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The Earring of the Definitive Meaning: The Speech That Classifies the Tenets

Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo



KHYENTSE VISION
PROJECT

grub pa'i mtha' rnam par dbye ba'i gtam nges don rna cha

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Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo

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INTRODUCTION

Over the centuries, Tibetan Buddhist writers preserved, refined, and transmitted numerous literary genres, which they had inherited from Indian masters and sources that were Indic in origin. Additionally, they invented many new genres to systematically and coherently organize, understand, and internalize the vast knowledge acquired from those sources, which were primarily Buddhist in their content.

One of the most successful and widespread genres in Tibetan literature is that of *drubta*, or tenet systems,¹ which primarily aim to present both wide-ranging and detailed treatments of philosophical deliberations, soteriological theories, and the ethical and moral teachings of the different traditions of ancient India and Tibet. From the Indian side, Bhāvaviveka's *Blaze of Reasoning* served as a template and model for the Tibetans.² Among the many Tibetan indigenous writings within this genre, one of the most well known is Tagtsang Lotsāwa's *Knowledge of All Philosophies*, along with its auto-commentary.³ The work of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo translated here, *The Speech That Classifies the Tenets: The Earring of the Definitive Meaning*, can also be read as a short work that belongs to the tenet-systems genre. The author's title of the work confirms it, and from its contents one can see that he discusses the fundamental tenets of the Buddhist schools of India and Tibet.

This text also represents another distinctive genre found among the collected written works of Tibetan authors—namely, *drilen*, or responses to queries.⁴ These include answers of varying length, written in both prose and verse, given by the teacher to their immediate disciples, or explanations of contemporary scholars commenting on diverse subjects, ranging from clarifications about a specific practice to complex and obscure philosophical points. Some responses may also refer to other works composed by the teacher. Among the noted authors of this genre are Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltzen and Gorampa Sönam Senge,⁵ both of whom are liberally

quoted in the text translated here. Many of Sakya Paṇḍita's *drilen* are found in the third volume of the standard Derge edition of his collected works, where he responds to the questions about his controversial *Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows*.⁶ The *drilen* penned by Gorampa are located in the tenth volume of the Derge edition of his works, and some are connected to his *Addendum to Differentiation of the Three Vows*.⁷ Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo refers to both of these works in a favorable manner, quoting them in *The Earring of the Definitive Meaning*.

The colophon of this text clearly states that it was written in response to a series of questions addressed to the author. In Sakya Paṇḍita's works, the questions are preserved separately, while in Gorampa's *drilen* they are integrated within the answers. Here, neither of these is the case. Moreover, the identity of the person(s) who sent or asked these questions remains unknown. Only further research will shed light on this matter, as it is beyond the scope of the current project.

A Brief Summary of the Content

Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo starts with the customary verse of obeisance, addressed here to the guru, who is inseparable from the nature of one's mind. Following the structure of the traditional homage, the rest of the work is also composed in verse. The author proceeds to present a short background on the Buddha's teachings and explains that if one fixedly adheres to a partial understanding, that constitutes a diabolical deed to destroy them. He comments that the various vehicles are taught as different means to realize the same reality.

Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo explains that the common characteristic fundamental to all philosophical extremists is their belief in a self that is independent of the psycho-physical aggregates constituting the empirical person. This is followed by a short exposition of some of the salient tenets of the four classical Buddhist doxographical schools—namely, the Great Exposition school (Vaibhāṣika), Sūtra school (Sautrāntika), Mind-Only school (Cittamātra), and Middle-Way school (Madhyamaka). He then briefly notes the similarities between the views of the Sūtra school and the Great Perfection (Dzogchen) and the differences between the Mind-Only school and the Other-Emptiness (Zhentong) school.⁸

The main part of the work is dedicated to the exposition of the teaching on the Path and Fruit (Lamdre), inspired by a short work attributed to the Indian yogi Virūpa. The author quotes numerous authoritative scriptural sources to substantiate his arguments and prove his readings. He compares the Path and Fruit teachings with those of the Mind-Only school, declaring that there is a considerable difference between them. Regarding the Great Perfection, however, he states that there exists no substantial difference from the Path and Fruit tradition at all, as both are identical

in their ultimate import, and the seemingly contrasting emphases and characteristics of the two systems are merely provisional.

Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo then presents his understanding of the dissimilarities between the Other-Emptiness school and the Path and Fruit tradition, mentioning the fundamental differences in their respective philosophical contentions and deliberations, even though they employ the same terminology. To prove this, he quotes from two works of the two distinguished writers mentioned above, Sakya Paṇḍita and Gorampa Sönam Senge.

The last topic explored in the work is the author's interpretation of pronouncements made in different discourses concerning the ontological status of the wisdom of the Buddha—that is, whether it exists, does not exist, both, or neither. For Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, the Buddha's wisdom is beyond any kind of limiting categories. The only way to realize it is to cultivate a meditative mind in a secluded and delightful retreat place.

The colophon, which is in verse, does not contain any additional information regarding the time and place in which the work was composed. Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo asks for forgiveness for any limitations and dedicates any positive merit accumulated through its composition.

ངེས་དོན་རྣམ་ཐོག་མེད་པའི་

The Earring of the Definitive Meaning

Having bowed to the guru, who is the vajra of the mind,
The face of the three doors of liberation,⁹
And whose nature is the unconditioned sphere of phenomena,
I will briefly expound answers to queries.

General Background

The lord who expresses nonduality
Taught inconceivable causal and resultant vehicles
To the trainees of the three families¹⁰
To bring them to their liberated states.

All beings who do not realize that,
Having adopted partisan views, disturb the teachings.
These are fabrications of the teachings
Belonging to the activities of Mahādeva.¹¹

Within this, everything from the Great Exposition school among the Hearers
To the vajra essence of the supreme secret¹²
Is correctly taught as a means to realize
The suchness of the singular reality of phenomena.

The Common Philosophical Characteristic of Extremists

All of the extremists
Who greatly delight in preaching eternalism and nihilism

Are united in accepting the existence of a self of a person
That is permanent, unitary, and independent of aggregates.¹³

Some of the Salient Features of the Four Buddhist Doxographical Schools

With respect to the self, those who expound our own system
Establish its nonexistence because it is not observed
As being either identical to or separate from the aggregates,
And also in other terms. [157]

Based on this, the followers of the Great Exposition school have not abandoned
even gross grasping
At the selfhood of phenomena,
Since they assert the true existence of the grasped object as atoms
And the grasping consciousness as a partless instant.

The followers of the Sūtra school abandon grasping
At the gross selfhood of apprehended phenomena
Since they assert all external phenomena as the perceiving aspects of the mind,
Yet they assert the cause of that to be external phenomena.¹⁴

Although the followers of the Mind-Only school have ascertained the non-trueness
Of subject-object duality on account of establishing the nonexistence
Of matter as characterized by spatial parts and consciousness as characterized by
temporal parts,
They still assert the nondual thoroughly established nature to be true.

Through the five great reasonings, the Autonomists¹⁵
Establish even that¹⁶ as lacking selfhood,
Presenting the ultimate as lacking essence
And the conventional as it appears.

The Consequentialists,¹⁷ having abandoned all elaborate propositions
With regard to imputation and depreciation,
Are endowed with the uniqueness of destroying others' propositions
Through the reasoning that shows internal contradictions.¹⁸

The Similarity between the Consequentialist School and the Great Perfection

Given that the Consequentialist school and the Great Perfection are of the same
taste
With regard to the inconceivable dharmatā

In the state beyond cognition,
Look at this with the mind of utter meditative equipoise.

The Difference between the Mind-Only School and the Other-Emptiness Tradition

The two—namely, the stainlessly pure Mind-Only school
And the Other-Emptiness tradition—are not similar.
This is on account of the former asserting consciousness as ultimate,
While the latter asserts wisdom as ultimate.

The Path and Fruit Tradition and Its Difference from the Mind-Only School

The followers of the Path and Fruit tradition¹⁹
Establish appearances as mind,
With the perceptions of mind as illusion and that illusion also as lacking essence.
This is further classified as being interdependent and beyond expression. [158]

Yet, the erroneous conception that sees
This position as similar to the realists
In asserting appearances as mind
Is the fault of not having subtly investigated.²⁰

It is thus stated in the *Vajra Tent Tantra*:²¹

Apart from the precious mind,
There are neither buddhas nor beings.
The abode or the object of consciousness
Does not even slightly exist externally.

And the *Tantra of Union*²² states as follows:

All those things characterized as possessing selfhood, external or internal,
Are to be investigated in terms of mind.
Apart from the mind,
They do not exist elsewhere.

These are noted and their rationale is accordingly stated by the savior Nāgārjuna:

With regard to a single external form,
Consciousnesses engage differently.²³
A beautiful form
Appears differently to others.
With regard to a single female form,

It turns out to have three aspects—
Filth,²⁴ something desired, and something to be eaten—
To the ascetic, lusty one, and a dog, respectively.

Thus, this type of argument establishes the proposition.

In particular, even though it is similar to the Mind-Only school
Concerning the mode of asserting selfhood as mind,
The mind is still not asserted as truly established
Since it is accepted as free from elaborations.

The Similarity between the Path and Fruit Tradition and the Great Perfection

Furthermore, the luminous Great Perfection, as in the *Great Tantra of Self-Arising*,²⁵

Extensively elaborates on the levels of views,
From the extremists that expound eternalism and nihilism [159]
To the supreme secret—namely, the vajra essence.

Likewise, the *Root Tantra of Hevajra*²⁶ states the following:

On that the followers of the Great Exposition school teach;
In like manner do the followers of the Sūtra school.
After that teach the followers of the Yoga Practice school,²⁷
And then afterward the followers of the Middle-Way school.

These and so on are clearly stated.²⁸

How the Path and Fruit Tradition Surpasses the Teachings of the Four Doxographical Schools

Virūpa, the lord of the yogis,
For the gradual engagement of practitioners
Taught the essential meaning of interpretations
That surpasses the extremists
And the two similar schools of the Hearers, though having commonalities with
them,
Since they teach aggregates, elements, and spheres of perception.

Inasmuch as it asserts the nonexistence
Of objects and consciousness, and the lack of nature
With respect to nonduality other than those,
It also surpasses the Mind-Only school.

It is also superior to the Middle-Way school,
Which asserts that although the conventional appears like illusion
An intrinsic essence does not exist,
Yet does not assert a “this is it” thesis with regard to the ultimate.

Therefore, transcending the four extremes
Primordially fabricated by the mind,
Practicing in union
Is the ultimate import of this path.

Furthermore, not being mere words
But the moment of bursting forth from basic space
By means of the discriminating wisdom of the ultimate,
It is of a single taste with the Great Perfection.

The Difference between the Great Perfection and the Path and Fruit Tradition

In brief, the teachings of immediate introduction to awareness
Within the profound and secret heart essence
Are meant for those with superb faculties
And those who belong to the lineage of the sudden realizers.²⁹ [160]

The manner of verbal instruction in the exposition
Of the Path and Fruit tradition is a gradual one.
If one correctly understands this mode,
Fabricated contradictions will be pacified in basic space.

The Difference between the Path and Fruit and the Other-Emptiness Traditions

The lord of yogis Virūpa presented the nature of mind
As the union of luminosity and emptiness,
While the proponents of Other-Emptiness presented a thoroughly established
buddha nature.³⁰

Even though these two share an identical epithet, their meanings are different.³¹
If asked why, it is as the Mañjunātha Sakya Paṇḍita said:

Therefore, since buddha nature
Is devoid of elaborations,
The appearance of the Buddha and cyclic existence
To sentient beings is viable.³²

Thus, with this and other arguments,
Buddha nature is established as being free from elaborations.
The Other-Emptiness school asserts it as permanent, stable, and thoroughly
established.

Hence, is there an occasion where these are asserted as similar?

Therefore, the great Omniscient One³³ said the following:

Natural luminosity is like a crystal
Transformed by latencies, like paint,
From which appear multiple states.
This sphere is the basis of all, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.³⁴

And to illuminate the meaning of this:

Here, Maitreyaṇātha and Nāgārjuna accept
Luminous, continuous, and unimpeded mind,
Which is free from the elaborations of the four extremes.
This uncompounded coalescence is asserted as the ground.³⁵

Hence, the scriptures and reasoning extensively establish
The manner in which the intentions of the
Two great charioteers are collected as one. [161]

The signification of this basis of illustration is stated as follows:

The dharmadhātu, the stained reality,
Luminosity, buddha nature,
Pure nature of mind, and so forth
Are taught as being synonymous with multiple appellations.
The *Laṅkāvatāra* and the *Ghanavyūha*,
The pith instruction of the lord of yogis,
And the venerable, illustrious Candrakīrti and others
Accept the term “basis of all”³⁶ as that [ground].
In the profound tantras, terms such as “Mañjuśrī,”
“Great wisdom,” “innately arisen,”
“Vajra,” “Vajrasattva,” “glorious,”
And “Samantabhadra” are countless taught as being synonymous with
the ground.³⁷

One must investigate these clear statements
With a keen intelligence.

Apart from this, asserting that buddha nature
Is a mere negation of inherent nature through reasoning
With respect to the stained mind,
Proposing it as being truly established nature, and so on
Are shown through correct reasoning as falling into the extremes of imputation
and denigration.³⁸
Yet here, as a middle way, for the time being,
It will be kept without negation or affirmation.

Deliberations on the Wisdom of the Buddha

With regard to the wisdom of the Buddha, which is the result,
The Autonomist tradition of the Middle Way school asserts
It as nonexistence, and the Other-Emptiness school asserts
It as permanent, stable, and unchanging.³⁹

The Consequentialist tradition, which includes the proponents of the ultimate
definitive meaning,
Asserts it as being free from any thesis of existence and nonexistence
Since it does not abide together with cognition
And is in the domain of the inconceivable.

The presentation of the nonexistence of wisdom in the sūtras [162]
Is intended so that its nonexistence
Is associated with defiled phenomena.
This is intended to ward off grasping at permanence.

In some discourses, wisdom is also stated as existing.
This refers to the inconceivable and inexpressible wisdom
That pervades all saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.
This is intended to clear the extreme of nihilism.

In reality, when one directly realizes the mode of existence
That transcends the two extremes
And is beyond propositions, the elaborations of eternalism
And nihilism are pacified within the basic sphere.

Advice to Practice

If one aspires to know the meaning of these correctly
Without abiding in single-pointed meditative equipoise
In a secluded and delightful forest,
It will never be realized through the sophistry of the intellectual.

Therefore, you privileged one,
Having drunk the essence of profound meaning like a young sun,
May your supreme intelligence bloom like a white lotus
And through the path of meditation be enriched with the resultant state of
abandonment.⁴⁰

Although you have offered an infinitude of questions
On account of your superb and marvelous knowledge,
I am conditioned by ignorance and laziness.
How then is there an opportunity to answer extensively?

Yet, with regard to what was briefly offered here,
May hosts of defects be cleared,
And through this virtue may all ocean-like sentient beings
Attain the state of omniscience.

*Sarvadā kalyāṇaṃ bhavatu.*⁴¹

NOTES

1. These are known as *siddhānta* in Sanskrit and *drubta* (*grub mtha'*) in Tibetan.
2. *Madhyamakabhūdayavṛttitarkajvālā* (*dbu ma'i snying po'i 'grel pa rtog ge 'bar ba*).
3. Tagtsang Lotsāwa Sherab Rinchen (stag tshang lo tsā ba shes rab rin chen, 1405–1477), *grub mtha' kun shes nas mtha' bral sgrub pa zhes bya ba'i bstan bcos rnam par bshad*.
4. Known as *praśnottara* in Sanskrit, the *drilen* (*dris lan*) genre in Tibet is sometimes also referred to as *zhulen* (*zhus lan*). See Liang, “Questioning Women,” 295–97; Almogi, “Analysing Tibetan Titles,” 40.
5. Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltsen (sa skya paṇḍita kun dga' rgyal mtshan, 1182–1251) and Gorampa Sönam Senge (go rams pa bsod nams seng ge, 1429–1489).
6. *sdom gsum rab dbye*.
7. *sdom gsum kha skong*.
8. Advanced by Dölpopa (dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan, 1292–1361) in the fourteenth century, the Zhentong (*gzhan stong*) interpretation of “other-emptiness” holds ultimate truth as distinct from relative truth.
9. The three doors to liberation are (1) emptiness, (2) signlessness, and (3) wishlessness—the three philosophical orientations that a Buddhist practitioner cultivates with respect to the nature, cause, and result of an entity or the whole practice, respectively.
10. The three families are those of the (1) śrāvaka (hearer), (2) pratyekabuddha (solitary realizer), and (3) bodhisattva.
11. For a brief historical story of this character, see Silk, “Mahādeva,” 298–301.
12. This phrase seems to be referring to the Dzogchen system, which Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo understands as the pinnacle of the Buddhist paths.
13. For a detailed presentation of the philosophical views and soteriological theories (or lack thereof) of some of the important non-Buddhist Indian traditions, see Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, *theg pa'i rnam dbye gsal bar byed pa'i gtam legs bshad ngo mtshar chu gter*, 73–80.
14. This is a unique epistemological stance of the Sautrāntika in their explanation of the sense perceptions. For them, sense perceptions and their objects are causally connected,

thus necessarily sequential. Hence, what appears to the perceiving perception is its own aspect, although caused by the real external phenomenon that precedes it, which is its objective condition.

15. That is, the followers of the Svātantrika-Madhyamaka school.
16. That is the thoroughly established nature (pariniṣpanna) asserted as possessing selfhood by the Mind-Only school.
17. That is, the followers of the Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka school.
18. For a detailed presentations of the philosophical views, ethical commitments, meditational and spiritual praxis, and resultant state of each of these four schools, see Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, *theg pa'i rnam dbye gsal bar byed pa'i gtam legs bshad ngo mtshar chu gter*, 91–119.
19. For an introduction and translation of some of the most fundamental scriptures of this practice lineage, see Stearns, *Taking the Results as the Path*. Additionally, see Gorampa, *gsung ngag lam 'bras don bsdus ma'i rnam bhsad zab don gnad kyi sgron me*, for a succinct introduction to the Path and Fruit teaching system.
20. Although the precise identity of the one who accuses the Path and Fruit tradition of this charge is not clear, at the end of his commentary on Candrakīrti's *Introduction to the Middle Way (Madhyamakāvatāra)*, Gorampa shows how a similar charge is unwarranted. See Gorampa, *lta ba ngan sel*, 748: 'di'i chos skyong zhes pa dang/ bzhi 'grel gyi phyogs snga chos skyong zhes gsungs pa'i chos skyong gnyis gcig pas dpal ldan chos skyong yin la/ des na bir wa pa sems tsam pa yin no zhes blo gros rtsing po dag smra ba ni rje bla mas bkag zin to//.
21. *Āryaḍākinīvajrapañjaramahātantrarājākālpanāma* ('phags pa mkha' 'gro ma rdo rje gur zhes bya ba'i rgyud kyi rgyal po chen po'i btag pa).
22. *Samputanāmamahātantra* (yang dag par sbyor ba zhes bya ba'i rgyud chen po).
23. *Bodhicittavivaraṇa* (byang chub sems kyi 'grel pa). The Derge edition of this text reads slightly differently as *tha dad shes pa 'jug par 'gyur*, which Geshe Thupten Jinpa (p. 3) translates as “With respect to a single external object, divergent perceptions can arise.”
24. The Derge edition of this text has *ro*, indicating that the ascetic sees the woman as a corpse.
25. *Mahā[vidyā]svamukti[sarvaghāṭṭita]tantra* ([rig pa'i] rang shar chen po'i rgyud). This belongs to the Dzogchen Seventeen Tantras.
26. *Hevajratantrarājanāma* (kye rdo rje zhes bya ba rgyud kyi rgyal po / kye'i rdo rje mkha' 'gro ma dra ba'i sdom pa'i rgyud kyi rgyal po).
27. The reference to the Yogācāra school here can be seen as related to the Cittamātra school.
28. The citations and its surrounding themes have been quoted here fully from an edition of this famous tantra, which is of fundamental importance to the Sakya tradition. See *Hevajratantra* (T 379, fol. 144b7–145a1): *dang por gso sbyong sbyin par bya/ de rjes bslab pa'i gnas bcus gnyis/ de la bye brag smra ba bstan/ mdo sde pa yang de bzhin no/ de nas rnal 'byor spyod pa nyid/ de yi rjes su dbu ma bstan/ sngags kyi rim pa kun shes nas/ de rjes kye yi rdo rje brtsam/ slob mas gus par blangs nas ni/ 'grub 'gyur 'di la the tshom med/*. See Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra*, 90 for the Sanskrit: *poṣadham diyaṭe prathamam | tadanu śi kṣāpadaṃ daśam || vaibhāṣyaṃ tatra deśeta | sūtrāntam vai punas tathā || yogācāram tataḥ paścāt | tadanu madhyamakam diśet || sarvamantra-*

*nayaṃ jñātvā | tadanu Hevajram ārabhet || gr̥hṇīyāt sādaraṃ śiṣyaḥ sidhyate nātra
samsayaḥ ||.*

29. For a summary of Dzogchen by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, including both its contents and its scriptural sources, see *theg pa'i rnam dbye gsal bar byed pa'i gtam legs bshad ngo mtshar chu gter*, 152–67.
30. For an introduction to and translation of the most important work of this school, see Hopkins, *Mountain Doctrine* and jo nang kun mkhyen dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan, *ri chos nges don rgya mtsho*.
31. For a detailed Sakya critique of the views of the Other-Emptiness school and its hermeneutical moves, both tantric and non-tantric, see Gorampa, *lta ba'i shan 'byed* and *dpal gsang ba 'dus pa'i sgrub thabs kun tu bzang po'i nyi 'od kyi don 'grel*.
32. For the context, see Kunga Gyaltzen (kun dga' rgyal mtshan), *sdom gsum rab dbye*, 16. For a translation of this verse, see Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltzen, *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes*, 57.
33. This refers to Gorampa.
34. See *sdom gsum kha skong*, 647.
35. See *sdom gsum kha skong*, 647.
36. *ālaya; kun gzhi*.
37. See *sdom gsum kha skong*, 648.
38. These are again illuminated and critiqued in Gorampa's aforementioned work. See Jamtsho, "A Study of the Life and Works of Go-rams-pa bSod-nams-seng-ge," Chapter 4 for the wider context and identification of the scholars who are critiqued.
39. For a substantial discussion about this topic from diverse perspectives and their implications, see Gorampa, *lta ba ngan sel*, 721–23.
40. The resultant state of abandonment through the path of meditation is a phrase describing the fully awakened state.
41. "May there always be virtue."

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