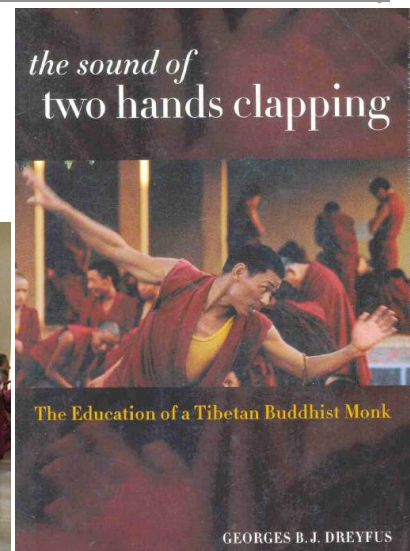


**Summary of:**

Georges Dreyfus

# The Sound of two hands clapping

UCAL Press, 2003



The first time I observed a debate here in Sera, I was overwhelmed. To see and hear thousand or more monks engaged in loud and near to athletic philosophical discussions made a strong impression on me, the more as the whole procedure was enigmatic and unintelligible, even for Tibetan-speaking lay people. Sometimes, when I came from the edge of the jungle and walked back to Sera, I could hear the rumour of the ongoing debate from a distance of nearly one kilometer and it gave me the impression of a football match going on somewhere there. As it was difficult to get informations concerning the content and the logical procedure of these formal discussions from our students or our fellow teachers, I began to look for literature which could help me understand a little bit what was going on the debate place.

I came accross this book and decided to write an excerpt or a short version of it, because it is very scholar and quite lengthy and looks a bit like a doctoral thesis written for scholars. I hope this short version will be helpful for everybody who is engaging in an encounter with the Geluk debating tradition. It is specially intended for future SmD-teachers.

Heiri Schenkel, Sera, 2006/07

*If you find errors, ununderstandable passages etc, please let me know. Thank you!*

## Introduction

The question Georges Dreyfus as a teenager asked was: "Would I exist if my parents had not by chance met? Who am I? When I die, will I cease to exist?" The rather grim answers of Camus and Malraux, as well as the unattractive prospect of "métro, boulot, dodo" made him look further. India's spirituality attracted him very much, especially after reading *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Yogananda (1946). So he went to India in 1970. Varanasi a deception for him, but Sarnath a revelation, and just accidentally he went to Dharamsala and finally, after 15 or so years of study, became the first Westerner with a Geshe degree.

There Geshe Rabten offered answers to the questions he had had when was young, when he realized that the assumption of a never disappearing self was erroneous, that liberation was possible, even without faith.

INSIDE AND OUTSIDE - page 3 (not included)

THE COMPLEXITY OF TRADITION - page 6

As soon as tradition and modernity are no more seen as in opposition, with a sort of hegemony of the latter, then tradition appears to be much more complex, flexible and multiform. Authority does play an important role in tradition, but this does not mean that it is fundamentalist. In tradition also truth has to be constantly interpreted. This is also why the author speaks of Tibetan scholars as intellectuals.

TRADITIONS AND ITS INTELLECTUALS

page 8

The book concentrates on the education of the monastic elite, a small minority within the population of a monastery. This however is necessary because one cannot restrict oneself to the study of the folklore and the rituals of a traditional culture without considering its intellectuals. Just using folklore to characterize a culture means reducing it to the appearances.

Intellectuals, according to Edward Shils, are "*persons with an unusual sensibility to the sacred, an uncommon reflectiveness about the nature of the universe and the rules which govern their society.*"

This book wants to show that although traditional Tibetan modes of behavior and institutions tend to be static and left behind, they have their importance in the modern world and that they are not marginal leftovers.

MONASTICISM AND SCHOLASTICISM

page 10

The intellectuals standing in the center of this book, the key term must be scholasticism and not monasticism. The term scholasticism is often misunderstood, although it was flourishing in many different cultures and continues to do so.

Medieval scholasticism is seen as a mode of presentation and as a way of thinking. The relation between faith and understanding was analyzed by *lectio* (presentation), *disputatio* and *argumentatio*. The revelatory status of the texts lead to their unconditional acceptance, but their meaning needed to be explored and re-explored. Revelation and reason come from God - so we should use both!

Even in medieval Europe scholasticism was not limited to theological studies, but it was also concerned with dialectic, rhetoric, grammar, mathematics and medicine. In the *Tibetan* context one can see scholastic practices as concerned with the relation between the *authority* (of the texts) and *interpretation*. The practice involves three intellectual techniques: Memory, commentary and dialectical debate. To discuss the importance of these three techniques for attaining<sup>1</sup> truth and to create a meaningful universe (which shapes life and character) is the main purpose of this book. It will also be of importance to discuss how much freedom of interpretation and of inquiry the Geluk system allows for.

The author does not see the necessity to distinguish sharply between monastic and hermitic scholars, because meditative and contemplative experiences are done by scholars who are rooted in the monastic tradition and are mostly well-trained scholars. So even scholars like Longtshen Rabjamba who left the monastery and retired into hermitage and did original philosophical and historical work and even poetry, need not be seen as completely opposed to monastic culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Attaining or constructing truth?

## PART I: THE CONTEXT

### 1. Tibetan Buddhism - A Brief Historical Overview

page 17

#### THE FIRST PERIOD: BUDDHISM IN TIBET

The creation of a powerful Tibetan empire under Songtsen Gampo around 850 led to the propagation of Buddhism, with the creation of an alphabet derived from Brahmi and Gupta scripts, giving rise to a literate elite. This Buddhism contains four layers: (1) The Hinayana (basic teachings of Buddha, based on samsara<sup>2</sup>, karma and moksha), (2) The Mahayana (with sutras exposing the ideal of the bodhisattva, the perfect vehicle paramita), (3) Esoteric<sup>3</sup> texts (tantras, secret texts, diamond vehicle, with strong accent on identification with a deity, visualization and meditation), (4) The non-canonical folk practices with possession, exorcism, divination, healing, worship of mountains and lakes, cult of house-gods. This has a strong relation to tantric layers.

#### THE SECOND PERIOD: THE NEW SCHOOLS AND THE ROLE OF MONASTICISM

The collapse of the empire in the ninth and tenth century led also to an eclipse of the politically influential monasticism, and to a sharp controversy between canonical Buddhism and the tantrikas. Atisha from Bengal (in his Bodhipathapradipa) helped find a compromise by including tantrism in the bodhisattva ideal. This was then fixed in the Path-literature (lam rim), the most famous being Dzongkapa's *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*. In this way exoteric Mahayana became harmonized with esoteric tantra. This led to a second propagation of Buddhism in Tibet at the end of the 10th century, which intensified in the 11th and 12th centuries. The main influence now came from India and no more from China or Central Asia. These schools are called the new schools (gsar ma), they stressed monasticism and tried to control tantra. The Kadam school was famous. Schools like the Sakya (1073) and Kagyu developed around famous teachers. These new schools claimed to have a purer, Indian, origin of their texts. As a reaction to this claim the Nyingmapa of Padmasambhava relied on the former sources of early Tibetan Buddhism with more emphasis on tantric elements, which didn't need a monastic infrastructure. It is only after 1150 that the Nyingma monasteries were founded.

#### THE THIRD PERIOD: THE SYSTEMATIZATION OF THE SCHOLASTIC CULTURE

page 23

From 1250 to the 16th century the contact with India was interrupted due to the Muslim invasion. In this "classical period" the immense literature was intensely studied and standardized. Two parts can be recognized: (1) the translated words of the Buddha (bka'gyur) containing the Vinaya, the Hinayana and Mahayana sutras, and (2) the translated treatises (bstan'gyur). For the Geluk DZONGKAPA was the most significant figure in this systematization - which seems to be a Tibetan specialty - the Indian tradition was less systematic. He considered himself and the other Gadenas (?) to be Sakya. Gaden, Drepung and Sera were founded in the years 1409, 1416 and 1419. Only gradually after 1450 did they drift away from their initial tradition, also because they were sharply criticized for their Madyamaka interpretation. Finally they choose the name "the virtuous", Gelukpa, but actually the splitting was more due to their involvement in political affairs.

#### THE FOURTH PERIOD: HIGH SCHOLASTICISM AND THE RISE OF SECTARIANISM

page 27

Due to the collapse of political structures the Buddhist schools rose to candidates for taking them over. First it was the Sakyas, but finally after 1450 the dispute for power led to a civil war between Tsang and central Tibet. With Mongolian help the central forces later won and in 1642 established the Geluk leader, the 5th Dalai Lama, as the supreme authority in Tibet. Under the protection of the government the three Geluk seats became the most powerful school.

<sup>2</sup> samsara: moksha: bodhisattva: paramita:

<sup>3</sup> exoteric:

The differences between the sects was more due to their political involvement and not to sharp differences in their interpretations of the texts. In spite of all Tibetan Buddhism is astonishingly homogeneous. But the animosity is still existing today, because the Geluk's hegemony and disregard for other interpretations is still strongly felt.

#### THE REACTION OF THE NON-GE-LUK SCHOOLS: THE NONSECTARIAN MOVEMENT. page 29

After 1850 a non-sectarian (ris med) movement gained force around great teachers in Eastern Tibet. All traditions were recognized as valid and thus a united front against Geluk dominance was found, but also the contemporary separation of all schools into Geluk and non-Geluk was created. It also lead to a scholastic revival based on new commentaries of the Indian texts by Kenpo Zhanpan and Mipam around 1900. The reception by the Geluk oscillated between genuine interest and sharp criticism, e.g. by Pabonka. Before 1950 however the Geluk hegemony had not been disputed in Central Tibet and Amdo. The philosophical differences between the two camps aren't finally thus important – it was more reasons of power and politics which kept the separation alive.

## 2. Tibetan Monasticism

#### THE NATURE OF BUDDHIST MONASTICISM AND ITS EVOLUTION page 33

The outer world prevents the realization of one's religious vocation, so there is a need for monasteries where renunciation (samnyasa) can be lived. In Buddhism this was institutionalized very early on - not based on a severe asceticism, but rather on a middle path. This path is defined by 253 rules in the Mula-sarvastivada-version of *Mahayana Vinaya*, the "legal code" of monastic life. Typical monastic mentality seems to be characterized by a certain individualism, a disdain for the life of the laity and a clear feeling of superiority. The detachment from lay life (also aiming at retaining the admiration or respect of the lay community) is reinforced by certain rules concerning behaviour: No dancing, no singing, no swinging of the arms while walking, no noise while eating, etc. On the other hand they provide religious services for the lay people - a duty that might already have been installed under Ashoka.

It is expressed in the Vinaya that Lamas also have the duty to help ordinary people in gaining merits aiming at their liberation, but they should not engage in practising astrology, medicine or in leading rituals for the lay community. This however seems not to be respected, not even in the Theravada schools.<sup>4</sup>

#### MASS MONASTICISM page 37

Before 1950 up to 20% of the Tibetan population may have been ordained. One can see two reasons for this: Gaining merits for oneself and one's family and political weight by the sheer number. For this the standards of entrance were gradually lowered and all sorts of "monks" could coexist within a big monastery. This development towards laxness was seen with mixed feelings: "The great monastic seats are like the ocean". They contain all kinds of fish, down to punk monks (ldab ldob). This also applies to Theravada monasteries before the 19th century, when reforms were undertaken to make them follow the Vinaya more strictly.

Monasteries have their own constitutions which are interwoven with the Vinaya and so the strictness of discipline can vary considerably, sometimes even between Khangtsens. So the Trehor house in Sera Jay seems to be particularly strict. There are always monks who, lacking intellectual or spiritual ambition, consider their present life as a meritorious and pleasant preparation for future lives. There are few „virtuosi“ who were (are ?) ready to endure hardship in order to study.

<sup>4</sup> In Sera we can observe that many pujas are held in the name of sponsors.

In exile it was a daunting task to rebuild the monasteries from scratch and monastic life then was not at all easy. In the beginning, to have a large number of monks wasn't the aim of the monasteries. Standards were risen, curricula with yearly exams established and the political involvement of monks reduced. Today monasteries are again growing fast, also due to the political moves of the Chinese authorities in Tibet to curtail monastic life. So again we have the mass character of Tibetan monasteries.

#### MONASTERIES AS CORPORATE ENTITIES

page 42

Independently from what Vinaya says about the community ritual of a monastery, they also have a corporate aspect. The involvement in the affairs of the outer world (which Vinaya sought to avoid), leads to a complex bureaucratic organisation and a set of rules, tasks and rights for those who are admitted. A lama characterized this as being "capitalist and democratic", with monks who can sometimes be stubborn and conservative.

#### MONASTERIES AS RITUAL COMMUNITIES

page 44

It may astonish that Buddhism as a rational philosophy does rely so much on rituals (so that monks wishing to meditate leave the monastery to get rid of them). One of the first conditions to be admitted as a monk is to memorize the monastery's own ritual material (*chos spyod*). Then there are also ritual obligations for the lay community.

The assembly hall, which by its size and decor demonstrates the importance of the monastery, is the place where the community gathers and where pujas, distribution of food and money, etc is done. Three rituals are prescribed by the Vinaya (which is in fact Hinayana, thus having a tantric tint): The fortnightly confession (*bso sbyong*) and the two rituals marking the begin and the closing of the rainy season. Then there are rituals connected to Buddha or to the founders of the sect concerned. Finally there are daily rituals, for example the evening prayer including praises to Tara and a recitation of the Heart Sutra. There can even be rituals demanded by the government, for example after having consulted the "governmental" oracle deity Ne-chung.

The rituals are important for the good relations between supporters (sponsors) and the monastery, and they can last days - what is not so much appreciated by the more scholarly monks.

#### TYPES OF MONASTERIES

page 47

In Tibet we have the central monasteries and small local monastic communities which often are affiliated to a center in a sort of network. The latter serve as training centers for the monks of the small communities. (...)

#### THE STRUCTURE OF THE THREE SEATS

page 49

The three seats each consist of several monasteries. The monasteries are the places where a monk primarily belongs to. The seat Drepung has the monasteries Loseling (*blo gsal gling*), Gomang (*sgo mang*) and Ngakpa (tantric, *sngags pa*) and Deyang (*bde yangs*). The seat Sera consists of Jay (*byas*), May (*smad*) and Ngakpa (*sngags pa*). Gaden has two: Shartse (*shar rtse*) and Jangtse (*byang rtse*). Each of these monasteries has its own assembly hall, administrative and disciplinary structures, economic basis, constitution, scholastic manuals (*yig cha*) and internal subdivision into regional houses (*khang tshan*).

A seat (it has no abbot) is administered by a council (*bla spyi*) composed of the representatives of the monasteries, of the regional houses, the present plus former abbots and important monastic officials. The decisions of the council are implemented by the two head disciplinarians (*thogs chen zhal ngo*). On the level of the monasteries discipline is enforced by the disciplinarians (*dge skos*). A prayer leader (*dbu mdzad*) leads the monastic rituals and a director of studies (*bla ma gzhung len pa*) makes sure that the proper debates and exams are held.

In medieval scholastic universities the scholars were grouped by "nations" . In the Tibetan universities it is by region in different houses, each ruled by a council which appoints a house teacher (*khang tshan dge rgan*) to administer the house, mostly on a yearly basis. In each level of organisation there are administrators (stewards, *phyag mdzod*). In Tibet the financial resources came from taxes on dependent estates and nomads.<sup>5</sup>

The complexity of these monasteries was also marked by the pomp of their ceremonies and the ornate dress of the officials. Despite the poorness of many monks the monasteries themselves were often very rich by amassing precious objects and pure gold also. These structures have, at least for the Geluk part, been recreated in Indian exile - first in Assam and then in Karnataka.<sup>6</sup>

Tibetan monasteries are far from being the ideal communities of enlightenment seekers that some imagine. They should not be idealized - in old Tibet they were made possible by a rigid and oppressive social structure. On the other hand they also were and are centers of a vibrant intellectual culture involving great minds, a rich literary production and deep philosophical elaborations.

### 3. Becoming a Monk: Teacher and Discipline

#### ADMISSION TO THE MONASTERY: THE ROLE OF THE ROOM TEACHER

page 55

(....). Once a monk is (was) in his regional Khangtsen, he is given a room teacher, a residence guru. This is one of the most important relationships in his life. He accompanies the novice until he is fully ordained and then for ten more years. Questions of money and the occasional beating can however be harmful to their relationship.

#### THE ROLE OF THE SCHOLASTIC TEACHER

page 59

At the start of his scholastic career, the new monk must choose a "text teacher" which is often suggested by the room teacher, but more intellectually minded monks like to choose teachers who are known or specially sharp and demanding. The freedom to have several teachers depends on the monastery. In Sera Jey it is not so much favored, in Loseling it is quite normal. In Namdröling the class teacher often is automatically the personal teacher of his class' monks.

In secular schools this typically Tibetan attachment to the teacher can also be observed and the title "GenLa" is an expression respect there too.

#### THE ROLES OF THE GURU

page 61

The Indian word Guru is translated as Lama, and hence the designation of "Lamaism" for Tibetan Buddhism. It can be argued whether this has a negative connotation like "Papism". Anyone who conveys knowledge is called *gay gen* (dge rgan). In the religious context they are called gurus or "spiritual friends" (dge ba'i bshes gnyen), but guru sometimes has a tantric connotation for a teacher who imparts empowerments (dbang), transmissions (lung) and special instructions (man ngag). In the tantric context gurus have a quasi-divine status. It must however not be forgotten that respected lamas (especially if they are reincarnated lamas, tulkus, sprul sku) due to their authority also have or had political influence. Tulku literally means "emanation body", but this is a Western simplification, because the connotation as understood by Tibetan society can vary between positive and negative. They are also called *rinpoches*, „the precious ones“. In tantric studies, the teacher has a divine status and is seen as a fully enlightened being which has embodied to help others in gaining

<sup>5</sup> So Drepung for example is said to have had 185 estates with 20000 subjects and 300 pastures with 16000 nomads.

<sup>6</sup> First in modest style but now, with easily flowing sponsor money, also in a rather grand style.

enlightenment. The student has a total devotion to this sort of teacher<sup>7</sup> and feels a complete union with him and love.

DISCIPLINE

page 63

The overall aim of a monastic education is to develop goodness, the challenge being not only to know this but also to *practice* it. The training in the trial period is (was) quite hard and demanding, aiming at reducing sensual desires and make the novices suitable for the monastic community, a bit like an army boot camp. "Technologies of power" (Foucault) to form "docile bodies" are (were) installed - which led to the stability of monastic communities over centuries.

These hardships apply to scholar monks. Other monks as a contrast had (have) an easy life, but they lacked the formation of mind and character the scholars were compelled to develop. Suppressing hedonistic desires and pleasures helps to make soteriological aims central in life. Once the initial hardship is overcome, the aims become clear and much more easy to attain - this has also been experienced by many saints in history, specially by those leading a hermitic life.

## PART II : TIBETAN SCHOLASTIC PRACTICES

### 4. Literacy and Memorization

page 79

TIBET AND LITERACY. FORMAL AND INFORMAL EDUCATION IN TIBET.

pages 80 and 82 (...)

THE PRACTICE OF MEMORIZATION

page 84

The ritual texts are the first to be memorized with the careful supervision by the teacher because the texts, which are actually Sanskrit written in Tibetan, are difficult to read and a precise reading is very important, especially for mantras. This direct transmission from teacher to student is called "*lung*". Memorizing may begin with the invocation of Manjushri and "*dhih, dhih, dhih..*", the sonic seed of the bodhisattva.

TIBETAN MONASTERIES: ISLANDS OF PEACE, OR OCEANS OF NOISE?

page 87

A Tibetan monastery is devoted not to meditation, but to rituals and sometimes studies, and it is an "arena suffused with sound" - except after lunch, when the monks can relax from debating and memorizing. *Sound* becomes central in Tibetan monastic life and loud recitation is a virtuous form of giving (to nature, invisible entities, spirits). The noisy common learning is also mobilizing interpersonal energy - and a spirit of competition too.

MEMORIZATION AND LITURGICAL DISCIPLINE

page 89

Memorization is an important part of discipline and a means to join the community in the beginning, when also esoteric texts and prayers have to be memorized. The amount of liturgic texts to be memorized however varies from one monastery to another, some being very demanding with hundreds of folios to memorize. (Often a monk has to show his mastery by reciting the whole liturgy in front of the assembled monks, which surely has a disciplinary aspect too). The uniformity in tune and rhythm of recitation in the puja also helps a disciplined integration into the monastic community. It makes the monks confident and pleases the sponsors...

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<sup>7</sup> This means he also cares for the physical well-being of his lama, cleans his room, empties the night-pot, sometimes even drinks a sip of his urine in the morning.....(!). (This is not to say that it is a general habit, of course, and may be quite different now in the emigration, HS)

## THE ROLE OF MEMORIZATION IN THE CURRICULUM

page 91

Memorization in the beginning is nearly taking the full time of the new monks, but also later on the basic texts have to be memorized. Tibetan monastic universities are not organized around topics but around texts, so knowing them is very important. Commentaries concerning "root texts" are grouped around these and also partly memorized, because they can provide arguments during a debate, although *understanding* here is more important than just memorizing. So the root texts help in organizing the study materials.

It is believed that knowledge must be immediately accessible and not just available. The note-taking dominant in Western ways of learning confines knowledge to the narrow space between the covers of a textbook and the material is not engraved in one's brain (or mind?). The memorized texts are a spiritual resource and a source of decisive quotations in a debate.

In all that Tibetan monastic education resembles traditional mediaval learning in Europe - while modern societies are mainly documetary. The traditional way of learning is and was not due to a scarcity of printed materials, because printing was well known for centuries.<sup>8</sup>

## MEMORIZATION AND ITS MECHANISMS

page 93

Why memorizing texts before understanding them? Memorization is mainly aural, only relying on sonic patterns, ignoring associations (which are difficult to understand anyway, when Sanskrit texts are written in Tibetan script). It also seems that memorized contents don't need a reconstruction by the brain, when we wish to use them.

Memorization before understanding is more difficult and therefore (theory says) less easily forgotten and more exact. The frequent repetitions create a large number of neural connections and thus a forgetting-proof permastore in an "implicite" memory which can also be unconsciously activated, like a pianoplayer does: Monks sometimes recite while asleep! But the interpretation of the processes of retaining and forgetting differ among psychologists. Some speak of neuronal decay in forgetting, others see it as caused by interference with new contents arriving at our brain.

For the use in rituals it is absolutely necessary that the texts are retained exactly, but debate also requires an exact wording, so that the arguments can at once be recognized. The Rig Veda for example was preserved for centuries in oral form and has, as it seems, been exactly retained - but there was no written alternative anyway.

"What comes with difficulty goes with difficulty." Memorization leads, is also pretended, more easily to calmness, attention and monastic stability than meditation.

## 5. The General structure of the Tibetan Curriculum

page 98

The commentaries are difficult to understand and have to be interpreted. This interpretation however is not left to the individual - it must follow strictly regulated practices.

## AUTHORITY AND THE ROLE OF COMMENTARY

page 99

Scholasticism is always concerned with the relation between understanding and tradition. It must be able to adapt to new circumstances and resolve contradicions within the tradition itself, be it by revising the commentaries, which are grouped around central texts. Central texts are classics of civilization, "great books" (Homer, Confucius, Newton, Mahabharata) from the "golden age" of civilization, as Tibetans put it.

Progress e.g. in physics is not achieved by re-reading Newton: We need to study interpretative texts, they are formative. It is interesting that medieval scholastic culture was similar to Tibetan

<sup>8</sup> and probably we still believe that without Gutenberg we wouldn't have any books. Did he know about his predecessors in China and elsewhere? Joseph Needham surely has reserched this too. (HS)



monastic culture, also relying on texts, commentaries and debate. Memorization should only be a preparation for the interpretation of the great texts.<sup>9</sup> Truth is reached by strictly regulated practices: Explanation of the texts through commentaries and investigation of their meaning through debate. The aim is to develop interpretative abilities. (But today's monastic reality is far from the ideal.)

#### THE TIBETAN CURRICULUM IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

5 major branches of learning						
Internal Buddhism. nang rig pa	Science	Logic and epistemology gtan tshigs rig paid he	Grammar sgra rig pa	Medicine gso ba'i rig pa	Arts & crafts bzo rig pa	
"supramundane"		More secular subjects				

5 minor subjects				
Poetics	Metrics	Lexicography	Theater	Astrology
Language-centered (especially Sanskrit)				Including arithmetic and astronomy

There is a resemblance between Christian, Islamic and Buddhist educational programs in that logic helps philosophy and language studies are educating. It is nevertheless remarkable that the Tibetan system is the least useful, because this is not its aim! Technical and abstruse philosophico-religious material is preferred because scholastic study is meant for the religious virtuosi, who lead a life separate from the mundane concerns of society.

## 6. Two curricular models

#### THE CURRICULUM OF DEBATING INSTITUTIONS

page 111

The Geluk are debating institutions, rather conservative and, at least in former Tibet with a tendency towards repression of writing. All 3 seats rely on the "5 great texts"

Preliminary Studies	Central Exoteric Studies	Esoteric (Tantric) Studies
3 years	First phase 6-10 years, second 4-8 years	1 year
<b>Collected Topics ( )</b> for training debate. In the first chapter e.g. relation between the colors. Then the Buddhist conceptual universe <b>Types of Mind</b> Overview of main concepts used in Buddhist epistemology: The nature of knowledge. <b>Types of Evidence</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Phase:</b> 3 texts <b>Ornament of Realization</b> Maitreya <b>Commentary on valid Cognition</b> Dharmakirti: Logic, epistemology, philosophy of language <b>Madhyamaka</b> (the culmination) Introduction to the Middle Way). Candrakirti, also Nagarjuna's Treatise of the Middle Way <b>2<sup>nd</sup> Phase:</b> With less intellectual importance <b>Treasury of Abidharma</b> Vasubhandu	Study and training in rituals, offerings, mandala-making, with 3 meditational deities. Main texts: <b>- Root Tantra</b> <b>-Fourfold Commentary</b> <b>-Commentary on the Root Tantra</b>

<sup>9</sup> Only "poor" monks, "parrots", stay with memorization of these first texts.

<p>With doxography the propaedeutics are completed. Also study of non-Buddhist systems.</p>	<p>Discipline-related topics <b><i>Vinaya Sutra</i></b> Gunaprabha. As in Sunni Islam and in Judaism: Approaching the divine through the study of the prescriptions.</p>	<p>In exile these studies have shrunk to one year, but the monks usually study privately (sort of secrecy aura) after finishing The Ornament.</p>
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#### TEXTS AND MANUALS IN GELUK EDUCATION

page 123

Each of the six monasteries has its own set of monastic manuals. Usually the texts of the founders are considered the best.

#### THE CURRICULUM OF COMMENTARIAL INSTITUTIONS (NYINGMA, KAGYU, SAGYA

page 128

The **Nyingma** (founded 1665, and re-founded in exile, with Ngagyur monastic school, by Penor Rinpoche around 1970) e.g. rely on 13 great texts, among them:

**First year:**

- Treatise ascertaining the 3 types of vow
- Santideva: Introduction to the Bodhisattva way of life

**Lower studies, 4 years:** Texts of Nagarjuna, Anyadeva, Candrakirti, Asanga, Vasubhandu, Dharmakirti. Limited study of logic and epistemology.

#### **Higher exoteric studies :**

- The Superior Continuum
- Ornament of Realization
- Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras
- Differentiation of the Middle and the Extremes
- Differentiation of Phenomena and (ultimate) Nature

#### **Esoteric studies** (usually in the monastery itself):

- Treasury of Qualities
- Trilogy of Self-Liberation
- Trilogy of Resting

So, with only little debate, commentarial institutions have a more complete education that includes literary and dialectical skills.

In earlier times there was a lively dialoge between all sects and monks went from monastery to monastery during their studies to get fresh ideas from all sides. Later the tendency towards sedentarity developed and the exchanges diminished.

The tight connection between Geluk monasteries, the institution of the Dalai Lama and political power around 1500 led to a decline of the commentarial institutions and a domination by the Geluk way with its intellectual debate-"firework". There was, at times, even a sort of censorship and repression exerced by the Geluk. Texts critical of TSONGKAPA were banned and nearly disappeared. A limited revival took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the Nyingmapa sect.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> So, it seems, SmD is mainly working with the most powerful and still dominating sect. Could it be that the Geluk monks have a sort of feeling of superiority? Are other sects not ready to accept science teaching, because we are collaborating with the arrogant? The support of the Dalai Lama is possibly not seen as a very convincing stimulus for all sects because he is mainly Geluk-based, although he personally values the Nyingma tradition highly - and this lead the Shukden-adepts to critisize him sharply.(HS)

## 7. Scholasticism and Orality: Myth and Reality

page 149

In the West we also had a scholastic tradition based on *lectio* and *disputatio* ("sic et non"), where the aural and oral connects to the literary.

In Tibetan Buddhism we have a primary orality, which is emphatic, close to experience, participatory and holistic, and then a commentary orality. The literacy is more analytic, secondary, bureaucratic. In monasteries we have rather a textual instruction instead of primary orality.

In the Middle Ages loud reading was a sort of public performance. Silent reading seems (at least in the West) to be a rather modern phenomenon which came with the availability of written texts, may be also with the individualised Bible-reading in Protestantism. In Tibet however loud reading is considered to be for beginners and lay people - speedy scholars do silent reading.

Oral commentary marks authority, hierarchy and direct transmission is a guarantee for truth. The legitimate scholar teacher transmits the true meaning of the author to the student monk. This is particularly important for Nyingmapa. Scholastic texts are read with reference, they are considered a treasure, an ocean of wisdom.

Teaching begins with three prostrations, then Manjushri is invoked. The teacher expects that his students have memorised the texts when he begins with his commentaries.

The divide between written and oral Tibetan is deep! Therefore translations of Indian texts are very difficult and genuine Tibetan commentaries are needed even for scholars. So modern Tibetans wishing to know more about Buddhism often use English texts to start with.<sup>11</sup>

## 8. Commentary and Meditation

page 164

Citation: "Commentarial and didactical skills constitute forms of cultural capital deployed in the struggle for power between competing religio-political groups." Commentaries form the basis or the framework in which contemplation can develop.

We have the three steps in ascension: First studying, then thinking, finally meditation.

This is comparable to our Middle Ages where, with time, a degradation towards solely teaching and preaching can be observed.

Meditation is only practiced by a minority by the Geluk, although it is a normative practice.

**"The Path":** Texts like *The Ornament* serve to construct a meaningful universe and the path that transcends it. It strengthens the faith in a soteriological possibility, based on a samsara-karma moksha worldview. Faith is the base, the "main cause", but we can distinguish two types of believers: *A priori believers* (which are considered external and unstable) and the *believers based on understanding* and evidence (internal, stable). The Geluk follow a more intellectual-rhetorical path, the Nyingma pa a path more based on experience and tantric meditation.

The Supplement: Supplementary commentaries are necessary because the original audience (e.g. Nagarjuna's) is no more. New audiences need more interpretation.

The problem of closure and openness (Science!). The question of creativity: Where does it have space?

"Only idiots agree." "If they agree, they are not learned"

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<sup>11</sup> It seems that Khampas, having less distractions, are or were more devoted to studies than people from other provinces.

## 10. Debate as Practice

page 195

Is debate purely ritualistic, just a meaningless vestige? Is it just application of logical principles? Is it a manifestation of the vitality of tradition?

There are discussions on whether the logic of debate is very specific or corresponds to Western logic. How far is it rhetoric, and how far does it provide deductive certainty? There also seems to be a ludic component with game logic in it.

### DEBATE AS DIALECTIC

page 200

According to Socrates and Platon dialectic serves the search for truth and isn't a rhetoric game. It is looking for the essence of things, well knowing that we, finally, don't know and will not know. Aristotle thinks that dialectics deals with the most likely and certainty can be found by demonstration based on the first principles. The logic used is devoid of any hyle (matter) and is concerned only with form.

So we have two conflicting views of what dialectics can: Achieve certainty or not!

In this context debate is like a sport - it has no other immediate goal outside itself, but it can be used for a higher purpose. (agonistic, Peter Abelard, 12<sup>th</sup> C, sic et non ??)

In the Middle Ages debate grew out of "lectio et disputatio". Sometimes there were two groups, "respondentes et oppositores" and they had either a fixed topic (quaestiones disputatae) or were thematically free discussions (disputatio de quolibet) which sometimes took on the character of show-discussions.

The Geluk's fixedness on debate also had critics, so a Sagya scholar of the 15th century considers debates to be "childish games". Nevertheless debate seems to be a generally liked type of interaction in all Tibetan traditions. Emphasis on it was inherited from India where it was already a central part of the studies in Nalanda. Logic and dialectic coincided and the study of "sound reasoning" was central.

### ARGUMENTS AND CONSEQUENCES

page 206

In Indian logic, the favourite tool is the statement of proof. An Indian argument contains four terms: subject, predicate, reason and example.

*"The subject, the sound, is impermanent because it is produced, just like a jar."*

The argument is not an axiomatic demonstration, but a dialectical tool used conversationally to bring knowledge to the audience. Nevertheless the argument aims at reaching certainty and not just a probability of truth. It begins by the respondent eliciting the proponents thesis.

The proponent is offering a thesis and a proof. ( <i>snar rgol</i> )	The respondent (questioner) has to show that thesis or argument are faulty. ( <i>Phyir rgol</i> )
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### PROCEDURES AND RULES OF DEBATE

page 211

Tibetan debates involve: A *defender* (*dam bca'ba*) who answers and puts forth assertions for which he is held accountable and a *questioner* or *challenger* (*rigs lam ba*) who raises qualms to the defender's assertions and is not subject to reprisal for the questions he raises (according to Purdue). The responsibility of the defender is to put forth a true thesis and to defend it.

The debate starts with a ritual invocation of Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, "*Dhih ji ltar chos can*", which can be interpreted in many ways. Then, in a preparatory phase, the questioner seeks to clarify the position of the defender by asking some questions, thus establishing an agreement on the starting base of the debate. It is also a phase of dissimulation and guessing by the

two parties and it is very delicate, especially in the case of a confrontation between different schools.

The Tibetan debate aims at detecting contradictions in the answers of the defender or to lead him into absurd statements. According to Sapan's tradition the defender has three allowable answers:

- (1) I accept (*dod*)
- (2) The reason is not established (*rtags ma grub*)
- (3) There is no pervasion (*kyab pa ma byung*).

This third answer is typically Tibetan (Sapan's) and is not found in Dharmakirti's tradition. If the defender hesitates to give an answer, he will be urged to do it by "*cir, cir, cir*" (ci'i phyir), possibly also by the audience.

Excerpt pages 214-216: A debate about impermanence.

Let us take the example of a debate about the definition of impermanence, which is "that which is momentary." The debate starts by delineating the agreement between both parties. The questioner may ask for further clarification, with such questions as "What does moment mean in this definition?" "Does it refer to a brief moment or to a longer one?" The defender may answer that the moment implied by the word „momentary“ is brief.

The questioner then proceeds to draw consequences, thinking that he has enough to go on. He may start, "It follows that things last only for a short moment since they are momentary." This statement is framed to embody the defender's answer concerning the meaning of momentariness and is considered the *root consequence* (rtsa ba'i tha'i gyur), which derives from the *root thesis* (rtsa ba'i dam bca') that the defender must be made to contradict.

The questioner proceeds by drawing out unwanted consequences intended to force the defender to give the no-pervasion answer that contradicts his explanation of the meaning of momentariness. For if the meaning of momentariness is to last only for a short moment, then being momentary must entail lasting for a short moment. To deny this and hold that there is no pervasion is thus tantamount to directly contradicting the thesis. Presented with the root consequence that embodies his view of the meaning of momentariness, the defender must try to thwart the questioner's attempts by choosing the answer that he can defend and does not contradict his earlier point. In this example, he has one obvious choice: to assent to the consequence. The other possibility, the rejection of the reason as being not established, is less defensible, since it contradicts the fundamental Buddhist view that all things are momentary. And, as noted, saying that there is no pervasion would contradict his thesis concerning the meaning of momentariness. Hence, he will assent to the question, thereby agreeing with a classical interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence. The questioner's task is then to oblige the defender to back off from his acceptance of the root statement, forcing him to make the no-pervasion answer that contradicts his main thesis. To do so, the questioner will draw unwanted consequences from the defender's position, pushing him to make counterintuitive statements until he reaches the point of absurdity. For example, the questioner will point to a mountain and state: "It follows that this mountain also lasts for a short moment since it is momentary." If the defender still agrees, the questioner may point to the fact that it cannot exist just for a short moment since the mountain has been there for millions of years. He may also try to oblige his opponent to agree with blatantly counterintuitive statements. For example, he can ask: "Have you never seen any object lasting more than a moment? Have you never seen any object older than a moment? Have you never seen any person older than a moment?"

Obliging the defender to make ridiculous statements is one of the ways for the questioner to gain the upper hand, forcing a *reductio ad absurdum* that can be seen as tantamount to a defeat of the defender. But although this way of ending the debate can be quite fun, it is not favored, for it is difficult to distinguish a blatant absurdity from an apparently counterintuitive but valid point. Hence, debaters prefer to end with their opponents' self-contradiction. In our example, the defender may try to back away from the counterintuitive consequences that the questioner has drawn. He may agree that there are objects older than a moment. At this point, the questioner must take the defender back to his root statement and oblige him to contradict himself. He may state: "It follows that the mountain lasts for more than one moment, since it is older than a moment." The defender will try to resist; for example, he might attempt to make distinctions between "being older than" and "lasting for more than." The questioner must then try to block these attempts. If he succeeds, he will be able to take the defender back to his root statement, which he will restate: "It follows that things last only for a short moment since they are momentary." At that point, the defender has an unenviable choice between two answers: reason not established and no-pervasion. The former implies the rejection of the fundamental Buddhist view that things are momentary. If he chooses this answer, a whole new debate starts. The questioner may try a rhetorical jab: "I thought you were a Buddhist!" But such a move can also backfire. The defender can turn the tables on the questioner, taunting him to establish this fundamental tenet: "I know what great masters such as Dharmakirti would say. But let us see what you can do!" The questioner will then have to mount a new attack to oblige the defender to retract his rejection of this Buddhist tenet. If the

questioner succeeds, the defender will have no other choice than to give the answer that here dooms him: "There is no pervasion." This is the moment of triumph for the questioner, who will express his victory by saying: "The root thesis is finished" (rtsa ba'i dam bca' tshar) or, more briefly, "Oh, it's finished!" (o'tshar).

This is the end of this debate, with the clear victory of the questioner. This victory is due to a direct contradiction between two statements and hence is easily detectable. Such clarity of outcome may explain why there is no formal role for a witness in Tibetan debates. Unlike Indian debates, which proceeded according to formal argumentative criteria on which a witness could adjudicate, Tibetan debates proceed through consequences aimed at exposing direct contradictions in the views of the defender. Detecting such contradictions does not require any special skills and hence the presence of a witness is not necessary.

#### THE PHYSICALITY OF TIBETAN DEBATES

page 217

Emphatic gestures accompany the Tibetan debate. Clapping: Left hand put forward means closing the door to lower states of rebirth. The clap: Coming together of the aspects wisdom and method of the path. Drawing back right hand: Wish to liberate all sentient beings<sup>12</sup>.

The mode of behavior is first: Low voice, humility, respect, upper robe worn in usual way (left shoulder covered, right bare). When the respondent becomes sure, he wraps the robe around his waist and loses humility, gains self-confidence until he finally pronounces: "The root thesis is finished!" It can finally come to ridiculing the loser, humiliation - and even blows. In this context a conflict between Tibetan tradition and Buddhist values has been discussed.

Tibetan tradition knows about the danger of debate, for it may encourage a pride in self. Nevertheless it is also appreciated as a ventilation of energy, for its immense emotional involvement and for its value as spectacle and performance. Why should intellectual enquiry not be fun?

#### LEARNING DEBATE AND THE COLLECTED TOPICS

page 221

The monastery-specific Collected Topics and some paradigms of debate are memorized. The Topics are usually arranged in five parts, three for the Topics proper (with 18 chapters), then the Types of Mind (*blo rigs*) and the Types of Evidence (*rtags rigs*). From the second chapter "*they learn primarily how to debate and become comfortable with the manipulation of reasoning within the rules governing the system of debate.*"

Concerning the relation between two terms there are four possibilities ("intersections"):

Exclusion (*gal ba*): nothing is both, as moon and sun, dog and primate

equivalence (*don gcig*): as morning star and evening star, impermanence and thing

inclusion (*mu gsum* = 3 extremities): as earth and planet

intersection (*mu bzhi* = 4 extremities): as human and heterosexual being

The second chapter of the Topics contains the presentation of the "established basis" (*gzhi grub gyi rnam bzhag*). It lies down the main lines of discourse for later studies, defines existence, phenomena, etc. The basic dichotomy between permanent and impermanent phenomena is the one around which many Buddhist doctrines are organized. In such a view the real, which is understood as changing and causally efficient, is opposed to the constructed which is understood as unchanging, causally ineffective, and hence less real. The category of real things is subdivided into matter (*gzugs*, *rupa*), cognition (*shes pa*, *jnana*) and noncompositional factors that are neither mental nor material, such as time. All this reflects the traditional Abidharma categories laid down by Dharmakirti and by Tibetan interpretations. This way of analysis still is present in the study of the Vinaya: Are vows material or mental?

#### DEBATE AS AN INTELLECTUAL SPORT

page 224

This part is a personal recollection by Dreyfus, so just an example: "What is the distribution between being a particular of a thing and being a material phenomenon?"

<sup>12</sup> not every debater however knows about the symbolic of his gestures

The correct answer in the Geluk system is: "An intersection, since not all material phenomena are particulars of a thing and not all particulars of a thing are material."

## 11. Debate in the Curriculum

page 229

The Collected Topics help to explain the basic logical procedure in debate and the main philosophical notions.

TEACHING DEBATE

page 229

The great Indian texts are first encountered in The Ornament, which initiates into memorizing root texts and reading commentaries. Poor students will never go beyond The Collected Topics.

Example of a typical debate *teaching* session:

For an example, take the cognitive nature of compassion, a topic that comes up during study of the Ornament. The teacher may start by asking, "What is the definition of compassion?" Students usually answer by giving the definition contained in the manuals: "Compassion is [defined as] the mental factor that wishes in reference to all sentient beings to protect [them] from all suffering." The teacher continues by asking whether compassion is part of the path or not. If students answer that it is, as they are likely to do, he will then ask whether compassion is a knowing mental state.

Students are again likely to answer affirmatively, because "being an enhanced knowing mental state" (mkhyen pal) is the definition of the path. Hence compassion must be an enhanced knowing mental state if it is part of the path. The question is then likely to be "What does compassion know?" Here, the response is likely to be less straightforward, for the inquiry has reached an uncertain area of the tradition.

Students may try to be tricky, arguing that compassion does not know anything despite being an enhanced knowing mental state. The teacher is then likely to state ironically, "You mean that it is an enhanced form of knowing that does not know anything, right?" Or he may ask, "How can compassion be a form of knowing if it does not have any object?" When the students get stuck, the teacher goes back to the basic question and asks for other answers. Some students may try to argue that compassion knows sentient beings' freedom from suffering. But the teacher will then ask: "Is this freedom from suffering already existing or is it future?" The first answer is not defensible, since compassion is the commiseration with beings who are presently suffering. If students answer that this freedom exists only in the future, the teacher will then ask whether compassion takes as its object the future happiness of sentient beings. What about their present suffering? Such a question reveals that compassion is focused not on the future but on the present, which is taken as profoundly lacking. Thus, future freedom from suffering cannot be the object of compassion.

Another possible answer is that compassion takes as its object sentient beings' present suffering. This answer is by far the most plausible but is likely to elicit the following question: "What is the difference between understanding the suffering of sentient beings, which is the cause of compassion, and feeling compassion itself?" In order to develop compassion, one needs to realize the suffering of sentient beings, but that realization does not necessarily make one compassionate. To generate compassion one must be concerned for their suffering and feel it as intolerable. Thus, to merely understand the suffering of others is not enough: if compassion is cognitive, it must know more.

We could argue that compassion is knowledge of our connection with others. But this answer is not easily defended, for compassion also includes consideration of others' suffering. The response that compassion takes as its object both our relation with others and their suffering, though in some ways more accurate, runs into other problems. It implies that a single mental state can take two objects; but within the understanding of mind presupposed here, that is impossible if these objects are differently valued. That is, a single mental state cannot at the same time hold one object negatively (the suffering of others) while another object positively (one's relation with others). Therefore, compassion cannot simultaneously have as its object the suffering of others and one's connection to others.

This example shows how debate works within an overall conceptual system whose foundations were laid during the study of the Collected Topics. The understanding of mind that is presupposed in this debate comes from the preliminary studies, particularly of the Types of Mind; there mind is explained as a succession of phenomenologically available but fleeting mental states, each directed toward particular objects. Hence, since compassion is mental, it must be a discrete mental state oriented toward a particular object. Whatever topic is debated, students assume that states of mind are momentary and intentional. Reliance on such foundations enables knowledge to build gradually and cumulatively, as is necessary to the development of critical skills. Debate presupposes a context without which the critique cannot proceed.

At this point, the teacher may stop and urge his students to explore the question further in their debates. Teachers debate in class to demonstrate how to use the practice to inquire into the relevant topics. The debates they propose are exemplary and students are encouraged to find their own. In debating, teachers often raise questions without answering them. By not proposing their own solutions, they push their students

to debate on their own. A good teacher encourages students' efforts and piques their intellectual curiosity so that they become engaged by the search rather than being satisfied merely to repeat handed-down truths.

As one can see from this example, debate plays a central role in the Tibetan scholastic pedagogy. A significant proportion of the class is spent on debate, with the specific amount determined by individual teachers.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICAL THINKING

page 232

Students learn not to accept ideas on the basis of superficial plausibility. But one can not always be profound, so sometimes debates just serve as a help in understanding contents and memorizing, especially in Vinaya. Sometimes they also constitute broad and interesting presentations of a topic and thus become a synthesis. The styles of debate are very individual, according to the aims followed. If winning is the main aim, then a debate can focus on special tricks. Others have a true search for meaning in mind. Non-Geluks tend to limit debate to the conventional realm while Geluk also like to debate the absolute.

#### THE STUDY OF LOGIC AND EPISTEMOLOGY

page 233

How debating skills connect to the curriculum? Its central parts are logic and epistemology, which are based on DHARMAKIRTI's<sup>13</sup> *Commentary on Valid Cognition*. In Tibet these were studied in common winter sessions of the three Seats. The tradition of these Jang sessions has been revived in exile in Southern India and has a growing fame, attracting also non-Geluks.

For DHARMAKIRTI logic is only an element in a broader inquiry into the nature of knowledge. He limits valid cognition to two ways: *Perception* as the basis and *inference* based on it, but not reducible to it.

#### MADHYAMAKA PHILOSOPHY

page 238

Tibetan Buddhism considers NAGARJUNA's Treatise on the Middle Path as the apex and the Geluk uses CANDRAKIRTI's (6th century) introduction as a guide, together with DZONGKAPA's commentaries, especially the *Clarification of the Thought*. This way is called *Prasangika*.

The Nyingma follows SANTARAKSITA's Ornament of the Middle Way. This path is called *Svatantrika*.

A central point of Madhyamaka is the distinction between the two truths:

**Conventional truth** about objects we can differentiate. The domain of common practice of distinguishing objects from each other. This entails a dualistic tendency and leads to attachment and suffering.

**Ultimate (absolute) truth**

SAKYA CHOKTEN, a critic of DZONGKAPA, tried to eliminate this dichotomy between existence and nonexistence to reach emptiness. The process is to first refute existence, then refute non-existence and then arrive at emptiness, which is, finally, not graspable: *Free from any subjective and objective determination, it realizes that all phenomena are beyond determination.*

The person, this is NAGARJUNA's teaching of the Middle Way, is beyond being and non-being. Freedom from fabrication is not just the result of negation. It means that things cannot be grasped as entities, they are beyond determination. Emptiness doesn't cancel out the conventional domain, but relativizes it. One is freed from the compulsion to reify objects as having their own intrinsic reality. In discerning conventional objects, we proceed through *dichotomies* such as self and other, agent and object, pot and nonpot, and the like. In this way we divide the universe of knowledge and reify

<sup>13</sup> DHARMAKIRTI (tib. Chos-kyi grags-pa) war ein buddhistischer Philosoph und Logiker, der im 7. Jahrhundert (1595-1659) in Indien lebte. Das von ihm in sieben Traktaten verfasste System der Logik umfasst vier Abschnitte:

1. die Wahrnehmung      2. die Schlussfolgerung für sich      3. die Schlussfolgerung für andere      4. die logischen Fehler  
Bedeutsam sind seine Untersuchungen zu Schlüssen mit negierenden Prämissen. Er entwickelte eine Begriffstheorie, die alle Begriffe durch Negationen (apoha) bestimmt.



these differences. These dualities enable us to classify these objects and appropriate them, but they distort reality, which finally leads to grasping and suffering. Objects do not exist in the way we grasp them - they are empty from existing through their own essence. But as a "glamorous proclamation of the antithesis" (Derrida), emptiness would also be a reification and a locking of the mind by alternatives. The negation must be undone and it must be realized that the object does not not-exist either; the person is beyond the extremes of being and non-being. Objects are beyond determination, they are not completely nonexistent. We can say that they exist conventionally and we can relate to them "appropriately". This is Nagarjuna's Middle Way according to SAKYA CHOKDEN and many non-Geluk thinkers.

Finally, emptiness is not an object and cannot be conceptually captured in the same way as, e.g., impermanence. It cannot be said, only indirectly indicated. The conventional realm remains important for providing the resources and skills to reach the ultimate, but it must be transcended.

Nagarjuna: *"The pacification of all objections and the pacification of illusion: No Dharma was taught by the Buddha at any time, in any place, to any person."* Emptiness is ineffable but not a mystical truth.

#### DECONSTRUCTION, MADHYAMAKA, AND DEBATE

page 241

The term "deconstruction" is osé, because the postmodern meaning is a radical loss of confidence in the possibility of any closure. NIETZSCHES "God is dead!" shows there is no more faith in tradition and "Bildung". From a Buddhist view postmodernism seems nihilistic, because Madhyamaka believes in it's narratives and in the possibility of liberation from suffering. The tradition has a soteriological value, which postmodernism has not.

The Middle Way also means to be in the middle between nihilism and eternalism (reification). The concept of emptiness can be frightening because of the loss of the self, but brighter students feel exhilarated, as if freed from a heavy burden. DERRIDA and NAGARJUNA both recognize at the same time the essenceless (hence enigmatic) nature of existence and the indeterminate, provisional character of interpretation. Both are relentlessly undermining their own interpretation, but postmodernism with it's nihilism leaves us disoriented.

Debate now favors this deconstructive approach by unearthing contradictions. It is a self-undermining approach.<sup>14</sup> The undermining process of Geluk debate relentlessly pushes investigation forward, preventing the mind from indulging in its tendency to seize on a final answer. So debate teachers often refuse to give positive answers to a question. Madhyamaka is also the dangerous middle way, the Path between nihilism and eternalism which only can be successful if one fully realizes that emptiness is fully compatible with the interdependence of conventional phenomena. The insight into emptiness does not destroy morality but shows its fragility and emphasizes the need to follow the precepts of the tradition.

There is often the complaint that debate is superficial and privileges cleverness over truth and that a skillful debater can prove anything, as GORGIAS already claimed for Greek dialectics.<sup>15</sup> Too much effort is put into performing spectacular debates and in training critical thinking instead of studying texts. Therefore sometimes knowledge of texts is rather poor among Geluk monks.

#### EXAMINATIONS AND THE ORGANIZATION OF DEBATE

page 250

The debate classes are:

- 1-3: Collected Topics
- Beginning-intermediate advanced
- 4-8: The Ornament

<sup>14</sup> In Indian tradition debate was rather the search for formal fallacies.

<sup>15</sup> Socrates and Plato offered a model of dialectic which does not confound the "adversary" but moves him to a higher level of understanding

9-10:	Madhyamaka (beginning and advanced)
11-12:	Vinaya (beginning and advanced)
13	Abidharma
14	Ka-ram, review of 11-13
15	Lha-ram, review of the whole curriculum for Geshe

Although citations from texts cannot be used to prove a fact, they are nevertheless sometimes used. This especially in a special class of thoroughly hidden phenomena (*shin tu lkog gyur*) that cannot be established by experience or reasoning, but only by relying on an authoritative statement. The acceptance of quotes depends on the judgement about what debate is for: Pedagogical tool or method of inquiry. In exile the development of a student is more closely followed than in former Tibet: There are yearly exams etc with possible failures.

#### FINAL EXAMINATIONS AND THE TITLE OF GESHE

page 254

Geshe (*dge bshes*) means "scholarly spiritual friend". There are four levels of Geshe:

Do-ram, Ling-se, Tsok-ram, Lha-ram (divine scholar).

In exile the title of Geshe has generally no more the social prestige it had in Tibet.

#### LEARNING HOW TO LOSE AND HOW TO WIN

page 260

How can monks sustain the pressure of debates with, sometimes, hundreds of knowledgeable onlookers? The answer is that there is a long training, in which one learns the moves, the tricks and the difficult points. But it has also a moral dimension in that one has to learn to eliminate the fear to lose and the wish to win and also not to be trapped in one's own mental rigidity.

(The rest of the chapter contains mainly the author's personal experiences.)

### 12. Is Debate a Mode of Inquiry?

page 267

Scholasticism is rarely seen as having a critical dimension. Is debate thus merely an exercise to validate a pre-given truth or is it a genuine way of inquiry? Some regard it a pedagogical tool, others think it promotes critical thinking.<sup>16</sup>

#### DEBATE AND INQUIRY

page 267

The ludic activity called debate has to be learned and so, in the beginning, seems to limit free expression, looks like a mechanical exercise without creativity. STEPHEN BATCHELOR says "*you set out to prove what you have already decided to believe.*" (e.g. regarding Buddha, rebirth, emptiness).

According to GADAMER, however, questioning is important in the process of understanding a text or a proposition. Good questions always go beyond the text! The text itself has to be questioned, with an orientation towards openness and this becomes the art of thinking. The text, although considered a symbol of the sacred, is exposed to the hermeneutics of suspicion. GADAMER again: Questioning is a task of reconstructing the question to which the traditional text is the answer. By confronting other students in debate other ways of comprehension of the texts become apparent and critically questioned, even sometimes dismantled.

<sup>16</sup> This question seems still not to be decided among monastic scholars. And even when it is accepted as a mode of inquiry, this inquiry is limited to the analysis of the traditional texts, and not to new phenomena - as Science does. HS

Until the 12th century mediaval scholastic debates also had a vast field of freedom for inquiry<sup>17</sup>. Only when ARISTOTLE was translated from Arab into Latin, restrictions and questions forbidden in debate came up to limit the diffusion of the stagirite's ideas. In Tibetan Buddhism there are limitations of critical thinking by tradition too- especially by those who see debate as a pedagogical tool and not as a way of critical inquiry. The traditional devotion which is due to the teachers also can limit critical thinking.

#### DEBATE AS A MODE OF INQUIRY

page 274

There is a partial openness to critical inquiry, but nevertheless this freedom doesn't allow to question the totality of a traditional truth. On the other hand it is also said that truth cannot be imparted dogmatically but needs to be appropriated by each person individually. It cannot be captured immediately and certainly not with simple statements. It must be understood through a process of inquiry that involves open-endedness.

Does faith imply certainty? And if, which certainty about what? Faith might be the result of the dialectic of belief and doubt - and this dialectic can be pushed by debate. To tolerate complexity is Buddhist but certainly not Western. Many Western Buddhists seek unambiguous answers and truths. They want e.g. to have exact definitions of wisdom, The Path, Enlightenment and they may tend to be „better popes than the pope itself“.

#### MADHYAMAKA WITHIN THE GELUK TRADITION

page 281

The Geluk school has adopted DZONGKAPA and his disciples. It defined a strict orthodoxy with explicitly pronounced positions. Nevertheless diversity is possible, as this saying tells: "Each area has its guru and each guru has its own dharma."

The question of an equilibrium between a deconstructive approach and systematic thinking can lead to disagreements between scholars. CANDRAKIRTI is more on the side of deconstruction while DZONGKAPA tends towards a systematic philosophical approach in which he integrates emptiness. He also tries to bridge the gap between the two truths with his realism based on logic. Non-logic statements like the one stating that things are neither existent nor non-existent are accepted for their "therapeutical" effect in preventing to cling to objects or something. But DZONGKAPA as a realist thinks such paradoxes are confusing and should not be taken literally. He modifies and limits the paradoxes of non-logic statements by introducing "modal operators" like "ultimate", "real" and "intrinsic existence".<sup>18</sup> In this way Dzongkapa performs a sort of *domestication of Madhyamaka deconstruction*.

It also appears that that the term "emptiness" is only fully understood when one has realized emptiness<sup>19</sup>. Only then can an individual understand fully the difference between the conventionally existing object and its nonexistent reified essence. There is, however, disagreement on how to identify the "object of negation"<sup>20</sup>. Some say meditative experience and not a discussion approach is necessary to better recognize the self-grasping tendency and as a help in refuting the self. So thinkers like PABONGKA in the "Gradual Path" insist on the importance of meditation to limit he

<sup>17</sup> May be even more than in modern universities with their hidden disciplinary mechanisms like peer review, funding procedures and tenure denial. HS

<sup>18</sup> Again this human (intellectual) tendency to cover the non-graspable with words, like modern physicists with, e.g., "superstrings", or "branes" (HS)

<sup>19</sup> whatever that means...

<sup>20</sup> the identification of the object of negation seems to be a central point in debate, but I don't understand its meaning.

role of conceptual inquiry and he therefore sees only a limited role for debate: "You could use these words in debate and they would serve to silence your opponent. but you have not identified the object of refutation until you have determined it through experience. You must recognize the object of refutation through vivid, naked, personal mental experiences brought an by an analytical process."

### 13 Rationality and the Spirit Cult

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There are traditional and modern conceptions of rationality. Practices associated with folk religion suggest that Buddhist rationality is often misunderstood. Yet there is no agreement on what "rational" means. In our context here it rests on the (theoretical) metaphysical needs of the human mind to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos and take a position towards it - but necessarily in a compulsory "rational" activity. Tibetan has no word for "reason" or "rationality", the nearest being *rigs pa* which means to fit, to be appropriate.

#### A DIFFERENT RATIONALITY

Tibetan scholars are too often made to look like modern intellectuals. Logical thinking and evidence (Plato) are the prerequisites for rationality, and reliance on logic is shared within Western and Tibetan rationality. The differences between monastic and modern education have little to do with the East-West divide but much with scholastic traditions. Geluk education strongly resembles that of medieval European universities.

#### RATIONALITY AND POPULAR PRACTICES

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Tibetans before and after exile engaged in folk practices like exorcism, divination, healing, retrieving of life force, worship of mountain and lake deities, cults of house gods, etc and some of them have entered the scholastic curriculum. So they affect the ways in which Tibetan scholars see the world. According to pure Buddhism a person is a selfless combination of aggregates, driven by the forces of karma. Scholars however say that people also possess a *spirit force (bla)* that keeps them alive and is located in and around the body, e.g. in sacred places. Sometimes it has even to be retrieved by a special ritual (*bla bkug*).

So in Tibetan culture many invisible things are accepted and believed in, they are "self-evident" and especially active in dreams. The world is experienced as being alive with, sometimes, protective spirits like Brahma (*tshang pa*)<sup>21</sup>. This being alive is of an other order and it is not accessible to empirical analysis. All these gods are mundane and cannot escape cyclic existence in contrary to the tantric deities, who are enlightened and therefore beyond the limitations of the world.

There is a conflict situation: As Buddhists Tibetans they only should take refuge to the three gems and therefore there is no need to have other protective forces.

#### THE ROLE OF PROTECTIVE DEITIES

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Some protective deities are supramundane, such as Six-Armed Mahakala (*dgon po phyag drug*) and the Great Goddess (*dpal ldan lha mo*), the equivalent to Mahadevi. Their worship is not problematic, but being so far away, their protective power is weak, so people prefer often to rely on the closer and much more potent mundane protectors. These violent spirits often have taken an oath,

<sup>21</sup> For many Tibetans it was not understandable why these spirits had not intervened when the Chinese invaded their homeland.

e.g. forced by great "saints" like Padmasambhava, to protect Buddhist teaching. These deities have quasi-human emotions such as anger, jealousy, etc and can be misused. So they should not be worshipped, only propitiated. Although they are never explicitly studied by scholars, they play an important role in monastic life. Each school, monastery, house, local group or family has its own protectors, often a supramundane and mundane combination.

As example: Drepung has the Great Goddess and Pehar as protectors. Gomang relies on Lion-faced Dakini (*mkha gro seng gei gdong pan can*) and Mahakala, while Loseling has chosen several female deities. Most collective prayers also include these deities, either in public or in the smaller groups.

This "cult" of deities causes disputes like the "Shuk-den Affair" concerning the protector Gyalchen Dorje Shuk-den (*rgyal chen rdo rje shugs ldan*), which began with the publication in 1973 of the Yellow Book by Dze-may Rinpoche (*dze smad rin po che*) in which Geluk scholars were warned that Shuk-den's wrath would kill them if they studied the texts of other traditions. The strong reaction of the Dalai Lama comes from his appreciation of the Nying-ma tradition, which he considers vital for Tibetan Buddhism and for the institution of the Dalai Lama. In 1978 Gen Lobsang Gyatso published a small pamphlet against the Shuk-den movement and in 1996 he and two of his students were murdered in Dharamsala, thus fulfilling Shuk-den's threat...

#### ENBEDDED AND DISIMBEDDED RATIONALITIES

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Unlike Western scholars Tibetan intellectuals never are tempted to bluntly reject magical elements and often engage in these practices. The Shuk-den controversy would also not have been possible without a sort of acceptance of the reality of magical curses and the like. Even Tibetan lay people are surprised about this attitude which much must lead to a conflict with rationality. Modern Buddhists also feel uneasy to discuss magical practice within Buddhist tradition - what the individual does with protectors doesn't matter, they can be helpful on a personal basis. Nevertheless even the Dalai Lama relies on the propitiation of the Great Goddess. This also underlines how Tibetan scholastic rationality remains embedded in the order of the world and hence is significantly different from modern rationality. It also demonstrates the inappropriateness of describing Buddhism as "scientific".

Scholasticism intends to create a **universe of religious meaning** based on the possibility of closure, in which the believer is not separated from the world but has a definite place in the order of things. This possibility has been negated with the advent of modernity and has also led to nihilism. The possibility of closure is given by the study of the Path, a narrative of spiritual progress towards liberation through realization of emptiness. Scholastic reason can be used to critique certain aspects of tradition but not tradition as a whole. Reason and rationality remain imbedded. The great texts are the authorities and scholars reappropriate their content constantly.

In contrast, although science has its paradigms which are sometimes difficult to overthrow, it contains the readiness to cast aside previous theories in the light of new facts and shape new ones.

#### 14. The Limits of the Inquiry

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The monastic manuals of the different schools are followed in a narrow manner and outside the debating ground there is no discussion of controversies. The inquiry has some degree of freedom, but it is limited by the authority of the past.

The Geluk teaching is organized in a well-thought, systematic, progressive way. Difficult concepts like emptiness are approached gradually. The conceptual systems are based on typologies and definitions. Here two examples of such definitions: "existence= that which is observed by a valid cognition", "impermanence = that which is momentary".

The question is whether this systemization restricts the freedom of inquiry. There is indeed an opposition between this knowledge system and the proclaimed antiessentialism. It must however be said that the Greek and Western meaning of the concept of definition (which is essentialist by stating genus and differentia: "human being=rational animal") is different from the Tibetan scholastic meaning. In the Middle Ages however definitions were seen as nominal, not as real and did not have informative content. Pascal, Hobbes and later Russell also saw definitions in this way. Indian and Tibetan tradition see them as describing unambiguously characteristics, a help for identification, but not designating essence. So, finally, the Tibetan tradition appears less contradictory, but it nevertheless is still surprising how strongly the debate is based on "juggling" with definitions. This somehow excessive focus was often criticized, e.g. by *Jang-gya* in the 18th century.

"present-day logicians, not valuing the great texts highly, take refuge in mere deceptive entanglements when disputing with others. They take a garland of foam - dry consequences that do away with the essential meaning - as the best of essences. Such people see only a portion; the actual thought is beyond their ken. Therefore, for them the scriptures have become like diamond words. (that is: impossible to penetrate.)"

He saw definitions as pertaining to the conventional domain. The trend to see definitions as absolute and to view upholding and undermining definitions as the heart of dialectic has gone worse since. At the very beginning, in the Collected Topics, this fixation on definitions and their logical connections is already planted. The provisional and contextual character of the monastic manuals is often forgotten. They become a canon which seems to be more important than the original Indian texts.

#### SYSTEMATIZATION AND FREEDOM:

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There is some feeling that sticking systematically to definitions and a strict consensus about what is the right position in debate curtail the freedom of inquiry. The definitions in the manuals are viewed as authoritative statements. Understanding and defending them seems to be more important than inquiring into the meaning of the great texts. There is an enormous degree of conformity among Tibetan scholars and a limitation of the range of what can be said, especially among the Geluk scholars. Nevertheless there is, in principle, some freedom of "maneuver".

#### EXTERNAL CONSTRAINTS ON INQUIRY

##### *The case of Ge-dün Chö-pel, 1904-1950*

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He was a brilliant scholar and painter in Labrang who soon was dissatisfied with the set curriculum and looked for alternatives. He took interest in mechanical apparatus and defended the Jain view that plants are sentient beings. He left for Drepung-Gomang, where he won legendary fame as unbeatable debater, until he began to disagree openly with the Geluk tradition. The more open-minded monks agreed with him but the majority saw him as a trouble-maker and molested him. He left for India where he quit being a monk and developed interest in other topics, even erotic poetry, and mainly in politics. After the war he came back to Tibet as a leftist. Prison and alcohol brought an

early end of his life. He had finally taken the Geluk freedom of inquiry too seriously. His fate showed the constraints of this inquiry, and one can wonder why the conservative tendency persists in Tibet. Is it the mountainous character of its people? This is probably too easy an answer.

#### DEALING WITH DISSENT

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It seems that social pressure was/is the line of defense of monastic institutions. Strong minds are warned by their friends not to be too outspoken and e.g. not to disagree openly with the manuals. "Letting go of the manuals" and "kicking the bowl" are ways of saying that a monk is not respectful and thankful.<sup>22</sup> The disciplinarians would proceed first gently and indirectly, but if this didn't help would use open humiliation. This menace holds the monks in line if they are tempted to deviate from it. To a certain degree these limitations can be overcome by well-trained minds, which appeal to the freedom of inquiry. Another type of constraint comes from the involvement of monasticism in political power. This e.g. led to a control of the Geshe Lharam examinations by the Tibetan government. Holding orthodox positions also became a symbolic political value in times of political turmoil. The present Office of Religious Affairs still plays a somewhat similar role, especially for the Geluk institutions. On the other hand the six abbots still are quite powerful and can prevent governmental actions they don't like.

So, finally, it needs some courage to be a dissenter and monks are anxious not to openly express opinions that may draw attention. The role of orthodoxy is particularly strong in the Geluk tradition, where the immediacy of experience is not valued, but the truth of doctrines.<sup>23</sup> This concerns especially the view that DZONGKAPA is the sole legitimate interpreter of the Indian texts. While other thinkers are ignored, he is the official Geluk filter for NAGARJUNA's Treatise. This clearly is also a political move of the powerful with the aim to push other sects into oblivion. Non-Geluk traditions tend to analyze the differences between different interpreters of the root texts because they are sceptical of Dzongkapa, and this can also be seen as a political move of an inferior group. The freedom of debate is thus also limited by the fact that Geluk monks do not know about views differing from Dzongkapa, and it can not really become dangerous! Geluk are immune by not knowing alternatives and in the absence of other way of interpretation they end up believing what they are supposed to believe, despite the best efforts to question. This pattern may hold for scholasticism in general.

#### THE ROLE OF THE STATE IN SCHOLASTIC EDUCATION

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Freedom of inquiry is/was also constrained by the political interests involved in monasticism, especially the institution of the Dalai Lama connected with the Geluk. (Other aspects have been described in the previous paragraph).

#### ORTHODOXY, TEXTS AND DEBATE

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In the political involvement of monastic lineages, holding the orthodox position became an expression of one's loyalty and deviation would be seen as political treason and as sign of ingratitude. The stress on doctrinal correctness influences the intellectual freedom of monastic intellectuals. Having the right view is equal to valuing the tradition.

<sup>22</sup> A critical voice: "as if the monastery was feeding us just to repeat the views of its manuals like parrots."

<sup>23</sup> Voice of the 18th century: "Since there is no other Tibetan tenet system whose view, practice and meditation are as faultless as the Geden, the Geluk is superior to all the other tenet systems..."

Scholars usually distinguish sharply between treating debate and treating texts, with relative freedom of roaming in exploratory debate and correct interpretations of the texts. While there is a degree of freedom in the debating process, written texts are much better scrutinized for deviations from orthodoxy, as GENDÜN's book critical of Dzongkapa showed. Or a controversy raised by Geshe Palden Drakpa suggesting that Vinaya did not correctly predict the times for the confession service. The whole discussion became very heated, polemic and *ad personam*, so he had finally to give in and let the affair die down.

#### SECTARIAN DIFFERENCES AND THE RHETORICS OF TRADITIONS

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Geluk thinkers put little emphasis on the immediacy of experience, insisting instead on the truth of doctrines. Tugen Lobsang Chöki Nyima (1737-1802) says: "Since there is no other Tibetan tenet system whose view, practice and meditation are as faultless as the Geden, the Geluk school is superior to all the other tenet systems from these three points of view." This sectarian rhetoric, based on the belief in Tsongkapa's superiority, is astonishing as it is here professed by somebody belonging to the liberal wing of his school. The worldview of e.g. Geluk thinkers is fixed very early by the limitation to Tsongkapa's commentaries only and later-on, when they also study other interpretations, they are no more able to change. The ignorance of the views of other schools is not merely an omission but it reflects a strategy of marginalization. Being sceptical of Tsongkapa's ideas, non-Geluk schools proceed differently. They analyze different interpretations to bring out the differences, also to show why and where the reformer Tsongkapa was wrong.

So the freedom of inquiry by debate might be an illusion after all: It does not seriously threaten the dominant orthodoxy, because it acts within the tradition without real knowledge of alternatives. In the absence of alternatives, you end up believing what you are supposed to, despite your best efforts to question. This might hold for scholastic schools in general.

#### Conclusion: Past and Future Uncertainties

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There is some freedom of thought but it is limited by the scholastic tradition and also by secular authorities, which somehow work hand in hand. A striking feature of Tibetan Geluk Buddhism is how little it was affected by modernity. The old monastic culture has been recreated in exile and the new centres offer a good picture of the old ones before 1950!

#### SCHOLASTICISM AND ITS ACCOMODATION TO MODERNITY

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In 1985, when Dreyfus left the monastery, changes were under way. For example a monk sponsor, LUCA CORONA, funded the instauration of a modern curriculum, but this encountered a lot of resistance, mainly because it was feared that the monks would gain new possibilities to leave the monasteries and join the outer world.<sup>24</sup> It is only in Sera Jeh that the plan was finally realized, while e.g. Drepung Shartse was strongly opposed.

The pressure of modernization and globalization is also felt in the monasteries. Many monks view monastic studies as a sort of education and are dissatisfied by their long duration - and in 1995 even 7 more years for the written examinations were added for the Geshe Lharam. The centrality of debate is also criticized, because this doesn't help them to work as teachers, e.g. in Dharma centers. They'd like to transform the monasteries into modern universities, like the one in Sarnath.

<sup>24</sup> Question of power. The more monks you can boast of the more "power" you have. (HS)



The accelerated influx of new monks after 1990 has radically changed the exile monasteries, creating problems of infrastructure and social integration. The older generation tried to win the newcomers for their traditional view, while those have been educated in India nearly became parias. This situation doesn't help to introduce modern topics into monastic education.

SCHOLASTICISM: A PERSONAL ASSESSMENT

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Did the generous Tibetan teachers succeed in convincing Dreyfus of the validity of their tradition? This is difficult to assess in the case of a Westerner! The fact that shortly after having his geshe, he didn't continue as a Tibetan would do: Teach students in a monastery or enter into tantric studies. (To enter into a career up to becoming abbot was excluded anyway). He chose a PhD-program in a Western university, which finally led him to a broader understanding of Buddhist philosophy and he also had the occasion to study and value the other traditions - what he could not have done from within his Geluk studies.

He also acknowledges that he only had arrived at the first level of understanding: Understanding that *"arises from listening"*. He had not reached the second level and understand how the texts could *"appear as advice"*. He was often chided by his teachers for his clever but superficial understanding. *"You are good with words but you are unable to see what they mean!"* His teacher Gen La would say *"Words, only words!"* There was a limit to what words can say - and so he could not go further, and this was somehow frustrating.

Forgetting words is important at a certain level to enhance thinking. A deeper understanding of emptiness can only be reached by the gradual cultivation and internalization of the Madhyamaka mode of inquiry, through thinking and meditation. In this way, ordinary subjectivity, particularly our obsession with our own self-importance, is disrupted and we gain the ability to deal with things, ourselves included, without grasping onto them. Personal: See through the limitations of the constructions and yet remain in the orbit of tradition.

This is more important than being a hero in debate! A person having realized emptiness can be defeated in debate and is not able to answer our questions, although for him our conceptual elaborations are transparent. This person is on a much higher level, but she could not answer our questions, didn't find the words. Scholasticism is an important education, but realizing emptiness does not automatically follow.

So Dreyfus remained a Westerner throughout the whole process and the more after it, when he reentered normal Western academia.