

The Distinction between Right and Wrong
in the Conventional (*kun rdzob, samvṛti*) According
to Tsong kha pa and mKhas grub rje

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The Distinction between Right and Wrong in the Conventional (*kun rdzob, samvṛti*) According to Tsong kha pa and mKhas grub rje

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0. The *satyadvaya* or two truths as an attractive theory set forth by Indians for explaining the two aspects of the world, reality and delusion, seem to have created much discussions among Buddhists and scholars up to the present. I would like to briefly discuss in this paper one of the controversies which occurred among the early dGe lugs pas with regard to Candrakīrti's statements on *samvṛti* or the conventional.

According to the 23rd verse and its self-commentary of the 6th chapter of the *Madhyamakāvātāra*, this objective world that we perceive every moment is called *samvṛti* or the conventional, nothing of which comes to be existent independently in reality, but which appears as if it had its own *svabhāva* or self-nature to those who distinguish objects in conformance to their conventions governed by nescience of reality; the conventional is therefore not real truth but the object of a false view.

*samyagmṛṣādārśanalabdhabhāvaṃ rūpadvayaṃ bibhrati sarvabhāvāḥ ।
samyagdrśāṃ yo viśayaḥ sa tattvaṃ mṛśādrśāṃ samvṛtisatyam uktam ॥ MA VI.23 (BCAP p.174)*

Every [objective] thing has two kinds of aspect: [one] recognized by a right view and [another] by a false view. The object of those who view in a right way is reality (the ultimate truth), and [that] of those who view in a false way is the conventional truth.

Tsong kha pa (1357–1419) and his disciple mKhas grub dGe legs dpal bzang po (1385–1438) understand this statement of the *Madhyamakāvātāra* to imply the very important and critical view of Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika that there is an existence established as real (*rang gi mtshan nyid kyis grub pa*) neither in the ultimate meaning nor in the conventional, contrary to the thought of Svātantrika-Mādhyamika, who approves such an existence in the conventional. This most fundamental idea for dGe lugs pa thought advocated by Tsong kha pa¹⁾ seems to govern their succeeding discussions about *samvṛti* which I describe later.

Let us now move on to the next stage of the *Madhyamakāvātāra*, the 24th, 25th and 26th verses of the 6th chapter. Candrakīrti there states as follows:

*mihong ba rdzun pa'ang nam pa gnyis 'dod de ॥
dbang po gsal dang dbang po skyon ldan no ॥
skyon ldan dbang can rnams kyi shes pa ni ॥
dbang po legs gyur shes bltos log par 'dod ॥ MA VI.24 (MABh p.103)*

The false view is further divided into the two kinds [of cognition]: one through normally functioning sense organs and the other through damaged sense organs. Perception of those who have damaged organs is considered to be wrong in contradistinction to perception through good sense organs.

1) Cf. GR88a¹⁻³.

*vinopaghātena yad indriyāṅām /
 saṅṅām api grāhyam avaiti lokah //
 satyaṃ hi tal lokata eva[m] śeṣaṃ /
 vikalpitaṃ lokata eva mithyā // MA VI.25 (BCAP p.171)*

Whatever object that the world (or people) perceive through the six non-damaged (or non-disturbed) sense organs is true only according to the world; the rest is false only according to the world.

*mi shes gnyid kyis rab bskyod mu stegs can //
 rnams kyis bdag nyid ji bzhin brtags pa dang //
 sgyu ma smyig rgyu sogs la brtags pa gang //
 de dag 'jig rten las kyang yod min nyid // MA VI.26 (MABh p.105)*

The conceptions of selfness and the like by non-Buddhists who have been troubled by a sleep of nescience, and the conceptions [of a cow, horse and the like imagined] upon an illusion, mirage and the like, do not exist even according to the world.

These statements seem to be quite simple, concrete and clear. However, it is a fact that the expression *lokata eva* or “only according to the world” offered ground for interpretative developments to the scholars of the dGe lugs pa. In other words, one can find therein the germs of differences in views among scholars. I would like to hereby point out one remarkable difference between Tsong kha pa and mKhas grub rje in the interpretation of the meaning of *lokata eva*.

1. I should mention first Tsong kha pa's basic ideas on recognizing the two truths. His commentary on the 23rd verse of the *Madhyamakāvātāra* from the *dGongs pa rab gsal* states as follows:

*kun rdzob bden par 'jog byed brdzun pa mihong bas rnyed pa'i don ni / shes bya brdzun pa stu ba'i don 'jal ba'i tha
 snyad pa'i tshad mas rnyed pa'o // yang dag pa'i don mihong ba ste 'jal ba'i rigs shes kyis rnyed pa'i yul gang yin pa de
 ni de nyid de don dam pa'i bden pa ste / GR108b²⁻³*

Whatever objective thing is recognized by a false view which establishes the conventional truth is, namely, recognized by conventional valid cognition²⁾. Whatever object is recognized by right knowledge which sees or measures a right objective thing is very true and the ultimate truth.

Tsong kha pa hereby gives the definition that the object of the conventional is recognized by *tha snyad pa'i tshad ma* as a false view while the object of the ultimate truth is recognized by *rigs shes*. The word *yang dag pa* that he uses here means “real” or “reality” to be examined by the *rigs shes* which is identified with the knowledge of saints and the view of the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika. The *tha snyad pa'i tshad ma*, on the other hand, is a cognition that never examines the reality of its object, but just distinguishes objective things in conformance to the conventions approved by people. This is the very meaning that Tsong kha pa attributes to the expression *lokata eva* of the *Madhyamakāvātāra*. He actually comments on this point as follows:

*nyid kyis sgras ni shes pa de rnams 'khrul par 'jog pa la ni / tha snyad pa'i tshad ma nyid kyis chog gi rigs shes la mi
 ltos par ston pa'o // GR111b³*

2) Tsong kha pa himself explains the *tha snyad pa'i tshad ma* in the *Lam rim chen mo* as follows:

*gzugs sgra sogs rnam par 'jog pa'i blo (=tha snyad pa'i tshad ma) ni gnod pa med pa'i mig la sogs pa'i shes pa drug po rnams yin
 pas (LRchen379b⁴). “The cognition which distinguishes forms, sounds and the like is the six kinds of cognition
 through non-damaged or non-disturbed eyes and the like.” It includes both conceptual and non-conceptual
 cognitions.*

By means of the word “only (according to the world)”, (Candrakīrti) indicates that conventional valid cognition is enough to define these [cognitions through wrong sense organs] as delusive: it is not by means of right knowledge.

According to Tsong kha pa, consequently, only *tha snyad pa'i tshad ma* distinguishes subjects and objects cognized through sense organs according to right and wrong in the conventional. If, for instance, there is a rope on the path, I see the object through my eyes at the first moment and then recognize that it is a rope, it is long and so on. Other persons who look at it also recognize this rope in the same way. This perception in which a figure of the rope appears is the *tha snyad pa'i tshad ma*. We normally distinguish and prove objective things in the world in this way. My cognition that it is a rope is accordingly right in this case as far as we do not start examining whether the rope has its own self-nature or not, whether it exists in reality or not, and the like, which is neither conformable to our conventions nor necessary to our daily life. The other case is that when I do not wear my glasses, I see the object through my shortsighted eyes, namely, my damaged sense organs, and believe that it is a snake; this is obviously wrong according to others' perception. However, in both cases my cognition is delusive if examined by right knowledge or from the view of the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika since the figures of the rope and snake appear in my perception as if they independently existed as real (*rang gi mtshan nyid, svalakṣaṇa*) owing to my nescience.

Tsong kha pa himself illustrates this idea as follows:

'phags pa la ltos nas ni yang log gnyis su med de / ji ltar gzugs brnyan la sogs snang ba ltar gyi don du med pa bzhin du / ma rig pa dang ldan pa rnams la sngon po la sogs pa rang gi mtshan nyid khyis grub par snang ba yang / snang ba ltar gyi don du med pa'i phyir ro // GR112a⁵⁻⁶

[Anything] cannot be distinguished in regard to right and wrong according to saints since blue and the like do not exist as they appear as if they were established as real [in the perception] of those who are nescient of reality in the same way that a reflected image and the like do not exist as objective things as they appear [in perception].

The same idea can be found in the *Lam rim chung ba* in which Tsong kha pa discusses the same subject in detail as well as in the *dGongs pa rab gsal* and *Rigs pa'i rgya mtsho*.

log pa'i yul yul can drug log pa'i kun rdzob dang / ma log pa'i yul yul can drug yang dag kun rdzob tu 'jog la / de yang 'jig rten pa'am tha snyad pa'i tshad ma la ltos nas yang dag dang log pa'i kun rdzob tu 'jog gi / 'phags pa'i gzigs pa'i rjes su 'brang ba'i rigs shes la ltos nas min pas / dbu ma pa rang lugs la ma rig pa dang ldan pa la gzugs brnyan sogs dang / sngo sogs snang ba gnyis la snang yul la ltos te 'khrul ma 'khrul gnyis med pa'i phyir / yang dag dang log pa'i kun rdzob gnyis su mi byed de / LRChung196a³-196b³

One can define the six kinds of wrong subject and object as the wrong conventional and the six kinds of not-wrong subject and object as the right conventional; it is by means of the people's or conventional valid cognition, not by means of right knowledge in accord with the view of a saint. From the view of (Prāsaṅgika-)Mādhyamikas, therefore, (the conventional) cannot be distinguished according to the right conventional and wrong conventional since the two kinds of appearance such as a reflected image and blue [in the perception of] those who are nescient of reality have no difference [with regard to] whether they are delusive or not.

And the coming important philosophical point is, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, that there is an independent existence established as real neither in the ultimate meaning nor in the conventional.

bdag 'dzin lhan skyes gnyis kyis bzung ba'i don lta bu ni / gnod pa med pa'i dbang pos bzung ba zhes pa yin la / 'jig rten pa'i bsam pa rang dga' ba la bltos nas yang dag pa'am bden pa yin mod kyang tha snyad du yang med do // GR112b⁵⁻⁶

An objective thing such as cognized through the two kinds of inherent selfness-grasping is said, in other words, to be cognized through non-damaged or not-disturbed sense organs; although it is right or true according to the spontaneous thoughts of people, it does not exist even in the conventional [if examined by right knowledge].

The expression '*jig rten pa'i bsam pa rang dga' ba* means the very ordinary thoughts of people including the two kinds of inherent selfness-grasping. It cannot be identified with the *tha snyad pa'i tshad ma*³⁾. Thus Tsong kha pa sets forth the three kinds of subject and object, which seems to be very characteristic of his thought⁴⁾:

subject	object
<i>bdag 'dzin (ma rig pa)</i>	<i>bdag nyid (rang mtshan)</i>
<i>tha snyad pa'i tshad ma</i>	<i>gzugs la sogs pa (kun rdzob bden pa)</i>
<i>rigs shes</i>	<i>don dam bden pa</i>

These three knowledges should distinguish from each other.

Tsong kha pa thus repeats this idea in his main works. Nevertheless his disciple mKhas grub dGe legs dpal bzang po gives an incompatible interpretation with regard to this point. I shall try to make the difference clear and consider the reason for it.

2. To be brief, dGe legs dpal bzang po never admits that objective things in the conventional can be distinguished according to right and wrong by means of *tshad ma* or valid cognition. Let us consider the following passage of his *sKal bzang mig 'byed*, the so-called *sTong thun chen mo*:

'jig rten gyi shes sngo na yang log gnyis kyi dbye ba yod ces pa yang / 'jig rten pa'i blo lhan skyes rang dga' bas yang log gnyis kyi dbye ba byed pa'i don yin gyi / 'jig rten pa'i tha snyad pa'i tshad mas yang log gnyis su dbye ba byed pa gtan ma yin te / tshad mas grub pa'i don du khas blangs nas rang lugs la khas mi len no zhes smra ba ni rigs pa smra ba'i tshul las 'das pa go bar byed pa'i phyir dang / gzugs sogs rnam 'jig rten pa'i blo gang gi 'dzin stangs kyi sngo na yang dag par grub pa'i blo ni bden 'dzin yin pas tshad ma mi rung ba'i phyir ro // KM220b²⁻⁴

[Candrakīrti's] statement that there arises a distinction between right and wrong in the knowledge of the world or people means that one makes a distinction between right and wrong by the inherent spontaneous cognition of people, but it never (means) that one makes a distinction between right and wrong by conventional valid cognition of people, since if [we] state that we do not admit an objective thing [to be right] from our view [of the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika], while having admitted it to be established by valid cognition, it would make an explanation transgressing the manner of those who speak reason, and since a cognition of people in the way of grasping of which form and the like is established to be right cannot be valid cognition because it is an [false] reality-grasping.

dGe legs dpal bzang po thus insists that objective things in the conventional can be distinguished according to right and wrong only by means of '*jig rten pa'i blo lhan skyes rang dga' ba*, which he defines just as an false reality-grasping, not by means of *tha snyad pa'i tshad ma*. I must point out,

3) I thank Rev. Karma Gelek Yuthok for his suggestion with regard to this point on the occasion of the Fifth International Seminar on Tibetan Studies 1989 in Narita.

4) I discussed these three kinds of subject and object set forth by Tsong kha pa in my paper for the *Journal of Naritasan Institute*, Vol. 13, 1990: "Tsong kha pa no Nyūchūron chūshaku ni Okeru Nitai wo Meguru Giron, I. Sezokutai wo Meguru Giron" (Tsong kha pa's Interpretation of the two truths in the *dGongs pa rab gsal*, I. On the *saṃvṛtisatya*).

however, that he does not object to the idea that there is a *tshad ma* to examine only false things in the conventional; he calls it *kun rdzob dpyod byed kyī tshad ma* or *tha snyad dpyod byed pa'i tshad ma*⁵⁾. This being so, what makes him reject the *tha snyad pa'i tshad ma* as a means of distinguishing the conventional? I understand that what he thereby tries to reject is the idea that one defines an object in the conventional as **right** by means of any *tshad ma* because it must be existent as real in so far as it is proved to be **right** by *tshad ma*. The word *yang dag pa* or *yang dag par grub pa* consequently has the same meaning as *bden pa* or *bden par grub pa* or *rang gi mtshan nyid kyis grub pa* in the arguments of dGe legs dpal bzang po. In so far as he follows this idea, he cannot admit anything **right** in the conventional either since it is an invariable principle for the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika that there is no existence established as real in the conventional either as I mentioned in the first section of this paper. He therefore seems to be trying to revise his teacher's thought with hesitation.

'jig rten pa'i shes ngo na yang dag dang log pa gnyis su dbye ba yod do zhes gsungs kyī / 'jig rten gyi shes ngo na yang dag kun rdzob dang log pa'i kun rdzob gnyis kyī dbye ba yod do zhes dpal ldan zla bas gang du yang ma gsungs la / bdag gi bla ma yang mi bzhed cing / gtan na khas blang du mi rung ste / 'jig rten pa'i blo rang dga' ba'i ngo na ka bum sogs kun rdzob ma yin pa'i phyir dang / blo gang gi ngo la ltos nas bden par 'jog pa'i blo de'i ngo la ltos nas rdzun par 'jog pa ha cang thal ba'i phyir ro // KM221a⁴⁻⁶

Although [Candrakīrti] says that there arises a distinction between right and wrong in the knowledge of people, neither Śrī-Candrakīrti says anywhere nor my teacher (Tsong kha pa) admits that there is any distinction between the right conventional and wrong conventional in the knowledge of people, and it should never be admitted since a pillar, bottle and the like are not the conventional for the spontaneous cognition of people and since it is absurd to define [an object] as false by means of the same cognition as that by which one defines [another object] as true.

dGe legs dpal bzang po seems to hereby insist that since the conventional is always true from the view of those who are nescient of reality while always false from the view of the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika, there cannot exist any distinction. He places the criterion for using the words “true and false” or “right and wrong” on the point of whether it is established as real or not in this argument too. Any cognition, in so far as the individual (*rang mtshan, svalakṣaṇa*) appears in it, must be said to be false, although it is a valid cognition (*tshad ma*) in the world.

Can this not make us suppose that dGe legs dpal bzang po might apply the principle that nothing *rang gi nyid mtshan kyis grub pa* or established as real should be admitted in the conventional to the distinction between right and wrong in the conventional? However, I think that Tsong kha pa's arguments never object to this principle because he clearly states that *tha snyad pa'i tshad ma* does not examine reality; therefore he uses the word *yang dag pa* in the conventional with the meaning that it is just right and acceptable in the world. This was originally made quite clear by the expression *lokata eva* in Candrakīrti's verse. lCang skya rol pa'i rdo rje (1717–1786), who discusses the same subject in his *Grub mtha'*, points out that this controversy between Tsong kha pa and his successors is occasioned by a misunderstanding of the word *yang dag pa*⁷⁾. I would like to end off this paper with lCang skya's brief comment upon this misunderstanding:

5) Cf. KM 218a³, 224a⁵.

6) As to the concept '*rang gi mtshan nyid kyis grub pa*' and its relation to *tshad ma* in terms of Tsong kha pa, see YOSHIMIZU C., "*raṅ gi mtshan nyid kyis grub pa ni tsuite (I)*" (On *raṅ gi mtshan nyid kyis grub pa (I)*), *Journal of the Naritasan Institute for Buddhist Studies* 15, 1992.

7) *Grub mtha'* 47b³.

lam rim che chung gi lung yang sgra sor bzhaḡ gis chog pas dkyogs bshad mang po mi dgos so // Grub mtha' 47b³

As the teachings in [both] large and small *Lam rims* [by Tsong kha pa] are enough clear [to make themselves understand if] being left word for word as they are, many distorted explanations are unnecessary.

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