# Sixth International Seminar of Young Tibetologists Keynote Address: What Tibetan Studies Academics Can Learn from the Tibetan Traditional Education System and Vice-Versa[1]

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As is widely known, the traditional Tibetan educational system, by which I mean the educational system used in Tibetan monasteries, and its central pedagogical approaches are either directly or indirectly structured around three principal practices: listening (*thos pa*), contemplating (*bsam pa*), and meditating (*sgom pa*). While exposition (*'chad pa*), debate (*rtsod pa*), and composition (*rtsom pa*) represent the main approaches to preserving and promoting the Buddha's teachings, the triad of refuting (*dgag pa*) other systems, establishing (*bzhag pa*) one's own system, and dispelling objections (*brtsod pa spong pa*) with respect to one's own system are employed as the primary framework for scholarly composition. Nevertheless, whatever method one may use, the goals of the traditional education system are always ultimately twofold: to tame one's own mind and preserve the teaching of Buddha.

As modern scholars or students in the field of Tibetology, particularly in Tibetan Buddhism, whether we implement qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods in our academic studies or research, our main goal is neither to tame the mind nor preserve Buddha's teaching. Our goal is rather to establish new academic knowledge and to further develop received knowledge for the sake of advancing our academic field. Since traditional and modern educational systems have very different goals, we should expect that their primary methodological paths toward their goals should be different as well. Traditional methodological tools and pedagogical techniques may not work for modern academic studies; likewise, some modern academic methodological apparatuses may not be suitable for the traditional educational system.

However, this does not mean that there is nothing at all that they

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might contribute to one another. Even though traditional and modern educational systems do not share the same final goals and principal training methods, without doubt there are several conventional pedagogical systems and methodological apparatuses for research that they might profitably share with one another.

Here, I will suggest that for students and scholars in traditional Tibetan educational systems, especially those who are in the monastic educational system, philological approaches and text-critical analysis that have been systematically developed and practiced within Western educational systems for centuries can provide extremely useful tools for working with classical literature and for other forms of traditional textual scholarship. On the other hand, in the past half-decade or so I have spent training in the academic study of Tibetan Buddhism, one major area that I often feel needs to be improved is the basic structure of the curriculum for graduate study in the field. There is a great deal to be learned from the traditional Tibetan educational system on this point, especially in terms of a rigorous comprehensiveness that would make a huge contribution to our graduate curriculum for the advanced study of Tibetan Buddhism. Hence, in this talk I will address the following two compound questions: How and why are modern philological approaches and text-critical studies important for students in traditional Tibetan educational settings, especially for those in monasteries and nunneries? And how and why should we seek to improve the academic curriculum for graduate-level study of Tibetan Buddhism in modern colleges and universities?

### *1. What can students or scholars in the traditional Tibetan educational system learn from the modern educational system?*

As students in traditional Tibetan educational settings, what can we learn from the modern academic system, and how can those elements be implemented within traditional academic practice? While there are certainly a number of different answers that could be given, as mentioned above, my experience in both traditional and Western academic educational systems for many years suggests two particular methodological approaches as key methods that would most benefit students in traditional educational settings: philological practices and text-critical analysis. These methods would definitely serve as crucial tools for improving and updating the traditional educational system and for preserving the value of traditional knowledge in the modern world.

Philology represents the fundamental method of gaining better comprehension of textual traditions and decoding textualized

meaning. As students in traditional educational settings, our primary responsibilities involve traditional texts. Each day, we read, memorize, recite, and debate mainly on the basis of traditional texts. However, intentionally or unintentionally, we often ignore some critical text-related issues that could have a huge impact on our proper understanding of texts and textualized meaning. Careful treatment of internal textual references, drawing a clear line between principal ideas from the original source and those from secondary sources, and linguistic analysis of similarities and dissimilarities between original and secondary sources' language patterns—these are some examples of crucial philological issues and practices we sometimes do not give the attention they deserve. Such oversights can create unnecessary obstacles to our understanding of texts and their meanings.

Moreover, there is a common tendency for traditional scholars to read original or primary texts through the lenses of secondary works, such as later scholars' commentaries, rather than study the original texts on their own. For such reasons, secondary sources are sometimes treated as equally important to the texts they comment upon, even though they were created in different times and places. As we know, vocabularies, phrases, and sentences convey different meanings at different times and in different historical contexts. Thus, I think it is crucial to be able to analyze the texts we read, study, and debate with systematic philological methods.

At the same time, I also would like to acknowledge that Tibetans have had, for a long time, their own rich tradition of philological practice. Philological principles and practices became well-known among Tibetan thinkers beginning in at least the fourteenth century. For example, we can assert that Tsongkhapa's *The Essence of Treatises: Distinguishing the Interpretable Meaning and Definitive Meaning* (*Drang nges legs bshad snying po*) is one of the masterpieces of traditional Tibetan philology. In this work, the interpretations of Buddhist philosophical ideas by Indian masters such as Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga, Candrakīrti, Bhāviveka, and Dharmakīrti are analyzed and evaluated, not only along philosophical lines, but also with detailed philological methods. In this text, Tsongkhapa carefully analyzes these works' general language patterns, modes of specialized philosophical terminologies, sources of internal textual references, and so on.

Another example of traditional Tibetan philological work is found in Tsongkhapa's commentary on the *Abhisamyālaṃkāra,* called the *Golden Garland Treatise (Legs bshad gser phreng)*. In the first chapter of *Golden Garland*, Tsongkhapa dedicates over six pages to investigating the authorship of twenty-one commentaries on the *Abhisamyālaṃkāra*. These twenty-one commentaries were commonly accepted as being of Indian origin by the majority of early Tibetan thinkers. However,

Tsongkhapa rejects the Indian origins of four of them. He uses different types of reasoning to analyze each. One is rejected on the basis of internal textual evidence, another on the basis of historical context, and so on. In another example, he rejects the Indian provenance of a commentary on the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in One Hundred Thousand Lines* (Skt. *Śata-sāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*; Tib. *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa stong phrag brgya pa),* which is commonly accepted as authored by the Indian master Dharmaśrī, because it employs many terms and phrases that do not appear in other works of Indian Buddhist philosophical literature. If, as Sheldon Pollock proposes, philology is "the discipline of making sense of texts",[2] then Tsongkhapa is a philologist working to make sense of these texts by analyzing their textuality and textualized meaning in their historical contexts. And there are numerous other examples of traditional Tibetan philology.

Although this is the case, philological methods and apparatuses have yet to be systematically defined and developed for use in the traditional Tibetan educational system. This being so, students and scholars in the traditional system, monastics in particular, would definitely benefit from the Western philological approach. I personally have found Western philological methods to be very useful and effective; they help us not only by providing an understanding of textuality, in the broadest sense, but also by providing tools to study the specifics of textualized meaning and historical contexts.

The text-critical approach, especially the critical editorial method, is one widely practiced scholarly method that could constitute a huge contribution to the traditional Tibetan educational system. As we know, the Tibetan textual tradition is very rich in terms of both size and content. The Tibetan Buddhist canon alone, which includes the translated words of the Buddha (Kangyur, *Bka' 'gyur*) and translated treatises (Tengyur, *Bstan 'gyur*), exceeds three hundred volumes. Tibetan scholars have produced countless works of scholarship over the centuries. As students in traditional educational settings, especially monasteries and nunneries, we engage with these texts on a daily basis. The tools of textual criticism, especially critical editorial methods, would provide us the skills and means for analyzing the nature of texts, procedures for collating the assembled materials, establishing relationships among texts, and textual evidence, as well as the process of printing and reprinting the texts. These tools and skills could prove to be crucial for students in traditional settings.

Most of the study manuals used in monasteries and nunneries, along with the Kangyur and Tengyur, have gradually started to be

[2] Pollock 2009: 937.

published in modern book format by traditional institutions. Large numbers of works of Tibetan classical literature, as well as other works, have been reproduced over and over to meet the demands of students and general readers. Given this situation, to what extent can we treat these reprinted versions of modernized classical texts as the authors' original works? What kind of editorial methods were used in the process of reproducing these classical texts? More importantly, is there a standardized editorial apparatus to deal with textual variants and other text-related issues in order to preserve the unamended intention of their original authors? Considering these questions, I think it is important to have standard conventions for the transcription of manuscripts and a systematic way of editing classical works in traditional institutions. I have personally found that Walter Greg's "The Rationale of Copy-Text"[3] and University of Virginia professors David L. Vander Meulen and G. Thomas Tanselle's "A System of Manuscript Transcription"[4] present particularly useful and effective editorial tools that traditional institutions and scholars could employ in their text-related work.

### *2. What can scholars and students in the modern educational system learn from the traditional Tibetan educational system?*

The structures of general curriculums and their contents, as well as pedagogical approaches employed by traditional Tibetan institutions, may slightly differ from tradition to tradition. However, in terms of principal learning subjects, all the major Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug, are primarily focused on five major fields and tantric teaching, as will be shortly discussed. However, in order to engage with today's audience more effectively and productively, I will here rely on my own educational background and the system in which I was educated. As a result, when I discuss the curriculum, pedagogy, and textual references, I am drawing mainly from the Gelug tradition, especially the educational system established at Ganden Monastery.

During the nineteen years I spent training in traditional philosophical studies at Ganden Monastery, I thought little about the overall structure of the traditional educational system and how it affects students' learning. I simply did not realize how well these traditional curriculums were designed. They were something we just took for granted. In 2009, I entered Gelugpa University for Geshe

[3] Greg 1950: 19.
[4] Vander Muelen and Tanselle 1999: 201.

Lharampa study and defended my Geshe Lharampa dissertation in 2015. These six years of Geshe Lharampa training at Gelugpa University gave me a strong sense of how well the standard monastic academic curriculums were designed and how well they prepare students for advanced study.

In general, the overall structure of formal curriculums at Gelugpa University is quite similar to that of modern academic curriculums. There are many subjects and much reading material that students are expected to engage in a relatively short period of time. In many cases, students lack sufficient time to properly digest all the assigned readings. However, the standard monastic academic training students must complete prior to entering Gelugpa University equips them with all the necessary tools to effectively face the challenge associated with this imbalance between academic expectations and the limited time allotted, a challenge we certainly face in advanced Geshe Lharampa study. I think a similar challenge confronts students in most modern educational institutions. Over the last nine years of my training, both in undergraduate and graduate programs in western academic settings, I have come to believe that this imbalance between academic expectations and time allotted is one of the main factors creating obstacles to students' understanding of assigned reading materials.

In the standard monastic curricular system, study materials are divided into several categories based on subject matter, such as Pramāna (*tshad ma*), Prajñāpāramitā (*phar phyin*), Mādhyamaka (*dbu ma*), Abhidharma (*mdzod*), Vinaya (*'dul ba*), and Tantra (*sngags*). Students then train in a single subject over the course of one or two semesters, or even an entire year when necessary. This pedagogical approach prepares students well for advanced study when they enter Gelugpa University. More importantly, this sort of well-designed curricular structure provides a comprehensive foundation for producing well-rounded scholars. At this point, then, I would like to discuss curricular structures in modern educational institutions and consider further the traditional Tibetan monastic curriculum in order to explore what the former might learn from the latter.

In general, undergraduate courses on Tibetan Buddhism seem to be the first place where students develop an interest in the field. For those who continue on to graduate studies, the next three or four years are the essential period for them to gain a general knowledge of the field and to develop a deeper understanding of a particular area of the field in which they will specialize. As we know, the courses on Tibetan Buddhism offered to undergraduate students usually present the topic in very broad terms. A common approach is to cover general concepts associated with the Four Noble Truths and an overview of the historical development of Tibetan Buddhism. Such an approach is

appropriate, as these courses are designed for college students who have little or no prior knowledge of the topic.

The following three or four years of graduate study offer students more opportunities to explore Tibetan Studies and Tibetan Buddhism, with options for specialized courses on a range of related topics. However, the curriculum can vary significantly, as the graduate courses on Tibetan Buddhism that are offered vary from semester to semester and from one year to the next, even at the same institution. Of course, these offerings prepare students for their further advanced study and research. Nevertheless, I strongly feel that a standardized curriculum for graduate study, which covers all major topics (Pramāṇa, Prajñāpāramitā, Mādhyamaka, Abhidharma, Vinaya, and Tantra) of traditional Tibetan Buddhism should be established at any institution where an advanced degree in Tibetan Buddhism, and especially Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, is offered. This will provide students with a solid foundation and better understanding of their academic field, and a more comprehensive sense of Tibetan Buddhism as a whole.

In my view, without such a standardized curriculum that systematically introduces and covers these major topics of Tibetan Buddhism I have mentioned, it will be an impossible task for students to get a full picture of Tibetan Buddhism and its philosophical system. For example, the subjects of Pramāna, Prajñāpāramitā, Mādhyamaka, Abhidharma, Vinaya, and Tantra are deeply connected to each other, both syntactically and semantically, at least in the context of Tibetan Buddhism. Hence, I think it is important to offer at least one semester-long course on each of these major subjects, so that students can develop some sense of the general structure, historical developments, and philosophical ideas of these major fields. With this approach, we really can produce well-rounded students in the academic field of Tibetan Buddhism and its philosophy.

Moreover, providing this type of effective and well-rounded academic plan will not only enrich students' general knowledge of Tibetology, broadly speaking, and their more focused understanding of the field of Tibetan Buddhism, but it will also equip them with the necessary knowledge and tools for a successful teaching career. Such an approach will enable teachers to design courses that provide students a comprehensive picture of Tibetan Buddhism, as it is. Whether we are teaching assistants or professors in the field, throughout our teaching career we commonly face a certain challenge: students regularly come up with a number of questions from their reading or research that fall outside of our specialty or area of focus. In such cases, at least we will be able to provide students with

justifiable answers or sufficient background information regarding their questions.

As we know, due to many factors, it is impossible for students in modern academic institutions to spend decades and decades on these subjects as students in traditional institutions do. Nevertheless, I think it is important to provide graduate students in Tibetan Buddhism in general and especially those who are specializing in Tibetan Buddhist philosophical training a sufficient background knowledge in their field and the critical skills they will need for fruitful academic careers. Hence, I think it would be ideal if institutions could offer at least a minimum of one semester each on Pramāna, Prajñāpāramitā, Mādhyamaka, Abhidharma, Vinaya, and Tantra.

In a world where education is often prioritized as a fundamental key to success, our lives can be characterized by an eagerness to explore new ideas and learn new skills. Whether we are students or scholars in the modern academic field of Tibetan Buddhist studies or engaged in traditional Tibetan Buddhist studies, there are a number of skill sets and forms of knowledge that we can learn from one other. Modern philology and the text-critical approach, for example, offer effective methods and relevant skills for the traditional Tibetan educational system. Thus, it would behoove students and scholars in traditional Tibetan educational settings to learn these methods and skills in order to improve and update their educational system and preserve the value of traditional knowledge in a manner that accords with the present day. As I have expressed above, advanced Tibetan Buddhist studies curricula would benefit significantly from further development and systematization, and I think the traditional Tibetan monastic curriculum would serve as an ideal model.

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