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On the Sources for Sa skya Paṇḍita's Notes on the Bsam yas Debate

by Leonard W.J. van der Kuijp

In an earlier issue of this journal, R. Jackson (1982:89-99) published a translation of, and a commentary on, Sa skya Paṇḍita's (1182-1251) account of the well-known, if still historically questionable, Sino-Indian controversies in eighth century Tibet. His paper was based on a passage that occurs in Sa paṇ's *Thub pa'i dgongs pa rab tu gsal ba* (TGRG), a work which he completed towards the end of his life.¹ This passage is found in the section in which he discusses the status and the reach and range of discriminative awareness (*prajñā*), the sixth transcending function (*pāramitā*). In his survey, Sa paṇ takes the opportunity to assail certain Bka' brgyud pa doctrines known under the generic name of the "white panacea" (*dkar po chig thub*) that are preeminently associated with the writings of Zhang g.yu brag pa brtson 'grus grags pa (1123-1193).² Sa paṇ links the doctrine of the "white panacea" with the quietistic teachings of the Chinese Buddhists active in early Tibet which, as he painstakingly indicates, were already discredited by the alleged outcome of the "debate" between Kamalaśīla and his Chinese counterpart.

On the basis of the primary sources available to him, R. Jackson has attempted to show that Sa paṇ, perhaps wilfully, employed "history as polemic" in order to criticise the "white panacea" of his immediate predecessors (and contemporaries) and that, moreover, he ". . . was the first Tibetan scholar to 'use' Hva shang Mahāyāna in this way, and . . . perhaps the most egregious . . .". However, in the light of a corpus of texts, apparently unavailable to R. Jackson at the time of his writing, these conclusions stand in need of an about-face revision. As I shall try to show as briefly and briskly as possible, these sources tell

us quite a different story, decisively exculpate Sa paṅ from those charges, and render R. Jackson's inferences untenable.

A most significant source for the Tibetan *phyi dar* perception of the "Bsam yas debate", which has thus far escaped the attention of scholarly scrutiny, is the monumental *Chos 'byung me tog snying po'i sbrang rtsi'i bcud* or *Mnga' bdag Nyan gi chos 'byung* written by the Rnying ma pa scholar and "teacher of treasures" (*gter ston*) Nyang ral nyi-ma[i] 'od-zer (1124-1192 or 1136-1204).³ Two slightly different manuscripts of this text, Manuscript A and Manuscript B, were published in the "supportive volumes" (*rgyab chos*) Five and Six of the *Rin chen gter mdzod* collection in 1979 in Paro, Bhutan. Another cursive *dbu med* manuscript of the same, housed at the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek, Berlin, was published this year (1985) by R. Meisezahl in a facsimile edition. Based on a comparison of these three manuscripts, Meisezahl (1985:14) came to the conclusion that: "Wer sie (the Berlin manuscript) benutzt, kann auf die in Bhutan publizierten Manuskripte „A“ und „B“ unbedenklich verzichten, falls nicht eine kritische Edition erwünscht ist." Turning to the useful table of contents compiled by L.S. Dagyab of Bonn University, we find that Nyang ral has devoted some fifteen folia to the "Bsam yas debate" (Meisezahl 1985: fols. 425-440). The very close, at times virtually literal correspondence between the wording of Nyang ral's account and the various notices in several of Sa paṅ's texts can only lead one to conclude that either Sa paṅ made use of Nyang ral's *Chos 'byung*, or that both derive their information from a third, as of yet unknown, earlier source. In order to show the degree of correspondence, I reproduce first a small segment of the account found in Sa paṅ's "open letter", his *Skyes bu dam pa rnam la spring ba'i yi ge*, SSBB 5, pp. 331/4/6-332/1/1:

*rgya nag mkhan po na re / 'khor bar skye ba'i rgyu
rang ngo rang gis ma shes pas lan / rang ngo rang gis
shes na 'tshang rgya / de'i phyir sems ngo 'phrod na
dkar po chig thub yin / . . . zer nas /*

Apart from the preamble of this passage, "The Chinese abbot, alleging⁴ . . .," Nyang ral (Meisezahl 1985: fol. 425, Tafel 287) reads virtually the same:

*'khor bar skye ba'i rgyu / rang ngo rang gi ma shes
pas lan / rang ngo shes nas rtogs na sangs rgya / de'i
phyir sems ngo 'phrod dgos / de ngo shes na dkar po
chig thub yin /*

In the TGRG p. 24/44/6 we have:

*. . . rgya nag gi dge slong na re / tshig la snying po
med tha snyad kyi chos kyis 'tshang mi rgya sems
rtogs na dkar po chig thub yin zer /*

And, on p. 25/3/6 Sa paṅ refers to some “later scholarly ‘dge ba’i bshes gnyen rnamś” who alleged that:

*. . . sems ngo 'phrod pas sangs rgya bar 'dod pa dkar po
chig thub du 'gro ba'i rgyu mtshan de yin gsung /*

Each of these three texts, after having outlined the salient features of the Chinese doctrine, then proceed to give a listing of five works which the Chinese abbot and/or monk had written. To some extent these have been identified in Karmay (1975:153) and Kimura (1981:186-187). Striking is the number of “buzz-words” used in these characterisations; such terms as *rang ngo*, *sems ngo 'phrod*, and *rtogs* are “loaded” with specific connotations found especially in the Rnying ma pa *rdzogs chen* tradition as well as in certain *mahāmudrā* teachings of the Dwags po Bka' brgyud pa schools and sects. Also noteworthy is the linkage effected between the “white panacea” and the teachings of the Chinese, a linkage first found in Nyang ral's text. As far as I am aware, the expression “*dkar po chig thub*” is only to be met with in the Tibetan medical literature and in early Dwags po Bka' brgyud pa texts. As for the former, modern dictionaries indicate it to denote *renshen* (*ginseng*), or the root of the Panax ginseng.⁵ This seems to reflect a later development of the semantic range of this expression, for the *Rgyud bzhi* counts it among the “unmeltable ‘stones’” and it is commented upon as such by Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho in his famous *Vaidūrya sngon po*.⁶ Other Tibetan materia medica texts provide different identifications⁷ and the great forerunner of the Zur-tradition of Tibetan medicine, Mnyam nyid rdo rje (1439-1475) has even

written a “history” (*lo rgyus*) of the *dkar po chig thub* in his celebrated *Bye ba ring bsrel* (Leh, 1975, 1977).⁸ Interestingly, Mnyam nyid rdo rje connects the *dkar po chig thub* drug with the otherwise unknown Nepalese physical Hakā, suggesting thereby that its origin should be sought in Nepal. As far as I am aware, Nepal is not traditionally associated with the production of Panax ginseng; the other species of Panax known to me is the Panax quinquefolius found in North America. It seems therefore that, broadly speaking, we will have to distinguish between at least two possible referents of “*dkar po chig thub*,” an Indo-Nepali-Tibetan one and a Sino-Tibetan one.⁹

As I already mentioned, “*dkar po chig thub*” is found among the early writings of the Dwags po Bka’ brgyud pa masters. Both Sgam po pa bsod nams rin chen (1079-1153)¹⁰ and Zhang g.yu. brag pa¹¹ make use of it when illustrating their *mahāmudrā* theories. Particularly in Sgam po pa’s oeuvre, medical terminology is often resorted to when he describes certain doctrinal positions in a metaphoric way. An excellent topic for future research would be a study of such medical metaphors in light of the fact the Sgam po pa, alias Dwags po lha rje, was a physician of some repute.

Besides these terminological parallels between Nyang ral’s account and the TGRG passage, there is also other evidence which, if it does not point to a direct dependence of Sa paṇ on the former, at least does not rule out the existence of an even earlier common source. In both texts (TGRG p. 25/2/2-3 and Meisezahl 1985: fol. 432 a-b) reports that Kamalaśīla argued against the validity of these illustrations as well as against the substance of the Chinese argument, alleging that “not only is your example false, but the substance (of your argument) is also erroneous.” (*khyed kyi dpe nor bar ma zad / don yang ’khrul te . .*). The exact wording is also reproduced in the TGRG p. 25/2/4-5. These and similar instances, which could be multiplied *ad infinitum*, leave no doubt that Sa paṇ was simply transmitting a received tradition and that he was by no means its originator. Of course, Nyang ral does not connect the *dkar po chig thub* notion of the Chinese with his Dwags po Bka’ brgyud pa contemporaries as Sa paṇ has done. This would, however, not appear illegitimate since the Dwags po Bka’ brgyud pa did make use of it.

Sa paṇ lists his sources for his account of the “Bsam yas

debate" at TGRG p. 25/3/6-4/2.¹² There he refers to "another testament," the *Rgyal bzhed*, *Dbā' bzhed* (sic), and the *'Ba'-bzhed* (sic).¹³ Van der Kuijp (1985a: appendix, originally submitted in 1982) has dealt with the various quotations of the *Sba bshed* in the later Tibetan historical literature, and there seems little point in reproducing those findings here. Suffice it to say that the newly discovered cursive *sba bzhed* manuscript as edited in Mgon po rgyal mtshan (1980: 72-75) contains a verbatim account of Sa paṅ's TGRG which is prefixed by the statement "Furthermore, according to one tradition" (*yang lugs gcig la*). Abbreviated versions of this account (and explicitly cited from the "*Sba bzhed*") are also found in Spos khang pa rin chen rgyal mtshan's *Sdom pa gsum gyi rab tu dbye ba'i gzhung lugs legs par bshad pa*, Vol. 2 (Thimphu, 1979), p. 295 which was completed in 1423 (water-female-hare), and in Dpa' bo gtsug lag's *Mkhas pa'i dga' ston*. This would seem to indicate that the association of *dkar po chig thub* with the Chinese goes back to pre-*phyi dar* Tibetan literature, and that there just might be some substance to Sa paṅ's linkage of some of the Dwags po Bka' brgyud-pa doctrines with those promulgated by the Chinese in eighth century Tibet. In this connection, it will be essential to try and ascertain the exact referents of "*dkar po chig thub*" as one cannot of course *a priori* exclude the good possibility that it was the terminological ambiguity of "*dkar po chig thub*" which led to Sa paṅ's association. It may thus very well turn out that the referent of the "*dkar po chig thub*" used by the Dwags po Bka' brgyud pa was quite different from that of the Chinese.

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- SSBB *Sa skya bka' 'bum*, Sde dge edition, comp. Bsod nams rgya mtsho, 15 Vols., Tokyo: The Toyo Bunko, 1968-69.
- TGRB *Sa skya Paṅḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan*, *Thub pa'i dgongs pa rab tu gsal ba*, SSBB 5, pp. 1ff.
- Tshe tan Zhabs drung (1982), *Bstan rtsis kun las btus pa*, Xining: Qinghai People's Publishing House.

NOTES

1. For the available prints of, and commentaries to, this text, see D. Jackson (1983: 6-7) and (1983a: 4-5); for an additional commentary and a cursive *dbu med* manuscript, see van der Kuijp (1985: 88-89).

2. On him and his life, see Dung dkar Blo bzang 'phrin las (1981: 126 ff., 445 ff.), where he gives the alternative birth-date of 1122. He also mentions that Tshal pa kun dga' rdo rje (1309-1364) had written his biography, but that it was not available to him. See, furthermore, Roerich (1979: 711-715) and 'Gos lo tsa-ba's *Deb ther sngon po*, Smad cha, Chengdu: Sechuan People's Publishing House, 1985, pp. 832-836.

3. I am inclined to accept the latter dates as several of his biographies associate him with Śākyaśribhadra who, having come to Tibet in 1204, apparently took part in the ceremonies for Nyang ral's funeral; see Dargyay (1979:101).

4. Despite recent reports to the contrary, I think it necessary to emphasize that Sa paṅ never associates Hwa shang Mahāyāna with the actual “debates”. A complete listing of references to Sa Paṅ's notes on Chinese Buddhism and Buddhists is provided in van der Kuijp (1985a:note 16).

5. See, for instance, the *Rgya bod ming mdzod*, Lanzhou: Gansu People's Publishing House, 1979, p. 23. It is, however, not listed in Y.N. Roerich's *Tibetan-Russian-English Dictionary with Sanskrit Parallels*, Issue 1, Moscow: Nauka Publishers, 1983, p. 95.

6. See his *Gso ba rig pa'i bstan bcos sman bla'i dgongs rgyan rgyud bzhi'i gsal byed vaidūrya sngon mallika*, Stod cha, Lhasa: Tibetan People's Publishing House, 1982 (Sde dge edition), p. 255. This passage consists of his comment

to the *Rgyud bzhi*, *Bshad rgyud*, chapter twenty, Lhasa: Tibetan People's Publishing House, 1982 (Sde dge edition), p. 67: *dkar po sbal rgyab dkar po chig thub dang // smug po chig thub la sogs de dang 'dra //*. A garbled (?) version of these two lines is found in Yuthok's *Treatise on Tibetan Medicine*, ed. L. Chandra, New Delhi, 1968, p. 290 in the *Ming don brda sprod rnam lnga* which omits *dkar po chig thub!* The verse of the *Rgyud bzhi* is reproduced in Dil dmar dge bshes bstan 'dzin phun tshogs' *Bdud rtsi sman gyi rnam dbye ngo bo nus pa ming rgyas par bshad pa dri med shel phreng*, Leh, 1983, p. 75. He glosses *dkar po chig thub* by "a white spear-head" (*dkar po mdung rtse*). According to Tshe tan zhabs drung (1982:276), Dil dmar dge bshes completed this work in 1840.

7. See, for instance, the recent *Gso rig snying bsdu skya rengs gsar pa*, Lhasa: Tibetan People's Publishing House, 1974, pp. 194-195 and Dil dmar dge bshes' text (see above note 6) pp. 257-258. Note too that 'Jam dpal rdo rje in *An Illustrated Tibeto-Mongolian Materia Medica of Ayurveda*, ed. L. Chandra, New Delhi, 1971, p. 146 also lists *dkar po chig thub* under the heading of "potion" (*thang sman*) and remarks on the difficulty of establishing its precise identification. This should be a matter of concern as he evinces a thorough knowledge of the traditional repertoire of Chinese drugs.

8. This work is, however, not available to me. The information given here is based on a chapter of this text which enjoyed separate circulation in the mountainous regions of northern Nepal. It bears the title of *Sman dkar gyi lo rgyus . . . Zur mkhar ba'i khyad chos*, consists of two folia, and was filmed by my friend Chr. Cüppers of the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project.

9. An admittedly cursory perusal of several Dunhuang manuscripts dealing with medicine has thus far not yielded the term *dkar po chig thub*.

10. See, for instance, the *Rje phag mo gru pa'i dris lan* in *The Collected Works of Sgam po pa bsod nams rin chen*, Vol. 1, New Delhi, 1975, p. 472.

11. It occurs in his highly provocative *Phyag rgya chen po'i lam mchog mthar thug* in the *Gdams ngag mdzod*, ed. Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, Vol. V, New Delhi, 1971, p. 769. Later Sa skya pa scholarship has identified this text as one of the sources for Sa skya Paṇḍita's critical remarks in his *Sdom gsum rab dbye*.

12. Jackson (1982:93) has omitted the '*Ba bzhed* (sic) from his translation. The TGRG p. 25/4/1 reads: . . . 'dir yi ge mangs pas ma bris te / which Jackson renders as ". . . (but) since I have already detailed much of this, I will write no more." I think this should be understood somewhat differently. In this passage, Sa paṇ comments on several other sources for the aftermath of the "debate" and declines to reproduce their readings. Hence, I understand this statement to mean: ". . . since it would get too wordy here (in my account), I have not written (about them in detail)."

13. The *Skyes bu dam pa rnam la spring ba'i yi ge*, SSBB 5, p. 332/1/4 adds "chronicles" (*lo rgyus rnam*) to his list of sources for his version of the "debate", and provides better readings for the three *Bzhed*-s: *Rgyal bzhed*, *Dpa' bzhed* (sic), and '*Bangs bzhed*.