

One of the Indian pandits who were invited to Tibet in the dynastic period was Vimalamitra. Later sources (from the 12th century onwards) describe him as one of the main transmitters of the rDzogs chen teachings, and this is what makes him an especially interesting figure.

According to the *sBa bzhed*, which is one of our earliest historical sources, King Khri srong lde btsan sends for an Indian *paṇḍita*, and Vimalamitra arrives to continue the teachings of Padma Sambhava. The *sBa bzhed* says:

*btsan po lha sras kyi zhal nas | ā tsarya'i gsungs dang sbyar na kho bo'i tshes kyang
yun ring po mi thub ces thugs ngal mdzad nas thugs las chung ngu la gshol bar bzhed
nas | pantita gcig spyan 'dren du btang pas | ā tsarya bi ma la mi tra byon nas | slob
dpon padma sam bha wa'i chos 'phro zhus nas sgom mdzad par bzhed nas | sras mu ne
btsan po la chab srid bskos pa dang | blon zhang 'u ring btsan po la bsko ba'i gros | ...*

The king, son of the gods, said, “According to the sayings of the *ācārya*, I cannot have a long life.” This made him sad, so wishing to put it off his mind somewhat, he sent an invitation for a *paṇḍita*, and therefore the *ācārya* Vimalamitra came. Then [the king] received the rest of the teachings of Padma Sambhava [from Vimalamitra]; and since [the king] wished to perform meditation, he commissioned his son Mu ne btsan po with the kingdom, and the minister 'U ring was appointed advisor.¹

If we follow the chronology of the *sBa bzhed*, this places the arrival of Vimalamitra around AD 795: at least after the Council of Tibet, which ended in 794, but before the resignation of King Khri srong lde btsan sometime before his death in 797.

We find a few scattered references to Vimalamitra in the old material. In the Dunhuang collections there is a single text ascribed to Vimalamitra, the S. tib. 688. In the *bSam gtan mig sgron*² we find quotations from a text called *Bi ma la'i klong 'grel* on p. 9,1; the same is again quoted on p. 276,4 with

¹ See *sBa bzhed ces bya ba las sBa gsal snang gi bzhed pa bzhugs*, 2nd ed., Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, Beijing 1982 (*BZC*), p. 81,20, and Stein, R. A.: *Une chronique ancienne de bSam yas: sBa bzed*, Publications de l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, Textes et Documents I, Paris: Adrian-Maisonneuve, 1961 (*BZS*), p. 65,2; dPa' bo gtsug lag 'phreng ba: *Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston*, Vol. *ja.*, ed. Lokesh Chandra, Śatapiṭaka Series 9 (4), New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1962 (*CBKhG*), p. 63,2,1.

² *bSam gtan mig sgron*, ed. S. W. Tashigangpa, Smarntsis Shesrig Spenzod, Vol. 74, Leh, 1974.

a slight deviation in the spelling: *Byi ma la'i klong 'grel*. Until now, I have not been able to identify this text. And in the *IHan dkar Catalogue*³ we find Vimalamitra as the author of two texts, both in section XX, *Theg pa chen po'i mdo sde'i tīkā*. These are No. 519, where the entry reads:

Shes rab kyi pha rol du phyin pa bdun brgya pa'i 'grel pa | slob dpon Vimalamitras mdzad pa | 2,100 śloka | 7 bam po ||

and No. 529:

Shes rab snying po'i rgya cher 'grel pa | slob dpon Vimalamitras mdzad pa | 300 śloka | 1 bam po ||

Both texts are found in the *bsTan 'gyur*, as No. 5214 and No. 5217 in the *Tibetan Tripiṭaka Peking Edition (TTP)*.

Our main sources of information for the life of Vimalamitra are later writings, especially the *Blue Annals*, and the writings of Nyang ral pa can and Klong chen pa.⁴

In the *Blue Annals* Vimalamitra is mentioned as the transmitter of rDzogs chen to Tibet together with Padma Sambhava, and for the first time the possibility of two Vimalamitras is mentioned:

Now, it is stated in ancient records about the ācārya Vimalamitra that there had been two Vimalamitras during the reigns of the religious kings Khri srong lde btsan and mNga' bdag Ral pa can. The “earlier” lived during the reign of the religious king Khri srong lde btsan. He did not dress in monastic robes but went about attired as a *yogin*. Therefore the king and his ministers expressed doubt as to whether he was a heretic, or a Buddhist. Doubts were also expressed, because, while making obeissance, he had broken an image of Vairocana. In order to remove the doubts of the ministers he composed the *sKyabs 'gro yan lag drug pa*, in which he said, “The king and ministers did not believe, so I composed the ‘Six Branches of the Refuge-taking Ceremony’.” He also composed the *Shes rab snying po'i rgya cher 'grel pa*, the *Rim gyis 'jug pa'i sgom don* and the *Cig char 'jug pa'i sgom don*. To judge from the method [employed in these books] he must have lived after the ācārya Kamalaśīla. The “later” Vimalamitra is the author of the *So sor thar pa'i rgya cher 'grel pa bam po lnga bcu pa*. He should be regarded as a monk. The “earlier” Vimala taught

³ Lalou, M., “Les textes bouddhiques au temps du roi Khri-srong-lde-bcan”, *Journal Asiatique*, Vol. CCLXI (1953), pp. 505–23. All subsequent *IHan dkar Catalogue* numbers refer to this edition.

⁴ The *Blue Annals* were written by 'Gos lo tsa ba gzhon nu dpal, 1476–8. Nyang ral pa can lived from 1136–1204, and Klong chen pa, 1308–64.

the precepts of the sNying thig to the king and to Myang ting 'dzin bzang po. Then Vimala proceeded to China.⁵

Unfortunately, 'Gos lo tsa ba does not go into further details about the above-mentioned “ancient records”, which he appears to have seen.

This description of two Vimalamitras has recently been mentioned by Western scholars like Gómez and Davidson, and it seems that their only source is the *Blue Annals*.⁶ Since the *Blue Annals* refer solely to what texts the two Vimalamitras are supposed to have written, and unidentified “ancient records”, it might prove fruitful to take a look at the texts authored by Vimalamitra. We find texts ascribed to Vimalamitra in different collections: the *bsTan 'gyur*, *Bi ma snying thig*, and *Rin chen gter mdzod*. Of these, the *Bi ma snying thig* and *Rin chert gter mdzod* are collections of *gter ma*-s, which make them doubtful as historical sources. This leaves us with the texts found in the *bsTan 'gyur*, where we also find the texts mentioned by the *Blue Annals*. The *Shes rab snying po 'i rgya cher 'grel pa* is No. 5217, the *Rim gyis 'jug pai sgom don* is No. 5334, and the *Cig car 'jug pa 'i sgom don* is No. 5306 in the 7TP. The reason for 'Gos lo tsa ba to say that the “early” Vimalamitra lived after Kamalaśīla is of course that the *Rim gyis 'jug pa* and the *Cig car 'jug pa* are related to the Council of Tibet. But as I have shown earlier, the *Cig car 'jug pa* was not written by Vimalamitra, but is based on a Dunhuang treatise, and later on it was (probably) falsely attributed to Vimalamitra, perhaps to give the treatise greater authority.⁷

Here it is interesting to see that these two texts are not found in the *IHan dkar Catalogue*, while the first text mentioned by the *Blue Annals*, the *Shes rab snying po 'i rgya cher 'grel pa* (No. 529) is included as the work of Vimalamitra. The “earlier” Vimalamitra is thus identical to the person described in the more or less legendary accounts we have of Vimalamitra.

Of the “later” Vimalamitra we have only one item of information: the statement of 'Gos lo tsa ba that he wrote the *So sor thar pa 'i rgya cher 'grel pa bam po lnga bcu pa*. We know no biography, not even the most sketchy, of the “later” Vimalamitra. If we look in the *bsTan 'gyur*, we find the text mentioned by the *Blue Annals*: the *So sor thar pa 'i mdo rgya cher 'grel pa 'dul ba kun las btus pa*, No. 5607 in *TTP*, and authored by Dri med bshes gnyen, the Tibetan translation of Vimalamitra's name. We can be reasonably sure

⁵ *The Blue Annals*, tr. G. N. Roerich, Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal Monograph Series, Vol. VII, Calcutta, 1949, Part I, pp. 191–2. Tibetan text, see Śata-piṭaka Series, Vol. 212, ed. Lokesh Chandra, New Delhi, 1976, f. 171, 2–6.

⁶ See Gómez, L. O., “Indian Materials on the Doctrine of Sudden Enlightenment”, *Early Ch'an in China and Tibet*, ed. L. Lancaster and W. Lai, Berkeley Buddhist Series 5, Berkeley, 1983, pp. 431–2; and Davidson, R. M., “The Litany of Names of Mañjuśrī”, *Tantric and Taoist Studies in Honour of R. A. Stein*, Vol. I, ed. M. Strickmann, Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques, Vol. XX, Institut Beige des Hautes Études Chinoises, Bruxelles, 1981, p. 9, n. 23.

⁷ See Faber, F., “A Tibetan Dunhuang Treatise on Simultaneous Enlightenment: The *dMyigs su myed pa tshul gcig pa 'i gzhung*”, *Acta Orientalia*, Vol. 46 (1985), pp. 49–50.

that this is the same text, since it is described in the *IHan dkar Catalogue* as No. 499, having fifty *bam po*-s: “So sor thar pa’i rgya cher ’brel pa ’dul ba kun las btus pa | 15,000 śloka | 50 bam po”. This of course also means that the text was written and translated before the time of the composition of the *IHan dkar Catalogue*. Now the *IHan dkar Catalogue* was written in either 812 or 824. We can therefore safely assume that the text was composed before 824 by the “later” Vimalamitra.

If we follow Tucci,⁸ the date of the *IHan dkar Catalogue* is 812. This means that the “earlier” and the “later” Vimalamitra would almost be contemporary, as the “earlier” Vimalamitra is considered to have stayed in Tibet for 13 years. If we add 13 years to the tentative date for the arrival of Vimalamitra, *c.*, 795, we get 808, which is very close to the composition of the *IHan dkar Catalogue* in 812. If there should have been two Vimalamitras, they almost certainly would have met in Tibet, but this does not tally with the statements given by the *Blue Annals*. Further, we can see that the information we find in the *IHan dkar Catalogue* does not support the assumption of two Vimalamitras. The Catalogue lists one text of the “earlier” Vimalamitra (No. 529) and one by the “later” Vimalamitra (No. 499) without making any distinction; on the other hand the two other texts mentioned by ’Gos lo tsa ba, the *Cig car ’jug pa* and the *Rim gyis jug pa* are not listed in the *IHan dkar Catalogue*. If we add all this up, the most credible solution is that there was only one Vimalamitra, who wrote some of the texts credited to him, and the rest was credited to him by posterity, as in the case of the *Cig car ’jug pa*.

That there is only one Vimalamitra is supported by ’Jigs med gling pa from another viewpoint. He refers clearly to views like the one brought forward in the *Blue Annals*, when he writes in his *dKar chag* to the *rNying ma rgyud ’bum*:

*Bi ma la snga phyi gnyis su byon par ’dod pa ni | slob dpon ’di mdo sngags kyi chos
rgya mtsho lta bu la mkhas pas so thar pa’i rgya cher ’grel la sogs pa’i bstan bcos
dgag par mi nus pa dag mchis pa | rdzogs pa chen po phyogs gzhan du ’phul bar ’dod
pa dag gis kun slong min na rung ste | don la shes rab snying po’i rgya cher ’grel dang
| rim gyis dang | cig char ’jug pa’i sgom don gnyis kyang slob dpon ’dis mdzad cing |
yer pa’i dkar chag las rab byung gi mkhan po mdzad pa’i lo rgyus bsnyad pa sogs
rtags kyang gang yin bsgrub dka’ la | spyir phags pa’i gnas brtan bcu drug dang | jo bo
a ti sha yang bshul lam la na bza’ dkar po yin la | bod de la khyim par ’dzin pa gsan
bas na bza’ rjes nas phebs pa sogs rtags ’ba’ zhid la nges pa kho na ’ang yod dka’o | de
ltar lo bcu gsum bod yul du bzhdugs nas star rgya nag ri bo rtse lngar gshegs |*

⁸ Tucci, G.: *Minor Buddhist Texts, Part II: First Bhāvanākrama of Kamalaśīla*, Serie Orientale Roma IX/2, Rome: Is.M.E.O., 1958, p. 46, n. 1

It is believed [by some] that there were two Vimalamitras, an “earlier” and a “later”. Since that teacher had knowledge of the *sutras* and the *tantras* equal to the ocean, it is clearly so that the *So so thar pa'i rgya cher 'grel* and other treatises cannot be refuted by the sages [as authentic works of Vimalamitra]. It might be that their intention is that they want to push rDzogs chen aside, but in reality the *Shes rab snying po'i rgya cher 'grel*, the *Rim gyis*, and the *Cig char 'jug pa'i sgom don* are also written by this teacher. In the *Yer pa Catalogue* there are stories about how [Vimalamitra] was the *mkhan po* of ordinations; and it is difficult to know what kind of dress he was wearing. Generally, the sixteen Arhats and also the Master Atiśa travelled in white clothes. When they heard that in Tibet this was considered the clothing of the lay people, they changed their clothes and went on. So it is really difficult to determine [what people are] by the clothes they wear. Thus [Vimalamitra] stayed thirteen years in Tibet, then he went back to Ri bo rtse Inga [Wutai Shan] in China.⁹

So, according to 'Jigs med gling pa, there is no reason to believe that there were two Vimalamitras. To him there are no contradictions in Vimalamitra's authorship. This might give us a clue as to why 'Gos lo tsa ba is talking of two Vimalamitras. From his remarks it looks as if he did not consider it acceptable that a *yogin* could be author of both tantric texts and *vinaya* texts. He might therefore have thought it necessary to introduce two authors by the same name.

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If we take a closer look at the texts authored by Vimalamitra found in the *bsTan 'gyur*, it becomes even more likely that we are only dealing with one Vimalamitra. In the *TTP* we find twenty-six texts attributed to Vimalamitra's authorship.¹⁰

Of these texts, nineteen are rather brief treatises found in the *rGyud 'grel* section, and dealing with various practices of the tantras and meditation. These are in complete concord with the traditional picture of Vimalamitra. In many cases the translators are not mentioned; but whenever they are, it is always translators who are normally associated with the early translation period around 800. Foremost come the well-known disciples of Vimalamitra, rMa Rin chen mchog and Jñānakumāra as the translators of Vimalamitra's tantric works.

There is one small text from the *Ngo mtshar bstan bcos* section, and three are found in the *dBu ma* section. These three are the already mentioned

⁹ rNying ma rgyud 'bum, Vol. 34 (E), f. 133, 4–134, 1.

¹⁰ *TTP*, Nos. 2941, 3505, 3931, 4724, 4725, 4732, 4738, 4740, 4746, 4747, 4755, 4759, 4764, 4765, 4769, 4772, 4776, 4777, 4780, 5214, 5217, 5306, 5334, 5367 (= 5479), 5607, 5917.

sKyabs 'gro yan lag drug pa, the *Cig car 'jug pa*, and the *Rim gyis 'jug pa*. In both the *Cig car 'jug pa* and the *Rim gyis 'jug pa* Ye shes sde is mentioned as co-translator. But since the *Cig car 'jug pa* was not written by Vimalamitra, and these two texts clearly form a unit, it is best to exclude both of them when we evaluate the authorship of Vimalamitra.

Then there are two texts from the *Sher phyin* section. One of them does not mention the translators); for the other one the names Vimalamitra, Bande Nam mkha', and Ye shes snying po are given.

The single *vinaya* commentary *So sor thar pa'i mdo rgya cher 'grel pa 'dul ba kun las btus pa* from the '*Dul bai 'grel pa* section was translated by Jinamitra, Sarvajñānadeva, and Klu'i rgyal mtshan; in the context of the two Vimalamitras it is interesting to see that we also find here translators from the early translation period, something which is in complete concord with the other texts ascribed to Vimalamitra.

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I will now return to the Dunhuang text, S. tib. 688. It is an interesting text since, of the texts that we know were not redacted after the 10th century, it is the only one we are able to link with Vimalamitra. The text is complete, and consists of three pages with five lines each. It deals with rosaries. In this paper I will only touch lightly on this text.¹¹ It begins thus:

'phreng ba'i lung | don rnam pa bdun gis bstan de | slob dpon gang gis mdzad pa dang | rgyud gang las btus pa dang | 'khu (= khungs) pa gang las byung ba dang | mtshams gang du gtogs pa dang | so so'i rigs ma nor bar bstan pa bgrang ba'i thabs dang | bsam rgyud ma nor ba dang | don las mtshan du gsol pa'o | 'di mdzad pa'i slob dpon ni | rgya gar gi mkhan po pan pyi ta stong lnga brgya'i nang na | bye ma la mu tras mdzad | rgyud phyogs ni thub pa A ba da ra las btus | khung ni rgya gar gi yul na | shing bod de slag ...

The subject of the '*Phreng bai lung* is taught in seven parts:

Which ācārya is the author,

Which tantras are relied on,

Where it comes from,

What are the rules connected with it;

It shows the different kinds [of rosary] without mistakes,

the technique of counting,

[How to use them] without a mistaken mind, and

The name given from the inner meaning.

Concerning the ācārya who is the author of this work:

It was written by Bye ma la mu tra,

¹¹ I am preparing a more thorough investigation and translation.

one of the 1,500 Indian *paṇḍita*.
 Concerning the tantras: they were obtained from
 the Accomplished A ba da ra la.
 Concerning the origin: in India, the bodhi-tree ...

Now, here the name of the author is given as “Bye ma la mu tra”. According to Klong chen pa this is the same as Vimalamitra. Klong chen pa says in the *Zab mo yang thig*:

At that time in 'Glang po'i sngang' in the Western part of India, the Dharmarāja Aśoka's daughter Dharmabodhi had a son called Bye ma la mu tra, who was a great ācārya.¹²

Then the following is written as a note to this, in smaller letters:

Some say that because he was fatherless his mother hid him in a sandpit, but he did not die and his eyes looked around with a clear expression; therefore he was called “the *mudrā* in the sand”. Some [others] say that he knew the *Dharma* as well as how to traverse a mound of sand, and therefore he was called thus. People who believe that are just talking nonsense. In the *gYu yig can* a father is mentioned, and that is in opposition [to the first story]. Therefore, from the *A ti bkod pa chen po*: “The foremost of the sages is staying in Ka ma ru.” So is it prophesied; and further: 'Bye ma is translated as “rgya chen”, and *mudrā* is “phyag rgya”, which gives Bye ma la mu tra. As his ordination name he received the name Vimalamitra, or Dri med bshes gnyen.

This story is of course legendary, but contains nevertheless the basic information that Bye ma la mu tra is the same person as Vimalamitra. It is therefore reasonable to assume that S.tib. 688 is a genuine work of Vimalamitra, something which is also supported by the contents of the text. A manual of rosaries is a very appropriate subject for the *yogin*-scholar that Vimalamitra appears to have been.

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We also find another occurrence of the name “Bi ma (la)”/“Bye ma la”. In the *sBa bzhed* we find the following rendering, dealing with the Council of Tibet:

*Ma hā ya na 'i slob ma las | myang sha mis rang gi sha btubs snya bye ma la dang
 rngog rin po ches rang gi pho mtshan brdungs |*

¹² Klong chen pa dri med 'od zer: *sNying thig ya bzhi*, Vol. 11: *Zab mo yang tig*, Part 2, reprinted by Tulku Tsewang, Jamyang and L. Tashi, New Delhi, 1971, p. 95, 3–6.

Of Mahāyāna's disciples, Myang sha mi cut up his own flesh; sNya bye ma la and rNgog rin po che crushed their own genitals.¹³

This passage has been mentioned earlier by both Tucci and Demiéville.¹⁴ Both of them consider this person to be a Tibetan and suggest that he is the same as a certain Pimolo mentioned in the Chinese dossier translated by Demiéville. But Demiéville goes further, suggesting that this “Vimala” is the same as Vimalamitra, and poses the question as to whether Vimalamitra is a Tibetan. I do not think that there is any evidence to connect these two—the Vimala who is obviously a Tibetan with the clan name “sNyag”, and the *yogin*-scholar Vimalamitra who is probably an Indian, as I have just shown.

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The earliest sources we have on the life of Vimalamitra are the works of Nyang ral pa can. In his *Chos byung*¹⁵ the circumstances of his invitation to Tibet are related. This description is the prototype of Vimalamitra's biography as found in later sources, i.e. in Klong chen pa's *sNying thigya bzhi*, and in the biographies of Padma Sambhava; in the “discovered” by O rgyan gling pa (1329–67), and likewise the gSer “discovered” by Sangs rgyas gling pa (1340–96). These relationships I intend to investigate later, in an attempt to trace the biography of Vimalamitra as far back as possible. In any case, I do not think that we have to worry about the question of one or two Vimalamitras any more; if there were two, the so-called “later” one is of no consequence whatsoever, as all available information on Vimalamitra appears to refer to the “earlier” Vimalamitra.

¹³ *BZC*, p. 65,2. The other versions of the *sBa bzhed* give slightly different spellings: the *BZS*, p. 55,2, “mnya' bi ma”; the *CBKhG*, p. 58,1,5, “sNyags bye ma la”; and *NRCB* (see note 15), p. 288,1,3.

¹⁴ See Gómez's summary of this discussion in note 21, pp. 431–2 of his “Indian Materials” (see note 6, above).

¹⁵ Meisezahl, R. O.: *Die große Geschichte des tibetischen Buddhismus nach alter Tradition*. *rNying ma'i chos 'byung chen mo*, Sankt Augustin: VGH Wissenschaftsverlag, 1985, Tables 238,3,2–242,1,4 (*NRCB*).