

# The Concepts of Truth and Meaning in the Buddhist Scriptures

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In 1976 during a visit to a Buddhist monastery on the East coast of the United States I made the acquaintance of a monk of the Theravāda tradition. During a series of often heated discussions which ensued my colleague raised this most fascinating and indeed insightful objection. He said to me: "You see the problem is really quite simple, the Hīnayāna asserts that all of Buddha's words are true while the Mahāyāna claims that all that is true is the word of the Buddha (*buddhavacanam*)."

The claim is a bit facile and by far an overstatement of the situation. The more I pondered the problem however, the less offensive I realized a Mayāyānist would find it, and in the end I felt that a Mahāyānist should feel quite at ease in conceiving of "the set of all truths" as being at least "the intent of the Buddha" (if not his actual words). This was a position which I thought should be perfectly acceptable.

In the years that have passed since this occasion, I have steadily pursued my interests in this question. In particular, I have attempted to determine what the Tibetan sources have to say in this regard, and whether it is a consistent account. This brief paper is then the result of some of these investigations.<sup>1</sup>

## *Scripture and Pramāṇa*

Buddhism has often been regarded as a non-dogmatic religion, and rightfully so. Despite the claims of some scholars<sup>2</sup>, the critical spirit, so eloquently captured in the parable of the goldsmith, is simply too important and all-pervasive a part of both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna Buddhism to be challenged.

Traditionally Buddhism has posited two forms of *pramāṇa*: *pratyakṣa*, or direct perception, and *anumāna*, or inference. In general Buddhists have, with the Vaiśeṣikas and against the Advaitins and Mīmāṃsākas, rejected the validity of *śabda* (Tib. *lung* or *sgra*), scriptural testimony, as a valid source of knowledge. But this must be qualified, for scriptural evidence is, at least according to some Buddhist sources, acceptable with a proviso. Dharmakīrti makes the following statement in *Pramāṇavārttikain* I, 216:

Reliable words are non-mistaken. They are a form of inductive inference.<sup>3</sup>

*āptavādāvisaṃvāda sāmānyād anumānatā*<sup>4</sup>

*yid ches tshig ni mi slu ba'i*  
*spyi las rjes su dpag pa nyid*<sup>5</sup>

Two questions come to mind: (1) what characterizes reliable words and (2) why are they a form of inductive inference? In succeeding verses Dharmakīrti explains that for a scripture to be considered reliable (and hence non-mistaken) it must at least not contradict direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*).

Now rGyal tshab Dar ma rin-chen comments extensively on this point in the *Thar lam gsal byed*<sup>6</sup>, his monumental commentary on the *Pramāṇavārttikain*. He concludes that only as regards very subtle points of doctrine (Tib. *shin tu lkog gyur*) can scripture be relied upon as an authority, and that this can be justified inductively. He says that the fact that the less subtle points of doctrine can be (either logically or perceptually) verified to be correct leads one to infer inductively that the very subtle points are also accurate.<sup>7</sup> Moreover only those scriptures which are “purified by means of the three forms of examination” (*spyad pa gsum gyis dag pa*), i.e., which meet the following three conditions, can be considered authoritative. The three criteria are:

1. that the scripture not contradict the testimony of direct perception (tib. *mngon sum la mi gnod pa*)
2. that it not contradict inferential reasoning (tib. *rjes dpag la mi gnod pa*) and
3. that it not contradict inference based on reliable words (tib. *yid ches rjes dpag la mi gnod pa*)

Now the first two constraints assure us that by taking scripture as valid testimony we are in fact not departing from the conviction that

*pratyakṣa* and *anumāna* are the guiding principles as regards validity. The third category is puzzling, for it seemingly involves us in a circular definition by positing reliability as a criterion for a reliable scripture. But this is in fact not the case. In discussing the third point rGyal tshab gives the following interpretation. He asserts that as a third constraint imposed on valid scriptural testimony, the work in question must be consistent. It cannot contradict other points of scripture, either explicit or implicit (tib. *dnegos shugs*).<sup>8</sup> Given the abundance of contradictory statements in the corpus of Buddhist exegesis, this is indeed a rigorous constraint.

In short, *śabda* had to meet very rigorous conditions in order to be considered valid, conditions which most interesting scriptures failed to meet; for if a text expounded a thesis concerning a point of controversy, it was almost certain that the anti-thesis would exist in another scripture. Thus, the majority of scriptures were themselves more the *objects* of verification than sources of it.

Be that as it may, one thing is clear: that the privileged status of the Buddha as an enlightened and omniscient being did not guarantee a privileged status to his word as regarded questions of truth; and if the veracity of *buddhavacanāṃ* was not post-hoc certain, then it necessitated a method for its verification.

### *Truth and Authenticity*

It was the need for reconciling the divergent opinions expressed in the Buddhist scriptures that led to a new genre of texts. If the *Nikāyas*, the *Abhidharma*<sup>9</sup> and the *Prajñāpāramitā* represent a first order or base level of scripture, *sūtras* such as the *Samdhinirmocana*, which attempt to arbitrate inconsistencies between first-order scriptures, can be termed second-order or level two meta-scriptures. By the time such questions had reached the great Tibetan master Tsong kha pa for example, the issues were at least third-order (and sometimes fourth). Tsong kha pa not only tackled the problem of reconciling two first order scriptures, he also took as his subject matter second order scriptures such as the *Samdhinirmocana*, trying to reconcile its claims (which he or course considered to be *buddhavacanāṃ*) with those made in other *sūtras* and *śāstras*.

It is important to note here that Tsong kha pa conducted his analysis not so as to be considered a third-level meta-physician (in the

literal sense of the term), but because he saw a real need to come to grips with the problems of meaning and truth that confronted him. His analysis was not a mere intellectual game, but an earnest attempt to answer questions he felt to be soteriologically important; and to do so in a thoroughly non-dogmatic fashion. He states at the beginning of his *Legs bshad snying po*:

It is impossible to elucidate (the status of a scripture) simply (by relying upon) a text which says “this is of direct meaning (*nges don*, skt. *nītārtha*),” because (were this the case), all the commentaries composed by Mahāyānists would have been pointless. Moreover, there are many disagreements between the very texts which say that they settle (the question of what is) direct and what indirect meaning. One is unable to settle the issue by simply (quoting) a scripture which says “this (text) is of such and such (a meaning)” because when it cannot be done (in this way as regards) general questions (i.e., first order questions), (why should it be so as regards) the specific issue of direct/indirect (meaning) (i.e., second order questions)?<sup>10</sup>

He concludes that

In the end, it is necessary to distinguish (such texts) by non-mistaken reasoning itself.<sup>11</sup>

and not by relying on dogma.

To sum up, then, second-order scriptures attempt to reconcile inconsistencies between first-order ones. Third-order texts deal with the inconsistencies of second-order texts, and so on. The thing to remember is that in this hermeneutical circus, the tricks become successively more and more daring as we proceed from level to level.

Before we can discuss the actual *modus operandi* of the reconciliation of inconsistencies, one major question needs to be answered: Why the need for reconciliation, arbitration or interpretation at all? After all, if two religious texts diverge, the simplest solution is to challenge the authenticity of one of them and to claim that the historically later one is apocryphal.

This attitude has existed throughout Buddhist history, but it has for the most part been one-sided. The Sautrāntikas criticized the innovative Abhidharmists. According to traditional hagiography Vasubandhu initially criticized the “heretical Mahāyāna” followed by his brother Asaṅga; and indeed, even today, we see some Theravādins

making the same kinds of criticisms of the Mahāyāna scriptures. The critique, however, is luckily one-sided, for the Abhidharmists (as far as we know) did not call into question the authenticity of the *Nikāyas*, nor does the Mahāyāna deny that the Pāli canon is *buddhavacanām*. Indeed, it is one of the Bodhisattva's root vows to refrain from "disparaging the *śrāvakayāna*" (*nyan-smod*)<sup>12</sup>.

It is quite fortunate that the debate did not for the most part center upon questions of authenticity, for excessive preoccupation with such issues could only have led to dogmatism, and to the stagnation of the tradition. The emergence of new scriptures and the reinterpretation of old ones is a sign of the vitality of a tradition. Thus, with the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, the Tantric scriptures, and even the Tibetan *dgongs gter*, we find a steady influx of creativity into the tradition. To dismiss them as apocryphal is simply to skirt the real issue, that of their meaning. Instead, it seems that once a *sūtra* (or a tantra for that matter) had been around for a while, it became accepted as *buddhavacanām*, and once this occurred, it was its contents, its meaning and its veracity (and not its authorship) that became the object of debate. From that point on it was only its status as either of direct meaning (*nītārtha*, Tib. *nges don*) or of indirect meaning (*neyārtha*, Tib. *drang don*) that came into question, and not its authenticity.

### *Truth in the Buddhist Scriptures*

Buddhists have traditionally held that the word of their founder expresses the truth (*satya*, tib. *bden pa*), and now we must inquire as to the meaning of this apparently very dogmatic statement.

In his *Chos 'byung*, the great Bu ston Rin chen sgrub quotes a sutra passage describing the Buddha's doctrine as being "of good meaning" (*svārtha*, Tib. *don bzang-po*), and he comments: "'of good meaning' refers to the perfection of the subject matter which is incontrovertible."<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the tenth of the sixty good qualities of the Buddha's word (*ṣaṣṭyākara upeta vak*, Tib. *yan lag drug cu dang ldan pa'i gsung*) is that it is "free from fault"<sup>14</sup>; the twenty-ninth that "it is correct because it does not contradict *pramāṇa*"<sup>15</sup> and the fifty-first that it is "perfect since it brings about completion of all the aims of beings."<sup>16</sup>

Now given this characterization of the Buddha's word the obvious question is, can the word of the Buddha (or of great saints such

as Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga) be anything *but* true?

The answer comes variously. The *Laṅkāvatāra*, in its usual radical style, has this to say.

The Mahāyāna is neither my vehicle nor (my) speech, nor (my) words; it is neither the truth, nor liberation nor the realm without appearances.<sup>17</sup>

And again:

Nirvāṇa is where the idea of truth is not adhered to because it is confusing.<sup>18</sup>

And yet, despite the fact that the *Laṅkāvatāra* de-emphasizes the importance of the notion of truth, the tradition has placed a great deal of emphasis on just such a notion.

Let us turn for a moment to Tibet, and in particular to a series of debates that occurred between the eighth Kar ma pa, Mi bskyod rdo rje, and the dGe lugs scholar Se rva rJe mtshun Chos kyi rgyal mtshan. In the latter's 'Gag lan kLu sgrub dgongs rgyan, he ascribes the following position to the Kar ma pa:

... when one is commenting on the meaning of a *sūtra* which teaches the *mādhyamika* view, if one interprets it as *cittamātra*, it will be the ruin of the teachings (*bstan pa chud gzan pa*).<sup>19</sup>

The work being referred to here is not a *sūtra* but a *śāstra* of Vasubandhu's, and the view being expressed by the Kar ma pa is a very common-sense one. If Vasubandhu's commentary interprets the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* (which both Se rva rJe mtshun pa and the Kar ma pa accept as *Mādhyamika* works) as if they were *Cittamātrin*, then Vasubandhu is in error, and his text cannot be said to expound the truth. But in reply, Se rva rJe mtshun pa has this to say:

The Acārya Śāntipa explained the intended meaning of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* to be the *Cittamātra*. The *Catursataka-bhāṣya* also says that the Sthāvira Dharmapāla explained the intended meaning of the *Mūlamādhyamikakārikās* as *Cittamātrin*. Now because these (sages) interpret *sūtras* which expound ('*chad*') the *Mādhyamika* view ... as *Cittamātra*, were this to ruin the teachings (as the Kar ma pa claims), then (one would be reduced to saying that) similar to those two sages, the Lord (himself), in

his own scriptures (ruined the teachings); for (did not the Buddha himself) extensively teach the Cittamātra views as the third wheel for the purpose of leading the disciples who have tendencies (*rigs*) toward the Cittamātra?<sup>20</sup>

Se rva rJe mtshun-pa's point is this: to mis-interpret (whether deliberately or not) is not necessarily to ruin. A hermeneutical fallacy does not necessarily lead to a scripture's being considered false or "ruined."

At this point, we might once again ask our question: what does the tradition mean when it says that the Buddha's word is true, and does asserting that it is *true* (in the sense with which the tradition uses the word *true*) preclude all possibility of its being fallacious? This latter position, that it is *logically* impossible for the Buddha's word to be false, is, to put it mildly, rather dogmatic. It is, as I hope I have made clear, not at all what is meant by the above claims that the word of the Buddha is true. Instead, the word "true" in the above contexts has a definite pragmatic tinge to it. When Bu-ston characterizes *buddhavaacanām* as *svārtha*, as being "of good meaning," when the sutras call it "perfect," "correct" and "free from fault," or when Se rva rJe mtshun pa claims that the Buddha's doctrine is valid or true despite inconsistency, they are not claiming that all of the scriptures are unconditionally true, but that they are pragmatically true. They are pragmatically true because they are all conducive to the spiritual development of those who hear them. Kajiya hits the nail on the head when he says that "the lower doctrines were not simply rejected but admitted as steps leading to an understanding of the higher ones."<sup>21</sup>

The Buddha's word is well-spoken (*subhāṣita*), says the *Vyākhyāyukti*, for ten reasons, the fifth one being that it is spoken "in accordance with the intellectual faculty of various human beings." We can now see quite clearly that this is what is being pointed to when the word "true" is predicated of the Buddha's word. "Truth" here refers to soteriological validity and not to the absence of logical inconsistency. With this more pragmatic sense of "truth," we can see why the tradition makes the claim, as did my Theravādin colleague, that all of the words of the Buddha are true.

### *Scriptural Inconsistency and Its Solution*

I began this paper with several claims as to the non-dogmatic

nature of Buddhist doctrine, and yet I have thus far made two apparently very dogmatic statements: first, that not only is questioning the authenticity of scripture not important according to the Mahāyāna, it is in fact discouraged by certain vows;<sup>22</sup> and secondly, that the Buddha's word is in its entirety true (in the pragmatic sense described above).

To preclude debate about authenticity shifts the focus of attention from authorship (*pudgala*) to doctrine (*dharma*). To make the unqualified assertion that all of the scriptures are pragmatically true accomplishes two things. It first of all reaffirms the presupposition of the Buddha's status as an enlightened being who "never speaks without a special purpose";<sup>23</sup> and more importantly, it engenders within the adept a sense of respect for the teachings, which he now considers relevant to his spiritual progress. It implicitly shifts the focus of attention from considering the doctrine as mere words (*vyañjana*) to considering it as relevant, or full of meaning (*artha*).<sup>24</sup>

If the Buddhist scriptures are authentically the word of the Bhagavān, and if they are pragmatically true, then two possible means for resolving the contradictions that arise in scripture have been precluded. We can neither take the dogmatic route of dismissing scriptures as spurious; nor can we deny the perfection of the Buddha by dismissing some of his scriptures as pragmatically false, as lacking soteriological value. And now, in a state of utter despondency, we may echo the words of the Bodhisattva Don dam Yang dag 'Phags in the *Saṃdhinirmocana*, as paraphrased by Tsong kha pa in the *Legs bshad snying po*:

We see that in some sūtras (The Lord) says that all *dharma*s lack *svabhāva*, etc. In others, the *svalakṣaṇa* of the aggregates, etc., are said to exist. When we compare these two statements a contradiction arises, and since there should be no contradictions, I ask (The Lord): with what intention did you say that *svabhāvas* do not exist?<sup>25</sup>

There is indeed a third alternative for resolving such inconsistencies, and it comes in the form of the doctrines of *neyārtha* and *nītārtha*. It is neither the authenticity nor the pragmatic truth of the Buddhist scriptures which the tradition questions, but only their intended meaning (*saṃdhi*, Tib. *dgongs*). In short, something had to give, and if it was neither authenticity nor soteriological worth, then it had to be meaning or intention.



All of the scriptures had two properties in common: they were all authentically the word of the Buddha, and they were all pragmatically true. They differed in that they were not all considered to be unconditionally true, which is to say that when subjected to analysis, some were found to be faulty, though at all times soteriologically valid. Those which passed the test of critical evaluation, which were considered unconditionally true, were labeled as of definitive meaning (*nītārtha*, Tib. *nges don*), which is to say that they were considered to be the ultimate intention (*mbhar thug pa'i dgongs pa*) of the Buddha. In a word, the focus changed from considering the word of the Buddha as true, to considering truth to be the Buddha's word (or at least his intention).

Now the way in which this was accomplished, the method for setting up the concepts of *neyārtha* and *nītārtha*, varied from school to school. In his discussion of these concepts in the Hīnayāna scriptures, Jayatilleke has this to say: "When he (the Buddha) is pointing out the misleading implications of speech . . . his meaning is direct."<sup>26</sup> Though this may be one interpretation of what it means for a text to be *nītārtha*, it is certainly not one that would be accepted by a follower of Mahāyāna. Within the latter system, we have an overabundance of data regarding the doctrines of direct and indirect meaning. The issue is raised in the *Laṅkāvatāra*, the *Saṃdhinirmocana*, and Candrakīrti's *Prasānnapadā*, and it becomes especially important in Tibetan exegetical literature, especially within the *gZhan stong* commentaries of Shakya mchog ldan and Dol bu pa, in the works of Bu ston Rinpoche, and of course in Tsong kha pa's *Drang nges legs bshad snying po*, which in turn has its own corpus of commentarial literature. To this latter interpretation we now turn.

### *Scriptures of Indirect Meaning*

Implicitly in the *Legs bshad snying po*, and quite explicitly in some of his other works (such as the *Legs bshad gser 'phreng*), Tsong kha pa states that a text must meet three criteria to be considered of indirect meaning (*drang don*). These are:

- (1) That it have a basis of intention (*dgongs gzhi*)
- (2) That it have the property of necessity (*dgos pa*)
- (3) That it contradict reality (*dnogs la gnod byed*) if taken literally.

If a treatise is to be considered of interpretive meaning, if it cannot be taken literally, then there must be some correct interpretation of the text. This is referred to as the “basis of intention.” It is the actual or ultimate meaning of a text or passage.

There must also be a necessity (*dgos pa*) in its having been taught with such a concealed intention or in such a hidden fashion. This is the second criterion which a text of indirect meaning must meet.

Finally, says Tsong kha pa, there must be some logical inconsistency which results from taking the passage as it stands without attempting to identify the actual meaning. Were there no contradiction (*gnod*—literally “harm”) in taking the apparent meaning as the actual intention of the text, then the text would not be of interpretive meaning but of definitive meaning. Some examples should clarify these criteria.

Again we turn to the *Se rva rJe mtshun-pa / Mi bskyod rdo rje* debates. There we find the former scholar making the assertion that the last three works of Maitreya (The *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*,<sup>27</sup> the *Mādhyāntavibhaṅga*,<sup>28</sup> and the *Dharmadharmatāvibhaṅga*<sup>29</sup>) are the Cit-tamātra treatises (and not Mādhyamika ones) because they put forth the doctrine of three final vehicles (*trīyānavāda*, Tib. *mthar thug theg pa gsum*),<sup>30</sup> interpreting *sūtras* which teach the *ekayāna* as being of interpretive meaning.

We find in *Sūtrālamkāra* XI, 53, for example, the seven “bases of intention” (*dgongs gzhi*) for the doctrine of the *ekayāna*. Since the *Sūtrālamkāra* expounds the doctrine of three final vehicles, it finds objectionable the doctrine of the *ekayāna*, and sets out to interpret it as a doctrine which cannot be taken literally (as *neyārtha*) by positing these seven bases of intention, which it claims to be the doctrines actually intended by the Buddha when he taught the provisional doctrine of one final vehicle. Suffice it here to cite just the second of these *dgongs gzhi*, *nairatmya tulyavat*.<sup>31</sup> All of the vehicles are “equivalent (as regards the fact that they all teach) selflessness,” and it is because of *this* similarity in the vehicles and not because there *is* ultimately one final vehicle, that the Buddha taught the *ekayāna*. The commentary explains:

... that there is one final vehicle (taught) due to an equivalence as regards selflessness means that there is a similarity in the vehicles of the *śrāvakas*, etc. as regards the non-existence of a self.<sup>32</sup>

This, then, is an example of the *dgongs gzhi* or the “basis of intention.” It is the actual or ultimate intention of a text or passage, the basis which underlies whatever provisional doctrine is expressed by taking the text literally, the basis which constitutes the correct interpretation of the text.

The claim being made by the *Sūtrālaṃkāra* is that when the Buddha taught the doctrine of the *ekayāna*, his actual intent (his *dgongs gzhi*) was to point out similarities in the tenets (such as selflessness) of the different vehicles. He did not therefore intend that the doctrine of the *ekayāna* be taken literally—this according to the *Sūtrālaṃkāra*.

Again, in response to the claim that the *tathāgatagarbha* is a self, the *Laṅkāvatāra* says regarding *dgongs gzhi*:

The Lord spoke: my doctrine of the *tathāgatagarbha*, Mahāmati, is not like the self-doctrine of the heretics. For the Tathāgatas, Mahāmati, teach the doctrine of the *tathāgatagarbha* having designated it to mean *sūnyatā*.<sup>33</sup>

The *dgongs gzhi* or “basis of intention” of the doctrine of the *tathāgatagarbha* is, according to the *Laṅka*, nothing but *sūnyatā*. It thus asserts that statements, such as those in the *Ratnagotravibhāṅga*, which claim the *tathāgatagarbha* to be a self (*ātman*) that is permanent (*nitya*), etc., could not be taken literally. We have thus seen two examples of the way in which *dgongs gzhi* forms an integral part of the process of classifying a work as *neyārtha*.

*Dgos pa*, or “necessity,” must also be present. Why was it necessary for the Buddha to teach the doctrine of the *ekayāna* if it cannot be taken as unconditionally true? The *Sūtrālaṃkāra* replies (XI, 54):

So as to convert some and so as to hold onto others, the fully enlightened ones have taught the *ekayāna* to those of indefinite (potential).<sup>34</sup>

The commentary goes on to explain that although there are three final vehicles, there are some beings (of indefinite potential—*aniyata*) who could take either Mahāyāna or Śrāvaka paths, and that the existence of these beings necessitated (*dgos pa*) the teaching of the *ekayāna*. Not to have taught it would have meant that these beings might have failed to realize their full potential.

Again, in regard to the *tathāgatagarbha* there is also a *dgos pa*. The *Laṅkāvatāra* states:

The Tathāgatas, The Arhants, the Fully Enlightened Ones teach the state of non-discrimination, the state without appearances, by means of the doctrine suggesting a *tathāgatagarbha* so as to turn away the fear of egolessness which worldlings have.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, according to the *Laṅkā*, it is “necessary” (*dgos*) to expound such a doctrine as the *tathāgatabarṇa* as an indirect teaching so as skillfully to lead those beings who fear *nairātmya* to an understanding of emptiness. In other words, it is a question of *upāyakauśalya*.

The third criterion, that there must be some fallacy (*gnod*) in taking these tenets as they stand, is the crucial point, for if no fallacy could be found, then the first two points would have been made in vain. The first two criteria, ascribing actual intention and motivation to certain teachings, can be seen more as outcomes of the third. Which is to say that where a doctrine does not contradict reality (*dnogs la gnod byed*) there is no need to determine a basis of intention (*dgongs gzhi*) or a necessity (*dgos pa*). This then is the essence of a text of indirect meaning, that it contradict reality; and to state the contrapositive, if a text is to be of direct meaning, it cannot contradict reality.

### *Scriptures of Direct Meaning*

What kind of doctrine, then, what text, does not contradict reality? Different schools of Buddhist philosophy have answered this question in different ways. Indeed, it is *this fact* which makes them different. According to the *Mādhyamika*, there is only one doctrine that does not contradict reality, and that is, of course, emptiness. Thus, scriptures which teach emptiness are identified as of definitive meaning (*nītārtha*, tib.*nges-don*) by the *Mādhyamika*. In discussing this point, both Bu ston and Tsong kha pa cite this famous passage from the *Akṣyamati nirdeśa*:

What are the *sūtras* of definitive meaning and what the *sūtras* of interpretive meaning? The *sūtras* which teach the conventional are said to be of interpretive meaning, and those which teach the ultimate are said to be of definitive meaning. Those *sūtras* which

teach various words and letters are said to be interpretive *sūtras*. Those *sūtras* which teach the profound, the difficult to see, the difficult to realize, those are said to be of definitive meaning. The *sūtras* which teach concepts such as self, beings, life, nourishment, mankind, personality (etc.) . . . these *sūtras* are said to be of interpretive meaning. Those *sūtras* which teach that things are empty, without characteristic, wishless, non-compounded, unarisen, unproduced; which teach that there are no beings, no life, no personality, no owners; (in short) those *sūtras* which teach the door to emancipation should be known as of definitive meaning. And that is why it is said 'rely on scriptures of definitive meaning and not on scriptures of interpretive meaning.'<sup>36</sup>

This idea of defining scriptures of definitive meaning in terms of whether or not they teach emptiness seems to be a characteristic of Mādhyamika thought. Still, we do find implicit statements to that effect in non-Mādhyamikan works. We find in the *Laṅkāvatāra* for example the following lines:

And again, O Mahāmati, the teachings of the self-nature of entities and of general characteristics are, O Mahāmati, the teachings of the manifest Buddha and not the teachings of the *dharmatā* Buddha.<sup>37</sup>

The *Laṅkā* goes on to identify such teachings as meant for the childish ones (*bāla*), thereby implicitly giving a more definitive character to the doctrine which expounds no-self-nature, i.e., emptiness. However, such passages are rare and, in contradistinction to the *Akṣayamatī-nirdeśa*, the *Laṅkā* can in general be said to repudiate the notion that *sūtras* which teach emptiness demonstrate the unqualified truth. For the *Laṅkā*, the ultimate truth is ineffable and beyond depiction by words. The linguistic categories of direct and indirect meaning are inapplicable to the ultimate, which is only the object of "the wisdom that a noble one has of the truth" (*tattvāryajñāna*).<sup>38</sup>

This raises a question which is hotly debated in Mādhyamikan circles as well. Given the general Buddhist belief that language is incapable of depicting reality, how can any doctrine that is expressed verbally (as *śūnyatā* is) help *but* contradict reality? And if it does contradict reality (which you will recall is the principal criterion characterizing a *sūtra* of interpretive meaning) then how can it be of definitive meaning (*nītārtha*)? We seem to be faced with a paradox: for a scripture to be considered *nītārtha* it must linguistically depict empti-

ness, and yet *in* the act of linguistically depicting, it is reduced to the level of *neyārtha*. The question is a complex one, involving, among other things, issues in the philosophy of mysticism.<sup>39</sup> It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it here to say that for Tsong kha pa, the ineffability of *śūnyatā* does not imply that it is incapable of being depicted linguistically; and it is exactly the correct enunciation of the doctrine of emptiness which characterizes a scripture of direct meaning. This is, according to Tsong kha pa, the ultimate intent of the Buddha; it is the unqualified truth. Thus, any scripture which fails to teach emptiness must of necessity be interpreted. How is one to know which conception of *śūnyatā* is the right one? Tsong kha pa answers: “through non-mistaken reasoning itself.”

Thus, in the end, it is the critical spirit which triumphs. If along the way spatio-temporal concerns such as authenticity are disregarded; and if overtly religious presupposition (such as the infallibility of the Buddha) prohibit the repudiation of the pragmatic value of the doctrine, it is only to pave the way for the truly important questions, those of the truth, and hence of the ultimate intent of the Buddha’s scriptures.

In the end, it is not so much that the words of the Buddha are true, as it is that the enunciation of ultimate truth becomes the sole criterion of the Buddha’s intention.

## NOTES

1. This paper is a revised and enlarged version of a paper that was read at the conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies held jointly with the International Association for the History of Religions in Winnipeg Canada on August 19, 1980.

The author wishes to express his thanks to a number of very learned *kal-yānamitras* from whom he has been fortunate enough to receive instruction. First and foremost is Geshe Lhundub Sopa with whom the author has had the good luck to read major portions of the *Drang nges legs bshad snying po* of Tsong kha pa and the *dGag lan kLu sgrub gdongs rgyan* of Se rva rJe mtshun pa. Thanks must also go to Kensur Wangdu Rinpoche, the former abbot of the Lower Tantric College, Samdong Rinpoche, Director of the Tibetan Institute of Higher Studies in Sarnath, Geshe Wangchen, tutor in Tibetan Studies for the University of Wisconsin Year in India Program, and Geshe Lobsand Tsering of Se rva Byas Monastic College in India for some very lucid explanations and discussions on the meaning of *pyad pa gsum gyis dag pa'i lung* (see below). Finally my thanks go to Mr. Roger Jackson and Gelong Thubten Thardo for reading the manuscript of the paper and making valuable suggestions for improvement. Of course, the views, interpretations, and errors expressed herein are ultimately the author’s own.

2. I am here particularly thinking of Esho Mikogami’s article “The Problem of

Verbal Testimony in Yogacara Buddhism," *Bukkyotaku kenkyu* No. 32 and 33, 1977, in which he seems to ascribe to the *Yogācārabhūmi* a quite rigid dogmatism.

3. The translation requires some justification. I have translated the word *sāmāyād* (literally "due to its similarity" or "due to generality") by the word "inductive" because this is quite clearly what the commentary takes it to be. It (the reliable scripture) can be inferred to be accurate as concerns very subtle points because of its similarity with other scriptural points, less subtle, which *can* be determined to be accurate by either deductive reasoning (*dnegos stobs rjes dpag*) or by direct perception (*mngon sum*). It is because those other, more evident, points are determined to be correct, that one can infer that the extremely subtle points (*shin tu lkog gyur*) are accurate. This is clearly a case of inductive reasoning.

4. *The Pramāṇavārtikā of Dharmakīrti*, R. Gnoli, editor, *Serie Orientalis Roma*, Rome, 1960, p. 109.

This is one of the most controversial verses in Buddhist *pramāṇa* literature, especially in Tibet. In the near future, I plan to devote an entire paper to the elucidation of the different traditions of interpretation of this verse, both Indian and Tibetan.

The verse originally appears in *Pramāṇasamuccaya* II, 5.

5. rGyal tshab Dar ma rin chen quotes this verse in *Thar lam gsal byed*, *Pleasure of Elegant Sayings* Press, Sarnath, 1974, p. 175.

6. The commentary on this point runs from p. 175 to p. 180 of the Sarnath edition (see previous note).

7. Whether induction in such a case is warranted is, I think, an open question. In any case, the most that one can hope to achieve from an inductive argument is that the conclusion is likely (that the very subtle points are most likely accurate) and not that it is certain. From my conversations with several scholars of the tradition, this seems to be not altogether appealing.

8. Again, there is an abundance of variant interpretations within the dGe lugs pa tradition alone regarding this third criterion. A more precise way of putting it, as rGyal tshab rje does, is to say that the scripture must be internally consistent. The former parts cannot contradict the latter (*snga spyi 'gal ba med pa*), nor can the explicit meaning contradict what is implied (*dnegos shugs 'gal ba med pa*).

9. R. Thurman, in an excellent article entitled "Buddhist Hermeneutics" (*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XLVI/1 p. 25), suggests that the Abhidharma itself "contains the earliest forms of the hermeneutical concepts," and this can certainly be agreed to provided that we make a distinction between a synthetic hermeneutic which attempts to synthesize analogous doctrines into a logical whole, and a didactic hermeneutic which attempts to reconcile contradictory doctrines by interpretation. The former is first order, the latter at least second. It seems to me that the Abhidharma is of the synthetic (and therefore first order) variety.

10. Geshe T. Rabtan, *Drang nges rnam 'byed legs bshad snying po dka' gnad rnam mchan bur bkod pa gzur gnas blo gsal dkai ston*, (annotations on the *Letgs bshad snying po* of Tsong kha pa with the root text), Lhun grub chos grags, Delhi, p. 5.

11. *Ibid.* p. 5.

12. See, for example, the list of Bodhisattva vows in *Pha bong kha Rin po che's Thun drug gi rnal 'byor*, found in *bLa ma'i rnal 'byor Shes rig par khang*, Dharmasala, p. 28.

13. Bu ston rin chen grub, *Collected Works*, edited by Lokesh Chandra, New Delhi, 1956-1971. In the volume of his *Chos 'byung*, p. 677.

14. *Ibid.* p. 651.
15. *Ibid.* pp. 652–3.
16. *Ibid.* p. 654.
17. *Laṅkāvatāra sūtra*, P.L. Vaidya, editor, *Buddhist Sanskrit Texts* No. 3; Mithila Institute, Darbhanga, 1963, p. 56.
18. *Ibid.* p. 75.
19. Se rva rJe mtshun Chos kyi rGyal mtshan, 'Gag lan kLu sgrub dgongs rgyan, Tibet House, New Delhi, 1969, p. 9.
20. *Ibid.* p. 18.
21. In M. Kiyota's *Mahayana Buddhist Meditation* U. of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1978, p. 117.
22. See note 12.
23. Bu ston, *op. cit.* p. 653.
24. As per the famous saying: *arthapratisaranena bhavitavyam na vyañjanapratisaranena. dharmapratisaranena bhavitavyam na pudgalapratisaranena* (etc.). In the *Mahāvīṇyūtpatti* the four *pratisamvidah* are given (Cf. XIII, 196).
25. Tsong kha pa, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
26. K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, Motilal Banarsidass, New Dehli, 1963, p. 363.
27. Ho Ui, et al., *A Complete Catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Canons*, Tokyo Imperial University, Japan, 1934, p. 609, No. 4020.
28. *Ibid.* p. 609, No. 4021.
29. *Ibid.* p. 609, No. 4022.
30. I.e., that there are three separate and distinct results that are the fruits of the Mahāyāna and Hinayāna practices. It is a specific feature of certain subschools of the Yogācāra to claim that there are three possible ultimate fruits of the Buddhist path—the enlightenment of a *śrāvaka*, the enlightenment of a *pratyekabuddha*, and that of a fully-enlightened Buddha. This claim is a feature of these Yogācāra schools which distinguishes them from the Mādhyamika.
31. *Mahāyanasūtrālaṅkāra*, P.L. Vaidya editor, *Buddhist Sanskrit Texts* No. 13, Mithila Institute, Darbhanga, 1963, p. 67.
32. *Ibid.* p. 67. The Sanskrit reads: *nairātmya tulyatvād ekayānatā śrāvakādīnām-ātmabhavatā samanyādyatā yānamiti kṛtvā . . .*
33. *Laṅkāvatāra*, p. 32. *Bhagavānāha—na hi mahāmate tīrthikātmavādatulyo mama tathāgatagarbhopadeśah. kim tu mahāmate tathāgataḥ śūnyatā . . . padarthānam tathāgatagarbhopadeśamkṛtvā . . . deśayanti.*
34. *Sūtrālaṅkāra*, p. 69.
35. *Laṅkāvatāra*, p. 33. *tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyaksambuddhā bālānām nairātmya-samtrāsopadavivāranartham nirvikalpanirābhasagocaram tathāgatagarbhamukhopadeśena deśayanti.*
36. As it appears in Geshe T. Rabten's *Legs-bshad snying-po* commentary (see note 10) p. 184.
37. *Laṅkāvatāra*, p. 3. *ya punareva mahāmate bhāvasvabhāva sāmānya lakṣana deśanā eṣa mahāmate nairmanikabuddha deśana, na dharmatā buddha deśana.*
38. *Ibid.* p. 33.
39. The whole question of ineffability as discussed by W. Stace in his *Philosophy of Mysticism* is quite relevant here. It is my belief that Professor Stace's arguments



against the cogency of the claim of ineffability are simply inapplicable to the Buddhist conception of what it means for something to be ineffable.