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**From Metaphor to Metaphysics**

**The Triad of Metaphor, Meaning, and Sign in Bön  
Dzogchen Philosophy**

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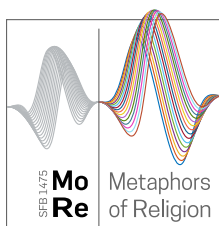
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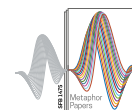
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# From Metaphor to Metaphysics

## The Triad of Metaphor, Meaning, and Sign in Bön Dzogchen Philosophy

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**ABSTRACT** In the 83rd chapter of the *bsGrags pa gling grags* [Drenpa's Proclamation], a twelfth-century historical narrative recounting the suppression of Bön (Tib. *bon*) by the Tibetan monarchy in the eighth century, a conceptual triad comprising metaphor (Tib. *dpe*), meaning (Tib. *don*), and sign (Tib. *rtags*) is found. This triad serves as a bridge between conceptual thought and direct experience, providing a framework for articulating the essential practice of Yungdrung (Tib. *gyung drung*, lit. eternal) Bön, which is aimed at attaining enlightenment within one's own self.

This triadic model is fairly common in Bön exegetical literature on Great Perfection (Tib. *rdzogs chen*, hereafter Dzogchen) texts, whereas in the Buddhist tradition, it is found almost exclusively in connection with the *Kun byed rgyal po* [All-Creating King], a fundamental scripture of the Ancient or Nyingma tradition (Tib. *rnying ma pa*) and classified as the principal *tantra* of the Semde (Tib. *sems sde*) or Mind Series.

A key feature of this triad is the evolution of light from a metaphor to a metaphysical principle, a shift that parallels the analysis of Hans Blumenberg (1920–1996), the German philosopher who identified a similar process in Western philosophy.

Blumenberg highlights how light, initially a natural and self-evident phenomenon, becomes a complex metaphysical principle, central to the history of ideas, particularly in works of Neoplatonists and Christian thinkers like Augustine. In this context, metaphor ceases to function as a secondary conceptual aid and instead becomes the primary means of articulating reality. In the Bön tradition, the practitioner's progression from conceptual engagement (metaphor) to the direct insight into non-conceptual reality (meaning) culminates in the recognition of the 'sign,' understood as the unbounded nature of mind. In this way, Bön philosophical discourse offers an original perspective on metaphor, not merely as descriptive or symbolic tools but as performative agents of spiritual transformation. The comparative analysis of Bön Dzogchen and Western metaphysics reveals shared concerns regarding the limits of conceptual thought and the role of non-discursive insight. Both traditions illustrate how metaphors move beyond their explanatory role to become cognitive tools for realisation, mediating access to the absolute nature of reality. This conceptual structure establishes a bridge between theoretical representation and direct experience, embodying a philosophical tension also found in Western reflections on metaphor and metaphysics. By drawing a parallel between the Bön tradition and Blumenberg's analysis of

Western thought, this paper explores a shared conceptual trajectory in which metaphor evolves into metaphysics, and light becomes an active agent for the realisation of absolute reality.

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**KEYWORDS** Light Metaphors, Great Perfection (Dzogchen), Bön Religious Literature, Hans Blumenberg, Metaphor and Metaphysics, Conceptual triad (Metaphor, Meaning and Sign)

## Introduction

### Time, Region, Religious Field, and Sources

This study delves into the use of light metaphors within the Bön tradition, a stratified and multifaceted religious heritage that flourished across the Tibetan Plateau and its neighboring regions.<sup>1</sup> Regarded by its adherents as the indigenous, pre-Buddhist religion that preceded the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet, Bön embodies a rich tapestry of religious beliefs, mythical narratives, cosmological visions, philosophical speculations and ritual practices, offering a fascinating field of study for both scholars of Eastern Central Asia and researchers in the history of religions. [1]

Recently, Per Kværne (*Kværne and Martin 2023, 5–6*) redefined the term Bön within the Tibetan context, identifying four distinct layers: [2]

- (1) Imperial-Period Practices (ca. 600–850): A collection of ancestral non-Buddhist beliefs and rituals that were not necessarily codified into a coherent system. These practices characterised Tibetan religiosity during the imperial period. [3]
- (2) Localised Practices (tenth–eleventh century): Localised religious practices occasionally connected to the imperial period, revealed through textual discoveries such as the Gatang (Tib. dGa' thang) *stūpa* in South-eastern Central Tibet. [4]
- (3) Eternal Bön (Tib. *g.Yung drung bon*): A post-eleventh-century religious system that incorporates Buddhist philosophical concepts, meditation techniques, and cosmological elements while integrating aspects of earlier traditions. This system evolved into monastic institutions as a declared alternative to Buddhism and continues to be practiced today both in Tibet and within the diaspora. [5]
- (4) Contemporary Frontier Practices: Diverse religious practices still observed in frontier regions of the Tibetan Plateau, often referred to as Bön by local communities. These practices retain elements of earlier traditions while showing occasional influence from Eternal Bön. [6]

1 In this contribution, I translate the Tibetan *dpe* (lit. 'example') as metaphor. The term metaphor is not intended to reflect an emic category explicitly theorised in Bön sources, but is employed as a heuristic and comparative tool. While Bön texts do not systematise the concept of metaphor as such, their use of symbolic imagery, analogical expressions, and semantic layering supports a metaphorical reading. Metaphor thus serves as an interpretive framework for examining how language operates within doctrinal and soteriological contexts—particularly in relation to representations of light and non-conceptual awareness.

After the eleventh century, during the second dissemination of Buddhist doctrines (Tib. *phyi dar*) in Tibet, Eternal Bön emerged as an organised religion, establishing the foundational nucleus of the Bön literary canon. While drawing extensively on Buddhist literature and assimilating many of its elements, the practitioners of Bön, the Bönpos (Tib. *bon po*), consistently sought to distinguish their tradition as a distinct and independent system with its own *raison d'être* and unique Tibetan indigenous identity. This effort involved integrating indigenous elements rooted in ancestral practices with motifs of foreign origin, including Iranian, Central Asian, and Chinese influences. The resulting literary corpus, marked by internal coherence and poetics, played a pivotal role in shaping Tibet's religious, intellectual, and literary history despite its development outside the mainstream Buddhist schools.<sup>2</sup> [7]

The Bön doctrines are traditionally classified into two primary systems:<sup>3</sup> [8]

(A) 'The Four Doorways and the Treasure as the Fifth' (Tib. *Bon sgo bzhi mdzod lnga*): [9]  
Unique to Bön, this system categorises doctrines into four doors:

(A.1) Wise Master (Tib. *dbon gsas*): Teachings from the Oral Transmission from Zhangzhung (Tib. *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud*) lineage and other Dzogchen traditions. [10]

(A.2) Black Waters (Tib. *chab nag*): Rituals including magical rites, funerary ceremonies, and divination practices. [11]

(A.3) White Waters (Tib. *chab dkar*): Texts and practices of the tantric tradition. [12]

(A.4) The Country of Phan (Tib. *'phan yul*): Texts related to monastic religion and *sūtras*. [13]

(A.5) The fifth category, the Treasury (Tib. *mdzod*), encompasses all four doors, offering detailed descriptions and explanations of their essential teachings. [14]

(B) 'The Nine Vehicles of Bön' (Tib. *theg pa rim dgu'i bon*): Mirroring the Ancient or Nyingma tradition of Buddhism, this system classifies teachings into nine vehicles, progressing hierarchically from lower to higher levels. The initial vehicles include practices such as divination, exorcism, and the pacification of demonic forces, followed by rites associated with death, foundational morality, and disciplines for lay practitioners as well as monastic discipline and tantric practices, culminating in the ninth and ultimate vehicle, the Supreme Vehicle (Tib. *bla med theg pa*). This pinnacle encompasses the doctrines of Dzogchen, which are systematically organised according to a tripartite framework, common to Buddhist schools, into basis (Tib. *gzhi*), path (Tib. *lam*), and fruition (Tib. *'bras bu*).<sup>4</sup> [15]

<sup>2</sup> For further analysis, see Blezer (2011) and Orofino (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Scholarly research on Bön literature has grown considerably over the past decades. Although this is not the place for an exhaustive review, it is worth recalling that sustained academic engagement with Bön began in the 1960s with the pioneering work of David Snellgrove (1967), followed by key contributions from Samten Karmay (1972, 1975) and Per Kvaerne (1973a, 1973b, 1974) among others. These foundational studies laid the groundwork for the development of modern Bön studies and opened the field to a wide range of subsequent scholarship.

<sup>4</sup> For the earliest academic account of the Nine Vehicles (Tib. *theg pa dgu*) in the Bön tradition, drawn from translated excerpts of the foundational text *gZi brjid* [The Glorious], see Snellgrove (1967).

The Bön tradition's articulation of Dzogchen is particularly distinguished by its transmission through three distinct lineages, collectively referred to in Tibetan as *A rdzogs snyan gsum*. These lineages transmit the teachings of Dzogchen and demonstrate notable parallels with the Buddhist Nyingma tradition. Despite their significance, they remain underexplored in contemporary scholarship, presenting fertile ground for future research. [16]

The three lineages are as follows: [17]

- (1) the Transmission of the Letter A (Tib. *A khrid*), [18]
- (2) the Transmission of the Great Perfection (Tib. *rDzogs chen*),
- (3) the Oral Transmission of the Great Perfection from Zhangzhung (Tib. *rDzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud*). (See [Kværne 1973a](#), [1973b](#); [Karmay 1988](#))

Among these, the Oral Transmission of the Great Perfection from Zhangzhung is considered the highest meditation system. According to the tradition, it originated in the ancient kingdom of Zhangzhung, a region encompassing the western territories of the Tibetan Empire, the area around Mt. Kailash, and the Indian regions of Ladakh, Kashmir, and Gilgit, which the Tibetan emperor conquered in the eighth century. According to Bön accounts, these doctrines were taught during the reign of Emperor Tri Songdétsen (742–ca. 800, Tib. Khri Srong lde brtsan) by Gyerpung Nangzher Löpo (fl. eighth–ninth c., Tib. Gyer spung sNang bzher Lod po), a disciple of the semi-legendary sage Tapihriza (Tib. Ta pi hri za) and then were preserved through an unbroken oral lineage until they resurfaced in the eleventh century.<sup>5</sup> [19]

## Methodological Approach and Thematic Focus

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach to analyse the symbolic and metaphorical uses of light imagery in Bön religious literature, focusing particularly on texts from the Oral Transmission of the Great Perfection from Zhangzhung. It integrates philological, semiotic, and historical-religious methodologies to uncover how these metaphors articulate doctrinal insights and function as dynamic tools for religious experience. [20]

The philological approach involves a close reading of key texts, including *sGron ma drug gi gdams pa* [The Doctrine on the Six Lamps; henceforth GDD in the footnotes] and its commentaries.<sup>6</sup> These works are analysed for their linguistic structures and symbolic [21]

5 For a good synthesis of the Bön Dzogchen literature see Achard (2021); Blezer (2011, 135–203).

6 For a partial translation of the chapter of this text concerning the post-mortem lamp (Tib. *bar do*), see Orofino ([1985] 1990, 61–86). See also Hatchell (2014, 234–64) and Achard (2017). The Tibetan word *sgron ma* is traditionally used to render the Sanskrit *dīpa* or *pradīpa*—terms that literally mean ‘light source,’ ‘that which illuminates,’ ‘lantern.’ Its use in both classical Sanskrit and Tibetan contexts often extends well beyond the literal. In Indian philosophical and exegetical literature, *dīpa* frequently appears in titles to indicate something that elucidates or clarifies a subject, as seen in *Mahābhāṣyapradīpaḥ*, *Kāvyaḥpradīpaḥ*, and *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*. This metaphorical nuance is equally evident in Tibetan literature, where *sgron ma* carries a similar connotation when it appears in the titles of texts. A notable example is a collection of six texts composed by Nyen Pelyang (fl. ninth c., Tib. gNyan dPal dbyangs) and preserved in the Tibetan *Tengyur* (Tib. *bstan ’gyur*). These works, which belong to the Mahāyoga *tantra* corpus, were retrospectively grouped—coincidentally, in the same manner as the text under discussion—under the title *sGron ma drug* [The Six Lamps]. See Takahashi (2009, 2018).

language to explore how light metaphors convey both contemplative and doctrinal dimensions, offering insights into Bön epistemology and practice.

Building on this foundation, the semiotic approach examines the conceptual triad of ‘metaphor, meaning, and sign’ (Tib. *dpe don rtags gsum*), a framework frequently encountered in the exegetical literature of Bön Dzogchen texts.<sup>7</sup> In this triadic model, metaphor (Tib. *dpe*) serves as a bridge between the mundane and the transcendent, meaning (Tib. *don*) encapsulates the doctrinal and experiential essence conveyed through the metaphor, and sign (Tib. *rtags*) guides practitioners toward the recognition of their innate wisdom. This structure facilitates the transition from the known to the ineffable, with light metaphors exemplifying what Hans Blumenberg calls absolute metaphors—metaphors that transcend mere description to become indispensable cognitive tools for articulating transcendent realities. The historical-religious dimension situates these metaphors within the Bön tradition and traces their interaction with early Buddhist Nyingma traditions. By identifying the same triadic framework of ‘metaphor, meaning, and sign’ in the Bön Zhangzhung oral tradition and in the Buddhist Nyingma literature, such as *Kun byed rgyal po* [The All-Creating King], the study uncovers shared cognitive frameworks, shedding light on the mutual influence of Bön and Buddhist systems in shaping Tibetan Dzogchen doctrines. [22]

## Case Study of Primary Sources

### The Doctrine on the Six Lamps

*The Doctrine on the Six Lamps* is one of the most significant texts within the Oral Transmission of the Great Perfection from Zhangzhung. It has two key commentaries: *sGron ma'i grel nyi 'od rgyan* [The Ornament of Solar Light, Commentary to the [Six] Lamps; henceforth GGN in the footnotes], authored by Bön scholar Uri Sonam Gyaltzen (fl. thirteenth c., Tib. Uri bSod rnam rGyal mtshan), and *sGron ma drug gi dgongs don 'grel* [The Commentary on the Profound Meaning of the Six Lamps; henceforth GDGG in the footnotes], written by Dru Gyelwa Yungdrung (1242–1290, Tib. Bru rGyal ba gYung drung).<sup>8</sup> [23]

The central theme of this root text is the teaching on the experience of the natural state (Tib. *gnas lugs*), the visions that arise from contemplative practice, and the esoteric methods for attaining the realisation of Buddhahood. This teaching is structured around Six Lamps, each functioning as a metaphor for fundamental aspects of the contemplative experience: [24]

- (1) The Lamp on the Abiding Basis (Tib. *gnas pa gzhi'i sgron ma*) [25]
- (2) The Lamp on the Fleishy Heart (Tib. *tsi ta sha'i sgron ma*)

<sup>7</sup> See *dPe don rtags gsum gyi skor* [On the Three Topics: Metaphor, Meaning, and Sign] 2008, vol. 1, 236–238; and Bru ston rgyal ba g.yung drung 2009, vol. 1, 108–110 (etext); 171 (e-text); 239–240. See also Kvaerne and Rikey (1966), xvii–xviii and 44–49.

<sup>8</sup> A translation of the root verses, along GDGG, can also be found in Hatchell (2014, 229–34). An alternative English rendering of the same material appears in Achard (2017).

- (3) The Lamp on the Smooth White Channel (Tib. *dkar 'jam rtsa'i sgron ma*)
- (4) The Lamp on the Far-Reaching Lasso Water (Tib. *rgyang zhags chu'i sgron ma*)
- (5) The Lamp on the Introduction to the Buddha Fields (Tib. *zhing khams ngo sprod kyi sgron ma*)
- (6) The Lamp on the Period Following the Moment of Death (Tib. *bar do dus kyi sgron ma*)

In this contribution, I will limit my focus to the first light, the Lamp of the Abiding Basis. [26]

### Translation of Sections from The Lamp on the Abiding Basis<sup>9</sup>

Homage to Samantabhadra [(Tib. *Kun tu bzang po*)], [27]  
 the All-Good, primordially awakened and [endowed with] self-awareness.  
 O Son of Noble Clan!  
 The Lamp of the Abiding Basis [(Tib. *gnas gzhi'i sgron ma*)]  
 Reveals the natural state of the essence of the basis [(Tib. *gzhi*)]  
 and the way *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* diverge.

The nature of the basis is taught to be understood in three aspects: [28]  
 the universal basis [(Tib. *kun gzhi*)],  
 awareness, and  
 intellect.

*The Universal Basis* [29]  
 The universal basis, the pure and perfect mind [(Skt. *bodhicitta*, Tib. *byang chub sems*)],  
 It is void clear light [(Tib. *'od gsal*)] uncontrived and uncontaminated.  
 Its vast primordial purity, the absolute body [(Skt. *dharmakāya*, Tib. *bon gyi sku*)]  
 Is immaculate, untouched by limitations.  
 Its spontaneous nature, the body of perfection [(Skt. *saṃbhogakāya*, Tib. *rd-zogs pa'i sku*)]  
 Is wholly perfect, universally perfect, totally perfect.  
 Its boundless and undetermined emanation body [(Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*, Tib. *sprul sku*)].  
 Arises in all kinds of unlimited magical displays.  
 It is not divided into distinct parts:  
 Like the sky, it pervades all phenomena.  
 It encompasses the entirety of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.  
 Its unique clear space enfolds all things.  
 In ethereal clarity, free from all distinctions.

9 All following translations are by the author. See GDD, 203: *Kun tu bzang po rang rig ye sangs rgyas phyag tshal lo/ rigs kyi bu/ gnas pa gzhi'i sgron ma zhes bya ba ni/ gzhi ngo bo nyid kyi gnas lugs dang/ 'khor 'das gnyis kyi gyes tshul bstan/ gzhi yi gnas lugs bstan pa ni/ kun gzhi rig pa blo dang gsum/ rnam pa gsum du shes par bya/*.

All arises from its unique vast, infinite space,  
 An empty space that is neither vast nor narrow.  
 Everything exists within its unique great dimension,  
 An equal dimension, neither high nor low.  
 It is known as the pure and perfect mind,  
 Described conventionally as threefold,  
 Yet ultimately indivisible,  
 Abiding as the single great iridescent sphere [(Tib. *thig le chen po gcig*)]<sup>10</sup>.  
 Samaya!<sup>11</sup>

### Awareness

[30]

The wisdom of awareness:  
 As the sun [(Tib. *nyi ma*)] arises from the vast expanse of the sky,  
 awareness arises from the vast expanse of the universal basis.  
 Clear [(Tib. *gsal ba*)] in its essence, empty in its nature,  
 This knowing awareness transcends all concepts.  
 Within it, the threefold radiant power [(Tib. *rstal*)] of vision unfolds:  
 sounds, lights [(Tib. 'od)], and rays [(Tib. *zer*)] arise.  
 They shine [(Tib. *shar*)] as lights [(Tib. 'od)] in the clear sky,  
 Self-arisen sounds [echo] from the empty space,  
 emanating [(Tib. 'phro)] as rays of non-dual awareness.  
 This power is known as the manifesting power of objects,  
 [Yet,] objects and awareness remain inseparable.  
 Undivided, they are one.  
 This is the wisdom of awareness,  
 The universal basis of the continuity of wakeful awareness,  
 The basis of the qualities of the mirror-like wisdom,  
 The consciousness of the Universal Basis of propensities  
 In its unmingled and total perfection,  
 The [wisdom] of awareness arises in the mental continuum of each being.

10 The Tibetan term *thig le*, corresponding to the Sanskrit *bindu* (lit. 'drop,' 'point,' or 'sphere'), is a key symbol in Dzogchen systems. In many contexts, it denotes the single, all-pervasive nature of ultimate reality; at the same time, it refers to visionary light phenomena perceived by advanced practitioners during esoteric practices. These often appear as iridescent spheres or luminous circles, manifesting either in the sky or in darkness, during dark retreat practices. For the significance of photism and visionary light phenomena in the Kālacakra and Dzogchen traditions, see Hatchell (2014, 104), and Orofino (2022). These visionary experiences are also depicted in Tibetan visual art: notably, in the murals of the Lukhang temple in Lhasa. See Baker and Laird (2011); Laird (2018); Luczanits (2011); Winkler (2002, 2016), as well as in contemporary Bön paintings, such as those illustrated in Guinness (2018). See also the article by Carmen Meinert in the present issue (Forthcoming).

11 GDD, 203–204: *kun gzhi byang chub sems nyid ni/ 'od gsal stong ba bcos slad med/ ka dag chen po bon gyi sku/ gang gi dri med mthas ma reg/rang bzhin lhun grub rdzogs pa'i sku/ kun rdzogs yong rdzogs thams cad rdzogs// nges med sprul sku lung ma bstan/ phyogs med cho 'phrul ci yang shar/ so sor tha dad ma yin te/ snang srid yongs la nam mkha' bzhin/ 'khor 'das yongs la spyi khyab bdal/ mkha' gsal gcig gis kun la khyab/ gsal ba'i mkha' la phyogs ris med/ klong chen gcig nas thams cad shar/ stong ba'i klong la yangs dog med/ dbyings chen gcig na thams cad gnas/ mnyam pa'i dbyings la mtho dman med/ de la byang chub sems zhes bya/ drang ba'i don du gsum du bshad/ nges pa'i don la dbye ru med/ thig le chen po gcig tu gnas/ sa ma ya//.*

The universal basis is undetermined and free from conceptions,  
 Its essence is primordially pure and immaculate,  
 It abides as the basis of both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*,  
 Of both defects and qualities alike.  
 Through the link between lights and awareness,  
 It becomes the basis of Buddha bodies and ordinary bodies.  
 Through the link between sounds and awareness,  
 It becomes the basis of the Buddha speech and ordinary speech.  
 Through the link between rays and awareness,  
 It becomes the basis of the Buddha mind and the ordinary mind.  
 Samaya!<sup>12</sup>

### *The Intellect*

[31]

As to the ordinary thinking mind,  
 Though the sovereign of wakeful awareness is free from conceptions,  
 It remains the basis from which the various thoughts and recollections arise.  
 Just as light rays [(Tib. 'od zer)] stream forth from the radiant power of the sun  
 [(Tib. *nyi ma'i rtsal*)],  
 The intellect emerges from the radiant power of awareness [(Tib. *rig pa'i rtsal*)].  
 This diversity of thoughts and recollections turns toward objects,  
 And the sixfold consciousness arises  
 As the manifesting power [seizing] the six sensory objects.  
 This is known as the 'thinking intellect.'  
 It is called 'recollection' for it remembers and perceives  
 And it is named 'mind' for its entanglement with objects.  
 Samaya!<sup>13</sup>

### *The Summary*

[32]

To sum it up, it is as follows:  
 What we call universal basis, awareness, and intellect,  
 Basis, essence, and magical displays,  
 Mother, son, and radiant power [(Tib. *rtsal*)],

12 GDD, 404: *rig pa'i ye shes bya ba ni/ nam mkha'i klong nas nyi ma bzhin/ kun gzhi klong nas rig pa shar/ ngo bo gsal la rang bzhin stong /rnam par shes rig rtog pa med/ de la snang ba'i rtsal gsum shar/ sgra dang 'od dang zer dang gsum / gsal ba'i mkha' la 'od du shar/ stong ba'i klong nas rang 'byung sgra/ gnyis med rig pa'i zer du 'phro/ de la snang ba'i yul zhes bya/ yul rig so sor ma yin te/ dbye yis mi phyed zung du 'brel/ de la rig pa'i ye shes zer/ shes rig rgyud kyi kun gzhi bya/ me long ye shes yon tan gzhi/ kun gzhi'i rnam shes bag chags gzhi/ ma 'dres yongs su rdzogs pa ru/ rig pa'i sems rgyud so sor shar / kun gzhi rtog med lung ma bstan/ ngo bo ka dag dri med kyang/ 'khor 'das skyon yon gnyis ka'i gzhi/ 'od dang rig pa 'brel ba las/ sku dang lus kyi gzhi ru gyur/ sgra dang rig pa 'brel ba las/ gsung dang ngag gi gzhi ru gyur/ zer dang rig pa 'brel ba las/ thugs dang yid kyi gzhi ru gyur/ sa ma ya/.*

13 GDD, 404: *blo yi sems zhes bya ba ni/ shes rig rgyal po rtog med kyang/ bsam dran sna tshogs 'char ba'i gzhi/ nyi ma'i rtsal las 'od zer bzhin/ rig pa'i rtsal las blo ru shar/ dran rig sna tshogs yul la spyod/ tshogs drug yul drug rtsal du shar/ de la bsam pa'i blo zhes bya/ dran zhing rig pas dran par bya/ yul la spyod pas sems shes bya/ sa ma ya/.*

As well as mind and the very essence of mind,  
 All abide in this manner, neither united nor separated,  
 In the continuum of each individual.  
 The universal basis is like the vast extent of the sky,  
 Awareness is like the quintessence of the sun [(Tib. *nyi ma'i snying po*)],  
 The intellect is like the light rays of the sun [(Tib. *nyi ma'i 'od zer*)],  
 Sounds appear as a self-arisen radiant power,  
 Lights shimmer as domes of rainbows [(Tib. *gzha' khyim*)] and solar brilliance  
 [(Tib. *nyi 'od*)],  
 And rays [spread as] a web of sun beams [(Tib. *nyi zer drwa ba*)].  
 Such is the natural state of the primordial essence.  
 Samaya!<sup>14</sup>

### Exegetical Reflections on the Lamp of the Abiding Basis

In interpreting the first chapter on the Lamp of the Abiding Basis, a compelling exegetical key emerges in the commentarial tradition. Specifically, the *The Ornament of Solar Light* (hereafter GGN in the footnotes) explains that the three elements of the first Lamp on the Abiding Basis: the universal basis, awareness, and intellect—correspond to the conceptual triad of metaphor, meaning, and sign. The text explicitly states: [33]

It is taught that the triad of *metaphor*, *meaning*, and *sign* is unified as a single iridescent sphere [(Tib. *thig le nyag gcig*)]. From the perspective of the provisional meaning, it is explained as threefold. This means that, according to the provisional meaning, intended for those who have not realised ultimate reality, the dimension of the universal basis is explained in terms of three. Sky [(Tib. *mkha'*)] is designated as the *metaphor*, the nature of mind [34]

[(Tib. *sems nyid*)] is set as the *sign* or marker, and the fundamental nature of reality [(Tib. *bon nyid kyi gnas lugs*)] is determined as the *meaning*. This is the teaching on *metaphor*, *meaning*, and *sign*. According to the definitive meaning, however, no such division exists. The triad abides as a single great iridescent sphere. Although it may be characterised as three within the cognitive framework of the disciples, ultimately, they cannot be separated into distinct, independent entities. They are, in essence, indivisible and remain unified in essence as one iridescent sphere.<sup>15</sup> [35]

This triadic schema is found in several Bön Dzogchen texts,<sup>16</sup> including the *rDzogs pa* [36]

14 GDD, 205: *mdo ru bsdus na 'di lta te/ kun gzhi rig pa blo dang gsum/ gzhi dang snying po cho 'phrul gsum/ ma dang bu brtsal dang gsum/ sems dang sems nyid ces kyang bya/ gang zag gcig gi rgyud thog na/ 'du 'bral med par gnas tshul ni/ kun gzhi nam mkha'i ngogs dang 'dra/ rig pa nyi ma'i snying po*

*chen po yang rtse klong chen gyi nges don* [The Definitive Meaning of the Supreme Vast Expanse of the Great Perfection] (Rossi 1999, 56–57), as well as in *Drenpa's Proclamation*,<sup>17</sup> as mentioned above:

By fixing your mind on the triad of sky [(Tib. *mkha'*)], expanse [(Tib. *klong*)], and dimension [(Tib. *dbyings*)] through the triad of metaphor, meaning, and sign, you will realise enlightenment within yourself. That is called the Eternal Bön.<sup>18</sup> [37]

The same cognitive triad is also attested in Nyingma literature, where it functions as a method to introduce disciples to their innate gnosis. A notable example occurs in the 34th chapter of *The All-Creating King*, the principal *tantra* of the Mind Series (Tib. *sems sde*) of the Dzogchen tradition within the Nyingma school (see Gentry 2017, 202, 369).<sup>19</sup> [38]

Dating to a period prior, or at the latest around, the eleventh century, *The All-Creating King* stands as one of the most foundational and richly stratified works of early Tibetan tantric literature. Its textual architecture reflects a complex editorial history shaped by wide-ranging intertextuality, drawing on a diverse textual corpus incorporating both complete texts that had previously circulated independently and reformulated passages adapted from diverse sources.<sup>20</sup> [39]

Among the most notable of these integrations is the *Rig pa'i khu byug* [The Cuckoo of Awareness] (a.k.a. *Rig sbyed snang ba'i rgyan* [The Realisation of the Ornament of Appearance] and *rDo rje tshig drug* [Six Vajra Words]), which forms the thirty-first chapter of the *tantra*. This is a particularly significant text, also preserved among the Dunhuang manuscripts (IOL Tib J 647), and can thus be dated to around the ninth century. Further intertextual connections link *The All-Creating King* to the *sBas pa'i rgum chung* [*The Small Hidden Grain*], attributed to the Indic master Buddhagupta (fl. ca. 8th c.)—likewise preserved as an independent text in the Dunhuang manuscript collection (IOL Tib J 594) as well as to several indigenous Tibetan treatises, some of which reveal thematic and structural overlaps with Bönpo sources. [40]

'dra/ blo ni nyi ma'i 'od zer 'dra/ sgra ni rang 'byung rtsal du shar/'od ni nyi 'od gzha' khyim 'dra/ zer ni nyi zer drwa ba'i tshul/ gdod ma gshis kyi gnas lugs yin/ sa ma ya.

15 See GGN, 270: *dpe don rtags gsum thig le nyag gcig tu gnas par bstan pa ni/ drang pa'i don du gsum du bshad/ ces pas kun gzhi'i dbyings la/ ma rtogs pa drang pa'i don la/ mkha' la dpe byas sems nyid rtags su bzhas nas/ don bon nyid kyi gnas lugs gtan la phab ste/ dpe don rtags gsum du bstan no/ nges pa'i don la dbye ru med /thig le chen po gcig tu gnas/ zhes pas gdul bya'i blo ngor gsum du mtshan na yang/ nges pa'i don la so so tha dad du dbye ru med de/ thig le nyag gcig tu gnas pa'o//*

16 For these and other references—including parallels in Nyingma literature—see Kværne and Martin (2023), 275, fn. 947.

17 For an English translation and in-depth study of the *bsGrags pa gling grags*, see Kværne and Martin (2023).

18 The Tibetan reads: *mkha' klong dbyings gsum la blo phugs stad nas dpe don rtags gsum gyis sangs rgyas rang la snyed pa gyung drung gis bon yin zer ro*. Cf. Kværne and Martin (2023, 274, 482). The Tibetan translation provided here is my own and does not follow the authors' version.

19 On the Mind Series and the *The All-Creating King* see Karmay (1985, 279); Karmay (1988, 207–8); Dargyay (1992); Germano (1994, 234–41); Namkhai Norbu and Clemente (1999).

20 Orna Almogi has observed that the *All-Creating King* serves as a paradigmatic example of the evolutionary formation of a principal scripture through ongoing textual assimilation. As she puts it: “The *Kun byed rgyal po* is thus a perfect prototypical case of an evolutionary process leading to the formation of a principal scripture with, along the way, relationships being formed with other scriptures of the same doxographical category” (see Almogi 2019, 15–16; cf. also Liljenberg 2018).

In addition to its textual complexity, the *The All-Creating King* plays a pivotal role [41] in articulating the direct recognition of primordial awareness (Tib. *rig pa*) and the immediate introduction to the nature of mind. As noted above, chapter 34 of *The All-Creating King* is particularly significant for presenting the triad of metaphor, meaning, and sign as an experiential method for leading disciples toward the realisation of their primordial nature. One representative passage reads:

If one wishes to definitively realise this reality: [42]  
 The metaphor is to be seen as akin to sky.  
 The meaning reveals the essence of reality as unborn.  
 The sign reflects the unbound nature of the mind's true essence.<sup>21</sup>

The presence of this metaphor in the earliest layers of Dzogchen literature suggests [43] a possible line of connection between 12th-century Bön literature and the Nyingma tradition, particularly with the earliest layers of Dzogchen texts.

## Conclusion: Metaphor, Meaning, and Sign—From Metaphor to Metaphysics

This brief contribution has explored how the conceptual triad of metaphor, meaning, [44] and sign, as articulated in Bön Dzogchen literature, may reflect broader ontological and epistemological frameworks—particularly those traceable in the earliest strata of Tibetan Dzogchen thought. Special attention has been given to the function of light-related imagery, which appears to mediate the practitioner's engagement with both contemplative experience and doctrinal formulation. While acknowledging the conceptual density and multivalence of the term light, its recurrence in key texts suggests a role that exceeds mere literary ornamentation. In this context, light appears not only as a symbolic motif but as a principle with ontological resonance—a dynamic that recalls Hans Blumenberg's analysis in his influential 1957 essay, "Light as a Metaphor for Truth" ([1957] 1993).

Blumenberg traces how light, initially a natural and self-evident phenomenon, be- [45] comes a complex metaphysical symbol in Western thought, especially within Gnostic, Neoplatonic, and Christian theological traditions. His notion of 'absolute metaphors'—figures of thought that resist complete conceptual reduction—proves especially relevant to the Bön context. There, light does not simply signify spiritual illumination but actively embodies both the ground of being and the path of realisation, functioning as a cognitive structure that bridges conceptual formulation and experiential insight.

The triad of metaphor, meaning, and sign appears as well in early Nyingma Dzogchen [46] literature, notably in the *All-Creating King*. In this text, sky serves as a metaphor for the open, boundless dimension of reality; its corresponding meaning is the unborn nature of reality, and its sign is the unimpeded nature of mind. This triadic structure

21 The Tibetan reads: *don 'di nges par rtogs 'dod na/ dpe ni rnam mkha' lta bur brtag/don ni chos nyid skye ba med/ rtags ni sems nyid 'gag pa med/* (cit. in Gentry 2017, 202).

mirrors that found in Bön texts such as *Drenpa's Proclamation*, suggesting a shared philosophical grammar within Dzogchen discourse. The components of the triad—space (Tib. *mkha'*), expanse (Tib. *klong*), and dimension (Tib. *dbyings*)—act as contemplative supports guiding the practitioner toward recognition of the mind's intrinsic awareness.

Revisiting Blumenberg's thesis in light of Bön Dzogchen thought thus brings into focus the way metaphors function as formative elements in systems of knowledge. In both Western philosophical and Tibetan contemplative traditions, metaphor is not a secondary linguistic embellishment, but a primary mode of conceptualisation. In the Bön framework, the practitioner's movement from conceptual metaphor to non-conceptual meaning, to the direct recognition of the sign—understood as the unbounded nature of mind (Tib. *sems nyid 'gag pa med*)—demonstrates the performative and generative function of metaphors in spiritual epistemology. [47]

In tracing the philosophical development of the metaphor of light, Blumenberg shows how symbolic imagery like light, the cave, and the eye transitioned from poetic figures to metaphysical concepts, deeply influencing Western notions of knowledge, truth, and being. His analysis underscores the structuring role of metaphor in philosophical thought, revealing how language itself mediates our access to reality. [48]

Placed in dialogue with Bön and Nyingma Dzogchen traditions, where light likewise signifies truth and awareness, this comparison highlights a shared concern with the limits of conceptual knowledge and the necessity of non-discursive modes of insight. In both traditions, the metaphor of light not only illustrates but structures epistemological frameworks, shaping how reality is approached, experienced, and articulated. Attending to such convergences provides a deeper understanding of how metaphors function not only within traditions, but also across them, as powerful agents in the formation of both philosophical and contemplative knowledge. [49]

## Abbreviations

BDRC Buddhist Digital Resource Center, <https://library.bdrc.io>.

GDD *rDzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud las sgron ma drug gi gdams pa*

GGN *rDzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud las sgron ma'i 'grel ba nyi 'od rgyan*

GDGG *rDzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud las sgron ma drug gi dgongs don 'grel ba*

IOL Tib J Tibetan Dunhuang Manuscripts preserved at the British Library in London (formerly in the India Office Library (IOL)).

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*rDzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud las sgron ma'i 'grel ba nyi 'od rgyan* (GGN) [The Ornament of Solar Light, Commentary to the [Six] from The Oral Transmission of the Great Perfection of Zhangzhung]. In *Gangs ti se bon gzhung rig mdzod dpe tshogs chen mo* [The Great Anthology of the Treasury of Knowledge of the Bön Tradition of Mount Kailash], vol. 24, [S.n.], 2009, 266–307. Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC), [purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW1KG14500\\_BCFBD0](http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW1KG14500_BCFBD0).

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