

WHERE DO COMMENTARIAL SCHOOLS COME FROM?
REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORY OF TIBETAN
SCHOLASTICISM

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In describing Tibetan Buddhism, it is customary to draw a sharp distinction between Geluk (*dge lugs*) and non-Geluk schools. The former, which traces its origin to Tsong Khapa (*tsong kha pa*, 1357-1419) and his direct disciples, is often described as clerical, emphasizing the role of studies in the religious career of its members. It is contrasted with the other main Tibetan Buddhist schools, the Nyingma (*nying ma*), Kagyu (*bka' rgyud*) and Sagya (*sa skya*) traditions, which are supposed to be less scholastic, stressing the immediacy of personal experience. Furthermore these traditions are often characterized as being tantric whereas the Geluk school is presented as being essentially limited to the exoteric or sutra aspect of Buddhism¹.

In this essay, I examine the degree to which this dualistic view of Tibetan Buddhism holds true within the realm of Tibetan monastic education by studying one its most typical institutions. At first sight, it may appear that the present state of Tibetan monastic education confirms this dualistic picture. There is a sharp contrast between the two models of scholastic education that subsume the field of Tibetan monastic education. The Geluk model, which is found in the three great monastic seats (*gdan sa*) of Sera, Drepung and Gaden, is characterized by a strong emphasis on debate that contrasts sharply with the educational model of the non-Geluk institutions, the commentarial schools (*bshad grwa*). The education of these institutions, which are found in all three non-Geluk traditions, puts less emphasis on debate and instead stresses exegesis as its central practice.

¹ For such a view, see: G. Samuel, *Civilized Shamans* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1993).

In this essay, I argue that this dualistic picture of Tibetan monastic education as being composed of two entirely separate traditions is misleading, for it masks the commonality that exist among these traditions. My argument focuses on the non-Geluk educational model of the commentarial school. I start with a brief presentation of some of the general features of Tibetan monastic education, focusing on the actual curricular models and delineating their main characteristics. I argue that despite very real differences, Geluk and non-Geluk curricular models share very strong similarities, especially when contrasted with other models known in the Buddhist world. I then examine the rise of the non-Geluk commentarial school model of monastic education, showing that this model is a recent creation, the result of the complex interactions of the non-Geluk traditions with the dominant Geluk scholastic model of the three monastic seats. I further argue that in fact both scholastic models are transformations of the common classical model from which they both derive. But before I can proceed with these historical considerations, I need to say a few introductory words about the general structure of Tibetan monastic education and briefly describe the main features of Geluk and non-Geluk educational models².

The Basic Structure of Tibetan Scholastic Education

The education of Tibetan monks can be seen to conform to a general model in which three stages can be distinguished. 1) Education begins with memorization and the acquisition of basic literacy, which constitute the heuristic and obligatory aspect of the process. After monks have memorized a sufficient amount of liturgical material they may continue with the central hermeneutical practices of 2) commentary and 3) debate. This structure is common to all existing Tibetan Buddhist traditions, underlining the crucial role that memorization and basic literacy play in the formation of Tibetan monks.

After learning how to read, Tibetan monks start their most basic educational practice, the memorization of an often large number of ritual

² The first two sections of this essay are derived from my *Sounds of Two Hands Clapping* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003), which the reader can consult for a more detailed examination of these topics.

texts. This is the essential and obligatory element of the disciplinary practices on which Tibetan monasticism rests. It integrates monks to the monastic community by allowing them to take part in its collective rituals, which are the central activities of the monastery. Unlike the higher scholarly training, which is reserved to the minority of those who are ready for many years of intense dedication, memorization concerns all monks. It inculcates in them a sense of discipline born out of following a daily routine under the supervision of their teachers. This cannot but greatly strengthen the sense of obedience that young monks develop toward authority, an important element of most monastic structures. But the most important disciplinary role of memorization is the training of monks as efficient members of the ritual community. This is the main function of monasteries in Tibet, providing ritual services to sponsors. Typically, upon entering a monastery, young monks (between six and twenty), first memorize its liturgy (*chos spyod*). Only then can they become members of the monastery, partaking in its benefits and in its common activities. Once they have memorized the ritual texts, they are able to recite them in unison with the community of monks using the same tune and rhythm. In this way, a powerful aesthetic effect is created, satisfying performers and supporters alike. The monks can feel confident of the value of such practices and sponsors can get the sense of religious awe that allows them to feel justified in their support for the monastery.

After having memorized the prescribed amount of ritual materials, monks may choose to pursue a higher monastic education and enter the course of studies provided by the larger monastic centers of their tradition. Such a choice is individual and traditionally only concerned a small minority, for most monks remained satisfied with their role as ritual specialist and never bothered with studies³. The first task of those who choose to enter into the course of scholastic studies is to memorize the great Indian treatises (*śāstra*, *bstan bcos*), the root (*rtsa ba*, *mūla*) texts, on which the whole tradition revolves. It is the study of these texts that con-

³ This situation is changing to a certain degree. The onset of modernity has tended to give greater importance to scholastic studies, which provide monks with an education that allow them to retain their claim to being a cultural elite. Hence, many monasteries are now providing some scholastic training to their young monks, thereby broadening the number of monks who undergo the training I am describing here.

stitutes the tradition, for unlike modern institutions where studies are organized according to disciplines, scholastic studies are organized around important texts. These texts are assimilated through commentaries and debates supported by memorization.

This model of monastic training is followed nowadays by all Tibetan Buddhist traditions⁴. There are, however, differences in the curriculum that is being studied in this way by these traditions. To greatly simplify, we can distinguish the Geluk curricular model as it is found in the three monastic seats from that found in the non-Geluk commentarial schools mentioned above. Let me briefly indicate the main features of these two models, focusing mostly on the latter.

The Two Models of Tibetan Scholastic Education

The Geluk model is well known and does not need to be explained at length here⁵. It focuses on the exoteric study of five great texts (*gzhung chen bka' pod lnga*), which are considered the central element of the education of monks/scholars. The study of these texts is preceded by a preliminary training devoted to the mastery of the techniques and vocabulary necessary to the practice of debates as explained by the Collected Topics (*bsdus grwa*). Once they have completed this study, Geluk monks are ready to examine the five great texts that are taken to summarize the main aspects of non-tantric Buddhism as understood by the Geluk tradition.

⁴ It appears that there may have been other models of monastic education in Tibet, but over time those have been replaced by one of the two dominant models we examine here. For example, the monastery of Kathog (*ka thog*) in Eastern Tibet had its own scholastic tradition going back at least to the 12th century. Its approach was based on the study of the nine vehicles as understood by the Nyingma tradition, with a heavy emphasis on the study of the esoteric lore. See M. Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 99. The writings of Karma Pakshi, who was trained in the Kathog tradition, suggest a kind of encyclopedic approach to education in which students are exposed to a variety of topics with an heavy emphasis on the highest tantric teachings, particularly those of the Great Perfection. Kongtrul's *Shes bya mdzod* is another example of this encyclopedic approach. See *Blo gros mtha' yas, kong sprul*, 1813-1899, *Theg pa sgo kun las bstus pas gsung rab rin po che'i mdzod bslab pa gsum legs par ston pa'i bstan bcos shes bya kun khyab*. Beijing: People's Publishing House (Mi Rigs dPe sKrun Khang), 1985.

⁵ For more details, see my *Sounds of Two Hands Clapping*.

The first text, the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* attributed to Maitreya⁶, deals with the nature and structure of the Buddhist path as seen from the Mahāyānist perspective. It is central to the education of monks, providing them with a coherent worldview that will support their religious practice. It also provides the occasion for the study of the Yogācāra tradition. The second text is Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*⁷, which is taken by the tradition to provide the most authoritative introduction to Madhyamaka philosophy as understood by the Geluk tradition. Throughout this first and most central period, which may take from six to ten years, students also study Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*⁸, which provides the philosophical methodology of the whole curriculum. Finally, the whole process is completed by the Abhidharma and Vinaya through the study of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*⁹ and Guṇaprabha's *Vinaya-sūtra*¹⁰.

Quite different is the curriculum of the non-Geluk institutions, the commentarial schools which are our focus here. Their curriculum is also composed of a list of texts that varies from school to school. There are the thirteen great texts (*gzhung chen bcu gsum*) favored by several Nyingma institutions, and the eighteen texts of great renown (*grags chen bcu brgyad*) studied in the Sagya tradition¹¹. Although these lists differ slightly, they mostly conform to a common model based on the study of a number of texts significantly larger than in the Geluk tradition. Typical in this respect is the curriculum of the Nyingma monastery of Namdroeling

⁶ Maitreya., *Abhisamayālaṃkāra-nāma-prajñāpāramitopadeśa-śāstrakārikā* (*shes rab pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mgon par rtogs pa'i rgyan zhes bya ba tshig le'ur byas pa*), D: 3786, P: 5184.

⁷ Candrakīrti, *Madhyamakāvatāra* (*dbu ma la 'jug pa*), D: 3861, P: 5262.

⁸ Dharmakīrti, *Pramāṇa-vārttika-kārikā* (*tshad ma rnam 'grel gyi tshig le'ur byas pa*), D: 4210, P: 5709.

⁹ Vasubandhu, *Abhidharma-kośa-kārikā* (*chos mgon pa'i mdzod*), D: 4089, P: 5590.

¹⁰ Guṇaprabha, *Vinaya-sūtra* (*'dul ba'i mdo tsa ba*), D: 4117, P: 5619.

¹¹ The Sa-gya eighteen texts of great renown consists of the thirteen listed below plus these five: Śāntideva's *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* (*Byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*, D: 3871, P: 5272), which is studied but not counted among the thirteen; Dharmakīrti, *Pramāṇa-viniścaya* (*tshad ma rnam par nges pa*, D: 4211, *Ce*, P: 5710); Dignāga, *Pramāṇa-samuccaya* (*tshad ma kun btus*, D: 4203, P: 5700); Sagya Paṇḍita, *lDom gsum rab byed*, in the Complete Works of Sa-skya Masters (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 1968-9), V.297.1.1-323.2.6, and *Tshad ma rigs gter*, in the Complete Works of the Great Masters of the Sa sKya Sect (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 1968), V.155.1.1-167.1.6.

(*rnam grol gling*), the exiled version of Peyül (*dpal yul*), one of the six main monasteries of this tradition. Its curriculum consists of three parts.

The introductory element is provided by the study of Pema Wangyel's (*pad ma dbang rgyal*) treatise on the three types of vow¹² and of Śāntideva's *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*¹³. Once monks have been exposed to the basics of the tradition, they move to the central part of their education, the study of the thirteen great texts, an extensive list of some of the most important texts of the Indian Buddhist commentarial tradition. Madhyamaka is studied by examining not just *Candrakīrti's Madhyamakāvatāra* but also Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* together with the other four smaller texts belonging to Nāgārjuna's collection of five reasoning texts (*rigs tshogs lnga*) as well as Āryadeva's *Catuhśataka*¹⁴. Similarly, the study of the Abhidharma is not limited to Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*, as in the Geluk curriculum, but also includes Asaṅga's *Abhidharmasamuccaya*¹⁵, which is said to represent the Mahāyāna point of view. Another important characteristic of this model is its inclusion of the five treatises of Maitreya¹⁶, which are considered central texts,

¹² The three levels of morality in the tradition are: prātimokṣa, bodhisattva and tantric. See: Padma dbang rgyal, *Rang bzhin rdzogs pa chen po'i lam gyi cha lag sdoms pa gsum rnam par nges pa zhes bya ba'i bstan bcos* Delhi: s.n., 1969.

¹³ Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (*byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*). D: 3871, P:5272.

¹⁴ Nāgārjuna. *Prajñā-nāma-mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*dbu ma rtsa ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa shes rab ces bya ba*). P: 5224; Āryadeva, *Catuhśataka-śāstra* (*bstan bcos bzhi brgya pa*), D: 3846, P: 5346. Padma mnam rgyal of Zur mang explains that *Prajñāmūla* contains the basic conceptual presentation of Madhyamaka, which is commented in the most authoritative Prāsaṅgika way, whereas Āryadeva's *Catuhśataka* is more concerned with meditation. *gZhung chen bcu gsum gyi thabs dang mtshan don 'grel pa blo gsal ngag gi rgyan* (Delhi: Dodrup Sangye Lama, 1976), 5-6.

¹⁵ Asaṅga, *Abhidharma-samuccaya* (*chos mngon pa kun las bstus pa*), D: 4049, P: 5550. Padma mnam rgyal explains that the Asaṅga's text presents a Mahāyāna view of the basis, path and fruit commonly accepted by all Buddhists whereas Vasubandhu's text focuses on the Hīnayāna view. *gZhung chen bcu gsum gyi thabs*, 5-6.

¹⁶ The four other treatises of Maitreya are: *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra* (*theg pa chen po'i rgyud bla ma bstan bcos*), D: 4024, P:5525; *Dharma-dharmatā-vibhaṅga* (*chos dang chos nyid rnam par 'byed pa*), D: 4023, P:5523. *Madhyānta-vibhaṅga* (*dbus dang mtha' rnam par 'byed pa*), D: 4021, P:5522; *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṃkāra-kārikā* (*theg pa chen po'i mdo sde'i rgyan gyi tshig le'ur byas pa*), D: 4020, P:5521. Padma mnam rgyal explains that the first contains the experiential view of the ultimate (to be contrasted with the conceptual presentation of Nāgārjuna) whereas the next three contain the presentation of the Cittamātra view, meditation and practice. *gZhung chen bcu gsum gyi thabs*, 22.

whereas the Geluk tradition tends to focus mostly on the *Abhisamay-ālamkāra*.

These texts are studied with their commentaries, Indian and Tibetan. Throughout the curriculum, other texts are used as well, texts that are important for understanding the history of the commentarial school. Mipham Gyatso (*mi pham rgya mtsho*, 1846-1912) wrote some of the treatises that provide the main doctrinal standpoint of the Nyingma tradition, much in the same way that Goramba's texts are central to the Sagya. But even more important for our purpose are the works of Kenpo Zhenphan Choeginangwa (*gzhan phan chos kyi snang ba*, otherwise known as Zhenga, 1871-1927), particularly his literal glosses on the thirteen Indian texts. These texts have been central to the formation of commentarial schools, providing the support and methodology for the exegesis of the Indian texts, as we shall see shortly.¹⁷ Through out this part of the curriculum, a variety of other auxiliary topics (grammar, composition, poetics, history) are also examined.

Finally, the third and last part is the esoteric curriculum, the study of tantras. It focuses on various texts that are not part of the thirteen texts and whose precise enumeration is beyond the purview of this brief introduction. Particularly important among the texts that are studied in the context are Yonden Gyatso's (*Yon tan rgya mtsho*) commentary on Jikmay Lingpa's (*'jigs med gling pa*, 1729-1789) *Treasury of Qualities* (*yon tan mdzod*)¹⁸, various commentaries on the *Guhyagarbha-tantra*¹⁹ and the two Trilogies of Longchen Rabjamba (*klong chen rab 'byams pa*, 1308-1363)²⁰.

¹⁷ *gZhan phan chos kyi snang ba*, *gZhung chen bcu gsum gyi mchan 'grel* (Dehra Dun: Kocchen Tulku, 1978). His works are also used by Sa-gya scholars. In the Sa-gya tradition, the works of authors such as Ngakchō (*ngag dbang chos grags*, 1572-1641) and Tukje Belzang (*thugs rje dpal bzang*, a direct disciple of Goramba who wrote complements [*kha skong*] to the latter's commentaries) are also used.

¹⁸ *Yon tan rgya mtsho*, *Yon tan rin po che'i mdzod kyi 'grel pa zab don snang byed nyi ma'i 'od zer*, Gangtok, 1969.

¹⁹ As, for example, *Mi pham*, *gSang 'grel phyogs bcu'i mun sel gyi spyi don 'od gsal snying po*.

²⁰ *kLong chen rab 'byams pa*, a.k.a. *klong chen pa dri med 'od zer*, 1308-1363, *Ngal gso skor gsum*. Gangtok: Dodrup Chen Rinpoche, 1973, and *Rang grol skor gsum*. Gangtok: Sonam T. Kazi, 1969.

Before proceeding any further, we may want to reflect on some of the differences between this Nyingma curriculum and the Geluk model we examined earlier. One of the central and obvious differences concerns the early inclusion of the study of tantras in the Nyingma curriculum. Whereas the Geluk curriculum seems not to include the study of tantras, the Nyingma tradition includes such a study at an early stage. Although it may seem that this justifies the claim that Geluk tradition is exoteric and Nyingma esoteric, the reality is more complex. First, one should keep in mind that even in the Nyingma tradition, tantric texts are not part of the standard curricular list. They are not included among the thirteen texts that compose the core of the curriculum, a fact that reflects their esoteric status. Second, it is a mistake to assume that the Geluk curriculum is limited to the exoteric domain and that the study of the five great texts marks the end of the training. Geluk monks often start their study of the esoteric tradition privately while studying at the great scholastic centers. After they finish their exoteric studies they are expected to stay at a separate institution devoted to the study and practice of tantra, often one of the two tantric monasteries of Lhasa²¹. There, they are trained in the different aspects of tantra: practice of rituals, construction of ritual implements including offerings and maṇḍala-making, and the study of the philosophy of tantra. They also study the main tantric texts of their tradition, which revolve around the practice of three meditational deities, i.e., Guhyasamāja, Yamāntaka, and Cakrasaṃvara. They particularly focus on the former and study the main texts concerning this practice, particularly its Root Tantra (*gsang 'dus rtsa rgyud*), The Fourfold Commentary (*'grel ba bzhi sgrags*), and Shayrab Sengge's Commentary on the Root Tantra (*gsang 'dus rtsa rgyud kyi ṭikā*)²².

²¹ Lower Tantric Monastery (*rgyud smad gra tshang*) and Higher Tantric Monastery (*rgyud stod gra tshang*), now relocated in India. In the Labrang monastery of Amdo, monks who have studied in the Monastery of Philosophy (*mthsan nyid gra tshang*) become Geshe upon passing their *bka' rams* examinations. They are then required to spend three years in one of the five tantric monasteries, the Lower Tantric Monastery (*rgyud smad gra tshang*), Higher Tantric Monastery (*rgyud stod gra tshang*), the Hevajra Monastery (*kye rdor gra tshang*), the Kālacakra Monastery (*dus 'khor gra tshang*), and the Medical Monastery (*smān pa gra tshang*). Similarly, one of the four monasteries in Tashi Lungpo is tantric.

²² Geshe Sopa, *Lectures on Tibetan Religious Culture* (Dharamsala: Tibetan Library, 1983), 64-65.

Thus, I would argue that in all Tibetan Buddhist traditions tantra functions relatively similarly, as the supplement that is supposed to remain secret but is nevertheless central and hence quite widely diffused. What changes from school to school is the way this supplement is approached. In the Ge-luk tradition tantras are studied privately or in separate institutions, the tantric monasteries, and hence may be studied quite late in the life of monks. By contrast, in the Nyingma tradition, monks study tantras at a much earlier stage within the context of the commentarial schools. Tantric concepts are introduced quite early on, during the preliminary stage when the differences between sūtras and tantras are laid out, a topic formally discussed by Geluk scholars only much later. Thus, there is a clear difference in the priority given to the study of tantra in Geluk and Nyingma traditions, but it is simply not the case that the former can be identified with the exoteric and the latter with the esoteric realms of Tibetan Buddhism. Furthermore, it is a mistake to attribute this difference to some kind of great Geluk vs. non-Geluk divide, for the practice of not including the study of tantras in the official curriculum of educational institutions is also followed by the Sagya tradition. Most Sagya commentarial schools do not officially include the study of tantras, which are studied outside of the curriculum within the confine of a guru-disciple relationship.

Another obvious difference between Nyingma and Geluk curricular models is the number of texts that are being studied. Whereas the Geluk tend to focus on the five texts, the Nyingma curriculum includes many more texts. This difference is clear in the ways each topic is studied. For example, Madhyamaka is studied by examining not just Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra* but also Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* as well as Āryadeva's *Catuhśataka*. Similarly, the study of the Abhidharma is not limited to Vasubandhu's *Abhidharma-kośa*, as in the Geluk curriculum, but also includes Asaṅga's *Abhidharma-samuccaya*. Another important characteristic of this model is its inclusion of the five treatises of Maitreya, which are considered central texts, whereas the Geluk tradition tends to focus mostly on the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*. We may then wonder whether this reflects a difference in the content of the education?

The answer to this question is again complex, but to simplify greatly I would like to argue that the main difference here is not one of content but one of pedagogy. If we group the study of Buddhism as it is done in

these traditions, we can discern five main areas: the study of the view (both Madhyamaka and Yogācāra), logic and epistemology, the study of the path, monastic discipline and tantra. Both curricular models cover these five topics, the main difference being in *how* the curriculum covers these matters. For each topic the Ge-luk curriculum tends to focus on a single text, which is then supplemented by further commentaries and monastic manuals (*yig cha*). By contrast, the Namdroeling curriculum covers each main area by examining several of the relevant texts. For example, when the Yogācāra tradition is studied in the Namdroeling curriculum, all the relevant works of Maitreya are examined, whereas the Geluk curriculum studies similar topics within the context of the study of a single text, the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*. Similarly, when the Mahāyāna path is examined, the Geluk curriculum focuses on the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* and does not explicitly examine other texts such as the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, as does the Namdroeling curriculum. Thus, what separates the two traditions are less the areas covered than the number of texts studied for each area as well as the ways in these areas are understood. What we have here are two distinct scholastic pedagogical approaches examining similar subjects in different manners and coming, at times, to different conclusions. The dialectical style of the Geluk tradition focuses on a few texts and emphasizes the practice of dialectical debate as the central method of education. As a consequence, this tradition has tended to limit the textual basis of its studies and stress the in-depth analysis of each text through debates. By contrast, the Nyingma tradition as exemplified by the Namdroeling curriculum is less dialectical and more textual. It emphasizes exegesis over debate, and offers a more rounded education that also includes some literary as well as dialectical skills.

This methodological difference becomes even clearer when one examines the schedule of the two kinds of institution as well as the pedagogy they follow. This is obviously not the place to go in any detail into this topic, which I have treated in detail elsewhere²³, but a few points will suffice here. When one looks at the schedule of commentarial schools one cannot but be struck by the central role of exegetical practices and the lim-

²³ For more details on the schedules of scholastic institutions, see *The Sounds of Two Hands Clapping*, 132-137, 246-248.

ited role of debate, which is typically practiced for only one hour a day, when it is practiced at all²⁴. Most of the day is devoted to the practice of commentary, which revolves around the morning class when students learn new material. This class consists mostly of an explanation of a root-text with a few debates. After lunch, students review the material covered in the morning, checking their understanding of the material and preparing questions. Later during the afternoon they reconvene with another junior teacher to review the material covered in the morning and make sure that they understand the text. Thus, throughout the day, there is comparatively little focus on an in-depth exploration of the topic, though questions are raised in preparation for the evening debate. The overwhelming concern is the development of the ability to explain the text and provide learned glosses and textual clarifications. After dinner, students review their lessons again following the same approach in preparation for the dreaded part of the day, the morning examination.

This examination is one of the practices most characteristic of the commentarial schools as they exist nowadays. The exercise typically takes place in the morning when the abbot designates the student who will have to explain and summarize the lesson of the previous day in front of an assembly. A name is drawn out and the student thus designated has to explain and summarize the lesson of the previous day in front of his classmates or even the whole school. He starts by explaining the point reached in the text and proceeds to comment on the text line by line. This exercise, which takes from twenty to thirty minutes, can be rather trying. Good students do well with practice and are able to refresh the memory of their classmates. The experience of less adept students or beginners can be quite different. Left to their own devices, their performance can range from incoherent and clumsy explanations, to bits of explanation painfully sandwiched between long moments of silence, to the inability to articulate a single word.

This pedagogy is very different from the one followed by the Geluk monastic seats. There, the overwhelming emphasis is on debate, which is practiced for hours (in pre-1959 Tibet, up to ten hours a day!). The prac-

²⁴ Kenpo Abey reported when he was at Dzongsar (see below) in the 1950s there was no debate taking place, except when Jamyang Loter Wangpo (*'jam dbyang blo gter dbang po*), who was so fond of debates, was there. Oral communication, Fall 2005.

tice of commentary, which students learn through the teachings of their tutors, occupies a smaller proportion of the day and is clearly less important than debate, though it is still central to the educational process. Similarly, the control of knowledge revolves around debate rather than commentary, contrary to how things are done in the commentarial schools.

Thus, the main difference between the various existing Tibetan monastic educational traditions is less a matter of content than one of methodology. These traditions share a large degree of overlap in the content of their education but follow a different approach. The commonality in content becomes even clearer when we contrast this curriculum with the educational model of other Buddhist traditions. One of the striking features of Tibetan educational models is the small role that the reading of the sūtras plays. In both curricular models, the students encounter the inspirational words of the Buddha only on rare occasions, through quotes and glosses, but rarely are the actual texts fully read. In fact, except for an occasional reading of the *Prātimokṣa-sūtra*, the main encounter between the students and the Words of the Buddha²⁵ occur with the study of the root tantras of the tradition such as the *Guhyagarbha* in the Nyingma tradition and the *Guhyasamāja* in the Geluk tradition²⁶.

Thus, a clear and common feature of Tibetan scholastic education is the de-emphasis on the reading of the sūtras and the privileging of a systematic study of their content as summarized by the great Indian treatises. Tibetan curricula almost entirely consist of these treatises, which offer systematic presentations of the Buddhist teachings. These texts are not part of the *bka' gyur*, the Words of the Buddha, but of the *bstan gyur*, the translated treatises²⁷. We could almost say that Tibetan scholasticism

²⁵ My describing these tantric texts as the Words of the Buddha is obviously not meant as a historical claim but as a reflection of the way these texts are considered by the tradition.

²⁶ I am referring here only to the readings that are part of the curriculum. Monks do read some of the sūtras, particularly those belonging to the *Perfection of Wisdom* category, on their own, but in my experience, this happens mostly when they are senior. As they progress through the curriculum, self-study becomes more important and careful reading of great texts may replace some of the excitement of debate. The picture of Geluk monks as being limited to the study of textbooks (*yig cha*) fits the beginners but is a crude caricature of the practice of more seasoned scholars.

²⁷ For a discussion of the Tibetan canon, see: P. Harrison, "A Brief History of the Tibetan bKa' 'gyur," in J. Cabezón and R. Jackson, *Tibetan Literature* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1995), 39-56.

has opted for a different set of canonical texts, the great Indian treatises as contained in the *bstan* 'gyur, rather than the sūtras of the *bka*' 'gyur.

This choice, which seems unique in the history of Buddhism, is less surprising when placed in its historical context, the transmission of Buddhism from India. In the early phase, Buddhism developed in Tibet under the patronage of a strong dynasty, which drew its Buddhism from several sources, India, as well as China and Central Asia. In such a situation, the influence of Indian Buddhism, though obviously strong, was not as exclusive as it would become later. Then, the study of sūtras dominated, as is clear in the respective number of sūtras and treatises translated during this period. This situation changed during the later period, when the transmission occurred in the absence of any strong centralizing authority. In this new context, Tibetans adopted to a large extent the models they received from India rather than develop a more synthetic approach, as had been the case during the earlier period. In the scholastic domain, this meant the adoption of the shastric methodology used by late Indian Buddhists, with the resulting focus on the study of basic treatises rather than on the sūtras. This shastric methodology is clearly in evidence in the late Hindu traditions where basic aphoristic summaries of a tradition's scriptural basis play a central role, 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. In the late Indian Mahāyāna tradition, these basic texts are not called *sūtras*, a name reserved for the teachings of the Buddha, but *treatises* (*śāstra*, *bstan bcos*). They fulfill the same function as their Hindu counterparts, that of summarizing, systematizing and explaining the meaning of the basic scriptures. Such texts are intended to serve as the basis of further oral and written commentary. They would be read in relation to a *bhāṣya* or a *ṛtti* ('*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*)²⁸, a more detailed gloss used to supplement the first commentary²⁹.

²⁸ A brief examination of the Tibetan catalogues of the *bstan gyur* suggests that the Tibetan translation of these terms is far from systematic, the word *bshad pa* being used to translate a *vyākhyā* as well as a *bhāṣya*. See, for example, P: 5555 and 5565.

²⁹ L. Gomez, "Buddhist Literature: Exegesis and Hermeneutics," in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: McMillan, 1987), II.529-540, 532.

Existing Tibetan curricula all share this focus on the treatises rather than the Words of the Buddha. They also tend to study the same treatises, though there are differences, as we saw above. Thus, when seen comparatively, it is quite clear that their similarity in content greatly outweighs their differences. What separates them is, as we have seen, less the topics they study than the methodology they follow. Whereas Geluk centers of learning tend to emphasize debate, commentarial schools tend to emphasize commentary.

This clear answer does not, however, close our inquiry, for it raises other obvious questions: where does this difference come from? How did these two methodologies develop? Are we dealing here with two separate traditions as the clear pedagogical differences seem to suggest, or are these differences the products of the transformations of a single tradition? In the next pages, I suggest an answer by examining the rise of the commentarial schools. I argue that far from representing separate traditions, the debating institutions and commentarial schools represent late transformations of a common tradition.

Dzokchen, Zhenga and the Rise of Commentarial Schools

In dealing with the history of an educational tradition, it is always tempting to naturalize the present and assume that what one studies has existed all along. This temptation also concerns the commentarial school. It is tempting to assume that such an institution has existed for a long time, perhaps as far as the foundation of Samye in the 8th century, as is claimed by many in the Nyingma tradition. But this temptation must be resisted and we need to inquire more precisely into the rise of this type of institution. When did it really come to be?

The answer is, as often, “it depends”. That is, it depends on what one means by “commentarial school.” If we refer by this term to an institution where scholastic exegesis is practiced, the traditional attribution may well be correct. Commentarial schools understood in this loose way may go back to the beginnings of Tibetan scholasticism as it was created at Sangpu and other similar institutions in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, or even to Samye in the eighth century when monasticism and scholasticism were first introduced in Tibet under Śāntarakṣita’s guid-

ance. However, if one refers to the full educational institution that exists nowadays, with classes and exams based on a clear pedagogical choice centering on exegesis and contrasted with the Geluk stress on debate, the answer is quite different, for this educational form came about quite late, as an element of the non-sectarian or *ris med* movement that took place in Kham (South-eastern Tibet) during the 19th century. Although this movement was not primarily scholastic, it did involve an attempt to revive the scholastic traditions among non-Geluk schools.

This scholastic revival was a way to reverse the massive decline in the level of scholastic activities among non-Geluk schools during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Although most non-Geluk scholastic centers did not actually disappear during this period, they were put under restrictions and consequently lost their importance. The monastery of Nalendra, which has been well studied by David Jackson, is a good example of such a fate³⁰. It was put under the rule of the Dalai-Lama's government, where it steadily declined, unable to compete with the fast developing Geluk monastic seats. Its fate illustrates the decline of the non-Geluk schools in the scholastic domain during this period, decline largely due to political circumstances such as the loss of support and protection, which large scholastic centers require to thrive. This is not to say that higher learning did not take place within non-Geluk traditions during this period. There were scholars, but they were mostly operating outside of institutional channels. Many of the non-monastic teachers belonging to a line of tantrikas received their education within their family, studying scholastic texts with their fathers or uncles. Others received their education from the various teachers they could visit, often having to move from teacher to teacher to learn the various parts of the curriculum³¹.

This decline was reversed during the 19th and 20th centuries when under the impetus of the non-sectarian movement and its charismatic figures, non-Geluk schools started to reinvigorate their monastic and scholastic institutions. The full story of this monastic and scholastic revival has yet to be told but is outside of the purview of such a short essay. Here, I

³⁰ D. Jackson, *The Early Abbots of 'Phan po Na-lendra* (Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, 1989), 29.

³¹ A good example of this kind of educational career is found in the life of Dezhung Rinpoche as depicted by D. Jackson, *A Saint in Seattle* (Boston: Wisdom, 2004).

focus only on a single aspect of this revival, the creation of the commentarial school model. In the process I also make some more general remarks concerning the overall evolution of the Tibetan scholastic tradition.

The story of the creation of the commentarial school model seems to center mostly around a single institution, the commentarial school of Dzokchen Shri Sengha (*rdzogs chen śrwi sengha*), and one of its most famous abbots, Kenpo Zhenga, the author of the literal glosses on the thirteen great Indian texts we already encountered. Dzokchen Shri Sengha had been founded earlier by a charismatic teacher, Zhanphan Thaye (*gzhan phan mtha' yas*, 1800-), who wanted to develop the practice of monasticism in the Nyingma tradition. In 1848, at his inspiration and with the active participation of Do Kyentse (*mdo mkhyen rtse*), one of the great non-sectarian teachers, a commentarial school was founded at a short distance away from the monastery of Dzokchen in a special location blessed by the imprint of the magical appearance of Shri Sengha, one of the main lineage holders of the Great Perfection tradition. A temple surrounded by individual cells for around fifty monks and their teachers was built apart from the monastery to mark the special character of this institution. Its members were to devote themselves to monasticism and studies rather than spend their time on the usual ritual activities of the Dzokchen monastery. The purpose of this school was not, however, the study of the great Indian treatises we examined above but the development of Nyingma monasticism in Kham, a particularly important task at that time.

Up to then, the Nyingma tradition had mostly relied on non-ordained tantric practitioners to transmit its teachings through authorized lineages. The move toward monasticism changed this situation, putting a greater emphasis on the respect of exoteric moral norms of behavior as a sign of spiritual authority. This move participated in the logic animating the non-sectarian movement, the revitalization of non-Geluk traditions so that they could compete with the dominant Geluk school. Since the Geluk hegemony was based on a widespread monastic practice, it was important for the other schools to develop their own monasticism to rival the dominant Geluk tradition. This seems to have been one the goals of Zhanphan Thaye in creating the Dzokchen commentarial school. There, the practice of monasticism was combined with the study of the three types

of vows as well as that of the Nyingma tantric lore, particularly the *Guhyagarbha* tantra and its exegetical tradition.

The creation of such an institution with its emphasis on monasticism was the first step in the revitalization of non-Geluk institutions. A further and equally important step was taken a few decades later with the transformation by Zhenga of this institution into a center devoted to the study of the exoteric tradition. This step was decisive in creating a scholastic model that could provide an alternative to the dominant model of the Geluk seats and could train scholars who could hold their own against the intellectual firing power of Geluk scholars. At this stage many of the details of this transformation remain obscure. The only known biography of Zhenga by Wontoe Kyenrab (*dbon stod mkhyen rab*) has not been found and hence we are reduced to the few indications provided by various monastic histories. What is clear, however, is the decisive role played by Zhenga and his teaching career, which is reflected in his own commentaries on the thirteen great texts mentioned above.

Zhenga's career started in the early years of the twentieth century when, after the death of his teacher Orgyan Tenzin Norbu (*o rgyan bstan 'dzin nor bu*), he moved from Gemang to Shri Sengha, by then a well established institution. Although the beginnings of his teaching were modest, Zhenga gradually became an important teacher at Shri Sengha, drawing many students and assuming the abbotship of this institution in 1909³². During his tenure, Zhenga started its transformation into one of the great intellectual centers in Kham. In fact, the creation of the commentarial school as we know it now, with its particular curriculum and its pedagogical approach, can probably be traced back to the time that Zhenga spent at Shri Sengha. Zhenga did not, however, stay there for very long and moved to other institutions where he became abbot and taught extensively. The reason for this move is not known to me, but its result was the spread of the particular pedagogical approach developed by Zhenga to other traditions, particularly to the Sagya tradition, which had been one of the two foremost scholastic traditions but had by then lost its place in the Tibetan scholastic world. Zhenga was particularly fond of this tradition and its great teachers, Sapaṇ (*sa skya paṇḍita*, 1182-1251) and

³² Jackson, *A Saint in Seattle*, 28.

Goramba (*go ram pa*, 1429-1489), whom he considered to be the most articulate exponents of non-Geluk exoteric views³³. Many in the Sagya tradition returned Zhenga's affection for their tradition, some even considering him to be one of Sapaṅ's manifestations³⁴.

After leaving Dzokchen, Zhenga taught at several institutions, the most important being Dzongsar (*rdzong gsar* or *rdzong sar*) which he founded as the first Sagya commentarial school in Eastern Tibet. Zhenga stayed there four years (1919-1923), and during this time he trained a whole generation of outstanding Sagya scholars who played a central role in the revival of Sagya scholasticism. Zhenga's disciples created new commentarial schools or revived older institutions, using the texts and methodology they had learned from him and thus spreading his influence throughout the Sagya tradition. Particularly important was the creation of a commentarial school at Sagya itself, which in turn led to the creation of several other similar institutions in Tsang and Central Tibet. Also significant was the creation of commentarial schools at Derge (*sde dge*) and Lhungpo Tse (*lhung po rtse*) by Wontoe Kyenrab, one of Zhenga's main disciples and successors at the head of Dzongsar commentarial school. Even older well-established institutions such as Tanak (*rta nag*) and Ngör seem to have been affected by Zhenga's influence³⁵.

Zhenga also influenced the Kagyü tradition as well, although there the filiation may be more problematic. The first commentarial school in this tradition was established at Pelpung (*dpal spung*) by Tai Situ Pema Wangchok (*twa'i si tu padma dbang mchog*, 1886-1952) in collaboration with Zhenga, who taught extensively at this institution.³⁶ In this way, Zhenga influenced a number of Kagyü masters, who spread his approach to various parts of Tibet by creating similar institutions. Nevertheless, his exact influence on the Kagyü tradition is harder to establish than in the case of

³³ In his meditational practice, however, Zhenga was a dedicated follower of the Great Perfection tradition. Jackson, *A Saint in Seattle*, 28.

³⁴ bsTan 'dzin lung rtogs nyi ma, *sNga 'gyur rdzogs chen chos 'byung chen mo* (Beijing: Tibetological Press, 2004), 309. I owe a special thank to Jann Michael Ronnis from the University of Virginia for drawing my attention and providing me access to this contemporary historiography of the Nyingma scholastic centers.

³⁵ bsTan 'dzin lung rtogs nyi ma, *sNga 'gyur rdzogs chen chos 'byung chen mo*, 310. Jackson gives 1918-1920 for Zhenga's tenure at Dzongsar. *A Saint in Seattle*, 30.

³⁶ From 1910-1918, according to Jackson, *A Saint in Seattle*, 30.

the Sagya school. A story depicts him as raving against the view of extrinsic emptiness (*gzhan stong*), presenting it in a public teaching as the worst wrong view whose adoption is worse than killing all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas³⁷. Upon hearing this tirade, many of the Kagyü reincarnated lamas left the teaching never to return. Although it is hard to know what to make of this story, which may reflect more a sectarian bias than an actual event, it is clear that Zhenga's well known opposition to the extrinsic emptiness teaching, which plays an important role in the Kagyü tradition, cannot but have contributed to create some frictions, though it does not appear to have limited the influence of his approach in the tradition.

Beside the foundation of these major institutions, Zhenga seems to have participated to the creation of other minor commentarial schools. With the blessing of Jamyang Loter Wangpo (*'jam dbyang blo gter dbang po*), another great figure of the non-sectarian movement, he became the abbot of the Sagya commentarial school of Gakye Gumdo (*rga skye dgu mdo*). He also spent some time at the Sagya school in Jyekundo, which he created, and contributed to the creation of a similar institution in the Drikung tradition. Thus, despite some uncertainties about the details of Zhenga's life³⁸, his contribution is clear and impressive. What we have here is a figure single-mindedly bent on a mission, that of creating a non-Geluk scholastic tradition based on a particular institution, the commentarial school, with its well-defined pedagogy and curriculum.

This approach is reflected in Zhenga's own commentaries on the thirteen great Indian texts (*gzhung chen bcu gsum gyi mchan 'grel*). These texts, which appear to summarize Zhenga's teaching activities at the many institutions he directed during his busy life-time³⁹, are neither intended to

³⁷ This story was reported by several Nyingma teachers at Namdroeling during my stay there in 1995.

³⁸ The *sNga 'gyur rdzogs chen chos 'byung chen mo* to which I have referred here presents only his teaching career and does not describe his training. Moreover, its presentation seems to reflect a clear agenda, emphasizing and, hence, perhaps exaggerating the role of Zhenga and of the Nyingma lineage in the revival of the scholasticism of the other schools. Still, its information seems accurate and represents a valuable source for the study of these important developments.

³⁹ It is not clear to me how and when these texts were written. Several were written at Lhundrub Dechen Ling (*lhun grub bde chen gling*), a Sagya monastery in Kham. See, for example, the colophon of his commentary on the *Vinayasūtra*: *gZhan phan chos kyi snang ba, gZhung chen bcu gsum gyi mchan 'grel*, vol.1.643.

be original nor do to raise particularly controversial questions. They mostly paraphrase the foundational Indian texts, using glosses gathered from the Indian commentaries explaining these texts, and adding here and there a few points gathered from Tibetan sources⁴⁰. In that, Zhenga's texts are very different from those of Mipham, the great scholar of the non-sectarian movement who provided incisive and compelling defenses of the Nyingma tradition and measured critiques of other traditions, especially but not exclusively of the Geluk⁴¹. Zhenga's texts offer nothing of the sort. They merely comment on the great texts, explicitly refraining from raising the kind of questions that are propitious to debate and are entertained by thinkers such as Gorampa or Mipham. Nevertheless, Zhenga's texts are greatly revered by his followers as being of equal value and status to that of Indian texts. This reverence seems to be largely due to the fact that these texts enshrine the exegetical methodology followed by Zhenga and his students in developing the non-Geluk form of education provided by the commentarial schools they created. These texts were adopted by several monasteries as their textbooks (*yig cha*), particularly by Zongsar. Hence, they are often called the *Zongsar Textbooks*.

The creation of this new institutional form was a self-conscious attempt to revive the three non-Geluk traditions in Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal⁴². It was presented as a return to the classical past when these traditions had a flourishing scholastic tradition. For Zhenga and his followers, the way to return to this past was the exegetical study of commentaries, the proper object of scholarship. By downplaying the role of debate emphasized by the Geluk monastic seats and stressing exegetical skills, they accentuated the differences between these two traditions and provided a clear articulation of a non-Geluk scholastic tradition. In this way, they started the process of reversal of the damage inflicted on the non-Geluk scholarly traditions and created an alternative to the dominance of Geluk scholasticism, which had often tended to present itself in Tibet as the sole inheritor and legitimate interpreter of the classical Indian Buddhist tradition.

⁴⁰ gZhan phan chos kyi snang ba, *gZhung chen bcu gsum gyi mchan 'grel*, vol.4.731.

⁴¹ For a study of Mipham's works, see: J. Petit, *Mipham's Beacon of Certainty* (Boston: Wisdom, 1999).

⁴² bsTan 'dzing lung rtogs nyi ma, *sNga 'gyur rdzogs chen chos 'byung chen mo*, 309.

The Catholicity of Classical Tibetan Scholasticism

The conclusion that the commentarial school as we know it, with its curriculum, its pedagogical approach and its practices (such as the morning examination), is of late origin is not surprising. Because they highly value their link to tradition, Tibetan scholastic institutions tend to attribute to their practices greater antiquity than they may actually deserve. But the reality is that Tibetan scholastic practices have kept evolving throughout most of the time in which they have existed. This is not just true of non-Geluk commentarial schools but also of the Geluk monastic seats and their focus on debate. It would be a big mistake to think that this focus and the texts that support it came fully formed with Tsong Khapa and his first disciples. Although the exact history of this transformation remains to be explored and is beyond the purview of this essay, it is clear that the Geluk debating institution, as we know it, is also a relatively recent development. It arose out of the complex process of differentiation through which the Geluk school was formed during the second half of the 15th, the 16th and the first half of the 17th centuries. Prior to this formative period, the education dispensed by the main scholastic centers of Tibet was quite different from what we can observe in Geluk centers nowadays, even in those centers that were sympathetic to the views developed by Tsong Khapa and his followers. This is quite clear when one looks at Tsong Khapa's training as it is presented in his various hagiographies.

These texts offer a partisan but intriguing view of a time that has often been characterized as the classical period of Tibetan scholasticism⁴³. This period seems to have been characterized by a large degree of eclecticism and fluidity of institutional organizations and affiliations. Monks went from monastery to monastery, studying with teachers belonging to different schools in accordance with the specialization of these teachers, without much regard for their sectarian affiliations. These differences were not understood to reflect deep sectarian divisions but were seen as individual variations between teachers. After having studied a certain

⁴³ This characterization is based on D.S. Ruegg, "On the Reception and Early History of the dbu ma (Madhyamaka) in Tibet," in M. Aris and A. Suu Kyi ed., *Tibetan Studies in Honor of Hugh Richardson* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1980), 277-9, 278.

number of texts, scholars would tour other centers to be examined on these texts.

Tsong Khapa's education reflects this eclectic atmosphere⁴⁴. Born in Amdo, Tsong Khapa moved to Central Tibet at the age of sixteen to be trained in the scholastic tradition that was by then well established in this part of Tibet. He went to Tzechen (*tse chen*) to study Madhyamaka, logic, epistemology, and Abhidharma with Rendawa, (*red mda ba*, 1349-1412), to Dewachen (*bde ba chen*) to study Prajñāpāramitā literature and to Zhalu where he studied the Heruka tantra. He also toured the great scholastic centers of Central Tibet such as Narthang (*sar thang*), Sagya⁴⁵, and the Kagyü establishment of Densatol (*gdan sa thel*) to be examined⁴⁶. Tsong Khapa is described as taking part at the age of twenty four in the Spring Session at Narthang⁴⁷. Hagiographies also describe Tsong Khapa's successes in his scholastic tours, but even there the details are difficult to figure out. Scholastic tours (*grwa bskor dam bca'*), as the name suggests, seem to have involved an explanation (*bshad pa*) of the texts on which the candidate was examined, and a debate in which he would answer queries concerning his explanations. Cha har dGe bshes bLo bzang Tshul khrims describes these tours in this way: "Having asked the permission of the teachers of the monastery, one sits in the midst of the assembly led by these teachers. One then answers distinguishing the meaning [in the questions] asked through debate by the scholars of this monastery." ⁴⁸ Though it is difficult to know the details of his daily training, Tsong Khapa does not seem to have followed the kind of routine that one can find nowadays in the three Geluk monastic seats where monks debate for hours every day. Tsong Khapa was not tied to a single monastery, as

⁴⁴ mKhas grub, *rJe btsun tsong kha pa chen po'i ngo mtshar rmad du byung ba'i rnam par thar pa'i 'jug ngogs*, in Tsong Khapa, *Collected Works* (Dharamsala: Tibetan Cultural Printing, nd), I.1.a-71.b.

⁴⁵ R. Thurman, *Life and Teaching of Tsong Khapa* (Dharamsala: Library, 1982), 8.

⁴⁶ bSod nams grags pa, *bKa' gdams gsar snying gi chos 'byung yid kyi mdzes rgyan* (Delhi: Gonpo Tseten, 1977), 24.b.4.

⁴⁷ bLo bzang 'phrin las, *'Jam mgon chos kyi rgyal po tsong kha pa chen po'i rnam thar* (Kokonor People's Press, 1996), 148.

⁴⁸ 'dus sde'i bla ma dag la zhu nas bla ma rnam kyis gtsos pa'i 'dus sde tshogs pa'i nang du bsdad nas dgon pa de'i mkhas pa rnam rim bzhin rigs lam gtong la gang dris pa'i don phyte ste lan 'debs pa yin la'). Cha har dGe bshes bLo bzang Tshul khrims, *rNam thar*, 96.

monks now are. He was often on the move, going from monastery to one another to study with various teachers, as was the custom then, and spending long period studying on his own⁴⁹.

The impression that the classical Tibetan scholastic was an eclectic and fluid tradition based on the practice of commentary with occasional periods of debate receives some degree of confirmation from the ways in which the institutions of the early Geluk school, or rather the Gaden school as it was then called, are described by early histories of the tradition⁵⁰. Quite revealing in this respect is Las-chen Kun dga' rgyal mtshan's *bKa' gdams chos 'byung gsal ba'i sgron me*. This text was written in the last years of the fifteenth century or the first years of the sixteenth century, presenting us with a view of Tsong Khapa's tradition as it was conceived in the last quarter of the fifteenth century. In this text we find mention of the great scholastic centers of the tradition, but what is striking is the way they are called. For example, in describing the monastery of Gaden, the text makes it clear that it was not originally founded by Tsong Khapa as a scholastic center but that it was only transformed into one by Kaydrub. The text then adds that Kaydrub "established a philosophical commentarial school at Gaden" (*dga' ldan du mtshan nyid kyi bshad grwa btsugs*)⁵¹.

This description of Gaden as a commentarial school is quite revealing, for it shows that there was no division at that time between commentar-

⁴⁹ The hagiography of another great figure of the time, Bodong, suggests a similar picture. See: *'Jigs med dbang po, Bo dong pañchen kyi rnam thar* (Shinhua: The Old Tibetan Texts Press, 1991), 68-78.

⁵⁰ How debate was practiced at that time is still an open question for me. Hagiographies do not provide much detail about daily schedules, and monastic constitutions (*cha yig*) are often mute about the history of the schedules they describe. What is important to remember is that even in the three Geluk monastic seats, debate was never practiced every day before 1959, but only during the sessions (*chos thog*) that took place regularly throughout the year (the rest of the time was spent memorizing and studying with one's teacher). This is also likely have been the case during Tsong Khapa's time, but as time went by these sessions seem to have become longer, becoming the center of the scholastic practices of these institutions. By contrast, Tsong Khapa is described by the hagiographical literature as spending most of his time studying on his own with his teachers and engaging only in occasional debates. This difference marks an important shift in the focus of Geluk scholarly practices, which seem to have become increasingly focused on debate.

⁵¹ Las-chen kun dga' rgyal mtshan, *bKa' gdams kyi rnam par thar pa bka' gdams chos 'byung gsal ba'i sgron me* (block print, nd), 370.b.1.

ial and debating institutions. An institution such as Gaden did not understand itself to be very different from other scholastic institutions, despite its allegiance to Tsong Khapa. Even in the second half of the fifteenth century, there was a fluid and informal scholastic tradition present in various monasteries where monks would come to study particular texts with teachers who were renowned for their mastery of these texts. It is possible that various centers had different specialties but that these differences were not understood as marking deep sectarian differences. Thus, neither Geluk debating institutions nor non-Geluk commentarial schools as they exist now represent the original model. They both are the results of the complex transformations that Tibetan scholasticism underwent after the fifteenth century when Central Tibet and Tsang descended into a protracted civil war and the sectarian divide became rigid. The clear separation that exists nowadays between the two distinct institutional forms we have examined in this essay reflects this later transformation of a much more catholic early classical tradition.

The catholicity of early Tibetan scholasticism should not lead us, however, to assume its universality. Although thinkers from several traditions were involved in scholastic activities, it would be a mistake to think that there was universal agreement about their value. In parallel with the formation of a scholastic tradition in the 11th and 12th centuries and its coming to maturity during the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries, there arose an anti-intellectualist tradition of thinkers such as Jikten Gonpo (*'jig rten mgon po*) and Karma Pakshi (1206-1283), who opposed scholasticism and its claim that reason can guide practitioners and lead to spiritual realization. These thinkers were deeply skeptical of scholasticism, denying much legitimacy to its claim to represent authoritative Buddhist thought in Tibet⁵². For these thinkers, spiritual realization does not just necessitate transcending rationality, a claim accepted by almost all scholastics in Tibet, but requires its radical rejection in favor of faith. In this perspective, scholasticism is not just limited, but is an actual obstacle to be rejected, if not ridiculed. It ensnares people in the net of the concepts they create instead of setting them free through the single-minded practice of meditation.

⁵² I am following here Kapstein's compelling description of Karma Pakshi as a skeptical fideist. See: *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism*, 101-106.

The conflict between this anti-intellectualist tradition and scholasticism is a well-known tension of Tibetan Buddhism that has surfaced at various periods. It would be a mistake, however, to assimilate this tension to the divide that exists nowadays between Geluk and non-Geluk scholastic traditions. Like their Geluk counterparts, the non-Geluk commentarial schools, whose rise we examined here, are based on the idea that the study of the great Indian texts is a valuable preparation to Buddhist practice. This appreciation for the role of the intellect differs profoundly from the rejection of reason sometimes associated with a more exclusive emphasis on meditative practice. This is not to say that this anti-intellectualism has not some resonance within some of the non-Geluk traditions and that the scholasticism of the commentarial schools represents a view of Buddhism unanimously accepted. There may be thinkers who are uncomfortable with this approach within their own traditions, but it is a mistake to conflate this tension with the differences separating Geluk and non-Geluk schools. Interesting differences are often less the marks of obvious sectarian divisions than the signs of the less obvious dialogue that takes place within living traditions.