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# Sa skya paṇḍita's Account of the bSam yas Debate: History as Polemic<sup>1</sup>

by Roger Jackson

*The Corinthians.* There is . . . no advantage in reflections on the past further than may be of service to the present.

Thucydides

*Peloponnesian War I*, 123

Most literate societies possess at least a rudimentary sense of the value of historical accuracy, and the means for separating fact from myth. They are, however, no less prone than non-literate societies to live under the sway of myths and symbols, and when an event affects men's minds sufficiently with its symbolic forcefulness, that event can become more important as myth than history, to the point where the true record is obscured nearly beyond recall. Such an event is the bSam yas debate, a debate between Indian "gradualists" and Chinese "simultaneists" called circa 792 to 794 by the Tibetan king Khri srong lde btsan, and after which Chinese Buddhist influence diminished considerably in Tibet.

Indian participants in the debate, most notably Kamalaśīla, in his three *Bhavanākramas*, felt that Hwashang Mahāyāna and his supporters were preaching an absolutistic quietism that was unrepresentative of Buddhist tradition, spiritually fruitless and subversive of the sort of gradual, ethically-based practices enjoined on the majority of practitioners. They felt, in short, that, should the Chinese carry the day, Tibet would be lost to true Buddhism, following an easy but pointless path. Tibetan historians — and not only those influenced by the dominant dGe lugs pa school—have tended to agree, viewing their country's early Buddhist history as a series of triumphs over the all-too-Tibetan temptation to adopt comfortable but specious spiritual practices. The

bSam yas debate, according to this view, is the first in a series of pivotal “reforms” that also include the advents of Atīśa and Tsong kha pa. As a result, the bSam yas debate and its participants have long since been absorbed into the realms of both popular and scholastic myth. They are no longer just events and people, but elements in a symbolic drama that, again and again, Tibetan writers have found useful as an illustration of points that are relevant not to the eighth century, but to their own times;<sup>2</sup> in the process, of course, the question of what actually happened at the debate has often been ignored.

Because it is both history and myth, the bSam yas debate is susceptible of two different sorts of study. A first-order study, the sort pursued by Demiéville, Tucci and Houston,<sup>3</sup> seeks to reconstruct what actually happened at the debate through a judicious use of all available historical materials, with the greatest weight, generally, given to the most ancient. A second-order study, which has not so far been attempted, would examine extant histories of the debate in order to show how each history reflects not only an actual course of events, but the more contemporary concerns of the historian. It is a contribution to the second type of study, the “history of history,” that I hope to make here.

Although it is possibly the oldest Tibetan history of Buddhism, the *Thub pa'i dgongs pa rab gsal* of Kun dga' rgyal mtshan, the Sa skya paṇḍita (1182–1251), has received little attention from Western scholars.<sup>4</sup> Written in Mongolia sometime between 1244 and 1251, it antedates by a century the far better known *Chos 'byung* of Bu ston Rinpoche and by a still greater span *The Blue Annals* of Gos lo tsa ba and the history of Buddhism written by Tārānātha. The *Thub pa'i dgongs pa rab gsal* contains an account of the bSam yas debate.<sup>5</sup> The account is worthy of attention, not so much for its antiquity, or for any new historical light it casts on the events at bSam yas, but for what it tells us about Sa skya paṇḍita and, more broadly, what it shows us about the process by which the bSam yas debate was mythologized. The account of the debate is part of the section “Refuting those who accept as the teaching of the Buddha that which is neither the *śrāvaka* (*yāna*) nor the Ma-hāyāna.” This section has four parts: “Refutations of (1) the early Chinese school, (2) the later (Tibetan) school that followed it, (3) the present-day school that accepts as *mahāmudrā* the meditation-(system) of the non-aspectarian Cittamātra and (4) (the school

that) accepts as *mahāmudrā* the specious (*ltar snang*) Perfection of Wisdom." The debate is described in the first of the four parts. A translation follows.

According to a Chinese monk of the time of King Bristong lde btsan, "Words are essenceless, so one cannot attain Buddhahood (*tshang mi rgya*) through a verbal *dharma*; when one examines the mind, that is the White Panacea (*dkar po chig thub*)." Having written commentaries on that (view, e.g., ) the *gSam gtan nyal ba'i 'khor lo*, the *gSam gtan gyi lon* and its *Yang lon*, the *lTa ba'i rgyab sha* and the *mDo sde brgyad cu khungs*,<sup>6</sup> he spread this White Panacea throughout all the Tibetan realm.

(The White Panacea) did not accord with the Indian Dharma-school, so the King invited the reverend Ye shes dbang po (to court). When he asked him which Dharma-school — the Indian or the Chinese — was the true one, Ye shes dbang po said, "The *ācārya Śāntarakṣita* left the following testament: 'Because the *ācārya Padmasambhava* gave this Tibetan realm the twelve protective goddesses (*brtan ma*), no heretics will arise. Nevertheless, because it is the nature of causality that both day and night, right and left, waxing and waning, and pure and impure *dharma*s (all) arise, after my death will come a Chinese master (*mkhan po*) who will negate method and wisdom and will say that one attains Buddhahood only by the examination of the mind called the White Panacea. The Conqueror talks in a *sūtra* of — "among the five degenerations — the degeneration of view." When it is said that there will be enjoyment of an (inferior) emptiness, (it is implied that this) will occur not just in Tibet; at the time of the five degenerations, (such) enjoyment will be (in) the nature of all persons. When this (attitude) spreads, it will be generally harmful to the Buddha's doctrine, so you (the King) then should invite from India my disciple, the great sage known as Kamalaśīla. (He will) enter into debate with the Chinese master. Practice (in accordance with) the school of the winner.' Because (Śāntarakṣita) prophesied (thus), I ask that you act accordingly."

When thus requested (by Ye shes dbang po, the King) invited the *ācārya Kamalaśīla*.

With the King and (various) sages looking on at bSam yas, the weapons of all (the disputants) were collected. Flower garlands were given (to the disputants). The winner would be honored, the loser expelled. The King promised to punish those who failed to act thus (i.e., abide by the result). At that time, on Kamalaśīla's side there were only a few: several (lineage-)holders of the Indian Dharma-school, the master Gos,

and others. On the Chinese master's side, a great multitude gathered, including Queen Bro za byang chub, gZid mal ba gco rma rma, and others.

Then, *ācārya* Kamalaśīla asked his opponent, "What is the position of the Chinese Dharma-school?"

The Chinese said, "Your Dharma-school, beginning from going for Refuge and generating the Thought of Enlightenment, ascends from below like a monkey ascending to a treetop. (In) our Dharma-school, one does not attain Buddhahood through the *dharmas* of activity (*bya byed*); (rather,) meditating non-discursively, one attains Buddhahood just by the examination of the mind. (Our) Dharma is one that alights from above, like a garuda alighting from the sky on a treetop."

At that, the *ācārya* said, "Neither the analogy nor the meaning is acceptable. Firstly, (as for) the unacceptability of the analogy: (i) does the garuda alight from the sky on the treetop with his wings grown instantaneously to maturity, or (ii) once he has been born in a crag or elsewhere, must his wings mature gradually, and (is he only then able to) alight (on a treetop)? (i) is impossible; (ii) is an appropriate analogy for the gradualist, but is not an appropriate analogy for the simultaneist."

The (Chinese) master could not reply to (the discussion of) the analogy.

At that, the *ācārya* added, "Not only is your analogy mistaken; your meaning is delusive, too. Does (your) non-discursive meditation (i) stop just one kind of discursive thought or (ii) is it necessary to stop countless discursive thoughts? If you say (i) that it is the stopping of one kind, then it follows that sleep, swoon and other (such states) also would be non-discursive (meditation), because they too only stop one kind of thought. If you say (ii) that it is the stopping of countless discursive thoughts, then, when you meditate non-discursively, is it (a) unnecessary or (b) necessary to have an immediately-preceding discursive thought, viz., 'I will meditate non-discursively'? If (a) it is unnecessary, then it follows that sentient beings of the three realms also produce (this kind of) meditation, because they also 'meditate' without an immediately-preceding discursive thought, viz., 'I will meditate.' If (b) it is necessary to have an immediately-preceding discursive thought, viz., 'I will meditate non-discursively,' then you have broken your promise to meditate non-discursively, for (that promise) itself is a discursive thought. It is analogous to losing silence when you say, 'I am observing silence,' or babbling about (the importance of) not babbling."

(Kamalaśīla) made this and other refutations through scripture and reasoning, and the Chinese master lost his confidence.

The King said to him, "If you have an answer, speak it!"

The master replied, "I am like one thunderstruck (*mgor thog brgyab pa*); I do not know (how to) answer."

The King said, "In that case, offer the flower-garland to the *ācārya* and make an apology. The White Panacea Dharma-school is to be spurned, and one should act in accordance with the Indian Dharma-school, which contradicts neither scripture nor reason. Also, from now on, anyone who practices the White Panacea will be punished."

This was decreed throughout all of Tibet, and the Chinese books were collected and hidden as treasures (*gter*) at bSam yas. Upset at (all) this, the Chinese master returned to his own country.

It is reported that (before he left) he prophesied to his followers, "I have (accidentally) left a shoe behind at the Dharma-center. I infer from this omen that when the Buddha's doctrine is on the verge of destruction, my doctrine alone will remain."

Later wise *kalyāṇamitras* have said, "The Chinese master did not understand the Dharma, but he was one who understood omens somewhat. Nowadays, the original Dharma has been spurned; that is the reason for (the popularity of) the White Panacea, which accepts that Buddhahood is attained by pointing to the mind."

I have seen it written in another testament that the one who inferred from the forgotten shoe at the time of the departure for China was another distressed Hva shang, not the master (involved in the debate).

It is also said that the Chinese master set his head on fire and died facing west, toward Sukhāvātī; that gZid mal ba gco rma rma committed suicide by beating his own genitals; and so forth, (but) since I have already detailed much of this, I will write no more. (The reader) should refer to the *rGyal bzhed dba' bzhed* chronicles.<sup>7</sup>

This rather concise account adds little that is reliable to what we already know of the circumstances and proceedings of the debate;<sup>8</sup> it does, however, tell us a great deal about Sa skya paṇḍita.

First, the strict use of logical dilemmas in the speech of rebuttal put into the mouth of Kamalaśīla reflects Sa skya paṇḍita's great interest in Buddhist logic — indeed, his *Tshad ma rigs pa'i gter*

stands as the first great Tibetan treatise on the subject. It is true that Kamalaśīla, on the evidence of his *pañjikā* to Śāntarakṣita's *Tattvasaṃgraha*, was an accomplished dialectician, and it is entirely possible that his argument in the course of the debate was every bit as tightly reasoned as Sa skya paṇḍita would have us believe. The fact remains, however, that in no other account of the debate is the dilemma employed so consistently — not even in Kamalaśīla's third *Bhavanākrama*, which was composed immediately after the debate, and presumably reflects the substance, if not necessarily the style, of Kamalaśīla's contribution to the proceedings. In the absence of any corroborating evidence, it is safest to assume that the speech attributed to Kamalaśīla by Sa skya paṇḍita reflects more closely what a Buddhist logician would like the *ācārya* to have said than what he actually said.

Second, and far more interesting, is a Sa skya paṇḍita's contention that the “Dharma-school” taught by the Chinese master is the White Panacea — a contention found in no other source. We know from Thuu kvan's *Grub mtha' shel gyi me long* that the White Panacea was a synonym for *mahāmudrā*, coined by Zhang g-yu brag pa brtson 'grus grags pa — Zhang Rinpoche — the founder of the Tshal pa lineage of the Dvags po bKa' brgyud tradition.<sup>9</sup> Zhang Rinpoche (1123–93) is clearly considered by Thuu kvan to have been one of the greatest of the bKa' brgyud masters, yet the Tshal pa school died out centuries ago, so we must reconstruct Zhang Rinpoche's views from second-hand accounts and from the fragmentary writings of his own that are available.<sup>10</sup> Thuu kvan describes the White Panacea as a “joining of method and wisdom as bliss and emptiness,”<sup>11</sup> and Nor bzang's *Phyag chen gsal sgron* adds that “when the earlier bKa' brgyud pas called their *mahāmudrā* meditations the White Panacea, their intention was that by producing the essence of the Original Mind, which is great bliss, by that one meditation on reality they would obtain the final fruit.”<sup>12</sup>

It is clear from Zhang Rinpoche's writings, scattered as they are, that he places great emphasis on the meditative search for and discovery of “the reality of one's own mind.”<sup>13</sup> In this emphasis, and in his preoccupation with ultimate truths and practices — often expressed through negation of the conventional — he is very much in tune not only with other early bKa' brgyud pas, but also with the *prajñā-pāramitā* and *dohā* traditions of Indian Bud-

dhism. The White Panacea, from the evidence of Zhang Rinpoche's writings, is virtually indistinguishable from *mahāmudrā*.

Be that as it may, we also know that Sa skya paṇḍita, in his *sDom gsum rab dbye*, violently opposed the White Panacea<sup>14</sup> on the grounds (a) that it implied “total mental inactivity,” or quietism<sup>15</sup> and (b) that there did not seem to be in it any place for such fundamental practices as *bodhicitta*.<sup>16</sup> It is far from a coincidence that these are among the same criticisms leveled against the system of Hva shang Mahāyāna by Kamalaśīla in his *Bhavanākramas*. Thuu kvan — like Nor bzang before him — defends the White Panacea from Sa skya paṇḍita's attack, maintaining that “if you examine the words of Zhang tshal ba honestly and in detail, (you find that) the position of complete mental inactivity clearly is not represented, and the objections in the *sDom gsum* are obviously forced,”<sup>17</sup> and that there is no warrant for believing that *bodhicitta* is considered superfluous in the White Panacea.<sup>18</sup> Thuu kvan exculpates Zhang Rinpoche, but not all of his successors, who “write their explanations of *mahāmudrā* accepting literally what is written in (his) *gSal sgron me*,”<sup>19</sup> and thereby fail to understand that in the White Panacea there is room for *both* discursive and non-discursive thought, method and wisdom, conventional and ultimate truth. Like many a Ch'an master, then — indeed, perhaps like Hva shang Mahāyāna — Zhang Rinpoche may not himself have misunderstood the Buddha's teaching but, because of his style and emphases, was likely to *be* misunderstood by others.

The question of the White Panacea's “legitimacy” quite aside, it remains the case that Sa skya paṇḍita not only believes it to be nihilistic quietism, but asserts it to be a *Chinese* Dharma-school, one in existence at the time of the bSam yas debate. Indeed, Sa skya paṇḍita believes both the White Panacea and the *rdzogs chen* tradition of the rNying ma to be Chinese in origin.<sup>20</sup> It is easy to see how he may have arrived at this conclusion: (a) The teachings of the White Panacea seem greatly to resemble those attributed to Hva shang Mahāyāna by Kamalaśīla; (b) There is evidence from ancient texts that the Hva shang's books were hidden after the debate, with their eventual rediscovery in mind. Therefore (c) the White Panacea is a revival of the teaching of Hva shang Mahāyāna.

It is quite possible that Chinese views exercised an influence on subsequent Tibetan schools, but if they did, it is far more likely

that they affected the rNying ma tradition, which unquestionably originated at a time when Chinese teachers were active in Tibet. The White Panacea — quite apart from being mentioned nowhere as a *gter ma*-based teaching — is in the mainstream of the Bka' brgyud tradition. Zhang Rinpoche was a disciple of sGom pa, who was in turn a direct disciple of sGam po pa. He was, thus, squarely in the lineage that reached back through Mi la ras pa and Mar pa to the Indian *siddhas* Maitrīpa (whom Thuu kvan describes as a teacher of the White Panacea), Tilopa and Nāropa. The White Panacea, therefore, belongs to the second diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet, whereas direct Chinese influence was only marked during the first; and the White Panacea's determinable antecedents are Indian, not Chinese. It is true that there exist the further possibilities (a) that there may have been Chinese influence on the Indian *siddhas*, and/or (b) that there may have been current in Zhang Rinpoche's time left-over Chinese ideas that may have inspired him. There is no evidence at present for either possibility; even if there were, the probability that both Hva shang Mahāyāna and Zhang Rinpoche taught the same doctrine, known as the White Panacea, would be remote.

The most reasonable conclusion, then, is that Sa skya paṇḍita's assertion, that the system taught by the Chinese master at the bSam yas debate was the White Panacea, is simply a case of polemical anachronism, an attempt to discredit the paṇḍita's contemporary opponents by associating them with an historical person of established notoriety. The conclusion is reasonable because (1) The White Panacea is mentioned as the bSam yas Chinese school in no other text, (2) There is no evidence that there ever existed *any* Chinese school called the White Panacea, (3) There is no other indication that the White Panacea existed as far back as the eighth century; all evidence points to its being firmly within the bKa' brgyud tradition, which is traced largely to post-eighth-century India and (4) Sa skya paṇḍita's virulent opposition to the White Panacea and other *mahāmudrā* teachings gave him a motive for attempting to discredit them.

Finally, it might be noted that the very fact that Sa skya paṇḍita sought to discredit the White Panacea by associating it with the Chinese position at the bSam yas debate indicates that, as early as the thirteenth century, the debate had begun to assume mythological status. Hva shang Mahāyāna, in particular, had already

assumed enough symbolic weight that identification with him might prove damning to a particular tradition. Sa skya paṇḍita was the first Tibetan scholar to “use” Hva shang Mahāyāna in this way, and he was perhaps the most egregious, but few have been the Tibetan historians or scholars with *no* ideological axe to grind; thus, slight is the chance that any account of the bSam yas debate is entirely reliable.<sup>21</sup> The Tibetans understood as well as other peoples that “the awareness of history is one of the greatest forces of which the beneficent appeal must be felt,”<sup>22</sup> for history presents a past from which the present may learn. Indeed, so useful is the past for the present, so important are its lessons believed, that in some cases — like Sa skya paṇḍita’s — “history” comes to matter more than what happened.

## NOTES

1. I wish to thank Prof. Geshe Sopa of the University of Wisconsin-Madison for first drawing my attention to Sa skya paṇḍita’s account of the debate, and for sharing his understanding of the account with me.

2. The most notable, perhaps, is Tsong kha pa, who, in the *thag mthong* section of his *Lam rim chen mo*, finds that the sort of quietism preached by Hva shang Mahāyāna has far from died out and that, in fact, it is prevalent among his opponents, particularly those guilty of “overpervasionism” (*khyab ches ba*) — negating too much in their search for the object to be refuted by a meditation on emptiness. Cf. Alex Wayman, *Calming the Mind and Discerning the Real. Buddhist meditation and the middle view, from the Lam rim chen mo of Tsoi-kha-pa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978). Among dGe lugs pa objections to Hva shang’s view are that he stresses (a) absolute truth to the exclusion of the conventional, (b) wisdom to the exclusion of method, (c) absorptive meditation (*jog sgom*) to the exclusion of analysis (*dpyad sgom*) and (d) mental inactivity to the exclusion of the cultivation of the *bodhisattva*’s perfections. Most of these criticisms are found, either explicitly or implicitly, in Kamalaśīla’s third *Bhavanākrama*. Cf. also Thuu kvan, *Grub mtha’ thams cad kyi khungs dang ’dod tshul ston pa legs bshad gyi me long*, “Jing” chapter, 11b8–12a7, and “dGe lugs” chapter, 57b8–5814 and 60a2–60b7.

3. Paul Demiéville, *Le Concile de Lhasa. Une controverse sur le quietisme entre Bouddhistes de l’Inde et de la Chine au VIIIe siècle de l’ère chrétienne*, vol VII of *Bibliothèque de l’Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale de France, 1952); Giuseppe Tucci, *Minor Buddhist Texts II* (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1958); and G. W. Houston, *Sources for a History of the bSam yas Debate*, Abteilung I, Band 2 of *Monumenta Tibetica Historia* (Sankt Augustin, Germany: VGH Wissenschaftsverlag, 1980). These are the three major Western monographs on the subject. Articles of interest include: Yoshiro Imaeda, “Documents de Touen-Houang Concernant le Concile du Tibet,” *Journal Asiatique*, 1975, pp. 124-146; R. A. Stein, “Illumination subite ou saisie simultanée:

Note sur la terminologie chinoise et tibétaine,” *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions*, vol. 179 (1971), pp. 3–30; and Alex Wayman, “Doctrinal Disputes and the Debate of bSam yas,” *Central Asiatic Journal*, vol. XXI, no. 2 (1977), pp. 139–144.

4. Houston, for example, fails to mention it in his *Sources for a History of the bSam yas Debate*, although it is cited in partial paraphrase, without attribution, in the *mKhas pa’i dga’ ston* of dPa’ bo gtsug lag, which Houston does include, and translates on pp. 42–43.

5. In *The Complete Works of Pandita Kun-dGa’-rGyal-mTshan*, compiled by bSod-nams-rGya-mTsho; vol. 5 of *The Complete Works of the Great Masters of the Sa-skya Sect of Tibetan Buddhism*, Biblioteca Tibetica I-5 (Tokyo: The Tokyo Bunyo, 1968), pp. 24/4/3–25/4/2.

6. These works, attributed to Hva shang Mahāyāna, are also listed in the *mKhas pa’i dga’ ston* of dPa’ bo gtsug lag, the *Chos ’byung* of Bu ston and the *Deb ther dmar po*. As Houston notes, however (p. 5), they are “not known to present scholarship.” The only two extant works believed to have been written by Hva shang Mahāyāna, which are both named *mKhan po ma ha yan gi bsam gtan cig car ’jug pa’i sgo*, are discussed in Demiéville, pp. 14–17.

7. This almost certainly refers to the *rGyal rabs sha bzhed*, an early chronicle that is concerned chiefly with the reign of Khri srong lde btsan. Cf. Houston, p. 4 and pp. 57–87.

8. A possible exception is Hva shang Mahāyāna’s rather dramatic suicide, which I have not seen reported elsewhere.

9. Thuu.kvan, “bKa’ brgyud” chapter, p. 17b. Cf. also G.N. Roerich, *The Blue Annals* (reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979), pp. 711–715.

10. The only text known to me is the *Writings (bKa’ ’thor bu) of Zhang-guryu-brag-pa brtson-grus-grags-pa*, reproduced from a manuscript from the library of Burmiok Athing by Khams-sprul Don brgyud-nyi-ma (Tashijong, Palampur, H.P.: The Sungrab Nyamso Gyunpel Parkhang, 1972). A number of the texts contained in the book discuss *mahāmudrā*, but none, as far as I can determine, mentions the White Panacea.

11. Thuu kvan, *loc. cit.*, p. 18b.

12. Cited *ibid.*, p. 23b.

13. Cited *ibid.*, p. 19b.

14. He also opposed the “One Thought” of ’Bri gung pa. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 23a.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, p. 23b.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 23a.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 23b.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 20ba.

20. Sa skya paṅdita, *sDom gsum rab dbye*, in *The Complete Works . . .*, p. 309, fol. 2–3.

21. The Wang Si text translated by Demiéville in *Le Concile de Lhasa* presents a view of the debate quite different from that of most Tibetan accounts, and it considerably antedates most of them. In both it and the *bKa’ thang sde luga* (which is also quite old), the Chinese are said to have won the debate, and their position is less ludicrously absolutistic than it tends to appear in many later histories. Cf. Tucci, p. 45.

22. Bertrand Russell, "The Art of History," in Robert E. Egner and Lester E. Denonn, eds., *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), p. 544.