of Pho-wa Drong-jug from Maitripa. Maitripa received this teaching from Oddiyana.²⁹

Though many believed that the lineage of Pho-wa Drong-jug came to an end in Tibet after the demise of Marpa Lotsawa in the 11th century but the performance of Drong-jug by Tong-khor Do-gyue Gyatso (1639-

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²⁵ Also known as Rechung Dorjay Drakpa, was one of the two foremost disciples of the 11th century yogi Milarepa.

²⁶ Thrinley, Dungkar Lobsang. *Dungkar tshig mdzod chen mo*, Peking: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 2002, p. 574 ²⁷ *Ihid*.

²⁸ Gyalpo, Thrag-thung. Mar pa lo tsa ba'i rnam thar, Khreng tu'u: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1984, p. 154

²⁹ Tsetan, Namgyal (ed.). *Bod ljongs zhib 'jug,* Xinhua: mTsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2014, p. 32

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1683) as mentioned above is the case that proves the existence of Pho-wa Drong-jug lineage of instruction still exist during those days in Tibet. In addition to that, there is also a case where Pho-wa Drong practice is perform within the Tibetan Bon tradition. For example, in the early 20th century at Thrika in Amdo province (Eastern Tibet), when the 1st incarnation of Khyung-mo Tulku passed away, he entered his consciousness into the dead body of young man.³⁰

We also find Pho-wa Drong-jug instruction in "Terma Literature" of Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. 'Pho ba grong 'jug gi man ngag gsang ba'i yang khul is the abridge instruction spoken by the great Yogi Padmasambhava (who travelled Tibet in the 8th century) and put down into writing by his tantric spouse Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal. It was discovered by Ogyan Samten Lingpa from the secret cave of Dragkar Dron-chu in 1681 CE.

Epilogue

The Pho-wa Drong-jug (transference of Consciousness and entering a corpse) teachings are based on tantric sources namely *Four Seats Tantra* (*Catuḥpīṭha*), *Sampuṭa Tantra*, *Vajradaka Tantra*, and so forth. Mahasiddhas Tilopa and Naropa were reputed for the development of the tradition of Six Yogas of Nāropa popularly known as Na ro chos drug in Tibetan. With the great effort and the profound wisdom of Marpa Lotsawa brought the teaching of Pho-wa Drong-jug (transference of Consciousness and entering a corpse) in his homeland Tibet in 1043 CE. Marpa's son Dar-ma Do-de, Rongpa Choesang, Tong-khor Sonam Gyatso, Khyung-mo Tulku are the yogis who performed Pho-wa Drong-jug (transference of Consciousness and entering a corpse) in the 11th, 17th and 20th Century respectively.

Tôhoku Imperial University Catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Canons (*Kangyur & Tangyur*) of Japan recorded a total number of 3334 major and minor Tantric texts in *Kangyur* and *Tangyur*.

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³⁰ Thar, Tsering. "The bla ma in the Bon Religion in Amdo and Kham", Samten G. Karmay and Yasuhiko Nagano, (eds.). New Horizon in Bon Studies. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2000, p. 423

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