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## The Development of Tibetan Scholasticism: Shakya Chokden's History of Madhyamaka Thought in Tibet

Shakya Chokden

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## The Development of Tibetan Scholasticism: Shakya Chokden's History of Madhyamaka Thought in Tibet

Serdok Paṅchen Shakya Chokden (1428–1507) stands out as one of the most remarkable thinkers of Tibet. The enormous body of his collected works is notable for the diversity and originality of the writings it contains, and for their exceptional rigor. One of the few Tibetan intellectuals affiliated with both the Sakyapa and Kagyiipa orders, which were often doctrinal and political rivals (see chapters 7 and n), he was also among the sharpest critics of Jé Tsongkhapa (chapter 16), the founder of the Gelukpa order that would come to dominate Tibet under the Dalai Lamas. For this reason Shakya Chokden's works were eventually banned by the Central Tibetan government. They are known to us today primarily thanks to a beautifully produced eighteenth-century manuscript from Bhutan, where the Central Tibetan ban did not extend and the religious leadership was congenial to the blend of Sakyapa and Kagyüpa perspectives that lent Shakya Chokden's texts much of their unique flavor.

Among the distinctive aspects of Shakya Chokden's oeuvre are his several contributions to the history of Buddhist thought. Historical writing in Tibet (chapter 11) was interested above all in important political or religious events, and the lives of the major actors. Doctrinal or intellectual history was generally ignored, no doubt in part because the outlook fostered in the monastic colleges was one of

perennialism: the truths revealed in the Buddha's teaching were eternal, and thus exempt from the process of historical change. Knowledgeable scholars were, of course, aware that commentarial and interpretive traditions did have a history of sorts, but this awareness tended to be expressed in their own commentarial notes, not in dedicated doctrinal histories. In Shakya Chokden's writings, however, we find sustained historical essays on Indian and Tibetan traditions of logic and epistemology, and of the Madhyamaka philosophy inspired by Nāgārjuna. The selections given here are drawn from his work on the latter, and may serve as an introductory guide to the philosophical writings included in the remainder of this chapter.

Shakya Chokden's discussion turns on the distinction made by Tibetan thinkers between two types of argument, termed in the present translation "autonomous reason" and "consequence." The first refers to the method of using positive proof to demonstrate the truth or falsehood of a given proposition. The second, by contrast, only seeks to undermine the propositions advanced by a (real or presumed) opponent by drawing out their untenable consequences, and so is similar to *reductio ad absurdum*, or "indirect proof," in Western systems of logic. This distinction was often considered by Tibetans to be the basis for designating two distinct schools of Madhyamaka philosophy, Svatantrika (Autonomous Reasoning) and Prasangika (Consequentialist).

—M.T. Kapstein

### **How the Tradition Pioneered by Nāgārjuna and his Followers Appeared in the Land of Nobles (India)**

As Nāgārjuna said in the *Sixty Stanzas of Reasoning*: "With the origin of all faults, nonexistence, having been abandoned, listen to that reasoning by which existence is also abandoned .... " It is explained that "the Protector Nāgārjuna three times roared with a lion's roar on the earth." It is well known that "first Nāgārjuna composed the treatises of the *Collection of Discourses* which primarily explain the side of the extensive deeds; next he composed the treatises of the *Collection of Reasoning* which primarily explain the dharma of the profound view as the emptiness related to severing superimpositions by listening and thinking; and finally he composed the *Bodhicitta Commentary, Praise to the Mind Vajra*, etc., which primarily explain emptiness which is

experienced through meditation.” Āryadeva, holding the traditions of all of these with equal emphasis, became his main holy son. He composed many treatises such as *Four Hundred Stanzas* and so forth.

It is known that the holder of his tradition, the Fearless Dharmapāla, composed treatises explaining the intents of the above-mentioned father and son as “mere knowing.”<sup>1</sup> He did this in accordance with the way of interpreting the intent of the Second Wheel of Dharma by the means of the Third Wheel of Dharma, as it appears in the Sūtras of the Third Wheel of Dharma themselves.<sup>2</sup> It is known that the Proponents of Entitylessness responded to this interpretation with sarcasm, explaining: “If, in spite of having distinguished the two truths, great charioteers [the major philosophers] were deluded, there is no need even to mention others,” etc.

The meaning of these words is as follows: “False truth<sup>3</sup> has to be explained in accordance with worldly conventions. That is the Madhyamaka tradition. But you explained it as mere knowing. That which is temporarily explained as ultimate truth finally also has to be explained as false truth, since it does not withstand analysis by reasoning. But you always explain ultimate truth as mere knowing. This is a mistake.” Which of these two opinions accords with the way of positing the definitive meaning in Vajrayāna [Tantric Buddhism] will be analyzed below.

The disciples of Nāgārjuna who came next are known as Buddhapālita and Bhāviveka. They agree in classifying the *Collection of Reasoning* explanatory style as exclusively that of the tradition of the Proponents of Entitylessness. In that context, they agree in explaining that “all objects of knowledge are empty of their own entity.”

1 “Mere Knowing,” often termed “Mind Only,” or Yogācāra (“Yoga Practice”), also refers to the philosophy of mind of the fourth-fifth century teachers Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, by whom Dharmapāla was inspired.

2 The discourses of the Buddha are sometimes classified into three “wheels,” according to their subject matter and philosophical outlook. The First Wheel corresponds to the early Buddhist teachings of impermanence, suffering, and absence of self; the Second Wheel to the teaching of emptiness elaborated in the “Perfection of Wisdom” sūtras of the Mahāyāna; and the Third Wheel to the doctrines of buddha nature, luminous mind, and gnosis found in other Mahāyāna sūtras.

3 Though this expression seems an oxymoron, it refers to apparent truth as known in the world, which comes to be seen as false when the ultimate is realized.

There are two types of entity. A pillar (for example) being empty of pillar means a pillar being empty of false entity. Emptiness understood as that pillar being empty of itself is temporarily posited as the ultimate nature of a pillar. But if that emptiness in its turn is analyzed by reasoning, it will also be found to be empty of itself. Thus a pillar is empty of an ultimate entity as well. In this way, since both entities are not seen in a pillar, it also does not exist. But then it is not accepted as nonexistent either, because “existence” – the basis of dependence of “nonexistence” – is not accepted. Interpretation applying such a method to all objects of knowledge is the common tradition of Proponents of Entitylessness. As their source they use the following passages: “If nonempty were a little existent, empty would also become a little existent,” and “One phenomenon is the entity of all phenomena.” Those teachers, who composed the Madhyamaka commentaries, arrive at the same identification of the meaning of emptiness, the object to be determined. But their way of determining emptiness is different. The difference is as follows.

### **Autonomous Reasoning (Svāntarika) Madhyamaka**

First, when the master Buddhapālita was commenting on the meaning of [Nāgārjuna’s words] “Neither from self nor from other ...,” he wrote: “It is said that phenomena which exist in their nature also don’t need production; if something exists yet gets produced, it will be never produced,” etc. The master Bhāviveka wrote the following refutation of this line of reasoning: “It is not reasonable because (a) the reason and example are not stated, (b) the fault of what others have said is not eliminated, and (c) since these are the words of the consequence, by reversing the given meaning, the reversed meaning of a probandum and its predicate becomes clear [i.e., things are *not* produced from self], and thus phenomena will turn out to be produced from other and contradiction with your tenets will arise.”

The meaning of this is as follows: “Is the reasoning, with which Buddhapālita was refuting the Sāṃkhya,<sup>4</sup> used as autonomous reason

<sup>4</sup> The non-Buddhist Sāṃkhya school of Indian philosophy held that the effect is in some sense already latent in the cause, to which the Buddhists objected that this would imply that what came into existence already existed, so that its coming-to-be implied a contradiction.

or consequence? If it is the first, then there is the fault of proof and example being the same. If it is the second, it is also faulty: Consequence which does not imply autonomous reason cannot produce inferential understanding. If it implies that reason, then production [i.e., production from other] must be accepted as the reversed meaning of the consequence. Thus it will become production in the frame of ultimate reasoning. Then it will contradict Madhyamaka tenets.”

Everybody who holds the explanatory lineage of this master in that way is known as [adhering to] Autonomous Reasoning [Svātantrika] Mādhyamika. That group has two further subdivisions: one which comes from Śrīgupta, Jñānagarbha, etc., and one which comes from the bodhisattva Śāntarakṣita and his spiritual son [Kamalaśīla]. They are called Sautrāntika Mādhyamika and Yogācāra Mādhyamika respectively in the *Notes on the View* composed by the Great Translator Yeshé-dé [ninth century].

The main treatises composed by these teachers are: the root text and the autocommentary of *Engaging in Two Truths* by Jñānagarbha, the root text and the autocommentary of *Madhyamaka Ornament* by the bodhisattva Śāntarakṣita, and the treatise of *Madhyamaka Vision* by his disciple Kamalaśīla. These texts are known as the *Three Madhyamaka Treatises of Eastern Svātantrikas*. They were translated and their meaning was determined at the earlier time of the Dharma king Tri Songdetsen. The Great Translator Ngok composed many commentaries of abbreviated meaning and word meaning on those treatises, and the explanatory lineage of those commentaries survived unbroken up to the present time. It has yet to be determined whether the Great Translator studied these treatises in India or with his uncle [Ngok Lekpé Sherap].

One of the followers of Śāntarakṣita is the master Haribhadra. He interpreted the meaning of the *Mother* [*Prajñāpāramitā*, the Perfection of Wisdom] according to the Yogācāra approach. Thus, everybody in the Land of Snows agrees that in his method of refutation of grasping at signs he used the reasoning of the Proponents of Entitylessness, while he explained the object of meditative experience in terms of the Yogācāra tradition.

Similarly, the Great Translator commented that Śāntarakṣita and his spiritual son had taught that the intent of the author of the *Commentary on Valid Cognition* [i.e., Dharmakīrti] was to explain the way

of severing superimpositions in terms of the self-emptiness reasoning (such as the reason of separation from one and many, etc.) and the object of meditative experience in terms of the mode of other-emptiness. The Great Translator himself also asserted the intent of the *Commentary on Valid Cognition* in the same way.

The Lord of Reasoning Chapa (Chökyi Senggé, 1109-1169) taught that the Sautrāntika and Cittamātra [“Mind Only”] traditions temporarily presented in the Seven Pramāṇa texts [of Dharmakīrti] are not suitable to express the actual intent of the author of the *Commentary on Valid Cognition*. Thus, he explained that emptiness, in terms of both being determined through reasoning and experienced in meditation, is exclusively that emptiness which is a nonaffirming negation [i.e., a negation with no positive entailments]. This is just a brief account of the explanatory approach of Autonomous Reasoning (Svātantrika) Madhyamaka.

### **Consequence (Prasangika) Madhyamaka**

It is known that the beginning of the explanatory tradition of what is commonly known as Prāsāngika is dated from the time when the Glorious Candrakīrti introduced a rebuttal to the faults ascribed to Buddhapālita by Bhāviveka. According to him, Buddhapālita’s assertion lies in consequence, which Bhāviveka did not explain. Candra’s explanation of the points which Bhāviveka didn’t understand is as follows:

- If a person is a Madhyamaka follower, he does not make a refutation with autonomous proofs for his own statements; neither does he create consequences which imply a reversed meaning of an opponent’s statements. This is because when one engages in pondering the ultimate mode of abiding, there is no acceptance of one’s statements, and if there is such an acceptance one will fall into the extremes of conceptual elaborations. So, the reasonings refuting Buddhist and non-Buddhist extremists are: “inferential cognition known to others,” “consequence revealing contradictions,” “equalizing by similar reasons,” and “nonestablishment due to the similarity of the proof and thesis.” With these reasonings it is enough just to refute in one’s mind the assertions of an opponent’s statements. One does not have to generate the inferential valid cognition ascertaining one’s own statements.



Regarding these explanations, later Svātantrika teachers taught that Bhāviveka's explanatory approach cannot be undermined by ascribing to, as its consequence, the fault of illusion established through ultimate reasoning. This is because when the object of negation, a mass of conceptualization, is negated, its opposite, the absence of conceptualization, is also negated.

In that context, both Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika arrive at nonaffirming negation of the whole mass of conceptualization. No difference in subtlety is accepted in that negation. Later Tibetans explain the difference between Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika in another way and thus deviate from correct explanation.

### **How Autonomous Reasoning Madhyamaka Came to Tibet**

It is clear that at the earlier time of the Dharma king Tri Songdetsen, when the *Three Madhyamaka Treatises of the Eastern Svātantrikas* were translated, just a brief explanatory tradition of those texts emerged. But the person who extremely clearly determined them through listening and explaining was Ngok Loden Sherap: "Beyond the eastern sea, at the edge of nomad lands, there will come an Intelligent One [Loden], different from Lohita. In his name, Wisdom [Sherap] is at the end. Likewise, the Snow Land in the North .... " That great being, prophesied by this and other Sūtras, greatly clarified Svātantrika through many commentaries. Among many holders of his explanatory tradition, the main one was Khyung Rinchen Drak. Among his disciples, known as Cyamar Jangchup Drakpa, Cangpa Sheu, etc., Drolungpa Lodrö Jungné was the holder of the tradition of all the excellent words of that great individual. Chapa Chökyi Senggé studied with both that Drolungpa and Cyamar Jangchup Drakpa. He composed many commentaries on the excellent words in general, and many on the *Three Treatises of the Eastern Svatantrikas* in particular. The words of explanations of the *Dharmas of Maitreya* and *Madhyamaka* by that teacher came down to Tsek Wangchuk Sengge. From him, they were received by Sakya Paṇḍita, by whom they were passed down to Uyukpa, who passed them to Zhang Dodepa and others. From that lineage they came to the Lord of Dharma, Lama Dampa, and then reached Rinpoché Yakpa.



## How Consequence Madhyamaka Came to Tibet

Atiśa said: “The follower of Nāgārjuna is Candrakīrti. With instructions passed down from him, the truth of reality is realized.” Thus, although at the time when Jowo Atiśa came to Tibet, the texts of Candrakīrti himself were not actually translated, Atiśa composed separate small treatises, such as the *Thorough Distinction of the Two Truths*, etc., explaining Candrakīrti’s intent. Atiśa taught them to the virtuous spiritual friend Dromtönpa. Then, in the text on the *Stages of the Path of the Three Individuals*,<sup>5</sup> he used Candrakīrti’s tradition as the basis for the presentation of the factors of the profound view; this approach has survived until today.

The tradition of the actual commentaries on Candrakīrti’s texts begins with Nyima Drak of the Patsap family in Penyül Gyel. He studied in India and Kashmir for twenty-three years, and invited to Tibet three paṇḍitas—Kanakavarman and others. In Rasa Trülñang [the Jokhang Temple of Lhasa] and other places, he translated many of Candrakīrti’s texts in general, and in particular translated and determined by explanation and study Nāgārjuna’s *Root Wisdom*, Candrakīrti’s *Engaging in the Middle Way*, Āryadeva’s *Four Hundred*, and so forth. It is known that he was active at the same time as the spiritual friend, the Great Sharawa, was engaged in explanation and study of Perfection of Wisdom, and when the Lord Düsum Khyenpa [1110-1193, the first Karmapa hierarch] was practicing in Jazang Drak. The Great Sharawa created many favorable conditions for Translator Patsap’s scholarly activities and encouraged his own intelligent disciples to study Madhyamaka with Patsap.

At that time there were four disciples known as the Four Sons of Patsap. Learned in both words and meaning was Mapcha Jangchup Tsöndrū. They also say that he might be the same person as Chapa’s disciple Mapcha Tsöpé Senggé. Learned in words was Sarbö from Tsang. They say that a small number of monks who followed his style of study and teaching existed in the Nyang region. Learned in meaning

<sup>5</sup> This is Atiśa’s major work, the *Lamp on the Path to Enlightenment (Bodhipathapradīpa)*, which teaches that there are three grades of aspirant: inferior (who seeks personal benefit in this or future lives); middling (who seeks personal freedom from suffering cyclic existence); and superior (who treasures others above self and works toward their liberation from suffering).

was Rinchen Drak from Daryül. They say that although he taught extensively, nobody capable of holding his lineage appeared. The one equally learned in both words and meaning was Zhang Jungné Yeshé. He established the Dharma University in Tangsak. He relied on the Translator Patsap's interlinear commentaries and outlines of the texts, and himself also composed various commentaries whose lineage is uninterrupted up to the present day. He also taught the *Root Wisdom*, *Engaging*, and *Four Hundred* treatises, and gave guiding explanations of the view of the Madhyamaka of Prāsaṅgika tradition.

At the end of approximately ten generations in the lineage transmitted from Zhang, there came a scholar whose name was Martön Zhönnu Gyeltsen. Many scholars from Ü-Tsang studied with him. He had lots of disciples, and the Great Lord Rongtön (1367–1449) also was his disciple. In later times, they say, the Noble Lord Rendawa (1349–1412) studied the Madhyamaka of Prāsaṅgika tradition with the Great Dokdokpa. I don't know with whom the later one had studied. Rendawa wrote commentaries on the *Root*, *Engaging*, and *Four Hundred* and also composed guiding explanations of the view. The one who studied with him was the Great Tsongkhapa (1357–1419).

### **How Acceptance and Rejection of These Two Came into Being**

While Chapa was teaching and studying Svātantrika Madhyamaka, a holder of Candrakīrti's lineage, the paṇḍita named Jayānanda, who wrote a commentary on the *Engaging in the Middle Way*, came to Tibet. At that time Chapa directly challenged him through debate and indirectly challenged Prāsaṅgika followers by composing a treatise with a great variety of refutations of both the words and meaning of Candrakīrti's treatise. Regardless of how his refutations hit the target, he definitely grasped the opponent's point of view.

Although at the time of the Great Translator Ngok, the Prāsaṅgika texts were not translated, by relying on their sayings (which he heard either in the Noble Land or in Tibet), in refuting Prāsaṅgika the Translator Ngok wrote a refutation of acceptance of the existence of the realization of the Madhyamaka meaning without relying on the three-moded syllogism: "Without the thought in their minds: 'This collection of conditions does not exist; both those people who proclaim apparent

things or their perfect refusal, deviate from the path of valid cognition and definitely fall into the great empty desert of wrong views.” He also wrote a refutation of the followers of Yogācāra and Svātantrika Madhyamaka: “Both those who accept some phenomenal existence by the power of reasoning and those who ascertain by valid cognition the suchness which is beyond the way of compounded phenomena, fall into the mouth of the great demon of unbearable grasping at things and are held fast by the sharp fangs of wrong views.” As for his own tradition, he explained that Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka has to be understood with the help of the reasoning of the author of the *Commentary on Valid Cognition*.

In later times, the Great Jonangpa [Dölpopa Sherap Gyeltsen, 1292–1361] said that what is explicitly taught as Madhyamaka in the texts of the master Candrakīrti belonging to the Vehicle of Reasoning is not suitable to be Madhyamaka, because it is the Dharma of the Age of Disputes. Madhyamaka is to be understood as it is explained by the Dharma language of Shambhala.<sup>6</sup> This implies that Svātantrika Madhyamaka cannot be interpreted in other ways either.

Also in later times, the Great Tsongkhapa explained that no correct view exists in those forms of Madhyamaka that are known to be different from the Madhyamaka taught in texts of Glorious Candrakīrti. He also said that all pure views of the sūtras and tantras necessarily belong only to this Prāsaṅgika tradition.

Shakya Chokden, *Three Texts on Madhyamaka*,  
trans. Yaroslav Komarovski (Dharamsala: Library of  
Tibetan Works and Archives, 2000), pp. 9-14, 21-24.  
Revised by the translator for the present publication.

<sup>6</sup> Dölpopa’s radical teaching is treated later in this chapter. He was inspired by the Tantra of the *Wheel of Time* (*Kālacakratāntra*), which is said to have been promulgated in the Inner Asian land of Shambhala.