

Revisiting the Tibetan Concepts of *med dgag* and *ma yin dgag*

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1. Introduction

This study revisits the well-known Tibetan Buddhist concepts of *med dgag* and *ma yin dgag*. Originally derived from the Indic concepts of *prasajyapraṭiśedha* “negation subsequent to [tentative] applying” and *paryudāsa* “limitational negation,” the Tibetan *med dgag* and *ma yin dgag* have been regarded in many cases as epistemological, rather than semantic, concepts especially after the rise of Gsang phu monastic tradition of the early Bka’ gdams pa. They play an important role in the Madhyamaka and Tathāgatagarbha doctrines of Rngog lo tsā ba (1059–1109), Dol po pa (1292–1361), Tsong kha pa (1357–1419), and so forth (cf. Kanō 2016, 361). Although plenty of studies have touched upon these concepts, two issues still seem to remain obscure: [1] What are the natures of *med dgag* and *ma yin dgag*? [2] How can the mystical experiences of Āryas be explained by these two concepts? By considering these two issues, the following analysis provides a new perspective on the key points of the Tibetan Buddhist debate on spiritual praxis.

2. What are *med dgag* and *ma yin dgag*?

2.1. As stated by Gser mdog paṅ chen (1428–1507), Rngog lo tsā ba considers Buddhahood as *med dgag* (“nothingness”), while Dol po pa considers it as *ma yin dgag* (“not-being”). This of course does not mean that Buddhahood, whether understood as *med dgag* or *ma yin dgag*, is negation (or the act of negating something) but instead means that it is *something known by negating other factors*. In this context, both *med dgag* and *ma yin dgag* are epistemological concepts that indicate the way an object is conceived.

2.2. The Indic concepts of *prasajyapraṭiśedha* and *paryudāsa*, on the other hand, can be understood within the context of interpreting the negative marker *nañ*. As in the sentence: *caitro na pacati* “Caitra does not cook,” if the negative is construed with a verbal activity

(*kriyā*) and the act of cooking is simply negated, one can interpret the negative as *prasajyapratishedha* or “negation subsequent to [tentative] applying.” And as in the sentence: *abrāhmaṇam ānaya* “Bring a non-Brahmin,” if the negative is construed with the subsequent noun (*uttarapada*) to imply someone other than a Brahmin (such as a Śūdra), then one can interpret it as *paryudāsa* or “limitational negation.”

2.3. Śāntarakṣita (ca. 725–788) distinguishes between *prasajyapratishedha* and *paryudāsa* in his theory of “exclusion of others” (*anyāpoha*) and associates them with the following three kinds of *apoha* that were originally taught by Śākyabuddhi (ca. 660–720).

1. “the substratum from which exclusion is made” = particulars (*svalakṣaṇa*)
2. “the means of exclusion” = the mental image manifesting in conceptual thought
3. “the act of exclusion” = the mere exclusion of others

The first one refers to external objects (*artha*), and the second one belongs to cognition (*buddhi*); both of them are apprehended by *paryudāsa*. The third one is equivalent to *prasajyapratishedha* (cf. Ishida 2005). In this theory, the two types of negation are related to conceptual thought and its formation, apart from the interpretation of the negative marker *nañ*. Many Tibetan scholars cite Śāntarakṣita’s *Tattvasaṃgraha* as the basis for their interpretation of the two kinds of negation.

2.4. It was probably on the basis of Śāntarakṣita’s *apoha* theory that the Tibetan indigenous concepts of *med dgag* and *ma yin dgag* have developed in a unique way. Although the semantics of the negative has still been discussed by many Tibetans, what has attracted more attention is the epistemic theory of negation. One prominent example is found in the writings of Phywa pa chos kyi seng ge (1109–1169). According to him, a negative factor (*dgag pa’i chos*, e.g., “lack of causality”) is something that can be apprehended by thinking of the concept (*don spyi*) of its opposite (e.g., “causality”) and then negating it (*Snying po* 87.1ff.; cf. Hugon 2015, 63).

2.5. Phywa pa speaks of a purely negative phenomenon (*dgag pa ’ba’ zhig pa*) as *med dgag* and a combination of the affirmative and the negative (*dgag sgrub tshogs pa*) as *ma yin dgag* (*Snying po* 87.6ff.). As regards the former, a positive factor is discarded (*sgrub chos dor ba*), whereas, regarding the latter, it is not. For Phywa pa, “the negative” in its strict sense is *med dgag* alone, and *ma yin dgag* is equal to a positive factor. He regards *ma yin dgag* as the subdivision of the positive rather than that of the negative (cf. Hugon 2004, 86). Phywa pa’s theory was generally accepted by his disciples such as Gtsang nag pa

brtson 'grus seng ge (12th cent.) and Mtshur ston gzhon nu seng ge (ca. 1150–1210). However, it was the theory of Gro lung pa and Rgya dmar ba, which preceded that of Phywa pa, that had more influence on later scholars like Sa skya paṇḍita (1182–1251) and Tsong kha pa. It is a theory that distinguishes between *med dgag* and *ma yin dgag* based on whether “other elements are projected [into consciousness]” (*chos gzhan 'phen pa*), and that considers *ma yin dgag* to be a subcategory of negative phenomena (*Gtan dbab* 17b6f.).

2.6. Tsong kha pa defines *med dgag* as “that which does not project or establish any other element when the object to be negated is explicitly eliminated by cognition” and *ma yin dgag* as “that which projects or establishes other elements when the object to be negated is eliminated by cognition” (*Rtsa she 'jik chen* 23b5ff.).

2.7. What is important for Tsong kha pa and his successors is the clear distinction between *med dgag* (“nothingness”) and *med pa* (“nonexistence”). According to them, *med dgag*, along with *ma yin dgag*, is a subcategory of the negative phenomena (*dgag pa*), which in turn is a subcategory of “what it to be cognized by a valid cognition” (*tshad ma'i gzhal bya*) or existence (*yod pa*). Thus, *med dgag* is a kind of existence and not nonexistence. In Tsong kha pa's view, emptiness, for example, is *med dgag* and hence existent and cognizable, although it is like nonexistence in that it is characterized by “the simple elimination of the object to be negated” (*dgag bya rnam par bcad tsam*). Just as space (*nam mkha'*) is apprehended by a valid cognition in the form of “elimination of obstacles,” so emptiness is apprehended by a valid cognition in the form of “elimination of substantiality.” For Tsong kha pa, that emptiness is *med dgag* implies that it is an existent phenomenon that can be captured by cognition and language.

3. *med dgag* and *ma yin dgag* within the spiritual praxis

3.1. As mentioned above, both *med dgag* and *ma yin dgag* are conceptually apprehended by negating an object of negation. However, this does not mean that they are always grasped by conceptual thought. Dol po pa holds that the ultimate reality an Ārya attains within the state of meditative equipoise is *ma yin dgag*, while Tsong kha pa opposes Dol po pa's view and considers it as *med dgag*. They speak of how *med dgag* or *ma yin dgag* is attained through yogic perception, which is free from conceptualization.

3.2. In Dol po pa's system, the mind is considered merely contaminated with adventitious faults but inherently pure as it is empty of all faults in essence. The fundamental nature of

the mind is therefore a negative phenomenon that is characterized by elimination (*rnam gcod*) of such faults, but at the base (*gzhi*) of the mind is inherently luminous wisdom (*yeshe rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba*), which is a positive phenomenon (*Ri chos* 217b6ff.). By eliminating the object to be negated, namely, adventitious faults in the mind, one can apprehend the existence of another element, namely, luminous wisdom that is projected in the process of the negation; and by abandoning those faults an Ārya establishes inherent luminous wisdom, which has been existing at the base of the mind. Therefore, Dol po pa holds that the truth of emptiness an Ārya sees in meditative equipoise is not *med dgag* but *ma yin dgag*, which projects or establishes the existence of inherent luminous wisdom.

3.3. In Tsong kha pa's system, the ultimate reality an Ārya attains within the meditative equipoise is emptiness, which is the mere absence of linguistic proliferation (*spros pa*, **prapañca*), and hence it is *med dgag* (*Rtsa she tik chen* 244b5ff.). Sentient beings have a misconception that things exist by their own intrinsic nature (*rang gi ngo bo*, **svabhāva*), which is nothing but a product of linguistic proliferation. To realize the truth and remove fundamental ignorance, the linguistic proliferation is to be negated by reasoning. This enables a yogin to gradually achieve direct realization of emptiness. Emptiness itself as understood by Tsong kha pa is *med dgag*, and it is the ultimate reality of Āryas since it is either intellectually apprehended by rational consciousness (*rigs shes*) or directly perceived by the wisdom of meditative equipoise (*mnyam bzhag ye shes*). On the other hand, the non-arising of aggregates (*phung po*, **skandha*), for instance, is *ma yin dgag* since it is always perceived by the dualistic cognition, such as eye-consciousness, together with “the basis of emptiness” (*stong gzhi*), namely, aggregates, which are projected in consciousness during the process of negation. Considering that, Tsong kha pa states that the non-arising of aggregates is the conventionality in its primary sense (*kun rdzob mshan nyid pa*) and is the ultimate merely in the secondary sense (*don dam btags pa ba*). Thus, Tsong kha pa makes a clear distinction between emptiness itself, which is *med dgag* and realized by yogic perception, and emptiness associated with its basis, which is *ma yin dgag* and perceived either by the dualistic cognition of ordinary beings or by the wisdom subsequently attained after meditative equipoise of Āryas.

3.4. According to Tsong kha pa, an Ārya “sees” *med dgag* within the state of meditative equipoise, and *med dgag* in that case is existence, not nonexistence. However, Tsong kha pa opines that others misunderstand *med dgag* as absolute absence like a rabbit's horn (*ri bong*

rwa dang 'dra ba'i cang med), and therefore, regard it as what causing fear (*Rtsa she tik chen* 245b3ff.). As Gung thang bstan pa'i sgron me (1762–1823) suggests in his *De nyid snang ba*, probably Tsong kha pa has in mind the proponents of the Rnying ma pa, Bka' brgyud pa, and Sa skya pa. Gung thang explains that they are therefore not concerned with negating “the [linguistic] proliferation of inherent existence” (*bdag gi spros pa*) but instead seek to cease “the [epistemic] proliferation of conceptual thought” (*rnam rtog gi spros pa*) and to attain the state of thoughtlessness (*had de ba*), thereby realizing emptiness as *ma yin dgag* (*De nyid snang ba* 33a5f.).

3.5. We may term their doctrine of spiritual praxis “quietism.” The quietist method of praxis of those schools can be found in many of their writings. Sgam po pa bsod nams rin chen (1079–1153) of the Bka' brgyud pa uses the metaphor of “ocean” (*rgya mtsho*) to refer to Dharma body and that of “waves” (*rlabs*) to refer to conceptual thought when he elucidates the essence of his quietist theory of praxis (*'Bum tig* 50b6f.). When conceptual thought spreads out from the mind, a yogin should just observe its true nature; and then it spontaneously disappears (*yal nas 'gro*) just as waves dissolve into the ocean without retaining its own essence (*rang so*). Thus, by doing so, a yogin attains the Dharma body (*De nyid snang ba* 27b3ff.). Another notable theory is “investigation of the mind” (*sems 'tshol*) explained by Dwags po bkra shis rnam rgyal (1512–1587). According to this theory, a yogin should observe the three stages of conceptual thought at its generation, duration, and extinction, and recognize that it is not established at any moment (*Phyag chen zla zer* 558.14ff.). Then, just as a raven that has taken flight from a boat returns to the original boat after confirming the absence of its target, conceptual thought returns to the original mind, dissolves, and is transformed into non-conceptual wisdom (cf. Shahidullah 1928, 152, 177). What is important here is to cease the activity of thought without affirming or negating anything about its objects. And this is the common feature of all forms of quietist method propounded by the Rnying ma pa and the Sa skya pa.

3.6. From the viewpoint of the Dge lugs pa, however, cessation of thought is similar to fainting (*brgyal*). To attain wisdom, a yogin must always concentrate on emptiness, first by apprehending it in the form of *ma yin dgag* and then directly perceiving it in the form of *med dgag*. In the *Mun sel sgron me*, authored by Mkhas grub rje (1385–1438), the process of achieving truth is explained by increase in the elements of *med dgag* and decrease in those of *ma yin dgag* within a yogin's mind. First, a yogin apprehends emptiness itself,

which is *med dgag*, but subsequently experiences dualistic appearance of the conventionality, which is *ma yin dgag*. Then gradually, as the clear appearance of emptiness that has been apprehended from the perspective of ascertainment (*nges ngo*) increases and the ordinary dualistic reality that has been perceived from the perspective of appearance (*snang ngo*) decreases in his mind, the truth of emptiness and the mind grasping it eventually merge into one just as when water is poured into water (*Mun sel sgron me* 6b6ff.).

3.7. There is no doubt that even the Dge lugs pa's analytic method of meditation is aimed at obtaining the non-conceptual wisdom at the final stage. The problem is therefore how to achieve the wisdom and express the truth of emptiness by language. This is the key issue that Tsong kha pa addressed throughout his life. One part of Tsong kha pa's thought centers around the statement from the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā*, which teaches that "seeing the truth" (*dharmadarśana*) is actually not seeing (*adarśana*) any element such as matter (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), and so forth, just as "seeing the sky" is actually seeing nothing. When Tsong kha pa composed the *Legs bshad gser phreng* at the age of thirty-one, he understood the statement literally, saying that "[An Ārya] sees the truth free from proliferation" is merely a metaphorical expression and that in actuality he does not apprehend the truth as anything (*Gser phreng* [tsa] 269b3ff.). However, in the *Rtsa she ṭik chen* composed at the age of fifty-one, Tsong kha pa presents another interpretation of the same statement (*Rtsa she ṭik chen* 159a5ff.). Just as when one gazes into the sky, one sees the space consisting in the mere elimination of obstacles, so an Ārya sees within the state of meditative equipoise the truth of emptiness consisting in the mere elimination of the object to be negated (*dgag bya bkag pa*). Thus, it is clear that Tsong kha pa initially embraced the quietist method of meditation, which resembles that of other schools, and eventually moved to the analytical and speculative method for grasping emptiness in the form of *med dgag*.

3.8. The religious experience of Āryas within the meditative equipoise is discussed by the Mahāyāna Buddhist thinkers of both India and Tibet, such as Śāntideva (ca. 685–763), Haribhadra (ca. 730–95), Abhayākara Gupta (ca. 11th–12th cent.), Nya dbon kun dga' dpal (ca. 1285–1379), Bu ston rin chen grub (1290–1364), and many others. In the *Legs bshad gser phreng*, probably following his predecessor Nya dbon's view, Tsong kha pa acknowledges Haribhadra's idea that the cognitive object of an Ārya's meditative equipoise is an illusion-like being, which according to Tsong kha pa is *ma yin dgag* (*Gser phreng*

[tsa] 269b6ff.), although it seems to contradict his own interpretation of the *Samcayagāthā*, namely that an Ārya does not see anything. But Tsong kha pa's final view, as expressed in the *Rtsa she ṭik chen*, is that an Ārya sees emptiness in the form of *med dgag*. The idea that an Ārya sees *med dgag* is characteristic of Tsong kha pa's analytic method of meditation. By articulating this idea, Tsong kha pa completely moved away from the quietist method, which he once embraced in his early years.

4. Concluding remarks

As regards the mystical experience of Āryas within the state of meditative equipoise, opinions are divided among Tibetan Buddhist scholars. Sgam po pa and Dwags po bkra shis rnam rgyal say that an Ārya ceases all activities of thought and thereby sees nothing; Dol po pa says that an Ārya realizes inherently luminous wisdom behind the absence of all faults of the mind, which is *ma yin dgag*; and Tsong kha pa argues in the final analysis that an Ārya sees the mere elimination of intrinsic being, namely, emptiness in the form of *med dgag*. Particularly relevant to this topic is the Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, specifically the one as taught in the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā* as well as those expounded by Śāntideva, Kamalaśīla, Haribhadra, Abhayākara Gupta, and many others. Also important in this connection are the distinction between two types of negations in Pāṇinian rules and Śāntarakṣita's epistemic account of *apoha*. There are still much to be investigated on the Tibetan concepts of *med dgag* and *ma yin dgag*: for instance, the problem of whether what is to be proved (*bsgrub bya*, **sādhya*) by means of the Mādhyamika's argumentation is *med dgag* or *ma yin dgag*; and the issues related to the Tantric praxis, where the primordial luminous mind is asserted to be *ma yin dgag* even in the light of the Dge lugs pa's analysis. That said, it is clear from the above observation that the epistemic concepts of *med dgag* and *ma yin dgag* have always played a central role in the development of the Tibetan Buddhist theory of spiritual praxis.

Abbreviations

<i>Gtan dbab</i>	<i>Dbu ma'i de kho na nyid gtan la dbab pa</i> (Rgya dmar ba byang chub grags): <i>Bka' gdams pa'i gsung 'bum</i> , vol. 31 (pp. 7–68). Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2007.
<i>De nyid snang ba</i>	<i>'Jam mgon rgyal ba gnyis pa la bstan pa'i snying po gsal bar mdzad pa'i tshul las brtsams te bstod pa don dang ldan pa'i rgya cher 'grel ba bstan pa'i de nyid snang ba</i> (Gung thang dkon mchog bstan pa'i sgron me): Zhol ed. Ka.

- Phyag chen zla zer** *Nges don phyag rgya chen po'i sgom rim gsal bar byed pa'i legs bshad zla ba'i 'od zer* (Dwags po bkra shis nram rgyal): *Bod kyi bcu phrag rig mdzod chen mo: bka' brgyud pa'i gsung rab*, vol. 20: *Thabs grol* (pp. 323–773). Xining: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2001.
- 'Bum tig** *Snying po don gyi gdams pa phyag rgya chen po'i 'bum tig* (Sgam po pa bod nams rin chen): *Collected works (gsuñ 'bum) of Sgam-po-pa Bsod-nams-rin-chen*, vol II. Delhi: Ballimaran Photo Offset Printers, 1976.
- Mun sel sgron me** *Lta khrid mun sel sgron me* (Mkhas grub rje dge legs dpal bzang po): Zhol ed. Ta. Tohoku No. 5499.
- Rtsa she ñik chen** *Dbu ma rtsa ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa shes rab ces bya ba'i nram bshad rigs pa'i rgya mtsho* (Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa): Zhol ed. Ba. Tohoku No. 5401.
- RGSG** *Prajñāpāramitāratnagaṇaṣaṃcayagāthā: Prajñāpāramitā Ratna-Guṇa-Saṃcaya-Gāthā, Sanscrit and Tibetan Text*. Ed. E. Obermiller. Bibliotheca Buddhica XXIX. St. Petersburg. Reprint, Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1970.
- Ri chos** *Ri chos nges don rgya mtsho* (Dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan). Gangtok. 1976.
- Snying po** *Dbu ma de kho na nyid kyi snying po* (Phywa pa chos kyi seng ge): *Phya pa chos kyi señ ge: dBu ma śar gsum gyi ston thun*. Ed. H. Tauscher. Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde 43. Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien Universität Wien, 1999.
- Gser phreng** *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan gyi 'grel pa dang bcas pa'i rgya cher bshad pa legs bshad gser gyi phreng ba* (Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa): Zhol ed. Tsa. Tohoku No. 5412.

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(This research was supported in part by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 21K00049)

Key words *med dgag*, *ma yin dgag*, spiritual praxis, Phywa pa, Tsong kha pa

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