Introductions to Tibetan Buddhism will usually state that it comprises four major schools: Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu and Gelug. But this simple structure belies the true complexity of the transmission of tantric Buddhism in Tibet. While the Sakya and Gelug are the closest to what we think of as ‘schools’ the Kagyu is actually an umbrella term for a series of major and minor tantric transmission lineages, and the Nyingma is even harder to define.

In the Tibetan language, *rnying ma* simply means ‘ancient’ or ‘old’. In the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, when Tibetan translators were travelling to India to find new tantric lineages, they began to call those who held lineages that went back to previous centuries ‘the old ones’: Nyingma. Over time, those who stuck with the earlier lineages began to use this name for their own traditions. But this was far from being a school, or even a coherent movement.

Jacob Dalton’s new book, *The Gathering of Intentions*, is based on his doctoral research on a single Buddhist tantra, an intriguing text that was said to have been translated not from Sanskrit, like most tantras, but from the Burushaski language. The genius of this book is that it shows how this tantra is the key to understanding how the Nyingma school eventually shaped itself into a coherent tradition.

Dalton traces the obscure origins of the *Gathering of Intentions* tantra (Tib. Dgongs pa ’dus pa’i mdo), finding it somewhere in between translation from a Burushaski original and composition in Tibetan. He shows its importance in the tenth century through the works of the scholar Nub Sangye Yeshe, who worked during Tibet’s ‘dark age’ after the end of the Tibetan empire and before the new translators appeared. He shows how the text presented an unusual nine-fold structure for the Buddhist path, culminating in the ‘inner yogas’ of *mahāyoga*, *anuyoga* and *atiyoga*.

Though the *Gathering of Intentions* itself was later classed as *anuyoga*, its importance for the Nyingma tradition was this nine-fold path, which became the way Nyingma practitioners conceptualised their texts and practices. As the other schools did not use this system, this became one of the most important points of self-definition for those who called themselves ‘Nyingma’. As Dalton shows, in the seventeenth century, the Nyingma became more institutional, as large monasteries were built for the first time, and a new ritual program was formed by the leaders of one of the major new monasteries, Mindroling. This was based on the structure set out by the *Gathering of Intentions*.

Taking his study right through to the modern era, Dalton shows how the *Gathering of Intentions*, along with Nub Sangye Yeshe’s commentary, was smuggled...
out of Tibet during the chaos of the mid-twentieth century. In an admirable and exciting exercise in contemporary history, Dalton recounts the many twists and turns by which the manuscript of the commentary finally found its way out of China and into India, where it was published in a new printed edition.

Finally, Dalton addresses the question of why his text, if so influential, is actually little read today, even in the Nyingma tradition. He makes a convincing case for the way the text came to structure the very idea of a ‘Nyingma school’ and in so doing, ceased to be necessary as a text in its own right: ‘Once this structure had been adopted as the dominant paradigm of the Nyingma school, the unwieldy Gathering of Intentions had little more to offer’ (p.131).

This insight is clearly important in any understanding of the gradual formation of a ‘Nyingma school’ and it also offers us the opportunity to reflect on how, in other cultures and contexts, texts might have a profound structural influence on a tradition, while themselves almost disappearing from view. While Dalton’s book is relatively short, it has a great deal to offer, in its combination of ancient history with contemporary ethnography, and the author’s reflections on the way rituals work in the definition and transmission of a religious lineage.