

Note on Drokmi's view on the teachings of Ratnākaraśānti and Vīravajra

Dondrup Tsering
(Charles University)

Drokmi Lotsāwa Śākya Yéshé (993-1077)¹ was one of the most significant figures in the later diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet (Tib. *bstan pa phyi dar*). He played a crucial role in introducing the Yoginītantra tradition to Tibet, particularly the *Hevajra* cycle and the *Lam 'Bras* (Path with the Result) teachings of the Sakya school.

Drokmi traveled to India to receive tantric teachings and returned to Tibet around 1025, where he spent the remainder of his life primarily in Mang mkhar mu gu lung², a village near Lha tse in Gzhis ka rtse. There, he continued to receive, transmit and practice the teachings he had acquired. Among the several Indian and Nepalese masters he studied under, Ratnākaraśānti (ca. 970–1045)³ and Vīravajra (ca. 985–1050)⁴ were undoubtedly the most important. Drokmi studied with

¹ 'Brog mi lo tsā ba shā kya ye shes, hereafter Drokmi.

² Also, Mang mkhar myu gu lung.

³ I follow Seton 2015 for the dating.

⁴ According to the *Blue Annals* and other biographies of Mar pa, Mar pa lo tsā ba chos kyi blo gros (1012-1097) visited and studied under Drokmi at the age of fifteen, which would have been in 1026 (1012+14), shortly after Drokmi's return to Tibet. This suggests that Drokmi returned to Tibet in approximately 1025. Both Grags pa rgyal mtshan and Dmar ston confirm that Drokmi spent thirteen years in Nepal and India, including four years studying under Vīravajra, before returning to Tibet. Thus, Drokmi likely left Tibet around 1012, at the age of twenty, and met Vīravajra around 1021. The *Blue Annals* further corroborates this departure date, stating that Drokmi was sent to India when Lo chen rin chen bzang po (958-1055) was approximately fifty years old. This would place the date at approximately 1007 (958+49), a five-year discrepancy from 1012, which may stem from the *Blue Annals*' use of 'approximately' for the date. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Drokmi departed for India in 1012, the same year Mar pa was born. Later, Vīravajra visited Drokmi's residence at *Mu gu lung*, where one of the thirteen caves bears his name. It was there that he taught and collaborated with Drokmi in translating several texts. The cave complex, constructed by Drokmi, served as the site where Drokmi and Gayādhara translated the triple texts of *Hevajra* cycle there in 1043, as recorded in the pilgrimage guide (*Gnas bshad*) to *Mu gu lung* written by Mus srab pa in 1479 (Davidson 2005: 164, 177, also footnote no.5). Vīravajra's visit must occurred after Gayādhara's three-year stay (1041-1043/44). When Adhīśa was invited to *Mu gu lung* in 1045/6, Gayādhara had departed at least a year earlier and Vīravajra had seemingly not yet arrived. Since Vīravajra reportedly spent three years in Tibet, he must have lived until at least

Ratnākaraśānti for eight years and with Vīravajra for four years while in India. He later received additional teachings from Vīravajra during the latter's visit to his residence. Drokmi's hagiography, recorded in *Bod kyi bla ma dam pa'i rnam thar* by Dmar ston chos kyi rgyal po (ca. 1198-1259) — a student of Sa skya paṇḍita (1182-1251) — contains an intriguing account of his studies under these two masters:

སྒོ་བ་དཔོན་ཤན་ཏི་བཟ་དགེ་སྒྲོང་དཔལ་བོ་རྩོམ་གསལ་ལྷགས་ཀྱི་བཤད་སྟེལ་ལེགས་

ཤིང་གདམ་དག་ཀྱང་ཆེ་བར་དགོངས་གསུངས་ཏི་ཤན་ཏི་བའི་ཟེ་སྒྲོང་ལྷི་དང་བསྐྱུན་པའི་རྒྱ་ཆེ་བར་

བྱུང་། དཔལ་བོ་རྩོམ་གསལ་ལྷགས་སུ་ལྷང་བདེ་བ་མན་དག་དུ་བྲིལ་ནས་བྱུང་།⁵

Stearns (2001: 88) translated this passage as follows: “The teacher Śāntipa thought that Bhikṣu Vīravajra’s system for the explication of secret mantra was excellent, and that the oral instructions were also great. So it has been stated. Śāntipa’s vast [teachings] corresponded to the piṭakas in general. Vīravajra’s were encapsulated in esoteric instructions to facilitate practice.”

However, the first part of this translation contains a significant error resulting from a misreading of the Tibetan particle *bas*⁶. Stearns interpreted *bas* as part of the name (along with the agentive marker -s), thereby equating it to Sanskrit Śāntipāda, a seemingly plausible assumption. This led him to interpret Śāntipa as the agent of the sentence, hence rendering it as “the teacher Śāntipa thought”.

In fact, the correct Tibetan equivalent for *pāda* is *pa*, not *ba*, especially following a disyllabic name such as *Śānti*, despite variations in its Tibetan transliteration (*śānti*/ *śān ti*/ *śan ti*). In this context, *bas* functions not as a nominal component but as a comparative particle, equivalent to *las* (meaning “compared to” or “in contrast to”), a usage that is well-attested in classical Tibetan literature. For example, a verse from the *Sa skya legs bshad* illustrates this comparative use clearly:

1050. Given that Vīravajra was unlikely to be younger than Drokmi, he was likely born before 993. However, if his life extended far beyond the known historical markers, it would imply that he visited Tibet at a rather advanced age, which seems unlikely. Therefore, I tentatively conclude that Vīravajra was active between 985-1050, a rather conservative range. Though this dating increases the discrepancy with his teacher Durjayacandra’s alleged tenure between 940-952 at Vikramaśīla monastery, it is more reliable because of calculating backward using firmer chronological references. See Sanderson 2009, pp159-161. for Durjayacandra’s tenure.

⁵ Stearns 2001, p88; see also BDRC: bdr, I1KG80347, p6.

⁶ This example is not intended to suggest that Stearns’ translation of the text is untruthful; On the contrary, it is generally a smooth and reliable rendering.

“མཁས་པ་རང་གིས་ཡུལ་བས་ཀྱང་། ཡུལ་ཁམས་གཞན་ན་མཚོན་པ་ཐོབ། །” (“Rather than {བས} in his own country, a wise one obtains honours in a foreign country.”)⁷

A slight textual corruption in the sentence — namely, the omission of *pa* before *bas*— led to Stearns' misreading. The sentence should correctly read: “slob dpon Śān ti [pa] bas...”⁸, which can be translated as:

“[Drokmi] said that [he] considered the monk Vīravajra's method of tantric interpretation superior, and that [his] pith instructions were also more effective than [those of] master Śāntipāda. [Although] Śāntipāda's [teachings] are extensive, corresponding to the overall [teachings of] the *piṭakas*, Vīravajra's are more readily applicable in practice, being encapsulated in pith instructions. (note: the phrase following “although” appears to be a later complement from a second hand in smaller script).

A similar textual error occurs in the Tibetan hagiographical text *Lam 'bras bla ma brgyud pa'i rnam thar ngo mtshar snang ba*, composed by Bla ma dam pa bsod nams rgyal mtshan (1312-1375). I have examined three manuscripts of the text:

Manuscript 1. BDRC. bdr: WA0XLF3C52BE85406. p17. L1.

Manuscript 2. BDRC. bdr: WA0XL8F311F2F8B1A. p130. L7.

Manuscript 3. BDRC. bdr: WA11860. p14. L4

⁷ Bialek's translation (2022:186) is based on the Eimer's edition (2014, 23a-b) of *Sa skya legs bshad*; Another example from the biography of Mi la ras pa reads: *o na khyed kyi cha lugs sprang po bas ngan pa 'di dra'i chos pa sngar ma mthong*/. Bialek (2022: 186), based on the de Jong's edition (1959, D 67b), translates as follows: “Now, as for your appearance worse than (*bas*) that of a beggar, I have never seen such a follower of Dharma.”

⁸ Here the nominative *pa*, based on the structure and content of the sentence, functions similarly to the genitive *pa'i*.

It is interesting to notice that the scribe of the first manuscript initially wrote (*Śān ti*) *pas*, likely because it felt more natural and intuitive to him/her. Upon recognizing the comparative *bas* in the source text, the scribe attempted to correct the mistake by altering *pas* to *bas*, simply by adding a stroke. However, the scribe failed to notice the prior omission of a *pa*, and the correction was not thorough—rendering the distinction between *pas* and *bas* was ambiguous⁹. In an effort to further underscore the comparative meaning, the scribe added an extra *kyang*, meaning “even more than (*Śānti* [*pa*]'s teachings).” Unfortunately, later scribes misread the equivocal *bas/pas*, and the subsequent two manuscripts mistakenly recorded “(*Śānti*) *pas*”.

This case is a typical example of the principle of *lectio difficilior potior* (“the more difficult reading is preferable”)¹⁰, as (*Śān ti*) *pas* sounds more natural to Tibetan readers than the correct *bas*, and is more convenient than recognizing that the *pa* before *bas* is actually missing, i.e., the intended correct reading is *Śān ti pa bas*.

There are several additional reasons, beyond those already stated, to support the correction of the passage. First and foremost, the passage represents Dmar ston's restatement of Drokmi's own words, which lends stronger credibility to the claim that it reflects Drokmi's personal assessment — rather than a statement by Śāntipāda, as implied by Stearns' reading (“the teacher Śānti pa thought...”). Secondly, it is doubtful whether Ratnākaraśānti was ever acquainted with Vīravajra¹¹. The Nepalese master Śāntibhadra introduced Ratnākaraśānti to Drokmi. Drokmi then studied with Ratnākaraśānti for eight years before having planned to return to Tibet. However, he unexpectedly encountered Vīravajra in a forest on his way to worship a statue of Avalokiteśvara in eastern India¹². Deeply impressed, he stayed for an additional four years to receive teachings from him¹³. This sequence of events suggests that the two Indian masters were likely unfamiliar with each other. Furthermore, the corrected reading better fits the

⁹ Notably, other *pa* and *ba* are very distinguishable in this manuscript.

¹⁰ I extend my gratitude to Dr. Szántó for introducing this editorial principle in the reading of Sanskrit texts.

¹¹ Ratnavajra also visited Tibet and appears to have met Vīravajra, who refers to him four times in his work (D1199.34b3; D1412, 394b1, 409a4, 421a5). However, no such reference exists regarding to Ratnākaraśānti.

¹² A mes zhas claimed that Drokmi received a prophecy from the statue after worshipping it, foretelling his future meeting with Vīravajra. This narrative is likely a later alternation. Szántó believes the location to be Bengal, see Szántó 2012, p119.

¹³ A mes zhas also reports that, after receiving an empowerment of Hevajra from Vīravajra, Drokmi was instructed to raise funds for the future teachings. Accordingly, he returned to Tibet, later revisiting Vīravajra two years afterward at the court of king *Canaka after securing financial supports from patrons, where he stayed for four more years.

context: the passage occurs immediately after Drokmi's completion of his studies in India and just prior to his return to Tibet. It thus reads more plausibly as Drokmi's own concluding evaluation of his two principal masters, rather than as an observation attributed to Śāntipāda.

Further support for this correction can be drawn from other sources. The *Blue Annals* contains a similar narrative regarding the life of Drokmi, and paraphrases the concerned passage as follows:

ལྷོ་རྒྱུ་པའི་གསང་ལྷགས་ཀྱི་ཚེས་རྣམས་ལྷན་གྱི་དེའི་ཚེས་ལ་ངེས་པ་ཆེར་སྐྱེས་དེར་ལོ་

བཞི་བཟུགས།¹⁴

Here, the name Śānti is correctly followed by *pa*, and the comparative *las* is used, functioning analogously to *bas* as previously discussed. I shall quote Roerich's (1949) translation here: "In contrast to the *Vajrayāna* doctrine of Śānti-pa, he felt great certainly in this doctrine, and spent there three years."¹⁵

Drokmi's preference for Vīravajra's teachings over those of Ratnākaraśānti may reflect his personal experience and inclination. Szántó has suggested that Drokmi may have regarded Vīravajra as his *paramaguru*,¹⁶ making it more likely that he was more aligned with his teachings. It is also important to note that another early text, *Bla ma brgyud pa bod kyi lo rgyus*¹⁷ by Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1147-1216), predates Dmar ston's work but does not contain the passage in question. Dmar ston is the first to record it. Since he claims that his work is based on what he received from Sa skya paṇḍita (1182-1251), these "words of Drokmi" must have reached Dmar ston through Sa skya paṇḍita. It is worth considering whether the absence or inclusion of this sentence equally reflects the differing attitudes of Grags pa rgyal mtshan and his nephew Sa skya paṇḍita (and dmar ston) toward Ratnākaraśānti and Vīravajra, or whether it represents later efforts by their successors to construct a particular narrative and tradition?

¹⁴ BDRC: bdr: UT1KG5762_I1KG5770_0000. p258.

¹⁵ Reorich 1949 p206; Note the word "de" in classical Tibetan can be used to denote a person rather than its usual function as an inanimate indicator. Therefore, "de'i chos la" should be translated as "his [Vīravajra's] teachings"; also, most sources agree that Drokmi studied with Vīravajra for four years. It is unclear whether Roerich's mention of "three years" is a translation error or reflects a variant source.

¹⁶ Szántó 2012, p119, footnote no.100.

¹⁷ The text has in general nearly identical title and parallel content to Dmar ston's account of Drokmi.

In Ngor chen's *thob yig*, over ten lineages of teachings are mentioned to have been passed down from Vīravajra to Drokmi and then to the Sa skya school, None, however, are attributed to Ratnākaraśānti. Even the lineages of three aforementioned tantric texts are also recorded as having been transmitted though Vīravajra. This prioritization is also evident in a 15th century commentary on the *Dākinīvajrapañjaratantra* (mkha' 'gro ma rdo the rdo rje gur gyi rgyud) entitled *Rnam bshad rnam par rol pa*²², written by Ldong ston smon lam (commonly known as lu phu chos rje nam mkha' smon lam, 15th CE) on February 6, 1465. There, only the interpretations of Vīravajra and Gayādhara are given, with no reference to Ratnākaraśānti.

The absence of Ratnākaraśānti in Drokmi's legacy, in part, reflect the priority of his successors, who chose to emphasize the lineages associated with Vīravajra. Although Grags pa rgyal mtshan's text does not include the passage under discussion, it already refers to Vīravajra as “སློབ་དཔོན་བཅུ་པའི་སློབ་མ་ནི་རྩྭ་གཉིས་ཀྱི་དཔལ་ལྷན་པའི་སློབ་དཔོན་མི་ཐུབ་ཆེན་པོ་དང་སློབ་མ་མཆོག་དག་སློང་དཔལ་པོ་རྩི་རྩི་ (Vīravajra, the direct

¹⁹ BDRC: bdr: WA0XLC557E9939EE2. p727. L4.

²¹ Seton discussed the downplaying of Ratnākaraśānti's role in the hagiographies of Adhīśa (982–1054) and observed a similar pattern in the transmission reports of Drokmi. He argued that this marginalization was due to Ratnākaraśānti's philosophical position—specifically, his opposition to Candrakīrti's view—which some of Adhīśa's hagiographical sources emphasize. However, this explanation does not seem to account for Ratnākaraśānti's diminished presence in Drokmi's legacy. Furthermore, although Seton suggests that it would have been impossible for Drokmi to undergo a significant shift in his attitude toward Ratnākaraśānti, a broader examination of Drokmi's intellectual trajectory indicates that such a change is not entirely implausible. See Seton 2015, pp. 46–54.

²² A detailed examination of this commentary will be published in another article.

and foremost disciple of master Durjayacandra, who is the lineage holder of Dombiheruka, the disciple of Virūpa)"²³. This highlights the prominence of the lineage. In later texts, such as A mes zhab's work, the original statement expressing Drokmi's preference for Vīravajra's teachings over those of Śāntipāda, i.e., "སྒོ་བ་དཔོན་ཤན་ཏི་[པ་]བས་དགེ་སྒོར་དཔའ་བོ་རྗེ་མེད་གསང་ལྷགས་ཀྱི་བཤད་སྒྲོལ་ལེགས་ཤིང་གདམས་ངག་ཀྱང་ཆེ་བར་དགོངས་", is replaced by a more direct affirmation of superiority of Virūpa's lineage: "བིལ་པའི་ཆོས་བརྒྱད་དགུ་པ་པཎ་ཏི་ཏ་ཆེན་པོ་མི་ཐུབ་སྒྲོལ་བའི་བཀའ་སྒྲོལ་དེ་ཉིད་ཁྱད་པར་དུ་འཕགས་པར་དགོངས་"²⁴ ([Drokmi thought that] the doctrinal tradition of the great paṇḍita Durjayacandra, the ninth successor in Virūpa's teaching lineage, was superior). This shift clearly illustrates a growing emphasis on the lineage itself over individual teachers.

In conclusion, while Drokmi's preference for Vīravajra's teachings may reflect his personal experience and inclination, the subsequent erasure of Ratnākaraśānti's role in his legacy likely stems from his successors' increasing prioritization of the Virūpa lineage. Both factors—Drokmi's own disposition and the evolving concerns of his tradition—contributed to the marginalization of Ratnākaraśānti in the transmitted legacy of Drokmi.

References

Primary sources

- Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1147-1216). *Bla ma brgyud pa bod kyi lo rgyus*. BDRC: bdr: WA0XLC557E9939EE2.
- Dmar ston chos kyi rgyal po (ca. 1198-1259). *Bod kyi bla ma dam pa'i rnam thar*. BDRC: bdr, I1KG80347; ed. in Stearns 2001.
- Bla ma dam pa bsod nams rgyal mtshan (1312-1375). *Lam 'bras bla ma brgyud pa'i rnam thar ngo mtshar snang ba*. BDRC: bdr: WA0XLF3C52BE85406; bdr: WA0XL8F311F2F8B1A; bdr: WA11860.
- Ngor chen kun dga' bzang po (1382-1456). *Thob yig rgya mtsho*. BDRC: bdr: WA0XL7676D0F44636.

²³ BDRC: bdr: WA0XLC557E9939EE2: p726. L6; also, in *Ngo mtshar snang ba* by Bla ma dam pa bsod nams rgyal mtshan: bdr: WA0XLF3C52BE85406. p16. L5: bdr: WA0XL8F311F2F8B1A. p130. L7; bdr: WA11860. p14. L3;

²⁴ BDRC: bdr: WA0XL4926CA867614. p 481. L4.

- 'Gos lo gzhon nu dbal (1392-1481). *Deb ther sngon po*. BDRC: bdr: UT1KG5762_I1KG5770_0000.
- Gtsang byams pa rdo rgyal mtshan (a.k.a. Mus sradd pa, 1424-1498), *Gnas chen muk gu lung gi gnas bzhad*, in *Bod kyi gnas yig bdams bsgrigs*. BDRC: bdr: MW22019. p295-303.
- Lo phu chos rje nam mkha' smon lam (15th), *Rnam par bshad pa rdo rje gur rnam par rol pa*. BDRC: bdr: WA3JT13352.
- A mes zhabs ngag dbang kun dga' bsod nams (1597-1659). *Legs bshad 'dus pa' rgya mtsho*. BDRC: bdr: WA0XL4926CA867614.

Secondary sources

- Bialek, Joanna. 2022. *A Textbook in Classical Tibetan*. Routledge.
- Davidson, Ronald M. 2005. *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture*. Columbia University Press.
- de Jong, Jan Willem. 1959. Ed. *Mi la ras pa'i rnam thar: texte tibétain de la vie de Milarépa*. Hague: Mouton & Co.
- Seton, Gregory Max. 2015. *Defining Wisdom: Ratnākaraśānti's Sāratamā*, doctoral thesis, Wolfson College, Oxford, UK.
- Eimer, Helmut. 2014. Ed. *Sa skya legs bshad: die Strophen zur Lebensklugheit von Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182–1251)*. Wien: Arbeitskreis für tibetische und buddhistische Studien.
- Roerich, George N. 1949. *The Blue Annals*. Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta.
- Stearns, Cyrus. 2001. *Luminous Lives: The Story of the Early Masters of the Lam'bras in Tibet*. Simon and Schuster.
- Szántó, Péter-Dániel. 2012. "Selected Chapters from the Catuṣpīṭhatantra (1/2): Introductory Study with the Annotated Translation of Selected Chapters." Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, Balliol College, Oxford, UK.
- Sanderson, Alexis. 2009. "The Śaiva Age: The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period." In *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, edited by Dominic Goodall et al. Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo.

