

# The Dialectic Between Religious Belief and Contemplative Knowledge in Tibetan Buddhism

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I would like to present this essay as an example of a Buddhist theoretical critique of the relation between religious belief and contemplative knowledge in Tibetan Buddhism, and I shall contrast this with Steven Katz's and Paul Griffith's academic analyses of mysticism and Buddhist insight practice. A tension has long existed in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition between religious belief based upon scriptural authority and contemplative knowledge drawn from first-hand, personal inquiry. While many of the great scholars and contemplatives of Tibet have emphasized the importance of a balance between these two themes, when a contemplative tradition degenerates, this tension is lost: scholars devote themselves exclusively to textual study, disclaiming the present possibility of experiential knowledge; while contemplatives disdain textual knowledge as dry intellectualism, thereby reducing their tradition to a system of theoretically barren techniques.

The very possibility of genuine contemplative inquiry and insight has been called into question by modern scholars of mysticism and Buddhism. Steven Katz, for example, claims that religious images, beliefs, symbols, and rituals define, *in advance*, the types of experiences a contemplative wants to have and does eventually have (1972: 33). In a similar vein, Paul Griffiths states that the Buddhist cultivation of contemplative insight (*vipassanā-bhāvanā*) consists of "repeated meditations upon standard items of Buddhist doctrine...until these are completely internalized by practitioners and their

cognitive and perceptual habit-patterns operate only in terms of them." (Griffiths: 13). Thus, according to the above interpretations, mystical experience in general and the Buddhist cultivation of insight in particular entail no genuine, open-minded inquiry, but rather a self-imposed form of indoctrination (Griffiths: 15). I shall argue, however, that this description characterizes Buddhist meditation only in its more degenerate forms and is therefore a misleading depiction of the tradition as a whole.

Within Tibetan Buddhism, the sect that most readily lends itself to the critique of Katz and Griffiths is probably the dGe lugs order, which over the past few centuries has become highly scholastic in theory and practice. Its appeal to scriptural authority and rational argument can be traced to the writings of Tsong kha pa (1357-1419), the founder of this order. For example, in his classic work entitled *The Great Exposition of the Path to Awakening*<sup>1</sup> his erudite discussions of the cultivation of meditative quiescence (*śamatha*) and insight (*vipāśyanā*) are based almost entirely upon the Buddhist canon, including *sūtras* attributed to the Buddha and Sanskrit commentaries composed by the patriarchs of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. The accounts of these two fundamental approaches to Buddhist meditation are standardized and essentially normative, with virtually no descriptions of contemplatives' own first-hand accounts of their individual experience. Moreover, these presentations include almost no references to the written accounts of Tibetan contemplatives, even though, by Tsong kha pa's time, the techniques for developing meditative quiescence and insight had been practiced in Tibet for more than five hundred years.

Advocates of the dGe lugs order defend this reliance upon textual authority and rational analysis in terms of the traditional, threefold sequence of Buddhist praxis, namely hearing, thinking, and meditation. Understanding derived from hearing (including textual study) consists of the intellectual comprehension of Buddhist doctrine; understanding derived from thinking (including the practice of rational analysis and

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<sup>1</sup>Tsong kha pa. *Byang chub lam rim che ba*. Collected Works, Vol. Pa.

debate) reveals whether that doctrine is internally consistent and whether it conforms to valid experience (*pratyakṣa*); and understanding derived from meditation is gained by attending to the *realities indicated by Buddhist teachings, and not to the assertions of the doctrine itself.*

The goal of the second phase of that training—namely, thinking—is not merely *belief (manaḥ-parikṣā)* in the validity of Buddhist doctrine, but *inferential knowledge (anumāna)* of the realities presented in that doctrine. The goal of the third phase of that training—namely, meditation—is *perceptual knowledge (pratyakṣa)* of those same realities. The first two of those types of understanding can be acquired during one's training in a monastic university under the guidance of erudite scholars. But to acquire the knowledge derived from meditation, one is advised to seek out a master who can teach from his own contemplative experience and that of the oral lineage of his own teachers. Such guidance therefore vitalizes the scholastic presentations of meditation with oral accounts of the personal experiences of generations of accomplished contemplatives. Moreover, the meditation master should also have the wisdom, drawn from experience, to help each student choose the most suitable techniques for his own cultivation of quiescence and insight. Without such personal guidance from an experienced teacher, it is argued, even the most lucid texts on meditation by themselves will provide inadequate guidance to the aspiring contemplative.

That system of training is said to be effective when a scholarly presentation of meditation is used by an experienced contemplative as a basis of practical guidance for his students. But when the teacher has no experience, then the text alone gives the impression that there is no significant variation in the ways individuals pursue the practices for cultivating quiescence and insight. That tradition further degenerates when teachers admonish their students that the era of contemplative realization is past, and that the most students can hope for in the present day is scholastic comprehension of the classical treatises and their commentaries.

The above description of the sequence of hearing, thinking, and meditation may be taken as evidence in support of Katz's and Griffith's assertion that Buddhist contemplative practice consists of nothing more than the adoption of cognitive and perceptual habit-patterns that accord with the principles of Buddhist doctrine. The phase of thinking about the doctrine, in their view, may be nothing more than an intellectual exercise aimed at personally validating that doctrine. This may especially appear to be the case when the scholastic training in dGe lugs monasteries lasts as long as twenty-five years during which there is little time for experiential inquiry by way of one's own meditative experience. Indeed, a similar critique of this approach was made by Karma chags med (1613-1678), an eminent scholar and contemplative of both the rNying ma and bKa' brgyud orders of Tibetan Buddhism. In his view, such a primary emphasis on extensive intellectual learning and debate may actually impede first-hand, empirical inquiry into the nature of the mind and the realization of a primal state of awareness in which conceptual constructs are transcended. This, he asserts, is the central issue in the Buddhist cultivation of insight. In accordance with the Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga traditions of Buddhist meditation, he proposes that one proceed swiftly to the experiential examination of the mind, such that one's view of the nature of awareness can be derived from one's own personal experience (Karma chags med, 1984: 376-377).<sup>2</sup>

While the dGe lugs order relies primarily on the Buddhist *sūtras* and *tantras* and their authoritative Indian and Tibetan commentaries, the rNying ma order also relies heavily on *gter mas*, secret teachings which are believed to have been composed and hidden by the eight-century, Indian Buddhist adept Padmasambhava, who was instrumental in bringing Buddhism to Tibet. Some of these were written manuscripts (*sa gter*) purportedly hidden in caves and discovered centuries later, in the manner of "spiritual time-capsules," when the time was ripe for them to be revealed. One classic

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<sup>2</sup>An English translation of this passage appears at the end of the chapter entitled "Instructions for Cultivating Insight" in Karma Chagmé, 1997.

*gter ma* is the meditation manual entitled *The Profound Dharma of The Natural Emergence of the Peaceful and Wrathful from Enlightened Awareness*. Like the writings of Kar ma chags med, this treatise emphasizes first-hand empirical investigation over rational analysis, as indicated by the following passage:

According to the custom of some teaching traditions, you are first introduced to the view, and upon that basis you seek the meditative state. This makes it difficult to identify awareness. In this tradition, you first accomplish the meditative state, then on that basis you are introduced to the view. This profound point makes it impossible for you not to ascertain the nature of awareness. Therefore, first settle your mind in its natural state, then bring forth genuine quiescence in your mind-stream, and observe the nature of awareness. (Padmasambhava: 320-321).<sup>3</sup>

The theme expressed in the above passage—of being introduced to a theory of the nature of awareness *after* one has experientially accomplished the meditative state of quiescence—is also expressed by Paṅ chen blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1570-1662), a prominent authority in the dGe lugs order, and the spiritual mentor of the Fifth Dalai Lama. In his meditation manual entitled *The Highway of the Victorious Ones: A Root Text on Mahāmudrā* he writes:

Thus, among the two traditions of seeking meditative experience  
 On the basis of the view, and seeking the view  
 On the basis of meditative experience,

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<sup>3</sup>This passage occurs in the section "Revealing the Nature of Awareness" in Padmasambhava, 1997.

This accords with the latter tradition.<sup>4</sup>

The dGe lugs order as a whole accepts in principle the possibility of authentic *gter mas*, but it is uneasily aware of the likelihood of counterfeits either knowingly or unknowingly being passed off as genuine teachings of Padmasambhava. This is all the more a concern in the case of "mind treasures" (*dgongs gter*)—teachings allegedly hidden by Padmasambhava in the mind-streams of contemplatives, who in subsequent lifetimes discover them in the course of their own meditative development. One relatively recent example of such a mind treasure is a treatise entitled *The Diamond Heart Tantra: A Tantra Naturally Arisen From the Nature of Existence From the Matrix of Primordial Awareness of Pure Perception*,<sup>5</sup> revealed to and written down by the nineteenth-century, Tibetan Atiyoga master bDud 'joms gling pa. This work, consisting of more than 260 folios, records a discussion of many points of theory and practice between Samantabhadra, the primordial Buddha, and a circle of his Bodhisattva disciples. The cultivation of quiescence and insight is a prominent theme of this *tantra*, but unlike the *normative* accounts presented by Tsong kha pa, the discussion here presents a description of the wide *variety* of experiences that individual practitioners may have in the course of this meditative training (bDud 'jom gling pa: 31-47).

Padmasambhava, Tsong kha pa, and Karma chags med all agree that the attainment of quiescence is indispensable for the achievement of contemplative insight. Tsong kha pa cites a common analogy to explain the relation between quiescence and insight: in order to examine a hanging tapestry at night, if you light an oil-lamp that is both radiant and unflickering, you can vividly observe the depicted images. But if the lamp is either dim, or—even if it is bright—flickers due to wind, you would not clearly

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<sup>4</sup>(*Phyag chen rtsa ba rgyal ba'i gzhung lam*) ACIP S5939F.ACT: 2.] In his autocommentary to this text, he explains that according to the tradition he is advocating here, one should first cultivate meditative quiescence and then proceed to the cultivation of insight.

<sup>5</sup>Tibetan title: *Dag snang ye shes droa pa las gnas lugs rang byung gi rgyud rdo rje'i snying po*. Sanskrit title: *Vajrahṛdayasuddhadhūtījñānahāresrīlamjātiyātisma*. Collected Works of H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche. Vol. 1. I am presently translating this entire text into English.

see those forms (Tsong kha pa, Pha: 134B-135A).<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the aim of the training in quiescence is to counteract the alternating laxity and compulsive agitation of the mind and to bring forth a high degree of attentional stability and vividness. Only when the awareness is trained in this fashion is it said to be a suitable instrument for the contemplative investigation of the nature of the mind and other phenomena.

This view of quiescence stands in sharp contrast to the interpretation of Paul Griffiths, who writes that such training is designed to focus the awareness upon a single point so that ultimately all mental activity is brought to a halt and no experience of any kind is able to occur (Griffiths: 13-15). If that were indeed the aim of the cultivation of quiescence, there would be good grounds for his conclusion that the goal of this training is incompatible with that of the cultivation of insight. But in reality, it would be hard to find any Tibetan Buddhist contemplative who would endorse his interpretation of quiescence, let alone seek to realize it. The cultivation of quiescence is no more incompatible with the cultivation of insight than the development of telescopes is incompatible with the observation of the planets and stars.

The goal of Buddhist meditation in the view of all the Tibetan Buddhist adepts cited in this paper is to gain non-dual, conceptually unmediated insight into the nature of ultimate reality that transcends all conceptual frameworks. This reality, they maintain, is not the product of their doctrines, nor is its realization the culmination of only one type of contemplative training. On the contrary, Paṅ chen blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan maintains that although many different techniques and types of terminology are used in diverse contemplative disciplines within Tibetan Buddhism, if they are examined by erudite, experienced contemplatives, they are found to converge upon the same reality (Paṅ chen blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan: 2). Karma chags med goes a step further in approvingly citing O rgyan Rin po che, a renowned contemplative of the bKa' brgyud order, who claims that Buddhist selflessness

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<sup>6</sup>For the English translation see Wallace, 1997: 118.

(*nairātmya*), the middle way (*madhyamaka*), the essence of the Tathāgata (*tathāgatagarbha*), the total-ground (*ālaya*), the absolute nature of reality (*dharmadhātu*), and even the Self (*ātman*) posited by certain non-Buddhist, Indian contemplative schools all refer to the same reality! (Karma chags med: 386-387.)<sup>7</sup>

Certainly not all Tibetan Buddhists make such inclusivist appraisals of contemplative experience. On the contrary, some dGe lugs pa scholars claim that only the authors of the textbooks of their own monastic colleges have come up with the one correct interpretation of the Madhyamaka view; other dGe lugs pa scholars have strayed from the one true path, and other doctrines concerning Mahāmudrā and Atiyoga, for instance, are regarded as being profoundly flawed and ineffective for the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. Likewise, some rNying ma pa scholars deny that contemplatives following dGe lugs interpretations of the Madhyamaka view penetrate to anything beyond a "partial" or "trivial" emptiness (Tib., *stong nyid nyi tshe ba*), which is nothing more than an artifact of their doctrine. Nevertheless, as indicated by the above references to Paṅ chen blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan and Orgyan rin po che, Katz is simply wrong in claiming that the non-exclusivist perspective is something primarily derived from "non-mystics of recent vintage for their own purposes." (1978: 46). According to Paṅ chen blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan, such a perspective has long been held by contemplatives who are both experienced in their own tradition and learned in the traditions of others. Such individuals have always been rare.

This inclusivist position stands in stark contrast to that of Katz, who claims that all contemplative states of consciousness are thoroughly structured by the conceptual, religious frameworks in which such experiences are sought. Indeed, one of his initial premises is that conceptually unmediated experiences are impossible in principle, for human experience invariably involves memory, apprehension, expectation, and language (1978: 26, 33, & 59). That human experience normally operates under those

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<sup>7</sup>This passage appears in the chapter "Instructions on Identification" in Karma Chagmé, 1997.

conditions can hardly be contested, and it is a fact long known by many scholars in the Buddhist tradition. But the central point of Buddhist contemplative training is to achieve a type of insight that is profoundly unlike ordinary human experience. To argue that conceptually unmediated experience is impossible on the grounds that it is inaccessible to non-contemplatives is like claiming that knowledge of the infinite density of the zero-point energy of the electromagnetic vacuum is impossible on the grounds that it is inaccessible to non-physicists.

When addressing the possibility of ineffable knowledge, the question must be asked: ineffable for whom? If Jack has never tasted anything sweet, Jill would be at a loss to find no words to convey to him the taste of Belgian milk chocolate, let alone the difference between that and Swiss chocolate. Likewise, wine connoisseurs have a terminology that is quite intelligible among themselves, but that conveys little to teetotalists. Evidently there are many kinds of knowledge and experience that cannot be conveyed in words to outsiders, and are, therefore, ineffable in some contexts. Once this point is acknowledged, we may consider whether two accomplished Mahāmudrā adepts might converse about the nature of emptiness and primordial awareness in ways that would convey meaning in that context, but not for those lacking such experience.

I suspect that Katz's refusal to entertain the possibility of knowledge or experience unmediated by language or concepts stems from his adherence to the Kantian metaphysical assumption that if there is some noumenal reality that utterly transcends human percepts and concepts, it cannot be known directly; at best, one can only think about it. But this is precisely the assumption that Buddhist contemplatives refute, some of them on the basis of their own experience. Since they cannot directly demonstrate the nature of their knowledge to others, they take great pains to show others how to acquire such knowledge for themselves. But Katz insists that experienced contemplatives are in no better a position to evaluate their experience than

are non-contemplatives (1983: 5). Thus, he discards the only feasible way for us to get at the nature of contemplative experience for ourselves so that we can speak of it from first-hand knowledge. Of course, if his initial Kantian premise is correct, his methodological position would also be sound. But such reasoning is obviously circular.

It must also be mentioned that within the context of Buddhist contemplation, most experiences and insights are *not* said to be ineffable or inconceivable. While ontological knowledge of ultimate reality (Tib., *ji lta ba mkhyen pa' i ye shes*) is said to be ineffable, in contrast, contemplative, phenomenological knowledge of conventional reality (Tib., *ji snyed pa mkhyen pa'i ye shes*) can be articulated; and the latter may be verifiable by other means of inquiry. Now when Katz claims that contemplatives' beliefs and practices define, *in advance*, the types of experiences they want to have and do eventually have, it would seem that he is denying the possibility of *any* real discoveries being made by means of contemplative inquiry. At this point, Katz's claim that his account does not "begin with a priori assumptions about the nature of ultimate reality..." (1978: 66) seems highly suspect.

Katz's attitude is remarkably similar to that of the scholastic clerics of Galileo's time who refused to look through his telescope to view the craters on the moon. Since Aristotle's metaphysics denied the possibility of such blemishes on the moon's surface, they were convinced *in advance* that even if they were to see the alleged craters, any such appearances would have to be due to distortions of the lenses of the telescope. Thus, experimental scientists, in their view, were in no better a position to evaluate the nature of scientific discoveries than were scholastic theologians.

From a similar vantage point, many Buddhist scholastics assume that conceptually unmediated knowledge is possible and has been achieved in the past; but they, too, find justification for refusing to put their assumption to the test of experience. Thus, despite the differences in their initial assumptions, the orientations of Katz and Buddhist scholastics are strikingly similar.

For all their differences, proponents of the rationally-oriented dGe lugs order and the empirically-oriented rNying ma and bKa' brgyud orders unite in advocating conceptually unmediated realization of ultimate reality as the goal of contemplative practice. While this experience is said to be of supreme value in and of itself, the authenticity of such experience is validated by its enduring fruits—namely the spontaneous emergence of unprecedented, unconditional love, intuitive wisdom, and freedom from fear and suffering. While dGe lugs pa contemplatives commonly prepare for such realization by means of extensive, intellectual analysis, and rNying ma contemplatives commonly adopt a more empirical approach, the end result, many of them claim, is identical. The progression, as in many other contemplative traditions, is from religious faith and belief to contemplative insight and knowledge.

This raises the fundamental question whether unbiased inquiry ever occurs within contemplative practice, when practitioners are following in the footsteps of earlier teachers who have shown the way to achieving their state of knowledge and enlightenment. This religious approach appears to be fundamentally different from the dominant modern paradigm of effective inquiry and genuine discovery, namely the scientific enterprise. If the ideal of science is to challenge repeatedly even the most widely accepted beliefs and practices of past researchers and to discover truths never before known to humanity, is this not diametrically opposed to the religious ideal of first believing wholeheartedly in the doctrines of one's tradition and then seeking to realize those truths for oneself?

There are certainly important differences between these two models, but there may be more similarity between them than first meets the eye. Buddhism advocates the cultivation of three types of faith: (1) the faith of admiration (Tib., *dang ba'i dad pa*) for the personal qualities, insights, and deeds of the great practitioners of the past; (2) the faith of belief (Tib., *yid ches pa'i dad pa*) in the validity of their insights; and (3) the faith of aspiration (Tib., *mngon par 'dod pa'i dad pa*) to realize those same qualities and

insights for oneself. While the term *faith* is not commonly associated with the scientific tradition, it is certainly true that many people are drawn to a career in science out of an admiration for the great scientists of the past and their discoveries. Moreover, it is the faith of aspiration that moves them beyond admiration alone to the active pursuit of scientific training and research. As for belief, during the first fifteen or twenty years of one's training in a discipline such as physics, a student is expected to believe in the integrity of the physicists of the past—that they did not fudge their data or perform sloppy analyses—and one must believe that the technology one uses in the laboratory will actually perform as the engineers who created it have claimed. Only in this way can a scientist "stand on the shoulders of their forebears" and make unprecedented discoveries of their own; and, of course, only a small minority of scientists seriously challenge the prevailing scientific views of their time. Nevertheless, the ideal of unwavering belief in religion and the ideal of fundamental skepticism in science do appear to radically segregate these two enterprises; and I suspect that it is this difference that leads Katz and Griffiths to adopt a thoroughly constructivist interpretation of contemplative knowledge.

From a Mahāyāna perspective, however, this issue cannot so easily be laid to rest, for—as Tsong kha pa discusses at considerable length (Tsong Khapa, 1984)—given the great diversity of mutually incompatible philosophical doctrines within the Buddhist tradition, belief in the validity of the teachings of the Buddha is no simple matter. While some of these doctrines were intended to be taken literally (*nītārtha*), as clearly representing the nature of reality, other were intended solely as pedagogic devices (*neyārtha*) that may be *instrumentally* effective in leading certain trainees to greater understanding, but which do not accurately *represent* reality. To make this issue all the more problematic, there is no universally accepted Buddhist scripture that distinguishes, once and for all, which among the Buddha's teachings correspond to reality and which are merely pedagogical in nature. Thus, Buddhist practitioners must finally resort to

their own reasoning powers and experience to determine which Buddhist theories and practices actually represent reality and lead to valid knowledge. To do so, some degree of skepticism towards one's own tradition seems to be indispensable. In the final analysis, the challenge before Buddhist contemplatives is not so very different from that facing scientific researchers. This fact is obscured, however, when contemplative inquiry is overwhelmed by the scholastic emphasis on preserving a tradition.

The role of belief is also a complex one when it comes to engaging in contemplative practice. While the techniques for cultivating quiescence can be described in precise detail, the types of experiences individuals will have during their own training are unpredictable; and the actual nature of the achievement of quiescence cannot be accurately imagined by those who have not experienced it. Moreover, the conceptually unstructured state of awareness that is purportedly experienced due to the cultivation of insight cannot possibly be grasped with the conceptual mind, so all one's learned ideas about it finally have to be left behind. Even though practitioners first believe in the validity and value of the insights of their contemplative tradition, if they fail to engage in genuine inquiry of their own, those salvific insights will never be achieved; and those practitioners will never become true contemplatives in their own right. Thus, genuine rational and empirical inquiry are indispensable, even though they take place within an accepted belief system.

If Griffiths were thoroughly justified in his conclusions about the nature of insight practice, then Katz would be right about the utterly constructed nature of mystical experience in Buddhism. And historically speaking, their conclusions do often hold true with respect to contemplative traditions that are either dead or dying. However, drawing on the wit of Winston Churchill, reports of the demise of the Buddhist contemplative tradition have been somewhat exaggerated.

When the vitality of a contemplative tradition is no longer sustained by accomplished adepts, it may degenerate into dry scholasticism, in which religious beliefs

gradually come to appear radically different from empirical knowledge. Moreover, if even textual knowledge of contemplation is lost, then the tradition may be reduced to a scattered array of techniques and miscellaneous claims of altered states of consciousness that are also far removed from verifiable empirical knowledge. According to the XIV Dalai Lama, religious writings may be likened to paper currency, while religious experience and especially contemplative experience are like gold reserves.<sup>8</sup> To the extent that such experience is no longer current or considered to be of value, religious texts appear to the outsider to have no validity; and an entire dimension of human experience—from a contemplative point of view, the most important dimension—is sacrificed as a result.

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<sup>8</sup>H. H. the Dalai Lama drew this analogy during a private conversation I had with him in 1980, at his home in Dharamsala, India.

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