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GEORGES DREYFUS

Tibetan Scholastic Education and The Role of Soteriology

The Hermeneutical and Rhetorical Dimensions of Commentary

Education is not the mere handing down of knowledge but the active developing of the person through the internalization of a tradition's content. If this process begins in the Tibetan monastic education with the acquisition of basic literacy and the heuristic of memorization, it continues with the hermeneutical practices aimed at appropriating the content of tradition as a basis for the cultivation of virtues. In general, hermeneutics can be defined as the art of interpretation systematically analyzed from a philosophical or methodological point of view. Tibetan scholastic educational activities are hermeneutical in that they are reflective interpretive practices that aim to understand the content of the root-texts used as bases of the educational process and their commentaries. These root-texts are themselves commentaries that are memorized and studied in the light of further commentaries. The interpretation of commentaries is thus one form that hermeneutical practice takes in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. It is not, however, the only or even necessarily the main one, for a remarkable feature of much Tibetan scholastic education is the importance of dialectical debates. They sustain the students in their investigations and lead to an in-depth comprehension of the tradition. Dialectical debates, together with commentary, represent the two central aspects of the hermeneutical practices that form the core of Tibetan scholastic education.

A study of the interpretive practices of a tradition cannot focus, however, only on the interpreted message. It must also examine the audience to which this message is addressed and the way in which the author or transmittor of this message intends to influence its audience. To interpret means to clarify, explicate, explain, but also to translate, render, and transpose. Interpretation is the work of an interpreter, a go-between, who mediates between an author and an audience (in some cases himself or herself). Interpretation, as Mailloux puts it, "conveys the sense of a translation pointed in two directions simultaneously: *toward* a text to be interpreted

and *for* an audience in need of interpretation."[1] Hence, a study of the interpretive practices of Tibetan scholasticism must take into account this double orientation and consider the semantic as well as the pragmatic or performative dimensions of interpretive practices. Such a study must understand these practices not only hermeneutically but rhetorically as well. The tradition is not a pure content but acquires its significance only in relation to the way in which it is used.

In one sense, it is tempting and not entirely wrong to assimilate commentary to the semantic aspect and debate to the pragmatic or performative dimension. Nevertheless, as we will see, this distinction is not adequate to the understanding of either form of interpretive practice. Commentary, which is our present focus, cannot be understood merely through an examination of its content. Like other types of text, commentary is not just descriptive but also performative. The commentator seeks to do something by writing his text and, more importantly for our purpose, the tradition or institution that uses his text is also trying to do something through the study of his words. We could speak here of textual communities, that is, actual social entities formed around common uses of basic texts and their commentaries. When people engage in common interpretive practices, they develop a sense of solidarity, of belonging to a distinct community with its own worldview, ethos and sense of identity. In this way, common interpretive practices provide the focus for further institutionalization and the development of rules. They also become the means through which new members are introduced to the community.[2]

Here I examine the pragmatic uses of texts and commentaries in the context of Tibetan Buddhist scholastic education. I approach this education by examining its curriculum, focusing on the use of texts rather than their content. In doing so, I follow a comparative approach in order to avoid the danger of focusing too narrowly on a single tradition, which is then taken to represent Tibetan tradition as a whole. I examine the curriculum of two types of institution which include most of Tibetan scholastic education, the

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1. S. Maillous, "Interpretation," *Critical Terms for Literary Studies*, eds. F. Lentricchia and T. McLaughlin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995) 121-134, 121.

2. B. Stock defines textual community as "a group that arises somewhere in the interstices between the imposition of the written word and the articulation of a certain type of social organization. It is an interpretive community but it is also a social entity," *Listening for the Text* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) 150.

dGe lugs (pron., ge-luk) monastic university exemplified here by Se rwa (se-ra), which can be described as a debating institution (*rtsod grwa*), and the commentarial institution (*bshad grwa*) exemplified by the rNying ma (nying-ma) monastery of rNam grol gling (Nam-dröl-ling), which is typical of non-dGe lugs institutions of higher learning.[3]

My examination of the dGe lugs and rNying ma versions of the scholastic curriculum follows a two step approach. I first provide a general comparison, following the classical method of delineating similarities and dissimilarities, between the curriculum of these institutions. In this way I show the nature of the two types of educational institutions that have dominated the Tibetan scholastic tradition. I then examine the curriculum more closely by focusing on one of its central topics, the study of the path, and inquiring into its role in the overall education. I show that in the Tibetan scholastic traditions this kind of topic, which concerns the practice of meditation, is important less for its direct relevance to meditative practice than for its contribution to the construction of a universe in which Buddhist practice becomes meaningful. I conclude by emphasizing the doctrinal nature of such construction and argue that this reliance on doctrine for the elaboration of a religious universe is one of the main characteristics of scholastic education.

The Structure of the Curriculum of a dGe lugs Institution

Se rwa is typical of the great institutions of higher learning that have constituted the intellectual strength of the dGe lugs tradition. Founded in 1419 by 'Jam chen chos rje (jam-chen-chö-jay), one of Tsong-kha-pa's (dzong-ka-ba) main disciples, it became a very large monastery in Tibet with more than ten thousand monks in the 1950s, possibly up to a third of them taking part in scholarly activities. It is now relocated in Bylakuppe, in South-India, not too far from Mysore, where it is becoming large again (well over three thousand) due to a recent influx of new refugees from Tibet.

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3. Although there are minute differences between the scholastic institutions of the three contemporary non-dGe lugs traditions, they all have the same commentarial model of education and are quite similar. This similarity is not accidental, for they all derive from the scholarly revival initiated by gZhan phan (Zhan-phan) toward the end of the nineteenth century in the context of the non-sectarian (*ris med*) movement initiated by 'Jam mgon kong sprul (jam-gön-kong-trul, 1813-1899) and 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen tse'i dbang po (jam-yang-kyen-tse-wang-po, 1820-1892).

The Se rwa curriculum[4] does not differ substantially from that of the other dGe lugs institutions of higher learning. The dGe lugs curriculum in its different version largely consists of the study of *five texts* (*po ti lnga*), which summarize the exoteric aspects of the tradition, and the study of tantric texts, particularly those pertaining to the *Guhya-samāja* (*gsang ba 'dus pa*) cycle.[5] This curriculum can be divided in three parts.

1) The first preliminary part is devoted to the mastery of the techniques and basic concepts necessary to the practice of debates. During this period, which can be as short as one year and as long as four or five years, monks are trained in the art of debate through the study of the Collected Topics. They are also introduced to the basic logical and epistemological notions that they will use throughout their studies. The texts used are textbooks (*yig cha*), specific to the college within the monastic institution.

-Collected Topics (*bsdus grwa*) in three parts
-Types of Mind (*blo rigs*)
-Types of Evidence (*rtags rigs*)

This preliminary study is often completed by an introduction to the study of doxography, which examines Buddhist and non-Buddhist tenet systems, and a Paths and Stages (*sa lam*) text, so that the students have a good idea of these aspects of the tradition. This part of curriculum is a preparation for the main part, the study of the five treatises. It aims at developing reasoning abilities. It also provides the student with the basic philosophical vocabulary required for the rest of the studies, but does not aim to bring to students any in-depth comprehension.

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4. The slight variations in the curriculum between the two scholastic colleges (Byas and sMad) of Se rwa are irrelevant here.
5. Sources on the curriculum of the three monastic universities are limited. Geshe Sopa, *Lectures on Tibetan Religious Culture* (Dharamsala: Tibetan Library, 1983) 41-3 and A. Wallace, *The Life and Teaching of Geshe Rabten* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1980) 47-9 are the main sources on the state of monastic education in Tibet. My presentation is also, and perhaps mostly, based on my stays in these monasteries where I observed monastic education as it has been reconstituted in exile in India. It is also based on countless conversations with older monks who constantly referred to the state of monastic life in traditional Tibet.

2) The second and central part is the study of the five great exoteric texts. It is subdivided into two phases: a) The main part which consists of the study of three texts that are considered to summarize the main aspects of non-tantric Buddhism as understood by the dGe lugs tradition:

-*Abhisamayālaṃkara*[6] (*Ornament of Realization*) attributed to Maitreya
-Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*[7] (*Introduction to the Middle Way*)
-Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*[8] (*Commentary on Valid Cognition*)

Together with Nāgārjuna's *Treatise of the Middle Way,*[9] which is studied in the light of Candrakīrti's *Introduction*, these texts provide the doctrinal and philosophical core of the dGe lugs tradition. They are considered the most important texts and studied with great care for a period of six to ten years. The students start with the *Abhisamayālaṃkara* (henceforth the *Ornament*), which is studied for four to six years. This text provides an understanding of the Buddhist and more particularly Mahāyāna worldview together with a detailed analysis of the path, as we will see shortly. Dharmakīrti's *Commentary*, which present an extensive view of Buddhist logic, epistemology and philosophy of language, is studied together with the *Ornament*, during special sessions (one or two months every year). This text is very important, for it provides the philosophical methodology for the whole curriculum. After being already well trained, students are ready to examine what is considered the most profound topic of the studies, Madhyamaka philosophy. Through the study of these three plus one texts, the students are introduced to the sharp philosophical mode of thinking particularly valued by this tradition. Sometimes, monks who are keenly intent on leading the heremitic life leave the monastery after finishing the study of these three texts. Although they could still benefit from further studies, they are considered well trained and able to start on their meditative career.

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6. *Abhisamayālaṃkāra-nāma-prajñāpāramitopadeśa-śāstra-karikā, shes rab pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mgnon par rtogs pa'i rgyan zhes bya ba tshig le'ur byas pa,* P: 5184.
7. *Madhyamakāvatāra-nāma, dbu ma la 'jug pa zhes bya ba,* P:5262.
8. *Pramāṇa-vārttika-kārikā, tshad ma rnam 'grel gyi tshig le'ur byas pa,* P: 5709.
9. *Prajñā-nāma-mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā, dbu ma rtsa ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa shes rab ces bya ba,* P: 5224.

b) The auxiliary and concluding part of the exoteric curriculum brings more maturity to the already philosophically well trained students through the study of the last two treatises:

-Vasubandhu's *Abhidharma-koṣa*[10] (*Treasury of Abhidharma*)
-Gunaprabha's *Vinaya-sūtra*[11]

These texts bring to the students a grasp of some of the doctrinal and practical backgrounds of Buddhism. The study of the Abhidharma enriches the students' understanding of the Buddhist worldview and the kind of spiritual perspective that this world enables. The study of the Vinaya completes the monastic curriculum by training the students in the intricacies of monastic discipline and the collective organization of the monastic order. Thus both texts are important but contribute little to the kind of intellectual sharpness that the tradition, and Tibetan scholars in general, particularly value. Hence, they are thought to be less important, though their studies take a long time (from four to eight years). The reason for this extended period is due to several considerations. The amount of textual material is large, but the main reason is to keep students, who are by then advanced scholars, in residence so that they themselves become teachers and share their knowledge before leaving the monastery. It is only after the completion of these studies that students are allowed to stand for the different levels of the title of Geshe (*dge bshes*), which brings to an end the exoteric part of the training.

3) Finally, the last part of the studies concerns the esoteric domain of the tantras. Tantras are not included in the official curriculum of monastic universities such as Se rwa. Monks who finish their studies and become Geshe are required to spend some time in a separate college devoted to the study and practice of tantra. This does not mean that these monks have not studied tantra before, for almost all of them have, but such a study is considered private and hence not part of the official curriculum.

The Curriculum of a Commentarial Institution

rNam grol gling monastery, or more specifically its commentarial school, is typical of the non-dGe lugs institutions of higher learning. rNam grol gling monastery is the exiled version of dPal yul (pa-yül) monastery, which is

10. *Abhidharma-koṣa-kārikā, chos mngon pa'i mdzod,* P:5590.
11. *Vinaya-sūtra, 'dul ba'i mdo tsa ba,* P: 5619.

one of the six great monastic centers of the rNying ma school founded in 1665 by Rig 'dzin kun bzang shes rab (rig-dzing kun-zang shay-rab). rNam grol gling monastery, which has over a thousand monks, is also relocated in Bylakuppe, a couple of miles from Se rwa. Its commentarial school, which was started at the beginning of the 1970s, is part of the monastery but is distinct from it. There are over three hundred students in the school, which is by now the largest institution of its type in the exiled community in India. It is quite representative of the style of education adopted by the three non-dGe lugs Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

In examining the curriculum of the rNam grol gling commentarial school, it is important to remember that the institution we are examining is different from a dGe lugs monastery such as Se rwa. Whereas in the latter scholastic studies are central elements of the monastic routine, in the rNying ma and other traditions studies are carried on in special institutions that are linked with the monastery but remain separate, often physically set apart. In rNam grol gling, the commentarial school (*bshad grwa*) lies next to the monastery but has its own administration, kitchen, and temple, though ultimately it is part of the dPal yul monastery as well. The curriculum of this institution is centered around the study of *thirteen great texts* (*gzhung chen bcu gsum*). It can also be divided into three parts: a preliminary, a central part (the study of the thirteen texts themselves), and esoteric tantra studies.

1) The preliminary part, which lasts one year, focuses on two texts: Padma dbang rgyal's (pe-ma-wang-gyel, fourteenth century) *Treatise Ascertaining the Three Types of Vow*[12] and Śāntideva's *Introduction to the Bodhisattva's Deeds.*[13] These texts, which are not counted among the thirteen great texts, are studied with the help of literal glosses and combined with a few auxiliary texts teaching grammar and history. During this period students are introduced to basic Buddhist ideas, Mahāyāna practices, as well as the three sets of vow (pratimokṣa, bodhisattva and tantra) to which Tibetan practitioners usually commit themselves. At this early stage central tantric concepts already are introduced. For example, the difference between sūtras and tantras, a topic formally discussed by dGe lugs scholars only after they have completed their exoteric studies, here is taken as a preliminary of the whole curriculum.

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12. *sDoms gsum rnam par nges pa'i bstand bcos.*

13. Śāntideva, B *bodhicaryāvatāra,byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa,* P: 5272. S. Batchelor, trans., *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works, 1979).

2) The second part is centered on the study of the *thirteen great texts*. It can be divided into two phases: a) The lower exoteric course, which last for three years,[14] begins to expose the students to the different aspects of the classical exoteric tradition as they are found in the most important Indian Buddhist treatises. Students I have interviewed often describe Madhyamaka philosophy as the main topic of these three years. This subject is examined through the following three of the thirteen texts:

-Nāgārjuna's *Treatise of the Middle Way*
-Āryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas*[15]
-Candrakīrti's *Introduction to the Middle Way*

To these three texts several other texts are added. A particularity of this curriculum is its emphasis on Śantarakṣita's *Ornament of the Middle Way*,[16] which is studied together with its commentary by Mi pham rgya mtsho (mi-pam-gya-tso, 1846-1912). Like in the first phases of the curriculum, these texts are studied with their commentaries, either literal glosses, often composed by gZhan phan, or more substantial explanations, often by Mi pham. The other aspect emphasized during these three years is the study of the Abhidharma, through an investigation of the following two of the thirteen texts:

-Asaṅga's *Abhidharma-samuccaya*[17] (*Compendium of Abhidharma*)
-Vasubandhu's *Abhidharma-koṣa* (*Treasury of Abhidharma*)

Together with these other texts such as Mi pham's *Entrance Gate for the Wise*, an introduction to the methodology of scholastic studies that rather closely follows Sa skya Paṇḍita's (1182-1251 C. E., henceforth Sa paṇ) text on the same subject. The fourth year is also occupied by the study of Buddhist logic and epistemology on the basis of the main text of the Tibetan tradition on this subject:

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14. The prospectus for the rNam grol-gling institute includes the introduction in the lower sutra course, which thus lasts for four years. It divides the curriculum in three parts: lower sūtra course, higher sūtra course, and tantra course. My own division in three plus one parts is made for the sake of comparison with Se rwa's curriculum.
15. *Catuḥśataka-śāstra, bstan bcos bzhi brgya pa*, P: 5346.
16. *Madhyamakālaṃkāra-pañjikā, dbu ma'i rgyan gyi bka' 'grel*, P: 5286.
17. *Abhidharma-samuccaya, chos mngon pa kun las bstus pa*, P: 5550.

-Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika* (*Commentary on Valid Cognition*)

This text is studied together with Mi pham's word commentary. Throughout this part of the curriculum, a variety of other auxiliary topics (grammar, composition, poetics, history) are also examined. One of the particularities of the rNam grol-gling's approach, is the limited role played by the study of logic and epistemology. This is quite different from the dGe lugs tradition, which prides itself on its mastery of Dharmakīrti's thought. It also contrasts with the Sa skya emphasis on the use of Sa paṇ's *Treasure* as a primer of Buddhist logico-epistemological studies.[18] By the end of the first four years, students have a sound command of Buddhist philosophy as well as a good overview of the general structure of the Buddhist tradition.

b) This knowledge is developed by the higher exoteric course, which lasts for two full years, provides students with an understanding of the Mahāyāna tradition, its view of the path and result. This course focuses on the five treatises attributed to Maitreya:

- *Mahāyānottaratantra*[19](*The Superior Continuum*)
-*Abhisamayālaṃkara* (*Ornament of Realization*)
-*Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṃkara*[20] (*Ornament of the Mahāyāna Sūtras*)
-*Madhyānta-vibhaṅga*[21] (*Differentiation of the Middle and the Extremes*)
-*Dharma-dharmatā-vibhaṅga*[22] (*Differentiation of Phenomena and [Ultimate] Nature*)

The course is completed by a study of monastic discipline on the basis of the study of the following two texts, which are the last of the thirteen texts.

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18. Sa-gya Paṇḍita, *Treasure on the Science of Valid Cognition (tshad ma rigs gter)*, Complete Works of the Great Masters of the Sa sKya Sect, vol. 5 (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 1968) 155.1.1-167.1.6. The curriculum of the Sa skya College in Rajpur (India) includes this text in its list of basic curricular texts.
19. *Mahāyānottaratantra-śāstra, theg pa chen po'i rgyd bla ma bstan bcos*, P:5525.
20. *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṃkara-kārikā, theg pa chen po'i mdo sde'i rgyan gyi tshig le'ur byas pa*, P:5521.
21. *Madhyānta-vibhaṅga, dbus dang mtha' rnam par 'yed pa*, P:5522.
22. *Dharma-dharmatā-vibhaṅga, chos dang chos nyid rnam par 'byed pa*, P:5523.

-*Pratimokṣa-sūtra* (the only teaching of the Buddha on the list of thirteen)
-Gunaprabha's *Vinaya-sūtra*

In this way, students complete the exoteric part of their studies. They have a sound understanding of a variety of points of view in Buddhist philosophy and a good grasp of numerous aspects of the Buddhist path. They are ready to move to final part of the curriculum.

3) The third part is the esoteric curriculum, the study of tantras. In the seventh and eighth years, general presentations of the tantric path are examined. The study focuses on the *Guhya garbha* tantra, which plays basically the same role in the rNying ma tradition as the *Guhya samaja* in the dGe lugs tradition. The main texts are:

-Yon tan rgya mtsho's (yon ten gya tso) commentary on 'Jigs med gling pa's (jik-may-ling-pa, 1729-1789) *Treasury of Qualities* (*yon tan mdzod*)[23]
-Mi pham's commentary on the *Guhya-garbha* tantra[24]
-rDo grub chen's (do-grub-chen) commentary on the *Guhya-garbha* tantra[25]

This study is completed by an introduction during the ninth year to the view of the Great Perfection, the main standpoint of the rNying ma tradition. The study is theoretical and introductory and focuses on kLong chen rab 'byams pa's (long-chen-rab-jam-ba, 1308-1363) two trilogies:

-the *Trilogy of Self-Liberation* (*rang grol skor gsum*)[26]
-the *Trilogy of Resting* (*ngal gso skor gsum*), particularly the *Resting [in] the Mind as Such* (*sems nyid rang grol*)[27]

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23. *Yon tan rin po che'i mdzod kyi 'grel pa zab don snang byed nyi ma'i 'od zer*, (Gangtok: 1969).
24. *gSang 'grel phyogs bcu'i mun sel gyi spyi don 'od gsal snying po*.
25. *dPal gsang ba'i snying po'i rgyud kyi spyi don nyung ngu'i ngag gis rnam par byed par rin chen mdzod kyi lde mig*, Collected Works, vol. 3 (Gangtok: Dodrup Chen Rinpoche, 1974).
26. *Rang grol skor gsum*, Gangtok: Sonam Kazi, Ngagyur Nyingmay Sungrab, vol 4.
27. *Ngal gso skor gsum*, Gangtok: Dodrup Chen Rinpoche, 1973.

Together with these works, other tantric texts, particularly Mi pham's commentary on the *Eight Words of Practice* (*sgrub pa bka' brgyad*) and 'Jigs med gling pa's work on the stage of development, are examined. In this way, students are given a solid grasp of the world of tantras, which is, as we will see, one of the goals of this education.

Comparing Curriculums: The Organization of Knowledge

If we compare the curriculums of Se rwa and rNam grol gling, we can see similarities and differences. There is no point here in listing all the relevant features of our comparison. Rather, let me make a few remarks, starting with the similarities. One of the most important features of Tibetan scholastic traditions is the way they organize knowledge on the basis of root-texts and their commentaries. As we know, this is not a Tibetan invention but derives from the methodology used by both Hinduism and late Indian Buddhism. In traditional India, topics of learning are discussed on the basis of a root text explicated by further commentaries, including a teacher's oral explanation. Even considerations of secular topics follow this model. For example, aesthetics is discussed in relation to the *Natya śāstra*, a basic text that provides the reference point for the whole field. Similarly, in Tibet the study of grammar, for instance, proceeds by commenting on basic texts, in this case the *gsum cu pa* and the *rtags 'jug pa*, two grammatical treatises that are said to have been composed by Thonmi Sam bhuta (seventh century) upon his return from India. Even the study of medicine is organized around the study of basic texts, the four medical tantras (*rgyud bzhi*), which are first memorized and then commented upon. Hence, commentary is central not just to religious traditions, but to the way in which knowledge is organized in these cultures.

We could even go a bit further and draw a partial contrast between modern ways of organizing knowledge by disciplines and traditional Indian or Tibetan reliance on commentary. Modern cultures mostly rely on an anonymous and abstract organization of knowledge through disciplines structured around "groups of objects, methods, their corpus of propositions considered to be true, the interplay of rules and definitions, of techniques and tools."[28] This is quite different from the Indian and Tibetan commentarial mode of organization which is based on the principle of explication of a pre-given meaning found in basic texts, which are called root texts (*rtsa*

28. M. Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Harper, 1969, 1972) 215-237, 222.

ba, mūla). These texts are most often versified, that is, written in *kārika* (*tshig le'ur byed pa*) or mnemonic verses. In the Hindu traditions, these texts are called sūtras, the aphoristic summaries of a tradition's scriptural basis, following the methodology developed in Patañjali's grammatical tradition. For example, the meaning of the Upaniṣads is summarized by the *Brahmasūtra,* which is in turn further explained by commentaries. Such texts are not written to be picked up and read by anybody, but are intended to serve as the basis of further oral and written commentary. They would be read in relation to a *bhāṣya* or a *vṛtti* (*'grel ba*), a commentary often written by the author of the root text. Those in turn could be supplemented by a *vyākhyā* or *ṭīkā* (*'grel bshad*),[29] a more detailed gloss used to supplement the first commentary.[30]

Tibetan curriculums are similarly structured. The root-texts that are memorized and studied in the exoteric part of the curriculum are all, with one or two exceptions, Tibetan translations of Indian treatises (*bstan bcos, śāstra*). All of the five or thirteen texts listed above, with the exception of the *Pratimokṣa-sūtra*, fit in this category.[31] This extended use of commentary is fairly unique in the Buddhist world. Certainly, other Buddhist traditions use commentaries but the Tibetan reliance on commentary is stronger than in most other Buddhist traditions, which tend to rely more on the study of the direct teachings of the Buddha and less on later commentaries. For example, both Chinese and Theravāda Buddhisms tend to emphasize the study of the direct teachings of the Buddha as they are contained in their versions of the canon.[32] Monks in these traditions study the words of the

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29. A brief examination of the Tibetan catalogues of the *bstang gyur* suggests that the Tibetan translation of these terms is far from systematic. The word *bshad pa* is used to translate a *vyākhyā* as well as a a *bhāṣya*. See P: 5555 and 5565.

30. L. Gómez, "Buddhist Literature: Exegesis and Hermeneutics," *Encyclopedia of Religion,* vol. 2 (New York: Mcmillan, 1987) 529-540, 532.

31. One exception is the inclusion in the Sa skya curriculum of Sa paṇ's *Treasure*. That this exception is also a treatise is quite revealing of the role of treatise in the Tibetan scholastic tradition.

32. On the different canons, see W. E. Clark, "Some Problems in the Criticism of the Sources of Early Buddhism," *Harvard Theological Review* 18.2 (1930): 121-147. For the Pāli canon, see K. R. Norman, *Pāli Literature* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1983) and S. Collins, "On the Very Idea of a Pāli Canon," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 15 (1990): 89-126. On the Chinese canon, see K. S. Chen, *Buddhism in China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964) 365-386.

Buddha more often and their commentaries directly explicate those. This is obviously not to say that these traditions do not rely on commentaries. For example, Theravāda Buddhism relies on commentaries such as Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification* and Chinese schools tend to emphasize texts such as the *Awakening of the Faith.*[33] Nevertheless, monks and scholars do tend to devote significant efforts to the study of the teachings attributed to the Buddha as a normal part of the curriculum. Theravādins tend to read the main sūttas as contained in the *Majjima Nikāya* or the *Dīgha Nikāya*, whereas Chinese monks often focus their study on a central sūtra such as the *Varjarcchedikā,* the *Lotus* or the *Avataṃsaka.*[34]

The Tibetan curriculum is structured quite differently. Although Tibetans do read and study the Buddhist sūtras, the exoteric teachings that purport to be Buddha's words, they tend to put less (this is a matter of degree) emphasize on the words of the founder and more on the systematic study of their content. All the five or thirteen texts used in the exoteric studies, with the exception of the *Pratimokṣa-sūtra*, are Indian treatises (*bstan bcos, śāstra*). They are the root-texts that are memorized and explained by further commentaries. These treatises do not purport to be the direct words of the founder but to clarify aspects of his message. They offer systematic presentations of the founder's teachings in order to facilitate the comprehension and practice of followers. Although these texts are not part of the *bka' gyur*, the collection of the Buddha's teachings available in Tibetan,[35] they are nevertheless canonical, since they are included in the *bstan gyur*, the translated treatises. The thirteenth century polymath Bu ston (bu-dön) brings out the authoritative and commentarial nature of such treatises, defining them as "works that explain the meaning of the Buddha's word, are

33. Bhikkhu Ñyāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification of Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa* (Boston: Shambala, 1956, 1976) and Y. Hakeda, *The Awakening of Faith* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967).
34. Bhikkhu Ñyāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom, 1960, 1995); M. Walshe, *Thus I Have Heard* (London: Wisdom, 1987); E. Conze, trans., *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Rome: Ismeo, 1957); L. Hurwitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976); T. Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture* (Boulder: Shambala, 1984).
35. P. Harrison, "A Brief History of the Tibetan bKa' 'gyur," *Tibetan Literature,* ed. J. Cabezon (Ithcaca: Snow Lion, 1995), 39-56.

in accordance with the path for the attainment of emancipation, and are composed by someone with a nondistracted mind."[36]

We may wonder about such a choice of curricular material, which seems to be unique in the history of Buddhism. This is not the place for an elaborate exploration of the scriptural background of Tibetan Buddhism which would be required to answer such a question in any detail. Suffice it to say that historically the form that Buddhism has taken in Tibet partly derives from the Indian models that existed at the time (eighth to twelfth centuries) when Buddhism was adopted by Tibetans. The emphasis on treatise can also be seen as a way to deal with the tremendous complexity of the canonical material. In general the Buddhist canon is enormous. The *bka' gyur* contains more than a hundred volumes of the teachings that purport to be Buddha's direct words. Moreover, these teachings are not only numerous, but they often explicitly contradict each other. Confronted with this mass of teachings, Tibetans have tended to be selective and systematic. They have prefered the systematic treatment of the material found in the canonical treatises to the more inspirational but less organized material found in the *bka' gyur*.

This organization of the curriculum reflects the unabashedly classical orientation of Tibetan scholastic traditions, their regard for the lost antiquity of high Indian Buddhist culture. The great Indian treatises, which form the basis of the curriculum, are considered to be classical by all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Their scholastic educations look on these texts from a past period (fourth to eighth century C. E.), a period often described as the "golden age of Indian civilization," as their models in relation to which their contemporary achievements are measured. For Tibetan scholars, such texts are classical in the full sense of the word, which is explained by Gadamer in this way:

> The "classical" is something raised above the vicissitudes of changing times and changing tastes. It is immediately accessible, not through that shock of recognition, as it were, that sometimes characterizes a work of art for its contemporaries and in which the beholder experiences a fulfilled apprehension of meaning that surpasses all conscious expectations. Rather when we call something classical, there is a consciousness of something enduring, of signifi-

36. Bu ston, *lung gyi snye ma*, 5, quoted in J. Cabezón, *Buddhism and Language* (Albany: Suny University Press, 1994) 45.

> cance, that cannot be lost and that is independent of all the circumstances of time—a timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other present.[37]

The great Indian treatises have this timeless and normative status. They are the obligatory reference points for later reflections. They are the "great texts" revered by Tibetan scholiasts. They provide the basis and model for the education of Tibetan scholars, who take them as setting the standards against which contemporary achievements are measured.

Comparing Curriculums: Commentary vs. Debate

On the side of differences, a striking feature is the number of texts and the time devoted to the study of each of them in rNying ma and dGe lugs curricular models. Whereas in the dGe lugs curriculum of Se rwa, only five texts are studied during a period of fifteen to twenty years, rNam grol gling monks study at least thirteen texts in half that time. The number of texts is much greater when we include the tantric ones, which are not counted among the thirteen texts, and additional the texts covering auxiliary topics. We may wonder about the reason for this difference. Does it reflect a difference in the content of the education?

It is true that there are differences in the number of topics covered by the two curriculums. The auxiliary topics of grammar, poetry, history, etc., are not covered in the Se rwa curriculum and neither are the tantras, which are studied privately in the tantric colleges. For the most part, however, the content of the two curricular models is similar. Both curriculums cover the same five main topics, albeit quite differently. If we group the different texts into areas of study, we can then discern five main areas: Madhyamaka philosophy, logic and epistemology, the study of the path, monastic discipline and tantra. Let us leave the last topic aside, since it is not

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37. H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 288. Such a description is adequate only from a phenomenological point of view. It describes the attitude of the participants in the tradition toward certain texts, but does not provide an adequate analysis of the cultural reality of these texts. Despite what Gadamer seems to suggest, there is no necessity in classical texts, for tradition is contingent. Textual choices come and go and what is considered classical by one age is forgotten by the next. Tibetan education provides examples of such changes. In the study of logic and epistemology, Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇa-viniścaya* was first chosen but later replaced by his *Pramāṇa-vārttika* under Sa paṇ's impulsion. Since then, Tibetan scholars consider this latter text as *the* classical expression of Buddhist logico-epistemological tradition.

officially part of the Se rwa curriculum and is supposed to be studied privately, and examine the ways the two curriculums cover the first four exoteric topics.

For each topic the Se rwa curriculum tends to focus on a single text, which is then supplemented by further commentaries and textbooks. The only exception to this practice is found in the study of the path which is done through two texts: the *Ornament of Realization* attributed to Maitreya and Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Abhidharma* (which I would also count as a study of the path). Even here, however, the textual overlap is only partial, since the former covers the Mahāyāna path whereas the latter covers the Basic Buddhist path. Thus, each topic is really examined through a single text. By contrast, the rNam grol gling curriculum covers each main area by examining several of the relevant texts. For example, when the Mahāyāna path is covered all five treatises attributed to Maitreya are examined. Similarly, when the Abhidharma is studied, both Vasubandhu's and Asaṅga's texts are examined. Thus, the number of texts studied for each area varies, although the four main areas are similar.

Thus, it is clear that the main difference between rNying ma and dGe lugs models is not one of content but of educational style or pedagogy. What we have here are two quite distinct models of scholastic studies. The dialectical style of the dGe lugs tradition exemplified by the Se rwa curriculum focuses on a few texts and emphasizes the practice of dialectical debates as one of (and possibly the) central method of education. Whereas in traditional Indian Buddhism debate seems to have been an occasional skill used mostly in public, the dGe lugs tradition emphasizes its pedagogical use as a way to master texts and develop a spirit of inquiry. This pedagogical role for debate has led the dGe lugs tradition to focus on dialectical questions rather than on the more textual and commentarial aspects of Indian Buddhism. As a consequence, this tradition has tended to limit the textual basis of its studies.[38] It has also sometimes neglected, especially in the three monastic universities, the practice of higher literary skills.

The rNying ma tradition, as exemplified by the rNam grol gling curriculum, on the other hand, is more textual. It emphasizes commentary over debate, and offers a more rounded education which combines literary as well as dialectical aspects. Contrary to dGe lugs institutions, which rely

38. The dGe lugs tradition is often praised by outsiders for its dialectical depth but criticized for its limitations in knowing the fundamental Indian treatises. Thus dGe lugs scholars are sometimes characterized as having a "limited [textual] vision" (*mthong bya chung ba*).

overwhelmingly on the practice of debate, non-dGe lugs scholastic institutions are more moderate in their use of debate as a scholastic pedagogy. Debate is a limited though important part of their curriculum and does not constitute the central methodology, as in the dGe lugs institutions. In that, the non-dGe lugs institutions may be closer to the Indian tradition where debate seems to have taken place mostly for public performance or in actual confrontations with other schools.

These two educational traditions are associated with two institutional forms: the debating institution (*rtsod grwa*) of the dGe lugs tradition, as in Se rwa, and the commentarial institution (*bshad grwa*), as in rNam grol gling. These two types of institution and the traditions associated with them have a long history, which we cannot examine at this point in any detail. Briefly, however, the model of commentarial institutions in Tibet can be traced back to Sa-paṇ, who transformed the Sa skya tradition into one of the main Tibetan scholarly schools in the thirteenth century. Sa paṇ stressed the role of study in monastic training and proposed a model of intellectual inquiry which was in many respects close to classical Indian ideas. Such a model is based on the harmonious combination of three practices: exposition (*'chad*), composition (*rtsom*) and debate (*rtsod*), as explained by Sa paṇ's own *Entrance to the Gate for the Wise* (*mkhas pa la 'jug pa'i sgo*).[39] In this text, Sa paṇ greatly emphasized traditional Indian commentarial categories as well as their literary background. He stressed the importance of grammar and semantics as basic scholarly skills and the relevance of Indian poetics to commentarial practice.

The debating tradition grew out of the scholarly activities of the famous translator rNgog lo tsā ba (ngok-lo-tsa-wa, 1059-1109). Despite his belonging to the bKa' gdams pa (ga-dam-ba) tradition, which in its origins looked askance at the study of philosophy, rNgog was deeply interested in scholarly studies, which he promoted in Tibet. Under his influence, Tibetan Buddhism in general and the bKa' gdams pa tradition in particular became more philosophically oriented. Under his impulse, the monastery of gSang phu ne'u thog (sang-pu-ne-wu-tok), founded in 1073 by his uncle rNgog legs pa'i shes rab (Ngok-lek-bay-shay-rab, one of Atīśa's direct disciples) started to develop as an active intellectual center. Its importance further increased with the work of Phya pa chos kyi seng ge (cha-ba-chö-gyi-seng-gay, 1182-1251), who brought about important developments due to his

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39. See D. Jackson, *The Entrance Gate for the Wise* (Wien: Arbeitkreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, 1987).

acute and original intellect.[40] Phya pa is credited with settling the form of debate practiced by Tibetans. It is under his influence that gSang pu became the center of a tradition that was going to differ from the more classical Indian model later imitated by Sa-paṇ.

Gradually, the education offered by the gSang pu tradition[41] spread throughout the Tibetan world. Later scholastic centers such as sNar thang (nar-thang), Zha lu (sha-lu), and bDe ba chen (de-wa-chen) adopted a curriculum similar to that of gSang pu. It is in these centers that Tsong kha pa and his main disciples received their basic scholarly training. Consequently, the dGe lugs school adopted the gSang pu tradition with its philosophical views, curriculum, and methods of study. From the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, a close link existed between the three dGe lugs monastic universities around Lhasa and gSang pu.[42] After this period, gSang pu lost its importance as a center of study and was supplanted by the three dGe lugs monastic universities, which became the dominant scholastic establishments in central Tibet.

We may begin to understand better the curricular organization of the two models of Tibetan scholastic education. We realize their important similarities and their more subtle variations, as well as the complex histories that lie behind them. But our effort of comprehension cannot stop here, for we need to understand the content of the curriculum. To do so I could describe the content of each text, but it would be hard to avoid the tedium of a scholastic laundry list. Hence, rather than survey the content of the whole curriculum, let me focus on a single aspect, the study of the path, in order to

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40. L. van der Kuijp describes Phya pa as a non-sectarian thinker mostly associated with the bKa' gdams pa. "Phya-pa Chos-kyi-seng-ge's Impact on Tibetan Epistemological Theory," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 5 (1978): 355-369, 357.

41. It should be clear that this label is a simplification, for both rNgog's and Sa-paṇ's traditions coexisted at gSang pu. The monastery was divided between bKa' gdams colleges, which followed Cha-ba's tradition, and Sa skya colleges, which probably followed Sa-paṇ's model of education. Rong ston (rong-dön, 1367-1449), for example, who was one of the foremost proponents of Sa-paṇ's tradition, taught extensively at gSang pu. See D. Jackson, "introduction," in *Rong-ston on the Prajñāpāramitā Philosophy of the Abhisamayālaṃkara* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 1988). Nevertheless, the name is convenient in view of the later connection between the dGe lugs school and the bKa' gdams elements at gSang pu.

42. See S. Onoda, *Monastic Debate in Tibet* (Wien: Arbeitkreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, 1992) 13-36.

clarify some of the central topics, goals and concerns of Tibetan monastic education.

The Place of the Study of the Path

If we look at the two types of curriculum and the number of texts studied and years spent on them, we can see that by far the greatest amount of effort is devoted to the area of studies which I have termed the *study of the path*. In the dGe lugs curriculum, this topic is examined through at least two texts: the *Ornament* and the *Abhidharma*. Even Candrakīrti's *Introduction* is largely concerned with the path as well. The importance of the topic is clear also in the number of years spent on each of these texts, particularly on the former, which is studied for four or five years at Se rwa through an elaborate textual examination always combined with lengthy debates. It is studied with Tsong kha pa's *Golden Garland*,[43] and rGyal tshab's (gyel-tsap, 1364-1432) *Ornament of the Essence of Commentaries*[44] as well as with the textbooks of the college. In this topic, the textbooks are important because they allow the students to cover topics that are not explicitly covered by the *Ornament*. Students, who have already examined the Abhidharma topics in their study of the *Ornament*, examine them again when they study Vasubandhu's commentary on the Abhidharma for

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43. Tsong kha pa, *Extensive Explanation of the Treatise of the Ornament Together with its Commentaries, a Golden Garland of Good Sayings.(bstan bcos mngon rtogs rgyan 'grel pa dang bcas pa'i rgya cher bshad pa legs bshad gser gyi phreng ba*, Bylakuppe, India: Sera Monastery. Block). The use of this book in the dGe lugs tradition has given rise to a lot of controversies. Despite its being authored by the founder of the tradition, many dGe lugs scholars prefer to rely on rGyal tshab's work or on textbooks. This choice is often questioned by thinkers outside of the dGe lugs tradition who snear at the refusal of many dGe lugs scholars to use the book of their founder. dGe lugs scholars, however, justify their choice by the fact the *Golden Garland* was written when Tsong-kha-pa was thirty one and had not yet reached his maturity. Hence, it cannot be taken as reflecting a mature dGe lugs standpoint, they argue. There is some truth to this. Tsong-kha-pa's large work appears to be a compendium of commonly accepted opinions concerning the *Ornament* and it reflects a variety of views, which are not all compatible with Tsong-kha-pa's later views. Nevertheless, it contains also some insightful explanations and several dGe lugs teachers hold that it is impossible in this tradition to claim to know the *Ornament* and its literature without mastering the *Golden Garland*.

44. rGyal tshab, *Ornament of the Essence of Commentaries (rnam bshad snying po rgyan*; Varanasi: Pleasure of Elegant Sayings Press, 1980).

two to four more years. Thus, altogether dGe lugs students may spend close to ten years examining the path.

In the rNying ma curriculum of rNam grol gling, the time devoted to the study of the path explained in the exoteric literature is shorter since the overall exoteric curriculum does not take more than six or seven years. Nevertheless, the topic is covered in considerable detail. True to its textual methodology, the rNying ma tradition exposes the students to this topic through the study of many texts: at least three of the five treatises attributed to Maitreya are clearly devoted to the study of the path and so are the two Abhidharma commentaries as well as Śāntideva's *Introduction to the Bodhisattva's Deeds,* which is used as an introductory text.

One may wonder why this topic of the path is covered so extensively in both types of curriculum? To those who are experts in a Buddhist tradition, the answer to such a question is self-evident. The path (*lam, mārga*) is the central notion of the tradition. As expressed by Buswell and Gimello, the path "incorporates, underlies, or presupposes everything else in Buddhism, from the simplest act of charity to the most refined meditative experience and the most rigorous philosophical argument. The study of mārga directs attention . . . to a general pattern of discipline encompassing both the whole life of the individual and the corporate life of the whole Buddhist community."[45] Scholars of Buddhism know that the study of a particular formulation of the path plays a central role in a Buddhist tradition. It is the structure around which a Buddhist tradition organizes its practices, its main doctrinal teachings, its central narratives, etc.

For those who have little expertise in a Buddhist tradition, this focus on the path may appear alien, requiring the substitution of the well known terms of religious studies with arcane Buddhological jargon. We should first notice, however, that the Buddhist literature dealing with the path is extremely frequent throughout the Buddhist world. Many other classical Indian treatises, such as those attributed to Asaṅga himself, fit in this class. In Tibet, there is a whole literature expounding this topic: the numerous commentaries on the *Prajñā-pāramitā* literature, the studies of Stages and Paths (*sa lam gyi rnam bzhag*) of the sūtra and the tantra, the texts devoted to the structure of the path in the traditions of the Great Seal and of the Great Perfection. Outside of India and Tibet, such texts are also widespread. In Theravāda, Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification* is only the

45. R. Buswell and R. Gimello, introduction, *Paths to Liberation* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 1992) 6.

most famous example of an extensive literature. Similarly, such texts have also played an important part in Far Eastern Buddhism, as evinced by the importance of Chih-i's (538-597) *Mo-ho-chih-kuan.*[46]

The impression of unfamiliarity further dissipates when we begin to realize that this classical Buddhist standpoint can be recast in terms of an emphasis on practice. Too often religious traditions are defined in terms of creed, an approach that is far from being as universal as it may seem. Although such a view has some applicability to Buddhism, I would argue that it is basically inappropriate to a tradition that emphasizes practice as its central focus. This does not mean that doctrines, symbols or narratives are irrelevant to Buddhism, as Buddhist scholars know, but that they need to be understood in terms of how they relate to actual practices.

When we realize that the idea of the path is the way in which Buddhism expresses its pragmatic and soteriological emphasis,[47] we begin to understand why students spend so many years in studying the structure and result of the path. We have yet to understand, however, the way in which such studies relate to actual practices. It may be tempting to assume that texts dealing with the path directly relate to actual practices, in particular to the meditative practices that are normatively speaking central to the tradition. I would like to argue that this assumption is warranted, however, only to a very limited extent. I would further argue that although practice is central to Buddhist traditions and the various treatments of the path are meant to address this pragmatic emphasis, it is a mistake to assume that teachings on the path necessarily reflect an experiential standpoint.

Recently, R. Sharf has argued in the same sense. His view is that some modern Buddhist scholars and contemporary Buddhist practitioners mistakenly regard the literature describing the structure and results of the path in experiential terms. Sharf says:

> In fact, it is difficult to imagine how somebody could mistake this kind of religious literature for "expressions" or "reports" of personal experiences; they are first and foremost scholastic compendiums, compiled by monks of

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46. See J. McRae, "Encounter Dialogue and the Transformation of the Spriritual Path in Chinese Ch'an," *Paths to Liberation*, eds. R. Buswell and R. Gimello (Honolulu: Hawai University Press, 1992) 339-370.

47. The soteriology normatively emphasized by Buddhist traditions is best described, following J. Z. Smith's useful distinction, as utopian rather than locative. "The Wobbling Pivot," *Map is not a Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 88-103.

> formidable learning who were attempting to systematize and schematize the confused and often conflicting descriptions of practices and stages found scattered throughout the canon.[48]

For Sharf, it is a categorical mistake to assume that the literature dealing with the path is either a reflection of Buddhist practice or a direct preparation for it. My point here is not to discuss Sharf's arguments, which address the presentations of many traditions and thus may have to be nuanced. Nevertheless, I believe that his view is quite appropriate in the case of the Tibetan presentations of the exoteric path that are central to scholastic education, especially the presentations derived from the works attributed to Maitreya and Asaṅga. Let me elaborate this point, before making a few broader concluding remarks.

The Study of the Path and Buddhist Practice

Among the canonical works concerning the exoteric path, the one that stands out is the *Ornament*, which is attributed by Tibetan scholars to the celestial Bodhisattva Maitreya. This work is studied for often up to six years in dGe lugs institutions and, although less time is devoted to it in non-dGe lugs institutions, it remains a central reference of the Tibetan presentations of the path. Thus, it constitutes an ideal testing ground to see whether Sharf's view applies to the Tibetan presentations of the path.

The *Ornament* is a commentary on the *Prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra*, the main canonical source of the teaching of emptiness. The primary concern of this commentary is not, however, to explain this teaching but to delineate the stages of the path from the Mahāyāna standpoint, a subject taught only implicitly in the sūtra, according to the Tibetan tradition. Tibetan scholars describe the topic of the *Ornament* as the stages of realization that are the hidden meaning of the sūtra (*smdo'i sbas don mngon rtogs kyi rim pa*). The *Ornament* summarizes its own content in this way:

> The perfection of wisdom (*prajñā-pāramitā*) has been proclaimed by way of eight themes: 1) the wisdom knowing all modes, 2) the wisdom knowing the paths, 3) the wisdom knowing all [phenomena], 4) the full practice of all

48. R. Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," *Numen* 42 (1995): 228-283, 238.

aspects, 5) the culminating stages of practice, 6) the gradual practice, 7) the instantaneous practice, 8) the dharma-body.[49]

Each of the eight chapters of the *Ornament* addresses one of the eight themes (*dngos po, padārtha*). There is no point here in analyzing these eight themes. Suffice it to say that the *Ornament* describes the structure of the Mahāyāna path through the four practices (*sbyor ba bzhi, catvāraḥ prayogāḥ*) or realizations (*mngon rtogs, abhisamaya*). These four realizations (chapters 4-7) take as their objects the first three themes (chapters 1-3), the three wisdoms of the Buddha. The result of this fourfold practice is the dharma-body of the Buddha and his special attainments (chapter 8).

I suggested earlier that the importance of the path in Buddhist tradition reflects a pragmatic orientation on the part of the tradition, which understands what would be called in English *religion* more as a matter of practice than of creed. It is tempting to infer from this that since it teaches the Mahāyāna path, the *Ornament* must bear a direct relation with actual Mahāyāna meditative practices. It is also tempting to infer the since this text explains the Mahāyāna path, those who study it intensively, as Tibetan scholars do, must be interested in this text for practical reasons. These assumptions are, however, unjustified. Although practice is central to Buddhist traditions and the *Ornament* relates to this pragmatic emphasis, it is incorrect to assume that teachings on the path necessarily reflect an experiential standpoint. In order to understand a text we cannot look just at its content and deduce from this its application; rather, we must consider the ways in which such a text is used by the textual communities in which it is embedded.

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49. *shes pha rol phyin pa ni / dngos po brgyad kyis yang dag bshad / rnam kun mkyen nyid lam shes nyid / de nas tham cad shes pa nyid / rnam kun mngon rdzogs rtogs pa dang / rtse mor phyin dang mthar gyis pa / skad cig gcig mngon rdzogs byang chub / chos kyi sku dnag de rnams brgyad// prajñāpāramitā-ṣṭābhiḥ padārthaiḥ samudīritā/ sarvākārajñatā (1) mārgajñatā (2) sarvajñatā (3) tataḥ// sarvākārābhisaṃbodho (4) mūrdhaprāpto (5) 'nunpūrvikaḥ (6) / ekakṣaṇābhi-sambodho (7) dharmakāyas (8) ca te 'ṣṭadhā //* E. Obermiller and Th. Stcherbatsky, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra-nāma-prajñāpāramitopadeśa-śāstra, The Work of Bodhisattva Maitreya* (Leningrad: Bibliotheca Buddhica, 1929; reedited Osnabrück: Biblio, 1970), stanzas I:3-4, P: 5184, *Ka*, 1.a-15.b, 1. This work has been translated by E. Conze, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (Roma: ISMEO, 1954). For a still unmatched study of the content of this work, see E. Obermiller, *Acta Orientalia* 11 (1933): 1-100. Translation, which is mine, is based on this last work.

In discussing the ways this text is used by Tibetan traditions, we may want to keep in mind the fact that the *Ornament* is used differently by the two main Tibetan scholastic traditions characterized above. In the non-dGe lugs commentarial institutions, the *Ornament* is studied for its content, the eight themes, which are explained through seventy topics (*don, artha*). In this way, students learn about the four realizations, the bodies (*sku, kaya*) of the Buddha as well as a number of elements of the Mahāyāna path such as the mind of enlightenment (*byang chub kyi sems, bodhicitta*). Non-dGe lugs traditions do not focus exclusively on the *Ornament*, but complete this study of the path by examining the other texts attributed to Maitreya as well as Asaṅga's and Vasubandhu's Abhidharma texts.

dGe lugs monastic universities proceed differently. They take the *Ornament* as the central text for the study of the path, treating it as a kind of Buddhist encyclopedia, and read it in the light of commentaries by Tsong-kha-pa, rGyal tshab and the authors of textbooks. Sometimes a single word of the *Ornament* is taken by commentaries more as a pretext for elaborate digression than as an object of serious textual explanation. Several dGe lugs colleges, such as the Byas (jay) College of Se rwa, recognize this situation and consider these topics as special (*zur bkol*).[50] They are studied in relation to the *Ornament* but apart. In this way, most of the topics relevant to the Buddhist path, whether from a Mahāyāna perspective or from a more general basic Buddhist standpoint, are covered in the course of studying this one text. The summarizing commentaries of the textbooks, particularly the *General Meaning* (*spyi don*), are here helpful in offering synthesized presentations of all the relevant topics. In this way, students are introduced to a variety of topics and perspectives, despite the limitations of their textual basis.

When we look at the ways in which both these Tibetan scholastic traditions use the *Ornament*, we see very little practical relevance, despite some claims by members of the traditions themselves. Among the topics either directly covered by the *Ornament* or studied in relation to it, few appear to have any direct relation to practice. Let us first look at the central themes of the text. Among the eight topics the first three, the three wisdoms of the Buddha, are not meant to be practiced directly. They are taken as the object

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50. In some colleges, some of the central topics such as tranquility or the distinction between interpretable and definitive teachings are considered separate topics. They have special texts devoted to them and in Se rwa Byas are studied apart, usually the year before finishing the *Ornament*. The other colleges do not have a special time devoted to them, but they do have special texts.

of the path, which consists of the four practices. Similarly, the last theme, the dharma-body of the Buddha is not directly relevant to practice but is the goal of practice. The central form of practice presented by the *Ornament* is the four practices or realizations, particularly the practice of all the aspects (*rnam rdzogs sbyor ba*), the topic of the fourth chapter. In fact, this is the central topic of the text and may have been an actual practice in which all the different aspects of the three wisdoms are summarized in a single meditation called the *meditation summarizing the three wisdoms* (*mkhyen gsum bsdus sgom*). This is not the place to explain this highly technical topic which would take us into the stratosphere of Tibetan scholasticism. What is relevant for our purpose is that this practice seems to be realistic. It does not involve any extraordinary feat, as in the case of the miraculous qualities of the Buddhas and Celestial Bodhisattvas, but can be implemented by anybody interested in doing so.

But, and this is the important point, no teacher I have ever met, seems to have practiced this meditation or even to have been clear on how to do so. Non-dGe lugs curriculums do study this practice but few seem to have a convincing understanding of this topic, even at the textual level. As far as the students I interviewed, they seem to have gotten very little out of the study of this part of the text. Among dGe lugs scholars, there is probably a better understanding of the topic at the theoretical level. Nevertheless, nobody I encountered seems to be clear about the ways to practice this text. Thus, it is clear that in the Tibetan scholastic traditions, the central themes of this text are not practiced. What about the other auxiliary topics, those that are briefly presented by the text or those that are studied through other texts?

It may seem that some of the less central topics studied have direct practical applications. For example, the mind of enlightenment (*byang chub kyi sems, bodhicitta*) is studied in the first chapter. Similarly, the single-pointed concentration that leads to the attainment of tranquility (*zhi gnas, śamatha*) is studied in great detail. Concentration is studied with considerable care for several months, and in certain colleges such as 'Bras spung sGo mang (dre-bung-go-mang) and Se rwa Byas is considered a special topic (*zur bkol*). Thus, topics such as the mind of enlightenment or concentration, which are of practical importance, are studied at great length. Moreover, teachers do point out the practical importance of studying them. Are these not signs that these texts are used for practice?

Although it is tempting to assume here an experiential relevance, the reality appears to be quite different, for the study of these topics remains mostly confined to the theoretical domain. Students do not devote much

time to the study of the aspects of these topics that are of direct relevance to actual meditation. For example, in the study of concentration, the nine stages leading to tranquility, which are of practical use, are not given much attention. Similarly, the two methods for generating the mind of enlightenment,[51] which are central to the Gradual Path (*lam rim*) literature, are barely mentioned. The real focus is theoretical. The mind of enlightenment is not studied here as an attitude to be developed but in function of its role in the overall Mahāyāna path. Similarly, the study of concentration focuses on the attainments of the four absorptions (*bsam gtan, dhyāna*) and the four formless concentrations (*gzugs med, arūpa*).[52] These are standard forms of Buddhist practice which have been and are practiced in certain Buddhist traditions. Nevertheless, they are rarely practiced in the Tibetan tradition. When monks become really serious about practice and start the type of extended retreat that would enable them to aim for such attainments, they do not practice the four absorptions or the four formless concentrations, but focus on the tantric path. There, the attainment of tranquility is discussed for which special methods are introduced,[53] but the attainments of absorptions and formless concentrations play little role.

Thus, the conclusion seems hard to escape. Despite claims to the contrary sometimes made by members of the tradition, the study of the *Ornament* and other texts similarly presenting the exoteric path seems to have little relation to experience within the context of Tibetan scholastic traditions. We may then wonder why Tibetan scholars spend so much time studying these topics? Are they taken in by their own claims? Or do they just keep studying texts that had an experiential relevance in an earlier time, which is now lost? I have obviously little to say about the historical back-

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51. The tradition of the Gradual Path often speaks of two methods to develop the mind of enlightenment: the first, the seven causes and effect, is based on considering the debt we owe all sentient beings for their having been our mothers and having had countless other kindness. The second, exchanging self and others, focuses on the equality of self and others and proposes an exchange of one's attitudes toward oneself and others. See Geshe Rabten, *The Essential Nectar* (London: Wisdom, 1984) 305-66.

52. The dGe lugs views on this topic have been well presented by L. Zahler, *Meditative States* (London: Wisdom, 1983), and Geshe Gedün Lodrö and J. Hopkins, *Walking Through Walls* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1992). For a detailed Theravāda view on the topic, see Ñānamoli, *The Path of Purification*, I.84-478. For an easier view, see A. Solé-Leris, *Tranquility and Insight* (Boston: Shambala, 1986) 56-73.

53. See D. Cozort, *Highest Yoga Tantra* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1986) 55-6.

ground of this last question, for the way in which these texts were used by Indian Buddhists is outside the purview of my inquiry. It is important to remember, however, that understanding the practices of a tradition as left-overs of a meaningful past that has lost its relevance is inadequate. People engage in the lengthy study of such texts not out of habit but because they find it meaningful. But what is the meaning that Tibetan scholars find in a text such as the *Ornament*?

Worldview and the Study of the Ornament

I would like to suggest that the answer is not to be found in experience but in what could be described as the formation of a worldview. The discussion of the exoteric path is central to Tibetan traditions not because it provides practical guidance but because it provides for the construction of the kind of meaningful universe that Buddhist practice requires. This explanation of the role of the *Ornament* follows a venerable tradition in the Western academical study of religions, which proposes that religion is a way to understand the universe and cope with the limits that it imposes on humans. Some of the formulations of this view, such as those of Tylor and Frazer, are by now thoroughly discredited. They were clearly wrong in presenting religion as a kind of primitive science aiming at the explanation of natural phenomena. Even more recent and relevant formulations of this view are still problematic in that they reflect too closely the theological background out of which they come. Weber, for example, holds that the religions of salvation are based on a theodicy of suffering and happiness.[54] Similarly, Geertz argues that religion is a model both of and for human existence. It enables humans to bear existential problems such as suffering or evil by placing these experiences within a meaningful framework.[55] Although not without merit, these views in which the Protestant influence is transparent fit Buddhism only imperfectly, for the latter is based on the rather optimistic idea that humans can overcome suffering. Hence, the idea of acceptance, which is central to Weber, Geertz and many modern scholars of religious studies, is problematic in a Buddhist context. Nevertheless, it is certainly not wrong to argue that a religion such as Buddhism seeks to enable its followers to cope with suffering and the other limits of human existence.

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54. M. Weber, "The Social Psychology," *From Max Weber*, eds. H. Gerth and W. Mills (New York, 1958) 271-275.

55. C. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *The Interpetation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 87-125, 100-5.

In a Buddhist perspective, this coping with suffering, which is the goal of the tradition, has several dimensions. First and foremost, Buddhist traditions hold that only sustained religious practices can effectively help humans to diminish and eventually overcome suffering. Such liberative, or to use J. Z. Smith's words,[56] utopian practices involve a whole range of soteriological practices. Most of them have little to do with meditative experience and pertain to what is usually called merit making. In this category, we can include not only most traditional lay practices such as giving to the monastic order but also most of the monastic practices as well. In particular, the scholastic studies examined here are understood by participants as a form of merit making. This type of Buddhist practice forms the core of much actual Buddhist practice. It should not be considered at odds with so-called higher meditative practices, but, on the contrary, as continuous with them. Merit making is part of the liberative or utopian dimension of the tradition. In some ways, the value that monks find in monastic studies derive from their being meritorious. Studying a text such as the *Ornament* is intrinsically valuable. It is in and of itself virtuous.

Nevertheless, this intrinsic virtuous quality of Tibetan scholastic studies is not their main value. Normatively speaking, the main value of studies, one of the two types of activity in which Buddhist monks are supposed to engage, is in their leading to the development of virtues such as inner calm, attention and inquisitiveness that will in turn enable the practitioner to be successful in the higher meditative practices. For there is no doubt that, from a normative standpoint, meditative practices are considered by most Buddhist traditions as the ultimate means of freedom. In considering these higher practices, however, it is a mistake to overemphasize the experiential dimension. Although Buddhist meditations involve experience, this is not their only or even most relevant feature. From a Buddhist perspective, meditations are first and foremost ethical practices that seek to develop central virtues such as detachment and compassion.

Moreover, ethical practices do not exist independently of larger cultural frameworks in relation to which they make sense. In particular, Buddhist practices require a cosmological framework in which the virtues that are being developed and the practices used for this purpose make sense. Buddhist practices and virtues are supposed to have immediate effects on the basis of which Buddhist teachers often argue for the cogency of their traditions. But the immediate benefits that one derives from certain practices are

56. Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot."

not enough to support the kind of intensive commitment necessary to their implementation. Humans do not live just by quick fixes but need to decide on long term goals and means to reach them. They need a narrative through which they know what to do and become persuaded that they are on the right track. They also need to be able to bring a sense of closure to such a narrative, to find a standpoint toward which their efforts are aimed and from which they make sense. Such a standpoint can be found only in a certain type of universe. To construct such a universe of meaning is one of the main goals of the study of the *Ornament* and other related texts in Tibetan scholastic traditions.

This universe of meaning is the one familiar to students of Buddhism. It is explained by the basic teachings of Buddhism such as the four noble truths and dependent origination, supplemented by the Mahāyāna sūtras. The four noble truths provide the kind of existential analysis of human existence, as impermanent, suffering and no-self, that can provide the basis for spiritual practices. These basic teachings also indicate the possibility of liberation and the path that can lead to such a goal, thus forming a universe in which the practices recommended by Buddhist traditions become meaningful. The universe of meaning constructed by the *Ornament* and other related texts is not, however, just that of basic Buddhism, for it is a Mahāyāna universe, where the goal of practice is less self-liberation than universal salvation. This is the universe of the Mahāyāna sūtras in which bodhisattvas strive to become Buddha through the practice of the perfections (*phar phyin, pāramitā*).

To develop such a view of the world, students go through a number of topics which pertain either to basic Buddhism or to the Mahāyāna tradition. They study the basic teachings mentioned above, including the four truths, the analysis of mental factors, the difference between concentration and insight, the form and formless absorptions, etc. In the dGe lugs debating institutions, these topics, (with which students of other Buddhist traditions, particularly Theravāda), are familiar, are studied in the textbooks and the commentaries, which take the *Ornament* as a pretext for exploring the Buddhist universe. This is in accordance with this tradition's emphasis on debate and the concordant tendency to keep the textual basis of studies limited. In the non-dGe lugs commentarial institutions, such a study is done in relation to other texts such as those of the Abhidharma.

Students also study the central topic of the Mahāyāna tradition, the structure of the Mahāyāna path, the central topic of the *Ornament.* Related topics such as the development of the mind of enlightenment, the nature and role of the perfections (*phar phyin, pāramitā*), or the conflicting views on

Buddha-nature (*bde gshes snying po, tathāgata-garbha*) are examined at great length. Students also study the divisions and sub-divisions of the paths, the stages of the Mahāyāna path, the qualities obtained at each of these stages, and the final results to which they lead.[57] In this way, the students form a coherent picture of the path and the universe in which this path makes sense.

In the non-dGe lugs commentarial institutions, particularly at the rNam grol gling monastery, this Mahāyāna picture of the world is in turn supplemented by the study of the tantric path. Right from the beginning, students are introduced to the tantric dimensions of Buddhist practice. The universe of meaning constructed here is not just Mahāyāna, but tantric as well. Students are made aware that the path and the goal are esoteric and that the exoteric texts figure as introductions to the real path, which is tantric. These texts are meant to be supplemented by the tantric description of the path. Thus the last three years out of a total of nine years of study are devoted to a detailed study of the tantric tradition.

But here again, it would be a mistake to take this tantric curriculum as reflecting a practical orientation. Students do not receive practical instructions on how to meditate. Such instructions are provided only after students have begun their actual meditative career. Moreover, such instructions are mostly given only in private or during optional periods of retreat. Hence, the tantric instructions contained in the curriculum of commentarial institutions are not intended to provide practical guidance but theoretical models that support the construction of a universe in which tantric practice is meaningful. The particularity of the rNying ma curriculum is not that it is more practical, but that the universe that it constructs is tantric rather than based purely on the exoteric aspects of the tradition. Thus, the difference with dGe lugs curriculum is real but does not concern the actual practices of either tradition.

The practices of the Tibetan traditions are quite similar, although not identical. What differs is the rhetoric used to present such practices and the ideological contexts thus created. In the dGe lugs model, the universe and the path to which students are introduced theoretically are exoteric and the actual tantric practices they later engage in are understood to fit into such a framework. Even while describing actual tantric practices dGe lugs texts tend to emphasize the primacy of the exoteric narrative of spiritual progress

57. For a brief overview of the literature, see: J. Levinson, "The Metaphors of Liberation," eds. Cabezon and Jackson, *Tibetan Literature*, 261-274.

thereby bringing the legitimacy of the classical exoteric model to their esoteric practices. In the rNying ma model, the universe to which students are introduced doctrinally is mostly tantric and the exoteric teachings are taken as supporting this construction. The actual practices that students later engage in fit easily into the narratives of spiritual progress derived from these tantric models. Members of the tradition sometimes find it harder, however, to justify their practices in reference to the classical Indian model.

Scholasticism and the Construction of Meaning

It is in this ideological and theoretical perspective that the *Ornament*'s discussion of apparently practical topics must be understood within a Tibetan context. Topics such as the mind of enlightenment or the attainments pertaining to the form and formless realms are important not because they directly prepare for meditations but because they support the elaboration of a universe in which Buddhist practice makes sense. The *Ornament* and similar texts are, for Tibetans, not reports on or direct preparations for Buddhist practice, but rhetorical representations of the meaningful universe envisaged by the tradition. They provide students with a meaningful outlook, which may support further practices, but which has no direct relevance to them.

This construction of a universe of meaning is not something unique to Tibetan scholastic traditions. Most religious traditions, however, do not take the doctrinal and intellectualist approach adopted by Tibetan scholasticism. Rather, they emphasize the role of myths and rituals in achieving such a goal. In the Tibetan scholastic traditions such dimensions obviously exist but they seem less important than in non-scholastic traditions. Myths are obviously present but they seem to play a less important role in the construction of meaning than the doctrinally based narratives. The central narratives are not derived from the concrete teachings of the founder or the biographies of the central figures, but emerge from abstract doctrines. This, I suggest, is a particularity of scholasticism as a religious phenomenon.

To be successful, this construction of a meaningful universe and the path that transcends it must become self-evident, so that students feel confident in their practices. The steps along the path must appear to them as concrete stages in relation to which Buddhist practice makes sense. This concreteness should, however, be understood in relation to the process of reification through which it is constructed. The map provided by the *Ornament* literature does not refer to some self-evident mental states existing independently of textuality. The stages described by the *Ornament* are not set in stone. Rather, they are constructed symbolic objects that acquire the solidity nec-

essary to inspire and sustain people in their actions. They are best characterized, following Burke's term, as symbolic actions, that is, as representational forces that attempt to influence their audience.[58] Thus, far from being a kind of guide to Buddhist practice or a description of spiritual experiences, the *Ornament* provides the Tibetan tradition with the framework that makes a narrative of spiritual progress possible and introduces an element of closure without which the commitment required by Buddhist practices cannot be sustained.

58. K. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1950) 22-3.