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The Differences between Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika Madhyamaka

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KHYENTSE VISION
PROJECT

dbu ma thal rang gnyis kyi khyad par

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INTRODUCTION

Within the wider Madhyamaka tradition that Tibetans received from India, one of the most important topics, and one that has greatly excited the philosophical imagination of scholars, concerns the differences (or lack thereof) between its Autonomist (Svātantrika) and Consequentialist (Prāsaṅgika) subschools. A substantial source of the discussions, which are epistemological, logical, hermeneutical, and so forth, is Candrakīrti's commentary on the first chapter of the *Root of Wisdom*, where he defended Buddhapālita and severely criticized Bhāvaviveka. Some of the great Tibetan works on this topic are Tsongkhapa's *The Essence of True Eloquence* and Gorampa's *General Exposition of the Middle Way*.¹ Although there is no mention of the sources used in the text translated here, it is evident that the general outline and presentation follow Gorampa's tenets.²

It is difficult to make generalizations about a topic as difficult and complex as the differences between the two subschools. However, the following differences suggested by three towering Tibetan Madhyamaka masters could be of some help, as they can be approached intellectually.³ According to Tsongkhapa Lobzang Dragpa (1357–1419), the main difference between these two schools is that the Autonomist school accepts phenomena as having defining characteristics on a conventional level, while the Consequentialists deny this.⁴ According to Gorampa Sönam Senge (1429–1489), the main difference is that the Autonomist school typically uses a form of argumentation called autonomous reason and the Consequentialist limits themselves to consequences while establishing the lack of essentiality with regards to all phenomena. According to Ju Mipham (1846–1912), the main difference is that the Autonomist school emphasizes an approximate ultimate on the occasion of establishing the view, while the Consequentialist school emphasizes an actual ultimate.⁵

Because the text translated here does not mention the author, one could tentatively treat the work as a *zindri*, a short note probably meant for personal use

and not for publication or wider circulation. While it does not include any other information, such as the sources on the basis of which it was compiled, the contents themselves seem to be congruent with the works of Gorampa on the same topic, suggesting that the text may be loosely excerpted from his works.

As for the actual subject matter, the following topics are treated: the difference between the two schools in terms of the arguments they employ, with the intention of bringing an understanding of emptiness in relation to the nonarising nature of phenomena; the difference in the two schools' theories of causality, namely, how they accept or deny the origination of results from a cause that is different from itself; the perspectives of the two schools on conditioned phenomena being deceptive or not; and the difference between the two schools in terms of the number of cognitions accepted as valid. As seen in the overview above, despite the relative brevity of the text, it is quite rich in terms of its content.

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The Differences between Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika Madhyamaka

There are a considerable number of differences between the two Madhyamaka schools, the Consequentialists and the Autonomists. Roughly speaking, these may be seen in explanations of the meaning of the following verse from the *Root of Wisdom*:

There exists no arising of an entity,
Anytime or anywhere,
From itself, from another,
From both, or without a cause.⁶

The Consequentialists teach four theses on the impossibility of four aspects, namely, any entity, anywhere or anytime, arising from itself, and so forth. Having taught these, they negate their four opposites, such as an entity arising from itself and so forth, primarily by indicating the consequences. They maintain that since cognition realizing the nonarising is engendered from this, there is no need to present autonomous reason, apart from the consequences, to engender valid cognition in others' minds realizing nonarising.

The Autonomists maintain that after having initially refuted the four mistaken concepts, such as an entity arising from itself and so forth, one must present reasons that establish the entity as nonarising. This is the main difference.

Moreover, the Consequentialists do not accept an entity arising from another even on a conventional level. Although a sprout arises from a seed on a conventional level, [213] they maintain that the sprout is not different from the seed. Furthermore, they maintain that at the time of being a seed, the sprout has not yet

arisen, and at the time of being a sprout, the seed does not exist, having ceased. The Autonomists accept the entity arising from another on a conventional level, because they maintain that the sprout arises from the seed and that the sprout is different from the seed.

Additionally, the Consequentialists maintain that even valid cognition is deceptive, since all compounded phenomena are deceptive. The Autonomists do not accept this. With regard to a definitive enumeration, the Autonomists accept two, namely, perception and inference. The Consequentialists accept four, adding inference through analogy and inference through scripture.

The Consequentialists maintain that śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas realize the non-essentiality of phenomena, that meditative equipoise is without appearance, and that at the level of buddhahood there are no mental factors, as mind and mental factors are contrary to buddhahood. These are not accepted by the Autonomists and many others.

With regard to the particulars advocated by the Sūtra school, they are functioning entities and synonymous with impermanence, essentially including all phenomena conditioned by causes and conditions (for example, pillars, vases, and so forth). Universals are inefficacious phenomena, being synonymous with permanence,⁷ including all unconditioned phenomena that do not arise from causes and conditions (for example, space and so forth).

NOTES

1. For Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's own exposition on the differences between these two schools, see his *theg pa'i rnam dbye gsal bar byed pa'i gtam legs bshad ngo mtshar chu gter*, 105–10.
2. For a brief and succinct presentation of Gorampa's position on the *Root of Wisdom*, see Sönam Senge, *Ita ba ngan sel*, 336–40. For a very extensive presentation, see Sönam Senge, *dbu ma spyi ston*, 181ff. See also Santina's *Madhyamaka Schools in India*, though it is worth noting that this work is not very comprehensive, since the author only focuses on one work of Gorampa and also limits the study to the difference between the schools in terms of the means of establishing ultimate reality.
3. For further reading, see *The Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika Distinction*, edited by Dreyfus and McClintock, which includes dozens of essays by leading scholars on this subject.
4. For Tsongkhapa's position on this and related issues, see Tsongkhapa Lobzang Dragpa, *drang nges legs bshad snying po*, 370ff.; for a translation of this work, see Thurman, *The Central Philosophy of Tibet*.
5. For Mipham's position, see Ju Mipham Jamyang Namgyal Gyatso, *dbu ma rgyan 'grek*; for a translation of this work, see Padmakara Translation Group, *The Adornment of the Middle Way*.
6. *Mūlamadhyamakākārikā* 1,1. The canonically transmitted version of this text in the Derge Tengyur reads slightly differently: *bdag las ma yin gzhan las min/gnyis las ma yin rgyu med min/dngos po gang dag gang na yang/skye ba nam yang yod ma yin//*. For an English translation of this foundational text of the Madhyamaka tradition, including the Sanskrit, see Siderits and Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way*.
7. The Tibetan text mistakenly has *mi rtag pa dang don gcig*, which is amended to *rtag pa dang don gcig*.

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GLOSSARY

actual ultimate

རྣམ་གྲངས་མ་ཡིན་པའི་དོན་དམ། • *rnam grangs ma yin pa'i don dam*

The ultimate realized by nonconceptual meditative wisdom during the meditative equipoise of the exalted being.

approximate ultimate

རྣམ་གྲངས་པའི་དོན་དམ་བདེན་པ། • *rnam grangs pa'i don dam bden pa*

The ultimate as realized by means of inference based on arguments.

arising from another

གཞན་སྐྱེས། • *gzhan skyes*

A causal theory proposing a fundamental difference between cause and effect.

arising from both

གཉིས་ཀ་ལས་སྐྱེས་བ། • *gnyis ka las skyes ba*

A syncretic theory of causality that proposes both identity and difference as a relationship between cause and effect.

arising from itself

བདག་སྐྱེས། • *bdag skyes*

A causal theory proposing a fundamental relationship between cause and effect.

arising without cause

རྫོ་མེད་ལས་སྐྱེས་བ། • *rgyu med las skyes ba*

A causal theory proposing that effect arises without dependence on causes.

Autonomist

རང་རྒྱུད་པ། • *rang rgyud pa* • Svātantrika

A subschool of Madhyamaka, within which many individual scholars with diverse philosophical approaches are included, all of whom are said to be influenced by the logic and epistemology of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti.

autonomous reason

རང་རྒྱུ་ཉི་རྟེན། • *rang rgyud kyī rtags*

A reason, whose terms like a subject, predicate, and the concomitant relationship among them are established through valid cognition,.

Consequentialist

ཐལ་འགྲུང་བ། • *thal 'gyur ba* • Prāsaṅgika

A school of Madhyamaka, whose main proponent is Candrakīrti.

defining characteristic

རང་གི་མཚན་ཉིད། • *rang gi mtshan nyid* • svalakṣaṇa

Phenomena characterized by some essence, not merely designated by language.

General Exposition of the Middle Way

དབུ་མ་སྤྱི་སྟོན། • *dbu ma spyi ston*

A key text by Gorampa Sōnam Senge on the major points of Madhyamaka.

Gorampa Sōnam Senge

གོ་རམས་པ་བསོད་ནམས་སེང་གེ། • *go rams pa bsod nams seng ge*

Gorampa Sōnam Senge (1429–1489) was a seminal philosophical contributor within the Sakya school.

inference

རྗེས་དཔག། • *rjes dpag* • anumāna

A valid type of knowledge based on a valid reason.

inference through analogy

དཔེ་ཉེར་འཇལ། • *dpe nyer 'jal* • upamāna

A knowledge episode based on analogy.

inference through scripture

ལུང་ཚན་པ། • *lung tshad ma* • āgamapramāṇa

A knowledge episode based on authoritative scriptures with regard to hidden phenomena.

Ju Mipham Namgyal Gyatso

མི་པམ་རྣམ་རྒྱལ་རྒྱ་མཚོ། • *mi pham rnam rgyal rgya mtsho*

Mipham Namgyal Gyatso (1846–1912) was an important philosopher in the Nyingma school.

meditative equipoise without appearances

མཉམ་བཞག་སྣང་མེད། • *mnyam bzhag snang med*

A position attributed to the Consequentialist school, which asserts that a noble being does not perceive any appearance in the sense of conventional phenomena during their meditative equipoise.

Middle Way school

དབུ་མ་པ། • *dbu ma pa* • Madhyamaka

A tradition of Buddhist thought inspired by and closely following the works of Nāgārjuna, especially the so-called logical corpus.

mind and mental factors

མེས་དང་མེས་སྤྱོད། • *sems dang sems byung* • cittacaittā

A compound denoting the mind and other facets of it.

non-essentiality of phenomena

ཚོས་ཀྱི་བདག་མེད། • *chos kyi bdag med* • dharmanairātmya

The reality of all phenomena understood as lacking any essential core.

nonarising

སྐྱེ་མེད། • *skye med* • anutpāda

A philosophically pregnant term use to denote the emptiness of phenomena.

perception

མངོན་སྲུང་། • *mngon sum* • pratyakṣa

A valid type of knowledge that accesses its object without intermediaries.

Root of Wisdom

དབུ་མ་རྩ་བ་ཤེས་རབ། • *dbu ma rtsa ba shes rab* • *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*

A key Madhyamaka text authored by Nāgārjuna.

Sūtra school

མངོན་སྲུང་། • *mdo sde ba* • Sautrāntika

Literally, “the Sūtra followers.” One of the two philosophical systems of the Hīnayāna, the other being the Vaibhāṣika. The Sautrāntika system relies closely on the sūtras and rejects the authority of the Abhidharma treatises accepted by the Vaibhāṣika. Both schools accept the true existence of outer phenomena in terms of indivisible particles and of mind in terms of indivisible moments of awareness.

The Essence of True Eloquence

ལེགས་བཤད་སྦྱིང་པོ། • *legs bshad snying po*

A key Madhyamaka text by Tsongkhapa that establishes the superiority of the Prāsaṅgika approach.

Tsongkhapa Lobzang Dragpa

ཚོང་ཁ་པ་བློ་བཟང་གྲགས་པ། • *tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*

Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) is regarded as the originator of the Gelugpa school.

zindri

ཟིན་ཟིན། • *zin bris*

A type of text made up of notes.