

The Logic of Liberation: Epistemology as a Path to the Realization of Mahāmudrā

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The present article is a contribution to the discussion on the place of epistemology in Tibetan Buddhism in relation to the doctrine of Mahāmudrā, drawing on a selection of Tibetan sources from the 16th century as well as Bhutanese sources from the 19th century.

While Buddhist epistemology may seem dry and cerebral, it plays a special role as a gateway to Mahāmudrā according to certain masters associated with the *gzhan stong* philosophy. For them, not only can direct valid cognition (*mngon sum tshad ma*) in general be linked to the non-conceptual states associated with Mahāmudrā meditation, but the basic epistemological definition of mind as luminous and cognizant (*gsal zhing rig pa*) is a precursor to the pointing-out instructions for recognizing the nature of mind. According to some interpretations, it is the direct valid cognition of apperception² (*rang rig mngon sum tshad ma*) which experiences this true nature and the direct yogic valid cognition (*rnal 'byor mngon sum tshad ma*) which realizes it.

1. How Can Logic Liberate?

The Tibetan term *tshad ma* (Skr. *pramāṇa*), in the sense of “science of valid cognition”, covers two main areas. The first area is “epistemology”, meaning the theory of knowledge, seeking to answer such questions as “what is knowledge?” and “how is it acquired?” The answer to the last question is, according to Dignāga, that we gain knowledge in two fundamentally different ways: Through non-conceptual cognition and through conceptual cognition. The first is called direct valid cognition (*mngon sum tshad ma*) and the second is called inferential valid cognition (*rjes dpag tshad ma*).

Conceptual cognition is considered valid only when it is derived from the arguments, syllogisms and the reasoning that fulfil specific criteria for validity. The science of the logical argument (Tib. *gtan tshigs kyi rig pa*), based on the *nyāya* type of logic, constitutes the second main area of *tshad ma*. The logical argument – practiced through debate – became an important part of the curriculum at Tibetan Buddhist scholastic institutions under the subject heading: *tshad ma*.

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² Also translated as reflexive awareness.

Although the science of the logical argument in general can be practiced as a mundane science, in the context of Buddhism it can also function as a means of liberation. In Buddhism invalid conceptions of reality are seen as the cause of suffering. The goal of the Buddhist path is the removal of suffering. Therefore, valid conceptual cognition based on reason is seen as an indispensable soteriological or liberating device. In other words, for Tibetan Buddhism in general, the ultimate purpose of *tshad ma* is the attainment of liberation.

However, the issue of the soteriological role of *tshad ma* has been contested, also in Tibet. The result, outcome or purpose of Buddhist epistemology has been viewed differently by different masters. Apparently Atiśa viewed *tshad ma* as irrelevant for meditating on the ultimate, while the 'Bri gung bka' brgyud master 'Jig rten sum mgon (1143–1217), in his *Vajra stanzas*, clearly states that the outcome of *tshad ma* is the display of *dharmatā*, emptiness. 'Jig rten sum mgon may be the earliest Tibetan master to emphasize the soteriological function of *tshad ma*.³

Furthermore, the various types of valid cognition were given different emphasis by the scholastic traditions according to their perceived soteriological efficacy. The *dga' ldan pa/ dge lugs pa* for example, took the soteriological function of correct conception in the form of inferential valid cognition (*rjes dpag tshad ma*) very much to heart, and consequently debate came to play a prominent role in their scholastic institutions.

However, it was the liberating role of non-conceptual perception or direct valid cognition that 'Jig rten sum mgon and others especially emphasized. Non-conceptual, non-mistaken perception or direct valid cognition has four subdivisions:

1. Sense direct valid cognition (*dbang po mngon sum tshad ma*)
2. Mental direct valid cognition (*yid kyī mngon sum tshad ma*)
3. Direct valid cognition of apperception (*rang rig mngon sum tshad ma*)
4. Direct yogic valid cognition (*rnal 'byor mngon sum tshad ma*).

While the first two take outer phenomena as their object in a non-conceptual manner, the third takes both the very act of directly perceiving as well as the very act of indirectly conceptualizing as its objects, depending on which act is present in the mind at a given time. The last subdivision refers to a breakthrough into non-duality, attainment of the first Bodhisattva level and entry onto the path of vision (*mtshong lam*).

Before presenting the soteriological function of *tshad ma* and its possible relevance to Mahāmudrā, I would like to introduce the Tibetan sources I have used as the basis for my presentation of the Tibetan interpretation of Dignāga's ascending scale of analysis.

³ See van der Kuijp 1987.

2. The Context of the Tibetan Sources

The two Tibetan texts quoted in section three of the present article, are the result of a collaboration between the seventh Karma pa Chos grags rgya mtsho (1454–1506) and Śākya mchog ldan (1428–1507), two masters representing what could be termed a *pramāṇa* based form of the *gzhan stong* tradition. We will take a brief look at the circumstances surrounding the composition of Śākya mchog ldan's *History of Pramāṇa*,⁴ his *History of Madhyama*⁵ as well as the Karma pa's *Ocean of Logic*.⁶ Although the two masters apparently met only three times in their lives, they seem to have shared a similar outlook. The Karma pa was the lineage holder of the Karma bka' brgyud school and one of the most powerful religious leaders in Tibet at the end of the 15th century. He emphasized scholarship and consequently established two important monastic colleges, one at Tshur phu and one at Chos 'khor lhun po. The highly respected scholar Śākya mchog ldan was a prolific writer of the Sa skya tradition, and had a strong connection to the practices upheld within the bKa' brgyud tradition. There has been some speculation as to who influenced whom, but it seems reasonable to assume that their relationship was one of mutual inspirations.

At their first meeting in 1484, at gNam rtse ldan in gTsang, the 56-year old Śākya mchog ldan was among the members of a large audience receiving teachings from the 30-year old Karma pa. In order to get a sense of the atmosphere at their meetings, I would like to quote some evocative and poetic descriptions of their meeting written by the Ninth rJe mkhan po of Bhutan, Śākya Rin chen (1709/10–1759), in his biography of Śākya mchog ldan⁷ where he describes their first contact as follows:

Seeing that the Sixth Buddha of the fortunate aeon, the Sovereign Lion's Roar, the wish fulfilling Bodhisattva, the manifestation of the liberating activity of the Buddha fields, beautified by a crown ornament of lapis lazuli light, the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva, the Victorious Sovereign Karma pa Chos grags rgya mtsho, was residing and teaching Dharma in the central place at gNam rtse ldan at this time,

And hearing clearly the melodious resounding of the bell of sweet Dharma, the torment of [Śākya mchog ldan's] longing was like someone covered in camphor longing to feel cool water. [Feeling like this, he] went to meet [the Karma pa]. With his expansive dharma vision [the Karma pa] saw that [Śākya

⁴ *Tshad ma'i mdo dang bstan bcos kyi shing rta'i srol rnams ji ltar byung ba'i tshul gnam bya ba nyin mor byed pa'i snang bas dpyod ldan mtha' dag bar byed pa* (hereafter abbreviated as *NMB*).

⁵ *dBu ma'i byung tshul nam par bshad pa'i gnam yid bzhin lhun po*.

⁶ *Tshad ma legs par bshad pa thams cad kyi chu bo yongs su 'du ba rigs pa'i gzhung lugs kyi rgya mtsho* (hereafter abbreviated as *RZGT*).

⁷ *Gang can gyi shing rta chen po dpal Śākya mchog ldan dri med legs pa'i blo gros kyi nam thar thub bstan gsal ba'i nyin byed* (hereafter abbreviated as *TBNB*).

mchog ldan] was a noble being, unlike anyone else, and had a seat of honour and privilege arranged for him.

For seven days, [the Karmapa] granted illuminating teachings, elaborating upon the Dharma. He clarified the 84,000 Dharma teachings and taught the great Madhyamaka syllogisms, based on an instruction manual by rJe Rol pa'i rdo rje, to the Paṇḍita Dharmarāja, together with his retinue of 500 Pitaka holders.⁸

At this time, they also heard from the ocean of sūtra and tantra the definitive meaning of the innermost wish fulfilling jewel, the Guru Yoga, pointing out the Trikāya, the instructions of co-emergent Mahāmudrā, the Six Doctrines of Nāropa and other vast instructions.⁹

Their next recorded meeting took place 18 years later, in 1502, at the specific request of the then 49-year old Karma pa. The message was received by the then 75-year old Śākya mchog ldan and was described by Śākya rin chen as follows:

At this time, the victorious sovereign Karma pa Chos grags rgya mtsho, the great knower of the three times, sent a formal request from the Dharmarāja Sumeru palace at Bya yul: “I am on my way towards Nyi ma in dBus gtsang. Come quickly to dBus for a discussion and conference for the benefit of the doctrine. Please bring the *dBu tshad chos 'byung* that you have composed.”

With a great feeling of sharing an undivided virtuous sphere of Bodhisattva intention, and with hearts as white as the moon, [Śākya mchog ldan] travelled with a supreme gathering of spiritual friends holding many volumes of pitaka, like ornaments, in their heart. Finally arriving at the Glorious Dharma Wheel, [i.e.,] Lhasa, he met the victorious lord Chos grags rgya mtsho. Staying for

⁸ *Dus skabs der bskal pa bzang po'i sangs rgyas drug pa rgyal ba seng ge'i nga ro bsam bzhin srid par byang chub kyi spyod pa spyad cing / sangs rgyas kyi zhing yongs su sbyong ba'i 'phrin las kyi snang ba vaidurya'i 'od zer 'phro ba'i cod pan gyis mdzes pa'i byang chub sems dpa' sems dpa' chen po rgyal dbang karma pa chos grags rgya mtsho gnam rtse ldan zhes bya ba'i bsti gnas su mdun gyis bltas pa la chos ston cing bzhugs so zhes snyan par grags pa'i chos kyi gand'i'i sgra dbyangs gsal por gsan pas / ji ltar gdung bas nyen pa la ga bur gyis [289] bgos pa'i chu bsil bas rig pa ltar gyur te mjal ba la phebs / rgya chen chos kyi spyan yangs pos skyes bu dam pa gzhan dang mi mnyam par gzigs pas / bzhugs gdan sogs 'jog che ba'i mthong bkur bsam gyis mi khyab par gnang / de'i tshe pañ chen chos kyi rgyal po 'khor sde snod 'dzin pa lnga brgya dang bcas pa rnams la bka' chos kyi 'brel ba gsung gi 'od zer gyi 'phro 'dus / chos chung brgyad khri bzhi stong gi glong [Sic!] thams cad gsal bar mdzad pa dbu ma'i gtan tshigs chen po'i gzhi'i khri / rje rol pa'i rdo rjes mdzad pa'i yig cha'i steng nas zhag bdun gyi ring stsal zhing (TBNB: 288.3–289.4).*

⁹ *dus gzhan dang gzhan du yang mdo rgyud rgya mtsho'i nges don yid bzhin gyi nor bu'i yang snying [290] bla ma'i rnal 'byor sku gsum ngo sprod / phyag rgya chen po lhan cig skyes sbyor gyi khri / na ro'i chos drug la sogs pa'i gdams pa rgya cher gsan no (TBNB: 289.5–290.1).*

several days, they discussed extensively general and particular points of the Buddha's doctrine.¹⁰

In this passage, we find reference to Śākya mchog ldan's *History of Pramāṇa* called *Appearance of the Sun* as well as his *History of Madhyamaka* called *The wishfulfilling Meru* mentioned previously, and they are both abbreviated as *dBu tshad chos 'byung*. The colophon of the first text states that the dominant condition for its composition was the request of *Dus gsum gyi sangs rgyas thams cad kyi 'phrin las dbang po rang 'byung kun mkhyen chos kyi rgyal po*, i.e., the Seventh Karma pa, and the colophon of the second text states:

Composed by Śākya mchog ldan dri med legs pa'i blo at gSer mdog can Dharma University of gYas ru in gTsang and offered to the lord of enlightened activities of all Victors of the three times (Seventh Karma pa), who embraces all with his compassionate gaze, sitting firmly on the dharma lion throne of the Dharma seat among the ocean-like gathering of disciples in the great temple of Rasa 'Phrul snang temple."¹¹

Thus, both texts bear testimony to the nature of the relationship between Śākya mchog ldan and the Karma pa.

The third meeting, which was to be their last, took place in Rin spungs soon after, in 1503. The historical account of this meeting is penned by dPa' bo gtsug lag phreng ba (1504–1564/6) in his famous historical work, the *Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston*:¹²

When the time approached for the visit of [the Seventh Karma pa] at the Rin spungs estate, as prophesised by Mar pa previously, Sa skyongs Don yod rdo rje (1462–1512) commanded that a great amount of grain, food and drink, like the wealth of Kubera be gathered.

¹⁰ *Dus skabs der bya yul chos rgyal lhun po'i pho brang nas / dus gsum mkhyen pa chen po rgyal dbang karma pa chos grags rgya mtshos bka' shog gnang ba la / nged nyi ma dbus gtsang gi phyogs la rta kha bsgyur yongs pa yin pas / bstan pa la phan pa'i gros 'dri 'dra snang ba la dbus phyogs su myur bar 'byon pa dang / dbu tshad kyi chos 'byung de rtsom la bskur mdzod gsung ba'i bka' lung phebs pas / byang chub sems dpa' phan tshun thugs nang zla ba ltar dkar zhing / dgongs pa'i dbyings mi phyed pa'i dges tshor chen pos / tshogs kyi mchog 'dus pa chen po'i dge 'dun dge ba'i bshes gnyen sde snod kyi glegs bam mang pos thugs kar brgyan pa dag dang thabs cig tu phebs lam du zhugs te mthar gyis chos 'khor dpal gyi lha sar phebs so / der rgyal dbang chos grags rgya mtsho dang mjal zhing / zhag shas kyi bar bzhugs nas rgyal ba'i bstan pa spyi dang bye brag gong spel kyi bka' bgros rgya cher mdzad. (TBNB: 397.2–398.2).*

¹¹ This text has been translated into English and published in Komarowski 2000.

¹² *Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston* (hereafter abbreviated as *KPGT*).

The assembly of sanghas from Byams chen and Chos lung headed by their abbots; 'Jam dbyang kun dga' chos bzang and others from rDzong dkar in 'Bras yul; Pan chen Śākya mchog ldan and others from gSer mdog; Kong ston dbang phyug grub pa and others, rTa nag thub bstan rnam rgyal's group and others, in short the [entire] lower La stod [gathered.¹³ Furthermore,] the sanghas from the smaller and bigger monasteries of upper Ngur mig of Rong headed by their own lamas, as well as a whole entourage of great benefactors [gathered]. Each of these groups complied, thinking “this is greatly appropriate” and so they gathered out of faith.

Between 20,000 and 30,000 were on their feet as a golden rosary welcoming [the Karma pa]. A great *thang ka*, as well as shrines were displayed. It was as if the gods were rivalling the human offerings and outshining them by arranging a canopy of rainbows in various shapes and by displaying a shower of flowers in the intermediate space.¹⁴

At this time all the scholars were [so] moved by faith that the hair in their pores stood on end and their obvious pride was pacified. [The Karma pa] satisfied them all with his generosity in Dharma and material goods. All the masters and disciples from each gathering listened to many Dharma commentaries, and they all attained faith and respect.

¹³ When this event is related in the *KRB* folio 339.2 (see note 17), it says that the great welcome organized by Sa skyong don rdor at Lhasa consisted of (representatives) from “ser 'bras dge gsum”. This could be understood as referring to Se ra, 'Bras spung and dGa' ldan and this is how it is translated in Karma Thinley: *The History of the Sixteen Karmapas of Tibet* p. 86 “He was greeted by monks from the Gelugpa monasteries of Drepung and Gaden.” But in the account quoted above “ser” refers to gSer ldog, and ” 'bras” to Sikkim, in particular rDzongs dkar.

¹⁴ *sngon rje mar pas lung bstan par grags pa'i gzhis ka rin spungs su phebs par nye bar na sa skyong don yod rdo rjes rnam sras kyi 'byor pa lta bu'i skya rags ches mang po dang / byams chen chos lung so so'i mkhan pos gtsos pa'i dge 'dun / 'jam dbyangs kun dga' chos bzang la sogs pa'i 'bras yul rdzong dkar ba / pañ chen shākya mchog ldan la sogs gser mdog can pa / kong stong dbang phyug grub pa sogs rta nag thub bstan rnam rgyal gyi tshogs pa sogs mdor na la stod man/ rong ngur mig yan gyi dgon che chung gi dge 'dun thams cad rang rang gi bla mas gtso byas te sbyin bdag chen pos ser sbreng la 'du dgos par bkas bcad cing so so nas kyang nges par gnas 'di lta bu ni ches 'os so zhes sems pas dad pas 'dus te khri phrag gnyis gsum du longs nges zer ba'i ser sbreng gi bsu ba dang gos sku chen mo gsham pa sogs byas tshe lha rnam kyang 'gran pa ltar nam mkha' 'ja' tshon gyi bla bre dbyibs sna tshogs pas bres shing me tog gi char gyis bar snang yog pas mi'i mchod pa zil gyis mnan tshe (*KPGT*: 1103.12–1104.2).*

In particular, among the senior scholars, the great Pandita Śākya mchog ldan, who was bright like the maṇḍala of the sun, was deeply inspired by [the Karma pa's] marvellous activity. Seeing that [Karma pa] had fully perfected the qualities of upholding the Mahāyāna, he attended him for the duration of his stay in gTsang.¹⁵

The sangha gathering relied upon and attended [the Karma pa] for many months, listening to many explanations and reading transmission of many sūtras and so on. [Śākya mchog ldan] listened to many profound and special Dharma teachings. When many realizations and a break-through occurred in his mind, he took [Karma pa] as his root lama and attended him up to dBus. At the time of departure, he took [the Karma pa's] foot on top of his head, shed many tears and prayed for a long time.¹⁶

This last passage indicates the impact of the relationship on Śākya mchog ldan. Further text relevant details from this last meeting were recorded in another biography of Śākya mchog ldan written by his student Kun dga' grol mchog (1507–1565/6) as follows:

[Śākya mchog ldan] went to Rin spungs at the invitation of the Omniscient Black Hat holder, the learned rGyal dbang chos grags rgya mtsho. He remained there for about a month, acting as judge at the debates between all the proponents of logic and scripture.

After the victorious lord's transmission of the text *Tshad ma rigs gzhung rgya mtsho* to the gathered diversified sangha he gave [Śākya mchog ldan] the command to correct it. However since he was fully occupied day and night, [he] did not have any opportunity to review it. At that time, since the learned Don yod was also present, [Śākya mchog ldan] gave him the scripture instructing him to identify if there were points mixed with other traditions; what were the foremost annotations, and what were the crucial points. After having done this, [Don yod] offered the text back to [Śākya mchog ldan].

After having looked at it briefly in the morning, for several days [Śākya mchog ldan] taught exclusively in accord with the *Rigs gzhung rgya mtsho* the whole time. Subsequently [Śākya mchog ldan] brought the texts that the

¹⁵ mkhas pa thams cad kyang mngon pa'i nga rgyal zhi ste dad pa'i spu long g.yos / thams cad la chos dang zang zing gi sbyin pas ngoms par mdzad cing chos sde chen po de rnams so so nas dpon slob thams cad kyis chos 'brel du ma gsan zhing thams cad kyang dad gus thob / khyad par phyis dus kyi mkhas pa rnams kyi nang na nyi ma'i dkyil 'khor ltar gsal ba paṅ ḍi ta chen po shākya mchog ldan ni ngo mtshar gyi mdzad pas thugs phrogs / theg chen gyi yongs 'dzin gyi mtshan nyid yongs su rdzogs par gzigs pas gtsang la bzhugs ring phal cher zhab phyi mdzad (KPGT: 1104.2–9).

¹⁶ dge 'dun gyi tshogs pa rnams kyang zla ba du mar zhabs phyir bsten te mdo mang la sogs pa'i lung dang bshad pa du ma gsan / nyid kyis thun mong ma yin pa'i zab chos du ma gsan te thugs dam gyi spangs rtogs du ma 'khrungs pas rtsa ba'i bla ma yang rab tu 'dzin / dbus kyi sa bar du zhabs skyel mdzad de thegs kar zhabs spyi bor blangs te spyen chab mang du bsil zhing smon lam yun ring du mdzad/ (KPGT: 1104.9–12).

Karmapa had previously encouraged him to write on the *History of Madhyamaka and Pramāṇa* into the middle of the gathering and questions were asked by each and everyone. More than a month was spent entirely on profoundly explaining the issues raised [in those questions].¹⁷

This passage informs us that Śākya mchog ldan was asked to proofread the Karma pa's text, and furthermore that he taught it to the gathering immediately afterwards. His own two texts were also used as basis for discussion. The final quotation referring to the event is from the Seventh Karma pa's biography:¹⁸

At gTsang [the Karma pa] was welcomed by many tens of thousands of sangha members from a wide variety of dharma divisions. In particular because of his strong devotion, Panchen Śākya mchog ldan attended to him throughout. Profound teachings based on the *Rigs gzhung rgya mtsho* were given for about a month. Asserting that their mind stream was one, their thrones were made of equal height.¹⁹

The quoted passages give us a sense of the forum in which the texts were presented and discussed, and we see that their works were not finalized in isolation but rather in a scholarly forum. They were among the last texts of Śākya mchog ldan's productive life. Although Śākya mchog ldan was the senior scholar, because of his great devotion, he served as an attendant to the Karma pa. He passed away four years later, leaving behind an impressive literary heritage that has only recently become widely available.²⁰

¹⁷ *rin spungs su rje thams cad mkhyen pa zhwa nag cod pan 'dzin pa rgyal dbang chos grags rgya mtsho ba'i spyen snar phebs / zla gcig tsam gdan chags zhing / phyogs ris kyi 'dus pa'i dge 'dun lung rigs smra ba ma lus pa'i rtsod pa'i dpang por bzhugs shing / rgyal ba'i dbang po nyis kyis mdzad pa'i tsad ma'i rigs gzhung rgya mtsho'i dpe stsal nas dag byed mdzod ces bka' bsgo ba gnang bas / nyin mtshan du thugs g.yengs ches pas gzigs skabs ma byung bar de dus phyags phyir mkhas pa don yod pa yang bzhugs pas / phyag dpe stsal nas gang gzhan lugs 'dres pa'am khyad thon gyi zur cha gang 'dug la zhog gzer thob shog / ces bka' gnang ba ltar mdzad nas phul bas / zhogs pa'i yud tsam gzigs pas zhag 'ga'i bar du rigs gzhung rgya mtsho las brtsams pa'i bshad pa kho nas dus 'da' bar mdzad rjes / snar rgyal dbang karma pa'i nyid kyis bkas bskul ba'i dbu tshad kyi chos 'byung rnams phyag tu bzhes nas 'dus pa'i dbus der re re nas dri mal gnang ba la / 'phros pa'i zab bshad 'ba' zhig pas zla ba tsam gyi yun 'da' bar mdzad (ZMB: 206.2–6).*

¹⁸ *Chos rje Karma pa sku 'phreng rim byon gyi nam thar mdor bsodus dpag bsam khri shing* (hereafter abbreviated as *KRB*) pp. 295.4–352.5.

¹⁹ *gtsang du gdan drangs chos sde ris med kyi dge 'dun khri phrag du mas bsus / lhag par paṅ chen shākya mchog shin tu dad nas zhabs spyi bor blangs / rigs gzhung rgya mtsho las 'phros pa'i zab bshad zla ba tsam gnang / thugs rgyud gcig pa'i zhal ba zhes dang bzhugs khri mnyam par mdzad / (KRB: 340.1–3).*

²⁰ See Burchardi 2008 for further details on the transmission of the texts. See Komarovski 2007 for a full scale study of Śākya mchog ldan.

3. Dignāga's Ascending Scale of Analysis

In the following I would like to illustrate how ascending levels of analysis of the process of perception described in the source texts of the Indian Buddhist logicians Dignāga (480–540) and Dharmakīrti (seventh century), are quoted by the Seventh Karma pa and elaborated upon by Śākya mchog ldan in their texts mentioned above. They both took a stance similar to 'Jig rten sum mgon and emphasized the liberating function of direct valid cognition in the form of *rang rig* and *rnal 'byor mngon sum tshad ma*. Their work represents a commentarial tradition that elaborated upon what they considered the ultimate intention of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti.

What distinguished Dignāga and Dharmakīrti from other Indian philosophers and logicians was that they maintained an essential identity between valid cognition and its result. Although the act of cognition was described as involving subject, object and a result, they concluded that, in fact the subject, object and result were nothing but consciousness itself. The ascending scale presentation of *pramāṇa-phala* is one of the most difficult points in Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's thought as Georges Dreyfus and Christian Lindtner have pointed out previously.²¹ According to them, Dharmakīrti's elaboration on the presentation of *pramāṇa-phala* is the clearest expression of his particular *Yogācāra* strategy.

3.1 The Level of No-analysis

The first level describing the result of direct valid cognition is classified by the Karma pa as the level of no-analysis that is in accordance with worldly convention (Tib.: *jig rten gyi grags pa dang mthun par ma b?rtags ma dpyad pa'i tshad 'bras*). At this level, the *Sautrāntika* assertion that the outcome of cognition is the cognition of an object (*don rtogs*) is emphasized. From this point of view, the result or purpose of an act of cognition is to come to know things. This function of valid cognition fulfils the ordinary aims of functioning in the world.

But the validity of this common sense approach is challenged by Dignāga himself (in his *Kārikā* 8cd²² and the *Vṛtti* on this), cited by the Karma pa as follows:

Here, there is no outcome other than *pramāṇa*, as the realists have it.
Instead the consciousness itself becomes a result by generating the aspect of the object.

²¹ Dreyfus, Georges & Christian Lindtner 1989.

²² Hattori 1968.

This is then labelled “*pramāṇa*” conceptualized as something involving differentiating activity.

[In fact] there is no [such] action.²³

In other words, what Dignāga is pointing out is that the knowledge of “outer objects” is not the actual result, but instead the “knowledge episode” itself as a mental event is the actual result. What is really happening is that one part of the mind perceives another part of the mind. It is simply mind knowing itself. It involves no interaction between an inner subject and an outer object.

3.2 The Level of Slight Analysis

This brings us to the second level classified by the Karma pa as the level of slight analysis (*rigs pas cung zad dpyad pa'i tshad 'bras*). On this level it is the *Vijñānavāda* assertion that the outcome of cognition is apperception (Skr.: *sva-samvedana*), that is emphasized. From this point of view, the result of an act of cognition is apperception (*rang rig*). Focusing on this function of valid cognition highlights the soteriological aim of transcending the world.

The two levels are not in opposition to one another but represent two facets of the action of cognition. The Karma pa says, following Dignāga [*Vṛtti* on *Kārikā* 9 a]:

In addition to the cognition of an object as a result to the non-analytical mind, Apperception can also be established as the outcome, because consciousness can generate two – the appearance of itself and the appearance of an object.

The cognition of the appearance of itself is logically [asserted] as the outcome of *pramāṇa* in the context of slight analysis.²⁴

In other words, we can come to “know” an aspect of mind through the process of “knowing” things. One of the previous *mkhan pos* at Karma Shri Nalanda Institute at Rumtek monastery in Sikkim, the respected mKhan po Tshul khri ms rgya mtsho rin po che has explained “we are only aware of our awareness when we are aware, that we are aware of something.”²⁵

²³ *'di la phyi rol pa rnams kyi bzhin du tshad ma las 'bras bu don gzhan du gyur pa ni med kyi/ 'bras bur gyur pa'i shes pa de nyid yul gyi rnam pa can du skyes pa dang / bya ba dang bcas par rtogs pa de nye bar blangs nas tshad ma nyid du 'dogs pa ste/ bya ba'ang ma yin no* [Read: *bya ba med pa yang yin no*. See Hattori p.100 n.1.58 & 1.59.] *RZGT*, Vol. 2: 282.21–283.2.

²⁴ *Yang na rang rig pa 'bras bur grub pa yin te / 'di ltar shes pa ni rang gi snang ba dang yul gyi snang ba gnyis par skyes pa las gang shes pa rang gi snang ba rig pa de ni cung zad rigs pas dpyod pa'i skabs 'dir tshad ma'i 'bras bur rigs pa'i phyir ro.* *RZGT*, Vol. 2: 310.7–9.

²⁵ Oral communication. 1992.

It is important to remember that the theory of apperception – that mind can know itself in the process of knowing objects – rests on the theory of aspects (Skr.: *ākāra*, Tib.: *rnam pa*). According to the *Sautrāntikas*, mind has no direct access to outer objects but must perceive them through a mental image. The *Sautrāntikas* and the *Vijñānavādins* both assert the reality of the mental aspect, but for two different reasons: The *Sautrāntikas* assert that aspects are real because they consider the objects they reflect to be real. So the aspect derives its reality from its content, the form of the perceived object. The so called Real Aspectarians (Skr.: *satyākāra*, Tib.: *rnam bden pa*) *Vijñānavādins* assert that aspects are real because they consider consciousness to be real. So the aspect derives its reality from the mental substance taking the form of the object.

3.3 The Level of Thorough Analysis

A third level of the result of valid cognition is described by the Seventh Karma pa as the level of thorough analysis of the true nature (Tib.: *shin tu gnas tshul la zhugs pa'i tshad 'bras*). Here the mental aspects, in the form of the object aspect and the subjective aspect are both viewed as false. In this the so called false aspectarians (Skr.: *alīkākāra*, Tib.: *rnam rdzun pa*) view of the *Yogācārins*, the aspects are viewed as deluded constructs superimposed on the luminous nature of consciousness. The aspects are not real because neither the reflected object nor its mental reflection is real.

Śākya mchog Idan says in his *History of Pramāṇa, Appearance of the Sun*:²⁶

In this tradition it is (therefore) impossible to directly perceive objects (*don rig pa*).

Here, that, which is to be actually cognized (*rig bya*) by Yogic perception, is the actual awareness itself (*shes pa rang mtshan nyid*).²⁷

And further:

In this tradition, the aspect of the cognition that takes on the appearance of the object (*don du snang ba'i rnam rig*) is proven to have no true existence.

This is taught in the *Pramāṇavārtikka* using the argument of being neither one nor many.

²⁶ See note 2.

²⁷ *De bas na lugs 'dir don rig pa'i mngon sum mi srid do/ 'dir rnal 'byor mngon sum gyi dngos kyi rig bya yang shes pa rang mtshan nyid yin* (NMB: 22.7–23.1).

Furthermore, by the reason of the non-existence of apprehended, the apprehender is proven to be non-existent.²⁸

By way of conclusion, he states:

Therefore, this particular pristine awareness,
that is empty of the two: apprehended and apprehending
is the true nature in the ultimate truth.
Its actual name is the pristine awareness of Dharmadhātu.²⁹

Apparently the epistemological theories of aspects describing the process of perception are here superseded by the Madhyamaka deconstruction of the reality of the mental aspects. However, the true nature of the mind which constitutes the underlying substratum, in which the process of perception does take place on a relative level, is not negated or described as a non-implicative negation. Instead, both the Karma pa and Śākya mchog ldan maintain that pristine awareness, empty of the aspect of apprehended and apprehending, exists. Thereby Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's emphasis on the primacy of mental aspect is retained but on a higher level. Śākya mchog ldan continues:

Here in our Madhyamaka
there is a phenomena that is 'existent' (*yod pa zhes bya ba'i chos*):
It is solely the pristine awareness of Dharmadhātu.³⁰

And further:

This [true nature] is experienced approximately (*rjes mthun pa*)
by the direct apperception (*rang rig mngon sum*) on the Path of Junction (*sbyor lam*)
and it is genuinely (*mtshan nyid pa*) actualized from the Path of Vision (*mthong lam*) onwards.

²⁸ *Lugs 'di la ni don du snang ba'i nam rig gam / gzung ba'i nam pa khyad gzhir bzung nas bden med du bsgrub pa'i rigs pa la / rnam 'grel mdzad pas gcig dang du bral gyi rigs pa yang gsungs la / gzhung rgyas pa las ni gzung ba med pa'i rtags kyis 'dzin pa mi 'grub par gsungs so / (NMB: 23.2–23.3).*

²⁹ *De lta na gnas lugs don dam pa'i bden par grub pa ni gong du bshad pa'i gzung ba dang 'dzin pa gnyis kyis stong pas khyad par du byas pa'i ye shes te / dngos ming ni chos kyi dbyings kyi ye shes so (NMB: 23.5–6).*

³⁰ *rang lugs kyi dbu ma'i skabs 'di ni yod pa zhes bya ba'i chos ni / chos kyi dbyings kyi ye shes gcig bu ste (NMB: 24.2).*

Since it has the capacity of overcoming the two veils and their latent tendencies, it represents the ultimate view arising from the treatises of the Great Master Father and Son.³¹

4. Parallels to Stages of Mahāmudrā Meditation

The following section investigates the possible relationship between the ascending scales of analysis of the result of valid cognition shown above and the stages of Mahāmudrā meditation. The first question we may ask is what kind of Mahāmudrā is being referred to here?

sGam po pa (1079–1153) was the first in the Karma bka' brgyud tradition to identify different paths to Mahāmudrā: Inference as a path (*rjes dpag lam du byed pa*), blessing as a path (*byin rlabs kyi lam*) and direct experience as a path (*mngon sum lam du byed pa*).³² Of these three, blessing as a path is probably the most well known and the most generally accepted. It involves transformation of one's perception through tantric techniques and empowerment.

sGam po pa's introduction of the other types of Mahāmudrā was questioned by various masters, notably Sa skya Paṇḍita (1182–1251).³³ Since inference and direct experience did not require empowerments and tantric techniques as methods (*thabs lam*), but were said to be liberating in and of themselves (*grol lam*), they were not restricted but became more accessible. This could be viewed as a problem, as this procedure could possibly dilute the tradition. However, there is evidence of a non-tantric transmission of Mahāmudrā in the Indian tradition of Maitrīpa, as shown by Mathes,³⁴ which clearly illustrates that such a tradition was not a later Tibetan invention.

More than 700 years later, 'Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899), following sGam po pa, elaborated on the three types of Mahāmudrā, calling them: Mahāmudrā of the Mantra tradition (*sngags lugs*), Mahāmudrā of the Sūtra tradition (*mdo lugs*) and Mahāmudrā of the Essence tradition (*snying po'i lugs*). Although the details of the exact relationship between sGam po pa's and Kong sprul's classifications of Mahāmudrā is part of a larger discussion, for our purpose here, Kong sprul's Mahāmudrā of the Mantra tradition would correspond to sGam po pa's path of blessing that was accepted by all. The latter two could be said to correspond to sGam po pa's path of inference and path of direct experience respectively. They could both be said to be based on *pramāṇa* or epistemology i.e., valid cognition as a path. Inference as a path utilizes the

³¹ *De nyams su mnyongs ba'i rang rig pa'i mngon sum rjes mthun pa sbyor ba'i lam dang / mtshan nyid pa mthong ba'i lam nas mngon du gyur pa des ni sgrib gnyis bag chags dang bcas pa 'joms nus pas na / bdag nyid chen po yab sras kyi gzung las 'byung ba'i lta ba mihar thug go (NMB: 23.5–7).*

³² For elaborations on this see sGam po pa 556.4–557.3, Mathes 201–203.

³³ See Jackson 1994.

³⁴ See Mathes 207–208.

epistemological category of inferential valid cognition (*rje dpag tshad ma*) in accordance with the Pāramitāyāna, and is a path of reason based on logical arguments that remove the misconceptions which prevent higher realization.

Kong sprul's Mahāmudrā of the Essence tradition then corresponds to sGam po pa's direct experience as a path. This type of Mahāmudrā is considered by Kong sprul to be more profound than the other types. The experience is described by Kong sprul as taking place when a realized master is said "to have awakened ordinary mind in the centre of one's being whereby realisation and liberation occur simultaneously without relying on effort through training with elaborate methods."³⁵ It happens in the context of receiving the blessing of the vajra pristine awareness empowerment³⁶. It is this direct experience that is relevant to our discussion since it is experienced through the epistemological category of direct valid cognition (*mngon sum tshad ma*), and its ascendancy is paralleled in the description of the three levels shown above.

On the path to the realization of Mahāmudrā or the nature of the mind, it is the ability of mind to know itself, rather than the mind's ability to know all kinds of other things that is the main priority. Therefore, the level of no-analysis is not relevant. However, I would like to show how the next levels of the ascending scale emphasising the mind's ability to know itself, closely parallel the pointing-out instructions used by the Ninth Karma pa dBang phyug rdo rje (1556–1603) in his Mahāmudrā manual the *Nges don rgya mtsho*.³⁷

There are four inter-related pointing out instructions which constitute a progression of meditation:

1. Recognize appearances to be mind (*snang ba sems su ngo 'phrod*).
2. Recognize mind to be empty (*sems stong par ngo 'phrod*).
3. Recognize emptiness to be spontaneously present (*stong pa lhun grub tu ngo 'phrod*).
4. Recognize spontaneous presence to be self-liberating (*lhun grub rang grol du ngo 'phrod*).

4.1 Recognize Appearances to be Mind

Here the student is encouraged to view external objects as being nothing but the self-radiance of the mind. This can be done through inference that deconstructs the misconceptions of the true reality of outer objects. But, in the context of meditation, it is often the non-conceptual sense direct valid cognition that is

³⁵ *Tha mal shes pa snying dbus su sad nas rtogs grol dus mnyam du 'gyur bas spros bcas kyi thabs dang sbyangs pa'i rtsol ba la ma ltos pa* (Kong sprul 1982, 2: 389).

³⁶ *rDo rje ye shes kyi dbang gi byin rlabs* (*Ibid.*).

³⁷ *Lhan cig skyes sbyor gyi zab khrid nges don rgya mtsho'i snying po phrin las 'od 'phrod*.

employed to determine the mental nature of outer objects. This leads to de-emphasizing those objects.

By progressing past the first level to the second level “one gains phenomenal access to the reflexive awareness that is thought to be invariant in cognition.”³⁸ In the context of meditation this leads to emphasizing subjectivity. In other words, one starts to focus inward on the mental aspect that assumed the likeness of an object instead of focussing outward at the supposedly outer object, because outer objects have been discarded as irrelevant for the purpose of refining the meditation that aims at realizing the nature of the mind. This implies a shift from the focus on the reflected image in consciousness, to the consciousness reflecting it. This first instruction parallels the shift from the realist *Sautrāntika* view to the *Vijñānavāda* view, from no analysis to slight analysis.

4.2 Recognize Mind to be Empty

This and the following two instructions correspond to the last level of thorough analysis and elaborate on the meditative experience on this level.

To counteract the possibility of the student shifting the tendency of reifying from (the coarser) outer objects to the mental aspects of experiences and activities involved in the process of perception, their empty nature is pointed out. The student is now encouraged to move beyond both the objective and subjective aspects of experiences generally conceived to be involved in perception. This stage reduces the emphasis on subjectivity itself, so both object and subject are de-emphasized. The Ninth Karma pa quotes in this context Nāropa’s *lTa ba mdor bsdus*:

Reflexive awareness, free from elaborations,
Appears yet is empty; it is empty yet it appears.
The inseparability of appearances and emptiness
Is like the moon [reflected] in water.
In this way, non-duality will be determined.³⁹

4.3 Recognize Emptiness to be Spontaneously Present

The relative and empty nature of the activities of mind is realized and both the subjective and the objective mental aspects are considered to be fleeting and unreal. However, since their relative appearance cannot take place in a vacuum, they are considered to occur in the (actual true) nature of mind. This true nature is neither absence nor total vacuity, but may actually be experienced. Therefore

³⁸ This phrase is borrowed from Antoine Lutz, John Dunne, and Richard J. Davidson, 2007.

³⁹ *Rang rig spros bral de nyid ni/ snang zhing stong la stong zhing snang/ de phyir snang stong dbyer med de / dper na chu yi zla ba bzhin / de ltar gnyis med gtan la dbab* (Ninth Karma pa dbang phyugs rdo rje 16th cent.: 100 B 1–2.; Callahan 2001: 169).

the “spontaneous presence” refers to this experience of the nature of mind, which is the ever-present background for the unceasing relative appearances of aspects of perception.

4.4 Recognize Spontaneous Presence to be Self Liberating

When the spontaneous presence of the nature of the mind is experienced, there is no action, instead this experience liberates in itself without any effort. It is the ultimate self-liberation of Mahāmudrā and the actualization of primordial awareness. This brings back echoes of Dignāga’s verse describing the act of perception, ending with the words “there is no action”. Thus it appears that the pinnacle of Mahāmudrā is in full concordance with this statement of the logician.

5. Concluding Remarks

According to the Seventh Karma pa and Śākya mchog ldan, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti’s presentation of the result of *tshad ma* constitutes a crucial historical source documenting why the realization of the nature of the mind is possible through soteriological systems such as *Mahāmudrā*. While *Mahāmudrā* instructions may provide the “how to” for realizing the nature of mind, the *tshad ma* descriptions of the inner workings of the mind, shows the reasons for “why” it is actually liberating to follow such instructions.

The constant elements of basic clarity and awareness (*gsal zhing rig pa*) are present throughout the path: at the beginning of the path; with the experience of these through apperception (*rang rig*) on the path and culminating with their actualization through yogic direct valid cognition (*rnal 'byor mngon sum tshad ma*) as the fruition of the path.

In fact, there have been various interpretations of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti in India and Tibet through the ages, but a comparison of these is beyond the reach of the present reflections. Suffice it to say that certain of the Realist interpretations of their thoughts have often confined their system to a propedeutic level which then had to be superseded.

However, the false aspectarian interpretation of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, as exemplified by the Seventh Karma pa and Śākya mchog ldan, purport to bring out Dignāga’s and Dharmakīrti’s true intention. Furthermore, it constitutes a full soteriological path, based on reason and the basic definitions of mind at the beginning up to the experienced realisation of this mind at the end, without stumbling upon the inconsistencies that the realist interpretations run into.

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