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Tsong-Kha-pa's Understanding of Prāsaṅgika Thought

by Lobsang Dargyay

I. Introduction

Tsong-kha-pa (1357-1419) is to the formation of Tibetan philosophy what Thomas Aquinas is to European theology. Tsong-kha-pa incorporated into Tibetan Buddhism hitherto neglected Indian strands of Buddhist thought, one of which I shall deal with in this paper, and he revived some which he felt had lost their impact. Perhaps the most outstanding contribution he made to the growth of Buddhist thought was his insistence on the importance of rational analysis of the mental process during and after meditation. Like Aquinas, Tsong-kha-pa was a learned man, a scholar-monk and saint, a model for future generations of Buddhists in Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal, China, Ladakh, and Russia. Despite his enormous impact on the formation of religious thought in those countries, Western scholars have only recently begun to study some of his numerous works.

Together with his teacher, Red-mda'-ba (1349-1412), Tsong-kha-pa promoted a particular way of understanding Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka philosophy: the Prāsaṅgika. In brief, the Prāsaṅgika way of understanding Madhyamaka entails rejecting the use of formal logic in interpreting Nāgārjuna's thought. It also involves showing the innate absurdity of any philosophical system. In other words, the Prāsaṅgika silences the human mind's restless urge to rationalize reality. Prāsaṅgika is a philosophical school which developed a method leading the religious seeker to the unmediated experience of the unspeakable. The study of Prāsaṅgika is therefore essential for a broader understanding of Buddhist mysticism.

Tsong-kha-pa composed a small work in which he explained his understanding of Prāsaṅgika thought. It consists in his lecture notes on Prāsaṅgika, which were later edited by his disciple rGyal-tshab-rje with the title "Notes on the Eight Difficult Points" (*dKa' gnas brgyad kyi zin bris*). I have chosen to study this text in some detail because of its thematic importance, but also because it supplements a text whose translation I have just completed, Go-rams-pa's *lTa b'ai shan 'byed*. The latter text presupposes the "Notes on the Eight Difficult Points." The Notes are a prime source for Tsong-kha-pa's understanding of Prāsaṅgika thought and for the Prāsaṅgika stream of Tibetan philosophy in general.¹

In this paper I shall survey the formation of Madhyamaka in Tibet to provide a background for the following discussion of the "Notes on the Eight Difficult Points." The later part of my presentation will deal with "store consciousness" (*ālayavijñāna*) as one of the eight points.

II. Survey of the Growth of Madhyamaka in Tibet

The Beginning

Madhyamaka philosophy had become known in Tibet by the 8th century, when such gifted Tibetan translators as Ye-shes-sde and dPal-brtsegs translated the most important Sanskrit works written on this topic. Later, they composed works of their own in which they demonstrated a good understanding of the problems involved in this philosophical system. These works constitute the very foundation of Tibetan Madhyamaka. In their endeavor to study Madhyamaka, the Tibetan thinkers were supported by a number of Indian Buddhist masters. They followed a line which was later identified as Svātantrika Madhyamaka, a kind of Madhyamaka which used some of the discoveries recently made in Indian logic.

The inauguration of in-depth studies of Madhyamaka in Tibet is closely tied to the activity of rNgog Lo-tsa-ba Blo-ldan shes-rab (1059-1109), nephew of the no less famous rNgog Legs-p'ai shes-rab, who founded the monastery of gSang-phu.

rNgog Lo-tsa-ba's entire teaching may be divided into three categories:

- i) The five works of Maitreya: rNgog Lo-tsa-ba considered the first four of them to be of an interpretive meaning (*drang don, neyārtha*) i.e., the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, *Madhyānta-vibhāga*, *Sūtrālaṅkāra*, and *Dharma-dharmatā-vibhāga*. Only the last of this set of five works, the *Māhāyana-uttaratantra*, is, according to him, of definitive meaning (*nges don, nītārtha*). rNgog Lo-tsa-ba favoured the ideas of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, but partially rejected those of Sthiramati.
- ii) Dharmakīrti's works on logic (*pramāṇa*): in rNgog Lo-tsa-ba's opinion, Dharmakīrti advocated ideas similar to those of Nāgārjuna, and for this reason he accepted Dharmakīrti's works without restriction. Among Dharmakīrti's followers, however, rNgog rejected Dharmottara's and Prajñākaragupta's (Tib. rGyan mkhan-po) understanding of the ultimate.
- iii) Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka works: rNgog Lo-tsa-ba taught Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka works in the light of a philosophical tradition which has materialized in three works collectively called *Rang rgyud shar gsum*, i.e., the "three Madhyamaka tractates of the East (Indian Masters) of the Svātantrika (tradition)." (These works are extant in the Tanjur and constitute the textbooks of Svātantrika studies in Tibet.)²

As Candrakīrti's works were not yet translated into Tibetan, rNgog Lo-tsa-ba learned about them by hearsay only, and rejected Candrakīrti's position. rNgog Lo-tsa-ba insisted that a correct understanding of the Madhyamaka works had to rely on Dharmakīrti's discoveries in the field of logic, and he felt that Candrakīrti's interpretation violated this basic rule.

rNgog Lo-tsa-ba had numerous, and not less famous disciples. They continued to promote their master's view of Svātantrika Madhyamaka, which remained the mainstream of Madhyamaka thought in Tibet up to the 15th century, when Candrakīrti's thought became more influential.

Prāsaṅgika Thought in Tibet

In later times, Tibetan scholars suggested that the basic ideas of the Prāsaṅgika system penetrated into Tibet at the time of Atiśa (982-1054), who had entered the country in 1042. This

was not yet a formal introduction of Prāsaṅgika, but a seminal phase, paving the way for the later introduction. To support this, one may point to some of Atiśa's shorter treatises, wherein he strictly follows Candrakīrti's thought: *Satyadvaya-avatāra*³ and the *Bodhipatha-pradīpa*.⁴ The latter text became the model for Tsong-kha-pa's famous *Lam rim chen mo*, wherein he extensively deals with Prāsaṅgika thought.

Pa-tshab Nyi-ma-grags

Prāsaṅgika thought became widely disseminated in Tibet when Candrakīrti's works were translated into Tibetan by Pa-tshab Nyi-ma-grags. He, together with his disciples, paved the way for a growing interest in the Prāsaṅgika system, which led eventually to its dominance of the Tibetan philosophical tradition.

Pa-tshab was born in 'Phan-po in 1055. Still a young man, he left for India, where he studied the Buddhist doctrine for 23 years in Kashmir, still a centre of Buddhist learning. Later, he invited three Indian pandits to Tibet to spread the buddhadharma there, among them gSer-gyi go-cha (Kanakavarma).⁵ After Kanakavarma arrived in Tibet, he resided at the Ra-sa 'phrul-snang temple and other places in Lhasa, where he translated most of Candrakīrti's works (particularly those with a Madhyamaka content). He was assisted in his translation by Pa-tshab Nyi-ma-grags.

At the same time, Pa-tshab also instructed disciples in the newly introduced Prāsaṅgika system. He found further support in Sha-ra-ba, an expert in the *Prajñāpāramitā*, who sent his disciples to Pa-tshab so that they would obtain a proper training in Candrakīrti's thought, i.e., the Prāsaṅgika system. But it seems that Pa-tshab was not a prolific writer, as only a single work is mentioned: *Sha-ra-ba'i dBu ma'i dri lan*, "Answer to Sharaba's Questions about Madhyamaka."⁶

Soon Pa-tshab became a renowned Madhyamaka scholar, who attracted many gifted disciples. The best of them are known as "the four sons of Pa-tshab":

1. rMa-bya Byang-chub ye-shes, also known as rMa-bya Byang-yes;
2. gTsang-pa Sar-sbos;

3. Dar Yon-tan-grags;
4. Zhang Thang-sag-pa Ye-shes 'byung-gnas.⁷

Eventually the school flourished and branched into various traditions, each generating its own set of influential thinkers. Among them, Rong-ston (1367–1449) assumed a crucial role in the formation of Buddhist philosophy in Tibet. With the formation of his lineage, the Prāsaṅgika tradition became firmly entrenched in the Tibetan philosophical system. The issue was no longer whether or not the Prāsaṅgika exegesis was a legitimate way to understand Madhyamaka, but how to achieve the most accurate interpretation of Candrakīrti's original intention. The great Sa-skyā scholars laid the foundation upon which Tsong-kha-pa constructed his version of the Prāsaṅgika system, a tradition which still has a firm grip on the entire philosophical tradition of Tibet.

III. *"The Notes on the Eight Difficult Points"*

Tsong-kha-pa composed this text as notes for his lectures on the most difficult topics within Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka philosophy. His gifted disciple, rGyal-tshab-rje, took notes while attending his teacher's lectures. For this reason, the work was later incorporated into Tsong-kha-pa's Collected Works as well as into those of rGyal-tshab-rje.

The text consists of 32 pages and is extant in three editions:

The Collected Works of Tsong-kha-pa bLo-bzang grags-pa, vol. 15 (Ba),⁸
The Collected Works of rGyal-tshab-rje, vol. 1 (Ka),
 vol. 7 (Ja) of the same collection.⁹

The three editions differ slightly in their titles; otherwise the first and second editions are identical and seem to preserve the original form of the text. The third edition was subjected to some editing by rGyal-tshab-rje. He clarified ambiguous terms or phrases, but did not alter the over-all meaning.

In "The Notes on the Eight Difficult Points," Tsong-kha-pa discusses the eight difficult points in understanding the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*, the fundamental Madhyamaka treatise writ-

ten by the Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna (2nd cent. A.D.). In his exegesis, Tsong-kha-pa strictly follows Candrakīrti.

For the present purpose, I shall summarize the eight points and then discuss the first one in some detail.

(1) Negation of *ālayavijñāna*: Tsong-kha-pa claims that the Prāsaṅgika system denies the existence of *ālayavijñāna* even on the conventional (*saṃvṛti*) level, not to mention on the ultimate (*paramārtha*) level.

(2) Negation of the axiom that things exist owing to their own nature: Tsong-kha-pa states that, according to the Prāsaṅgika, entities or things do not exist owing to their defining characteristics or to their own nature (*rang gi mtshan nyid khyis grub pa, svalakṣaṇa-siddha*). This applies not only on the ultimate, but also on the conventional, level. These two axioms lead to a discussion of karma, i.e., actions and their results, because the *ālayavijñāna* was designed to function largely as a reservoir for “storing” the karmic traces, and the opponents of the Prāsaṅgika argued that if things do not exist due to their own nature, karma will become unreal. In this context Tsong-kha-pa develops his unique view of karma, wherein the term *zhig pa* (cessation) plays a major role.

(3) Existence of external objects: this is accepted by Prāsaṅgika on the conventional level only, in contrast to the Cittamātra claim.

(4) Negation of “independent proof” (*rang rgyud, svātantra*): the Prāsaṅgika does not allow for applying the “independent proof,” but uses instead a “presupposition or reason which is well known by opponents” (*gzhan grags, paraprasiddha*) in order to illustrate the opponents’ errors.

(5) Negation of “introspective awareness” (*rang rig, svasaṃvitti*), as there is no valid proof to verify its existence.

(6) “Hearers” (*śrāvaka*) and *pratyekabuddhas* realize the lack of inherent reality, i.e., the voidness of all things existing.

(7) The Prāsaṅgika definition of the two kinds of obscuration: (a) the obscuration of defilement (*nyon sgrib, kleśāvaraṇa*), and (b) the obscuration of omniscience (*shes sgrib, jñeyāvaraṇa*).

(8) The Buddha’s perception of the impure world: Tsong-kha-pa discusses how the Buddha is able to perceive impure phenomena, although he has removed all obscurations.

IV. Discussion of *Ālayavijñāna*

The term *ālayavijñāna* occurs in *sūtras* and *tantras* as well, but the term becomes systematized only in the later development of Buddhist philosophy. Commonly, it is translated as "storehouse-consciousness," which translates the Indian term in a literal manner. Tibetan philosophers replaced the Sanskrit term with *kun gzhi*, which literally translated means "basis of all." In this paper I shall use the Sanskrit word, *ālayavijñāna*, because it is widely known in the West. I do so despite the fact that Tsong-kha-pa, whose treatise I am about to discuss here, wrote in Tibetan and for a Tibetan audience.

In general, the concept of an *ālayavijñāna* was developed by those Buddhist thinkers who followed the Yogācāra tradition. For this reason, we find an elaboration of the *ālayavijñāna* concept mainly in the works of this particular school of Buddhist thought. There was a need to develop such a theory, mainly because of the conflict between two claims made simultaneously by Buddhist thinkers: (a) universal impermanence and (b) the residue of karmic traces. If everything in this world is subject to immediate decay, where—we have to ask—are the traces of the acts stored so that they can produce their appropriate effects? The Yogācāra/Cittamātra thinkers responded to this query with their *ālayavijñāna* theory: a neutral mental continuum carries the karmic traces and bridges the gap between death and rebirth, between the endless series of fleeting moments of existence.

In his interpretation of *ālayavijñāna*, Tsong-kha-pa strictly follows the works traditionally ascribed to Asaṅga. Tsong-kha-pa discusses this concept also in a separate treatise with the title "Detailed Explanation of *Ālayavijñāna* and *Kliṣṭamanas*".¹⁰ There, he states that the *ālayavijñāna* is different from the six other kinds of consciousness, i.e., visual consciousness, auditory consciousness, and so on.

According to Tsong-kha-pa, a consciousness must have four aspects in order to qualify as *ālayavijñāna*:

- (1) Its objects (*ā lambana, dmigs pa*):
 - (a) the five sensory objects, e.g., form, sound, etc.
 - (b) the five sense organs, e.g., eye, ear, etc.

- (c) the karmic traces
- (2) Its character (*ākāra, nam pa*): Although the *ālayavijñāna* somehow mirrors the inanimate and animate world, it cannot discriminate. It is a dream-like consciousness.
- (3) Its nature (*ngo bo*): It is of a neutral nature; it is neither of a virtuous or unvirtuous nature.
- (4) Its associations: The *ālayavijñāna* is associated with the five mental events:
 - (a) emotions,
 - (b) conception,
 - (c) mentation,
 - (d) contact,
 - (e) mental engagement.

According to Tsong-kha-pa, these are the premises put forward by Yogācāra and which must be met by the concept of *ālayavijñāna*. He also assumes that only Yogācāra/Cittamātra, but not Prāsaṅgika, recognizes this concept. At this point, we have to remember that the concept of *ālayavijñāna* was developed mainly to support the existence of karmic traces. Although the Prāsaṅgika thinkers did not embrace the concept of *ālayavijñāna*, they affirmed that acts generate effects or “fruits.”

In the *dKa' gnas brgyad* we read:

Although [the Prāsaṅgika] rejects the *ālayavijñāna*, the completed karma is not wasted, because even without acceptance of the [*ālayavijñāna*] there is no contradiction in the ceased karma's (*las zhig pa*) giving rise to its result.¹¹

Tsong-kha-pa substantiates his claim through Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*, particularly VI, 39.¹²

V. Go-rams-pa's Contestation of Tsong-kha-pa's Position

In the *Differentiation of [Madhyamaka] Views* (*lTa ba'i shan 'byed*) Go-rams-pa bSod-nams seng-ge (1429-1489) rejected the position taken by Tsong-kha-pa regarding *ālayavijñāna*. He assumes that the Prāsaṅgikas reject the concept of *ālayavijñāna*, as its existence cannot be verified through philosophical investigation, but that they accept it on a conventional level. To

support his theory, Go-rams-pa refers to the *Bodhicitta-vivaraṇa*, a commentary on a verse of the 2nd chapter of the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* which is ascribed to Nāgārjuna.

Go-rams-pa clarifies his own position as follows:

Although the Prāsaṅgika do not accept an *ālayavijñāna* which supports action and its fruit and which can withstand logical investigation, in general they should accept the *ālayavijñāna*, because the *Bodhicitta-vivaraṇa*, [by Nāgārjuna] actually says that the *ālayavijñāna* does exist [in the Prāsaṅgika system].¹⁵

Go-rams-pa does not identify the verse he has in mind. A later dGe-lugs-pa thinker, Gung-thang dKon-mchog bstan-pa'i sgron-me (1762-1823), points to verse 35 as the one in question, but finds himself unable to agree with Go-rams-pa because of contextual considerations.¹⁴

The verse in question reads:

Just as the ocean and trees are moved though they have no mind (*citta*), likewise the store-consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) is [only] active dependent upon a body (*kayaśarīrya*).¹⁵

Thus, the Prāsaṅgika strategy was to take references by Nāgārjuna to the *ālayavijñāna* in a "broad" sense, as roughly synonymous with *manovijñāna*, rather than in the "narrow" sense employed by the Yogācāra thinkers.

VI. Conclusions

Tsong-kha-pa claims that the concept of *ālayavijñāna* as defined by the Yogācāra/Cittamātra is not compatible with the Prāsaṅgika system. This statement was contested by Go-rams-pa by pointing at the occurrence of the word *ālayavijñāna* in Nāgārjuna's writings. This led Go-rams-pa to the conclusion that the Prāsaṅgikas do accept *ālayavijñāna*, but only on the conventional level. Later dGe-lugs-pa scholars rejected his position on the basis of numerous testimonies found not only in Candrakīrti's writings but also in tantric texts. Here, neither time nor space permits dealing with this later development in the detail required.

NOTES

1. This is part of a research project aiming at analysing this important text. It is financed through a grant of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and co-sponsored by The Calgary Institute for the Humanities.

2. These three tracts are: *Satya-dvaya-vibhāga-kārikā* by Jñānagarbha, together with his own commentary; *Madhyamaka-alamkāra-kārikā* and its commentary by Śāntarakṣita; *Madhyamaka-aloka* by Kamalaśīla.

3. CTBC 3902, 4467; *Satyadvaya-avatāra*, tr. by Lindtner, "Atisa's introduction to the two truths" (JIPh 9, 1981, p. 161-213).

4. CTBC 3947, 4465; tr. by H. Eimer. *Bodhipatha-pradīpa. Ein Leergedicht des Atisa (Dīpaṃkara śrījñāna) in der tibetischen Überlieferung*. Wiesbaden 1978 (Asiatische Forschungen 59).

5. BBY p. 233.

6. PTh p. 431.

7. DNg p. 305, *Blue Annals* p. 343; Padma dkar-po, CTP. fol. 118a.5.

8. Ed. by D. Gelek, New Delhi (n.d.).

9. IASWR microfiche edition.

10. *Yid dang kun gzh'i dka' ba'i gnas rgya cher 'grel pa* (The Collected Works of Tsong-kha-pa) vol. Tsha, p. 356-474.

11. p. 569f. In a contribution to *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments* ed. by Ron Neufeldt, State University of New York Press (1986) I discuss the concept of "ceased karma" in detail.

12. MMA VI, 39 rpt. Tokyo 1977; tr. by La Vallée Poussin. *Le Muséon* vol. 11, p. 518.

13. *lTa ba'i shan 'byed* fol. 29a.

14. *The Collected Works of Gung-thang dKon-mchog bstan-pa'i sgron-me* vol. 2, p. 284, ed. by Gelek. New Delhi, 1972.

15. Chr. Lindtner. *Nagarjuniana* (Indiske Studier 4). Copenhagen, 1982, p. 196f, v. 35. Tsong-kha-pa discussed v. 34 and 25 in his *Gongs pa rab gsal* p. 298f (*gSung 'bum* vol. Ma, n.d.).

ABBREVIATIONS

BBY	<i>dBu m'ai byung tshul rnam par bshad pa'i gtam yid bzhin lhun po</i> by Sakya-mchog-ldan, ed. by Kunzang Tobgey. Bhutan 1975.
CTBC	<i>A Complete Catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Canons</i> , ed by Hakuji Ui. Sendai, Japan 1934.
CTp	<i>Chos 'byung bstan pa'i pad ma rgyas pa'i nyin byed</i> by Padma-dkar-po, blockprint n.d.
DNg	<i>Deb gter sngon po</i> by 'Gos Lo-tsa-ba gZhon-nu-dpal. New Delhi 1976.
IASWR	The Institute for Advanced Studies of World Religions, State University of New York, Stony Brook, New York.
JIPh	<i>Journal of Indian Philosophy</i>
MMA	<i>Madhymakāvatāra</i>
PTh	<i>dPe rgyun dkun pa 'ga' zhig gi tho yig don gnyer yid kyi kun da</i> by 'A-khu Shes-rab rgya-mtsho, ed. by Ngawang Sopa. New Delhi 1974.