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Fighting for the truth – *satyadvaya* and the debates provoked by Mi pham’s *Nor bu ke ta ka*¹

Markus Viehbeck

With its roots in the rich Indian tradition of religio-philosophical disputation, the phenomenon of debating in Tibet is an integral element of monastic scholarship as it developed on the plateau. In the course of monastic education specific types of debates are utilised as a heuristic method to facilitate a student’s entrance into the intricacies of Buddhist doctrine.² Beyond the frame of everyday monastic courtyard debating, debates between different factions and schools serve not only as a pedagogical means, but often exhibit a more antagonistic nature. While Tibetan history is full of accounts of – at times very fierce – personal disputations, there are no records informing us about the exact development of these. As opponents were not always proximate in terms of space and time, debates also materialised in the form of polemical texts, composed to refute a (living or dead) opponent. These texts came to form an

¹ This article is the substantially revised and enlarged version of a paper titled “Die Lehre von *satyadvaya* in ’Ju Mi phams *Nor bu ke ta ka*” that was presented at the Conference of German Orientalists (Deutscher Orientalistentag) in Freiburg in September 2007 and published in 2009 (Viehbeck 2009). I would like to thank Helmut Tauscher, Anne MacDonald, Dorji Wangchuk, Birgit Kellner, Patrick Mc Allister, and Susanne Kimm for their numerous comments and corrections. The research for this article was conducted within the project “Tibetan Madhyamaka Exegesis: Later Developments” (project P19597), headed by Helmut Tauscher and funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF). The final version of this article was completed within the project “Reasoning in South Asian and Tibetan Buddhism” under the leadership of Birgit Kellner, as part of the Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context,” Heidelberg University.

² See Dreyfus 2003b for a detailed description of the role of debate in the monastic education system.

independent genre of Tibetan literature.³ It is in texts of this genre where we find recorded not only rather eristic forms of criticism, but also the expression of views that contributed to and reflected the most fundamental doctrinal differences that evolved in the different religio-philosophical traditions.⁴

In this paper, I intend to give a few glimpses into one specific controversy, a series of debates that originated towards the end of the nineteenth century subsequent to the composition of 'Ju Mi pham's *Nor bu ke ta ka*. Providing a comprehensive picture of these debates is not only very difficult in general, but virtually impossible in the frame of a short article. I will therefore limit my focus to the discussion of a single concept, the doctrine of *satyadvaya*.⁵

1. Introduction

On September ninth 1878,⁶ 'Ju Mi pham (1846–1912)⁷ completed a text he called *Nor bu ke ta ka* (NK),⁸ a commentary on the ninth

³ Lopez 1996 gives a short description of 'polemics' as a literary genre. A more extensive discussion is found in Cabezón & Dargyay 2007: 11ff., together with a sketch of the history of polemical literature (pp. 18ff.).

⁴ As Cabezón has pointed out, studying polemical texts can therefore lead to a fuller picture of the richness and variegation of Tibetan scholastic culture, which can be easily overlooked when dealing with self-contained depictions of Buddhist doctrine by individual authors; cf. Cabezón 1995: 645ff.

⁵ It should be noted that the present article, concerned only with a single concept and focussed more on the starting point of the debates, the *Nor bu ke ta ka*, is preliminary, and that some of its assessments are tentative. More details of these debates, in particular within the controversy between 'Ju Mi pham and Dpa' ris Rab gsal, are discussed in my Ph.D. thesis, see Viehbeck 2012.

⁶ The date is given according to Schuh 1973: 115.

⁷ If not stated otherwise, biographical data is given according to the database of The Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (www.tbrc.org); all data was retrieved on January 23, 2009.

⁸ The full title of the text is *Shes rab kyi le'u'i tshig don go sla bar rnam par bshad pa nor bu ke ta ka*. A translation of the complete text into French can be found in Arguillère 2004. Translations of important passages of the NK are also found in Lipman 1981, Williams 2000a and 2000b, Pettit 1999,

chapter of the *Bodhi(sattva)caryāvatāra* (BCA) and as such dealing *inter alia* with the many of the key concepts of Madhyamaka philosophy. Given Mi pham's general status as the most eminent philosopher of his own school, it is not surprising that this work became the main source in the exegesis of the BCA in the Rnying ma tradition.⁹ Equal appreciation of his commentary was not shown by scholars of other traditions, in particular those of the Dge lugs school, and it seems that Mi pham himself may have anticipated criticism: in the colophon of the NK, Mi pham mentions that he had received explanations from his teacher Rdza Dpal sprul (1808–1887) and consulted all Indian commentaries that were available in Tibet, as well as the major Tibetan works.¹⁰ Thus it seems that Mi pham made an attempt to legitimise his often innovative interpretations by grounding them on the lineage of explanations of his own tradition, as well as on the statements of authoritative Indian masters. By mentioning the Tibetan commentaries, he further acknowledges other exegetical traditions in Tibet. But this expressed admission of other commentarial traditions of course did not prevent him from deviating from them.

Mi pham's commentary differs considerably from the mainstream interpretation of the Dge lugs school¹¹ and therefore evoked a downpour of polemical letters (*rtsod yig*)¹² sent by members of

Dreyfus 2003a, Phuntsho 2005, and Duckworth 2008.

⁹ In the Rnying ma tradition's monastic educational system special emphasis is laid on the study of the NK as can be seen, for example, in the contemporary curriculum of the Snga 'gyur Rnying ma Institute, the *bshad grwa* of Rnam grol gling monastery in Bylakuppe, South India.

¹⁰ Cf. the respective passage in the colophon of the NK 47b5–6: *gnas lnga rig pa'i pañ chen dpal gyi mtshan can las tshul 'di'i bshad khrid legs par nos shing / bod du bzhugs pa'i rgya 'grel thams cad dang / bod kyi mkhas pas brtsams pa'i legs bshad phal che ba kun kyang mthong zhing / [...]*.

¹¹ It is of course simplistic to speak of a 'mainstream interpretation' – of any tradition. Nevertheless, most Dge lugs authors seem to share common ideas, and the BCA commentary by Rgyal tshab Dar ma rin chen can be seen as a representative model for many of these (see *Rgyal sras 'jug ngogs*, or Sweet 1977 for a translation).

¹² As Cabezón (Cabezón & Dargyay 2007: 12f.) rightly mentions, the whole genre can be divided into texts that criticise and texts that respond

this tradition to disprove his understanding of the BCA's content. This was later depicted by (Mi pham's opponent) Dpa' ris Blo bzang rab gsal (1840–1912) in the following apocalyptic scenario:

[Heavy] monsoon rain clouds of impeccable scriptures piled up and the world was shaken by the roar of a thousand thunders of disproof; the swords of the red lightening of logic were flashing, crossing [each other], and the hail and thunderbolts of harmful meteors were crashing down, eager to refute claims, etc.¹³

Mi pham was criticised for the views presented in the NK on various occasions for more than twenty-five years, both by way of these polemical letters and in personal debate.¹⁴ The most outstanding among these disputes are the encounters between Mi pham and the two Dge lugs scholars Brag dkar Sprul sku Dpal ldan bstan 'dzin snyan grags (1866–1928) and Dpa' ris Blo bzang rab gsal. Mi pham composed a response to a critical letter written by Brag dkar Sprul sku, which gave rise to two more polemical letters from Brag dkar Sprul sku. He also answered a letter from Dpa' ris Rab gsal and again Rab gsal's response to this letter. Thus a debate manifested, which is preserved in the extant exchanged letters of the two

to that criticism. Examples of the first are *rtsod yig*, *dgag pa*, *dgag yig*, etc., while the latter contain the element of an answer, e.g., *rtsod lan*, *dgag lan*, *brgal lan* or *rtsod spong*, *rtsod bzlog*.

¹³ *Ga bur chu rgyun* 151.5–10: *rnam dag lung gi dus kyi char sprin 'khrigs shing sun 'byin 'brug stong ldir bas sa chen 'dar / rigs pa'i glog dmar mtshon cha bsnol mar 'khyugs pa nas khas blangs kyi bsal ba sogs spro ba'i gnod byed gnam lcags kyi thog ser bab pa la /*.

¹⁴ The reconstruction of the exact historical events is a rather difficult matter: a historical work that deals with the precise course of events is not known to me and the information that can be gained from the scattered remarks in different *rnam thar*, *encomia*, etc., is very vague. One also has to be aware of the genre-immanent shortcomings when using such texts as historical sources. There seem to have been a couple of actual debates between Mi pham and his opponents, the encounter between him and 'Ja' pa Mdo sngags being probably the most famous one. For the debate with 'Ja' pa Mdo sngags, see Schuh 1973: XXXI; for an overall overview of the (personal) debates, see Phuntsho 2005: 52–54. More precise information can be gained from the colophons and the introductions of the polemical letters themselves, as will be shown below.

parties.¹⁵

¹⁵ The following historical scenario can be reconstructed from the colophons and the introductions of the exchanged letters: Mi pham wrote his NK on September 9, 1878 (Schuh 1973: 115), which was then criticised by Brag dkar Sprul sku in his *Zab mo dbu ma'i gnad cung zad brjod pa blo gsal dga' ba'i gtam* (*Blo gsal dga' ba'i gtam*), written when he was twenty-three years old (i.e., ca. 1888). Mi pham replied to this letter with his *Brgal lan nyin byed snang ba*, which he finished on June 11, 1889 (Schuh 1973: 116). As reported by Brag dkar Sprul sku in his *Mi pham rnam rgyal gyis rtsod pa'i yang lan log lta'i khong khrag 'don pa'i skyug sman* (fol. 3aff.; abbr. *Skyug sman*) it was after receiving this reply that Brag dkar Sprul sku sent a second letter titled '*Jam dbyangs rnam rgyal gyi 'dod tshul la klan ka bgyis pa zab mo'i gtam* (*Zab mo'i gtam*), and later a third letter that was just mentioned, namely, the *Skyug sman*. The colophon of neither of these responses mentions a date of composition, and no further answers to these texts from Mi pham's side are known.

In 1897, Mi pham was further criticised by Blo bzang rab gsal who, in preparation of the actual debate letter, wrote a short letter called *Rigs 'phrul dpyid kyi pho nya* (*Pho nya*) on the third day of third Tibetan month. The actual letter, '*Jam dpal dbyangs kyi dgongs rgyan rigs pa'i gzi 'bar gdong lnga'i sgra dbyangs* (*Ju lan*), was completed on the fifth day of the ninth Tibetan month in the same year, but reached Mi pham only in the twelfth Tibetan month of the Water-Tiger year, hence at the beginning of the Gregorian year 1903 (see *Rab lan* fol. 2a). Mi pham finished his response entitled *Gzhan gyis brtsad pa'i lan mdor bsdus pa rigs lam rab gsal de nyid snang byed* (*Rab lan*) on the eighteenth day of the fourth Tibetan month in 1903, and it reached Blo bzang rab gsal on the eighth day of the seventh Tibetan month in the same year (*Ga bur chu rgyun* p. 157). Blo bzang rab gsal also wrote a polemical letter in reply to this, the *Shes ldan yid kyi gdung sel rigs lam ga bur chu rgyun* (*Ga bur chu rgyun*), dated on the third day of the twelfth Tibetan month in the same year, which would be the beginning of 1904 according to Gregorian calculation. Mi pham confirmed the reception of this letter with a short letter in 1905 (date and month not specified, see the appendix to the *Rab lan* 187b) and answered it with another short letter (untitled and undated, see the appendix to the *Rab lan* 187bff.), thus ending the discussion between him and Blo bzang rab gsal.

In his last text, *Ga bur chu rgyun* (p. 152), Blo bzang rab gsal also mentions another polemical letter called *Rgol ngan 'joms pa'i rdo rje pha lam*, supposedly sent to Mi pham as a criticism; neither its author nor any other details are known to me.

Another critical work, called '*Ju mi pham 'jam dbyangs rnam rgyal rgya mtsho'i rtsod yig gi lan blo dman snying gi gdung sel ga bur thig pa'i spun zla*

Reasons for the fierce criticism Mi pham's NK received, other than the above-mentioned discrepancy in fundamental doctrinal and exegetical matters, are difficult to determine. It is commonly accepted that socio-political issues played a certain role in these disputes:¹⁶ Mi pham is seen as one of the most prominent representatives of the "*ris med* movement," a complex network of individuals with varying agendas, rather than a self-conscious and unified movement, which emerged in Eastern Tibet in the nineteenth century and used its claim for religious plurality to establish itself as a counterbalance to the supremacy of the Dge lugs school. In this role, he was not only a philosophical, but also a political rival to his Dge lugs opponents.¹⁷ But even though the rivalry is assumed, it is

(*Ga bur thig pa'i spun zla*), was written by Ldan ma Blo bzang chos dbyings (1890–1941), who – just like Brag dkar Sprul sku – was associated with 'Bras spungs monastery in Central Tibet. No date of composition is mentioned for this text either, and Mi pham did not write a response to it. If the life dates mentioned in Chos dbyings' short biography (see *Ldan ma chos dbyings rnam thar*) are correct, he probably wrote his criticism only at the end of Mi pham's life or even after his death (1912). The text itself mentions the debate between Mi pham and Brag dkar Sprul sku and also Mi pham's *Brgal lan nyin byed snang ba* (p. 131), but not the debate between Mi pham and Blo bzang rab gsal.

¹⁶ Cf., for example, Schuh 1973: XXXI. The connection between philosophical dispute and political constraint is obvious throughout Tibetan history, clearly expressed, for example, in the sanctions the Central Tibetan Dge lugs government enacted after its rise to power during the time of the fifth Dalai Lama. Commonly known is the ban of Jo nang and certain Bka' brgyud texts and the conversion of their monasteries to Dge lugs institutions. Less known is the fact that scholars from the Dge lugs tradition itself who were seen as diverging from the mainstream, were also the target of censorship, as Cabezón (Cabezón & Dargyay 2007: 31f.) has reported. The only places where such censorship could be undermined were the eastern regions A mdo and Khams, where the influence of the central government was weaker and where texts critical of the Dge lugs mainstream, such as the works of Go rams pa, were circulating.

¹⁷ A comprehensive study of the various aspects of *ris med* remains a desideratum. Previous accounts tend to focus on individual facets. Smith (Smith 2001: 237ff.), for example, describes *ris med* more from the viewpoint of its religious ideals, as a movement that developed against sectarianism and bigotry. Schuh emphasises its political dimension, presenting the *ris med*

very difficult to find actual traces of the socio-political background in the polemical letters exchanged. The term ‘*ris med*,’ for example, appears nine times in Dpa’ ris Rab gsal’s three letters to Mi pham, albeit never to designate a group of political opponents, but almost always in its most inclusive sense, meaning “all, without distinction, without bias.”

The texts themselves discuss a whole range of topics from rather trivial issues like mistakes in spelling or grammar¹⁸ to the most essential matters like the nature of reality. I will discuss in the next couple of pages one of these main issues, namely, the doctrine of *satyadvaya*,¹⁹ arguably the most central concept in Tibetan Madhyamaka philosophy. In doing so, I focus on the starting point of the debates, i.e., Mi pham’s NK, which I read with support from its commentary, the *Nor bu’i sgron me*, written by Zhe chen Padma rnam rgyal (1871–1926).²⁰ Further material from the actual debates is added to specify certain problems and to provide an (admittedly brief) look at the later Dge lugs critics.

movement as that of a politically weak social group against the politically strong (cf. Schuh 1976: LVI and Schuh 1973: XXXf).

¹⁸ The fact that considerable effort is spent on discussing those insignificant problems in itself leads to the conclusion that the opponent is attacked not only with the intent to correct a perceived philosophical misunderstanding, but also simply for being the (political *and* philosophical) opponent.

¹⁹ In secondary literature, *satyadvaya* is usually translated as “two truths” or “two realities,” thus emphasising either its epistemological or its ontological aspect. For a detailed discussion of these two aspects and the problem of rendering *satya*, see Tauscher 1995: 200–214. As will be shown below, both aspects are important when discussing Mi pham’s interpretation. I therefore use the original Sanskrit term instead of a translation.

For an analysis of the doctrine of *satyadvaya* that contrasts the thought of Tsong kha pa with that of Go rams pa, see Thakchoe 2007.

²⁰ Padma rnam rgyal, the fourth incarnation of the Zhe chen Rgyal tshab, was one of Mi pham’s chief disciples and, as far as I know, the only one who composed a commentary on the NK. The full title of his work is *Spyod ’jug sher le’i ’bru ’grel kun mkhyen bla ma’i gsung las btus pa rab gsal nor bu’i sgron me*.

1.1 *Satyadvaya in the BCA and Mi pham's interpretation*

In the BCA, Śāntideva concisely formulates his understanding of *satyadvaya* in the second verse of the ninth chapter:

saṃvṛti and *paramārtha*,²¹

²¹ Translating these two technical terms poses some problems. Well known are the three definitions of *saṃvṛti* that are given in *Prasannapadā* XXIV.8 (see Seyfort Ruegg 2002), the *locus classicus* for the meaning of *saṃvṛti* in Madhyamaka. In the first, *saṃvṛti* is presented as having the meaning of “concealing.” Not-knowing (*ajñāna*), due to covering the reality of all things (*sarvapaḍārthattvāvachchādana*), is equated with it. In the second, *saṃvṛti* is presented as meaning “causing each other to come into being” (*parasparasambhavana*); it is dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The third meaning given is “convention” or “wordly designation” (*lokavyavahāra*); cf. Nagao 1992: 14ff. Prajñākaramati in his *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā* (BCAP) starts his commentary on BCA IX.2 following Candrakīrti's first definition: *saṃvṛti* is paraphrased with ignorance (*avidyā*) and delusion (*moha*), cf. BCAP p. 352.6. In his subsequent explanation he also makes reference to Candrakīrti's other two definitions, i.e., *saṃvṛti* is described as “having the form of a thing that dependently originated” (*pratītyasamutpannaṃ vasturūpam*), which is also called “worldly convention” (*lokasaṃvṛti*), cf. BCAP pp. 352.13 and 353.1.

Also for *paramārtha* three meanings are traditionally mentioned, employing Bhāviveka's *Tarkajvāla*. Using the different possibilities of interpreting the Sanskrit compound, *paramārtha* is explained as, first, highest object (*karmadhāraya*), second, object of the highest [gnosis] (*tatpuruṣa*), and third, that which has the highest as [its] object (*bahuvrīhi*), cf. Tauscher 1995: 271. The last interpretation takes *paramārtha* as the subject, while the previous two understand it as the object. A common translation which covers both of these principal aspects – *paramārtha* as subject and object – is “the absolute.” Recreating the contrast between *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti*, *saṃvṛti* is then often translated as “relative,” or “conventional,” the latter being also the more general and older meaning of *saṃvṛti*; see Nagao 1992: 13ff. Translating *saṃvṛti* in this way has the advantage that it can be understood as an object as well as a subject; it can refer to the concealing – and in this sense conventional – ignorance, as well as its object. On the other hand, it has the disadvantage that the literal meaning of “concealing” that was emphasised by Candrakīrti and followed by Prajñākaramati in his explanations to the BCA gets lost. As I cannot think of an elegant English expression that includes all the above-mentioned aspects of *saṃvṛti*, I simply use the Sanskrit term. For aesthetic and practical reasons I also use “*paramārtha*”

These are considered as the two *satyas*.
 Reality (*tattva*) is not the sphere of cognition;
 Cognition is said to be *saṃvṛti*.²²

The second part of the verse led to considerable controversy in Tibetan scholastic circles, which centred on the question whether the statement “reality (*tattva*) is not the sphere of cognition” is of definitive (*nīthārtha*) or interpretable meaning (*neyārtha*).²³ In the following, I will concentrate on the first part of the verse, the actual determination of the two *satyas*. Mi pham explains this part in the following manner:

It is thus: all these phenomena (*dharmā*) comprising afflicted and purified [classes of phenomena]²⁴ (i.e., all phenomena of *saṃsāra* and *nīrvāṇa*) **are considered**²⁵ to exist **as the two, *saṃvṛtisatya***, mere ap-

when *saṃvṛti* and *paramārtha* are given as a pair of two contrasting terms, but I render it as “absolute” when only *paramārtha* is discussed.

- ²² Tib.: *kun rdzob dang ni don dam ste //*
'di ni bden pa gnyis su 'dod //
don dam blo yi spyod yul min //
blo ni kun rdzob yin par brjod //; BCA (D 31a1; P 35a4).
 Skt.: *saṃvṛtiḥ paramārthaś ca satyadvayam idaṃ matam /*
buddher agocaras tattvaṃ buddhiḥ saṃvṛtir ucyate //; BCAP 352.3–4.

Note that there is a slight discrepancy between the Sanskrit version and the Tibetan version. While Sanskrit “*tattva*” is usually rendered in Tibetan as “*de nyid*,” the Tibetan text reads “*don dam*” at this point, which is the Tibetan equivalent of Sanskrit “*paramārtha*.”

The Dunhuang version of the BCA as it has been emended by Akira Saito reads as follows:

don dam pa dang ni kun rdzob ste //
'di ni bden pa gnyis su bshad //
don dam blo'i spyod yul myin /
blo dang sgra ni kun rdzob yin //; cf. Saito 1993: 2.

²³ Phuntsho 2005: 166ff. discusses the differences between the Dge lugs tradition and Mi pham when interpreting these two verse lines.

²⁴ Note that *kun byang* is the abbreviated form of *kun nas nyon mongs pa* (*saṃkleśa*) and *rnam par byang ba* (*vyavadāna*).

²⁵ Here and below, bold print marks words of a basic text that appear in the context of explanations on the basic text.

pearances, phenomena (*dharmin*) as many as there are (*chos can ji snyed pa*), and *paramārthasatya*, emptiness, reality (*dharmatā*) as it [actually] is (*chos nyid ji lta ba*). [...] Here, *saṃvṛti* is the mode of appearance [of phenomena]: while [they] do not exist in the manner of [having] the nature (*rang bzhin*) of arising and so forth, [they] appear as such, similar to an illusion, a dream or strands of hair [seen by someone affected by floaters]. *paramārtha*, on the other hand, is the mode of existence: when the nature of those appearances is examined, it is completely free from arising and so forth.²⁶

According to Mi pham, all phenomena, i.e., all knowables (*shes bya*), are bifurcated through the scheme of the two *satyas*. Their appearing aspect, the appearances “as known in the world, that is, in a mere non-analytical and naive manner,”²⁷ is *saṃvṛtisatya*, whereas their empty nature, which is seen “if the nature of those appearances of a certain phenomenon (*dharmin*) is investigated well by non-erring insight,”²⁸ is *paramārthasatya*. The doctrine of *satyadvaya* is formulated as a distinction of two modes: the mode of appearance (*snang tshul*) and the mode of existence (*gnas tshul*). In this model of *satyadvaya* the two *satyas* are determined to be “identical in nature and different with regard to the characteristic distinction”²⁹ (*ngo bo gcig la ldog pa tha dad*),³⁰ a formulation that

²⁶ NK 2b1–3: *'di ltar kun byang gis bsdus pa'i chos 'di dag thams cad la chos can ji snyed pa snang tsam kun rdzob kyi bden pa dang / chos nyid ji lta ba stong nyid don dam gyi bden pa gnyis su gnas par 'dod de / [...] de la kun rdzob ni skye sogs kyi rang bzhin du med bzhin der snang ba sgyu ma dang rmi lam skra shad lta bu'i snang tshul 'di yin la / snang ba de'i rang bzhin brtags na skye sogs kyis rnam par dben pa'i gnas tshul don dam pa yin te /*

²⁷ *Nor bu'i sgron me 4a5: ma brtags nyams dga' tsam du 'jig rten na ji ltar grags pa.*

²⁸ *Nor bu'i sgron me 4b5–6: chos can snang ba de'i rang bzhin la phyin ci ma log pa'i shes rab kyi legs par brtags na.*

²⁹ I borrow this translation of the Tibetan technical terms from Tauscher 2003: 235, where it is used in the context of Phya pa Chos kyi seng ge's determination of the two *satyas*.

³⁰ Mi pham himself does not use this exact terminology in the NK, but he formulates the principle that is expressed by these terms by way of a negative statement: “Consequently, if [one thinks that] also the two *satyas* of that kind are different on the absolute level, or identical on the conventional level, it will be disproven due to the four respective faults.” See NK 2b4–5: *des na de*

is most common among the Dge lugs interpreters of Madhyamaka philosophy (and was often criticised by Tsong kha pa's opponents like Śākya mchog ldan and Go rams pa).³¹

In his various Madhyamaka works,³² Mi pham emphasises that one in general has to distinguish two different usages of the term *satyadvaya*.³³ He states, for example, in the *Rab lan*:

Two different ways of establishing the two *satyas* are explained in the great scriptures: in the first [way], the mode of existence, i.e., the non-existence of arising, is designated as *paramārtha* and the mode of appearance, i.e., the conventional, as *saṃvṛti*. In the second [way],

lta bu'i bden pa gnyis po de'ang don dam par tha dad pa dang / kun rdzob tu gcig yin na skyon bzhi bzhi dag gis gnod par 'gyur ba.

In other texts, Mi pham clearly determines the relation between the two *satyas* as *gnas tshul* and *snang tshul* with the technical expression “*ngo bo gcig la ldog pa tha dad*” (see, e.g., *Gzhan stong seng ge'i nga ro* fol. 3a, or Pettit 1999: 417 for a translation), and his commentator leaves no doubt that this relationship underlies Mi pham's explications in the NK (see *Nor bu'i sgron me* fol. 5b). Further, Mi pham defends the principle of “*ngo bo gcig la ldog pa tha dad*” in his *Brgal lan nyin byed snang ba*, when he explains that “both, emptiness of true [existence] and dependently arising appearances, i.e., the [respective] counterpart of the distinction in two such *satyas*, are different merely with regard to [their] characteristic distinction, but [...] with regard to suchness that is to be known individually, i.e., the inexpressible indivisibility of *satya*, the two *satyas* will come to be identical in nature” (see *Brgal lan nyin byed snang ba* 31b3–6: *de 'dra'i bden gnyis su phye ba'i ya gyal gyi bden stong dang rten 'byung gi snang ba gnyis po ldog pa tsam gyi cha nas tha dad kyang / [...] bden pa dbyer med brjod bral so so rang gis rig par bya ba'i de bzhin nyid der bden gnyis ngo bo gcig par 'gyur ro //*).

³¹ Cf. Tauscher 1995: 192–194.

³² See, for example, *Gzhi'i le'u* 2b4–3a1 (I would like to thank Dorji Wangchuk, University of Hamburg, who brought this passage to my attention), *Gzhan stong seng ge'i nga ro* 1b3–3a5 (see Pettit 1999: 415ff. for a translation), *Brgal lan nyin byed snang ba* 34a2–34b2, his commentary on the *Madhyamakālaṅkāra* (see Duckworth 2008: 6) and the *Gsung sgron* (Duckworth 2008: 11). Phuntscho 2005: 114 further mentions Mi-pham's *Don nam nges shes rab ral gri* and *Nge shes sgron me*.

³³ For Mi pham's twofold approach in determining the two *satyas*, see also Duckworth 2010. Duckworth 2011 gives further a more general introduction to the thought of Mi pham.

both, object and subject, of [a perception where the mode of] existence and [the mode of] appearance are in accord, are designated as *paramārtha*, and both, object and subject, of [a perception where the mode of existence and the mode of appearance] are in discord, [are designated] as *saṃvṛti*. This [latter way of establishing the two *satyas*] is done with regard to the conventional level.³⁴

The first model, with *satyadvaya* conceived in terms of *gnas tshul* and *snang tshul*, operates from an ontological point of view, investigating the nature of the appearances. Here, the relation of the two *satyas* is defined as “identical in nature and different with regard to the characteristic distinction” (*ngo bo gcig la ldog pa tha dad*). The second model is concerned with the epistemological aspect: truthful³⁵ cognition and its object are described as *paramārtha*, whereas false cognition and its object are described as *saṃvṛti*. Their relation is explained as “separate in a way that identity is excluded” (*gcig pa bkag pa'i tha dad*), an explication that was also accepted by earlier (non-Dge lugs) Mādhyamika like Rngog Lo tsā ba, Rong ston, Dol po pa,³⁶ and Go rams pa,³⁷ with regard to the conventional

³⁴ *Rab lan* 74a3–5: *gzhung chen po rnam su bden gnyis kyi 'jog tshul mi 'dra ba gnyis bshad pa'i dang po gnas tshul skye med la don dam dang / snang tshul tha snyad la kun rdzob kyi ming gis bstan pa de yin la / gnyis pa gnas snang mthun par gyur pa'i yul dang yul can gnyis ka la don dam dang / mi mthun par gyur pa'i yul dang yul can gnyis ka la kun rdzob kyi ming gis bstan pa ni tha snyad nye bar bzung ba'i dbang du yin la /*

³⁵ ‘Truthful’ is used here to capture the explanation Mi pham has given above. It describes a cognition and its object, where the mode of existence and appearance are in accordance, or, in other words, where a thing appears exactly the way it exists.

³⁶ Cf. Tauscher 1995: 191f. In his *Gzhan stong khas len seng ge'i nga ro* (fol. 3a, or Pettit 1999: 417 for a translation), Mi pham explains that the *gzhan stong* interpretation of emptiness (mainly propagated by Dol po pa) must, by all means, be seen in the light of the second model of the two *satyas*, which proceeds from the perspective of truthful and false cognition.

³⁷ Go rams pa treats this topic, for example, in *Lta ba ngan sel* fol. 47b–48a and *Dbu ma spyi don* fol. 56bf, where he ends with Sa paṅ's conclusion that on the absolute level the categories of identity (*gcig pa*) and difference (*tha dad*) do not make sense, but on the conventional level the two *satyas* are accepted as “separate in a way that identity is excluded” (*gcig pa bkag pa'i tha dad*); cf. *Dbu ma spyi don* 58bf.

level. Whereas in the latter model the two *satyas* are qualitatively different, one referring to the conceptual consciousness of ordinary people and the other to the gnosis of the Āryas, and exclude each other, in the first model *saṃvṛtisatya* is a means for entering the absolute³⁸ and ultimately the two *satyas* are not separated, in the sense that appearances and emptiness are united.³⁹

As clear from the earlier citation, Mi pham stresses the first model in his NK, explaining the two *satyas* as *snang tshul* and *gnas tshul*, i.e., appearances and emptiness. In a later passage in the NK, Mi pham clarifies the purpose of this distinction:

The establishment of *satya* as twofold is a mere door for establishing the disciples on the path. On the absolute level, there is also no division of *satya* into two [aspects].⁴⁰

³⁸ Cf. *Nor bu'i sgron me* 6b2f. Referring to *Madhyamakāvatāra* VI.80 (MAv 175), *saṃvṛtisatya* is explained as a means (*thabs/lupaya*) for entering *paramārthasatya* and *paramārthasatya* is explained as its result (*thabs byung/lupeya*). As Candrakīrti clarifies in his commentary, the path to the absolute can only be taught by way of using linguistic conventions. In this sense, the conventional (*tha snyad*, here used as a synonym for *kun rdzob*) must be accepted to approach the absolute: the conventional becomes a means for the absolute; cf. MAvBh 178. Further, Mi pham points out in *Rab lan* 77b5ff. that the very appearances that are accepted in a mere non-analytical and naive manner (*ma brtags nyams dga' ba tsam*) become a means or the basis for realising the absolute since the meaning of the latter is seen when those appearances are investigated by a reasoning that investigates the absolute (*don dam dpyod pa'i rigs pa*).

³⁹ The combination of these two models of *satyadvaya* allows Mi pham to integrate the two important strands of interpreting *paramārthasatya* in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism: the Middle Cycle of the Buddha's teachings that emphasises the emptiness of all appearances is related to the first model, which discusses the two *satyas* in terms of *gnas tshul* and *snang tshul*, while the Last Cycle, which is connected to the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine, contrasts the positive qualities of truthful experience (comprising both aspects of subject and object) with the disadvantages of false or obscured experience. Thus, the teachings of the Last Cycle are to be seen from the viewpoint of the second model; cf. Duckworth 2008: 6ff.

⁴⁰ NK 37a3: *bden pa gnyis su bzhag pa ni gdul bya lam la 'jug pa'i sgo tsam ste / don dam par bden pa gnyis su chad pa'ang med de*. This passage comments on BCA IX.107–8.

And further:

Although there is no establishment of *satya* as twofold on the absolute level, there is [such an establishment] on the conventional [level], since [*satya*] is ascertained as the mode of appearance and the mode of existence, as it was stated earlier (in BCA IX.2): “**these are considered as the two *satyas*.**”⁴¹

For Mi pham, the distinction of phenomena as appearances and their empty nature is only a superficial one; ultimately, the empty and appearing aspects are unitary. However, the distinction of the two *satyas* becomes important in pedagogical and doctrinal terms: according to Mi pham, it is the distinguishing characteristic of the differing approaches of the Svātantrika and the Prāsaṅgika traditions that the two *satyas* are either – at least temporarily – distinguished or emphasised as unitary.

2. Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika

The classification of Indian Madhyamaka as Svātantrika or Prāsaṅgika is known to be problematic. Ostensibly not an Indian invention, this distinction was introduced by Tibetan doxographers in the eleventh century and reflects an attempt to systematise an intricate tradition.⁴² Among the Tibetan successors, the distinction plays a varying role: Tsong kha pa, for example, sees a fundamental difference between the two traditions and emphasises the supremacy of Prāsaṅgika, expressed *inter alia* in the *Dka' gnad/gnas brgyad*,⁴³ a work that formulates the “eight difficult points,” i.e., the eight core

⁴¹ NK 37a4–5: *don dam par bden pa gnyis su bzhaḡ pa med kyang tha snad du yod de / snang tshul dang gnas tshul gnyis su nges pa'i phyir / sngar 'di ni bden pa gnyis su 'dod ces pa bzhin no /*

⁴² Cf. Dreyfus & McClintock 2003, for discussions of the differentiation of the Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika traditions from various perspectives.

⁴³ This work (of which different versions exist) consists of Tsong kha pa's oral instructions that were written down by his disciple Rgyal tshab Dar ma rin chen. For an introduction and translation of this text see Seyfort Ruegg 2002: 139ff. Mi pham's critic Brag dkar Sprul sku also refers to the eight points when he emphasises the characteristics and supremacy of the Prāsaṅgika; see *Blo gsal dga' ba'i gtam* pp. 422ff.

characteristics of the Prāsaṅgika tradition. For other scholars like Rong ston (1367–1449) and Go rams pa the differences are minor and consist only in methodological issues.⁴⁴

For Mi pham, these categories are not self-evident. He refers to Bu ston (1290–1364) who thinks of the categorisation of Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika as a “mere Tibetan invention.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Mi pham insists on the significance of these categories – not in the sense of there being a fundamental difference between them, but as two different traditions of interpretation: “Even though there is not any difference in regard to the ultimate meaning, there is a difference owing to ways of explaining the scriptures.”⁴⁶ More important, however, is Mi pham’s attempt to bring both traditions together as different approaches to ultimate reality.

⁴⁴ Dreyfus 2003a: 318–328 and Cabezón 2003: 289ff. give an overview of the respective positions.

⁴⁵ The pertinent passage in the NK reads: “Profound scholars like Bu ston and others indeed proclaimed (*mdzad*) that the Prāsaṅgika-Svātantrika distinction is only a personal invention of Tibetans and that it did not develop in India.” (NK 3b3: *mkhas mchog bu ston la sogs pas ni thal rang gi khyad par 'di bod kyi rtog bzor zad de / rgya gar du ma byung bar mdzad mod /*). While Dreyfus refers to this passage correctly (Dreyfus & McClintock 2003: 4), it was misunderstood by Lipman who thought Mi pham stated that scholars like Bu ston created the Prāsaṅgika-Svātantrika distinction (Lipman 1981: 56). Dorji Wangchuk kindly informed me about the following two passages in Bu ston’s writings, which conform to Mi pham’s assessment of his view: “The so-called two Madhyamaka [traditions] of Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika are known in Tibet. I did not see explanations of this designation and terminology in the Indian śāstras.” (*Gsung thor bu* 38b6: *dbu ma rang thal gnyis zhes bod du grags pa 'di / ming 'dogs dang tha snyad rgya gar ba'i bstan bcos nas bshad pa ni / ma mthong /*). And further: “The terminology ‘Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika’ is applied by the Tibetans.” (*Gsung thor bu* 50b6–7: *dbu ma pa rang thal zhes pa / bod kyiis tha snyad btags par 'dug ste /*).

⁴⁶ NK 3b3–4: *mthar thug gi don la khyad par ci yang med kyang gzhung 'chad tshul gyi dbang du khyad par yod de /*.

2.1. The approach of the Svātantrika tradition

In regard to the absolute (*don dam*, *paramārtha*) – as Mi pham explains – the Svātantrika distinguishes a “concordant” (*mthun pa*) or “nominal” (*rnam grangs pa*, *paryāya*) absolute on the one hand, and an “actual” (*rnam grangs ma yin pa*, *aparyāya*) absolute on the other hand. While the latter is ultimate in nature and thus equivalent to the absolute as it is presented in the Prāsaṅgika tradition, the former is only provisional: being conceived in opposition to the conventional appearances, it is characterised through the negation of these appearances. Accordingly, it is stated in the NK:

Also in regard to the absolute, emptiness [in the sense] of a mere non-implicative negation (*med dgag tsam*), i.e., the non-existence of arising and the non-existence of abiding, etc., that negates arising and abiding, etc., is only a door for entering the great emptiness that is free from the four extremes (i.e., existence, non-existence, both and neither). That is why the terms ‘nominal absolute’ or ‘concordant absolute’ are used.⁴⁷

Here, the nominal absolute is described as merely intermediary in regard to the final absolute, a step which is nevertheless of crucial importance. Mi pham continues:

First of all, since the arising of the gnosis that is free from the four extremes is not possible for those who have the habit of grasping at things since beginningless time, it is first necessary to generate insight, i.e., a mental state that is distinguished by the mere non-existence of all things on the absolute level [...].⁴⁸

For ordinary beings, direct realisation of the “great emptiness” (*stong nyid chen po*) is completely impossible; their attachment to existence is so strong that it first needs to be counteracted by

⁴⁷ NK 2b5–6: *don dam pa de la'ang skye ba dang gnas pa sogs bkag pa'i skye med dang gnas med sogs med dgag tsam gyi stong pa ni stong nyid chen po mtha' bzhi dang bral ba la 'jug pa'i sgo tsam yin pas rnam grangs pa'i don dam mam / mthun pa'i don dam zhes brda mdzad de /*

⁴⁸ NK 2b6–3a1: *re zhiḡ thog ma med pa nas dngos por zhen pa goms pa rnams la mtha' bzhi dang bral ba'i ye shes skye ba'i skabs med pas thog mar dngos kun don dam par med pa tsam gyis rab tu phyed ba'i sems byung shes rab bskyed dgos pas na / [...].*

the conception of the mere non-existence of the appearances. This is why the Svātantrika explains negations of appearances in the *sūtras* and *śāstras* “as sheer non-existence, which negates merely true existence, in the sense of the nominal [absolute].”⁴⁹ This non-existence is, however, not assumed to be the ultimate absolute.

According to Mi pham, the characteristic approach of the Svātantrika is grounded in the emphasis on the nominal absolute and thereby in a separate perception of the two *satyas*:⁵⁰ even though there is no arising of appearances on the absolute level, appearances cannot be denied on the conventional level. Appearances are established since a cognition that investigates the conventional recognises their self-characteristics (*rang mtshan*). If appearances are negated, one must hence add that this is done with regard to the ultimate level. The approach of the Svātantrika can thus be summarised in the following terse formula: “non-existent on the absolute level, undeceptively existent on the conventional level.”⁵¹

This is not the place to discuss whether Mi pham’s understanding concurs with the intention of Bhāviveka and his followers; for us, its resemblance to the explanations of Tsong kha pa (who, of course, sees himself as a Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika) is more important. Like all Mādhyamikas, Tsong kha pa underlines the importance of a view that falls neither into the extreme of annihilationism (*chad mtha’*) nor into the extreme of eternalism (*rtag mtha’*), a view expressed by the essential Madhyamaka statement that things are “neither existent nor non-existent” (*yod min med min*).⁵² For Tsong kha pa this formulation is, however, not to be understood literally:

⁴⁹ NK 3a2: *bden yod tsam ’gog pa’i med rkyang rnam grangs pa’i don du.*

⁵⁰ Cf. NK 3a.

⁵¹ NK 3a4: *don dam par med la kun rdzob par bslu med du yod do zhes.*

⁵² This statement is found in various *sūtras* like the *Ratnakūṭa* (cf. Frauwallner 1994: 167) or the *Śālistambasūtra* (cf. Cabezón & Dargyay 2007: 80, 287). The respective passage of the latter *sūtra* often appears in Madhyamaka-related *śāstras*: Seyfort Ruegg mentions the *Jñānasārasamuccaya* ascribed to Āryadeva, Bhāviveka’s *Madhyamakaratnapradīpa*, Jitāri’s *Sugatamata-vibhaṅgakārikā* (*bhāṣya*), Advayavajra’s *Tattvaratnāvalī* and the *Subhāṣita-saṅgraha* ascribed to Sarahapāda (Seyfort Ruegg 2000: 143).

applying such contradictory qualities as ‘existent’ and ‘non-existent’ to a single logical subject is not possible – these qualities are said to be mutually exclusive (*phan tshun gzhan sel ba*).⁵³ Tsong kha pa solves the apparent contradiction by adding a qualifier: “Neither existent nor non-existent” is rightly understood as “neither existent on the absolute level nor non-existent on the conventional level.”⁵⁴ As seen earlier, this formulation represents an approach which Mi pham sees as characteristic for the Svātantrika tradition. For Mi pham, this approach entails a conception of the two *satyas* as separate, which – according to him – is based on a wrong conception of emptiness: the conventional appearances themselves are not empty of an intrinsic essence (*rang gi ngo bo*), but what is to be negated, that is, the object of negation (*dgag bya*), is a *truly established* essence (*bden grub kyi ngo bo*) of these appearances. It is this conception that Mi pham sees as a common misunderstanding of later Dge lugs scholars.⁵⁵

Accordingly, Mi pham’s and Tsong kha pa’s explanations of the absolute differ: for Tsong kha pa, the actual absolute (*rnam grangs ma yin pa’i don dam*) is to be understood correctly as a non-implicative negation (*med dgag*). For Mi pham on the other hand, such an absolute can only be a determination achieved in dependence on the conception of existence and hence corresponds to the nominal absolute. A non-implicative negation (*med dgag*) only refutes the extreme of existence, but cannot achieve the meaning of “freedom from extremes” (*mtha’ dang bral ba*).

Thus, Mi pham explains the approach of the Svātantrika in such a way that he accords the Dge lugs school’s presentation of Madhyamaka a similarity to that of the Svātantrika tradition. With this in view, the fierce criticism that Mi pham’s NK received is easily understood.

⁵³ See, e.g., Tsong kha pa’s *Gser phreng* as quoted in Tauscher 1995: 60.

⁵⁴ Tsong kha pa’s general understanding of *yod min med min* is discussed extensively in Tauscher 1995: 56ff.

⁵⁵ For Mi pham’s criticism see, e.g., *Rab lan* 2b3–4: *deng sang rje bdag nyid chen pa’i brgyud pa ‘dzin par khas ‘che ba dag gis kun rdzob rnam rang gi ngo bos mi stong par dgag bya yan gar ba bden grub kyi stong par bzhed pa mang bas stong nyid ma yin dgag tu song zhing* / [...].

It is nevertheless important to understand that for Mi pham the unity of both approaches is crucial. His statement that “such an unimpaired establishment of the two *satyas* on their respective levels,” that means the approach of the Svātantrika, “is definitely beneficial for the beginner’s mind,”⁵⁶ should thus be taken literally and not in any polemical sense.

2.2. The Prāsaṅgika approach

As mentioned earlier, the difference between Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika – according to Mi pham – is foremost of a pedagogical nature. Whereas the Svātantrika tradition approaches the final absolute by way of the nominal absolute, the Prāsaṅgika is characterised by its direct approach. On the absolute level a separate conception of the two *satyas* is not tenable. It is stated in the NK:

But, considering the two characteristics of existence and non-existence separately, in the way [that things] “exist on the conventional level and do not exist on the absolute level,” is not established with respect to the ultimate mode of existence.⁵⁷

It is for that reason, Mi pham explains, that Candrakīrti and his followers refuted the establishment of things by way of their self-characteristics (*rang mtshan*) even on the conventional level and thus argued against a separate conception of the two *satyas*.⁵⁸ Ultimately, appearances and emptiness cannot be separated from each other. Mi pham declares:

Precisely, the form etc., of whatever appears is empty and though it is

⁵⁶ NK 3a4–5: *de ltar bden gnyis so so rang sa na ma nyams par bzhag pa 'di lta bu ni las dang po pa'i blo ngor cis kyang bde ba yin te /*. Lipman, with his translation “lack of meditative composure,” obviously read “*ma mnyam par bzhag pa*” instead of “*ma nyams par bzhag pa*,” and therefore had problems making sense of this expression in the present context; cf. Lipman 1981: 55.

⁵⁷ NK 3a6: *'on kyang gnas lugs mthar thug pa'i dbang du na kun rdzob tu yod pa dang / don dam par med pa zhes yod pa dang med pa'i mtshan nyid gnyis so sor phyogs su chad de gnas pa ma yin te /*.

⁵⁸ Cf. NK 3b2: *'di ltar kun rdzob tu rang mtshan gnyis grub pa de'ang bkag pas bden gnyis so sor 'dzin pa khegs te*.

empty, this itself appears as form etc.⁵⁹

Mi pham's statement is of course an allusion to or, one could even say, an interpretation of the very famous passage of the *Heart Sūtra* (*Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayasūtra*): "Form is emptiness and nothing but emptiness is form."⁶⁰ For Mi pham, authentic *Prajñāpāramitā* culminates in the realisation of the coalescence or unity of appearances and emptiness (*snang stong zung 'jug*). Only a view that unites appearances and emptiness conforms to the absolute mode of existence (*don dam pa'i gnas tshul*). In the end, all forms of grasping, that is, negation as well as affirmation (*dgag sgrub*), have to be abandoned. Freedom from proliferation (*spros pa*) is only then achieved when not only the extreme of eternalism, but all four extremes (*mtha' bzhi*), i.e., existence, non-existence, both existence and non-existence, and neither existence nor non-existence, are abandoned, an understanding that is also emphasised by Go rams pa.

In its full meaning this realisation can only be accomplished by highest gnosis, the gnosis of the Āryas (*'phags pa'i ye shes*). This, however, does not imply that ordinary beings must not indulge in the coalescence of appearances and emptiness. Mi pham states:

Thus, the four extremes are not abolished instantly by the analytical meditation of ordinary people who investigate the mode of existence, but, after the four are refuted in an alternating way, an experience in the realm of coalescence, i.e., the meaning of [being] without reference point, arises [...].⁶¹

While Mi pham's description with regard to the ultimate level is very similar to Go rams pa's explanation as found in his *Lta ba'i*

⁵⁹ NK 3a6–3b1: *gang snang ba'i gzugs la sogs pa 'di nyid stong zhing / gang stong bzhin pa de nyid gzugs sogs su snang ba yin.*

⁶⁰ Skt.: *rūpaṃ śūnyatā śūnyataiva rūpaṃ* (Conze 1967: 150).

Tib.: *gzugs stong pa'o // stong pa nyid gzugs so //* (Silk 1994: 120f.).

⁶¹ NK 4a4–5: *des na gnas lugs la dpyod pa'i so so skye bo'i dpyad sgom gyis mtha' bzhi cig char khegs pa min kyang / res 'jog gi tshul du bzhi char bkag nas dmigs med kyi don zung 'jug gi dbyings la go myong skye bar [...].*

shan 'byed,⁶² a work in which he explicitly criticises the Dge lugs position and contrasts it with his own understanding, Mi pham's dependence on Go rams pa's work becomes obvious in the above quotation from the NK: the words employed by Mi pham are a mere paraphrase of three lines of the summarizing verses from the end of the *Lta ba'i shan 'byed*.⁶³

3. Later criticism

In his later letters to Dpa' ris Rab gsal, Mi pham repeatedly emphasises that he does not deviate from Tsong kha pa's ultimate intention. He refers to specific works⁶⁴ by Tsong kha pa to prove their consensus, stating that on the basis of Tsong kha pa's statements in the scroll (*shog dril*) he offered to Red mda' ba,⁶⁵ it should be "clear that only freedom from proliferations is accepted as the ultimate mode of existence."⁶⁶ Two *ślokas*, he asserts, in Tsong kha pa's *Lam gtso rnam gsum*⁶⁷ capture the Dge lugs founder's ultimate intention, namely, that a perfect analysis of the [correct] view entails an understanding of freedom from proliferations, which is beyond the concepts of emptiness and non-emptiness, that is, certainty in the mode of existence, which is coalescence, free from extremes.⁶⁸

⁶² See Cabezón & Dargyay 2007 for an edition and English translation of this text.

⁶³ Cf. *Lta ba'i shan 'byed* 46b3:

gnas lugs dpyod pa'i so skye'i blo gros kyis //
mtha' bzhi'i spros pa gcig char mi kheg kyang //
res 'jog tshul gyis bzhi char bkag nas ni //

Unfortunately, these summarizing verses were not included in Cabezón & Dargyay 2007.

⁶⁴ Mi pham mentions Tsong kha pa's *Shog dril*, *Lam gtso rnam gsum*, his commentaries on the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and the *Madhyamakāvatāra* and his later compositions (*physis rtsom*) in general; see *Rab lan* 113b–116a.

⁶⁵ Cf. *Shog dril*.

⁶⁶ *Rab lan* 49b1: *spros bral nyid gnas lugs mthar thug tu bzhed par gsal lo //*

⁶⁷ Cf. *Lam gtso rnam gsum* 9.13–18.

⁶⁸ Cf. *Rab lan* 115a3–5.

From another passage⁶⁹ in Tsong kha pa's *Shog dril* it should be "clear that [Tsong kha pa] did not accept a non-implicative negation (*med dgag*) alone as the ultimate emptiness, as it is explained nowadays."⁷⁰ Thus, Mi pham implies that the conceived discrepancy between his and Tsong kha pa's teachings on the meaning of Madhyamaka is based on a wrong interpretation of the statements of the founding master of the Dge lugs tradition that developed among later scholars of the school. With the following ironical statement Mi pham goes on to mock his opponents, giving a vivid example of the often sarcastic rhetoric of the debates:

It is not right to say that the holders of the lineage of Rje [Tsong kha pa] do not know the intention of Rje Lama (i.e., Tsong kha pa) and that someone else knows it. Hence, what else is there [to do] than say: Well then, please proceed in this way [of wrong understanding]!⁷¹

A different perspective on the matter was, as might be expected, taken by his Dge lugs opponents, as can be seen with the following examples of criticism taken from Dpa' ris Rab gsal's *'Ju lan*.

In the Dge lugs tradition the nominal absolute is commonly defined as a *ma yin dgag* (*paryudāsa*) type of negation, whereas the actual absolute is conceived as a *med dgag* (*prasajya*) negation.⁷² According to Mi pham, the absolute as *med dgag* is still a negation and therefore only a conceptual approximation of the ultimate absolute, which is described as transcending every notion of negation or affirmation, i.e., is free from all four extremes. For Dpa' ris Rab

⁶⁹ Mi pham seems to refer to *Shog dril* 63, which he paraphrased in the preceding passage.

⁷⁰ *Rab lan* 114a4: *deng sang gi brjod tshul ltar med dgag 'ba' zhis stong nyid mthar thug tu mi bzhed par gsal te |*.

⁷¹ *Rab lan* 116a1: *rje'i brgyud 'dzin dag gis rje bla ma'i dgongs pa mi mkhyen par gzhan zhis gis shes so zhes smra bar mi rigs pas 'o na de ltar mdzod cig ces zhu ba las ci yod |*.

⁷² For an explanation of these two types of negation in this context, see Tauscher 1995: 296f., 308f. Tauscher 1988 discusses the distinction of nominal and actual absolute as found in Ngag dbang dpal ldan's *Grub bzhi*, a text that reflects the common view in the Dge lugs tradition. A comprehensive discussion of the distinctions of *paramārtha*(*satya*) is given in Tauscher 1995: 291–326.

gsal “an absolute, an ultimate mode of existence, that exceeds the emptiness of true existence or selflessness does not exist; there is no other ultimate root of *samsāra* apart from self-grasping.”⁷³ The postulation of freedom from all four extremes as propounded by Mi pham, he thinks, must result in “the non-existence of grasping anything,”⁷⁴ a nihilistic view that Rab gsal associates with that of Hwa shang Mahāyāna. But still, he says ironically, Mi pham “is not to blame, since he received the shoe that [Hwa shang] left as a reward.”⁷⁵ In Rab gsal’s eyes, Mi pham’s refutation of the non-existence of true existence (*bden med*) as the ultimate absolute disregards the law of double negation and results in the unwanted consequence of accepting true existence. Rab gsal declares:

As [something] would be truly existing if it does not exist in the form of the non-existence of true existence and [something] would also be truly existing if it is not not-truly existent, [Mi pham] himself is sharpening the weapon that kills him.⁷⁶

For Dpa’ ris Rab gsal, emptiness is correctly formulated as the negation of true existence (*bden grub*), i.e., the non-existence of true existence (*bden med*). It appears that Mi pham’s intentional highlighting of the ultimate absolute as beyond any linguistic or conceptual convention is misleading to Rab gsal. According to him, Mi pham would not be able to settle for any position, as he would regard every position as an extreme. In the end, Rab gsal explains,

⁷³ *Ju lan* 78.13–79.2: *bden stong dang bdag med pa las lhag pa’i gnas lugs mthar thug don dam pa ni med de / ’khor ba’i rtsa ba mthar thug pa bdag ’dzin las gzhan du med cing /*.

⁷⁴ Cf. *Ju lan* 81.7–8: *gang du’ang ’dzin pa med pas*.

⁷⁵ *Ju lan* 81.9–10: *lham lus pa bgo skal du thob pa’i phyir le lan bda’ ba’ang med do //*.

The topic of “Hwa shang’s remaining shoe” refers to the story that Hwa shang left a single shoe when leaving the arena where he was defeated by Kamalaśīla. This was seen as an omen that there would be individuals in Tibet who would continue to adhere to Hwa shang’s view. For the symbolism of Hwa shang’s remaining shoe, see Lopez 1996: 223, n. 5.

⁷⁶ *Ju lan* 82.2–5: *rang gsoḍ pa’i mtshon cha rang gis brdar ba ste / bden med du med na bden grub dang / bden grub ma yin pa min na’ang bden grub tu ’gyur ba’i phyir /*.

Mi pham will not even be a Mādhyamika since if one abides in the middle of the extremes – something a Mādhyamika is supposed to do according to Rab gsal – Mi pham would say that one abides in the third extreme, the extreme of neither (existence nor non-existence).⁷⁷

4. Summary

Constituting the very core of Madhyamaka theory, the doctrine of *satyadvaya* serves well as a starting point for investigating the disputes – instigated mainly by Dge lugs scholars – that arose in regard to Mi pham’s exegesis of the ninth chapter of the BCA.

According to Mi pham, the concept of *satyadvaya* and its bifurcation into *saṃvṛtisatya* and *paramārthasatya* can be approached from two different perspectives. From an epistemological point of view it describes truthful and false cognition together with their objects. In this model, the two *satyas* are explained to be “separate in a way that identity is excluded” (*gcig pa bkag pa’i tha dad*), a formulation often used by non-Dge lugs scholars with regard to the conventional level. In Mi pham’s view, it is this model which is also used in the *gzhan stong* tradition.

The ontological approach explains *saṃvṛti* as the appearances, i.e., the “mode of appearances” (*snang tshul*), and *paramārtha* as their nature, the “mode of existence” (*gnas tshul*), i.e., emptiness. It is this latter approach that Mi pham endorses in the NK. Here, the two *satyas* are said to be “identical in nature and different with regard to the characteristic distinction” (*ngo bo gcig la ldog pa tha dad*), terminology Mi pham has seemingly taken from the Dge lugs tradition. However, these similarities end when the role of the distinction of the two *satyas* is discussed. For Mi pham, a temporary emphasis on the conception of the two *satyas* as separate is the characteristic of the Svātantrika tradition, and an approach he describes as closely resembling Tsong kha pa’s interpretation of the description of things as “neither existent nor non-existent” (*yod min med min*). Typical for the Prāsaṅgika, as Mi pham explains, is,

⁷⁷ Cf. *Ju lan* 83.12–84.5.

however, a unified conception of the two *satyas*. The ultimate absolute is not a mere (or non-implicative) negation, but transcends all notions of affirmation and negation; it is free from all four extremes of existence, non-existence, both and neither.

While Mi pham's theory shows some similarities to the Dge lugs conception of *satyadvaya* with regard to the level of linguistic representation, it differs greatly with its emphasis on the ultimate absolute as the coalescence of appearances and emptiness, completely transcending the realm of logic and language. It is this 'anti-rational' move, with its focus on reality as seen by way of direct meditative experience rather than logical descriptions, that was one of the major focal points of the later Dge lugs criticism.

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- BCA (Skt.) – Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. See La Vallée Poussin 1901–1914.
- BCA (D), (P) – Śāntideva, *Byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa* (*Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*). In: D, vol. XXXVI, *Bstan 'gyur*, Dbu ma, Tb. vol. *La*, 3876 # 3871, 1/2–12/79 (7); P, vol. 99, *Mdo-'grel XXVI La*, No. 5272, 243.1.1–262.2.7 (1–45a7).
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