

Article

Crisis, Timing, and Textual Preservation in a Degenerate Age: The Copying, Wearing, and Recitation of Buddhist Tantras in Tibet

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Abstract

For Buddhists, preserving the Word of the Buddha has been intimately linked to the astrological notion of a “degenerate age,” marked foremost by the decline of Buddhism in our world and increased incidence of crises such as epidemics, famines, and wars. A tantric scripture called the *Only Child of the Teachings* (*Bstan pa bu gcig*), one of the root tantras of the Tibetan Great Perfection Heart Essence tradition, presents itself as not only the offspring of the teachings but also as “the ember of the teachings” that can reignite Buddhism during the degenerate age and, when copied, worn, and ritually recited, confront symptomatic calamities, liberate the deceased from bad destinies, and even hasten the realization of awakening. Properly enlisting the *Only Child* toward these aims requires careful consideration of another tantra, called *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* (*Dus gnad nges pa*), which serves as the user’s manual for the *Only Child* by specifying the astrological, material, and ritual elements for the *Only Child*’s reproduction, wearing, and efficacious deployment. This paper examines the content of *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* in its broader context as a lens into understanding how scriptures can generate the reproduction, preservation, and ritual use of other scriptures, particularly during times of crisis, and what this generativity between texts implies about the creation and revitalization of tradition more broadly. It includes in an appendix a preliminary Tibetan edition and English translation of *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*.

Keywords: Buddhism; tantra; Tibet; Great Perfection; amulet; astrology; textual copying; textual preservation; ritual; recitation; degenerate age



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1. Introduction

The ritualized copying of books has been a central part of Buddhist textual culture since Buddhist scriptures were first recorded in writing. Integrating literary skill, craftsmanship, and devotional care, book copying has been an important way for Buddhists to generate merit while contributing to the spread and longevity of the Dharma. In the Tibetan cultural sphere, the Buddhist devotional care for books has over the centuries sometimes assumed the form of copying tantric scriptures into miniature booklets and wearing them on the body as amulets (Gentry 2025; 2017, 236–259). Such amulet booklets have been enlisted not only for protection against misfortunes and other pragmatic aims but also with the hope of attaining liberation from *saṃsāra*.

The tantra called the *Only Child of the Buddhas* (*Sangs rgyas sras gcig*), otherwise known as the *Only Child of the Teachings* (*Bstan pa bu gcig*, Klong chen rab ’byams pa Dri med ’od zer 1970–1971, vol. 7, 37.2–71), is the paradigmatic instance of such “liberation through

wearing” texts (*btags grol*) (Gentry 2025). The *Only Child* made its debut in Tibet between the eleventh and twelfth century as part of the early development of the Tibetan *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* (*Bi ma snying thig*) tradition of the Great Perfection (Rdzogs chen).¹ Although scholars disagree on the precise origins of the *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra*, there is general consensus that it represents a uniquely Tibetan assimilation of strands of late Indian tantric Buddhism, integrating developments in Mahāyāna cosmology, buddhanature theory, and visionary pure-land practices with astrological speculations and Vajrayāna completion-stage yogic practices loosely cognate with the *Kālacakra tantra* (Yeshe 2023, pp. 40–43; Hatchell 2014; Germano 2005). Largely in keeping with this picture, the Tibetan *Only Child* follows in the footsteps of many Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna texts before it in extolling its own capacities to benefit beings through its copying and carrying but extends such promises to include the lofty goal of liberation through its regular wearing and periodic recitation.² However, to properly use the *Only Child* and unlock its potency requires close consultation of another tantra known as *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* (*Dus gnad nges pa*, Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971, vol. 7, 273–287.4). *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*, whose narrative framing depicts its instructions as having been taught by the Buddha Vajradhara, serves as the user’s manual for the *Only Child*. It prescribes in the authoritative voice of a past Buddha the material, astrological, environmental, and ritual specifications for the *Only Child*’s reproduction, wrapping, wearing, and efficacious deployment.

As its title suggests, *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* frames its specifications according to the most efficacious windows of time in which to recite or otherwise ritually deploy the *Only Child*. Crucial to its articulation of the timing of the *Only Child*’s use are calamities interpretable as indications of a Buddhist “degenerate age.” A degenerate age, otherwise known as an age of strife, is a Buddhist cosmological notion that depicts the passage of time according to the relative decline and degradation of beings’ life span, health, afflictive mental states, ethical conduct, resources, views, and so on (Nattier 1991). According to this concept, which has been a mainstay in the Buddhist tradition throughout much of its long and diverse history, the decline of beings’ circumstances goes hand in hand with the decline of the Dharma in their world. An age of decline is in this way a Buddhist variation on the notion of the “end times.” For most Buddhists, however, who propose a nonrepeating, cycle-like, or, more accurately, wave-like, conception of time rather than a linear one, an age of strife marks the final, lower reaches of a cosmic cycle of decline, just prior to the complete or nearly complete disappearance of the Dharma from the world. A period at the dregs of decline then ushers in a period of gradual growth and development, until the upward cosmic cycle reaches its zenith, another buddha appears in the world (Maitreya will be next), and a downward cycle begins once again (Nattier 1991, pp. 8–26).³ An important implication of such an age is that the attenuated presence of the Dharma makes necessary innovative Buddhist media specially designed for both preserving the Dharma as long as possible and strategically reaching beings in timely and unprecedented ways.

Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing instructs that the *Only Child* should be recited specifically on the occasions of earthquake, harvest-damaging frost, human and livestock epidemic, solar and lunar eclipse, famine, and other events of collective threat and astrological import. It secondarily stipulates the *Only Child*’s use in individual funerary proceedings through fastening it on the head or around the neck of the deceased. This emphasis on timely use during astrologically significant calamities and events, including death, plugs into Buddhist degenerate age logic. Most urgent about a degenerate age for Buddhists is that with the increasing frequency of calamities and the shortening of collective lifespan comes the waning presence of the Dharma in the world. Seen in this light, instructions on how and when to copy, wrap, wear, and recite scripture, as we find in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*, suggests a concerted strategy of textual preservation and proliferation, particularly

during times of crisis and precarity, when the Dharma and its textual heritage are under threat of extinction.

But *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*'s emphasis on timeliness, in terms of the specific time constraints it designates for efficacious ritual use, occasioned by timely events that mark a degenerate age, stands in marked contrast to the temporality expressed in the *Only Child of the Teachings* tantra itself. The *Only Child of the Teachings* presents itself as a cosmic force beyond the confines of time—both the first linguistic expression of, or emanation from, the ontological ground of ultimate reality, and the regenerative force that reignites the Dharma at the end of each degenerate age.

This paper examines *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* and its symbiotic relationship with the *Only Child* to ask what the possible effects were from bringing together their two different senses of temporality for the *Only Child*'s ongoing popularity and use. It argues that integrating their contrasting temporalities by, in essence, couching the efficacy of the cosmic *Only Child* in terms of the timing of events that are both communal and personal in scope and significance has been fundamentally generative. Not only has it led to the preservation, copying, and ritual use of the *Only Child* over the centuries, ensuring its survival in times of catastrophic rupture and upheaval. More broadly, the merging of cosmic time with the timings of events of great social and individual significance can be fruitfully identified as a generative force behind religious traditions writ large, creating and reaffirming any given tradition's vitality and relevance during times of great turmoil and change.

In the case of the *Only Child*, however, the logistics of its timely use are only alluded to in shorthand form in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*, thus implying a broader background knowledge in astrology which correlates cosmic, communal, and individual times that can only be ascertained piecemeal throughout the wider *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* corpus. Complicating things further, over time the *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* tradition's astrological system of correlating times and scales of time fell out of use, leaving much about the stipulated timing of the *Only Child*'s efficacious recitation obscure, despite the ongoing popularity of the *Only Child*'s copying and use.

To most fully appreciate the generative capacities of the relationship between the *Only Child* and *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* requires reconstructing their place in this broader astrological context. The present paper is a preliminary foray in this direction. I lay the groundwork for this research by illustrating how the *Only Child*'s ongoing copying and use depended in large part on its circulation with *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*, and how the *Only Child*'s cosmic self-presentation as both the child and progenitor of all Buddhist teachings established the framework, in turn, for how its temporality and use figure in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*. Against the backdrop of their symbiotic textual lives, I then examine their different senses of temporality, starting with the *Only Child*'s cosmic sense of temporality, followed by a deeper examination of the elemental astrology alluded to in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* as crucial for the *Only Child*'s timely use. This discussion of elemental astrology draws on strands from the wider *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* corpus to illustrate overlaps with *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* important for understanding the rationale it sets forth for the *Only Child*'s efficacy. I conclude with considerations of what the case of *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* and the *Only Child* might imply about the broader dynamics of tradition when scriptures develop symbiotically with other scriptures, depending on each other for their formation, preservation, and enduring importance. To help illustrate this case study, the paper includes in an appendix a preliminary Tibetan edition and English translation of *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*. Before delving into *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* itself, a

brief look at the symbiotic relationship between *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* and its subject matter, the *Only Child of the Teachings*, is first in order.

2. A Codependent Textual Relationship Between Mother and Child

Most distinctive about *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* tantra is that it prescribes the copying, wearing, and recitation of another tantra, the *Only Child* tantra. By the fourteenth century there had developed two distinct traditions of copying the *Only Child* tantra (Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971, *Snying thig ya bzhi*, vol. 1, 246.6–254.3).⁴ The earliest tradition involves copying the entire tantra in gold-colored ink on dark blue paper to form a tiny booklet. This resembles the practice, in miniature, of producing deluxe Mahāyāna volumes like the *Prajñāpāramitā* that was prevalent in Tibet starting in the late tenth century (Kapstein 2024, p. 41; Wangchuk 2016).⁵ The second and later tradition of copying the tantra stipulates extracting its sixth chapter, comprised of a series of twenty-five mantra formulas of unknown provenance along with their putative Tibetan meanings, and drawing them in a circular diagram together with other mantras and images. Both traditions prescribe carefully wrapping the text or diagram in five-colored thread and constantly wearing it around the neck, under the armpit, or on the crown of the head so closely that “it never gets cold.”

Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing prescribes the earlier miniature booklet tradition. It states in its opening section:

The great self-occurring letters (i.e., the *Only Child*)
should be written in the precious substance of gold,
to form a book four-finger widths in measure,
wrapped in multicolor silk.
From just holding it to one's crown
one will attain the qualities of an emanation.

By wearing it under the left armpit,
it will be the same.
For one who fastens it around the neck
and constantly reveres it,
the qualities of an emanation body will also be attained. (Klong chen rab 'byams
pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971, vol. 7, 276.1–4)⁶

Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing revisits these directives at its conclusion with some additional details:

Write down the text, the secret words to be worn,
in gold or beryl,
starting from “prior to any conscious awareness” (*dran pa kun gyi thog ma yi*),
through “removing the attachment of the sense faculties” (*dbang po zhen pa
bzlog pa*),
all the way down to “this very rare statement” (*rab tu dkon tshig*).
By affixing it around the neck or on the head it brings accomplishment.
One will attain awakening as the perfected king. (Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri
med 'od zer 1970–1971, vol. 7, 286.6–287.2)⁷

The first passage above stipulates the color of ink to be used for copying the tantra, the measurements of the booklet to be formed with it, and where on the body it is to be worn. The second passage offers a few of the same details, with some variation, allowing it to be copied in beryl, and not just gold. It also specifies more precisely that it is the entire *Only*

Child tantra that is to be copied and worn, from its opening line—“prior to any conscious awareness”—to its concluding colophon, which begins, “this very rare statement.” The second passage above is also careful to remark that it should be copied “through ‘removing the attachment of the sense faculties’,” which is the first line of the 25 verse couplets that comprise chapter 6 of the tantra. This detail likely implies awareness of the other amulet tradition that developed in association with the *Only Child*, in which chapter 6 alone is copied in a circular diagram, along with other mantras and images. Here, this detail seems to announce, it is the entirety of the text that should be regarded as most efficacious.

The preference expressed in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* for copying and wearing the entire tantra, and not just chapter 6, is prefigured by the *Only Child* tantra itself. Early in the tantra we find a directive to hold and recite the whole tantra, “without anything added or omitted.” This occurs in the context of extolling the tantra’s indispensable role in the awakening of buddhas and in the survival and reemergence of their teaching, the Dharma, through the degenerate age of any world system.

When anyone attains Buddhahood
in any world-system,
this flies up into the clear sky
three times and
five self-effulgent lights issue forth from it.

Since the *yogin* who holds this is highly fortunate,
there is no doubt
that whoever recites all the words of this three times
with their vajra tongue,
without anything added or omitted,
will also become equal to them (i.e., buddhas).

Therefore, even were one to understand and meditate
on the entirety of all tantras taught, at the same instant,
there would be no liberation without this manifesting.

Since this involves the self-multiplication of the seed,
even the buddhas who are lords of the teaching
are unable to express with their tongues
a mere word of the speech of the teaching
without this very seed.

Without relying on this,
not even a mere fragment of [the teaching’s] words occurs.

During any period of degeneration of the teaching,
anyone to whom all these blessed words appear
can recite with their tongue faculty
the tantras and commentaries they have never seen before. (*Klong chen rab
'byams pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971*, vol. 7, 39.3–40.3)⁸

Remarkable here is that simply holding and reciting the *Only Child* tantra in its entirety promises to render the *yogin* “equal” to those who previously reached Buddhahood, transformative events that are themselves heralded by the flying up of the tantra and its radiation of light. Also noteworthy is that the *Only Child* presents itself not only as a “child” of the buddhas and their teaching, a result of awakened wisdom, as the tantra’s title expressly

denotes, but also as the self-replicating seed of the Dharma, without which the teaching cannot be known and expressed in the future. In this, the *Only Child* plays the dual role of both offspring and progenitor of the buddhas and their Dharma. As the tantra says of itself, on the one hand, “it naturally arose from the beginning as a self-occurring text,” as “the basket of the Dharma teachings itself,” “the basis of awareness from the beginning;” while, on the other hand, “it is the ember of the teaching” that “will continue to manifest,” “until all discursive thoughts are gone.” In sum, it is the alpha and omega of the entire Buddhist dispensation—the original generative resonance of the Dharma at the beginning of any world system’s formation and the pulsing regenerative lifeline of the Dharma ensuring its survival through the dregs of degenerate times.

The tantra emphasizes its pivotal role by describing its uniquely manifold capacity to reach beings, particularly during degenerate times, when only the ember of the teaching remains, regardless of beings’ lifeform or language.

It can teach
all Dharma teachings in accordance with
the mental capacities of all beings
and the awakened thought of all buddhas.

It brings about indivisibility
with the awakened mind of buddhas and
with the awakened thought of vajra-holders.

Therefore, it is the ember of the teaching.

This self-occurring king of teachings
appears in accordance with
the birth-forms of individual beings,
in whatever their individual languages are. (Klong chen rab ’byams pa Dri med
'od zer 1970–1971, vol. 7, 40.3–6)⁹

In this, the tantra insists, the ground of ultimate reality itself finds expression through the tantra in any language used among the universe’s myriad lifeforms. The variegated manifestations of this tantra, moreover, are credited with the power to reignite the Dharma during the dregs of time, teach myriad beings as needed, and thereby connect them with the mind of awakening itself.

A few verses later the tantra goes on to explain how, as the unconditioned source of all, rooted in the ground of ultimate reality, it gives expression to a variety of methods that are so efficacious they naturally lead to meditative states:

When discursive thoughts vanish, so does this teaching—
this is called ‘vajra.’

Because this entire teaching
is free from the conditions of the elements,
it is vajra, the source of all, the secret mantra.

Since it points toward many methods,
meditating with natural ease arises from it.

This essence, self-antidote, and elixir of the teachings,
is the natural state of the ground itself. (Klong chen rab ’byams pa Dri med 'od
zer 1970–1971, vol. 7, 41.2–3)¹⁰

The dual role of the tantra as both child and progenitor is emphasized more clearly just below. Here, the tantra is referred to as a something that radiated forth from the ground of ultimate reality and, thereby, has served as the basis for the proliferation of all further Dharma teachings.

By manifesting from this unconfused ground,
at the very beginning,
it is a radiated tantra;
just as an effect naturally occurs from a cause,
all expressions have arisen from just this, within a nonconceptual state,
without having been formed.

This will appear
to the person who apprehends light rays.

Multiplying from this, it increases in number. (Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971, vol. 7, 41.5–6)¹¹

The idea that the *Only Child* tantra radiated forth from the ground of ultimate reality is formalized in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* by referring to the *Only Child* repeatedly as an “emanation body” (*sprul pa'i sku*), specifically one that emerged spontaneously without depending on any conditions of production, authorship, or agency whatsoever. In claiming for the *Only Child* the status of a spontaneously emanated text, the tantra can be included among the ranks of the emanated books (*sprul pa'i glegs bam*) of the early Kadampa tradition (Bka' gdams pa) and the eighteenth to nineteenth century *yogin* Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdrol (Zhabs dkar Tshogs drug rang grol, 1781–1851) as another instance of this curious genre of texts (Pang 2017).

Toward the conclusion of its opening verses, the tantra spells out in greater detail the benefits of interacting with it. It begins on a martial and funerary note by promising the pacification of war, even the intractable battle between the devas and asuras, and escape from rebirth among the six classes of beings—the totality of *saṃsāra*—for all who hold its words.

Therefore, by just holding its words,
the battles between the devas and asuras will naturally recede.
This will avert all battles throughout the three realms.

It blocks the escape hatch into the six classes of beings.
It is the vehicle that transports us
to the city of peace. (Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971, vol. 7, 42.4–6)¹²

This extraordinary range of benefits from wearing and reciting the tantra—spanning this lifetime, the next lifetime, and the ultimate awakening of the “city of peace”—clearly stems from its role as the primeval linguistic expression of the ground of ultimate reality. It is the form of the tantra itself, above and beyond whatever propositional content it might communicate to readers, that is central to its efficacy. And yet, that the *Only Child*'s content nonetheless retains an important role is evident in the dictate to precisely copy the text in its entirety, read it aloud, and meditate on its message. Indeed, the *Only Child* claims to constitute the entirety of the Heart Essence tradition, including its origin and theoretical grounding, its contemplative path, and its fruition of awakening. This combination of discursive and material features, along with the notion that it can appear in any language

whatsoever, suggests that integral to the *Only Child*'s perceived efficacy is its unique fusion of form and content, but regardless of the specific language in which it appears. This putative union of form and content, coupled with its portability, likely accounts in large part for the tantra's enduring importance among Tibetans.

The early widespread popularity of copying the entire *Only Child* tantra in the form of a booklet amulet is evinced in the discovery of a manuscript of the text as far away from Tibet as Khara Khoto, in present day Inner Mongolia, PRC, that likely dates to the Tangut Xi Xia kingdom (1038–1227), or to the first century or so of the period of Mongol control (ca. 1227–1327) (Zorin 2020, p. 163). The Khara Khoto *Only Child* manuscript was written in gold-colored ink on dark paper, as alluded to in the passages above from *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*, suggesting that it served as the *Only Child*'s user's manual since before this time. Testifying to the *Only Child*'s enduring importance, its booklet amulet format is still used to this day in funerary rituals in eastern Tibet and elsewhere, where it is placed on the corpse of the deceased and recited with the expectation that its potency can liberate consciousness from rebirth in the lower realms.¹³

The prodigious dissemination of the *Only Child* is no doubt linked to how insistently *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* extols its precise copying, constant wearing, and timely recitation. This set of emphases appears to have contributed to not only the proliferation of copies of the tantra but also to the scribal accuracy of copies across generations. Indeed, although the *Only Child* has been hand-copied and circulated over a wide terrain for nearly a millennium, variations across extant versions of the text are surprisingly few.¹⁴

Evidence corroborating that *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* circulated together with the *Only Child* since close to the latter's inception is found in extant catalogues of the *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra*. The catalogue titled *Adorned by the Sun* (*Nyi mas brgyan pa*), likely the earliest available list of contents of the *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra*, states, "The *Only Child* that encapsulates all the teachings has one section with two parts: a mother and a child" (Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971, vol. 7, 15.1–2).¹⁵ A few folios later the catalogue clarifies what "mother and child" refer to here:

If there were no *Ascertaining the Crucial Point*, the words of Vajradhara, the timing of worship would be unknown. Thus, by compiling the mother with the child, the *Only Child of the Teachings* can be accomplished. Therefore, cherish the secret record of contents. (Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971, vol. 7, 20.2–3)¹⁶

Here, the catalogue highlights its own importance precisely on account of its role in ensuring that the *Only Child* circulate in tandem with *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*. It also spells out the consequences of not transmitting the mother and child together—without *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*'s instructions on the timing of the *Only Child*'s worship, the catalogue implies, the tantra's reproduction, wearing, and recitation could prove futile. Despite the *Only Child*'s reliance here on *Ascertaining the Crucial Point* to fulfil its true potential, the mother–child relationship between the two texts is expressed in terms of a curious reversal of kinship roles: the root tantra of the *Only Child* is clearly the prior "mother" scripture (*ma*), a term that in other Tibetan scribal contexts signals the role of a textual exemplar, whereas *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* is its derivative child (*bu*), which would more commonly refer to a "mother" exemplar's copies, or offspring. In terms of scribal practice, however, we might more accurately characterize *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* as the *Only Child*'s midwife, responsible for delivering its offspring copies into the world. The designation of *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* as the child to the mother *Only Child* would thus seem to stem from the notion that the former derives its existence from the latter in terms of subject matter, somewhat akin to how an "explanatory

tantra” (Tib. *bshad rgyud*, Skt. *vyākhyātantra*) functions in relation to its prior “root tantra” (Tib. *rtsa rgyud*, Skt. *mūlatantra*).

The next oldest extant catalogue of the *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra*, titled the *Self-Illuminating Lamp* (*Sgron ma rang gsal*), follows *Adorned by the Sun* in expressly connecting *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* to the *Only Child*’s production and use, but with more detail.

The golden letter is to be imprinted in yellow
on sixteen leaves of precious dark-blue paper,
wrapped in five color silk and bound with string of gold.

The natural praiseworthy statement taught by Vajradhara
is precisely what completes, without a single letter of pith instructions wanting,
the *Only Child of the Teachings*. (*Klong chen rab ’byams pa Dri med ’od zer*
1970–1971, vol. 7, 31.1–3)¹⁷

This passage offers not only more precise material directions than *Adorned by the Sun* for how to reproduce and package the *Only Child* tantra. It also stipulates that *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*, referred to here with its subtitle, the “natural praiseworthy statement taught by Vajradhara,” is indispensable for “completing” the *Only Child*, such that no instructions for the tantra’s use are left out. The idea expressed here that the *Only Child* is incomplete without *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* echoes the statement from the earlier *Adorned by the Sun* catalogue but leaves aside the mother–child relationship witnessed in the earlier catalogue.

That foundational scriptures like the *Only Child* must depend on other scriptures for their reproduction, use, and efficacy is in this way a clear theme in both early *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* catalogues. Prescriptions regarding the “timing” of the *Only Child*’s most efficacious use appears to be the “crucial point” of this relationship. But the dependence of scripture on other scripture is integral to the *Only Child*’s own self-description, quite aside from its relationship to *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*. As amply illustrated above, the text of the *Only Child* describes itself as the very first scripture to appear and, as such, the progenitor of the Buddha’s teaching at the beginning of time itself and at the dawn of each eon. Moreover, the *Treasury of the Dākinīs*, a collection of *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* instructions that probably circulated as early as the twelfth or early thirteenth century, more provisionally states that the Heart Essence pith instructions (*man ngag*) will be inefficacious without practicing them in combination with the *Only Child*, thus framing them expressly in dependence on the *Only Child* (*Vimalamitra n.d.*, 217.3).¹⁸ To discern what the importance of scriptural interdependency, time, and timing implies about the *Only Child* tantra’s identity and use and how *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* figures in its timely deployment requires that we investigate the ways that temporality functions in these two codependent scriptures.

3. Cosmic Time, Elemental Astrology, and Temporal Windows of Heightened Efficacy

Temporality figures differently in the *Only Child of the Teachings* and *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*. The *Only Child*’s sense of temporality is resolutely cosmic in scope. As presented just above, the *Only Child* describes itself as the unauthored resonance of reality itself, the very first Dharma teaching that arose, naturally, before any buddha had ever even reached *nirvāṇa*. The opening narrative frame of the *Only Child* expresses this cosmic sense of primordality by replacing the common opening formula of most Buddhist scriptures, which relates the precise place, time, audience, and other contextual details of

any of the Buddha's many discourses, with a grand cosmological setting, strikingly free of contextual factors. Instead of the usual, "Thus have I heard at one time, the Buddhas was residing in X with Y, doing Z, when A approached and asked..." the *Only Child* has the following:

Starting with "Thus have I..." and so forth,
the very realization
of millions upon billions of buddhas was taught,
and the essence of awakened mind,
exactly as it is, was pointed out countlessly.

At one time, prior to *nirvāṇa*,
this was taught, shown, and explained
as the definitive essence itself
for [planting] the authentic seeds
of the unfabricated singular nature. ([Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971](#), vol. 7, 37.5–38.1)¹⁹

In its role as the original Buddhist teaching, the tantra suggests that the *Only Child* has also served as the "mother" enabling the emergence of buddhas and, more specifically, the "ember of the Dharma," and the "seed" that "proliferates" all Dharma teachings. As described above, chapter 1 of the *Only Child* extols its general virtues as both the original offspring of awakening that "manifested from the undeluded ground of reality at the very beginning" and as the "multiplying seed" for the birth of all subsequent Dharma teachings and awakened buddhas. Chapter 2 begins by summarizing in a few lines the *Only Child's* dual role as both child and mother:

Emaho!
Although this is a naturally concealed expression,
as the self-occurring great primordial purity,
the secret proliferating expression manifests as follows. ([Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971](#), vol. 7, 44.3–4)²⁰

The remainder of the chapter goes into greater detail by describing how the *Only Child* appeared throughout a series of 66 eons, starting with the "very beginning" of time itself and concluding with our current "eon of strife." In delineating this series of 66 eons, the chapter lists not only the name of each eon, but also the name of the buddha residing then, how many beings the *Only Child* liberated in the given eon, and the title by which the tantra was then known. The formula for the first eon is as follows:

With the very first buddha,
the lord Exalted Cognition, at the very beginning,
the seal Wheel of Self-Cognition—
the special expression exalted from the ground—
emerged at the beginning of the first universe.
At that time, 700 quadrillion [beings were awakened];
this seal was supreme. ([Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971](#), vol. 7, 44.4–6)²¹

The final member of the series of 66 eons follows the same general pattern.

The lord Gnosis Free of Concepts
 understood it to be the Essence of the Single Word Itself.
 In the eon Strife Riven
 90 upholders of the awakened bloodline
 held it as the supreme definitive seal. (Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od
 zer 1970–1971, vol. 7, 57.4–5)²²

Sixty-six eons is not a very familiar duration in Buddhist cosmological accounts. But when we subtract the first eon, at the beginning of time, and the last eon, Strife Riven, we arrive at sixty-four eons, a well-known calculation for the duration of material worlds cited by Vasubandhu in his *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (Vasubandhu 1988–1990, vol. 2, p. 495)

In contrast to the *Only Child*'s cosmic sense of time, *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*'s sense of temporality is much narrower in scope. Concerned with prescribing the proper timing for the efficacious deployment of the *Only Child*, its temporality is limited to two kinds of occasions: astrologically significant periods of heightened efficacy, and funerary services for the deceased, which may or may not involve the observation of astrological specifications. The first of these comes first in the text and occupies most of its prescriptions. Here we encounter a theory of astrological change, linked to the elements and the human body and their transformations over the course of time, and according to temporal windows of heightened efficacy marked by natural disasters and other calamities and events of collective concern. It distinguishes between four different elemental temporal frames—concentration (*zug*), dispersal (*byer*), equilibrium (*snyoms*), and disturbance (*'khrug*)—during which to recite the *Only Child*. When collective calamities, such as earthquake, epidemic, or famine occur, or when events of astrological import, such as solar and lunar eclipses, take place, depending on the event, the tantra instructs wearers to recite the *Only Child* a specific number of times, using a specific style of recitation (expressed in terms of different types of “tongues” (*lce*)) and a specific kind of contemplative practice, together with a specific type and number of ritualists, culminating with a banquet, held for a specific group and number of beings. Each temporal facet of the ritualized recitation—precisely when the recitation, ritual gathering, banquet, and invitation of guests should occur—is determined based on the distinction of the elements that comprise the physical body, that is, when the bodily elements are concentrated, dispersed, balanced, or disturbed.

It is left unspecified in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* whether the four-fold temporal rubric applies only to the body of the presiding *yogin*, or to the elemental conditions governing all embodied bodies involved. However, the specificity of effects might imply the former, as reciting the *Only Child* while observing such elemental astrological conditions, we are told repeatedly throughout this section, ensures that the reciting *yogin* will attain the qualities of an emanation body (Tib. *sprul pa'i sku*, Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*), or at least the seed for such, although entering the path to liberation and buddhahood itself also figure as possible results. To amplify the *Only Child*'s efficacy, this section punctuates by way of conclusion, the reciting *yogin* is instructed to observe specific yogic postures, mantra recitations, and contemplative practice on the empty and cognizant nature of their own awareness, thus yoking body, speech, and mind to the task.

Despite *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*'s emphasis on occasions of collective crises here, it is only when we turn to the funerary section that follows that we receive explicit instructions on how to implement the *Only Child* “for the benefit of other beings.” Here the text offers only the simplest of funerary procedures: attach the *Only Child* amulet-booklet to the head or around the neck of the corpse of the deceased, inclusive of humans and animals, prior to cremation. This section also delineates the different postmortem outcomes that various kinds of beings, ranging from heinous sinners to non-Buddhists, can be expected to achieve from being cremated with the *Only Child*: heinous sinners

become equal to *śrāvakas*; ordinary beings become equal to advanced bodhisattvas; and non-Buddhist religious practitioners “who cleave to tenet systems fixed on concepts” become equal to buddha Vajradhara.

The funerary section of the text concludes by delineating the signs sensible to funeral officiants and attendees that cremating the deceased draped with the *Only Child* tantra has in fact yielded the expected postmortem aims. Here, the color of the smoke from the creation, the direction in which the smoke wafts, the color of the burning bones, how the *Only Child* attaches to the bone, environmental occurrences like earthquakes, sounds, and lights, and the appearance of relics and deity images are correlated with the type of being cremated as signs of positive postmortem outcomes.

Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing is clear that those enlisting the *Only Child* for funerary services should observe the same four-fold elemental astrological rubric delineated above, though nowhere does it specify precisely how. It simply implies the rubric in the funerary section by describing how only advanced Great Perfection practitioners—“those with signs of actual awareness”—need not recite it or be cremated with it: they will reach accomplishment from having simply encountered the tantra, *regardless of the elemental astrological specifications of dispersal, concentration, and the rest*.

In addition to this surprising concluding caveat, there is much else that is opaque about how elemental astrology figures in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*. Throughout the broader *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* corpus, this four-fold rubric equally marks the elemental astrological cycle of each day, month, and year. However, *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* frames the *Only Child*’s recitation as a timely response to sudden events. Accordingly, it gives the distinct impression of applying the four-fold rubric more narrowly to the cycle of a single day. See, for instance, how *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* suggests we use the *Only Child* in response to epidemics and flus:

When epidemics and flus arise,
this should be recited with the iron hook tongue
nine, 11, or 19 times
and at that time, the yoga of non-conceptuality should be meditated on.
Holding a banquet for nine or 18 children
is highly recommended.

The recitation should be at the time of disturbance.
The meditation should be at the time of equilibrium.
The children should be invited at the time of dispersal.
The banquet should be held at concentration.
The supreme person who has done such
will yield the qualities of an emanation body. (*Klong chen rab ’byams pa Dri med ’od zer 1970–1971*, vol. 7, 278.6–279.2)²³

Compare this to how *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* proposes we use the *Only Child* during a crisis of famine.

During times of famine,
if this is recited with the *katvāṅga* tongue,
one will also possess an emanation body—
it should be five, three, or two times.
At that time, an offering of perfume should be made,
and throwing a banquet for butchers or followers of non-Buddhist traditions
would be most excellent.

The recitation should be at the time of dispersal.

The offering should be made at equilibrium.

The sinners should be invited at disturbance.

And the banquet should, accordingly, be at concentration.

This too will plant the seed of an emanation body. (Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971, vol. 7, 279.5–80.2)²⁴

Despite these specifications for the times of disturbance, equilibrium, dispersal, and concentration, nowhere in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* do we find a clear explanation of what these temporal frames demarcate. And its mother scripture, the *Only Child*, has no mention whatsoever of this astrological terminology. This absence presumes knowledge on behalf of its readership from yet another scriptural or oral source to help fill the gap. Reviewing the broader corpus of *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra*-related texts yields a few possible candidates for what reciters and ritualists were expected to draw from to augment their knowledge of elemental astrological specifications. For instance, the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra, presented as the root tantra of the tradition (as opposed to the *Only Child*!) in several *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* sources, offers many pertinent passages. These details are developed more fully in the commentary to the *Unimpeded Sound* and more fully still in the *Treasury of the Ḍākinīs*.²⁵ For the sake of brevity, and to focus attention on what I believe to be the earliest strata of this elemental astrological system, I will limit my remarks to a selection of relevant passages from the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra and the *Treasury of the Ḍākinīs* collection before considering how these relate to *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* and venturing some conclusions.²⁶

The rubric of disturbance, equilibrium, dispersal, and concentration appears somewhat differently across these bodies of literature. In general terms, however, the framework signals the fluctuating configuration of the four elements that constitute the physical body according to the four seasons of each lunar year, four groupings of days in each month, and the four-times-two three-hour periods of each 24 h cycle of day and night. The time frames for each individual's elemental disturbance, equilibrium, dispersal, and concentration is determined based on the birth year of the individual according to not only the year's four zodiacal elemental signs of earth, water, fire, and air, but also according to the year's governing zodiacal animal from among the twelve signs of rat, ox, tiger, dog, dragon, horse, snake, hare, rooster, monkey, pig, and sheep.²⁷ In the *Unimpeded Sound*, the *Treasury of the Ḍākinīs*, and elsewhere in the *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra*, this elemental astrological rubric is also linked to the diagnosis and treatment of illnesses, particularly for *yogins* as they undergo the physical difficulties of long-term contemplative retreat.

Among these sources, the *Treasury of the Ḍākinīs* collection contains the most detailed descriptions of elemental astrology and associated medical diagnoses and treatments. Moreover, unlike the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra, the *Treasury of the Ḍākinīs* expresses a direct link with the *Only Child*. A title page of one of the collection's texts echoes *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* by mentioning the indispensability of the *Only Child* for the realization of Buddhahood (Vimalamitra n.d., 217.3). Remarkably, this text also happens to offer description of the general functions of various calculations that situate elemental calculations in a broader astrological framework.

Settling mundane and transcendent matters by means of knowledge of calculation is as follows: through calculation of the enumeration of past lives, the changes in karma are calculated, thereby calculating through the expansion of the time of virtue when the fruition of awakening will be attained; through calculation of the beginning and end of lifespan, the dispersal and concentration of the elements and the time of death is calculated; through calculation of a

single lunar year and the twelve months, the development and decay of the elements, and the strengthening and weakening of personal power and welfare is calculated; through calculation of the connected segments of a single day, the male and female demons are identified.... (Vimalamitra n.d., 258.3–7)²⁸

Earlier in the collection, this framework of elemental astrology and its impact on health and illness are elaborated in verse:

By virtue of the specifications of year and month,
the disturbances of the elements are collated and calculated.
By virtue of the features of day and night,
the measure and time frame
of dispersal, concentration, equalization, and disturbance are ascertained.

The time of an elemental illness is to be determined
by virtue of the specifications of earth, water, fire, and wind.
If the time frame of the beginning, middle, and end of lifespan,
and the years [of lifespan] can be ascertained,
through this, one's calculations (i.e., one's astrological chart) is resolved.

If the calculations do not come to pass,
spring, summer, fall, and winter,
and likewise, earth, water, fire, and wind, are to be correlated.
Through calculating them, time frames will be determined.²⁹

These passages only hint at the level of elaboration with which the *Treasury of the Ḍākinīs* collection treats the early Heart Essence system of elemental astrology and healing. Indeed, taken as a whole, the collection gives perhaps the most detailed account available anywhere.

The *Unimpeded Sound* tantra also treats elemental astrology in some detail. For instance, the tantra includes a section that directly addresses the question, “What happens at the culmination of dispersal, concentration, and equalization?” (*byer zug snyoms pa'i mtha' cir 'gyur*, Vimalamitra 1973–1977, vol. 1, 11.2). Here, unlike in the *Treasury of the Ḍākinīs*, the governing rubric includes only the triad of dispersal, concentration, and equilibrium, with “disturbance” treated separately. Also noteworthy is how the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra weaves these together with embryology and ritual efficacy by correlating the three modalities of the elements with the formation, illness, medical treatment, longevity, and dissolution of the body; the four tantric activities of pacifying, enriching, coercing, and destroying; and victory in battle, among other effects. Nonetheless, the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra's treatment of elemental astrology is less coherent and fleshed out than what we find in the *Treasury of the Ḍākinīs*. The following passage captures well the ambiguities of the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra's system of correspondences.

Dispersal, concentration, and equilibrium are twelve-fold;
precisely these three, for each of the four [elements]—
earth, water, fire, and wind—makes twelve.

With the concentration of earth, the faculties withdraw.
Its dispersal causes disturbance.
Its equalization yields fruit.

The concentration of earth yields particles.
Its dispersal yields limbs.

Its equalization completes the formation of the body.

The concentration of fire causes illness.

Its dispersal transforms the body.

Its equalization stabilizes the elements.

The concentration of wind protects the elements.

Its dispersal disintegrates other deeds.

Its equalization brings wind and mind together as one.

With the three, this [signals] the end of action.

With the concentration of water, earth collects.

With the meeting of dispersal and dispersal,

nothing can be accomplished and [everything] dissipates.

With dispersal alone one becomes ill.

Equalization enables the accomplishment of the correlation of calculations and medicines.

Both fire and wind [together] corrode the body.

Their dispersal causes the accomplishment of all actions.

Their equalization brings disturbed actions to an end.

From water and fire actions are well accomplished.

Their dispersal brings engagement with others.

Their equalization accomplishes longevity and power.

Earth and wind accomplish pacifying.

Their dispersal enriches and coerces.

Their equalization accomplishes acts of destroying.

The very action of wind and water,

through dispersal, accomplishes all virtuous deeds.

Their equalization ensures victory in battle.

Earth and fire accomplish increasing.

Their dispersal accomplishes transfer of the elements.

Their equalization accomplishes ritual procedures through opposition.

Their concentration and dispersal

resolutely brings about the culmination of action, God of Lords. (Vimalamitra 1973–1977, vol. 1, 51.2–52.3)³⁰

The *Unimpeded Sound* tantra continues with the theme of elemental astrology for several folios. Perhaps most pertinent for how *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* calculates the most efficacious time and manner of reciting the *Only Child* are passages that address the question: “What are the branches of the correlation of calculations?” (*rtsis kyi sbyor ba’i yan lag ci*, Vimalamitra 1973–1977, vol. 1, 11.6). Although several of these verses are difficult to decipher with certainty, they clearly advocate learning elemental astrological calculations, applied to days, months, and years, not only to predict the possibilities of personal illness, treatment, and death, but also to address collective crises such as frost, heavy rain, drought, famine, and conflict, precisely the occasions prescribed for the recitation of the *Only Child* in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*.

Birth, illness, and death
are to be correlated with certainty for oneself and others.

In the twelve-fold enumeration of three—
[three] months [each] for winter, summer, spring, and fall—
for one thousand years and three hundred thousand 24 h periods,
there is no duality for constellations.
Therefore, years and months become stacked up.

Based on the transformation of day and night,
the day and night become two equal times.

Based on the well-known enumeration of “lunar date,”
in the waxing period [of the lunar year] the night is longer.
Then, by virtue of 180 [degrees],
in the waning period [of the lunar year] the day is longer.

The wise should ascertain the time of reversal
based on day and night, in their twelve phases,
from the division of the method of male and female elements,
which make for the relative duration of day and night.

Virtue and non-virtue are divided
based on the relative duration of day and night.

To the 24 h period too, in which day and night are joined,
are correlated twelve time periods of auspicious connection,
[as with the] month and year, in terms of dispersal, concentration, and equilibrium.
If one knows the twelve phases of everything,
the knowledge of Mañjuśrī is perfected.

Based on the enumeration of the miraculous display of external elements,
and the duration of day and night,
the elemental years apply to hours.

Years apply by individual extension,
such that, having joined one’s own time to the beginning (*mgo la rang dus mnyam sbyar*),
wind, light, loud sound,
together with earthquakes, reflections,
and the manner of dissolution of the clear sky,
are correlated, accordingly, with the individual directions,
such that frost, heavy rain, drought,
famine, illness, classes of spirits,
conflict, and the movement of mountain thrones,
are known based on individual time and type.

The *yogin* should know, in order,
the individual features of kings, subjects, ascetics,
queens, ministers, and scholars,
elderly, youth, cattle,

and other animals,
 along with the forms of men and women,
 as well as fruit, crops, and fruit trees,
 according to their virtue and quality. (Vimalamitra 1973–1977, vol. 1, 71.1–72.6)³¹

There is much to consider in these verses about the workings of elemental astrology in the *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra*. Taken as a whole, the verses offer terse instructions on how to understand the twelve-fold fluctuations of the four elements, in terms of their gradual dispersal, concentration, and equilibrium, over the time frames of lifetimes, years, months, and, most significantly, each 24 h period. The two final passages, beginning with “Years apply by individual extension,” stand out for how they reflect details distributed throughout *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*. The occasions marked for recitation of the *Only Child* in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* are, in this order, when there is earthquake, sound, light, frost, epidemic and flu, solar and lunar eclipse, famine, livestock epidemic, and death. It is precisely on such occasions, according to *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*, when *yogins* should recite the *Only Child*. Moreover, earthquake, together with sounds and lights, is also described in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* as a sign that the deceased on whose behalf the *Only Child* is recited has thereby “attained the fruition of an emanation body” (Klong chen rab ’byams pa Dri med ’od zer 1970–1971, vol. 7, 284.3).³²

Alternatively, in the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra, it would appear that the corresponding list is given to encourage *yogins* to learn through elemental astrology how to predict when catastrophes such as frost, heavy rain, drought, famine, illness, the intrusions of harmful spirits, conflict, and avalanches, described as “the movement of mountain thrones” will take place, based on the environmental signs of earthquakes, accompanied by bright lights and loud sounds, and so forth. But nowhere in these passages does the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra link environmental signs to funerary occasions and the concomitant recitation of scripture. *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*, for its part, makes earthquakes, lights, and loud sounds do double duty, both as events that signal important occasions to recite the *Only Child* and, later in the text, as signs that the *Only Child*’s recitation for the deceased has been efficacious to bring about results.

Another possible parallel is in the *Unimpeded Sound*’s exhortation for *yogins* to know the “individual features of kings, subjects, ascetics, queens, ministers, and scholars, elderly, youth, cattle, and other animals, along with the forms of [other] men and women.” This might be a variation on the theme found in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* of prescribing a sociology of ritual efficacy wherein different numbers of beings, listed in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* as *yogins*, monks, *yoginīs*, children, animals, butchers, followers of non-Buddhist traditions (Tib. *mu stegs*, Skt. *tīrthika*), and arhats, are thrown banquets on the different occasions of the *Only Child*’s recitation to ensure the successful achievement of intended aims. Along similar lines, the reference to fruit, crops, and fruit trees in the *Unimpeded Sound* could be an oblique reference to the food used for such banquets.

A more direct connection along these lines is traceable to the *Treasury of the Ḍākinīs*, which also prescribes details of astrologically significant rituals and banquets, in which the number and type of ritualists and invited guests, and especially the timings of these events, are spelled out with considerable elaboration (Vimalamitra n.d., 73.4, 92.4–93.1, 115.8, 126.5). However, the *Treasury of the Ḍākinīs* prescribes such banquets for occasions of specific astrological significance for individuals, according to their birth year, and not in response to collective calamities, as in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*. Recitation of the *Only Child*, moreover, is prescribed nowhere in the *Treasury of the Ḍākinīs*.

4. Concluding Remarks

All these connections taken together help fill out the broader context of production and reception for *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*, specifically in terms of the understanding of elemental astrology assumed among its audience of readers. Even without conducting an exhaustive treatment of these assumptions, which would require excavating and more carefully analyzing all the elemental astrology passages scattered throughout the *Treasury of the Ḍākinīs*, the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra, its commentary, and the rest of the *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra*, the selections presented above should suffice to give a rough sense of what scribes, wearers, and reciters of the *Only Child* tantra were presumed to know to properly unleash the tantra's power. On its own, *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* offers only the barest skeleton of how elemental astrology works with its prescriptions to respond to events of collective crises and astrological import by correlating the recitation of the *Only Child* to periods of elemental change and corresponding ritual and contemplative actions. But these associations, however sparse and oblique they appear, could have perhaps been enough to evoke in the minds of readers the broader world of elemental astrology of which they partake. The rationale underlying the system of elemental astrology thus evoked situates all actions within a network of shifting relations, in which the specific birth years of actors, according to the combinations of elements governing their physiological constituencies, specifically their periods of embodied elemental dispersal, concentration, equilibrium, and disturbance, can be enlisted to calculate temporal frames of heightened or attenuated efficacy, so as to strategically maximize the effects of virtuous actions, foretell and treat illness, predict natural disasters, cheat death, and even prophecy one's own awakening.

Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing situates the recitation of the *Only Child* within this system by prescribing the procedure of its recitation according to the framework of the elements' dispersal, concentration, equilibrium, and disturbance, in response to calamities of collective concern, events of astrological significance, and death. What such a range of events signals for the *Only Child*'s recitation is various in scope. For instance, while solar and lunar eclipses generally signal an exponential multiplication of the effects of any virtuous and non-virtuous actions, including scriptural recitation, crises like epidemics, famines, and frost can perhaps be remedied through the *Only Child*'s recitation, reducing casualties and losses, and the tantra's recitation on the occasion of death is expressly for delivering the consciousness of the deceased from negative rebirths or from *saṃsāra* as a whole. Advanced Great Perfection practitioners, moreover, by virtue of their stable meditative realization on the nature of awareness, have transcended the elemental astrological system, such that simply encountering the *Only Child* suffices to bring about awakening.

When we add to this range of temporal astrological contexts, cues, and caveats the *Only Child*'s very different, more cosmic temporal scope, the occasions for reciting the *Only Child* prescribed in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* take on a slightly different significance. As outlined above, the *Only Child* is free of the terminology of elemental astrology that marks *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*. The *Only Child* emphasizes instead its own originary cosmological role at the beginning of time, and its regenerative role at the beginning of each eon, when it serves as the ember of the Dharma that survives the dregs of each eon's degenerative age to reignite the Dharma once again for the next eon. Considering the Buddhist rationale of the increased frequency of collective calamities presumed to transpire during a degenerate age, the designation of collective crises for the *Only Child*'s recitation in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* might be construed as a way to counteract the forces of degradation that typify such an age. Further, given that, according to Buddhist degenerate age logic, the increasing incidence of collective crises goes hand in hand with the disappearance of the Dharma from the world, emphasis on the faithful copying of the *Only Child*, its formation into miniature, portable deluxe editions,

and its constant wearing close to the body, and ritual use, until death, comes into focus as an efficacious strategy of textual preservation, particularly during times of extraordinary rupture and upheaval, like pandemic, famine, earthquake, and other events of widescale death and destruction.

The symbiotic relationship between the *Only Child* and its user's manual, *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*, also constellated a wider body of scripture by way of *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*'s vague allusions to astrologically calculated windows of ritual efficacy that are insufficient in and of themselves to determine timing with the precision called for. In this, *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* has not only encouraged the faithful copying, preservation, and proliferation of the *Only Child of the Teachings*, prescribing the details of its production into amulet booklets, and their circulation, wearing, and timely ritual recitation. It has also gathered into its orbit a broader corpus of *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* literature that describes the elemental astrological specifications only obliquely referenced in its folios but essential, by its estimation, for the *Only Child*'s proper ritual use. Considering the dynamics by which this family of Tibetan scriptures has formed, circulated, and been ritual deployed, in tandem—child depending on mother, and mother on child, with reversals of kinships roles, the assumption of midwife role, and the aggregation of open-ended networks of scriptural kin—presents us with a particularly rich case study of how Buddhist scriptures can sometimes develop in complex symbiotic relationships with other scriptures, contributing not only toward one another's formation, but also to their preservation and continued relevance in new contexts.

It seems that in the fourteenth century the elemental astrology of the *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* faded into relative obscurity, even as the tradition of circulating the *Only Child* together with *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* continued unabated into the present. For instance, Longchenpa (Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer, 1308–1364), well known for his codification of the *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* in his *Heart Essence in Four Parts* collection (*Snying thig ya bzhi*), gives very little attention to elemental astrology in his own writings on the Heart Essence. A stark exception is a “liberation through wearing supportive text” (*btags grol rgyab yig*) for the *Only Child*'s use that he composed and included in the *Heart Essence in Four Parts* collection. Therein, Longchenpa copiously cites *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* and, without naming any source, ventures to identify the text's references to the periods of the elements' dispersal, concentration, equilibrium, and disturbance.

The times of dispersal, concentration, and so forth, are, in this context, calculated in terms of the cycle of day and night—during the daytime from dawn to mid-morning is dispersal; until noon is concentration; early afternoon is equilibrium; and mid-afternoon to sunset is disturbance; during the nighttime in the early evening is dispersal; late evening is concentration; the midnight hours are equilibrium; and the hours before dawn are disturbance. The recitations [of the *Only Child*], meditations, invitations [of guests], and holding of banquets for groups [prescribed in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*] should be done in correlation with the phase of dispersal, concentration [and so forth] during whichever part of the day or night those signs (i.e., epidemic, famine, etc.) occur. (Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971, vol. 1, 266.4–67.8)³³

From where, precisely, Longchenpa derived these calculations remains something of a mystery. In this writing's colophon, Longchenpa acknowledges having “carefully recorded in one place the contents of the *Only Child of the Teaching*, its commentary, and the *Crucial Point* text, which is its method of wearing, in their entirety” (Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971, vol. 1, 266.4–67).³⁴ Yet, as delineated above, nowhere in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* are these precise correlations made. And the *Only Child* and its word-by-word commentary (which I left out of this discussion due to its later date)

are strikingly bereft of any of this astrological language. This raises the question whether Longchenpa drew these calculations from the broader *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* corpus or surmised them himself based on it. Whatever the case, he clearly recognized where *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* fell short and felt compelled to fill the gap. But given the fact that, as we have seen above, the broader elemental astrological system of the early *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* tends to link calculations to the birth element and animal of the person, Longchenpa's blanket application of this four-fold elemental rubric to the times of day and night, regardless of personal astrological chart, gives the impression that he was concerned less with reproducing the specificities of the received astrological system than with simply supplying the crucial points of timing alluded to only obliquely in *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*.

Despite such evidence for the diminished importance of this broader astrological context in the *Only Child's* reception from the fourteenth century on, *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*, by framing the *Only Child's* cosmic temporality within the timing of socially and individually significant rubrics and events, has proven to be fundamental for the generative and regenerative capacity of the *Only Child* tantra over the centuries. More broadly, the friction created from *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing's* integration of cosmic, social, and individual scales of temporality also points to a characteristic intrinsic to religious traditions in general, well beyond the *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* and its *Only Child* tantra. It is, after all, the dynamic interplay between cosmos, society, and individual that gives shape to religious traditions and animates them with renewed vitality in times of upheaval and crisis. Thus, much like the *Only Child* tantra itself—both the generative force of all Buddhist teachings and the regenerative force for rekindling Buddhist teachings during a degenerate age—the merging of its cosmic sense of temporality with the timing constraints for its most efficacious use provides us with an instructive case study for considering the dynamics that guide the formation and transformation of religious traditions as a whole.

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Appendix A

The following Tibetan edition and English translation of *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing* was prepared in collaboration with Khenpo Yeshe based primarily on the 'A dzom par ma edition, as reproduced in *Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971, Snying thig ya bzhi*, vol. 7, 273–87.4, with critical comparison made to the *Rnying ma rgyud 'bum* edition, as reproduced in *Mtshams brag dgon pa'i bris ma*, vol. 13, 521–30 (*Anonymous 1982*). Punctuation follows the *gter tshag* of the *Snying thig ya bzhi* version and not the *shad* of the *Rnying ma rgyud 'bum* version. Pagination also follows the *Snying thig ya bzhi* edition. Subject headings in brackets are my own addition.

Sigla

Nty *Snying thig ya bzhi* ('A dzom par ma)

Gtb *Rnying ma rgyud 'bum* (Mtshams brag dgon pa'i bris ma)

[Title Page]

(*Gser yig can*)³⁵

Rdo rje 'chang gis gsungs pa mchod 'os rang bzhin gyi tshig dus gnad nges pa
(The Golden Letters)

Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing:

The Natural Praiseworthy Statement Taught by Vajradhara

[Title]

[274]

rgya gar skad du: bud+d+ha sarba pu tra e ka: tan tra u pa d+he sha nA ma:

bod skad du: sangs rgyas thams cad kyi sras gcig gi rgyud kyi man ngag ces bya ba:

In the Indian language: *Buddha-sarva-putra-eka-tantra-upadeśa-nāma*

In the Tibetan language: *Sangs rgyas thams cad kyi sras gcig gi rgyud kyi man ngag*

[In the English language: *Pith Instruction of the Only Child of All Buddhas Tantra*]

[Homage]

thog ma'i mgon po 'od mi 'gyur ba la phyag 'tshal lo:

Homage to the primordial Lord of Immutable Light!

[Opening Narrative Frame, 274.2–275.3]

de nas rdo rje 'chang gis ni:

thugs kyi dkyil 'khor sgo phye nas:

tshig gi rgyal po 'di dag kun:

rdo rje'i mgur du rab dril te:

ljags kyi dbang po la bkram nas:

tshems ni bzhi bcu'i bar nas ni:

gsang chen dam pa'i tshig 'di kun:

ma brjod[gsungs Gtb] 'phros pa'i tshul gyis [275] gsungs[bya Gtb]:

Then, Vajradhara

opened the door to the *maṇḍala* of his awakened mind,

brought together into his vajra throat

all this king of expression,

arrayed it on his tongue faculty,

and between his forty teeth,

spoke this whole statement of the ultimate great secret

by way of an expansion on the inexpressible.

kyai[kye Gtb]:

snang ba'i rgyal[bdag Gtb] po a la la:

sangs rgyas rnams kyi sras gcig po:

bstan pa'i sa bon yang zhun[yang zhun sa bon Gtb] gdung :

don dam rgyal po'i rtags chen po[line missing Gtb] :

snying po sprul pa'i sku 'di ni:

klog[klag Gtb] dang 'dzin dang bcang ba'i thabs:

'di nyid rim pa ji lta bar:

snying po gsang ba nga yis kyang[yang Gtb]:

spro bar bya 'o gsang[snang Gtb] ba'i bdag:

“Hey!

King of Appearances! Alala!

Lord of Secrets, I will elaborate
on the secret essence,
precisely according to its stages,
of the very method of reciting, memorizing, and wearing
the *Only Child of the Buddhas*,
the distilled awakened bloodline that is the seed of the teaching,
the great sign that is the king of the ultimate meaning,
the essential emanation body.

[How to Copy and Wear the *Only Child*, 275.3–276.4]

rnal 'byor skal dang su ldan pa:
'di ni snang bar yang dag go:
de yis[yi Nty] sangs rgyas sras po 'di:
sangs rgyas bden pa mthong ba des:
sprul pa'i sku ni 'di ltar [276] bcang :
bdag[gang Gtb] gi spyi bo'i gtsug gam ni:
mchan khung ngam ni mgul du 'o[yang Gtb]:

“This is sure to appear
to any *yogin* with proper fortune.
Those who see the *Child of the Buddhas*
as the actual Buddha
should wear this emanation body as follows:
on the crown of one's head,
under the armpit, or around the neck.

rang byung chen po'i yi ge rnam[las Gtb]:
rin chen gser gyis bris nas ni[dpe 'di rin po che las bri]:
glegs bam sor ni bzhi pa'i[yi Gtb] tshad:
sna tshogs dar gyis gril[dril Gtb] nas kyang :
rang[gang Gtb] gi spyi bor bzung na yang :
'di la sprul pa'i[sku'i Gtb] yon tan thob:

“The great self-occurring letters
should be written in the precious substance of gold,
to form a book four-finger widths in measure,
wrapped in multicolor silk.
From just holding it to one's crown
one will attain the qualities of an emanation.

[rang byung yi ge 'di dag la Gtb]
mchan khung g.yon du bcangs pa yis:
'di yang de dang mnyam pa yin:
'di nyid mgul du[mgul du 'di nyid Gtb] btags nas ni:
rgyun du gus par byed pa la:
'di yang sprul sku'i yon tan thob:

“By wearing it under the left armpit,
it will be the same.
For one who fastens it around the neck
and constantly reveres it,

the qualities of an emanation body will also be attained.

[When and How to Recite the *Only Child*, 276.4–280.5]

rang byung yi ge 'di dag la:
glegs bam de[glo Gtb] ltar bzung nas ni:
'di ltar mchod pa yang dag bya:

“Holding such a book
 with these self-occurring letters,
 one should properly worship as follows:

gal te sa g.yos byung tshe na:
'di nyid lan drug lan bdun nam:
yang na lan ni lnga 'am gsum:
rdo rje'i lce yis bklag par bya:

“Should there be an earthquake,
 it should be recited with the vajra tongue
 six times, seven times,
 five times, or three.

tshogs ni rnal 'byor lo yi grangs:
'di yi dus su rab tu gtang :
dam tshig mchog ldan rnal 'byor pas[la Gtb]:
tshogs kyi ston mo[mchod pa Nty] de bzhin bya: [277]

“Gaṇacakras equal in number to the yogin's age
 should be held at that time.
 Yogins with supreme samayas [intact]
 should likewise perform a gaṇacakra banquet.

bklag pa 'byung ba byer dus su:
tshogs ni snyoms pa'i dus na bya:
ston mo de bzhin 'khrugs pa'i dus:
rnal 'byor pa ni zug pa yi:
dus na[gnas Gtb] so so'i gnas nas 'bod:

“The recitation should be done at the time of the dispersal of the elements.
 The gaṇacakra should be done at the time of equilibrium.
 A banquet should likewise be convened at the time of disturbance.
 The yogins should be invited from their respective places
 at the time of concentration.

'di ltar 'byung ba'i khyad par las:
rnal 'byor de ni[bzhin Gtb] thar lam du:
yang dag nges par 'jug pa yin[yi Nty]:
rdo rje 'chang ba rnams dang ni:
skal ba yang dag mnyam pa'o:

“Based in this way on the distinctions of the elements,
 the yogin is sure to
 perfectly enter the path to liberation and
 perfectly share the fortune

of the vajradharas.

sgra ni byung pa'i dus na yang :
lan[Gtb yang] ni drug dang[gam Nty] bdun dang lngar:
pad ma[pad+ma Gtb] yi ni lce yis[yi Gtb] ni:
skal dang[ba Gtb] ldan pas bklag par bya:

“When sound occurs too,
 fortunate ones should recite it
 with their lotus tongues
 seven, six, or five times.

'di dus lha la mchod pa[par Nty] 'bul:
dge slong tshul khrims ldan pa la:
chos dang mthun[ldan Gtb] pa'i ston mo bya:

“The gods should be propitiated with offerings at that time
 and a banquet in accordance with the Dharma should be held
 for fully ordained monks with [pure] discipline.

bklag pa byer[emend. byed Nty, Gtb] pa'i dus na yin:
mchod pa de bzhin snyoms pa la:
dge slong zug pa'i dus na 'bod[bde Gtb]:
ston mo 'khrugs pa'i dus na[pa la ni Gtb] bya:
'di ltar su yis byas pa de:
'di yang sprul pa'i sku dang mnyam:

“The recitation is to be at the time of dispersal.
 The offerings, likewise, at equilibrium.
 The fully ordained monks are to be invited at the time of concentration.
 And the banquet is to be held at the time of disturbance.
 Whoever has done such
 will be equal to an emanation body.

'od kyi snang ba byung ba'i tshe:
lan lnga gsum mam [278] lan gcig tu:
dung gi lce yis bklag par bya:
'di dus rlung ni bsgom par bya:
rnal 'byor ma ni dam tshig can:
dgu 'am[nas Gtb] bcu gcig man chod[chad Gtb] la:
bza' btung rtsub pa'i ston mo bya:

“When the brightness of light shines forth,
 it should be recited with a conch tongue
 five times, three times, or once.
 Wind should be meditated upon at that time.
 And a banquet of rustic food and drink should be held
 for as many as nine or 11 *yoginīs*
 with *samayas* [intact].

bklag[klag Gtb] pa snyoms pa'i dus na yin:
rlung ni byer ba'i dus na yin:

rnal 'byor ma[la Nty] ni snyoms pa la:
ston mo 'khrugs pa'i dus na'o:
'di ltar byas pa'i rnal 'byor pa:
sprul pa'i sku dang yang mnyam mo:

"The recitation should be at the time of equilibrium.
 The wind [meditation] should be at the time of dispersal.
 The *yoginīs* [invited] at equilibrium.
 And the banquet [held] at the time of disturbance.
 Yogins who have done such
 will also become equal to an emanation body.

sad kyis rgyal khams khyab pa'i tshe:
ral gri'i lce yis 'di brjod['byed Gtb] na:
sangs rgyas yon tan 'di yis thob:
'di dus sgra yi mchod pa bya:
rnal 'byor lnga 'am bco lnga la:
byin rlabs[brlabs Nty] gtor ma lan bdun btang :

"When the country is covered with frost,
 if one recites this with the sword tongue,
 one will attain the qualities of a buddha.
 At that time, one should make an offering of sound
 and cast blessed oblations seven times
 to five or 15 *yogins*.

bklag[klag Gtb] pa zug pa'i dus na yin:
mchod pa snyoms pa'i tshe na'o:
byer ba la ni rnal 'byor 'bod[bod Gtb]:
'khrugs['khrug Gtb] pa'i tshe na gtor ma[ston mo Nty] btang :
'di ltar su yis byas pa la:
sprul pa sku yi yon tan thob:

"The recitation should be at the time of concentration.
 The offering should be at the time of equilibrium.
 The *yogins* should be invited at dispersal.
 The oblations should be cast at the time of disturbance.
 Whoever has done such
 will attain the qualities of an emanation body.

rims dang yams nad byung ba'i tshe:
dgu dang bcu gcig bcu dgur ni:
lcags kyu'i lce yis brjod par bya:
'di dus rnam par mi rtog [279] bsgom[mi rtog bsgom par bya Gtb]:
byis pa dgu 'am bco brgyad la:
ston mo bya bar rab tu bsngags:

"When epidemics and flus arise,
 this should be recited with the iron hook tongue
 nine, 11, or 19 times

and at that time, non-conceptuality should be meditated on.
Holding a banquet for nine or 18 children
is highly recommended.

bklag[klag Gtb] pa 'khrugs['khrug Gtb] pa'i dus na yin:
sgom pa snyoms pa'i dus na'o:
byis pa byer ba'i dus su 'bod[bod Gtb]:
ston mo zug pa nyid la bya:
de ltar byas pa'i skyes mchog ni:
'di la sprul pa'i[sku Gtb] yon tan thob:

“The recitation should be at the time of disturbance.
The meditation should be at the time of equilibrium.
The children should be invited at the time of dispersal.
The banquet should be held at concentration.
The supreme person who has done such
will yield the qualities of an emanation body.

nyi zla[ma Gtb] gza' yis zin pa'i tshe[dus Gtb]:
'di ni lan lnga drug gam dgu[drug dgu 'am ni Gtb]:
'khor lo'i[lo Gtb] lce yis yang brjod na:
'di yang sprul pa'i sku dang mnyam:
'di dus srog 'don dge ba bya:
dud 'gro'i rigs la ston mo btang[bya Gtb] :

“During a solar or lunar eclipse,
if this is recited with the circle tongue
five, six, or nine times,
one will also become equal to an emanation body.
At this time, one should perform the virtue of saving lives
and throw a banquet for animals.

bklag pa byer[par bya Gtb] ba'i dus na yin:
srog 'don snyoms pa nyid la'o:
dud 'gro zug pa'i dus na yin:
ston mo 'khrugs pa'i dus na bya:
de ltar ston mo sus byas pa:
sprul pa sku yi yon tan thob[sprul sku'i yon tan thob pa'o Gtb]:

“The recitation should be at the time of dispersal.
Saving lives is at equilibrium.
The animals [should be brought] at the time of concentration.
The banquet should be held at the time of disturbance.
Anyone who holds such a banquet
will attain the qualities of an emanation body.

mu ge dag ni byung ba'i tshe:
kha TwAM[stong Gtb] lce yis rab['di Gtb] brjod na:
'dis kyang sprul sku 'dzin pa yin:
lan ni lnga'am gsum gnyis[dang dun nyid Gtb] yin:

'di dus dri yi[yis Gtb] mchod pa bya:
shan pa 'am ni mu stegs la:
ston mo bya bar[ba Gtb] rab tu bzang[bsngags Gtb] : [280]

“During times of famine,
 if this is recited with the *katvāṅga* tongue,
 one will also possess an emanation body—
 it should be five, three, or two times.
 At that time, an offering of perfume should be made,
 and throwing a banquet for butchers or followers of non-Buddhist traditions
 would be most excellent.

bklag[klag Gtb] pa byer ba'i dus na yin:
mchod pa snyoms pa nyid la bya[yin Gtb]:
sdiḡ can 'khrugs['khrug Gtb] pa nyid la 'bod[ste Gtb]:
ston mo de bzhin zug la'o[pa la'o Nty]:
'dis kyang['di yang Nyt] sprul sku'i sa bon 'jog:

“The recitation should be at the time of dispersal.
 The offering should be made at equilibrium.
 The sinners should be invited at disturbance.
 And the banquet should, accordingly, be at concentration.
 This too will plant the seed of an emanation body.

rgyal khams phyugs nad byung ba'i dus[tshe na Gtb]:
rang byung chen po'i[po Gtb] yi ge 'di:
lan brgyad dang ni bcu drug tu:
rtse gsum lce yis 'di brjod do[na Gtb]:
'di dus mar me'i[A lok Gtb] mchod pa bya:
dgra bcom pa ni bdun la yang :
ston mo bya bar rab tu bsngags:

“When livestock epidemic is present throughout the country,
 this great self-occurring text
 should be recited with the three-pronged tongue
 eight and 16 times.
 At that time, an offering of butter lamps should be made,
 and holding a banquet for seven *arhats*
 is highly recommended.

bklag[klag Gtb] pa zug pa nyid la yin:
mchod pa byer ba nyid la bya:
dgra bcom snyoms pa'i dus na 'bod[yin Gtb]:
'khrugs['khrug Gtb] pa la ni ston mo bya:
de['di Gtb] ltar byas pa'i skyes bu la[ni Gtb]:
sprul pa'i sa bon nges par 'jog:
'di la the tshom byar mi rung :
nges gsang[pa'i Gtb] 'bras bu dam pa'o:

“The recitation should be at concentration.

The offering should be made at precisely dispersal.
 The arhats should be invited at the time of equilibrium.
 The banquet should be held at disturbance.
 The person who has done such
 is sure to have the seed of an emanation body planted in them,
 of this there should be no doubt—
 it is the highest fruition of the definitive secret.

[Vocal, Bodily, and Mental Comportment to Observe, 280.5–281.3]

oM dang yang dag su ldan pa:
sangs rgyas rnams kyi sku la sbyor:
hUM dang yang dag su ldan pa:
'di[des Gtb] ni thugs ka de bzhin no:
aH[AM Nty] dang yang dag su ldan pa:
gsung la yang dag 'di yis reg:
de phyir ngag gi spyod[sbyor Gtb] pa gces:

“Whoever is properly equipped with *om*
 will be joined with the awakened body of the buddhas.
 Whoever is properly equipped with *hūm*
 will likewise be [joined] to their awakened mind.
 Whoever is properly equipped with *āḥ*
 will be perfectly connected to their awakened speech.
 Therefore, vocal conduct is to be cherished.

gang gis seng ge byas pa la[na Nty]:
'di la nad dang [281] 'jigs pa bral:_
glang po su yis byas pa la:
'di la srog[rdzogs Gtb] med dbugs kyang med:
drang srong gang gis byas pa la:
mi rtog las byung byer[zer Nty] zug snyoms:
'di ltar lus kyi bya byed gces[ces Gtb]:

“Whoever has done the lion [posture]
 will be free of illness and peril.
 Whoever has done the elephant [posture]
 will have no [sign of] life-force or even breath.
 For whomever has done the sage posture,
 dispersal and concentration that emerges from non-conceptuality is equalized.
 This is how to cherish bodily activity.

smig[mi Gtb] rgyu rang yul[yal Gtb] sus shes pa:³⁶
'di la rtag med chad pa med:
dran[rang Gtb] bsam bral ba sus shes pa:
'di la 'ong['gro Gtb] med 'gro[Gtb 'ong] ba med:
cer[gcer Gtb] mthong rang ngo sus shes pa:
'di la 'khor dang myang 'das med:
'di ltar sems kyi dngos po gces:

“Anyone who understands one’s [cognitive] objects as a mirage
is free of permanence and annihilation.
Anyone who understands freedom from thoughts,
is free of coming or going.
Whoever nakedly sees and recognizes one’s own face
is free of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.
This is how to cherish the nature of mind.

[The Virtues and Benefits of the Only Child, 281.3–282.4]

e ma
rang byung chen po’i yi ge[*yi ge chen po Gtb*] *’di:*
rab tu ngo mtshar che bas na:
ha ha:
’di ltar sus kyang ma byas par[*pa Nty*]:
rang byung kun gyi[*gyis Gtb*] *thog mar byung :*

“Ema!
As this great self-occurring text
is truly astounding,
Haha,
it was not composed by anyone at all,
but self-occurred, arisen before anything.

a la la ho sprul pa’i sku:
’di la byed pa’i rkyen med pas:
tha ma ’jig pa kun dang bral:
’byung bas cung zad gnod pa med:
’di ni nam mkhar[*mkha’ Nty*] *’phar bar nges:*

“Alala ho! An emanation body—
since there are no conditions that produced it,
it is free of all perishing in the least,
and it cannot be harmed by the elements in the slightest.
It is sure to float in the sky.

sangs rgyas sprul pa yin pas[*pa Nty*] *na:*
’di la bshad cing sgom pa med:
’di[*yid Gtb*] *bral bems po*[*po’i Gtb*] *sgom*[*ston Gtb*] *par snang :*
de phyir ’di dang ’phrad par yang :
rab tu dka’ zhing snang ba min: [282]
des na ’di dang gang phrad[*’phrad Gtb*] *pa:*
sangs rgyas ’bras bu thob pa la:
the tshom dgos pa ma yin no:

“Since it is an emanation body of the buddha,
it is inexpressible and beyond meditation.
Without this it will happen that you are meditating [only] on an inert material object.³⁷
Thus, even encountering it is very rare,
as it does not [commonly] appear.

Therefore, whoever encounters it
attains the fruition of awakening—
of this there need be no doubt.

e ma 'jig rten gang zhig[gzhan Gtb] na:
sangs rgyas 'bras bu sus thob tshe:
de tshe rang byung chen po 'di:
'phar zhing rang 'od lnga po 'byung['di Gtb] :
de tshe lan gsum bklag par bya:
de yang de dang mnyam par 'gyur:

“Ema! When anyone attains the fruition of awakening
in any world,
this great self-occurrence
flies up and its natural radiance of five colors shines forth.
At that time, it should be recited three times—
one will then become their equal.

'di ni bcangs pa tsam gyis kyang :
sangs rgyas nyid du 'gyur ba la:
the tshom za ba[bya bar Gtb] ci zhig dgos[dgongs Gtb]:
gal te byol song³⁸ mgul du 'di:
btags na de nyid grol bas[kyang grol Gbt] na:
'gro ba mi rnam smos ci dgos:

“Through just wearing this
one will reach awakening—
what need is there to doubt it.
Even animals are liberated
when this is fastened around their neck,
let alone human beings.

[How to Use the *Only Child* in Funerary Services, 282.4–283.2]

e ma rang byung yi ge 'di:
sems can gzhan gyi don byed na:
tshe 'das de yi spyi bo 'am:
mgul du 'di btags['di btags yi ge Gtb] bsregs na ni:
de nyid grol bar smos ci dgos['tshal Gtb]:

“Ema! When this self-arisen text
is used for the benefit of other beings,
there is no need to mention
that when the deceased are cremated with it fastened on the head or around
the neck,
they will be liberated.

mtshams med lnga po spyad pa yang :
nyan thos rnam dang skal ba mnyam:
lung du ma bstan skye bo rnam:
byang chub sems dpa'i sa dang mnyam:

yid dpyod 'dzin pa'i grub mtha' yang :
rdo rje 'chang dang mnyam par nges:

“Even those who have committed the five deeds of immediate retribution
 will become equal to *śrāvakas*.
 Beings who have not been prophesied
 will become equal to bodhisattvas on the levels.
 Even those who cleave to tenet systems fixated on concepts
 will indeed become equal to Vajradhara.

'di dang 'phrad[phrad Nty] [283] pa'i skal ba can:
snying 'dra sems kyi bu gcig la:
rig pa dngos kyi rtags yod pas:
bklag cing bsreg par[pa Gtb] bya mi dgos:
'phrad[phrad Nty] pa tsam gyis 'grub pa yin:
byer zug la sogs bshad mi dgos:

“Fortunate, heart-like, only-children of the mind
 who encounter this—
 those with signs of actual awareness—
 need not recite it or be cremated [with it];
 they will be accomplished by just encountering it.
 Instructions on dispersal, concentration, and so on need not be given.

[Signs that the Funerary Use of the Only Child was Efficacious, 283.2–284.3]

de yis[yi Nty] rtags rnams 'byung ba ni:
byol song me 'od dkar gsal la:
dud pa sngon po shar phyogs su:
rus pa'i 'od[mdog Gtb] kyang dmar gsal yin:
gser gyi yig 'bru ma zhig par:
de yi rus pa nyid la 'byar:

“The occurrences of signs through it are as follows:
 for animals, the firelight will be bright white,
 blue smoke will billow to the east,
 the light from the bones, moreover, will be bright red.
 The golden letters will be grafted to the bones,
 without disintegrating in the least.

'di nas zla ba bcu gsum na:
sa rnams nges par g.yo ba yin:
de dus 'od kyang mog mog po[bya Gtb]:
snang ba[bar Gtb] nges par 'gyur pa yin:

Thirteen months thereafter,
 the earth will surely quake.
 At that time, light will become dim—
 perception will thus surely transform.

sdig can me mdog ser la gsal:

dud pa nub phyogs kha dog dkar:
rus pa'i mdog ni sngo nag la:
yi ge zhig ste thig ler snang :

“For sinners, the color of fire will be bright yellow,
 its smoke will billow to the west and be white in color,
 the color of the bones will be dark blue,
 and the text will disintegrate and appear as circles.

'di nas[ni Gtb] zla ba dgu na yang :
sgra ni shar gyi phyogs su 'byung :
'di la 'od ni mer mer po:
'di don nges par yang dag go:

Nine months from then
 a sound will emerge from the east.
 With it will come a bright light.
 The significance of this is certainly most excellent.

yid dpyod[spyod Gtb] grub pa'i mtha' 'dzin pa'i: [284]
me mdog dkar gsal g.yos pa med:
dud pa sngon po gyen 'greng 'byung[gsal Gtb] :
rus mdog dkar po thig le can:
yi ge de nyid ma zhig par:
kha dog dkar po 'od dang ldan:
skabs skabs[na Gtb] rus[rul Gtb] pa'i dkyil na snang :
'di la sku dang gdung yang 'byung :

“For those who hold to tenet systems that fixate on concepts,
 an unwavering bright white firelight will appear.
 Blue smoke will billow up.
 On the bones white circles will appear.
 The text will not disintegrate,
 but glow with a white light,
 which will occasionally appear in the middle of the bone;
 and deity forms and relics will also emerge on it.

'di nas zhag ni gsum na yang :
sgra ni shar kyi phyogs nas 'ong[na'o Gtb] :
'od ni nub kyi phyogs su snang :
'di ni nges par sprul pa yi:
sku yi 'bras bu rnyed pa yin:

After three days
 a sound will come from the east
 and a light will appear in the west.
 This means that they will have surely attained
 the fruition of an emanation body.

[The Virtues and Benefits of the *Only Child*, 284.3–286.6]

kye ma
 snang bdag[dag Nty] rang bzhin sprul pa'i sku:
 de yi phyir na[phyi nang Gtb] gsang tshig 'di[ni Gtb]:
 thun mong nyid du phrad pa min:
 rigs ldan skyes bu skal chen po[bas Gtb]:
 'ga' la 'di nyid snang ba las:
 kun gyis mthong ba ma yin no['di nyid mthong ba min Gtb:

“Kyema!

Lord of Appearances! Since it is a natural emanation body,
 these secret words are thus
 not commonly encountered.
 They only appear to some
 greatly fortunate beings of noble family
 and are not seen by all.

³⁹rang byung yi ge 'di med par:
 skyes bu nyid ni gang su rung :
 sems can don nyid byed 'dod kyang :
 sems can don ni nus pa min:
 yang dag lam ni mthong ba min:⁴⁰
 yang dag lam ni mthong srid kyang :
 nyan thos rnams dang khyad ci yod:
 kun [285] gyi spyod yul ma yin no[te Gtb]:

“Without this self-occurring text,
 even should someone
 wish to act for the benefit of beings,
 they would not be able—
 they would not see the true path.
 And even if they could see the truth path,
 how would they be any different from *śrāvakas*?
 It is not within the purview of everyone.

gal te 'di nyid 'phrad[phrad Nty] na yang :
 'di ni nges pa'i sprul pas na:
 sgrib byed nyid dang ma bral bas:
 'di la the tshom skye bar 'gyur:

“Even were one to encounter it,
 because it is a definitive emanation,
 those still unfree of obscurations
 would have doubts about it.

des na 'di nyid rnam spangs pas:
 'bras bu gtan nas[rtag tu Gtb] brlag pa yin:
 skal[bskal Gtb] pa mchog rab ldan pa kun[la Gtb]:
 the tshom[tsom Gtb] skye bar ga la srid:
 de yis 'di nyid gsang chen du:
 yang dag par ni 'gyur ba'o:

“Thus discarding it,
they would lose the fruition forever.
But how could all those with supreme fortune
ever doubt it?
For them it would truly be
the great secret.

gal te 'di nyid snang ba'i mis:
'di nyid yod par su gzhan la:
smra bar byed pa'i mi de yi[yis Gtb]:
rang gi 'bras bu rang brlag tu:
'di yis byed pa kho na yin:

“If people to whom it has appeared,
while possessing it,
were to utter it to another,
they would lose their own fruition,
and that's all it would accomplish.

de yi phyir na rang byung gi:
yi ge 'di nyid[ni Gtb] yod pa'i mis[pa yi Gtb]:
tshig zur tsam yang smra mi bya[tshig gi zur tsam smra bar ni]:⁴¹
gsang ba las ni dngos grub 'byung[rgyu Gtb] :

“Therefore, people who have
this self-occurring text
should not breathe so much as a word of it.
Accomplishment comes from keeping it a secret.

ma gsang mchog dang thun mong gi:
dngos grub de['di Gtb] yis spangs pa yin:
gsang ste[te Gtb] lus la yang dag bcang[bcangs Gtb] :

“The supreme and common accomplishments
are discarded by not keeping it secret.
Keeping it secret, wear it properly on the body.

'di dang bral bar ma byas na[par Gtb]:
nam zhig 'chi ba'i dus kyi tshe:
'di nyid lus la gnas pa la:
rigs drug skye ba rnam bzhi yi: [286]
grong khyer du ni 'jug mi srid:

“If you never part from it,
then when it is time to die,
and it is present on your body,
it will be impossible for you to enter
the city of the four kinds of birth among the six classes of beings.

de yi phyir na 'di nyid dang :
'gro dang nyal dang 'dug pa dang :

de bzhin za[‘grend dang bza’ Gtb] dang ‘chag pa dang :
phyag dang skor ba la sogs byed:
‘thung dang[‘dud pa’i Nty] lag pa’i[pa Nty] gar nyid dang :
rgyug[skyugs Nty] dang khru byed phyi sa ‘dor:
de bzhin smra dang sngags zlos dang :
yi ge klog dang mchod bshags dang :
ji ltar smra ba la sogs dang :
bsam pa ji snyed g.yo ba dang :
ji ltar sna tshogs spyod byed kyang :
‘di dang ‘bral bar mi bya’o:

“Therefore, walk, lie down, sit,
 and likewise eat, stroll,
 prostrate, circumambulate, and so forth
 together with it.
 Never part from it,
 no matter what you are saying,
 what thoughts are circulation,
 or what among the myriad activities you are performing,
 whether you are drinking, gesturing with your hands,
 whether you are running, washing, or defecating,
 whether talking, reciting mantras,
 reciting texts, making offerings, or confessing.

‘di ni ris[rig Gtb] med sprul pa’i skus[sku Nty]:
rang gzhan don rnams rdzogs par byed:
byol song rigs[gzugs Gtb] sam bud med dam[dang Nty]:
skye ba dman pa’i sems can yang[kyang Gtb] :
‘di dang bral bar ma byas na:
nges par ‘bras bu thob pas na:
bral pa’i bar mtshams ma zhugs par[pa Nty]:
‘di la rab tu gces pa yin:

“This is the boundless emanation body
 that fulfills the aims of oneself and others.
 If beings never part from it,
 regardless of whether they are animals, women,
 or beings of low birth,
 they will surely attain fruition.
 Therefore, revere it highly
 without ever letting there be a period of separation from it.

de bzhin drod dang ma bral bar:⁴²
rgyun du lus la[de yi phyir na Gtb] bcang bar bya:
gal te dus tshod byung ba’i tshe:
‘di nyid klog[klag Gtb] par yang dag go:
‘di nyid bcangs pas nges par ‘grub:

“Accordingly, wear it on the body constantly,
 without ever letting it get cold.

Whenever the occasions arise,
it is perfect to recite just this.
By wearing just this, one is sure to reach accomplishment.

[How to Copy and Wear the *Only Child*, 286.6–287.2]⁴³

'chang ba'i [287] gsang tshig yi ge ni:
dran pa kun gyi thog ma yi:
dbang po zhen pa bzlog pa nas:
rab tu dkon tshig yan chad la:
gser ram bai DUr+ya yis bri:
mgul lam spyi bor btags pas 'grub:
mngon rdzogs rgyal por sangs rgyas thob:

"Write down the text, the secret words to be worn,
in gold or beryl,
starting from 'prior to any conscious awareness' (dran pa kun gyi thog ma yi)
through 'removing the attachment of the sense faculties' (dbang po zhen pa
bzlog pa)
all the way down to 'this very rare statement' (rab tu dkon tshig).
By affixing it to around the neck or on the head it brings accomplishment.
One will attain awakening as the perfected king."

[Closing Praise and Rejoicing, 287.2–3]

ces rdo rje 'chang gis gsungs pa la mngon par bstod de rjes su yi rang ngo :

[The retinue] praised and rejoiced in what Vajradhara said.

[Colophon, 287.3–4]⁴⁴

mchod 'os rang bzhin gyi dam tshig chen po'i tshig: shin tu gsang na nges par 'grub pa'i bka' gsang
gnyan po rdzogs pa chen po gser gyi snying po nyi ma rab tu snang byed kyi man ngag: _dus gnad
nges pa rdzogs so: sA mA yA: rgya rgya rgya:: [287.4]

This concludes *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing, the Natural Praiseworthy Statement of the Great Samaya, the Pith Instructions of the All-Illuminating Sun, the Essence of Gold of the Great Perfection*, the powerful secret word that surely brings accomplishment if kept perfectly secret. Samaya! Seal! Seal! Seal!

Notes

- ¹ On the early development of the *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra*, see Achard (1999, 2018); Yeshi and Dalton (2018, 2022); Gentry (2025). Khenpo Yeshi and I are currently preparing an English translation and study of the *Only Child* tantra which will present more developed considerations regarding the place of this tantra in the early formation of the *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra*. All English renderings presented herein of passages from the *Only Child* tantra and *Ascertaining the Crucial Point of Timing*, including the Tibetan edition and English translation of the latter in Appendix A, were executed in collaboration with Khenpo Yeshi.
- ² For Tibetan arguments for and against the Indian Buddhist pedigree of the claim of liberation through wearing, see (Gentry 2017, pp. 236–59; 2025).
- ³ For a traditional synopsis of this cosmological concept as enlisted in a popular nineteenth century instruction manual, see (Patrul Rinpoche [1994] 1998, p. 45).
- ⁴ Here, in his *Btags grol gyi rgyab yig yid bzhin lhun grub* (*Bla ma yang tig*), Klong chen pa (1308–1364) in fact presents three traditions: the first involves forming a simple *yantra* diagram, whereas only the second, subdivided into two, involves copying all or part of the *Only Child* tantra and forming a miniature portable booklet (*glegs bam du bya ba*). These two traditions of forming amulet booklets from copies of the *Only Child* also appear in the revelations of the fourteenth-century Treasure revealer Sangs rgyas

gling pa (1340–1396); see (Sangs rgyas gling pa 1972, vol. 10, 311–40, 447–60), and especially 431–46, where they are listed at the beginning.

⁵ The practice of copying *sūtras* in gold-colored ink on dark-blue paper seems to have originated in China in the sixth century but only caught on in Tibet from the late tenth century on (Kapstein 2024, p. 41). Tibetans have most famously produced deluxe editions in gold-colored ink on blue paper with the Prajñāpāramitā literature, specifically the *Vajracchedikā*, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, and *Śatasāhasrikā*.

⁶ rang byung chen po'i yi ge rnam: rin chen gser gyis bris nas ni: glegs bam sor ni bzhi pa'i tshad: sna tshogs dar gyis gril nas kyang : rang gi spyi bor bzung na yang : 'di la sprul pa'i yon tan thob: mchan khung g.yon du bcangs pa yis: 'di yang de dang mnyam pa yin: 'di nyid mgul du btags nas ni: rgyun du gus par byed pa la: 'di yang sprul sku'i yon tan thob:

⁷ 'chang ba'i gsang tshig yi ge ni: dran pa kun gyi thog ma yi: dbang po zhen pa bzlog pa nas: rab tu dkon tshig yan chad la: gser ram bai DU rya yis bri: mgul lam spyi bor btags pas 'grub: mngon rdzogs rgyal por sangs rgyas thob:

⁸ 'jig rten kham ni gang du yang : sangs rgyas nyid ni sus thob pa: de tshe 'di ni lan gsum du: nam mkha' dag la 'phar ba dang : rang 'od lnga po 'di las byung : 'di 'dzin rnal 'byor skal che bas: lan gsum 'di yi tshig kun yang : lhag dang chad pa med par ni: rdo rje'i lce yis sus brjod na: 'di yang de dang mnyam par yang : 'gyur ba 'di la the tshom med: de phyir bstan pa'i rgyud rnam kun: thams cad dus gcig sgom shes kyang : 'di ma snang bar grol ba med: 'di ni sa bon rang 'phel bas: bstan pa'i bdag po gang sangs rgyas: 'di nyid sa bon med par ni: bstan pa'i gsung ni tshig tsam yang : lce yi dbang pos brjod mi nus: de tshig 'di la ma brten par: rdul cha tsam yang 'byung ba min: bstan pa gcig gi snyigs ma la: byin brlabs tshig ni 'di kun yang : gang la snang ba'i mi des kyang : ma mthong rgyud dang bstan bcos ni: lce yi dbang pos brjod par nus: ⁹ sems can kun gyi bsam pa dang : sangs rgyas kun gyi dgongs pa dang : ji ltar mthun pa'i chos kun ni: 'di yis ston par nus pa yin: sangs rgyas rnam kyi thugs dang gcig: rdo rje 'dzin pa'i dgongs pa dang : dbyer mi phyed par 'dis 'gyur ro: de phyir bstan pa'i me ro yin: rang byung tshig gi rgyal po 'di: so so'i sems can skyegzugs la: so so'i brda skad ci lta bar: 'di nyid de ltar snang ba yin:

¹⁰ dran zad tshig 'di zad par ni: rdo rje zhes ni tshig 'di kun: 'byung ba'i rkyen dang bral bas na: rdo rje kun 'byung gsang sngags yin: thabs lam du ma mtshon pa'i phyir: rang babs bsgom pa 'di las byung : snying po rang 'dul bstan pa'i bcud: gzhi nyid kyi ni babs yin no:

¹¹ ma 'khrul sngon thog nyid kyi gzhi: 'di las 'phros pas spros pa'i rgyud: rgyu las 'bras bu rang byung bzhin: 'di nyid las ni tshig kun yang : dran bsam bral ba'i ngang nyid las: byas pa med par byung ba yin: 'od zer 'dzin pa'i skyes bu la: 'di ni snang bar 'gyur ba'o: de las 'phel nas grangs 'ga' 'byung :

¹² lha min g.yul rnam rang log tu: 'di tshig bzung ba tsam gyis 'gyur: kham gsum g.yul kun 'dis bzlog go: rigs drug rnam kyi 'bros khungs 'gegs: mya ngan med pa'i grong khyer du: 'jug par byed pa'i 'khor lo yin:

¹³ I have personally witnessed the appending of the *Only Child* tantra to corpses and the tantra's recitation at the death and cremation of eastern Tibetan lamas and their European sponsors.

¹⁴ For a sense of the *Only Child*'s broad range of versions, see (Gentry 2025); the relationships between versions will be explicated in some detail in Khenpo Yeshe and my study of the tantra, currently in preparation.

¹⁵ bstan pa thams cad 'dus pa'i bu gcig po: dum bu gcig ste ma bu gnyid yod:

¹⁶ rdo rje 'chang gi tshig gnad nges pa med na mchod pa'i dus mi shes: de ltar ma dang bu gnyis bsdebs pas bstan pa bu gcig 'grub: de yi phyir na gsang ba'i kha byang gces:

¹⁷ rin chen mthing shog byang bu bcu drug la: ser po gser gyi yi ge btap pa ni: dar tshon lngas gril gser gyi sgud pas bcings: rdo rje 'chang gsung mchod 'os rang bzhin tshig: 'di nyid kyi ni bstan pa bu gcig gi: man ngag yig sna lhag ma med par rdzogs:

¹⁸ bstan pa'i bu gcig med na bsgrub kyang 'bras bu med. On the proposed dating of the *Treasury of the Dākinīs*, see (Gentry Forthcoming).

Since preparing a draft of this paper, David Germano, Jacob Dalton, and I have embarked on a comprehensive study of this important collection. My renderings of its passages that appear herein have been revised in consultation with Germano and Dalton.

¹⁹ 'di skad bdag la sogs pa yi: sangs rgyas bye ba dung phyur gyi: dgongs pa nyid dang grangs med par: thugs kyi snying po ji lta bar: gsungs shing bstan pa'i dus gcig na: mya ngan 'das pa'i thog mar ni: 'di ni nyag cig rnal ma yi: don gyi sa bon rnam su ni: nges pa'i snying po nyid du yang : gsungs so bstan to bshad pa yin:

²⁰ e ma ho: gsang mdzad rang bzhin tshig 'di yang : rang byung ye dag chen por ni: spel tshig gsang ba 'di ltar snang :

²¹ ye thog dang po'i sangs rgyas ni: dang po mngon 'phags dran pa mgon: phyag rgya rang dran 'khor lo ni: gzhi las 'phags pa'i khyad par tshig: spyi phud sngon gyi thog mar byung : 'di dus phrag khrig bdun cu yis: phyag rgya 'di ni dam pa'o:

²² dran pa zad pa'i ye shes mgon: snying po rang tshig gcig par go: bskal pa rtsod dang ldan pa la: bcu phrag dgu yi gdung 'dzin pas: nges pa'i phyag rgya dam par bzung :

²³ rims dang yams nad byung ba'i tshe: dgu dang bcu gcig gcu dgur ni: lcags kyu'i lce yis brjod par bya: 'di dus rnam par mi rtog bsgom: byis pa dgu'am bco brgyad la: ston mo bya bar rab tu bsngags: bklag pa 'khrugs pa'i dus na yin: sgom pa snyoms pa'i dus na yin: byis pa byer ba'i dus su 'bod: ston mo zug pa nyid la bya: de ltar byas pa'i skyes mchog ni: 'di la sprul pa'i yon tan thob:

²⁴ mu ge dag ni byung ba'i tshe: kha TwAM lce yis rab brjod na: 'dis kyang sprul sku 'dzin pa yin: lan ni lnga'am gsum gnyis yin: 'di dus dri yi mchod pa bya: shan pa 'am ni mu stegs la: ston mo bya bar rab tu bzang : bklag pa byed pa'i dus na yin: mchod pa snyoms pa nyid la bya: sdig can sprul pa nyid la 'bod: ston mo de bzhin zug pa la'o: 'dis kyang sprul sku'i sa bon 'jog:

²⁵ For presentation and analysis of how aspects of this elemental astrology find expression in the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra and its commentary, see Zuckerman (2025); for the commentary on the *Unimpeded Sound* tantra, see Vimalamitra (2009).

- 26 There is also a word-by-word commentary to the *Only Child* which I do not consider here because of its later date of composition, and because discussion of elemental astrology is strikingly absent from it; see (Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer 1970–1971, vol. 7, 73–271). For a preliminary consideration of the relative chronology of this amulet-book literature, see (Gentry Forthcoming).
- 27 This schema of the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air (*sa chu me rlung*) is markedly distinct from the more typical five-fold Tibetan calendrical elements of fire, earth, iron, water, and wood (*me sa lcags chu shing*). This four-fold schema also departs from the *Kālacakra* tantra's astro-medical system by not including the fifth element of space and the sixth element of gnosis. On astrology and medicine in the *Kālacakra* tantra, see (Wallace 2009).
- 28 *rtsis kyi rig pa'i 'jig rten dang // 'jig rten las 'das pa gtan la dbab pa ni//de yang tshe rabs grangs kyi rtsis kyi// las kyi 'gyur rtsis nas dge ba'i dus 'phel gyis byang chub chen po'i 'bras bu nam thob par rtsi ba dang / tshe thog mtha'i rtsis kyi skyes bu'i lus kyi 'byung pa'i byer zug dang 'chi ba'i dus tshod brtsi ba dang / lo gcig zla ba bcu gnyis kyi rtsis kyi/ 'byung pa'i dar rgud dang dbang thang dang skyid sdug drag zhan brtsi ba dang / nyin gcig thug phrad kyi rtsis kyi gdon pho mo ngos bzung pa dang /*
- 29 *lo dang zla ba'i bye brag gis// 'byung pa rnams kyi 'khrugs sdebs brtsi// nyin dang mtshan mo'i khyad par gyis// byer zug snyoms dang 'khrug pa'i// tshad dang dus tshod nges par bzung // sa chu me rlung khyad kyi ni// 'byung pa'i nad kyi dus nges brtag/ tshe stod bar dang tha ma dang // lo rnams dus tshod nges bzung na// 'dis kyang rang rtsis phebs pa yin// de rtsis dus la ma bab na// spyid dang dbyar dang ston dang rgun// sa chu me rlung de bzhin sbyar// de rtsis dus tshod nges par brtag/*
- 30 *byer zug snyoms la bcu gnyis te// sa chu me rlung bzhi la yang // gsum gsum nyid de bcu gnyis la// chu yi zug pas dbang po sdud// byer ba yis ni 'khrugs par byed// snyoms pa yis ni 'bras bu 'byin// sa yi zug pas rdul rnams 'byin// byer ba yis ni yan lag 'byin// snyoms pas lus 'byung rdzogs pa'o// me yi zug pas nad du byed// byer ba dag gis lus gnas 'gyur// snyoms pas 'byung ba gnas par byed// rlung gi zug pas 'byung ba skyob// byer bas las gzhan 'jig pa las// snyoms pas rlung sems gcig du sdud// gsum gyis byed pa'i mtha' 'di'o// chu yi zug pas sa 'dus la// zug pa zug pa 'phrad pa yis// gang mi 'grub cing 'jig par 'gyur// byer ba nyid kyi nad du 'gyur// snyoms pas rtsi sbyor sman rnams 'grub// me dang rlung gnyis phung po 'jig/ byer bas las kun 'grub pa la// snyoms pas 'khrug pa'i las mthar 'gyur// chu dang me las don rab 'grub// byer bas gzhan la 'jug par 'gyur// snyoms pas tshe ring dbang thang 'grub/ sa dang rlung gis zhi ba 'grub// byer bas rgyas dang dbang du byed// snyoms pas mngon spyod las rnams 'grub// rlung dang chu yi bya ba nyid// byer bas dge ba'i las kun 'grub// snyoms pas dmaṅ las rgyal ba'o// sa dang mes ni spel ba 'grub// byer bas 'byung ba spo ba 'grub// snyoms pas gshed kyi cho ga 'grub// zug byer las kyi mtha' la yang // nges par 'gyur ro dbang po'i lha//*
- 31 *skyes dang na dang 'chi ba ni// rang dang gzhan du nges par sbyar// zla ba dgun dbyar dpyid ston dang // gsum gyi grangs rtsis bcu gnyis la// lo stong zhag kyang 'bum phrag gsum// skar ma yi ni gnyis med pas// lo dang zla ba steng brtsegs 'gyur// nyin dang mtshan gyi sgyur byed las// nyin mtshan mnyam pa dus gnyis 'gyur// tshes zhes rnam grangs grags pa las// yar gyi ngo la mtshan mo ring // de nas brgya dang brgyad cu yis// mar gyi ngo la nyin mo ring // nyin mtshan ring thung byed pa yi// 'byung ba pho mo'i thabs dbye las// bcu gnyis rim pa nyin mtshan las// log pa'i dus te mkhas pas bzung // nyin mtshan ring dang thung ba las// dge dang mi dge dbye ba'o// nyin mtshan 'gres pa'i zhag la yang // zla ba lo ste byer zug snyoms// rten 'brel dus te bcu gnyis sbyar// thams cad bcu gnyis rim shes na// 'jam dpal mkhyen pa rdzogs pa'o// phyi rol 'byung ba'i cho 'phrul dang // nyin mtshan ring thung rnam grangs las// 'byung ba'i lo rnams dus tshod[emend. chod] sbyar// lo ni so so'i 'gres sbyar te// mgo la rang dus mnyam sbyar nas// rlung dang 'od dang sgra chen dang // sa g.yos mnyam dang gzugs brnyan dang // nam mkha' dag gi yal lugs ni// so so'i phyogs dang des bstun nas// sad dang char chen char med dang // mu ge nad dang gdon rigs dang // rtsod dang ri khri g.yo ba ni// so so'i dus dang rigs las shes// rgyal po dmangs dang dge sbyong dang // btsun mo blon po pan di ta// rgan dang gzhan dang phyugs rnams dang // gzhan yang byol song so so'i bye brag dang // skyes pa bud med gzugs rnams dar// shing thog lo thog rtsi thog rnams// legs dang nyes dang bzang ngan rnams// rim pas rnal 'byor pas shes bya'o//*
- 32 'di ni nges par sprul pa yi: sku yi 'bras bu rnyed pa yin:
- 33 *de yang byer ba dang zug pa la sogs pa'i dus ni// skabs 'dir nyin mtshan phrug gcig gis brtsi ba yin te/ de'ang nyin dus kyi nam langs nas dros po che'i bar du byer ba'o// de nas gung la ma slebs bar du zug pa'o// gung mthil po ni snyoms pa'o// grib bsil phebs nas nyi ma nub pa'i bar ni 'khrugs pa'o// mtshan dus kyi srod byer ba/ srod yol zug pa/ nam phyed snyoms pa/ tho rangs 'khrugs pa'o// de ltar nyin mtshan gyi cha gang la rtags de rnams 'byung ba'i byer zug gi rim pa dang sbyar la/ klog pa dang / sgom pa dang / 'bod pa dang / tshogs kyi ston mo rnams bya ba yin no/*
- 34 *bstan pa bu gcig dang / de'i 'grel pa dang / bcangs thabs gnad yig la sogs pa thams cad kyi don phyogs gcig tu zhib mor bkod pa*
- 35 Gtb is missing a separate title page, homage, and title here. It includes the title, *Mchos 'os rang bzhin gyi*[emend. *gyis*] *tshig chen po* (*The Great Natural Praiseworthy Statement*), only at the conclusion of the text.
- 36 Gtb alternative reads "Anyone who understands non-discursivity [and the] natural dissipation [of thought]"
- 37 Following the variant readings, this line would read, "It will happen that you are teaching [only] a mindless inert material object."
- 38 Gtb adds here the unmetrical syllables *zhig gi*.
- 39 In Gtb this line begins with the unmetrical *des na*.
- 40 Gtb is missing this line.
- 41 Gtb has the additional line here: *rnal 'byor pa yis mi bya'o/*
- 42 See note 41 above.
- 43 Gtb is missing this section.

- ⁴⁴ Gtb is missing this section. Instead, it has: *mchod 'os rang bzhin gyi[emend. gyis] tshig chen po rdzogs so//// 'di ni bsam pa'i tshig/* ("This concludes the Great Natural Praiseworthy Statement. These are words for reflection.")

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