

A Luminous Transcendence of Views: The Thirty Apophatic Topics in dPal dbyangs's *Thugs kyi sgron ma*

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The constructed nostalgia of the later Great Perfection, or rDzogs chen, tradition gazes backward temporally and geographically toward eighth-century India, reminiscing an era in which the subcontinent is thought to have served as generous benefactor of Dharma gifts to the fledging Buddhist empire of Tibet. Insistence on the familiar Buddhist requirements for true transmission—authenticity and legitimacy founded in lineage and longevity—certainly inspired many of its textual “revelations” beginning in the eleventh century. Many of those nostalgic constructions of rNying ma history have been well documented by modern scholars.

It would be rash to assert, however, that despite all those imaginings, there were no historical primordia of the Great Perfection in the preceding centuries. The textual roots of the Mind Series (*sems sde*) texts are testament to these early stirrings, as are the Dunhuang manuscripts identified by Sam van Schaik as expressing a form of “Tibetan Zen.”¹ A third seed was planted via the Tibetan Mahāyoga tantra tradition, and within it, germinations of Great Perfection genealogy, observable prominently in the ninth-century works of dPal dbyangs, who in some colophons and later histories is designated gNyan dPal dbyangs. His works include six canonical verse texts retrospectively entitled *sGron ma drug*, or *Six Lamps*,² and the *rDo rje*

¹ Sam van Schaik, “The Early Days of the Great Perfection,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 27.1: 167 and 201.

² The *Six Lamps* texts are as follows: *The Lamp of the Mind* (*Thugs kyi sgron ma*), *The Lamp of the Correct View* (*lTa ba yang dag sgron ma*), *The Lamp Illuminating the Extremes* (*mTha'i mun sel sgron ma*), *The Lamp of Method and Wisdom* (*Thabs shes sgron ma*), *The Lamp of the Method of Meditation* (*bsGom thabs kyi sgron ma*), and *The Lamp of the Precious View* (*lTa ba rin chen sgron ma*). These are P5918, P5919, P5920, P5921, P5922, and P5923, respectively. There are other *Lamp* collections in both Nyingma and Bön traditions, usually comprising four or six texts. The most prominent example of these is from the Bönpo Great Perfection lineage, the *sGron*

sems dpa' zhus lan (*Vajrasattva Questions and Answers*) catechism found at Dunhuang in three manuscript copies. I have discussed these texts and their most likely Indian inspirations elsewhere. Here, I highlight a particular text within the *Six Lamps*, his *Thugs kyi sgron ma* (*Lamp of the Mind*), as intending to establish, quite early on, a standard set of topics we see well developed in systemizations of the early Great Perfection tradition a few centuries later, and perhaps even before that, in Mind Series texts such as those attributed to Mañjuśrīmitra like the *Byang chub kyi sems rdo la gser zhun* and the *Byang chub sems bsgom pa*.³

Of all dPal dbyangs's texts, the *Thugs kyi sgron ma* is the ideological, linguistic, and practical hinge to his Mayājāla corpus as a whole, linking the other five of the *Six Lamps* texts and providing convincing evidence for accepting those *Six Lamps* as a collection, as well as offering insight to the later interpretations of his catechism. The *Thugs kyi sgron ma* displays dPal dbyangs's full range of presentation. It includes, on the one hand, dPal dbyangs's direct recommendations to Mahāyoga tantra, and on the other hand, his depictions of the realization of reality as utterly unstructured, unmediated, and transcendent of any dichotomization or reification, using the apophatic language sprinkled throughout the rest of the *Six Lamps* texts. Thus, by emphasizing these two elements—the transgressive and the transcendent—within a single text, the *Thugs kyi sgron ma* may have served as a valuable field guide to early Tibetan Mahāyoga and at least to some degree as a useful strategic plan for the cultivation of something more sustainable and vibrant on Tibetan soil, the Great Perfection. As I hope to show, dPal dbyangs's very deliberate indexing of these topics appears to have been intended to standardize them as interpretive categories even while undercutting the value of reliance upon them as such, redefining Mahāyoga tantra as it found its earliest shape in Tibet.

ma drug gi gdams pa. See Christopher Hatchell's "Advice on the Six Lamps" in *Naked Seeing: The Great Perfection, the Wheel of Time, and Visionary Buddhism in Renaissance Tibet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), and Jean-Luc Achard's English translation in the *Six Lamps: Secret Dzogchen Instructions of the Bön Tradition* (Boston: Wisdom, 2017).

³ See Namkhai Norbu and Kennard Lipman's *Primordial Experience: An Introduction to rDzogs-chen Meditation* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001). Karen Liljenberg has discovered parallel passages to dPal dbyangs's *Lamp* text the *Thabs shes sgron ma* in the *rTse mo byung rgyal*, a text she has identified as belonging to the *sems sde* corpus the *Sems sde lung chen po bco brgyad*. Karen Liljenberg, "A Critical Study of the Thirteen Later Translations of the Dzogchen Mind Series" (doctoral dissertation, SOAS, 2012), 57-60. I suspect there are further discoveries to be made of such borrowings between early Tibetan Mahāyoga texts and those of the early Mind Series. See also Liljenberg's paper elsewhere in this issue.

*Addressing (and Dismissing) the Terms:
dPal byangs on the Indian Philosophical Schools*

dPal dbyangs unabashedly announces his intention to promote the Mahāyoga system throughout his corpus. This sense of mission drove his textual production, and he often asserted Mahāyoga's superiority in relative terms. dPal dbyangs devoted a substantial introduction in his *Thugs kyi sgron ma* to doxographical discussion, matching his contemporaries' concerns to sort out the great complexities and internal contradictions of the Buddhist traditions entering Tibet in the late Imperial Period. At issue for many Tibetans were the Indian epistemological and ontological issues promoted by such scholars as Nāgārjuna, Bhāvaviveka, Asaṅga, and Vasubandhu. In both the *Thugs kyi sgron ma* and his *rDo rje sems dpa'i zhus lan*, dPal dbyangs treats these forms of mainstream Indian Buddhist philosophy, and in summarizing the central debates between them, mentions a handful of schools and analytical techniques by name. Though brief, his discussions portray a familiarity with the terms of the arguments, and assume a similar knowledge on the part of his audience.

The *Thugs kyi sgron ma* mentions three major Indian philosophical schools—the Sautrāntika, the Yogācāra, and the Mādhyamika. Within the text's general organizational schema, one would expect to find in the place held by these three schools in this section of the text a description of the three vehicles of śrāvaka, pratyekabuddha, and bodhisattva. dPal dbyangs's displacement of those vehicles with the three Indian philosophical schools may indicate that he ranked this list of schools in ascending order of correctness, but it is more likely that this was the standard order of ranking. There is precedent for this within the later rNying ma tradition, in which the three philosophical schools are associated with the vehicles of śrāvaka, pratyekabuddha, and bodhisattva.⁴ Earlier in the text, in the only explicit mention he makes of these three middle vehicles, his descriptions are so brief (a single line for each), that it is not possible to claim with certainty that dPal dbyangs intended a direct correlation between the three vehicles and the three schools, nor does he make clear which vehicle(s) might espouse which view(s). However, regardless of our inability to assign intent in this case, his replacement of a discussion

⁴ The Sautrāntika school is normally associated in the later rNying ma tradition with the *śrāvakayāna* and *pratyekabuddhayāna*. The Yogācāra and the Mādhyamika are associated with the *bodhisattvayāna*. bDud 'joms Rinpoche 'Jigs bral ye shes rdo rje, Matthew Kapstein, and Gyurme Dorje, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History* (Somerville: Wisdom, 2012), 156-160.

of vehicles with a discussion of philosophical schools does indeed fit with his treatment of all aspects of religious tradition under the rubric of views. Many scholars have observed a closer affiliation of rNying ma thought with the Yogācāra than with the Mādhyamika. As the work of David Germano, William Waldon, and Sam van Schaik has shown, however, despite the relative strength of its influence on rNying ma schools generally, Yogācāra philosophy has a “complex history” within rDzogs chen systems, and that history cannot be mapped as a unidirectional trajectory of development.⁵

While the central texts of all three of these schools were most likely part of the early Tibetan monastic curriculum, the primary affiliations during the early Imperial era for scholars in Tibet were with two hybrid schools that formed as subdivisions of the Mādhyamika: the Yogācāra-Mādhyamika and the Sautrāntika-Mādhyamika.⁶ The tenets of both of these subschools of Mādhyamika appear to have been established there by the mid-eighth century. Of these, the Yogācāra-Mādhyamika teachings were propounded by the famed Indian scholars Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla at bSam yas, thus becoming the normative philosophical system taught there from the monastery's establishment to the eleventh century. The primary sources of information about the Yogācāra-Mādhyamika of this period are Śāntarakṣita's *Madhyamakalaṅkāra* and his disciple Kamalaśīla's commentary, the *Madhyamakalaṅkāra-kārikā*. The basic arguments of both Mādhyamika schools were subsequently summarized in Zhang Ye shes sde's early ninth-century Tibetan doxography, the *lTa ba'i khyad par*. According to the *lTa ba'i khyad par*, the Yogācāra-Mādhyamika asserts that conventionally, consciousness knows objects, but that this is only because the objects themselves are of the

⁵ Sam van Schaik, “Adaptations and Transformations of India Yogācāra in Tibetan rDzogs chen,” *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no 43, Jan 2018, 9-31. See also his *Approaching the Great Perfection: Simultaneous and Gradual Methods of rDzogs chen Practice in the Klong chen snying thig* (Boston: Wisdom, 2004). A more comprehensive study can be found in David Germano and William Waldon's “A Comparison of Ālaya-Vijñāna in Yogācāra and rDzogs chen,” in *Buddhist Thought and Applied Psychological Research: Transcending the Boundaries*, eds. Nauriyal, Drummond, and Lal (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁶ These two early subforms of Mādhyamika thought in Tibet are described by Zhang Ye shes sde in his eighth-century *lTa ba'i khyad par*, PT 814, 5a-9b. The former is also mentioned in Nyi ma'i 'od's *lTa ba'i rim pa*, ITJ 607, 6v4. The founding of Sautrāntika-Mādhyamika is attributed to Bhāvaviveka. Though the first of these terms does not appear in any known Indic literature, Vimalamitra mentions “the two forms of Mādhyamika in his *Rim gsum*, P. 4742567b7, saying “dbu ma rnam gnyis yin te....” See David Seyfart Ruegg's *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India* (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 1981), 59, and Kennard Lipman's “A Study of Śāntarakṣita's *Madhyamakalaṅkāra*” (University of Saskatchewan, 1979).

intrinsic nature of that consciousness. External objects are like those seen in a dream—nonexistent as such. In adopting this stance, Ye shes sde disagrees with the Sautrāntika-Mādhyamika school, which asserts conversely that objects do indeed exist conventionally. On the level of ultimate truth, the two schools adhere to the basic Mādhyamika premise that mind is free of both singularity and multiplicity of essences, and therefore, its existence is not established at all. Thus, it is primarily their divergent stances on the issue of the conventional level of truth that differentiates the two sub-schools.

We can go some distance in understanding dPal dbyangs's position on these subschools of the Mādhyamika by looking into his *Zhus lan*. In the answers he offers there to three of the questions posed by an unnamed interlocutor—Questions 24, 25, and 28—dPal dbyangs addresses the fundamental tenets of the two hybrid philosophical schools. In his answer to Question 24, dPal dbyangs begins by addressing the relevance to tantra of the essential distinction between the two schools. He is asked, “For the mantric practitioner, how is it best to view [the distinction between] the two—Yogā[carā]-Mādhyamika and Sautrāntika-Mādhyamika?” Without explicitly identifying with the former, dPal dbyangs seems to align himself with its tenets in the answer that follows.

All the meditative stabilizations which fail to view those marks [of a buddha] as merely aspects of consciousness will lack a connection to the mind, and therefore will fail to accomplish the One.”⁷

In the answer to the question that follows, Question 25, dPal dbyangs explores the debate further. “If one does not view those marks conventionally as merely mind, and yet is aware of there being no phenomena whatsoever, is it not still possible to achieve transformation through meditative stabilization?” In other words, if we read “there being no phenomena” as “there being no phenomena in the ultimate sense,” might the Sautrāntika-Mādhyamika interpretation bring about buddhahood? His answer clearly refutes such a possibility.

[If there were] an unrelated meditative stabilization on an existent other [than mind], the mind could not be transformed in [meditating on] that other object. In the case [of a meditative stabilization]

⁷ *gsang sngags spyod pa rnams kyi tshul gyis ni/mtshan ma'i ting 'dzin thabs la dbang sgyur bas/ rnam rig tsam du ma bltas ting 'dzin kun/ sems dang 'brel ba myed pas gcig myi 'grub/*. The reference to “accomplishing one” is unclear. It may refer to accomplishing one or the other of these schools' aims, but I think more likely it refers to accomplishing the single Dharmakāya.

upon there being no [ultimately existent phenomena] whatsoever, it would thus be impossible for a mind to cause [anything] to appear.⁸

In such passages as these, we find dPal dbyangs actively thinking about tantric practice in relationship to specific ontological and epistemic positions. However, in a final question in the *Zhus lan*, addressing the issues of conventionally existent external objects, dPal dbyangs warns that simple adherence to the philosophical position that external phenomena do not exist (as in Yogācāra-Mādhyamika) is not sufficient. The interlocutor asks, "If one engages in calm abiding without conceptualizing external objects, but still possessing a view which clings to self, will there be no liberation?" to which dPal dbyangs answers,

Having completely abandoned attachment to the self, there is no clinging to [external] phenomena anywhere. As long as there is a deceiver clinging to self, although one attains an abiding calm as a mountain, there will be no liberation.⁹

This brings us to dPal dbyangs's final conclusion regarding all the main scholastic interpretations of reality available to him. To whatever degree dPal dbyangs's views align with Yogācāra or Yogācāra-Mādhyamika sets of epistemological assertions, his project is not to conform to any particular tenet system, but rather to cut through the reification of concepts entirely, which latter activity he sees as characteristic of all philosophical disputation. His meditative experiments in seeking to integrate Indian Buddhist speculative thought with his own views serve in the end to subvert the importance of articulating any particular stance at all. Instead, dPal dbyangs employs a different vocabulary, unencumbered with logical negotiations using Indian Buddhist terminology and conceptual frameworks. In this, he declines to embrace even the Mādhyamika foundations or methodologies of the Yogācāra-Mādhyamika position.

This is made quite clear in his *Thugs kyi sgron ma*.

[The Mādhyamika] dismiss the particulars of extreme [positions]. In so doing, topics such as meditation, great nirvana, the existence and nonexistence of appearances, accomplishment and non-accomplishment by means of reasoning, and so forth are debated, and the extremes are examined. [Yet,] from such verbal conventions,

⁸ 'brel myed ting 'dzin gzhan na sgom//gzhan kyi yul la 'gyur ba myed//ci yang myed pa nyid la yang//sems kyi de phyir snang myi nus/.

⁹ bdag tu 'dzin pa yongs su spangs nas ni//chos su 'dzin par byed pa gang yang myed//ngar 'dzin sgyu mkhan yod kyi bar du ni//ri 'dra'i zhi gnas thob kyang grol myi 'gyur/.

they thereby establish [those very extremes], [creating] a subject-object dualism.¹⁰

Though its aim may be worthy, dPal dbyangs asserts that even Mādhyamika positions create the sort of conceptual dichotomization they attempt to avoid by arguing via verbal conventions. It is clear that dPal dbyangs finds fault not merely with verbal convention, but with the deeper project of attempting to eradicate extreme attitudes through reasoning itself, a sort of unskillful word game.

Thus finding all philosophical schools lacking, dPal dbyangs turns his critique briefly to what he calls the outer tantras, Kṛīya, Yoga, and Ubhayā. Despite the latter's attempts at transcending dichotomization through claiming to take the fruit as the path and to see cause and effect as indivisible, they perpetuate it through asserting "hollow" views, similarly to the Indian schools, and coupling these with "hollow," externally oriented practices. This outer tantric grasping at 'pure' vows and speech is like "rinsing a sword made of water." In conclusion to the whole first half of the *Thugs kyi sgron ma*, dPal dbyangs pronounces that "Although all [are established] as free [from extremes], by means of extremes, there remains an extreme. Therefore, they never reach certainty."¹¹

Such certainty, according to dPal dbyangs, can only be found in his Mayājāla system, that of the Mahāyoga. In the presentation of tantric thought which makes up the rest of the *Thugs kyi sgron ma*, he avoids the terminology of the preceding descriptions and turns instead to the apophatic and transcendent language characteristic of the rest of the *Six Lamps* collection. The distinction he makes in the two sections of that text serves as an abdication of exclusive affiliation with any of the Indian philosophical schools or other forms of tantra, and suggests that dPal dbyangs promoted the Mahāyoga for its ability to transcend discursiveness itself, and to bring about epistemic and ontological realizations that could be neither contained nor expressed via any of those earlier frameworks.

¹⁰ *mtha' yi bye brag sel byed cing/ de 'dra bsam gtan 'das chen cing/ snang ba yod dang med pa dang/ rigs pas 'grub dang ma grub sogs/ de dag la rtsod mtha' tshol ba/ snyed nas des 'jog bzung 'dzin can/.*

¹¹ *kun kyang mtha' yis bral ba' ang mtha' / yin phyir nges pa' i blo mi bzhag/.*

dPal dbyangs's Thirty Apophatic Topics

Kriya and Yoga tantra praxis rests on what dPal byangs identifies as the dynamic of sound. The mantras with their cosmos-constructing reverberations, the illuminative mantric syllables enthroned on lotuses and moons as literary bodies of awakening, and the role of Speech as one of the three manifestations of Buddhahood exemplify the easily recognizable centrality of sound in classical tantra systems. dPal dbyangs's fundamental criticism in the *Thugs kyi sgron ma* is not only of lower forms of tantra, however, but of all Buddhist and non-Buddhist tenet systems so asserted. Turning to the mistaken utterance in all doctrinal pronouncements, he declares:

By means of the dynamic of a single sound, one has a particular realization. In the first sound lies the very totality of all phenomena and abodes. Yet, having been named, what is real is reversed, and consequently, takes on a completely fallacious meaning. ...The terms used to indicate views, knowledge, primordial wisdom, and so forth, are distinct from the meaning of each individual phenomenon. They are to be illuminated as utterly unmixed.¹²

With this, dPal dbyangs launches his teachings on the views of Mahāyoga tantra, or the Great Vehicle of Method (*thabs kyi theg pa chen po*),¹³ which makes up the core content of the text. His striking shift in terminology from the preceding third of the text sets the stage for the remainder of the *Thugs kyi sgron ma*, most commonly describing Mahāyoga realization in thoroughly negating terms. In keeping with extant versions of the text, I preserve its verse format here to highlight what David Germano might call its poetic "rhetoric of absence."¹⁴

The **unoriginated Thusness**
Is **empty** and **without appearance**,
Nondual and **equal**,
Nothing at all, ineffable and **inconceivable**,
Unabiding, unobservable, without thought, and

¹² *sgra gcig don gyis khyad par rtogs/ dang po chos kun gnas bubs nyid/ dang por mtshan cing dngos bzlog dang/ gnyis par yang dag bden bral don/ [...] lta ba rig pa ye shes sog/ mtshon pa'i sgra grags chos rnam kyil/ rang rang don rnam tha dad pa/ khyad par ma 'dres gsal bya'i phyir/.*

¹³ Here, dPal dbyangs appears to be citing Buddhaguhya's *Mārgavyūha*, as I have shown elsewhere. See Kammie Takahashi, "Contribution, Attribution, and Selective Lineal Amnesia" in *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* no. 32, Avril 2015, pp. 5-23.

¹⁴ David Germano, "Architecture and Absence in the Secret History of rDzogs Chen," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 17.2 (Winter 1994): 203-335.

**Beyond extremes, utterly pure, and
 Without characteristics or aspirations.**
 In the dharmatā, the dharmadhātu itself,
 There are **no elaborations, no comings or goings,**
No obstructing appearances, nor any attainment.
 There is **no freedom, liberation, or accomplishment,**
No conventional or ultimate truths,
No nonattachment or intrinsic nature,
No immateriality, desirelessness, or logic,
No selflessness, otherlessness, nor any sphere of activity whatso-
 ever.¹⁵

The passage resembles others in dPal dbyangs's corpus in which negative descriptors clear a conceptual space, but its length and symmetry set it apart. In structure and method very similar to the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, which is ordered around rejections of the fundamental Buddhist doctrine of the six *pāramitā*, and to the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya Sūtra*, which is ordered around rejections of several other essential doctrines such as the five aggregates, the six senses, and so forth, dPal dbyangs's *Thugs kyi sgron ma* and indeed these verses themselves establish the thirty topics as sites of inquiry while denying them any ultimate validity as real. While some, such as abiding and observation, are almost universally denied in some way throughout Mahāyāna literature, others such as desirelessness and nonattachment are more radical states or values to deny. It would not be surprising, especially given the early Tibetan Buddhist authorial practice of seamlessly incorporating other material into one's own text, to find this rhythmic, lyrical passage also preserved elsewhere. In any case, whatever its source, dPal dbyangs undoubtedly sought to highlight its contents. This is not a 'bru 'grel word-by-word commentary, however. The remaining two-thirds of the *Thugs kyi sgron ma*—its ideological center—is structured on those thirty foundations as topics, addressing each (bolded in the above passage) one by one in some detail and from a variety of angles, constituting the embedded verses as a table of contents for the Mahāyoga core of the *Thugs kyi sgron ma*.

¹⁵ *mtshon phyir ma skyes de bzhin nyid/ stong pa nyid dang snang ba med/ gnyis su med dang mnyam pa nyid/ chi'ang min dang smra bsams 'das/ mi gnas mi dmigs mi rtog dang/ mtha' bral rnam par dag pa dang/ mtshan med smon pa med pa dang/ chos nyid chos kyi dbyings nyid dang/ spros bral 'gro 'ong med pa dang/ suang dang 'gag med thob pa med/ grol dang thar dang thob pa dang/ kun rdzob don dam bden pa dang/ ma chags pa dang rang bzhin dang/ dngos med zhen med rigs pa dang/ bdag med gzhan med spyod yul med/.*

In thirty discrete sections ordered according to the verse, dPal dbyangs redresses the ranked, mistaken perspectives outlined in his doxography, ranging from the non-Buddhist nihilists and eternalists, to proponents of Yogācāra and Mādhyamika, the śrāvaka of the three lower vehicles, and the lower tantras of Kriyā and Yoga.¹⁶ As he draws out those perspectives on each topic, dPal dbyangs reveals their mistaken attempts to reject, deny, abandon, and overcome negative emotions, mistaken thoughts, and so forth. For dPal dbyangs, their fault lies primarily with their reliance on discursive methods involving the very conceptual and reifying polarizations they seek thereby to eradicate.

According to this presentation, those lesser approaches begin with a worthy teaching or idea, such as the unoriginated, but proceed to one extreme or another in conceptualizing that idea or putting it into practice, almost always serving to reify an absence. dPal dbyangs performs the syntactical feat of undercutting those verbal acts of negating, denying, and so forth through reasoned conceptualization without himself becoming mired in such activities, exposing their methods as mistaken due to their clinging either to the rejected element's absence or to the very act of rejecting. In his enactment of the Mahāyoga position which concludes his treatment of each topic, dPal dbyangs provides a glimpse of complete freedom from the attempt at elimination, from the reification of elimination, and even from attempts at the elimination of reification of elimination. It is a thorough departure from both sūtric Buddhist theory regarding the severing of the afflictions and from lower tantric assumptions regarding purificatory rites intending deeper purified states.

For example, on the concept 'Beyond Extremes' from the sixth line of the verse, he opens with a list of lesser categorizations of the topic's meaning.

As for what are renowned as [methods of] overcoming the "extremes," these are: formlessness free of the two wrong extremes [of eternalism and nihilism]; freedom from partial knowledge of origination and cessation [of suffering]; intrinsic awareness that is freedom from the eight, four, and two extremes; and obtaining the good quality of being free from extremes while simultaneously conceptualizing the extremes as defects.¹⁷

¹⁶ Curiously, he does not address pratyekabuddha or bodhisattva vehicles, or Ubhayā-tantra, in this section.

¹⁷ *mtha' zhes thub par grags pa rnam/ log pa'i mtha' gnyis bral gzugs med/ skye 'gag cha shes bral ba dang/ rang rig mtha' brgyad bzhi gnyis bral/ mtha' la skyon du rtoq byed cing/ mtha' bral yon tan len byed pa/*. The eight extremes are identified in later rNying-ma tradition as creation, cessation, nihilism, eternalism, coming, going, diver-

He undermines those perspectives, now revealed as mistaken, with a passage on the importance of eliminating any sense of extremes altogether.

These are methods of overcoming [the extremes] while depending [upon an existence of the extremes themselves]. Therefore, even a 'freedom' from extremes is the chief of all extremes. Having made the conventional into an object of knowledge, they are mistaken.¹⁸

Finally, dPal dbyangs reveals the Mahāyoga transcendence of all dichotomies, including parsing things into extremes.

Although absolute freedom from the extremes should be understood, those known as the eight extremes and so forth are [mere] appearances to intrinsically aware primordial wisdom. Therefore, elaborations at the very moment of compassion are merely nominal at that time, because they don't exist. Nonduality is free of extremes. The same camphor which is called 'medicine' is nondual with 'cool poison'. Thus, once one is liberated, those [descriptors] become mere utterances. Although it is indistinguishable from arriving at an extreme, there is no contact with anything whatsoever. Therefore, it is explained as the highest form of freedom from extremes.¹⁹

Thus, dPal dbyangs shows how lesser systems attempt to distance their approach from extremes of view while inadvertently reconstituting them. Without falling into the trap of explicitly asserting the existence of extremes, he evokes a freedom that neither reifies nor eliminates, but is spontaneously free by means of a realization of the absence of any extremes such as 'medicine' and 'poison'.

sity, and identity. See bDud 'joms Rinpoche's *The rNying Ma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, vol. 2, 158. The four extremes are those addressed within Nāgārjuna's tetralemma: being, nonbeing, both being and non-being, and neither being nor non-being.

¹⁸ *yang dag mtha' bral shes bya ba'ang/ mtha' brgyad la sogs grags pa rnams/ rang rig ye shes suang pa'i phyir/ spros pa thugs rje'i dus nyid na/ ming tsam der red med pa'i phyir/ mtha' dang bral ba gnyis su med/ sman zhes bya ba'i ga bur dus/ grang ba'i dug dang gnyis med ltar/ bral rjes brjod pa de kho na/ thug ba'i mtha' dang dbyer med la/ gang du'ang thug pa med pa'i phyir/ mtha' bral bla mar bshad pa yin/.*

¹⁹ *yang dag mtha' bral shes bya ba'ang/ mtha' brgyad la sogs grags pa rnams/ rang rig ye shes suang pa'i phyir/ spros pa thugs rje'i dus nyid na/ ming tsam der red med pa'i phyir/ mtha' dang bral ba gnyis su med/ sman zhes bya ba'i ga bur dus/ grang ba'i dug dang gnyis med ltar/ bral rjes brjod pa de kho na/ thug ba'i mtha' dang dbyer med la/ gang du'ang thug pa med pa'i phyir/ mtha' bral bla mar bshad pa yin/.*

This *via negativa* methodology is mirrored throughout the *Six Lamps* collection. In the *Thabs shes sgron ma*, dPal dbyangs explains that there can be no aim to one's practice of Mahāyoga:

If one knows the single authentic method by which sentient beings are awakened, and that one's own mind itself is awakened, then there is nothing else to achieve. Therefore, neither is there anything to abandon.²⁰

If one's mind is already awakened, this renders nonexistence an impossibility. In the *lTa ba rin chen sgron ma*, dPal dbyangs employs the common simile of a dream to examine this illusory nature of reality. The dreamlike qualities of appearances cannot be reified if one realizes the natural state of all things to be unoriginated.

As for the mirage of nonexistence within appearance itself, there arises no awareness of nonexistence for those who know it [to be a mirage]. The wise who realize the unoriginated, intrinsic nature of phenomena do not reify it as unoriginated emptiness. If the intelligent who possess awareness, unoriginated, primordially pacified, nondual, unelaborated self-awareness, do not abide even in the sphere of the ineffable, how could they perceive [a dichotomy of] real and conventional?²¹

Finally, in *lTa ba yang dag sgron ma*, dPal dbyangs goes so far as to declare the Mahāyoga free even of the elimination of the reification of elimination, again relying on dream imagery to make his point.

Just as the blisses and sufferings of one's dreams are equal in their intrinsic nature once one has awoken, so both conceptual and non-conceptual consciousnesses are completely equal once one has insightful awareness. Similarly, once one knows that throughout the three times, the utterly pure does not transcend one's own intrinsic nature, and once one no longer pursues the elimination of reification, the natural sphere emerges, and thus, there will be no need of fabrication.²²

²⁰ *sems can sang rgyas bden par tshul gcig cing/ rang gi sems nyid sangs rgyas yin shes nal/ gzhan nas bsgrub par bya ba ci yang med/ de lta bas na spang bar bya ba'ang med/.*

²¹ *snang ba nyid na med pa'i smig rgyu la/ shes ldan rnam ni med pa'i blo mi 'byung/ chos rnam rang bzhin ma skyes rtogs pa yi/ mkhas pas skye med stong par sgro mi 'dogs/ ji bzhin ma skyes gdod nas zhi ba yi/ gnyis med spros bral rang rig blo ldan pa/ brjod med ngang tsam du yang mi gnas nal/ dngos dang tha snyad 'dzin par ga la 'gyur/.*

²² *rmi lam dag gi bde dang sdug bsngal dag/ sad par gyur na rang bzhin mnyam pa ltar/ rnam par rtog dang mi rtog gnyis ka yang/ shes pas rig na rang bzhin yongs kyis mnyam/ de ltar dus gsum rnam par dag pa dag/ rang bzhin nyid las ma 'das shes na ni/ sgro 'dogs bus pa'i rjes su ma 'brangs nas/ rang bzhin ngang du yong gis bcos mi dgos /.*

Luminosity within the Absence

dPal dbyangs often turns to negatively-phrased expressions in his discussions of the expanse and primordial awareness to describe their sheer lack of aspects or characteristics; there is no contact with anything whatsoever. In fact, as we have seen, the few statements he makes in more positive directions regarding the nature of reality are limited almost entirely to either descriptors which are appositive with emptiness (such as the 'natural sphere') or to metaphor. Sprinkled throughout the *Six Lamps* are comparisons of empty spontaneous presence with the reflective qualities of a jewel, appearance and nonappearance as like ocean water and waves, attachment and non-attachment as like a swamp and a lotus, complete emancipation without any crossing over to another side like a great fish gliding through the water, and so forth.

Despite the preponderance of *via negativa* rhetoric in the *Thugs kyi sgron ma* and of his rejection of the usefulness of intentional activity toward attaining enlightenment in all his texts, however, dPal dbyangs does describe a luminous and primordial awareness. According to the *Thugs kyi sgron ma*, all discriminating consciousness is self (*bdag*), which is also intrinsic awareness. Emptiness is the intrinsically aware expanse of reality, the source of all, the ocean mind of the buddhas. Elaborations are mind itself spontaneously arising. These statements might be understood as poetic ontologies, along the lines of Anne Carolyn Klein's descriptions of Tibetans' unique "willingness to see words and referents coalescing."²³ dPal dbyangs asserts that these are illusory phenomena existing right in the dynamic foundation of the expanse itself. However, given that the foundation is itself emptiness, it is as if there are no phenomena to exist. Having undercut the validity of rejection, he here refuses to establish appearances. Rather, all which might be taken up as objects of knowledge are already aware and luminous, in, and as, the expanse of reality. The divisions between ontology and epistemology here fade away at the limits of the ineffable.

The Practical Terms of Awakening

Within this illuminating vision involving neither subject nor object as such, it would be nearly impossible to propose any particular method

²³ Anne Carolyn Klein, *Unbounded Wholeness: Dzogchen, Bön, and the Logic of the Non-conceptual* (Oxford: Oxford, 2006), vii, fn. 5.

of generating or attaining such a view. However, dPal dbyangs occasionally does mention, and even recommend, practice, albeit in quite circumscribed ways. He explains that the focus of meditation (*bsgom*) in Mahāyoga is mind, or alternatively, the expanse of dharma itself (*chos kyi dbyings nyid*), these two being equivalent. He further states that it is the intent of the buddhas to meditate in accordance with the nonabiding nature of mind. dPal dbyangs suggests that, having seen all phenomena as an unimpeded flow of illusion and as all of one flavor in the vast expanse of reality, one should meditatively cultivate even the five impurities which are characteristic of our degenerate Dharma age as blissful heavenly abodes. The impression all these positive descriptions of meditation give is that the practice dPal dbyangs taught, if any, was to see with a new perspective rather than to take up a particular posture, purification, or technique. View is paramount.

Though one would expect these ninth-century texts to reflect the considerable diversity of meditative technology at hand, dPal dbyangs uses only two technical terms—meditative stabilization (*ting nge 'dzin*) and calm abiding (*zhi gnas*)—in those few positive statements regarding Mahāyoga meditation that we do find in the *Six Lamps*, and the latter term only once. In a sūtric Buddhist context, meditative stabilization is said to be perfected when the mind contemplates or abides in a particular conceptual or nonconceptual object or mental state without wavering from it. In the more specific context of Mahāyoga tantra meditative practice, a set of three meditative stabilizations, or *ting nge 'dzin gsum*, later comes to refer to a series of ordered meditative cultivations of maṇḍala and deities, and specifically, of oneself as the deity at the maṇḍala's center. This set of three meditative stabilizations form the foundation of that later Mahāyoga practice, constituting the generation stage (*bskyed rim*) of cultivating oneself as the deity.

dPal dbyangs's usage of the term *ting nge 'dzin* in the *Six Lamps* does seem to allow for the possibility that he was referring to particular aspects or stages of this latter tantric set of three practices. However, his comments are very general and lack any reference to the set of three as a whole, or to a specific stage in the context of a structured progression of meditations. Neither does he employ in the *Six Lamps* any of the standard terms for these stages which would make such identification clearer, though one such reference, to the 'meditative stabilization of Suchness', does exist in the *Zhus lan*. For example, in the *Thabs shes sgron ma*, he seems to be describing something resembling the second of the three meditative stabilizations, which is associated with the skillful employment of compassion.

When one is aware of such a method of Dharma, universal compassion toward all those who are unaware is generated. Having generated such compassion, one practices meditative stabilization on the illusory nature [of appearances]. Thereby, one teaches all manner of skillful practices to benefit [others]. What is the intention of the buddhas? It is to meditate in accordance with the nonabiding intrinsic nature of mind. What is [their] boundless compassionate endeavor? It is to emanate in accordance with the meditative stabilization of yogic skillful means.²⁴

Although dPal dbyangs's description here suggests the second Mahāyoga samādhi, in which there is generation of oneself as a deity or of the meditative emanation of a buddha, his descriptions lack both the later standardized terminology used to refer to these three samādhi, and any reference to particular, ordered stages of meditation.

In *lTa ba rin chen sgron ma*, which is the most specifically tantric among the texts of the *Six Lamps*, dPal dbyangs refers to the normative division of yogic practice into their two respective types of resulting accumulations: accumulations of primordial wisdom (*ye shes*) and accumulations of merit (*bsod nams*):

Having purified the mind of misconceptions with supreme insight, [one attains] the great accumulation of primordial wisdom, the Dharmakāya of the Conqueror. Having mastered meditative stabilization of the minor and major marks, [one attains] the great accumulation of merit, the Rūpakāya of the Conqueror.²⁵

This dyad of primordial wisdom and merit is associated in other tantric contexts with the most basic division of all the various types of meditations into those which are nonsymbolic (*mtshan med*), including formless meditations on emptiness, and those which are symbolic (*mtshan bcas*), including the set of three generation-stage meditative stabilizations described above. dPal dbyangs does use the term 'symbolic' (*mtshan gyi*) to describe the yogic accumulation of merit involving meditative cultivation of the marks of a buddha (constituting normative generation-stage practice) and resulting in attainment of

²⁴ 'di lta bu yi chos kyi tshul rig na/ ma rig rnams la snying rje yongs kyis skye/ snying rje skyes nas sgyu ma'i ting 'dzin gyis/ phan 'dogs thabs kyi spyod pa cir yang ston/ sangs rgyas rnams kyi dgongs pa ji lta ba/ sems kyi rang bzhin gnas med de ltar bsgom/ thugs rje'i 'bad pa rab 'byams ji lta ba/ rnal 'byor thabs kyi ting 'dzin de ltar sprul/.

²⁵ shes rab mchog gis log rtog sems sbyangs nas/ ye shes tshogs chen rgyal ba chos kyi sku/ dpe byad mtshan gyi ting 'dzin dbang thob nas/ bsod nams tshogs chen rgyal ba gzugs kyi sku/.

the Rūpakāya. In so doing, he may allude to the standard bifurcation of Mahāyoga practice into symbolic and nonsymbolic that we find, for example, in Vimalamitra's roughly coeval commentary to the *Guhyagarbha*, the *Rim gsum*.²⁶ This accords further with a similar passage in the *Zhus lan* in which dPal dbyangs remarks that the superior path of awakening includes two types of meditation.

Calm abiding (*zhi gnas*) based on nonmistaken realization and meditative stabilization [in which] the seals of marks clearly [appear]—such a meaningful superior path of awakening is bound to lead to excellence time and again.²⁷

In this latter context, dPal dbyangs may be referring to the third meditative stabilization in which one meditates on subtle and coarse seals, and reminding his interlocutor of the fact that such a meditation belongs to that rubric of yogic practice which is symbolic.

However, though dPal dbyangs may be intending such specific references to the dyad of symbolic and nonsymbolic and to the three stages of meditative stabilization, he does not employ any standard terminology or make any recommendations to a graduated method or program. In the *lTa ba rin po che'i sgron ma*, dPal dbyangs compares all methods of practice to medicine in a dream, echoing his comments in the *Thugs kyi sgron ma* regarding the meaninglessness of the designation 'medicine' imputed upon camphor. Ultimately, such curative methods are without any actual effect because there is neither medicine nor healed patient, only luminous knowing.

One should know the many [means of] liberation on the Noble Path to be like the medicine which cures illness in a dream. The moments of gradually purifying suffering are methods of generating distinctive insight and meditative stabilization. Attaining awakening to the intrinsic nature of mind is like eradicating illness and gaining the bliss of healing in a dream.²⁸

Similarly, the *Zhus lan* explains that in meditative stabilization, though the deities of the maṇḍala may appear to move of their own volition, they are merely aspects of one's mind and do not really exist as separate bodies. This mind, however, is itself neither fully existent nor nonexistent. Though dPal dbyangs describes meditative stabiliza-

²⁶ P4742: 568a1.

²⁷ *ma nor rtogs dang ldan pa'i zhi gnas dang /mtshan ma'i phyag rgya gsal ba'i ting nge 'dzin//di 'dra'i don ldan byang cub lam mchog ste//yang nas yang tu khyad par 'gro bar bya/.*

²⁸ *rmi lam nad sel sman dang 'dra ba ni/ 'phags lam rnam thar mang por rig par bya/ sdug bsngal khad kyis 'byang ba'i skad cig ma/ shes rab ting 'dzin khyad par skye ba'i tshul/.*

tion throughout that text as a concentration upon the ocean of awakening or upon the marks of a buddha as aspects of mind, in the *lTa ba yang dag sgron ma*, he equates the mind's absence of characteristics with that of space, showing how meditation on either is fruitless, claiming "there is no meditating on space because space is without defining characteristics. Just so, how can there be meditation on the nonorigination of Mind, which is unoriginated by means of its very essence?"²⁹

A recommendation that exemplifies his practically oriented teachings most neatly is the following, again from the *Thugs kyi sgron ma*. In it he beautifully evokes the image of currents of pure water flowing from one's attitude of playful liberation, once again using metaphor instead of making specific injunctions to practice:

It may take an extremely long time—emancipation from the four currents of suffering due to the affliction of ignorance, and emancipation through clearing away hindrance and abandoning, and emancipation through joining with splendor—because desire for all these is entering the ocean of desire; one will be carried off in a single direction by the stream of [one's] effort. [However, though one] possesses the highest and longest wrong views, those very four streams [of suffering] are the path and fruit. Therefore, by playing directly in the current flowing from method and insight, there is complete emancipation without crossing over, like a great fish gliding through the water.³⁰

Conclusion

Taken altogether, these apophatic descriptions of mind embedded within discussions of practice cooperate with the *via negativa* rhetoric of the *Thugs kyi sgron ma's* thirty topics. In both cases, dPal dbyangs contextualizes his assertions regarding Mahāyoga insight by clearing away all possible conceptualizations of it as a localizable or describable object of attainment through any progressive, technical, or linguistically-originated activity. He does this by critiquing ill-performed and misguided uses of meditations by gods in the Form-

²⁹ *ji ltar nam mkha' mtshan ma med pa'i phyir/ nam mkha' de nyid bsgom par mi 'gyur bzhin/ ngo bo nyid kyis ma skyes sems kyis ni/ ma skyes de nyid bsgoms par ga la 'gyur/*

³⁰ *ma rig nyon mongs las sdug bsnal/ chu bo bzhi las thar pa'ang/ shin tu ring dang rgyud pa dang/ 'gag spangs bsal bas thar pa dang/ zil gnon sbyor bas thar 'dod pa/ 'dod pa'i rgya mtshor chud pa'i phyir/ rtsol ba'i chu rgyun phyogs cha khyer/ mchog dang ring ba'i log lta can/ chu bo bzhi nyid lam 'bras phyir/ thabs dang shes rab las nyid kyi/ chu bo nyid la rol spyod pas/ brgal ba med par rnam par thar/ chu la nya chen 'phyo ba/*

less Realm and by those in the lower vehicles, and most particularly by those in the lower forms of tantra, who are attached to their methods of purification and approximation of the deity, hoping for awakening to appear without realizing their 'goals' are already of the true nature of reality. All are mistaken efforts based in mistaken views taking conceptual objects and subjects as real.

Encompassing all these mentions of meditation, whether positive or negative, are dPal dbyangs's constant declarations that the very idea of engaging in meditation upon some other object is a mistaken dichotomization of reality. In *Ita ba yang dag sgron ma*, he describes this method of no-method:

When you know the dynamic by which the obstructions are indistinguishable from their antidotes, you will abandon all diligence.

When you settle into the continuum with great equanimity and without fabrication, although it is merely a nominal convention, practice what is called 'meditation' on this.³¹

Throughout the *Six Lamps*, and especially in the *Thugs kyi sgron ma*, dPal dbyangs's injunctions to follow the Mahāyoga are not recommendations to philosophical positions or to particular practices, but rather to experiences of vision that, like waking from a dream or gliding through a river, are luminous, natural, spontaneous, and free from any effort or reification of extremes whatsoever. That these literary methods attain a full flowering in the later rDzogs chen tradition has been well documented. dPal dbyangs's contributions to those future blooms are in these apophatic enactments of freedom.

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³¹ *mi mthun pa dang gnyen po dbyer med don/ rang gis shes na rtsol ba kun spangs tel/ btang snyoms chen por ma bcos ngang bzhaq na/ tha snyad tsam du'ang bsgom zhes di la bya/.*

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