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Bodhicaryāvatāra 9:2 As A Focus For Tibetan Interpretations of the Two Truths In the Prāsangikā Mādhyamika[1]

by Michael J. Sweet

I.

The two truths (*satyadvaya*) have always been viewed by the Mādhyamikas as vital for an accurate understanding of their school;[2] significant differences in ontology, epistemology and religious practice rest on the definition of this concept. The controversy among Tibetan scholiasts revolving around the interpretation of the second verse in the ninth chapter (*prajñāpāramitāpariccheda*) of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (*BCA*) brings some basic divergences in their exegesis of the two truths into sharp relief. This verse reads as follows:

> saṃvṛtiḥ paramārthaśca satyadvayam idaṃ matam/
> buddheragocarastattvaṃ buddhiḥ saṃvṛtirucyate//
> "The conventional (*saṃvṛtiḥ*) and the ultimate—
> these are accepted as the two truths. Reality
> (*tattvam*) is beyond the sphere of the intellect;
> intellect is called 'concealing' (*saṃvṛtiḥ*)."

The Geluk view, exemplified by Gyaltshap (*Rgyal Tshab*) and Tsgonkhapa, holds that the second half of this stanza should not be taken in its literal sense, because if ultimate truth were not the object of some type of intellectual understanding, it would be unknowable, and it would therefore follow that all religious practice aiming at the realization of the ultimate would be in vain.[3] The earlier Sakya and later Nyingma commentators dissented from this line of interpretation, arguing that ultimate truth "cannot be objectified by the mind because it transcends all discursiveness (*prapañca*)",[4] although these commentators do affirm

a non-intellectual intuition of the ultimate. This conflict of opinion is grounded in a difference of emphasis between Geulk and non-Geluk approaches to religious knowledge, which may be roughly designated as "scholastic" versus "yogic", or cognitive versus experiential. In the present endeavor to clarify this question we will deal with differing Mādhyamika definitions of the two truths, its treatment in the *BCA*, the texts and arguements most often utilized by Tibetan scholars on this point and the historical context of this controversy.

II.

The Mādhymika assertion of two truths should not lead one to assume that this school accepts two different levels or degrees of reality; from earliest times Buddhist texts have denied that there is a multiplicity of truths,[5] and the Mādhyamika is in accord with this. *Saṃvṛtisatya* is usually translated semantically as "conventional truth" (= *vyavahārasatya*)[6] but from a strictly etymological point of view it should be explicated as "truth for a concealing [cognition]"; it is "that through which the comprehension of reality is concealed and blocked."[7] Even though the Prāsangika Mādhyamika distinguishes between a "true conventional" (*tathyasaṃvṛtiḥ*), defined as the ordinary perception of any object by an inimpaired sense organ[8], and a "false conventional" (*mithyāsaṃvṛtiḥ*) comprising illusions, mirages and the like[9], both aspects of conventional truth are regarded as "false from the standpoint of the ultimate", that is, from the viewpoint of the true vision of the Saints.[10] Although conventional truth is thus actually false from the perspective of the ultimate, it retains its utility as a means of pointing the way towards the ultimate.[11] The Prāsangika Mādhyamika "strives only to prove that it [i.e. conventional truth] is not valid from the point of view of the absolute."[12]

Critics of the Mādhyamika such as Kumarīla have argued that the Mādhyamika cannot validly claim to have a dual truth since its conventional truth is "a euphemism for untruth (*mithyā*) or unreality."[13] Mādhyamika thinkers were always on the alert to avoid this objection; Nāgārjuna replies to an accusation of nihilism by stating that "things like a cart, a pot, a cloth etc., though devoid of own-being because of being dependently originated, are occupied with their respective functions, e.g. carrying. . .containing. . .protecting from the cold."[14] It is not the empirical fact which is rejected as false, but the intellect's interpretation

of it; a conventional truth is defined ontologically as any phenomenon which arises in dependence of another[15]—clearly not an assertion of non-existence.

Śāntideva as well treats the same problem at 9:105c-106b: an opponent objects that on Mādhyamika premises "the conventional does not exist—how can there be two truths?" The reply is by no means clear, as its meaning is disputed by various commentators, perhaps reflecting the dilemma which the Mādhyamika faces on this score. The main thrust of Śāntideva's argument appears to be that the causal efficiency of phenomena is unaffected by their epistemological status as conventional truths: "that which is definitely subsequent exists" (9:107c), that is, a dependently produced conventional object can be empirically determined to exist subsequent to its production, although production and cessation are, in the final analysis, imaginative constructs. It must always be borne in mind that the two truths have both an epistemological and ontological character; from the latter viewpoint conventional truth is defined as "that object which is found by conventional means of valid knowledge"[16] the object itself, as well as the non-analytical unimpaired sense consciousness by which it is ascertained, are reckoned as conventional truths. Such an object is not a mere fiction, although the mode in which it is perceived is inextricably bound up with false reification.[17]

The ambiguities of this problem have contributed to an uneasy tension within the Prāsangika Mādhyamika between more substantialistic and more negativistic views of the conventional. If Candrakīrti's interpretation be taken as normative for this school then its predominant tendency seems to be negativistic. For Candrakīrti, conventional truth is just the object of those who have false vision (*mṛṣādarśana*)[18]; it is an artificially constructed (*kṛtrimam*) truth, and it is equated with delusion (*moha*).[19] The difficulties that this view gives rise to were recognized by Bhāvaviveka and other Svātantrika Mādhyamikas, who subdivided conventional truth on the basis of its empirical efficiency or non-efficiency. However, such a distinction can only be made if one accepts the Svātantrika claim that the conventionally existent exists in its own right (*rang.ngo.nas.grub.pa.*)[20] and thus is amenable to verification (*tsad.mas.grub.pa*). That the conventional is endowed with such an independent existence is emphatically denied by the Prāsangikas, and Śāntideva concurs in this (9: 108, 111-115); his equation of the conventional with intellect (*buddhi*), i.e., with ignorance and error,[21] is completely in line with the Prāsangika view that the

conventional is wholly false from the standpoint of its mode of perception.

Tibetan scholars in the Geluk tradition have given a different emphasis to their explication of the conventional. It was an innovation of Tsongkhapa, the founder of this school, "to present the conventional *valid* existence of all phenomena, detailing the acceptability of the certification of the conventional existence of all phenomena by valid cognizers."[22] According to Tsongkhapa and subsequent Geluk scholars the task of the Prāsangika Mādhyamika is not only to refute false notions which obscure the nature of ultimate reality; it must also definitely validate all the phenomena comprising *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.[23] This leads to the assertion that conventional phenomena are established by a conventional means of valid knowledge which certifies their causal efficiency. This position has been extensively criticized by Sakya and Nyingma scholars for being more in harmony with the logical methods of Dharmakīrti, who establishes the ultimate existence of phenomena using the same criterion.[24]

III

Aside from their disagreement over whether or not conventional truth can be verified, the fundamental problems raised by Tibetan scholars in connection with *BCA* 9:2 have dealt with the nature of the ultimate. Their point of departure is 9:2c: "Reality is not within the sphere of the intellect." Here again we find Sakya and Nyingma interpretations raised against those of the Geluks, in this case over the crucial issue of whether an ultimate truth can be an object of cognition (*jñeya*). Since Śāntideva has clearly stated that ultimate truth is not within the range of the intellect, the Tibetan debate has centered around the question of whether or not such a denial is logically and scripturally justifiable, and hence whether Śāntideva's statement is to be taken literally or requires interpretation.

The transcendent and inexpressible nature of the ultimate is a recurrent theme in the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras: "it cannot be grasped, it cannot be talked about, it is neither a *dharma* nor a non-*dharma*."[25] The *Satyadvayāvatāra-sūtra*, which is cited by Prajñākaramati and many of the Tibetan commentators as well, states this viewpoint with great clarity:

> "If, Devapūtra, the ultimate truth should be the object of body, speech and mind in an ultimate sense (*paramarthataḥ*) it would not be reckoned an 'ultimate truth', it would be a conventional truth. But, Devapūtra, ultimate truth entirely transcends all conventional usage; it is without distinctions, non-arisen and non-ceasing, free from designatum and designation, object of cognition and cognition, even as far as transcending being an object of the gnosis of the omniscience which is endowed with the best of all modes."[26]

Similarly, Nāgārjuna observes that "the character of reality is non-dependent, quiescent, non-discursive, non-constructive, non-dual."[27] Candrakīrti as well holds that "ultimate truth is not an object of cognition."[28]

The bulk of scriptural and authoritative Indian commentarial evidence appears to support a literal reading of *BCA* 9:2; such a view is upheld by all of the Indian commentators on this passage, including the most important ones, Prajñākaramati and Vibhūticandra. According to the latter, the ultimate is not an object of any constructive cognition,[29] nor is it within the operational sphere even of *sarvākāra-jñāna*.[30] However, despite this seemingly comprehensive denial, he does not entirely rule out the possibility of some type of apprehension of the ultimate, stating that it is the object of "the partless adamantine meditative absorption."[31] The literal reading of *BCA* 9:2 is followed by Sakya and Nyingma commentators.[32]

On whan then does the Geluk school base its idiosyncratic position that Sāntideva's words cannot be taken on their face value in this instance? The scriptural passage most frequently cited by them in this connection[33] is drawn from the *Pitṛpūtrasamāgamasūtra*, and is found in the *Sikṣāsamuccaya:*

> "This much is what is to be known, the conventional and the ultimate. Since the Blessed One sees and knows and experiences these as Emptiness, he is called 'The Omniscient'."[34]

This passage does indeed seem to establish that ultimate truth is an object of cognition, at least for a Buddha. However, the sūtra goes on to say that "furthermore, that which is the ultimate is inexpressible, incomprehensible, uncognizable, unexplained, undeclared. . . ."[35] a seemingly unambiguous denial of the inaccessibility of the ultimate, which, significantly, goes unquoted by Geluk authors.

There appears to be a paradox in the Prāsangika Mādhyamika treatment of the ultimate. It is ineffable and non-conceptual, but at the same time "it is rational in the sense that it is developed through a rational procedure"[36] i.e. through the Mādhyamika critique. Consequently, there must be "a kind of unexplained leap from the dialectic to the acquisition of insight."[37] No Mādhyamika denies that the ultimate is intuited in some manner or other. According to Candrakīrti, for example, it is "the object of right vision of the saints who know reality."[38] The difficulty lies in determining by what means an apparently unknowable ultimate can be apprehended. The more logically oriented of the Mādhyamika thinkers could not be satisfied with a mysterious leap beyond conceptualization, and a compromise developed within the Mādhyamika which seemed to render the ultimate more accessible. This was effected by Bhāvaviveka, founder of the Svātantrika Mādhyamika, who bifurcated ultimate truth into actual (*aparyāya*) and analogous (*paryāya*) aspects. The actual ultimate is equivalent to the ultimate of the Prāsangikas; it is transcendent, and its intuition is free of discursiveness (*niṣprapañca*). The analogous aspect merely accords with the ultimate, and its perception involves discursiveness.[39]

IV

It is unquestionable that the Svātantrika position had a profound effect on Tibetan Buddhism during its period of initial growth and development. The initiator of Tibetan monastic Buddhism, according to Tibetan historiography, was the great Svātantrika scholar Śāntarakṣita; according to Tibetan accounts his pupil Kamalaśīla upheld the Svātantrika position at a debate held at Samye monastery at the end of the eighth century under the auspices of King Trisongdetsen, at which one of the main questions at issue was the immanence or transcendence of ultimate knowledge. Although doubt has been cast on the occurence of an actual face-to-face debate between Indian and Chinese Buddhists at Samye, there was, in any case, a significant controversy between advocates of Indian and Chinese Buddhist doctrines extending over a number of years during the last decades of the eighth century.[40] According to the tradition universally accepted by the Tibetans the Chinese Ch'an master Hoshang Mahāyāna advocated a radical "leap" theory of enlightenment:

> He who has no thoughts and inclinations at all, can be fully delivered from Phenomenal Life. The absence of any thought, search or investigation brings about the non perception [*anupalabdha*] of the reality of seperate entities. In such a manner one can attain [Buddhahood] at once.[41]

This viewpoint is identical to that ascribed to Hui-neng in the *Platform Sūtra*[42], and it can be justified by reference to much Indian Buddhist material as well.[43] Nevertheless such an approach appeared heretical to Indian teachers like Kamalaśīla, who advocated a progressive path of ethical and intellectual practice[44] which became the predominant orientation for religious training in the Tibetan monastic tradition.

The Geluk interpretation of Śāntideva's formulation of the two truths, although from a professedly Prāsangika point of view, seems to have been influenced by the Svātantrika position. Gyaltshap argues that Śāntideva's assertion of the inaccessibility of reality to the intellect refers only to an intellect endowed with dualistic perception (*gñis snang gi blo*); he maintains that Emptiness does become the object of direct non-dualistic means of valid knowledge.[45] Tsongkhapa also observes that "without the concept (*don.spyi*) of the object of negation (*dgag.bya*), i.e. true existence, it is impossible to ascertain true non existence."[46] This view posits the necessity for a positive cognition to lead one to the inexpressible actuality of the ultimate; this would seem similar in content and function to the analogous ultimate of the Svātantrika. There is little foundation for this view in the *BCA* itself; Śāntideva makes it clear that the apprehension of non-substantiality is a non-apprehension:

> "When imagined entities are not contacted, their non-existence is not contracted, since if an entity is false it is clear that its non-existence is false." 9:139

In 9:47c-48 he rejects the notion that liberation can be obtained while any conception, regardless of how elevated, remains in the mind:

> "A mind with an object must remain fixed somewhere. Without [an understanding of] Emptiness a fettered mind will be produced again. . . Therefore Emptiness should be contemplated."

Moreover, in the verse which tradition declares was the occasion for his levitating out of the sight of his audience during the first recitation of

the *BCA*, Śāntideva states that one who has truly attained a realization of the ultimate has not done so through a process of cognition, but rather through the extirpation of all views:

> "When neither existence nor non-existence remains before the mind as there is no other condition, it is pacified." 9:34

Thus, there may be some substance to the Nyingma claim that the Geulks are actually following the Svātantrika in their explication of Śāntideva's position on ultimate truth.[47] An accurate determination of the validity of this charge is, however, beyond the scope of the present article, as it would require a full examination of the long, drawn-out polemics between Geluks and non-Geluks on this subject.[48] Even if the Nyingma characterization were accurate, it may indicate a difference in pedagogic method, rather than a real disagreement over the final nature of the ultimate. What the Geluks advocate is an intermediate conceptual state of cognition preceding the final non-dual apprehension of the actual, inexpressible ultimate; this accords with Nāgārjuna's statement that "Without reliance on convention the ultimate cannot be expressed."[49] All major Tibetan authorities accept that Emptiness is a pure negation (*prasajyapratiṣedha*), and according to Bu.ston there is no difference between the Svātantrika and the Prāsangika regarding the true nature of the ultimate;[50] their apparent differences are merely propaedeutic. The Svātantrika, like the Geluk, recommends that there first be meditation upon an ultimate which can be understood conventionally, through an image, while the Prāsangika, like the Nyingma, advocates from the outset a direct intuition of Emptiness which is free from the four extremes (*catuṣkoti*) and thereby not within the sphere of word or thought.[51] Few Tibetan Buddhists would go as far as the Ch'an masters in denying any usefulness to ratiocination, at least as a preliminary aid to the realization of the ultimate, nor would the Geluk claim that in the final analysis the ultimate is within the realm of discursive thought.[52]

Śāntideva, with exemplary Mādhyamika even-handedness, takes a middle of the road position on this problem; he affirms that "all investigation is expressed through recourse [to conventional designations] as they are known [in the world]" (9:108), but he does not concede that this will necessitate an infinite regress of investigations; Mādhyamika analysis has an inherent "self-destruct mechanism", since that analysis is itself included among the phenomena which are determined to be

without substance. Thus, through the use of an admittedly conventional analysis, one reaches a perception of the ultimate which is characterized by the absence of clinging or non-clinging objects, i.e., a transcendence of affirmation and negation, "and everywhere there is non-activity (*nirvyāpāra*) and peace."[53] Both Geluks and non-Geluks could accept such a position, and indeed the twentieth century Geluk scholar Ngulchu Thogmay (*Ngul.chu Thogs.med*) propounds such a compromise view in his commentary on the *BCA*,[54] which is held in high regard by Tibetan scholars of all schools.

NOTES

Department of Religion, Williams College, Williamstown, MA 01267.

1. The material in this article appears in a different form in my doctoral dissertation, *Śāntideva and the Mādhyamika: The Prajñāpāramitā-pariccheda of the Bodhicaryāvatāra* (University of Wisconsin, 1977). The Sanskrit text that I have relied on in making my translation of the ninth chapter of the *BCA* (and for those verses translated in the present article) is that of P.L. Vaidya, *Bodhicaryāvatāra of Śāntideva* (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1960).

2. See e.g. Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*MMK*) 24:9, "ye 'nayorna vijānanti vibhāgaṃ satyayordvayoḥ / te tattvaṃ na vijānanti gambhīraṃ buddhaśāsane//".

3. See translation of Gyaltshap's *Byang.chub.sems.pa'i.spyod.pa.la.'jug.pa'i.rnam.bshad.rgyal.sras.'jug.ngogs* in Sweet, op. cit., p.206-207.

4. Mipham, *Sher.'grel.nor.bu.ke.ta.ka* (Varanasi: Tarthang Tulku, 1966), p.9.

5. e.g. "ekaṃ hi saccaṃ na dutīyam atthi," *Suttanipāta*, quoted in K.N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1963), p.353.

6. Prajñakaramati, *Bodhicaryāvatāra-Pañjikā* (*BCAP*) in Vaidya, op. cit., p.171.4-5.

7. *BCAP*, p. 170.29. Also see Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā*: "ajñānaṃ hi samantat sarvapadārthatattvacchādanāt samvṛtir ityucyate" quoted in T.V.R. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1960), p.245, f.n. 1.

8. Candrakīrti, *Madhyamakāvatāra* 6:5, quoted in *BCAP* p. 171.15-18. Also ibid., p.171.4-19.

9. Loc. cit.

10. Ibid., p.171.20.

11. See *Madhyamakāvatāra* 6:80 in *BCAP*, p.179.26.

12. J. May, "Kant et le Mādhyamika", *Indo-Iranian Journal*, V.3, 1959, p.107.

13. Kumarīla in *Ślokavārttika*, Niralambanavāda v.6-8, quoted in B.K. Matilal, *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p.153.

14. Nāgārjuna, *Vigraha-vyāvartanī*, V.22.

15. "Paraspara- sambhāvanaṃ vā samvṛtir anyonyāśrayeṇetyarthaḥ", *Prasannapadā*, quoted in Murti, op. cit., p.245, f.n. 1.

16. Lcang.skya Hu.thog.thu Ye.shes.bstan.pa'i.sgron.me, *Grub.mtha'i. rnam.par. bzhag.pa.gsal.bar.bshad.pa. thub.bstan.hun.po'i.dmzes.rgyan* (Sarnath: Lama Guru Deva, 1970), p.353.

17. See Gyaltshap, op. cit., p.218.

18. *Madhyamakāvatāra* 6:13, quoted *BCAP*, p.174.26-29.

19. Ibid., p.171.15-18.

20. G. Sopa and E. Jones, "The Two Truths in the Svātantrika Mādhyamika" (unpubl. paper, n.d.), pp.15, 22.

21. *BCAP*, p. 170.30, commenting on 9:2.

22. J. Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness*, Ph.D. thesis (University of Wisconsin, 1973), p.211. Emphasis mine.

23. Ibid., p.235.

24. Ibid., pp. 235-44 and Mipham, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

25. *Vajracchedika*, translated in E. Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1958), p.36.

26. *BCAP*, p.177.9-12.

27. *MMK*, 18:9.

28. See the commentary to *Madhyamakāvatāra* 6:28 in *Dbu Ma La Hjug Pa* (Dharamsala: Council of Cultural and Religious Affairs, 1968), p.88.

29. Vibhūticandra, *Byang.chub.kyi. spyod.pa.la.'jug.pa'i. dgongs.pa'i.grel.pa.khyad. par.gsal.byed* (his own translation of *Viśeṣadyotanī*) *PT* 5282, vol. 100. f. 307a.7: "rtog.bcas.kyi.ji.sñad.pa'i.yul.ma.yin.zhing".

30. Ibid., f. 307b.4.

31. Loc. cit.

32. For example in Bsod.nams Rgyal.mtshan, *Spyod.'jug.rnam.bshad* (New Delhi: N. Topgay, 1970), pp.306-307; Bu.ston Rin.chen. grub *Byang.chub.kyi.sems.gsal.bar.byed. pa'i.od.zer*, Vol. 19 (dza) of *The Collected Works of Bu-Ston*, ed. Lokesh Chandra (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1971), pp.502.4-504.5; Mipham, op. cit., p.8: "dngos.po'i.gnas.tshul.don.dam.pa.ni.yod.pa.dang.med.pa.dang.gñis.ka dang/ gñis.min.gyi.mth'.kun. dang.bral.bas.na.blo.yi.spyod.yul.min".

33. For example in Tsongkhapa *Dbu.ma.dgongs.pa.rab.gsal*, *PT* vol. 154, p.176, Gyaltshap, op. cit., p.208.

34. *Śikṣāsamuccaya of Śāntideva*, ed. by P.L. Vaidya (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1961), p.136.26-27.

35. Ibid., p.136.29-30.

36. K. Potter, *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p.238.

37. Ibid., p.239.

38. In *BCAP*, p.174.22-23.

39. Sopa and Jones, op. cit., p.13.

40. See Y. Imaeda, "Documents Tibétains de Touen-Houeng Concernant le Concile de Tibet" in *Journal Asiatique*, 1975, pp. 125-141.

41. Bu.ston, *History of Buddhism (Chos. 'byung)*, trans. by E. Obermiller, 2 vols., 1931-32 rpt. (Tokyo: Suzuki Research Foundation, 1965), p.193.

42. *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, trans. by P. Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), pp. 137-139.

43. Candrakīrti himself expresses the view that "the stopping of conceptions—the sages say that this is the fruit of criticism. Ordinary people are bound by conceptions—the ascetic who does not conceive goes to deliverance" in *Madhyamakāvatāra*, Tibetan translation, Chapter 6, p.117. This is echoed by Abhāyakara: "He who does not conceive

anything is liberated in this life", quoted in A. Wayman, "Contributions to the Mādhyamika School of Buddhism", *JAOS v.89*, n.1. p.151. Also see the citations from scripture utilized to defend this position by the Chinese side in P. Demieville, *Le Concile de Lhasa* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1952), pp. 53-63, 95-107.

44. Bu.ston, *History of Buddhism*, v.2, pp. 194-195 and Kamalaśīla, *Bhāvanākrama*, translated by G. Sopa and E. Jones (unpubl. ms., n.d.), pp. 52-82.

45. In Sweet, op. cit., p.175.

46. Tsongkhapa, op. cit., p.129.

47. Mipham, op. cit., pp. 4-6.

48. For a full discussion of the works produced by this controversy, many of which are not yet available in the West, see the introduction by Gene Smith to Mipham's *Rab.lan* (Gangtok: Sonam Kazi, 1969), pp. 8-11.

49. "vyavahāramanāśritya paramārtho na deśyate", *MMK* 24:10ab.

50. Tsongkhapa, op. cit., p.149; Mipham, *Sher.'grel.nor.bu.ke.ta.ka*, p.4.9-10. On *prasajya-pratiṣedha* see Matilal, op. cit., pp. 162-164.

51. Mipham, op. cit., pp. 6-8.

52. Since the type of non-dualistic intellect that comprehends the ultimate, according to Gyaltshap, op. cit., p.175, completely transcends discursiveness.

53. *BCAP*, p.250.1-2.

54. See pp. 197-198 of his *Byang.chub.sems.pa'i.spyod.pa.la 'jug.pa'i.'grel.pa.legs.par. bshad.pa'i.rgya.mtsho* (Sarnath: Pleasure of Elegant Sayings Press, 1974).