The rich history of the development of tantra in Tibet commenced with the transmission of Mahāyoga from India, but the first three centuries of the process of transmission and development, from the eighth to tenth centuries, remain shadowy at best, despite recent scholarly advances in the studies of Indian and Tibetan esoteric Buddhism. Based on this research, it appears that the Guhyagarbhatantra and other tantras belonging to the Māyājāla cycle were perhaps circulating in Tibet by the mid-eighth century, and the following decades brought an increasing number of commentaries on Mahāyoga texts in general, as well as ritual manuals designed to guide one in the progression of rites and practices.

Simultaneously with these tantric developments, of course, Tibetans were composing their own philosophical treatises on exoteric subjects within Mahāyāna from the eighth century onward. However, for the most part, these two streams of literature—the esoteric ritual literature and the exoteric philosophical literature—remained distinct throughout the eighth, and into the ninth, centuries. In fact, based on the texts found at Dunhuang, most later Mahāyoga authors of the ninth and tenth centuries continued to address the issue of ritual in practical terms and to avoid philosophical speculation. Indeed, this bifurcation appears to have been standard in India itself even longer than it prevailed in Tibet, with the Kālacratantra and the Ārya tradition of the Guhyasamājatantra serving as prominent exceptions.

The Rdo rje sems dpa’i zhus lan is one of a mere handful of Mahāyoga texts from Dunhuang to bring these two literary traditions into

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1 See, for example, DAVIDSON 2002; GERMANO 2002; DALTON 2004; and VAN SCHAIK 2004.

2 Unfortunately, the earliest clear evidence for dating the existence of the Māyājāla texts in Tibet is to be found in the Dunhuang documents which date from the tenth century.
dialogue, directly addressing the issues of wrathful, ritualized Mahāyoga praxis in epistemological and ontological terms. In so doing, the Zhus lan is also able to reconcile the apparent ideological contradiction between the themes of deliberately violent practice commonly associated with the Mahāyoga literature, and the themes of spontaneous, expansive awareness just beginning to appear in the philosophical literature, and is almost certainly one of the earliest Tibetan texts to do so. The text strikes a distinctive balance between the priorities of praxis and gnosis, and as S. van Schaik has demonstrated, it appears to represent a stage in tantra’s development between the directed design we see in the liturgical Mahāyoga material from Dunhuang and the more relaxed and open style of the philosophical discussions associated with the sems sde literature and the Rdzogs chen movement.

The catechistic literary form of the Zhus lan also exemplifies this balance. An interlocutor, concerned largely with ritual, meditation, and the immediate results of yogic practice, questions apparent contradictions and paradoxical assertions made within the tantric tradition, and is answered by the master, whose perspective frames and gives meaning to the rites and meditations, while ultimately asserting their emptiness. In fact, the text might be seen as an edifying conversation between the young Mahāyoga movement focused rather narrow-mindedly on the technical aspects of the practice, and a developing philosophical sophistication in the form of the master, who is able to illuminate for his young student the more subtle, profound teachings to be garnered through thoughtful enquiry into the nature of that practice.

Not a great deal is known about the Zhus lan’s author, identified in the colophons as Dpal dbyangs. He almost certainly lived during the ninth century, and was said to be a disciple of Vimalamitra and to have instructed the author of the Bsam gtan mig sgron, Gnubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes. The controversy regarding the identity of this figure with the second abbot of Bsam yas also named Dpal dbyangs, who presided over the Bsam yas debates, has loomed for centuries, and differing opinions continue to be published.

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3 Other such texts include IOL Tib J 454, IOL Tib J 508, and IOL Tib J 647.