Atiśa's Explanation of *thun mong ba* and *thun mong ma yin pa:*

One Aspect of Atiśa's Theory on the Gradual Path

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1. Introduction

Thun mong ba / thun mong ma yin pa（Skt. *sādhārana / asādhārana*）, usually rendered as "common / uncommon," are general Tibetan terms whose meaning varies depending on the context. Although they are not standard technical terms, Atiśa（982–1054）uses them as such, without giving a further explanation. This paper aims to examine the meaning of these two terms focusing on the lexical examples that appear in Atiśa's works, the *Lta sgom chen mo*（TGCM）and the *Mūlāpattiṭīka*（MPṬ）, based on which one aspect of the Atiśa's theory on the gradual path can be clarified.

2. On preceptors, disciples, and instructions

In the TGCM, Atiśa explains the characteristics（Tib. *mtshan nyid*, Skt. **lakṣana*）of preceptors, disciples, and instructions（Tib. *gdam ngag*）using the concept of "common" and "uncommon." Regarding the preceptors, understanding the truth completely and being equipped with virtues, affection and so forth are stated as "common," while possessing the ability to make others mature（by the four initiations）is stated as "uncommon." Understanding the nature of *saṃsāra* and purifying *bodhicitta* are stated as common characteristics of disciples, while stabilizing **saṃbodhicitta*（Tib. *rdzogs pa'i byang chub sems*）and receiving the four initiations as uncommon.[1]

The characteristics of instructions are explained more extensively than those two mentioned above. For instance, what instructions with common characteristics teach is described as five spiritual faculties which consist of conviction, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. On the other hand, Atiśa explains the opposite as *utpattikrama* and *saṃpannakrama*, based on the three types of views: the view of the mundane mind, of the eyes of wisdom, and of the pure mind. In this part, he identifies the

nature of the mind as luminosity, the ultimate truth, by realizing which the achievement of non-dual unification (Tib. *zung 'jug,* Skt. **yuganaddha*) is achieved.[2]

From the discussion above, we can conclude that Atiśa relates the common characteristics with Pāramitayāna, while the uncommon characteristics with Mantrayāna, dividing them according to whether it requires the four initiations or not. Regarding the relationship between the two, Atiśa provides two clues. First, he claims that the instructions with common characteristics teach *utpattikrama* and *saṃpannakrama*, *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*, method and wisdom as separate.[3] This reveals that Atiśa does not acknowledge the achievement of non-dual wisdom through Pāramitayāna. Second, Atiśa also explicitly states that the "common" are preliminary practices (Tib. *sngon 'gro*), which implies the "uncommon" is based on the "common."[4] From this, hierarchy and continuity between the two can be inferred.

In the MPṬ, Atiśa divides the path into "common" and "uncommon," in the same manner. However, in addition to this, Atiśa enumerates **praveśasaṃvara* (Tib. *'jug gyi sdom*) and **praveśacittasaṃvara* (Tib. *'jug sems gyi sdom*) as elements of "common" and "uncommon" respectively.[5]

3. On refuge

Regarding refuge, Atiśa states as follows in the MPṬ:

> Then, observe the *pratimokṣa* vows by relying on the common refuge. After that, observe the *bodhicitta* by relying on the special refuge. After that, accept the **praveśasaṃvara* and achieve the understanding of view, practice, and meditation through the four initiations.[6]

Although Atiśa uses the term "special" (Tib. *khyad par*, Skt. **viśeṣa*) rather than "uncommon," it is clear that this term is used for "uncommon" because it makes a pair with "common." Here, the *pratimokṣa* vows are sorted as an element of common refuge, while the *bodhicitta*, the **praveśasaṃvara,* and the four initiations as those of special refuge. Since it is already discussed that **praveśasaṃvara* and the four initiations belong to "common" and "uncommon" respectively, we can conclude that this division differs from the first one discussed in 2. Here Atiśa designates Hīnayāna refuge of *śrāvaka*s as "common," while Mahāyāna refuge of bodhisattvas as "uncommon." In this case, whether one has the *bodhicitta* or not is the criterion. Considering that Atiśa places *pratimokṣa* vows as basic moral precepts of bodhisattvas, it is obvious that he acknowledges the

continuity between these two.

4. On results

In the TGCM, Atiśa presents another usage of "common" and "uncommon" which divides the results of co-emergent luminosity. As the common results, Atiśa lists the Eight Accomplishments[7] (Tib. *grub chen brgyad*) and the Eight Activities[8] (Tib. *las chen brgyad*). The uncommon results are further divided into two; those of practitioners on the path of training and beyond the path of training (Tib. *slob pa dang mi slob pa*): Learning that physical bodies and appearances are like rainbows is the former while arising of the three mental bodies is the latter.[9] It is speculated that uncommon results are superior to common results. Although this text does not provide any further clues, in the *Bodhipatha-pradīpa*, Atiśa states as follows:

> It is considered that the requisite for awakening is perfected with ease through the activities like pacification, enrichment, and so forth (= the Eight Activities) attained by the efficacy of mantra, and also through the power of the Eight Accomplishments and so forth like "Good Vase"…[10]

Atiśa defines the Eight Activities and Eight Accomplishments as means to accumulate the requisite (Skt. *saṃbhāra*) for awakening rather than the ultimate achievements as stated in the commentary:

> Since I wrote some of the means for accumulating the two requisites of bodhisattvas who stay in the *utpattikrama* in the root text, here too, I shall write some relying on the root text.[11]

This quotation indicates that Atiśa, in the *Bodhipathapradīpa* and its auto-commentary, confines the teachings on Mantrayāna to the *utpattikrama* practices. In these works, Atiśa does not explain any initiations other than the vase initiation (Tib. *bum pa'i dbang*) for the reason of moral precepts. Considering this, it is possible to assume that the vase initiation is related to the *utpattikrama* and the Eight Accomplishments and Activities in Atiśa's system. Therefore, it is inferred that Atiśa divides the path of Mantrayāna practices into two kinds according to whether moral precepts are violated or not.

In conclusion, what Atiśa calls "common results" in the TGCM are related with the practices that do not exceed the *utpattikrama* practices performed by practitioners who received only the vase initiation, while the "uncommon results" are related with the

saṃpannakrama practices performed by practitioners who received the secret （*guhya*） and the wisdom （*prajñā*） initiations that violate moral precepts.

5. Concluding remarks

Atiśa differentiates between Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, Pāramitayāna and Mantrayāna, and practices pro- and contra- moral precepts, utilizing the concept of "common" and "uncommon." Although the meaning of "common" and "uncommon" is not fixed, it is clear that these two suggest continuity and ascending hierarchy relationships. Further, through the discussion above, we can get a glimpse of one aspect of Atiśa's theory on the gradual path that he gives higher value to Mantrayāna rather than Pāramitayāna, to the practices that would violate moral precepts rather than ones that maintain moral precepts.

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Notes

1）See TGCM 48.8–49.5.   2）See TGCM 49.20–50.7, 55.22–60.2.   3）See TGCM 53.18–20. 4）See TGCM 55.21.   5）See MPṬ, D193a1–6.   6）See MPṬ, D195a5–6.   7）Paranormal activities attained through advanced practices （Cuevas 2015, xxi–xxii）.   8）Although Atiśa names the Eight Activities, only four are listed in the *Bodhimārgapradīpapañjikā*: pacification, enrichment, subjugation, and ferocity.   9）See TGCM 64.11–19.   10）*Bodhipathapradīpa*, D240b5–6. 11）*Bodhimārgapradīpapañjikā*, D286b5–6.

Abbreviations and Primary Sources

Bodhipathapradīpa: D3947.   *Bodhimārgapradīpapañjikā*: D3948.   **TGCM**: *Lta sgom chen mo*. In （Jo bo rje dpal ldan a ti sha'i gsung 'bum,） vol. 2, 48–68. Lha sa: Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying skrun khang, 2012.   **MPṬ**: *Mūlāpattiṭīka*, D2487.

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