

“Empty Like the Sky”: Polysemy and the Problem of “Mere Clear Awareness” at the Intersection of Sūtra and Tantra in Fifteenth-century Tibet¹

The *Wisdom Drop* says, “Everything external is momentary, the magical play of the joyful mind. Likewise, it is not other than mind. The mind is (empty) like the sky.”²

Ngor chen kun dga’ bzang po

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Detaphors bear the potential to agitate as well as to bridge the boundary of representation and reality. To describe the nature of the mind is to describe the nature of reality, a daunting task with especially high stakes for Buddhist authors. To say that “the mind is like the sky” is to place two equally elusive and unbounded entities side by side and to gesture toward a shared quality of emptiness that defies exemplification and description. Emptiness is a state of non-conceptuality, non-grasping, and expansiveness that provides the key to liberation from suffering. Neither the mind, the sky, nor their shared quality of emptiness can easily be measured or described. Metaphor functions as a container for comparison and a measure of the limitless and ineffable. Both the Sanskrit term *upamā* and the Tibetan term *dpe* express the comparative dimension of metaphor and its ties to “resemblance” and “measurement.”

Metaphorical language plays upon the simultaneity of sameness

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² *ye shes thig le las/phyi yi thams cad skad cig ma/dga’ mo sems kyi cho phrul yin. de ltar sems la gzhan pa min. sems nyid [159c.4] nam mkha’ lta bu’o.* Ngor chen Autocommentary, 159c.1-159c.4.

and difference inherent in language itself. As they move across contexts, metaphors, like puns, transform and assume different meanings while attesting to the stickiness of language. By “stickiness,” I mean the manner in which words and phrases retain aspects of their previous contexts. The Sanskrit term for pun, *śleṣa*, evokes this sense of “adhering or clinging to” or “embracing” meanings.³ In the case of puns, the stickiness of language produces delight, a reveling in the conjunction of sameness and difference. However, the polysemic nature of language does not always produce delight and even when it does, like many good jokes, it can be accompanied by a sense of discomfort.

This article traces the interpretive movements of one fifteenth-century Tibetan Buddhist author wrestling with the stickiness of language. It exposes the variety of ways in which this author resists language’s polysemic quality in coping with an uncomfortable resemblance between two contexts for describing the mind’s “clarity” [Tib. *gsal ba*] and “self-awareness” [Tib. *rang rig*]. It also highlights choice moments in which the same author turns the polysemy of language to his advantage through an intertextual approach exemplified in his use of the metaphor “empty like the sky.” I conclude the article by illuminating the benefits of a literary approach to tantric polemical texts to show how a heightened attention to the language of these texts highlights deeper tensions between resemblance and identity troubling Buddhist authors. In gesturing toward their creative responses to these tensions, we begin to see a phenomenon in which “mirrors are windows,” akin to the mimetic patterns Ramanujan described in analyzing instances of repetition, reflection and inversion in Indian literature.⁴ In making these broader connections, this article suggests the literary approach as a complement to existing models for approaching tantric polemical texts from perspectives such as ritual, philosophy, lineage, apologetics and “sectarian differentiation.”⁵

In 1406, a Tibetan scholar monk, Ngor chen kun dga’ bzang po po (1382-1456), composed *Root and Commentary for Overcoming Objections to the Three Tantras*, a tantric polemical text and autocommentary.⁶

³ Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary: v0.3 RCI, <https://lexica.indica-et-buddhica.org/dict/lexica>. Accessed August 2020.

⁴ A.K. Ramanujan, “Where Mirrors are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflection,” *History of Religions*, Vol. 28, No.3 (Feb., 1989), 187-216. I am grateful to Charles Hallisey for suggesting this work to me.

⁵ Cabezón introduces “sectarian differentiation” as an alternative model to sectarianism for describing the nature of conversation and conflict in fifteenth-century Tibetan polemics. He distinguishes the two phenomena as oriented around “belonging” and “pathology” respectively. José Ignacio Cabezón, Lobsang Dargyay, and Go-rams-pa Bsod-nams-señ-ge 2007: 7.

⁶ Ngor chen) Kun dga’ bzang po (1382-1456). *gsung ’bum/ Kun dga’ bzang po*. 1968 and W11577. “Overcoming objections to the Three Tantras” *Rgyud gsum gnod*

Ngor chen's biographer Sangs rgyas phun tshogs (1649-1705) writes: "Through debate, he reversed mistaken views. At an earlier time, some said that the great Dharma protector (Virupa) was a Cittamātrin [*sems tsam*] pandit and that the intention of his three tantras together with oral instructions was to spread the Cittamātrin perspective. (In response,) Ngor chen composed the great treatise that defends through scripture and reasoning, the *Root and Commentary for Overcoming Objections to the Three Tantras*."⁷ The biographer speaks of a charge that threatened the foundation of the Sakya tradition of Tibetan Buddhism to which Ngor chen belonged. The "three tantras" are the Hevajra root tantra and the two explanatory tantras, the *Saṃpuṭa* and *Vajrapañjara*. These three texts form the basis for the Path and Fruit [*lam 'bras*] lineage originating in the figure of the Indian mahāsiddha Virupa and transmitted by the Sakyapa as their most treasured tantric tradition.⁸ The opponent's charge implies a direct correlation between the integrity of philosophical views and tantric ritual approaches. In combining the techniques of philosophical debate with tantric exegesis, the genre of tantric polemics provides the ideal medium for Ngor chen to respond to such a claim.

Ngor chen's *Overcoming Objections to the Three Tantras* reflects the importance of grounding tantric perspectives in Madhyamaka descriptions of emptiness. The scholastic climate of early fifteenth-century Tibet placed increasing emphasis upon polemics and philosophical debate as arenas for demonstrating skill in articulating the Madhyamaka perspective. Tibetan doxographers positioned the Madhyamaka as the most refined system for accessing soteriological truth, at the apex of the program for Buddhist learning. Unfortunately, the Madhyamaka emphasis upon theorizing the virtues and limitations of language and conceptuality did not always synch well with the profound tantric instructions. In particular, tantric accounts of the power

'joms. Vol.9: 155d-157a. "Commentary on Overcoming Objections to the Three Tantras." *Rgyud gsum gnod 'joms kyi 'grel pa*. Vol.9: 157a-164b * [referenced throughout as Ngor chen Autocommentary]

⁷ Sangs rgyas phun tshogs (b. 1649 d. 1705). 1688. [based on Dkon mchog lhun grub (b. 1497 d. 1557)]. The Source of the Wish Fulfilling Jewel, the Oceanic Qualities which Gather the Rivers: the Biography ("Liberation Story") of the Victorious Vajradhara Kun dga' bzang po. *Rgyal ba rdo rje 'chang kun dga' bzang po'i rnam par thar pa legs bshad chu bo 'dus pa'i rgya mtsho yon tan yid bzhin nor bu'i 'byung gnas*, 546.2-5.

⁸ Chogye Trichen Rinpoche's 2003 commentary on Grags pa rgyal mtshan's "Parting from the Four Attachments" mentions this charge and dismisses it by asserting that Virupa only taught Cittamātra before becoming a tantric mahāsiddha. See Thub-bstan-legs-bsad-rgya-mtsho, Thubten Choedak, Ngag-dbang-kun-dga'-theg-chen-dpal-'bar, Jay Goldberg, John Dewese, and Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan 2003: 161.

of the mind as an agent in transforming our realities proved challenging to align with the Madhyamaka perspective.

The “Consciousness Only”⁹ orientation of the Yogācāra tradition lent itself more easily to tantric explanations. The focus upon the mind as the primary agent of transformation allowed for the possibility of channeling the power of awareness for its liberating potential. However, the evolving dynamics of Tibetan scholasticism prohibited openly identifying with the Yogācāran or related Cittamātrin/Vijñapti-mātrin perspective. Although, in theory, different rules dictated the parameters of sūtra and tantra, despite the best intentions of many authors to hold the boundary, these two techniques for progressing toward liberation bled into one another.

Ngor chen’s pithy polemical root text is lauded among Sakyapas today as an eloquent and lucid expression of the integrity of their transmission of the Hevajra tantric tradition. The concise nature of his argument, consolidated in a mere five folia sides, is especially appealing since apparently “people don’t like elaborate explanations these days.”¹⁰ Ngor chen’s autocommentary, about 30 folia sides, is a testament to his command of the discourses of both sūtra and tantra as well as to a distinctly Sakyapa approach to describing the nature of the mind in tantric terms.

Defending the Emptiness of the Hevajra Tantra

Ngor chen explicitly composed his text in response to the charge that the “naturally co-emergent wisdom” [*rang bzhin lhan cig skyes pa’i ye shes*] described by the Hevajra tantras as “self-aware great bliss” [*rang rig bde ba chen po nyid*] reeked of the “mere clear awareness” [*gsal rig tsam*] of the Consciousness Only traditions. In investigating what precisely looks so Consciousness Only about the Sakyapa approach to tantra, this article demonstrates the relationship of clarity and emptiness to be of the utmost importance.

⁹ The biographer’s claim that Ngor chen composed a defense against the accusation that Virupa himself was a Cittamātrin may be slightly hyperbolic, reflecting the biographer’s own role in the “sectarian differentiation” of the Sakyapa and Dga’ldan pa traditions. The use of the term Cittamātrin [*sems tsam*] is also cause for reflection. Ngor chen himself almost exclusively uses the Vijñapti-mātra [*rnam rig tsam*] or Vijñapti-vada [*rnam rig smra ba*] terminology in his text. This subtle variation in the language may reflect transformations in the meanings of these terms and the attitudes toward their associated perspectives over the ensuing centuries. However, in many Tibetan contexts, these terms are used interchangeably with Yogācāra. For the sake of consistency, I use a generic term, “Consciousness Only,” to refer to this network of thought, except in cases where there is a significant shift in terms.

¹⁰ Ngor chen Autocommentary, 164a.4.

Ngor chen summarizes the opponents' view as follows:

A few Pāramitā *scholars (scholars of the sūtra) say that the *rang bzhin lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes* which is the primary ultimate meaning of the two-part tantra, explanatory tantra(s), together with their oral instructions and the precious *lam 'bras* is explained in the tantras as "self-aware great bliss." Based on this, "self-awareness becomes awakening." So it is said...Moreover, the commentators say that "as for that so-called wisdom, being clear and aware, it is wisdom." Since they explain (that wisdom) as mere clear awareness (based on that quote), they explain the ultimate intention of the three tantras and oral instructions as merely the Vijñapti(-mātrin) position [*rnam rig tu gnas pa kho na yin zhing*]. Also, in the *Pearl Garland*, the commentary on difficult points of the root tantra composed by Shantipa (Ratnākāraśanti), it is also explained in the manner of the Vijñapti (-mātrin) [*rnam rig gi tshul*]. So they say.¹¹

Ngor chen's primary objective is to disambiguate a conflation of terms describing supreme enlightened wisdom and bliss. His opponents have misconstrued the supreme wisdom described by the Hevajra tantras as "naturally co-emergent wisdom" [*rang bzhin lhan skyes ye shes*], confusing it with the "mere clear awareness" [*gsal rig tsam*] of Consciousness Only. In response, Ngor chen endeavors to demonstrate how "naturally coemergent wisdom" is an expression of emptiness unsullied by the mentalistic implications of terms for mere clarity like *gsal rig tsam*. Likewise, he distinguishes the "self-aware great bliss" [*rang rig bde ba chen po nyid*] extolled in the Hevajra Tantra from "mere self-awareness" [*rang rig tsam*]. The tension underlying the text is the possibility that the confusion of these terms is not merely coincidental.

Ngor chen divides his argument into eight points of refutation:

1. the misconception of the tantra piṭaka and Consciousness Only view

- A. expressing the Consciousness Only position
- B. establishing the position of the tantra(s) itself
- C. comprehending "naturally coemergent" [*rang bzhin lhan skyes*]

¹¹ *pha rol tu phyin pa'i tshul la mkhas pa kha cig/ brtag pa gnyis pa bshad pa'i rgyud dang/de dag gi man ngag gsung ngag rin po che lam 'bras bu dang bcas pa'i* [157b.2] *brjod bya'i gtso bo mthar thug pa'i don du gyur pa rang bzhin lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes ni/ rgyud las/ rang rig bde ba chen po nyid/ rang rig nas ni byang chub 'gyur. zhes sogs... 'grel byed dag* [157b.3] *gis kyang/ ye shes zhes bya ba ni gsal zhing shes pas na ye shes tel/zhes gsal rig tsam la 'chad pa'i phyir/ rgyud gsum man ngag dang bcas pa 'di'i dgongs pa mthar thug pa ni/ rnam rig tu gnas pa kho na yin zhing/slob dpon shan ti pas* [157b.4] *mdzad pa'i rtsa rgyud kyi dka' 'grel mi tig phreng bar yang rnam rig gi tshul du bkral ba yin no. zhes zer ro.* Ngor chen Autocommentary, 157b.1-4.

(if the opponent's claims were true):

2. There would be a contradiction with the main tantra.
3. The three tantras would no longer be the word of the Buddha.
4. The whole tantra piṭaka would become Consciousness Only.
5. Nāgārjuna and his disciples would become Consciousness Only.
6. The Madhyamaka would become Consciousness Only.
7. The Buddha would have entered the disciples into the wrong path.
8. Attaining liberation through reliance upon mantra would become impossible.

Ngor chen's refutations escalate in intensity to show a domino effect in which destabilizing the authority of the Sakya transmission of the Hevajra Tantra ultimately destabilizes the authority of all tantras, of the Madhyamaka and its most renowned Indian proponents, Nāgārjuna and his disciples, of the Buddha himself, and of the tantric path. In addressing Ngor chen's efforts to grapple with the stickiness and polysemy of the language of clarity and naturalness, this article focuses primarily on the first section of his argument. This first section, the most lengthy, consumes about seventeen of approximately thirty folia sides of the commentary. Ngor chen refutes the opponent's mistaken conceptions of both the Consciousness Only and tantric perspectives. In doing so, he creates space to articulate an accurate understanding of what it means to be "naturally coemergent" [*rang bzhin lhan skyes*] in the sense intended by the Hevajra Tantra.

Natural coemergence [*rang bzhin lhan skyes*] is one in a cluster of terms for which Ngor chen negotiates associations with Consciousness Only. They include:

- *rang rig [tsam]* "[mere] self-awareness,"
- *so so rang rig* "individual self-awareness,"
- *rang bzhin lhan skyes* "naturally co-emergent,"
- *rang rig lhan cig skyes pa* "self-aware co-emergence,"
- *rang rig bde ba chen po* "self-aware great bliss."

The terminology of the "self-aware" and "naturally" and "spontaneously" born or "co-emergent" describes a language of "naturalness" marked by the reflexive marker *rang* [Skt. *sva-*], generally translated as "self."¹² To be "self"-anything, born, aware or what have you, implies that an entity exists somehow outside the parameters of cause

¹² On issues of polysemy and the language of "naturalness" in Indian Buddhist texts, see R.M. Davidson, "Reframing Sahaja: Genre, Representation, Ritual and Lineage," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*. 30: 45-83.

and effect and of interdependence, and thereby is, in a sense, real or permanent. The form of naturalness evoked by *rang* therefore generates sensitive questions like: Can consciousness see itself? Is the nature of the mind inherently or primordially pure? This language is also pervaded by natures and essences [*rang bzhin, ngo bo*]. These natures and essences operate in perpetual tension with established descriptions of the true nature of phenomena as “essenceless.”

The language of naturalness found in forms like *rang bzhin lhan skyes* provokes highly charged questions with widely divergent answers across traditions, questions about whether we are naturally buddhas and whether enlightenment is something that happens naturally. For example, the “naturalness” of the enlightenment experience is at issue in the very narrative of the origins of Tibetan Buddhist identity, revolving around an alleged encounter at Samye monastery between the Indian monk Kamalaśīla and the Chinese monk, Mo ho yen. This iconic debate symbolizes the triumph of the Indian gradualist approach over the Chinese subitist one. The rhetorical power of the clash of perceptions of “naturalness” makes the historical basis of the encounter practically irrelevant. Mohoyen’s naturalness is perpetually raked up as the classic straw man of Tibetan Buddhist polemics. The Tibetan passion for doxography, the suppression of Consciousness Only perspectives, and the careful navigation of the language of Buddha nature are all symptoms of anxieties around naturalness in Tibetan scholastic circles.¹³ A literary approach to tantric polemics reveals the importance of this genre in responding to and even perpetuating such anxieties.

The following verse from the Hevajra root tantra is Ngor chen’s main source for concern: “As for the very self-aware great bliss, from self-awareness comes awakening” [*rang rig bde ba chen po nyid/ rang rig nas ni byang chub ’gyur*].¹⁴ *Rang rig* [*svasaṃvedana*], translated as “self-awareness” or “reflexive awareness,” is an especially tricky

¹³ While it may initially seem surprising that tantric perspectives would be evaluated in philosophical terms, the history of Tibetan doxography itself reinforces this tendency; for example, as Dalton shows, Tibetans overlaid a distinctly doctrinal orientation that diverged from ritual framework of Indian models in organizing the tantric corpus. Dalton also considers early non-Buddhist precedents for categorizing views like Bhaṭṭhari and acknowledges the contributions of Indian Buddhist scholars like Bhāvaviveka as well as those visiting Tibet later like Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla. Dalton: 118-120, 145. Harter re-examines the category of doxography in Tibetan Buddhism through the work of Red mda’ ba, presenting important insights into the assumptions attached to the term and re-evaluating its aptness for the Tibetan context. His attention to the quality of “accumulation” is especially interesting. Harter 2011:104 & 111.

¹⁴ *Hevajra Tantra* I.viii.46. *Kye’i rdo rje’i rgyud*, Sde dge bka’ ’gyur, Vol.80, 10a.7-10b.1. TBRC W4CZ5269.

category in the Indian epistemological sources by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti and their Tibetan interpretations.¹⁵ Making sense of the relationship of *rang rig* across genres and, in particular across sūtra and tantra, poses pronounced challenges.¹⁶ Within Ngor chen's commentary, the need to define what "good *rang rig*"¹⁷ looks like and to distinguish it from a problematic way of thinking about *rang rig* becomes imperative.

Ngor chen deploys citations from Nāgārjuna's praise texts to parse "self-awareness" accordingly. Ngor chen marshals evidence of multiple references within *Hymn in Praise of the Dharmadhātu* to "individual self awareness" [*so so rang rig*] in connection with qualities like purity and union [*sbyor ldan nyid*].¹⁸ He calls upon another praise text, the *Hymn to the Three Bodies*, to venerate *so so rang rig* as that which is immune to exemplification [*dpe med*], free even from the intangible power of metaphor to gesture toward the ineffable.¹⁹ In the process of evoking these references, Ngor chen imagines an opponent who might raise the objection that Nāgārjuna's praise texts are themselves Consciousness Only.²⁰ These texts inhabit a delicate exegetical terrain in which the Madhyamaka patriarch deviates from his expected "negative" descriptions of mind or of reality in favor of a more "positive" approach to communicating its essence.²¹ The *Hymn in Praise of the Dharmadhātu* is the most renowned of the three featured praises; the degree to which the tone and mode of representation expressed by this text diverges from Nāgārjuna's standard Madhyamaka treatises has prompted some scholars to nuance and diversify his authorial persona and others to doubt the attribution of this text to the Madhyamaka author.²² Ngor chen's use of passages from *Hymn in Praise of*

¹⁵ See, for example, Dunne 2013: 276-278 on questions of "reflexive awareness" and the "simultaneity" of cognitions.

¹⁶ For rigorous investigations of the category see the 2010 "Special Issue on Buddhist Theories of Self-Awareness (*svasaṃvedana*): Reception and Critique" in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*.

¹⁷ Doug Duckworth suggested this term (panel response, Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Denver, Colorado, November 2018).

¹⁸ Another reference to the text appears in the general discussion of natural co-emergence in Ngor chen's text to be discussed below. See Ngor chen Autocommentary 160d.4-5.

¹⁹ *gzhan yang chos dbyings bstod pa las/so sor rang rig rnam dag nal sa rnams* [163a.2] *de yi bdag nyid gnas*. Ngor chen Autocommentary, 163a.1-2. On the relation of *rang rig* and *so so rang rig*, see Brunnholz 2007, 65.

²⁰ See Ngor chen Autocommentary 163b.6. He lists prophecies of Nāgārjuna's coming from two Mahāyāna texts, the *Lankavatāra* (a text with significant ties to "consciousness only") and the *Manjuśrī-mūla-kalpa* in resiting this assumption.

²¹ See Brunnholz, Karl, and Rang-byung-rdo-rje 2007: 53.

²² See Brunnholz, Karl, and Rang-byung-rdo-rje 2007: 25 & fn 64. See also references to Ruegg 1981 & Lindtner 1982.

the Dharmadhātu therefore exemplifies his skillful navigation of the stickiness of language. For if the very founder of the lauded Indian Madhyamaka tradition uses language that evokes associations with essentializing Consciousness Only views, who wouldn't be vulnerable to such charges?

Moreover, Ngor chen persists in citing Nāgārjuna's famous praise text in the face of a Tibetan citation history that would seem to be at odds with his own aims of defending the Sakyapa sūtric and tantric understandings of the nature of the mind and its reflexivity. Beyond concerns with the relationship of the Sakya teachings to Indian Consciousness Only thinkers, Ngor chen is concerned to distinguish his tradition from Tibetan thinkers who fell on the wrong side of the buddha nature debates of the preceding century and the heirs to their legacy. The buddha nature debates in Tibet took shape as a dispute around the potential of all beings to become buddhas or, put another way, around the possibility that beings are "naturally" enlightened. The ideas of Dol po pa (Dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan, 1292-1361) were especially contentious. Dol po pa's theory of "other emptiness" [*gzhan stong*] suggested that the heart of enlightened potentiality was empty only of "other" [*gzhan stong*] but not empty of its own nature. The eternalist connotations of this view, the implications that there was a truly existing, independent, and enduring nature, produced increasing discomfort for many Tibetan critics. Dol po pa appealed to the "positivistic" mode of expression in Nāgārjuna's praises to articulate the Jo nang pa understanding of the true nature of reality.²³

Reading polemical texts in a literary way connects Ngor chen to a broader world of Buddhist textuality, fueled by a perpetual tension between naturalness or essences and their refusal. Ngor chen's citations illustrate how terms describing natural and spontaneous arising or co-emergence like *rang bzhin lhan skyes* pose similar problems for Buddhist authors across genres and circulate through very different genres of Buddhist texts.²⁴ While the language of natural arising and

²³ Go-rams-pa Bsod-nams-señ-ge, José Ignacio Cabezón, Lobsang Dargyay, and Go-rams-pa Bsod-nams-señ-ge 2007: 29

²⁴ Davidson traces the related movements of *sahaja* across esoteric and philosophical genres of Indian Buddhist textuality and suggests the mutual significance of its permutations in the discourses of Yogācāra and Hevajra. He writes, "Sahaja is, in fact, a good test case for the manner in which esoteric Buddhist technical terminology, developed in one environment, moved into others, and was sometimes held at bay and sometimes surreptitiously appropriated in disparate venues...It is my proposal that sahaja was a preclassical word that became employed in scholastic, particularly Yogācāra, literature as an adjective describing conditions natural or, less frequently, essential with respect to circumstances encountered in an embodied state...While sahaja eventually was articulated as a technical term to identify the culminating experience of sexual practice...the term took on an

awareness may be prized in realms like *rdzogs chen* and *tathāgatagarbha* as well the Yogācāra, it may be met with skepticism or even hostility within philosophical and polemical genres of Madhyamaka thought. The contested aspects of natural co-arising, simultaneity and co-emergence suggested by the term *lhan cig skyes pa* [Skt. *sahaja*] therefore span the divide between sūtra and tantra.²⁵

Throughout the text, Ngor chen adopts a variety of strategies to cope with the clarity, self-awareness, and naturalness common to both Consciousness Only and Sakyapa discourses. His approach is deeply intertextual, forging connections between descriptions of mind and reality drawn from diverse genres of Buddhist literature. In the next section, I closely examine the manner in which Ngor chen uses the metaphor of the sky to frame the Sakyapa tantric perspective on mind as complementary with the Madhyamaka view. I reveal how Ngor chen uses the metaphor of the sky to turn the polysemic qualities of language to his advantage and to relate emptiness and bliss in a uniquely Sakyapa way.

Empty Like the Sky: Polysemy and Emptiness

Metaphors preserve the gap between representation and reality, suggesting shared qualities between entities without reducing them to

increasingly philosophical importance in the Hevajra environment." Davidson, "Reframing Sahaja," 46-47. He likewise suggests that exegetes inspired by its use in the tantric ritual context elaborated upon *sahaja* fueled in part by the rapidly expanding rhetoric of "nature" (*prakṛti*), "non artificial" (*akṛtrima*) and other rough synonyms." Davidson, "Reframing Sahaja," 66.

²⁵ Select Tibetan interpreters of the Madhyamaka, aware of its tantric connotations, consciously used *lhan cig skyes pa* to describe the relationship of the two truths in larger projects of bridging genres. Broido explores the use of this term by the sixteenth-century Bka' rgyud pa authors Pad ma dkar po and Mi bskyod rdo rje to "bridge" sūtra and tantra. Broido 1985: 10. Broido's conclusion gestures toward the possibilities for exploring similar attempts within other lineages. This article engages a compatible project within the fifteenth-century Sakyapa tradition, a project whose results may even have influenced Broido's authors. Broido claims that "Sahaja is a term of the mother-tantras, and indicates a stronger degree of connection than the terms 'mixing or inseparable' typically used in the Guhyasamāja literature." Broido 1985: 31. Kvaerne elucidates key dimensions of the term *sahaja*, which he translates as "simultaneously arisen," in the Indic tantric context, emphasizing its connection with the phases of ritual consecration. Kvaerne 1975-6: 89: "For the moment I shall limit myself to saying that I believe that 'simultaneously arisen' or the like is the most suitable translation, and (anticipating my conclusions) that the term *sahaja* is basically connected with the tantric ritual of consecration where it refers to the relation between the ultimate and preliminary Joys." Davidson inventories the various modern translations and interpretations of *sahaja*, arguing for an approach nuanced by attention to historical and ritual context. Davidson, "Reframing Sahaja," 48-52.

that thing. Ngor chen uses the metaphor of the sky as a container to transfer the emptiness so strongly articulated in the Madhyamaka perspective to the tantric descriptions of the mind in terms of wisdom and bliss. The sky is part of a broader linguistic inventory whose polysemic nature and appearance in potentially conflicting contexts contribute to the confusion of the Sakyapa and Consciousness Only views. The sky appears across multiple genres, including those regarded as essentializing in their treatment of the nature of mind and of enlightened potential. For example, Brunnhozl observes how: "The default example used throughout tathāgatagarbha texts for this nature of mind being without reference points, inexpressible, and indemonstrable is space."²⁶ Ngor chen taps into the power of the sky as a metaphor capable of moving across genres to cope with the impact of the movements of language itself. The roots of the English term for metaphor as a form of "carrying across" remind us that all language is transitive. Through the metaphor of the sky, Ngor chen navigates the resemblance between the language of clarity and naturalness found in tantric materials to that of Consciousness Only. In doing so he reveals the transitivity of language to be both a blessing and a curse.

Ngor chen argues that conflating the wisdom of bliss with the "mere clear awareness" of Consciousness Only is not the intention of the three tantras and the oral instructions of the Sakyapa Path and Fruit lineage. For example, he references the *Vairocana-Abhisambodhi Tantra* to express how despite explanations of the nature of the mind as "mere clear awareness," the nature of clear awareness is empty.²⁷ Ngor chen also uses the Indian mahāsiddha Virupa's commentary to explain the "self-aware great bliss" of the root tantra as "empty like the sky" and reinforces this equation of bliss and emptiness with a quote from the *Drop of Mahāmudrā*²⁸: "As for innately true [*rang dngos*] great bliss, it is well-known as the wisdom wind. As for that (bliss), it is explained as the sky, and the sky is taught to be empty. All emerges from emptiness. All dissolves into emptiness. Emptiness abides as utterly stainless, free from all aspects..."²⁹ This passage correlates *rang*

²⁶ Brunnhozl 2007: 109.

²⁷ Ngor chen, Autocommentary, 158c.6.

²⁸ The Sakyapas class these "Drop" [*tilaka*] texts as "continuum" tantras, a further diversification of the Hevajra cycle of three tantras (one root and two explanatory) promoted by the Sakyapa tradition as received from Virupa. Ngor chen himself, in the "Notes," appears to respond to objections from "a later Sakya Geshe" that this set of texts should not be included within the Hevajra cycle. This source also describes the line of transmission of these texts from the eleventh-century figure Prajñāgupta. See Sonam Tsemo, Sonam Gyatso, and Wayne Verrill 2012: Chapter 6.

²⁹ *phyag rgya chen po thig le las/ rang dngos bde ba chen po ni/ ye shes rlung du rab tu grags. de ni nam mkha' zhes su bshad. nam mkha' stong pa bstan pa'o. stong pa las ni thams cad*

ngos great bliss, the real deal great bliss, or great bliss “from its own side” with a vital element of tantric physiology, the wisdom wind.³⁰ The paradoxical relationship of emptiness and form is echoed in the description of this emptiness as both free from aspects and supreme among them, reminding the reader of the ways in which emptiness allows Mahāyāna authors to posit a matrix or source unimpeded by ontological confines. Ngor chen wields the metaphor of the sky in translating the qualities of emptiness from the context of sūtra to that of tantra.

A literary approach to polemics highlights Buddhist authors’ skepticism regarding the representational power of language alongside their struggles with and celebrations of its stickiness and its polysemy. Tzohar observes how metaphor assumes a performative function in Buddhist literature, particularly in the Yogācāran context; this function destabilizes essentialist views of meaning and supports the claim of an ineffable nature of reality.³¹ Tzohar is interested in the way Buddhist authors use language and in particular metaphor as both “medium” and “message” as well as the ways in which these metaphors bear multiple meanings simultaneously.³² This phenomenon of polysemy provides a valuable point of orientation for understanding the complexities of Ngor chen’s situation. In viewing his text through the lens of polysemy, I address the style of his intertextuality as it takes shape in his struggles with the conflation of Sakyapa and Consciousness Only descriptions of the mind’s clarity and self-awareness. Polysemy is, moreover, helpful in making sense of the manner in which Ngor chen transforms the “stickiness” of language into a tool for synthesizing sūtric and tantric descriptions of emptiness.

Ngor chen uses polysemy to address instances of resemblance to the language of Consciousness Only sources and to justify or transform that resemblance. For example, Ngor chen cites Sthiramati’s commentary on one of Vasubandhu’s key Yogācāra texts, the *Triṃśikā*, in which the sky, described as “one taste,” “stainless,” and “unchanging,” signifies the ultimate truth.³³ For Ngor chen, the sky also provides a means of connecting sūtric and tantric descriptions of

'byung. stong pa'i ngang du thams cad thim. [158d.5] stong pa yang dag dri med gnas. rnam pa thams cad dang bral ba/ mchog gi rnam pa skyed med dag/ rang dga' nyams su myong ba dngos. Ngor chen Autocommentary: 158d.4-158d.5.

³⁰ Komarovski 2016 translates *rang dngos* as “from its own side.” This translation lends itself nicely to the qualities of self-referentiality described above.

³¹ Tzohar 2018: 77.

³² Tzohar 2018: 85.

³³ *de'i 'grel pa blo brtan gyis mdzad par/ dam pa ni [157d.5] 'jig rten las 'das pa'i ye shes bla na med pa'i phyir ro. de'i don ni don dam pa'o. yang na nan mkha' ltar thams cad du ro gcig pa dang/dri ma med pa dang/mi 'gyur ba'i phyir ro/ yongs su grub pa de don dam pa zhes bya'o. Ngor chen Autocommentary, 157d.4-5.*

emptiness and extends this connection to link the Indian Buddhist *śīdha* tradition with the legacy of the Tibetan Sakya masters. Drawing upon a surplus of associations with the birthless, unchanging, spontaneous, and selfless punctuated by the reflexive terminology of *rang*, Ngor chen correlates the self-aware great bliss of the Hevajra tantras with emptiness itself. Ngor chen invokes Virupa to equate the “self-aware great bliss” of the tantra with the sky and the quality of selflessness: “This dharma which is selfless like the sky is great bliss.”³⁴ Ngor chen demonstrates that the teachings of the Sakyapa masters are commensurate with an accurate understanding of clear awareness and emptiness in terms of the two truths. He does so by deploying a host of citations from their works oriented around the metaphor of the sky.³⁵ Building upon these citations, he describes the true nature of the mind as follows:

Just as in the sky there is no beginning or end, the mind, moreover, is taught to be without beginning or end.

Just as the sky is not harmed by conditioned phenomena, so the mind is not hurt by adventitious conditions.

Just as the sky pervades all that is animate and inanimate (container and contents), the mind pervades all *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.

Just as the sky is free from color and space and so forth, the mind is taught to be empty of all conceptualization of subject and object.

Based on that teaching, the intention of the Sakyapa venerables is that that mere clear awareness is the characteristic of the conventional mind but not the ultimate truth.³⁶

Ngor chen uses the language of being “empty of” and “free from” [*dang bral*] to express the Sakyapa view of the mind as being devoid of teleologies, of enduring traces of karmic consequences, and of duality. The positive valence of the mind is the quality of “pervasion” of

³⁴ *nam mkha' lta bur bdag med pa'i /chos 'di bde ba chen po'o*. Ngor chen Autocommentary: 158a.5. A further commentary on Virupa's text by Slob dpon dpal 'dzin extends the interpretation of that which is like the sky and selfless [*bdag med pa*] with transcendence and freedom [*'das shing bral ba*]. Ngor chen Autocommentary: 158d.1-2.

³⁵ See section on “Freedom” below for more thorough investigation of these passages.

³⁶ *nam mkha' la thog mtha' med pa bzhin sems kyang thog mtha' med par bstan. nam mkha' la 'dus byas kyi gnod pas mi tshungs pa bzhin sems kyang blo bur gyi rkyen gyis* [159b.6] *mi 'jig. nams mkha' snod bcud thams cad la khyab pa ltar/ sems kyis 'khor 'das thams cad la khyab. nams mkha' la kha dog dang sbyibs la sogs pa dang bral ba bzhin/ sems kyang gzung 'dzin la sogs pa'i rnam rtog ma lus pas* [159c.1] *stong pa bstan to. zhes gsungs pa'i phyir rje btsun Sakyapa nams kyi dgongs pa'ang gsal rig tsam de nyid kun rdzob sems kyi mtshan nyid yin gyi don dam du bzhad pa ni ma yin no*. Ngor chen Autocommentary: 157b.5-159c.2.

saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.

Ngor chen engages the sky in an intertextual way, exemplifying how naturalness as invoked through polysemy and thrives in perpetual tension with the absence of natures. The example of the sky illustrates how Buddhist metaphors operate in tension with a lack of recourse to or even perhaps “freedom from” exemplification. Tracing the manner in which metaphors like the sky function as both “medium” and “message” (to use Tzohar’s terms) allows us to more fully appreciate how Ngor chen correlates bliss and emptiness. Through perpetual tension between the “mere” vs. the “very,” essences and their refusal, the distinction of “good *rang rig*” from bad, Ngor chen solidifies a connection augmented by the play of freedom and union.

Resemblance or Identity?: Appearances as Mind

Through this multi-faceted approach, Ngor chen facilitates a more profound appreciation for the complexities of language itself, particularly in navigating the intersection of genres.

He reveals his self-consciousness of the sticky nature of language in writing: “Therefore, despite the mere resemblance of the manner of labeling appearances as mind to the Vijñapti (one) [*rnam rig pa dang ming tshul mtshungs pa tsam*], the (tantric) meaning is not equivalent.”³⁷ In this passage, Ngor chen resists the power of language to take on a life of its own, to allow for multiple meanings, and to create the possibility of conflating distinct approaches to understanding the true nature of mind and of reality. In some instances, Ngor chen suggests that sūtra and tantra use different language to describe the same thing; in others, he indicates that the thing they are attempting to articulate is beyond expression.

In elucidating how the tantric perspective on appearances, mind, and emptiness works, Ngor chen shows how all appearances are mind and that mind is empty. What is it about the Sakyapa understanding of the nature of the mind that looks like “Consciousness Only”?³⁸ In this section, I respond briefly and then reformulate the question to produce more robust answers. The Sakyapas do indeed place a comparable degree of emphasis upon the mind, appearances, and illusions to Consciousness Only, and they employ much of the same language and metaphors. The Sakyapas themselves might say, ‘Yes, we also think everything is mind, but we don’t say the mind is real like they

³⁷ *des na snang ba sems zhes rnam rig pa dang ming tshul mtshungs pa tsam yin gyi don mtshungs pa ni ma yin te*. Ngor chen Autocommentary, 159c.5.

³⁸ I am grateful to Karin Meyers for posing this question. (Q & A, AAR, Denver, November, 2018).

do.' In this vein, Ngor chen writes:

The *Wisdom Drop* says, "Nothing exists apart from the mind. Wherever and whatever [there is], this is everything. As for that, all is mind." So it says. Likewise, the point of the teaching of all appearances as mind in the (tantras, the) *Vajra-pañjara* and so on is not accepted as all appearances actually being mind like [for] the Cittamātra.³⁹ Since (according to tantra), the nature of the mind is emptiness, what emerges from that, all appearances are emptiness. The *Wisdom Drop* says, "Everything external is momentary, the magical play of the joyful mind. Likewise, it is not other than mind. The mind is (empty) like the sky."⁴⁰

Opponents or skeptics like those who inspired Ngor chen to compose this text might interpret this defense as mere semantics. Tropes like momentariness [*skad cig ma*] and illusion [*cho phrul*], familiar tropes of Consciousness Only genres, reinforce the overlap in descriptions of all appearances as mind.⁴¹

In both the Sakyapa tradition and in Consciousness Only traditions, metaphors are pedagogical tools for catalyzing an understanding of the true nature of things. Sakyapa pedagogy employs examples and metaphors resonant with Consciousness Only in guiding the practitioner toward the apprehension of the mind's empty nature. Ngor chen references these practices in his defense:

Should you say it is (i.e. that the tantric view is the same as Consciousness Only), in his "Union of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa," Rje btsun chen po (Grags pa rgyal mtshan) says: "Appearances are established as mind, but from the teaching of the eight, the four root (examples) of the dream and so on and the four branch (examples) of the hallucination [*mig yor*] and so on, there is no difference between these examples and these appearances. Although apprehended experientially, these appearances are not established in reality." It should be expressed directly in accord with the explanations of the unreality of appearances.⁴²

³⁹ This is the only place in the text in which Ngor chen uses the term Cittamātrin [*sems tsam pa*] rather than Vijñapti-vadin [*rnam rig smra ba*] or Vijñapti-mātra [*rnam rig tsam*].

⁴⁰ *de'i phyir ye shes thig le las/ sems las gzhan ni yod la min. [159c.2] gang zhig ci zhig 'di thams cad/ de ni thams cad sems yin no. zhes dang/de bzhin du/rdo rje gur la sogs par yang/snang pa rnams sems su bstan pa'i don yang sems tsam pa ltar snang ba thams cad sems su bden par khas mi len gyi [159c.3] sems kyi ngo bo ni stong pa nyid yin pa'i phyir/ de las byung zhing snang ba thams cad kyang stong ba nyid yin te/ye shes thig le las/phyi yi thams cad skad cig ma/dga' mo sems kyi cho phrul yin. de ltar sems la gzhan pa min. sems nyid [159c.4] nam mkha' lta bu'o. Ngor chen Autocommentary, 159c.1-159c.4.*

⁴¹ Tzohar 2018 uses magical illusions as a key example of the operation of polysemy in Yogācāran literature. See especially Chapter Two.

⁴² *gal te yin na rje btsun chen po'i 'khor 'das dbyer med las/ snang ba sems su sgrub pa [159c.6] la/ rmi lam sogs rtsa ba'i dpe bzhi dang/ mig yor sogs yan lag gi dpe bzhin stel*

Appearances are not real in any essential way and neither is the mind. Metaphors such as the hallucination provide accessible examples of how things appear and how we experience them even though they don't exist in any unshakeable sense. As the shared inventory of metaphors show, the Consciousness Only tradition offered compelling teaching tools for the Sakyapa, tools Ngor chen could not openly embrace. Ngor chen's resistance to the resemblance of Sakyapa descriptions of the mind to Consciousness Only counterparts is part of a larger response to a kind of linguistic taboo. Many Tibetan authors of his time are compelled to avoid using Consciousness Only modes of expression in order to avoid association with a philosophical view regarded as inferior to the ultimate Madhyamaka perspective by which all phenomena are regarded through the lens of emptiness. The taboo on Consciousness Only perspectives and modes of expression in Tibetan scholasticism and upon the language of essences more broadly within and across Buddhist discourses were compelling deterrents. Ngor chen's approach to metaphorical language such as "empty like the sky" reminds a reader of the gap between representation and reality and also cautions them to recall that resemblance does not always indicate identity.

The emptiness of the mind is vital in distinguishing the Sakyapa view of all appearances as mind from the Consciousness Only equivalent. What unique tools or frameworks do the Sakyapas possess for presenting the nature of the mind and reality as emptiness, great wisdom, and great bliss rather than as mere clarity or mere self-awareness? In the remaining sections of this article, I respond to this question by concisely introducing the nuances of three principles invoked by Ngor chen as integral dimensions of the Sakyapa orientation: freedom [*bral*], union [*gzung 'jug*], and ineffability [*brjod bral*].

Freedom

The term "free" [*bral*] appears over twenty times over the course of Ngor chen's text to express "freedom from" a range of limiting factors:

- dust [*rdul bral*] [159b.1, 159b.5]
- color and shape ... [*kha dog dang sbyibs la sogs pa dang bral ba*] [159b.6]
- svabhāva [*ngo bo nyid bral*] [159c.4],

brgyad gsungs nas dpe 'di rnams dang/ snang ba 'di la khyad par med del nyams su ni dpe 'i rnams kyang myong la/ bden par ni snang ba 'di dag kyang ma grub [159d.1] pa'o. zhes snang ba rnams bden med du bshad pa 'di rnams ji ltar drang smra bar bya'o. Ngor chen Autocommentary, 159c.5-159d.1.

- expression [*brjod bral*] [159d.6, 161a.5, 161a.6],
- proliferations [*spros pa dang bral*] [159b.3, 160a.4, 160b.3],
- the extremes of existence and nonexistence [*yod med kyi mtha' dang bral ba*] [160d.6]
 - from the two extremes [*mtha' gnyis dang bral ba*] [161b1]
 - from extremes [*mtha' dang bral ba*] [159b.1]
- separation (of the two truths) [*ya ma bral*] [161a.4],
- signs [*mtshan ma dang bral ba*] [158c.2, 158d.5 160b.6]
- form [*gzugs dang bral*] [161b.4]
- all activity [*rtsol ba thams cad dang bral ba*] [162b.6]
- birth and obstruction [*skye ba dang 'gag pa dang bral ba*] [164a.2]
- signs [*mtshan ma thams cad dang bral ba*] [161a.]
- transcendent and free [*'das shing bral ba*] [158d.2]
- illness [*nad dang bral ba*] [159a.2]

Ngor chen links the language of “freedom from” in Sakyapa discourse to a broader program of critiquing conceptuality as confining our appreciation of the true (empty) nature of things. For example, Ngor chen describes great empty bliss as follows:

As for this, from the *Samputa* it says, “Conceptualization is great ignorance and is the downfall into the ocean of saṃsāra.” In accord with this statement, anything which is endowed with conceptuality is suffering. Freedom from that is great bliss. It is put like this. For example, when there is freedom from illness, health without suffering, ordinary people call it happiness. For these (ordinary people), although there is no bliss apart from the absence of suffering, the mere absence of suffering is widely known as bliss. Likewise, although there is no virtue apart from the mere absence of evil deeds in the dharmadhātu, it is labeled as ‘virtue.’

Because it's taught like this, the two are not to be understood as equivalent.⁴³

The great empty bliss Ngor chen is attempting to describe is not to be confused with ordinary pleasure defined simply in dualistic terms as an absence of ordinary suffering. Ordinary happiness remains

⁴³ 'dir ni sam pu ti las/ rnam rtog ma rig chen po ste/ 'khor ba'i rgya mtshor ltung byed yin zhes pa ltar/ gang rtog pa dang bcas pa ni du kha yin la/ de dang bral ba ni bde ba chen po ste. [159a.2] ji skad du/ dper na nad dang bral ba na/ lus bde mya ngan med pa la/ sems bde zhes ni 'jig rten zer/ 'di dag du kha med pa las/ gzhan pa'i bde ba med mod kyil 'on kyang du kha mad tsam la/ bde ba yin zhes kun la grags. de bzhin [159a.3] chos kyi dbying la yang/ sdig pa med pa tsam zhig las/ lhag pa'i dge ba med mod kyil/ dge ba yin zhes btag par zad. ces gsungs pa ltar yin pas/ de gnyis mi mtshungs par shes par bya'o. Ngor chen Autocommentary, 159a.1-159a.3. See also [159b.2] mthar phyin ni srid pa zad pa'o. zhi ba ni gnad pa med pa'o. Ngor chen Autocommentary, 159a.1-159a.3.

entrenched in the framework of labeling [*btag par*] that itself reinforces an inaccurate conceptual binary. Ngor chen distinguishes “mere absence of suffering” [*du kha med tsam*]— bound to a limiting view of the nature of reality— from great bliss. The recourse to relativity over duality resonates with Madhyamaka descriptions of the two truths and gestures toward a distinctly Sakyapa employment of their “inseparability” [*dbyer med*]. The language of freedom [*bral*], in this case from conceptualization, nuances the language of negation effected by absence [*med pa*]. Freedom transcends “mere” absence to express a more profound nature of things.

In confirming that the teachings of the Sakyapa masters concur with the view of the empty nature of mind and of wisdom, Ngor chen engages commentaries by the Sakya patriarchs on a verse from the Hevajra Tantra not cited in his text:⁴⁴ *ye shes 'di ni ches phra zhing/ rdo rje nam mkha'i dkyil lta bu/ rdul bral thar sbyin zhi ba nyid/ khyod rang yang ni de yi pha.*⁴⁵ This verse can be provisionally translated as follows: “This wisdom is subtle to comprehend, the vajra, like the center of the sky, free from dust, bestowing liberation, peaceful. You yourself are the father of that.”⁴⁶ In unpacking this verse, and in particular the metaphor of the sky, the commentators provide clues to a distinctly Sakyapa tantric approach characterized by two key forms of freedom: freedom from extremes [*mtha' bral*] and freedom from proliferations [*spros bral*].

The view of “freedom from extremes” [*mtha' bral*], especially its articulation in the works of Ngor chen’s student Go rams pa (Go rams pa Bsod nams Seng ge, 1429-89), has been lauded as one of the most significant Sakyapa contributions to the Madhyamaka view of the relationship to the two truths; its role in later fifteenth-century polemics between the Sakyapa and Gandenpa traditions has received considerable scholarly attention.⁴⁷ Go rams pa uses “freedom from extremes” together with “freedom from proliferations” to establish the Sakyapa

⁴⁴ I referenced this same section [159a.4-159b.4] briefly above in the previous section on polysemy.

⁴⁵ *Hevajra Tantra* II.xii.4. *Kye'i rdo rje'i rgyud*, Sde dge bka' 'gyur, Vol.80, 29a.7-29b.1. TBRC W4CZ5269.

⁴⁶ For more on this verse, see Chogye Trichen Rinpoche’s commentary in Thubstan-legs-bsad-rgya-mtsho, Thubten Choedak, Ngag-dbang-kun-dga'-thegchen-dpal-'bar, Jay Goldberg, John Dewese, and Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan 2003:178.

⁴⁷ For examples, see Go-rams-pa Bsod-nams-señ-ge, José Ignacio Cabezón, Lobsang Dargyay, and Go-rams-pa Bsod-nams-señ-ge 2007 and Kassor 2011. Broido 1985: 33-43 treats “freedom from proliferations” [*spros bral*] as a “bridge” between Madhyamaka and tantra and between theory and practice within the writings of sixteenth-century bka' rgyud pa authors. For a thorough exploration of the term, see Hookham 1991: Chapter Five.

perspective as the “true middle way” and to distinguish it from both Jo nang pa eternalism and Gandenpa nihilism.⁴⁸ In eliminating the possibility of four extremes (existence, non-existence, both, and neither) through reasoning, *spros bral* leads to an experience of transcending both logic and the compulsion to grasp at concepts; supplemented by non-conceptual meditation, realizing freedom from proliferations leads to liberation.⁴⁹ For Go rams pa, such varieties of freedom provide an ideal method for realizing nonduality.⁵⁰ Cabezón highlights how Go rams pa uses freedom from proliferations “as much denominatively as descriptively” to “brand” a distinctly Sakyapa approach to Madhyamaka.⁵¹ Ngor chen’s text demonstrates an appeal to the language of freedom that sets the stage for Go rams pa’s later “branding” choices.

Ngor chen correlates the tantric and sūtric systems by invoking “freedom from extremes” and “freedom from proliferations” in the tantric context. In doing so, he refers to the profound language of the tantras themselves and to the tantric commentaries by Sakyapa masters. For example, Ngor chen cites Sakya patriarch Bsod nams rtse mo to identify this wisdom described in the tantra with the experience of the third tantric initiation [*gsum pa’i tshe myong ba gang yin pa’o*].⁵² He explains the center of the sky as the heart or essence [*snying po*] and free from extremes [*mtha’ dang bral ba’o*], in a notable play upon the tension between essences and their absence. Ngor chen also cites Grags pa rgyal mtshan’s response to an imagined opponent who would mistakenly identify “self-aware wisdom” [*rang rig yes shes*] as “mere self-awareness” [*rang rig tsam*]: “Free from proliferations [*spros pa dang bral bar*], it casts off the awareness of self and other, and it is not established as any such object of observation. As for the example

⁴⁸ Go-rams-pa Bsod-nams-señ-ge, José Ignacio Cabezón, Lobsang Dargyay, and Go-rams-pa Bsod-nams-señ-ge 2007: 48.

⁴⁹ See Kassor 2011 for a lucid presentation of *spros bral*. According to Kassor, Go rams pa’s articulation of freedom from proliferations presented a synthesis of theory and practice, reason and experience, that lent itself to ecumenical platforms though Go rams pa himself is “not necessarily ecumenically minded.” Kassor 2011:135.

⁵⁰ Go-rams-pa Bsod-nams-señ-ge, José Ignacio Cabezón, Lobsang Dargyay, and Go-rams-pa Bsod-nams-señ-ge 2007: 53-4.

⁵¹ Go-rams-pa Bsod-nams-señ-ge, José Ignacio Cabezón, Lobsang Dargyay, and Go-rams-pa Bsod-nams-señ-ge 2007: 48.

⁵² *de bzhin du slob dpon rin po che bsod nams rtse mos kyang/ ye shes ’di ni gsum pa’i tshe myong ba gang yin pa’o. ches phra ba [159b.1] ni rtogs par bka’ ba’o. rdo rje ni mi phyed pa’o. nam mkha’i dkyil ni mtha’ dang bral ba’o. yang ni dkyil ni snying po ste mtha’ dang bral ba ste/ nam mkha’ ’di dmigs pa med pa’o. rdul bral ni nyon mongs pa zad pa’o.* Ngor chen Autocommentary 159a.5-159b.2.

of that, it is said to be equal to the sky.”⁵³ The Sakyapa notion of “freedom from proliferations” [*spros bral* Skt. *niṣprapañcā*] therefore echoes familiar Consciousness Only concerns with the mind’s excessive tendencies to generate thoughts and images as well as to default to binaries.⁵⁴

Through his citations of the Sakya venerables, Ngor chen articulates a sky-like freedom achieved by meditative realization of freedom from proliferations. The meditation involves three stages:

- establishing appearances as mind (*snang ba sems su bsgrub pa*)
- establishing mind as illusion (*sems sgyu mar bsgrub pa*)
- establishing illusion as naturelessness (*sgyu ma rang bzhin med par bsgrub pa*)⁵⁵

This practice undeniably shares a vocabulary of appearances, illusions, natures and naturelessness with the Consciousness Only corpus. However, Sakyapa authors like Grags pa rgyal mtshan argue that the resemblance diverges after the first step of this contemplative

⁵³ *de spros pa dang bral bar bstan pa'i phyir/ rang gzhan yang dag rig pa spangs te/ de gnyis phan tshun ltos pa'i phyir dang/ dmigs par bya ba'i yul 'ga' [159b.4] yang ma grub pa'i phyir ro.de nyid dpe ni mkha' mnyam zhes bya ba smos te.* Ngor chen Autocommentary, 159b.3.

⁵⁴ In Go rams pa's understanding of freedom from proliferations: “Proliferations” refer not only to truly existent things (*bden pa'i dngos po*), but to all signs of negative and positive phenomena that mind engages in and diffuses toward (*blo 'jug cing 'phro ba dgag sgrub kyi chos kyi mtshan ma thams cad*). “Freedom” refers to the utter non-findability in terms of being free [even] from mere negative and positive phenomena (*dgag sgrub kyi chos tsam dang bral ba'i ci yang ma rnyed pa nyid*), transcendence beyond the objects of functioning of examples, sounds, and minds (*dpe dang sgra dang blo'i spyod yul las 'das pa*).” Komarovski 2016: 154, paraphrase of Go rams pa 1995g. 93-4. Go rams pa articulates freedom as “nonfindability” [*ma rnyed pa nyid*] and transcendence [*las 'das pa*] of frameworks of analysis, experience, and expression. As in Ngor chen's text, the freedom associated with knowing the true nature of reality is depicted as free from exemplification, from metaphors themselves. This claim derives its meaning from the centrality of metaphors to both the pedagogical system and to textuality. This particular application of freedom nuances absences with the quality of “non-findability in terms of being free [even] from mere negative and positive phenomena.” In this definition, *tsam* diminishes the binary between that which can be validated by reason and that which can be defeated by it.

⁵⁵ Thub-bstan-legs-bśad-rgya-mtsho, Thubten Choedak, Ngag-dbang-kun-dga'-theg-chen-dpal-'bar, Jay Goldberg, John Deweese, and Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan 2003 is a modern commentary upon the song of Grags pa rgyal mtshan describing this practice. See especially 151-183. Komarovski 2016: fn 45 references this practice in Go rams pa's and Shākya mchog ldan's writing. See also Komarovski 2011: 97.

practice.⁵⁶

Ineffability and Union

Whether it is possible to describe the true nature of things or even worthwhile to try is a question troubling the rhetorical use of the languages of natures and essences. Within Buddhist textuality, ineffability serves as both a positive descriptor of the nature of ultimate reality and an invective against conceptual clinging.⁵⁷ Ngor chen presents “freedom from expression” [*brjod bral*] as a key aspect of the mind’s true nature. Many of the forms of freedom he describes are forms of freedom from bases for description like color, shape, signs, and form. According to Ngor chen, “Thus, natural coemergence (*rang bzhin lhan skyes*) is taught as the freedom from expression [*brjod bral*] which is the nonduality of conventional and ultimate, but it is not taught as mere clear awareness.”⁵⁸ Ngor chen correlates this variety of freedom with nonduality, a proper understanding of the two truths, and natural coemergence; he also uses it as a tool in distinguishing the latter from “mere clear awareness.” He adds a disclaimer: “Thus, since it is not possible to assign another name to that which is free from all signs [*mtshan ma thams cad dang bral ba*] and free from observation [*dmigs su med pa*], it’s designated as “naturally coemergent” and “union” and so on. However, ultimately what is “union” [*zung ’jug*] is not taught as the totally pure view which is free from the two extremes.”⁵⁹ Representations does not equal reality but rather provide containers for regarding the “natural” state of things.

Discourses of “union” or “inseparability” are common for the Sakyapas, the most famous being the inseparability of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.⁶⁰ The Sakyapas use inseparability as a tool for explaining their

⁵⁶ Thub-bstan-legs-bśad-rgya-mtsho, Thubten Choedak, Ngag-dbang-kun-dga’-theg-chen-dpal-bar, Jay Goldberg, John Dewese, and Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan 2003: 159.

⁵⁷ Tzohar 2018 explores important connections between the use of metaphor and ineffability. See especially Chapter Three where he examines the *Tattvārthapaṭalam* chapter of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* along with corresponding commentary from the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*. Komarovski 2008 has produced extensive work on the category of the ineffable, with particular attention to the Sakyapa approach.

⁵⁸ *des na kun rdzob don dam dag/ gnyis su med pa’i brjod bral la*. Ngor chen Autocommentary, 161a.5

⁵⁹ *des na mtshan ma thams cad dang bral ba dmigs su med pa de nyid la* [161b.1] *ming gzhan gdags mi nus pa’i phyir/ rang bzhin lhan skyes dang zung ’jug sogs kyis brtags kyil/ zung ’jug ces pa mtha’ gnyis dang bral ba’i lta ba yang dag pa’o. zung ’jug ces pa/ zhes kyang mi gsungs te*. Ngor chen Autocommentary, 161a.6-161b.2.

⁶⁰ Chogye Trichen Rinpoche describes a variety of forms of union and inseparability from the Sakyapa repertory: “of appearance and emptiness” “of sound and emptiness” “of bliss and emptiness” and “of awareness and emptiness.” Thub-bstan-

perspectival philosophical orientation and for avoiding the extremes of eternalism and nihilism. In the section devoted to explaining the “naturally co-emergent wisdom,” Ngor chen engages the “union of clarity and emptiness” [*gsal stong gzung 'jug*] to distinguish the nature [*ngo bo*] of this very special form of wisdom from mere clear awareness. Over the course of the passage, Ngor chen establishes a series of links between ineffability [*spros bral*], non-findability [*ma rnyed pa*], and union [*gzung 'jug*]. He carefully parses the nature [*rang bzhin*] of the mind (its emptiness) from its characteristic [*mtshan nyid*], clarity.

Thus, as for clarity, it is the conventional truth. As for emptiness, it is the ultimate truth. If you ask, how are these two united? The mind does not abandon clarity, (because) Clarity is the characteristic of the mind. But if you carefully examine that clarity, no matter what is sought, be it place, family, color, shape, and so forth, there is nothing that is found. The (quality of) non find-ability and non-establishment is called emptiness, the nature of the mind.⁶¹

Ngor chen identifies clarity as belonging to the world of concepts and things, of the conventions for operating within the ordinary or unenlightened perspective. Clarity characterizes the mind, but emptiness is the true nature of things. Ngor chen applies “non-findability” [*mi rnyed*] and “non-establishment” [*ma grub pa*] to explore the relationship of clarity and emptiness in terms of the two truths. While the properties on being “not” found and “not” established may initially appear to fit within a negative dialectic on the true nature of the mind and of reality, Ngor chen employs them here to indicate the content of an experience rather than an ontological reality. He connects this experience of nonduality and nonconceptuality with “union” [*zung 'jug*], writing:

Likewise, this inability to find anything whatsoever when seeking clarity is called emptiness. That seeker, emptiness, is called clarity. In short, in the time of clarity, there is emptiness. In the time of emptiness, (there) is clarity. *Gsal stong*, that which cannot be separated, for that there are various names taught: the unfabricated nature of mind, the wisdom of natural coemergence, or nondual, or inexpressible, or union, and so on. Likewise, it is nondual. Since when we hold fast to the

legs-bśad-rgya-mtsho, Thubten Choedak, Ngag-dbang-kun-dga'-theg-chen-dpal-'bar, Jay Goldberg, John Dewese, and Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan 2003: 177.

⁶¹ *des ni gsal ba ni kun rdzob kyi bden pa* [160a.6] / *stong pa ni don dam pa'i bden pa ste/ de gnyis ji ltar zung du 'jug ce na/ sems kyi gsal ba mi 'dor ni/ gsal ba sems kyi mtshan nyid la/ gsal ba de legs par brtags na/ gnas sam rigs sam kha dog gam/ dbyibs la* [160b.1] *sogs pa gang ltar btsal yang/ mi rnyed cing ma grub pa ni/ stong pa sems kyi rang bzhin zhes bya*. Ngor chen Autocommentary: 160a.5-160b.1.

concept of “union,” it becomes an extreme view, don't grasp it!⁶²

This kind of union is also related to Nāgārjuna's description of the relationship of conventional and ultimate: the two must be viewed separately before mixing them.⁶³ Drakpa Gyatso, a Sakyapa expert at the International Buddhist Academy described the relationship of clarity and emptiness found in the passage to me as follows: “There is no seeker separate from emptiness. That's the ultimate truth. When we look for the mind, it disappears. The seeker himself is empty. The meaning here is that emptiness and clarity can't be separated.”⁶⁴ “Don't grasp it!” In presenting this particular form of “union,” Ngor chen warns against the temptation to reify it. The Mahāyāna emphasis on the interdependence and relativity of concepts reverberates here along with the understanding of emptiness as a state of not grasping at entities or concepts. The union of clarity and emptiness (*gsal stong gzung 'jug*) therefore builds upon the Consciousness Only emphasis upon nonduality while simultaneously engaging the Madhyamaka concern with nonconceptuality. Furthermore, it resonates with tantric descriptions of the union of wisdom and compassion and of “one taste.”⁶⁵ The language of “clarity” does resemble more positive descriptions of the nature of mind found throughout the literature of Consciousness Only, Buddha nature, and Other-emptiness. Ngor chen copes with this resemblance by emphasizing the consonance of “union” with a mainstream Madhyamaka perspective on emptiness in terms of the avoidance of extremes.

For the Sakyapas, the mind's clarity is its “capacity for transformation,” a quality that can be glimpsed in the gaps between the

⁶² *de ltar na/ gsal ba btsal bas ma rnyed pa la stong ba zhes bya. stong par tshol mkhan de nyid la gsal ba zhes bya ste. [160b.2] mdor na gsal ba'i dus nyid na stong ba/ stong pa'i dus nyid na gsal ba/ gsal stong gnyis so sor sus kyang dbyer mi phyed pa de la bcos min sems kyi ngo bo'am/ rang bzhin lhan cig skyes pa'i ye shes sam/ gnyis med dam/ brjod bral [160b.3] lam/ zung 'jug ces bya ba la sogs pa'i ming gi rnam grangs du mas bstan pa yin la/ de ltar gnyis med/ zung 'jug ces nges par bzung na yang lta ba mthar cad du 'byung ba'i phyir/ der yang mi 'dzin te. Ngor chen Autocommentary: 160b.1-160b.4.*

⁶³ Nāgārjuna says, “Because whenever one understands the conventional and ultimate as separate, they come to be intermingled, that is understood as union.” *klu sgrub [161b.3] kyis/ kun rdzob pa dang don dam dag/ so sor phyed ste shes gyur nas/ gang du yang dag 'dres gyur bas/ zung du 'jugs par de bshad do/ zhes so. Ngor chen Autocommentary, 161b.2-.3.*

⁶⁴ Drakpa Gyatso, International Buddhist Academy, Personal communication, June 2018.

⁶⁵ See Broido 1985: 26-31 for a discussion of the roots of “union” [Tib. *zung 'jug* Skt. *yuganaddha*] in the final krama of Nāgārjuna's *Pañcakrama*, its place in Bka' rgyud pa critiques of Tsong kha pa, and the resemblance of Bka' rgyud pa and Sakyapa approaches to the inseparability of the two truths and of appearance and emptiness.

disappearance of one thought and the arising of the next.⁶⁶ Clarity is also vital for appreciating how the deconstruction of the thought process results in understanding the nature of mind not to be a void but a “non-dual continuity.”⁶⁷ Clarity is at the crux of the polemical imperative. Ngor chen’s text responds to concerns with clarity. He wrote the commentary in response to a request from a student to clearly teach the meaning [*don gsal bar gyis*] of the pithy verses.⁶⁸ The language of clarity recurs throughout the text to reinforce textual validity, to confirm that something is clearly taught in the scriptures. Likewise, clarity plays a key role in establishing a theory of textual meanings as natural, flowing or radiating forth in an uninterrupted stream from enlightened masters of the past to commentators of the present. Clarity therefore establishes a sense of continuity of meaning, one that appears “natural.” This aspect of the use of clarity indicates that something is evident, and has the power, like the mind itself by some accounts, to “clear away misconceptions.” The subtle interplay of this sense of clarity as articulation and the more profound sense of clarity as inseparable from the empty nature of things produces the naturalness of meaning, as something presently obscured but essential and awaiting discovery.

*“Mirrors are Windows”:
On a Literary Approach to Tantric Texts*

This article has illuminated tensions around the rhetoric of naturalness in Tibetan scholasticism and has revealed the boundary between Buddhist philosophy and tantra in fifteenth-century Tibet to be porous. The confusion of the Sakyapa transmission of the Hevajra tantras with a Consciousness Only position and of “naturally coemergent wisdom” and “self-aware great bliss” with “mere clarity” threatened the integrity of both their philosophical and tantric traditions. Ngor chen’s tantric polemics were a defense of Sakyapa understandings of the nature of the mind and of emptiness itself. Attention to the language of “freedom,” “non-findability,” and “union” in Ngor chen’s text suggests a distinct awareness among Sakyapa authors of the importance of reflecting a coherent formulation of the Madhyamaka view, even in approaching tantric materials.

⁶⁶ Thub-bstan-legs-bsad-rgya-mtsho, Thubten Choedak, Ngag-dbang-kun-dga’-theg-chen-dpal-bar, Jay Goldberg, John Dewese, and Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan 2003: 176.

⁶⁷ Thub-bstan-legs-bsad-rgya-mtsho, Thubten Choedak, Ngag-dbang-kun-dga’-theg-chen-dpal-bar, Jay Goldberg, John Dewese, and Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan 2003: 179.

⁶⁸ Ngor chen Autocommentary: 164a.6.

Ngor chen provides a crucial link between later fifteenth-century Sakyapa authors navigating the philosophical morass of eternalism and nihilism and the positions they were critiquing, such as those of Tsong kha pa and Dol po pa. Scholarship to date has emphasized later fifteenth-century Sakyapa and Gandenpa polemical exchanges on their respective understandings of the Madhyamaka tradition. Two of Ngor chen's students, Go rams pa (Go rams pa Bsod nam Seng ge, 1429-89) and Shākya mchog ldan (1428-1507) have been especially influential both for Sakyapa self-understandings and academic interpretations of the tradition.⁶⁹ The suppression and subsequent revelation of their writings have also enhanced their allure for scholars.⁷⁰ Although the approach to tantra is more explicitly at issue in Ngor chen's text, he also plays a formative role in defending the Sakyapa approach to Madhyamaka, setting the stage for these later fifteenth century authors.

A literary approach to polemics highlights the skepticism of Buddhist authors regarding the representational power of language alongside their struggles with and celebrations of its stickiness and its polysemy. In analyzing the complexities of resemblance in Indian literature, the repetition, subversion and transformation of literary forms such as metaphors across genres, A.K. Ramanujan observes:

“Mimesis is never only mimesis, for it evokes the earlier image in order to play with it and make it mean other things. When the ‘same’ Indian poem appears in different ages and bodies of poetry, we cannot dismiss them as interlopers and anachronisms, for they become signifiers in a new system: mirrors again that become windows.”⁷¹

Ngor chen guides a reader in thinking more deeply about what it means to be “empty like the sky” in a complementary manner, revealing “mirrors again that become windows.” He illuminates the role of this metaphor of the sky in Consciousness Only texts of describing that which is “one taste,” “stainless,” and “unchanging” as well as to describe buddha nature. He simultaneously highlights its function within a broader Mahāyāna context to describe the selfless and empty nature of reality. He also uses the sky to bridge the Madhyamaka and tantric perspectives and as a container for regarding the nature of

⁶⁹ On Shākya mchog ldan, see Komarovski 2008, 2014, and 2016.

⁷⁰ Go rams pa's texts were “destroyed or otherwise removed” from monasteries by the Dga' ldan pa in the seventeenth century at on the orders of the Fifth Dalai Lama. They were republished and disseminated during the twentieth century, gaining attention within the “nonsectarian” (*ris med*) movement. Kassor 2011: 121-122.

⁷¹ A.K. Ramanujan. “Where Mirrors are Windows: Toward and Anthology of Reflection,” 207.

mind, of great bliss and of great wisdom as pervasive and free.

My hope is that this study contributes to a more robust appreciation of fifteenth-century Sakyapa polemics and of the use of language to synthesize sūtra with tantra as well as theory with practice. In examining the language of clarity and naturalness in Ngor chen's text in light of its intertextuality and polysemy, I encourage readers to resist the temptation to reduce resemblance to identity in Buddhist texts before taking a closer look.

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