

PREFACE

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The five papers published in this volume were originally presented in a panel entitled *The Bsam yas Debate: Challenges and Responses* which was convened at the XVIIth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies in Vienna, August, 2014. The panel provided a forum for exploring traditional and contemporary responses to the influential Sino-Indian debate that was hosted by the Tibetan emperor Khri Srong lde btsan (Trisong Detsen) at Tibet's first monastery, Bsam yas, towards the end of the 8th century in order to decide the future of Buddhism in his country. While many historical details of the debate remain obscure, it is now widely accepted that a debate did occur, most likely as a series of encounters spanning about a year, and that it was organized according to standard Indian Buddhist principles of formal debate that were well-known to Tibetans since early in the 8th century, with the emperor presiding in the role of the arbiter or “witness” (Tib. *dpang po*, Skt. *sākṣin*). At issue was whether enlightenment is realized gradually through analytical meditation, as argued by the Indian participant Kamalaśīla, or all at once through contemplating the nature of mind, as proposed by his Chinese Chan (Zen) counterpart Heshang Moheyan. The account of the debate preserved in Tibetan chronicles and in the cultural memory of Tibetans has Kamalaśīla roundly defeating his opponent, thus securing Indian Buddhism as the official state religion and sanctioning the banishment of Chinese Chan practitioners and their suddenist teachings from Tibet. The reality must have been otherwise since Sino-Tibetan Chan communities are known to have existed in Tibet well into the tenth century CE. At any rate, the standard debate narrative soon assumed the status of a comprehensive founding myth (Bretfeld 2004: 15) within the Tibetan cultural memory, one that has since been used, in various rhetorical contexts, both to valorize a standard Indian Buddhist scholastic model of reason-guided gradualism and to ostracize as “non-Buddhist”

(*chos min*) any non-gradualist elements – especially among Mahāmudrā and Rdzogs chen traditions – that were thought to advocate a Chinese Heshang view (*hwa shang gyi lta ba*) and style of meditation.

Although a growing body of academic research has been devoted to clarifying various historical and doctrinal aspects of the debate,¹ beginning with the pioneering researches of Paul Demiéville (1951) and Giuseppe Tucci (1958), comparatively little attention has been given to the long and vital history of critical responses to the debate advanced by Buddhist scholars. A case in point is the largely unexplored polemical literature of the Tibetan Rnying ma and Bka' brgyud traditions, which steadily increased in volume during the second promulgation (*phyi dar*) period in the face of unrelenting attempts, starting with Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182–1251), to invalidate their main systems of exegesis (*bshad lugs*) and practice (*sgrub lugs*). After Sa skya Paṇḍita, it had become standard practice amongst his advocates to identify the rival traditions, both historically and typologically, with the type of anti-nomian and anti-intellectual views and practices ascribed to the Chinese heretic Heshang Moheyān.

Among the defendants, some of the most cogent efforts to clarify and reconcile the rival debate positions were advanced during Tibet's post-classical era (15th and 16th centuries)² following the overthrow of the Sa skya hegemony by the founder of the Phag mo gru dynasty, Ta'i Situ Byang chub rgyal mtshan (1302–1364), in 1354. This was a period when several of the Bka' brgyud sects for the first time enjoyed sufficient institutional backing, religious authority, and intellectual freedom to begin replying to the criticisms of Sa skya Paṇḍita and his Sa skya and Dge lugs advocates. If one considers the long list of scholars who critically replied to Sa Paṇ's Mahāmudrā criticisms by means of the standard methods of argumentation based on scripture (*lung*) and reasoning (*rigs*), one cannot fail to be struck by the fact that all belonged to the post-classical

¹ Important in this regard are contributions by David Seyfort Ruegg, in particular 1989a and 1989b.

² I here follow the periodization suggested by Leonard van der Kuijp who coins the term “post-classical” to refer to a period of Tibetan epistemology beginning in the 15th century “characterized by a reappraisal of Pre-Classical [late 10th to late 12th centuries] *tshad ma*, by critiques of Sa-paṇ's work, and by its defense.” Cf. van der Kuijp 1989: 6.

period or later. The list of respondents includes such luminaries as 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal (1392–1481), the Fourth Zhwa dmar Chos grags ye shes (1453–1524), Karma phrin las Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1456–1539), Dwags ram pa Chos rgyal bstan pa (1449–1524), Shākya mchog ldan (1423–1507), the Eighth Karma pa Mi bskyod rdo rje (1507–1554), Dwags po Bkra shis rnam rgyal (1511–1587), the Fourth 'Brug chen Padma dkar po (1527–1592), the 'Bri gung Zhabs drung Chos kyi grags pa (1595–1661), 'Brug pa mkhas dbang Sangs rgyas rdo rje (1569–1645), Ngag dbang 'phrin las (17th century), and Rtse le Sna tshogs rang grol (b. 1608).³ The divisively sectarian and heatedly polemical climate of the time ensured that their responses did not go unchallenged for long; in due course the critical responses of Shākya mchog ldan, Mi bskyod rdo rje, and Padma dkar po in their turn provoked fierce rebuttals from defenders of Sa skya pa and Dge lugs pa doctrine.⁴ Such interactions must be seen as part of a broader post-classical trend toward the consolidation and protection of representative views and practices of the major Tibetan schools. These were typically legitimized by claims of fidelity to Indian Buddhist sources and reinforced by the charisma and prestige of the traditions' spiritual founders. This phase of doctrinal protectionism developed in tandem with the expansion of religious institutional networks and the forging of institutional identities.

If the Tibetan Buddhist tradition has generally regarded the Bsam yas debate as a veritable 'clash of civilizations' between two ideologically opposed views regarding the Buddhist goal of awakening, contemporary scholarship has begun to raise probing questions about the nature and legacy of the controversy itself. One point in question is the widely-held

³ Several of the authors named here responded to Sa Paṅ's critiques in the context of commentaries on Rang byung rdo rje's *Zab mo nang don*. This largely unexplored commentarial literature which so far comprises thirteen extant commentaries (as well as two minor works), the most recent being *Zab mo nang gi don 'grel ba'i lus sems gsal ba'i me long* of Thub bstan phun tshogs (b. 1955) published in 2004, is an invaluable source for understanding doctrinal developments in Bka' brgyud traditions during the formative 14th to 16th centuries.

⁴ For an 'impressionistic' overview of Tibetan polemical literature during the 14th to 16th centuries, see Cabezón and Dargay 2006: 18–33. A short summary of post-classical polemical literature, with a focus on Bka' brgyud contributions, is provided in Higgins and Draszczuk 2016: 15–16 and n. 7.

assumption that the views advanced by the Indian and Chinese debaters were fundamentally incompatible; that if one view is true, the other must be false. This incompatibility thesis was traditionally thought to provide the justification needed to separate “true religion” (*chos*) from “false religion” (*chos min*) and to sanction the proscription of the latter. It has recently been observed, however, that terms for “gradual” and “simultaneous” were long employed in Indian and Chinese Buddhist sources not to demarcate opposing religious schools but to distinguish, within a given system, more or less direct methods of propounding and/or internalizing a teaching in line with the differing capacities of individuals or of the same individual at different stages of his or her spiritual itinerary. It has also been suggested that the purported incompatibility of approaches presupposed in standard debate narratives has served more to conceal than reveal the perennial epistemological and soteriological issues and tensions at the heart of the debate: the role of conceptual analysis in non-conceptual realization and the relative efficacy of conceptual and non-conceptual kinds of meditation.⁵

Some of the papers collected here demonstrate the extent to which various Tibetan scholars from as early as the 10th century already challenged the widely-held opinion that the gradualist/subitist distinction should be framed as an either/or choice between mutually exclusive alternatives. Of particular interest are attempts by post-classical Bka’ brgyud scholars to reconcile these two competing paradigms by contending that the Buddhist path is best viewed as neither exclusively gradual nor sudden but as incorporating elements of both. Central to their commensurability view is the idea that the gradualist/subitist dyad reflects a dialectical tension between more and less conceptually-mediated cognitive styles which turns out to be constitutive of the path of awakening itself. From this perspective, the entire tangle of soteriological antinomies that had increasingly become the focus of debate and controversy in India, China and Tibet – including *inter alia* gradualism/subitism, causal/acausal attainment, rational inference/direct acquaintance, conceptual/non-conceptual realization, nature/nurture – are seen as the binary expression of a basic polarity, inscribed in the structure of human reality itself, between more and less conceptually-determined modes of cognition and comportment.

⁵ See Tillemans 2013.

It was thought that the resolution of such antinomies lay not in favouring one side to the exclusion of the other but in reconciling the two by discovering their underlying unity. A case in point are the numerous Bka' brgyud and Rnying ma pith-instructions (*man ngag*) which make use of key distinctions between mind (*sems*) and the nature of mind (*sems nyid*), or dualistic consciousness (*rnam shes*) and nondual wisdom (*ye shes*), in order to prompt the aspirant to discern within mind's adventitious flux of thoughts and feelings – the workings of ordinary consciousness – an innate unconditioned mode of being and awareness. This underlying unity of conceptual and non-conceptual cognitive styles is the gist of Sgam po pa Bsod nams rin chen's (1079–1153) influential and controversial precept that “thoughts are *dharmakāya*.” Against this background, it becomes understandable why representatives of those Tibetan traditions which had traditionally been consigned to the losing side of the Bsam yas debate stood united in viewing the reconciliation of discursive and pre-discursive modes of being and awareness as the shared cornerstone of a complex variety of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist teachings (tantric and non-tantric) which commonly emphasized the unity (Skt. *yuganaddha*, Tib. *zung 'jug*), coemergence (Skt. *sahaja*, Tib. *lhan cig skyes pa*), inseparability (Skt. *abhinna*, Tib. *dbyer med*) or nonduality (Skt. *advaya*, Tib. *gnyis med*) of the two truths or realities (conventional and ultimate) and their associated modes of cognition. What unites these otherwise heterogeneous exoteric and esoteric Buddhist doctrines is the principle that the ground and goal of all Buddhist thought and practice lies in understanding the unity of the two truths, the inseparability of appearance and emptiness (*snang stong dbyer med*).

In his contribution to this volume, Klaus-Dieter Mathes assesses 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal's attempts to coordinate the type of gradual-analytical and direct-nonconceptual approaches to ultimate reality which had allegedly been pitted against one another at the Bsam yas debate. In his characteristically conciliatory fashion, Gzhon nu dpal proceeds from the assumption that the discourses of the second and third turnings of the Wheel of Dharma (*dharmacakra*)⁶ which highlight these two approaches

⁶ The idea that the Buddha gave his teachings in three successive stages of increasing subtlety and profundity, known as the 'turnings of the wheel of dharma' (*dharmacakra*-

are compatible rather than contradictory. In his view, ultimate reality may be determined either through logical investigation which culminates in “freedom from discursive elaborations” (*niṣprapañca*), as emphasized in the second *dharmacakra*, or experienced directly through non-conceptual forms of insight or wisdom, as emphasized in the third *dharmacakra*. Following Sahajavajra’s (11th century) **Tattvadaśakaṭikā*, Gzhon nu dpal explains that all characteristic signs (*nimittas*), i.e., reifications that distort true reality, are abandoned by directly realizing their natural luminosity through a direct experience of their true nature unmediated by concepts. To be sure, this appears to be quite different from the standard Mahāyāna approach wherein conceptual analytical meditation is deployed to dispel the mental signs (*nimittas*) which reify and distort reality, eventually giving way to non-conceptual wisdom in the same way that a fire kindled from rubbing two pieces of wood burns the pieces of wood themselves (as explained in the *Kāśyapaparivarta* of the *Ratnakūṭa*). Gzhon nu dpal outlines this approach on the basis of Kamalaśīla’s commentary on the *Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇī*. Gzhon nu dpal’s point is that the gradualist approach stands in contrast, but not contradiction, to the Mahāmudrā pith-instructions of the Buddhist Mahāsiddhas and their Indian and Tibetan interpreters who claim that those of higher acumen can proceed with meditation based on direct perceptions right from the beginning. Both approaches aim at non-conceptual wisdom, differing only in the extent to which conceptual analysis is deemed *indispensable* to such realization. Gzhon nu dpal endorses the Buddhist Siddha view that unmediated perception is already operative on the preliminary bodhisattva-levels of the path of preparation. On this note, Mathes concludes that although this

pravartana), seems to have its inception in the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* (circa 4th century CE), an important scriptural source for the Yogācāra school of Indian Buddhism. The first wheel, associated with the Lesser Vehicle (Hīnayāna), comprises core doctrines of early Buddhism such as the four noble truths (*āryasatyā*). The second and third wheels were associated with the Greater Vehicle (Mahāyāna). The second wheel consists of teachings emphasizing that all phenomena are empty (*śūnya*) of inherent existence. The third wheel explains this emptiness in terms of the Yogācāra doctrine of the three natures (*trisvabhāva*), and is also frequently, though not uncontroversially, associated with the doctrine of buddha nature (*tathāgatagarbha*). The *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* maintains that the first two wheels are of provisional meaning (*neyārtha*), requiring further interpretation, whereas the final wheel is of definitive meaning (*nītārtha*).

direct unmediated approach to awakening has been compared (usually unfavourably) to the Chinese position attributed to Heshang Moheyan in the standard accounts of the Bsam yas debate and its later reiterations, it is already well-attested in the writings of Indian Siddhas such as Maitrīpa (986–1063) and his disciple Sahajavajra who saw it as the preferred path to awakening.

The article by David Higgins offers a synoptic overview of the Fourth 'Brug chen Padma dkar po's (1527–92) efforts to clarify the sense and significance of the Dwags po Bka' brgyud doctrine of mental non-engagement (Skt. *amanasikāra*) and to defend it as a valid system of exegesis (*bshad lugs*) and practice (*sgrub lugs*). Its starting point is Padma dkar po's polemical rejoinder to Sa skya Paṇḍita's (1182–1251) objection that Dwags po Bka' brgyud traditions advocated the type of self-stultifying mental non-engagement (*amanasikāra*) that had allegedly been promoted by Heshang at the Bsam yas debate prior to his ignominious defeat at the hands of Kamalaśīla. In defending Bka' brgyud *amanasikāra* teachings in light of Maitrīpa's *Amanasikāra Doctrinal Cycle* (*yid la mi byed pa'i chos skor*), the Fourth 'Brug chen sets out to show how these are fully in accord with authoritative Indian Madhyamaka and tantric *amanasikāra* teachings, to the extent that all agree that thoughts are left behind at the time of ascertaining the ultimate, but are diametrically opposed to the type of perpetual blank-mindedness ascribed to Heshang. A key to Padma dkar po's defence is his insistence upon the compatibility between Kamalaśīla's conceptualist interpretation of *amanasikāra* as a well-founded mental engagement (*yoniśo manasikāra*) having emptiness as its object and Maitrīpa's strongly nondual interpretation of *amanasikāra* as mental engagement having emptiness (*a* = emptiness + *manasikāra*) as its nature. Indeed, neither would disagree that the goal of Buddhist meditation is a non-conceptual ascertainment of the ultimate nor that the path consists in dispelling reifications which conceal it. The key difference, then, is whether this goal of non-conceptual wisdom is "arrived at" via conceptual representations and a lengthy process of analytical investigation (Kamalaśīla) or "disclosed" in its original condition through direct perception in which conceptual representations are left behind (Maitrīpa, Rāmapāla, Sahajavajra, Padma dkar po). Though it may be argued that Padma dkar po's compatibilism makes a significant

concession to a representationalist strain of Cittamātra epistemology that had been refuted by Maitrīpa's Apratiṣṭhāna (non-foundationalist) Madhyamaka tradition, and in this way elides important differences between their respective epistemologies, Higgins argues for seeing it as a type of *soteriological contextualism* which aims to accommodate *both* perspectives by coordinating their respective soteriological roles and spheres of application. Such is the conciliatory thrust of his middle way: to combine the virtues of each approach while avoiding the vices of pursuing either as an end in itself.

The article by Martina Draszczyk surveys a number of influential Bka' brgyud responses to Sa skya Paṇḍita's (1182–1251) critique of 'present day' non-gradual Mahāmudrā teachings as promoting the same kind of self-stupefying *amanasikāra* that was attributed to the Chinese Chan contestant Heshang Moheyān. While the historical background and doctrinal background of Sa Paṇ's criticism have been well-documented by David Jackson, the extensive and often illuminating responses by Bka' brgyud pa scholars of the classical period have received very little attention. Focusing on the works of Karma Bka' brgyud scholars of the 15th and 16th century such as the Eighth Karma pa Mi bskyod rdo rje (1507–1554), Shākya mchog ldan (1428–1507), Zhwa dmar Chos grags ye shes (1453–1524), and Karma phrin las pa Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1456–1539), Draszczyk assesses their attempts to show how the *amanasikāra* teachings of Sgam po pa Bsod nams rin chen (1079–1153) are consistent with Maitrīpa's interpretation of *amanasikāra* as an unmediated perception of the nature reality. For these scholars, *amanasikāra* signifies a direct acquaintance with the unity of appearance and emptiness which prevails when dualistic thoughts have ceased. These authors are unanimous that when Sgam po pa emphasized, for those of highest acumen, a non-gradual path of direct perception of ultimate reality which could circumvent various forms of scholastic and tantric preliminaries, he was simply elaborating a system of thought and practice that was already well-established by the Indian Buddhist Siddhas and their commentators.

In a thought-provoking reconsideration of Kamalaśīla's views on the role of conceptual knowledge in non-conceptual realization, Martin Adam argues why we would be remiss to consider the Bengali paṇḍit as a champion of a type of gradualism which regards meditation as a mere

vindication of insights already gained through prior rational analysis. This, Adam argues, would be to crucially underestimate Kamalaśīla's emphasis on the contribution meditation makes to knowledge in his *Bhāvanākramas*. It would also be to wrongly conflate the quite different roles assigned to thinking (*cintā*) and meditation (*bhāvanā*) in his account of the Buddhist path. In this regard, Adam takes issue with a view recently expressed by Tom Tillemans⁷ that Kamalaśīla and his Indian contingent endorsed an epistemological position that did not accept the possibility that meditation could add any new information or knowledge beyond what is gained by philosophical analysis. Tillemans usefully qualifies Kamalaśīla's view as endorsing a type of "continuity thesis" which holds that conceptual thought is a necessary condition of non-conceptual realization. This is distinguished from the kind of "independence thesis" associated with Heshang which regards meditative states of mind as fundamentally different from those of philosophy owing to their respective non-conceptual and conceptual natures. Now, it is undeniable that for Dharmakīrti, Kamalaśīla, and many of their later Tibetan advocates, conceptual knowledge was considered indispensable to non-conceptual realization: indeed, it is only through long and intensive meditation on conceptual representations such as impermanence, selflessness and the like that such objects begin to appear clearly without conceptual mediation. Yet, a closer look at Kamalaśīla's epistemology reveals the extent to which he confines this Vijñānavāda representationalism to the domain of conventional knowledge, a domain that is left behind with the attainment of the ultimate goal of non-conceptual wisdom which, from a Madhyamaka perspective, is entirely free from conceptual elaboration (*niśprapañca*) and devoid of any object of knowledge. It would appear, then, that Kamalaśīla, as a proponent of the so-called Yogācāra-(Svātantrika-) Madhyamaka school, was himself something of a soteriological pluralist⁸ who was prepared to accept not only that different epistemologies have validity at different stages of the Buddhist path but that they are all

⁷ See above note 2.

⁸ Sara McClintock, for example, has argued that for Kamalaśīla, "[b]oth sākāravāda and nirākāravāda have limitations as theories of cognition, yet both also have their place on the path toward a Madhyamaka perspective in which ultimately both are relinquished" (2014: 334). See also the paper by Higgins in this volume.

eventually overcome with the realization of *buddhajñāna*. For his part, Adam contends that the *Bhāvanākramas* assign a necessary and quite specific function to conceptual meditation in the process of acquiring a direct, non-conceptual knowledge of reality (*nirvikalpajñāna*): “certain kinds of conceptual activities do not in fact obscure the mind but instead lead it incrementally towards nonconceptual gnosis by helping to dispel conceptual reifications.” This *negative role* of conceptual thought perhaps offers the strongest case against seeing Kamalaśīla *only* as a continuity theorist: if the main role for conceptual analysis is its own undoing, then its goal is not *ultimately* tied to any positive object of knowledge (*jñeya*); rather, the meditation culminating in *buddhajñāna* must be nondual, objectless and in this sense quite different from the foregoing conceptual thinking which comprises both the process and object of negation.

One shadowy figure lurking in the background of Bsam yas debate narratives is the Indian *tānika* Vimalamitra whom the Rnying ma (Ancient) tradition regards as a key figure in the early transmission of Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) teachings. In a cogent work of historical revisionism, Joel Gruber examines two texts attributed to Vimalamitra which seem to alternately support the two rival positions of the Bsam yas debate. While the *Cig car 'jug pa rnam par mi rtog pa'i bsgom don* (short: *Cig car 'jug pa*) appears to defend the efficacy of the Chinese sudden path to liberation, the *Rim gyis 'jug pa'i bsgom don* (short: *Rim gyis 'jug pa*) sets forth the Indian gradualist path. Despite the purported Indian victory over the Chinese at Bsam yas, it has been alleged that Vimalamitra's texts present both approaches as being equally valid. While both texts have received considerable attention in contemporary scholarship, previous studies have not considered the genealogy of early narratives describing Vimalamitra's stay in Tibet. As a result, scholars have examined the authorial issues central to understanding these works without accounting for the gradual standardization of competing Vimalamitra biographies. The scope of past studies has also been limited to sūtric works, excluding the dozens of tantric texts ascribed to Vimalamitra that were previously unattributed or attributed to another author/translator. Gruber's article helps to fill these gaps in existing scholarship by employing a more extensive body of data to determine whether the *Rim gyis 'jug pa* and the *Cig car 'jug pa* should be included in the long

list of similar works of contested authorship that were traditionally attributed to Vimalamitra in order to establish an Indian pedigree for views and practices that had become central to the Rnying ma tradition.

Taken together, the five articles gathered here lead us to reconsider from a variety of theoretical perspectives the nature and legacy of the Bsam yas debate. That the views which came into confrontation at Bsam yas have continued to be discussed and hotly debated by leading masters in all Tibetan traditions down to the present day makes this formative debate as relevant as ever for our understanding of some of the key epistemological and soteriological issues that have defined Tibet's cultural history. It is anticipated that these papers will contribute to a more nuanced picture of the historical-doctrinal contexts and legacy of the debate and inspire further research in this area.

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