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A Relativity Theory of the Purity and Validity of Perception in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n.

John Milton (1608–1674), *Paradise Lost*

One devoid of self-cognitive mind that cognises true [reality],
Would perceive even [pure] Buddha fields to be domains of bad
destinations (e.g. hells).
[For] one who realises the [true] reality of equality [taught by] the
Supreme Vehicle,
The very domains of bad destinations are domains of the Akaniṣṭha
[and] Tuṣita [heavens].

*sGyu 'phrul le lhag and rDo rje gsang rgyud*¹

1. INTRODUCTION

On the whole, Tibetan Buddhist scholars have honestly striven to adhere to the doctrines of Indian Buddhism. But we do encounter from time to time philosophical theories and interpretations that are of purely Tibetan provenance. Most of them seem to be the product of an attempt to resolve conflicts and inconsistencies found in the heterogeneous Indian Buddhist scriptures and systems, which, as I have already tried to illustrate on the basis of the Buddha Nature theory, were dealt with in different ways.² No doubt differences in interpretations provoked heated debates, but it is precisely these and similar doctrinal disputes that gave

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¹ *sGyu 'phrul le lhag* (p. 425.6–7) and *rDo rje gsang rgyud* (p. 332.3–4):

yang dag shes pa'i rang rig blo med na ||
bde gshegs zhing yang ngan song gnas su mthong ||
theg mchog mnyam pa'i don nyid rtogs pa ni ||
ngan song gnas nyid 'og min dga' ldan gnas ||.

Note that the *rDo rje gsang rgyud* erroneously reads *bla* instead of *blo* in *pāda* a. This verse is cited by Mi-pham in his *'Od gsal snying po* (pp. 94.6–95.2), with the *sGyu 'phrul rgyas pa* named as his source. Instead of *ni* in *pāda* c, he has *na*.

² Wangchuk 2004.

rise to fascinating philosophical ideas that are uniquely Tibetan. One of the most intriguing examples is the debate surrounding an Indo-Tibetan Buddhist theory of knowledge, namely, on how beings of various realms and spiritual levels are said to perceive a common entity, for instance, what is known to us humans as water. Some of the questions that Tibetan scholars have asked were whether what we call water exists at all as water, whether our perception of water is a valid cognition, or whether it may be that water is not simply water after all but in fact pus (*pūya: rnag*), as it is perceived by hungry ghosts (*preta: yi dwags*); nectar, as it is perceived by gods; a goddess, as it is perceived by yogins; or still something else. They also pondered upon such questions as whether there is a common and shared object of perception, and if so, what it is, and which of the perceptions—if every sentient being of the six realms perceives it differently—is valid, and what the criteria of perceptual validity are. Scholars from the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism (dGe-lugs, Sa-skya, bKa'-brgyud, and rNying-ma) who reflected upon these questions came to varying conclusions, which will be discussed elsewhere. This paper seeks to introduce a relativity theory of the purity and validity of perception in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, one essentially the result of attempts made by some scholars of the rNying-ma (or the Ancient) School of Tibetan Buddhism to answer the above queries, having apparently drawn their inspiration from Indian Buddhist sources.

The theory that I intend to present has revealed itself, as is often the case, as more complex than initially assumed. Firstly, this theory of perception does not concern an anthropocentric view of perception, and is not limited to human knowledge, but embraces the entire spectrum of karmically conditioned perceptions experienced by the six classes of sentient beings, namely, gods, demigods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and beings in hell. Secondly, human beings for one may have access to various dimensions of perception. For instance, based on karmic influences, a man may perceive an entity “x” as water—as something that can quench his thirst—but he may also be able to meditatively enhance his perception and perceive “x” as a female being capable of arousing samādhiic ecstasy in him. Thirdly, this theory presupposes varying understandings of ontology, logic and epistemology (*pramāṇa*), gnoseology (i.e. the theory of *jñāna*, which in the Buddhist context can be understood as higher epistemology), and soteriology—in the varying Buddhist philosophical systems—and this

makes the matter all the more complicated. Fourthly, there is a certain terminological constriction in having to express eastern thought in western languages, and one cannot always adopt or else try to get around using western scientific or philosophical terms such as “relativity” and “relativism”³ without running risks of being misunderstood.

2. THE HISTORICAL AND DOCTRINAL SETTING

Of the four periods of the history of Buddhist logic and epistemology (*pramāṇa*) in Tibet as proposed by Leonard W. J. van der Kuijp,⁴ namely, Ancient (i.e. pre-Glang-dar-ma Period, that is, pre-9th century), Pre-Classical (beginning with Klu-mes Tshul-khrims-shes-rab in the 10th century), Classical (beginning with Sa-skya Paṇḍita Kun-dga’-rgyal-mtshan in the 12th century), and Post-Classical (beginning in the 15th century), the Ancient Period witnessed the translation of only a few Indian works on Buddhist logic and epistemology.⁵ One is likely to assume that beyond these few translations Tibetan scholars of the Ancient Period have really nothing to say or offer on matters pertaining to Buddhist logic and epistemology. Such an assumption would certainly be justified if we were to think exclusively in terms of commentaries on pure *Pramāṇa* treatises belonging to the Dignāga-Dharmakīrti school of Buddhist logic and epistemology, but not necessarily if we were to consider Buddhist theories of knowledge and their application in more general terms. For example, the theory of four kinds of *yukti* (“logical reasoning”), namely, reasoning [based on the principle] of dependence (*apekṣāyukti: ltos pa’i rigs pa*), reasoning [based on the principle of the ability of things to] cause effects (*kāryakaraṇayukti: bya ba byed pa’i rigs pa*), reasoning that establishes

³ I would like to thank John Taber for kindly acquainting me with Maria Baghramian’s monograph on relativism (Baghramian 2004). Unfortunately, it has not been possible to go into a discussion of whether my own employment of the terms “relativity” and “relativism” conforms to one or more of the numerous semantic nuances and usages presented therein. I shall have to leave it up to readers for themselves to judge if and to what extent the theory presented in this paper can be described in those terms.

⁴ van der Kuijp 1989: 8–9.

⁵ For the *Pramāṇa* texts translated during the Ancient Period in Tibet, see Frauwallner 1957.

the tenability [of the other three types of reasoning] (*upapattisādhana-yukti*: 'thad pa sgrub pa'i rigs pa), and reasoning [based on the rule-boundedness] of reality [itself] (*dharmatāyukti*: chos nyid kyi rigs pa), is particularly interesting, for it existed in India prior to Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, for the most part within the Maitreya-Asaṅga or Yogācāra textual milieu. Some of the earliest sources of the four *yuktis* may well be the *Śrāvakabhūmi*⁶ and *Bodhisattvabhūmi*⁷ (and not the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*,⁸ in spite of its sūtra status). The four *yuktis* are either merely alluded to or discussed in greater detail in these and other Indian works. In Tibet, the topic seems to have been quite popular from early on, as the commentaries on the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* and the *bKa' yang dag pa'i tshad ma* ascribed to the Tibetan King Khri-srong-lde-btsan⁹ adequately demonstrate. One of the most detailed and systematic explanations and applications of the four *yuktis* I have seen thus far, however, is that of the eleventh-century rNying-ma scholar Rong-zom Chos-kyi-bzang-po (henceforth Rong-zom-pa),¹⁰ who evidently relied on Candragomin's *Nyāyasiddhyāloka*.¹¹ Rong-zom-pa's explanations and applications of these four *yuktis* are very useful, containing as they do intriguing deliberations on a number of ontological, epistemological, soteriological, and gnoseological issues.¹² Although the four *yuktis* will not be discussed in this article, it should be pointed out that early Tibetan deliberations on theory of knowledge, including what I call the relativity theory of the purity and validity of perception, can best be understood at the backdrop of these four *yuktis*.

⁶ *Śrāvakabhūmi* (pp. 236.10–240.15).

⁷ *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (p. 293.17–18).

⁸ *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* X.7 (pp. 155–158).

⁹ See Steinkellner 1989 and Powers 2004: 20, n. 43.

¹⁰ *dKon mchog 'grel* (pp. 102.9–103.15); *mDo rgyas* (pp. 308.22–314.10); *Theg tshul* (pp. 487.20–491.20); *sNang ba lhar sgrub* (pp. 560.6–563.1). Mi-pham also discussed the four *yuktis* on a number of occasions; see, for example, his *mKhas 'jug* (pp. 296.3–300.4), his commentary on *Madhyamakālaṃkāra* 65 (*dBu ma rgyan 'grel*, pp. 241.3–249.2), *mDo sde rgyan 'grel* (pp. 667.2–668.4), *Shes rab ral gri* and *Shes rab ral gri'i mchan* (pp. 790.1–792.4), and *sKad gnyis shan sbyar* (pp. 235.6–236.1). For the role Mi-pham envisioned for the four *yuktis* within the general Mahāyāna context, see his *Legs bshad snang ba'i gter* (p. 897.1–4). See also Kapstein 2001: 317–343.

¹¹ For a discussion of the authorship of the *Nyāyasiddhyāloka*, see Steinkellner 1984.

¹² *Rang byung ye shes* (pp. 124.21–125.22); *dKon mchog 'grel* (pp. 103.15–109.9); *sNang ba lhar sgrub* (pp. 563.1–567.6).

It was, however, only in the nineteenth century that the rNyingma school managed to “colonise” the field of classical Buddhist logic and epistemology, primarily thanks to the efforts of Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho (1846–1912),¹³ who became an authority in the field in his tradition. One of Mi-pham’s most significant contributions to theories of knowledge is his systematisation of the theory of two kinds of means of conventional valid cognition (i.e. cognition that has the conventional as its object) (*kun tu tha snyad pa’i tshad ma: sāmvyavahārikapramāṇa*),¹⁴ namely, one based on ordinary (lit. “of this-side,” i.e., this-worldly) perception (*tshu rol mthong ba: arvāgdarśana/aparadarśana*)¹⁵ and the other based on pure perception (*dag pa’i gzigs pa: *śuddhadarśana*).¹⁶ Mi-pham himself thought his theory to be a matter of great profundity (*shin tu zab pa’i gnad*) crucially relevant for both tantric and non-tantric Buddhist systems. What can his motive for introducing such a theory have been? Mi-pham was, like Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa (1357–1419), a champion of the Pramāṇa and Madhyamaka systems, and he strongly believed in an intimate and natural relationship between Dharmakīrti’s Pramāṇa and Nāgārjuna’s

¹³ The few Pramāṇa works by Mi-pham are: (a) *Tshad ma rnam ’grel gyi gzhung gsal por bshad pa legs bshad snang ba’i gter* (MS, vol. 20, pp. 1–901); (b) *Tshad ma kun las btus pa’i mchan ’grel rig [= rigs?] lam rab gsal snang ba* (MS, vol. 8/hūm, pp. 473–619); (c) *Tshad ma rigs pa’i gter mchan gyis ’grel pa phyogs las rnam par rgyal ba’i ru mtshon* (MS, vol. 11/kha, pp. 549–751); and (d) *bsDus tshan rtsod rigs smra ba’i sgo ’byed* (MS, vol. 27, pp. 285–353). See the *bsTan pa’i mdzes rgyan* (pp. 676.5–677.2)—a work of mKhan-po Kun-bzang-dpal-ldan, or in short Kun-dpal (1872–1943), which includes some additional Pramāṇa writings of Mi-pham, of which the *Tshad ma rnam ’grel gyi bsdus don nyi zla’i phreng ba* seems particularly noteworthy. For a discussion of Mi-pham’s theory of interpretation (as presented in his *Shes rab ral gri*), see Kapstein 2001.

¹⁴ The term *sāmvyavahārikapramāṇa* is attested in Prajñākaramati’s *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā* (p. 180.25) and in Prajñākaragupta’s *Pramāṇavārttikālaṃkāra* (e.g. pp. 3.14, 5.23, 226.8). Cf. *Pramāṇavārttikālaṃkāra* (p. 487.28): *sāmvyavahārikam pramāṇam*. Prajñākaragupta also employs terms such as *vyāvahārikapramāṇa* (*ibid.*, p. 226.8) and *sāmvyavahārikapratyakṣa* (*ibid.*, p. 13.4). (I would like to thank Eli Franco for drawing my attention to Prajñākaragupta’s work.) Note that Tibetan sources also employ the expressions *tha snyad dpyod pa’i tshad ma* and *tha snyad (pa’i/kyi) tshad ma*.

¹⁵ *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā* (p. 182.9, 13); Jackson 1987: 401, n. 103. Cf. Negi 1993–2005: s.v. *tshu rol mthong ba*.

¹⁶ Mi-pham, *’Od gsal snying po* (pp. 82.1–84.5) and *Shes rab ral gri* (pp. 800.3–801.4).

Madhyamaka,¹⁷ or between the systems of the “Two Kīrtis,” namely, Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti.¹⁸ Harmony between the doctrines of Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti also meant for him harmony between Yogācāra and Madhyamaka, and so too between the Nāgārjuna and Maitreya-Asaṅga traditions. The means of absolute valid cognition (i.e. cognition that has the absolute as its object) (*don dam pa'i tshad ma: pāramārthikapramāṇa*)¹⁹ emphasised by Nāgārjuna and the *sāṃvyaavahārikapramāṇa* emphasised by Dharmakīrti are often referred to as the two means of valid cognition of the two kinds of reality (*bden pa gnyis kyi tshad ma gnyis*).²⁰ The explicit or implicit argument—analogueous to Dharmakīrti’s argument for the number of *pramāṇas*—is that because there are two kinds of *prameya*, namely, conventional and absolute realities, there must be two kinds of *pramāṇa*, namely, *sāṃvyaavahārikapramāṇa* and *pāramārthikapramāṇa*.²¹ If something such as fire exists on the conventional level, it must be attestable through *sāṃvyaavahārikapramāṇa* for if it is not attestable through such a cognition, it cannot exist on the conventional level. Similarly, if there is an absolute reality such as emptiness, it must be attestable through *pāramārthikapramāṇa*,

¹⁷ Mi-pham, *dBu ma rgyan 'grel* (p. 46.5–6): *khyad par don dam pa'i tshad ma dpal ldan klu yis ji ltar bzhed pa dang | tha snyad kyi tshad ma dpal chos kyi grags pas ji ltar bzhed pa gnyis rags [= rigs] pa'i rgya mtsho chen por ro gcig tu bskyil zhing |*. See also *ibid.* (p. 47.3): *dbu tshad seng ge mjing bsnol*.

¹⁸ See the intermediate verses (*bar skabs kyi tshigs su bcad pa*) in the *dBu ma rgyan 'grel* (pp. 13.6–15.2).

¹⁹ The term *pāramārthikapramāṇa* is attested, for example, in Prajñākaragupta’s *Pramāṇavārttikālamkāra* (p. 30.22; cited in Franco 1997: 50, n. 12). Cf. *Pramāṇavārttikālamkāra* (p. 67.12–13): *pāramārthikaṃ pramāṇam*. Prajñākaragupta also employs the term *pāramārthikaprameya* (*ibid.*, p. 215.13). Note that Tibetan sources also use the term *don dam dpyod pa'i tshad ma*.

²⁰ The terms *tha snyad pa'i tshad ma* and *don dam pa'i tshad ma* seem to go back to the *Pramāṇaviniścaya* (p. 44.2–5): *sāṃvyaavahārikasya caitat pramāṇasya rūpam uktam | atrāpi pare mūḍhā viśamvādayanti lokam iti | cintāmayīm eva tu prajñām anuśīlayanto vibhramavivekanirmalam anapāyi pāramārthikapramāṇam abhimukhī-kurvanti |*; Tibetan translation (Vetter 1966: 100.20–24): *'di ni kun tu tha snyad pa'i tshad ma'i rang bzhin brjod pa yin te | 'di la yang pha rol rmongs pas 'jig rten slu bar byed pa'i phyir ro || bsam pa las byung ba nyid kyi shes rab goms par byas pas rnam par 'khrul pas dben zhing dri ma med la log pa med pa don dam pa'i tshad ma mngon sum du byed do ||*. See also Mi-pham, *Legs bshad snang ba'i gter* (p. 553.14–17).

²¹ Such an argument is clearly inspired by Dignāga’s *Pramāṇasamuccaya* 1.2 (Steinkellner 2005: 1) and Dharmakīrti’s *Pramāṇavārttika* 3.1 (see the *Pramāṇavārttikālamkāra*, p. 169.10–11).

for reality that is not attestable through *pāramārthikapramāṇa* is not an absolute reality. However, Mi-pham also belongs to a tradition that postulates the indivisibility of the two truths. Accordingly, he posits that ultimately there is only one single *prameya*,²² and hence only one single *pramāṇa*, which he equates with self-occurring gnosis or with the gnosis of the Self-occurring One (i.e. the Buddha) (*svayambhūjñāna: rang byung gi ye shes*). Tsong-kha-pa, when discussing, for example, *Madhyamakāvātāra* 6.71b, points out the consequence of denying the established Pramāṇa theories.²³ He, for his part, apparently feared that a denial of the Pramāṇa theories would lead to logical, ontological, epistemological, and ethical-moral indeterminism (or arbitrariness), or as Thubten Jinpa in his study of Tsong-kha-pa's Madhyamaka philosophy correctly points out, to "epistemological scepticism," "ontological nihilism," and "moral relativism," all of which were for Tsong-kha-pa different aspects of the same problem and equally objectionable.²⁴ Mi-pham, too, could not imagine a world where there are no reliable criteria to differentiate between valid and invalid cognition. If a cognition were to be arbitrarily regarded as valid or invalid, how could one determine what is correct and incorrect, and what is right and wrong? He could thus in principle share Tsong-kha-pa's concern.

Mi-pham, however, had a concern of another kind, which was obviously not shared or addressed by his fellow Tibetan scholars from the gSar-ma ("New") schools. The established epistemological paradigm, which is perhaps common to most Tibetan Buddhist schools, must have appeared too narrow and inadequate to him, for it did not and could not address or explain Buddhist doctrines which he thought were of greater significance. Buddhist scriptures are full of allusions to the ideas of supernatural or supramundane phenomena or perceptions that make no sense to the ordinary human understanding. For instance, in just a single atom there are said to exist Buddha fields numbering as

²² For a similar idea, see Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika* 3.53d (as cited in the *Pramāṇavārttikālamkāra*, p. 212.28): *meyaṃ tv ekaṃ svalakṣaṇam*.

²³ Tsong-kha-pa, *dGongs pa rab gsal* (fol. 178b2–3): *de ltar go ba de'i don yin par bzung nas tshad mas grub pa la yid brtan med do zhes smra na ni | don 'di kho bos 'di ltar rtogs so zhes pa gcig kyang gzhas tu med cing | tshad ma thams cad la skur pa 'debs pas na shin tu mi 'thad pa'o ||*.

²⁴ Jinpa 2002: 34, 175.

many as the total number of atoms. It is even explicitly stated that neither has the size of the Buddha fields been contracted nor the size of the atom expanded. How is one to deal with such an idea? One alternative would be to dismiss it as mere rhetoric. Most Buddhist scholars would not go for this alternative. Another alternative would be to explain it as a miracle demonstrated by the supernatural power of a *buddha*, which *de facto* means that such a phenomenon or event is not attestable through any means of valid cognition. Some Tibetan scholars might accept this explanation. The problem with it, though, is the absurd implications that it involves, particularly in a context where the same entity “x” that appears to ordinary humans as water appears to yogins—who have fewer or no defilements or obscurations, who undergo fewer or no sufferings, and are partially or totally released from saṃsāric bondage—as something else. At least from a Buddhist point of view, the supposition that our ordinary perceptions, obscured by intellectual-emotional defilements, pain, sufferings, and bondage, are valid or true, whereas yogic perceptions free from intellectual-emotional defilements, pain, sufferings, and bondage, are invalid or false sounds quite absurd and supercilious. Mi-pham’s motive thus seems to have been to propose an upgraded and updated theory that could explain otherwise logically unexplainable phenomena, particularly the idea of pure appearances and pure perceptions (thematized in both tantric and non-tantric Mahāyāna scriptures).

3. MI-PHAM’S THEORY OF THE TWO KINDS OF *SĀṂVYAVAHĀRIKAPRAMĀṆA*

Mi-pham argues that there must be two types of *sāṃvyavahārikapramāṇa*, for any phenomenon on the conventional level has two modes, namely, the mode of appearance (*snang tshul*) and the mode of existence (*gnas tshul*). A conventional entity “x” such as water may appear to be impure, but it always exists in a pure state; in its absolute mode of existence, however, it is always characterised by emptiness (*śūnyatā*: *stong pa nyid*).²⁵ He thus classifies means of valid cognition into two types: *sāṃvyavahārikapramāṇa* and *pāramārthikapramāṇa*. *Sāṃvyavahārikapramāṇa* is further divided into one based on ordinary

²⁵ Cf. the tables in Pettit 1999: 431–434.

perception (*tshu rol mthong ba la brten pa kun tu tha snyad pa'i tshad ma*) and one based on pure perception (*dag pa'i gzigs pa la brten pa kun tu tha snyad pa'i tshad ma*). He distinguishes them on the basis of their cause (*rgyu*), nature (*ngo bo*), function (*byed las*), result (*'bras bu*), and example (*dpe*), as follows:

Distinctions between the Two Types of <i>Sāṃvyavahārikapramāṇa</i>			
Basis of Distinction		<i>Sāṃvyavahārikapramāṇa</i> Based on Ordinary Perception (<i>tshu rol mthong ba la brten pa kun tu tha snyad pa'i tshad ma</i>)	<i>Sāṃvyavahārikapramāṇa</i> Based on Pure Perception (<i>dag pa'i gzigs pa la brten pa kun tu tha snyad pa'i tshad ma</i>)
1.	Cause (<i>rgyu</i>)	Given rise to by dint of a correct assessment of its limited object, the [perceptible] phenomenon (<i>rang yul chos can nyi tshe ba la tshul bzhin brtags pa'i stobs las skyes pa</i>)	Acquired as an outcome of the correct appropriation of true reality [during meditative absorption] (<i>chos nyid ji lta ba tshul bzhin dmigs pa'i rjes las 'thob pa</i>)
2.	Nature (<i>ngo bo</i>)	Cognition that is provisionally non-deceptive in regard to its mere object (<i>rang yul tsam la gnas skabs mi bslu ba'i rig pa</i>)	Discriminating insight of great range possessed by a subject [surveying] the full gamut [of phenomena] (<i>ji snyed pa'i yul can rgya che ba'i shes rab</i>)
3.	Function (<i>byed las</i>)	Elimination of superimposition [and depreciation] in regard to the objects of ordinary perception (<i>tshul [= tshu rol] mthong gi yul la sgro 'dogs sel ba</i>)	Elimination of superimposition [and depreciation] in regard to the [normally] inconceivable domain (<i>bsam gyis mi khyab pa'i spyod yul la sgro 'dogs sel ba</i>)
4.	Result (<i>'bras bu</i>)	Proceeding on after the pertinent object has been exactly determined (<i>skabs don yongs su bcad nas 'jug pa</i>)	Gnosis that cognises [phenomena] to the full extent (<i>ji snyed mkhyen pa'i ye shes</i>)
5.	Analogy (<i>dpe</i>) ²⁶	Human sight (<i>mi'i mig</i>)	Celestial sight (<i>lha'i mig</i>)

Mi-pham presented these two types of *sāṃvyavahārikapramāṇa* on at least two occasions, namely, in his general commentary on the **Guhyagarbhatantra* (a fundamental tantric scripture of the rNying-ma school) called *'Od gsal snying po*, and in his work on hermeneutics

²⁶ Not counted separately by Mi-pham.

called *Shes rab ral gri*, on which he also wrote an annotated commentary.²⁷ One important question is how original Mi-pham was and how much he owed to his Indian and Tibetan predecessors. As far as I can see, no one before him had proposed and explained two kinds of *sāṃvyaḥārikapramāṇa*. On the other hand, although the Sanskrit term for *dag pa gzigs pa'i tshad ma* (**śuddhadarśanapramāṇa*) has yet to be traced in Indian sources,²⁸ the idea of pure perception (*śuddhapratyakṣa*: *dag pa'i mngon sum*) is attested in the *Hetuvidyā* section of the *Yogācārabhūmi*²⁹ as shown by Hōjun Nagasaki in his article “Perception in Pre-Dignāga Buddhist Texts,”³⁰ where it is listed and explained as one of the four kinds of *pratyakṣa*, the other three being perception by means of corporeal sense faculties (*rūpīndriya-pratyakṣa*: *dbang po gzugs can gyi mngon sum*), perception [in the form] of mental experience (*manonubhavapratyakṣa*: *yid kyis myong ba'i mngon sum*), and mundane perception (*lokapratyakṣa*: *'jig rten gyi mngon sum*). Nagasaki interprets *śuddhapratyakṣa* in two ways: (a) as *manonubhavapratyakṣa* and (b) as *lokottarajñāna*. One wonders whether *śuddhapratyakṣa* could have meant both pure mundane gnosis (*śuddhalaukikajñāna*: *dag pa 'jig rten pa'i ye shes*) and non-conceptual gnosis (*nirvikalpajñāna*: *rnam par mi rtog pa'i ye shes*). In Tibetan sources, the idea of means of pure valid cognition occurs primarily in the context of what is called “establishing the divinity of appearance” (*snang ba lhar sgrub pa*), that is, establishing the supramundane-ness of the very mundane, the divinity of the very earthly—according to Mi-pham, a uniquely rNying-ma concern, which stems from the eleventh-century rNying-ma scholar Rong-zom-pa, and is described by him as the “Lion’s Roar” (*seng ge'i nga ro*) of this scholar.³¹ Indeed Mi-pham’s theory of pure *sāṃvyaḥārikapramāṇa* is clearly largely inspired by

²⁷ *'Od gsal snying po* (pp. 82.1–84.5); *Shes rab ral gri* (pp. 800.3–801.4).

²⁸ Compare the expression *pramāṇapariśuddhasakalatattvajña* in the *Pramāṇavārttikālamkāra* (p. 51.22).

²⁹ *Hetuvidyā* (p. 340.2–13).

³⁰ Nagasaki 1991: 223–225.

³¹ Mi-pham, *Nges shes sgron me* (p. 103.4–5):

snang kun rang bzhin lhar sgrub pa ||
snga 'gyur ring lugs kho na ste ||
kun mkhyen rong zom paṇḍi ta'i ||
legs bshad seng ge'i nga ro yin ||.

For an English translation, see Pettit 1999: 222.

Rong-zom-pa's writings, particularly those passages attempting to establish the divinity of appearance.³²

4. RONG-ZOM-PA ON ONTOLOGY, EPISTEMOLOGY, SOTERIOLOGY, GNOSEOLOGY, AND THE INDIVIDUALITY OF PERSONS

Undoubtedly Rong-zom-pa's work on establishing the divinity of appearances is unprecedented in the world of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. He is said to have composed a set of seven works of varying size, what one might call his "heptalogy," on the establishment of the divinity of appearances, of which only one is extant.³³ The fundamental idea behind the establishment of the divinity of appearances is that phenomena, which appear to us in manifold ways, are in reality primordially pure regardless of whether we perceive them as such or not. One of Rong-zom-pa's main arguments is that a *dharma* ("phenomenon") can hardly be impure if its *dharmatā* ("true reality") is pure, for there is an essential connection between *dharma* and *dharmatā*. Both *dharma* and *dharmatā* are thus pure, and hence also divine. For him, then, divinity means purity. Where could Rong-zom-pa have got this idea from? The proposition that all phenomena are completely pure is widespread in tantric and non-tantric Mahāyāna literature. In particular, it plays a dominant role in the **Guhyagarbhatantra*, a tradition to which Rong-zom-pa belonged, and wherein the so-called (a) external world or habitat (*snod*), comprising five elements, (b) its inhabitants (*bcud*), made up of five psycho-physiological aggregates (*phung po*), and (c) mental continua (*rgyud*), a set of eight kinds of "mind" (*rnam par shes pa tshogs brgyad*), are all said to be pure, the purities of the external habitat (*snod dag pa*), its inhabitants (*bcud dag pa*), and the mental continua (*rgyud dag pa*) being referred to as "three kinds of purity" (*dag pa rnam pa gsum*).³⁴ The central philosophy of the **Guhyagarbhatantra* is that all phenomena are in their conventionality characterised by great purity (*dag pa chen po*) and in their absoluteness

³² For Mi-pham's own efforts to establish the divinity of appearance, see his *'Od gsal snying po* (pp. 77.2–97.1).

³³ See Rong-pa Me-dpung's list of Rong-zom-pa's writings (*Tho yig*, p. 239.5–6): *snang ba lha sgrub che phra bdun du grags pa la sogs pa dag yin te* |. See also Almogi 1997: 248–249; 170–171.

³⁴ Rong-zom-pa, *dKon mchog 'grel* (p. 184.1–6).

by great equality (*mnyam pa chen po*), and that the two modes are characterised by great indivisibility (*dbyer med pa chen po*). One of the main devices employed to establish such propositions is the four kinds of reasoning referred to above.

We may now set the theory proposed by Rong-zom-pa in the wider context of his assessment of the Mahāyāna doctrine. Broadly speaking, Mahāyāna Buddhism can be classified into tantric and non-tantric, although the borderline tends to be quite fluid or permeable. One generally assumes that non-tantric Mahāyāna is doctrinally more conservative than tantric Mahāyāna. This is, however, not always the case, inasmuch as some sūtras contain ideas that are more developed than those found in certain tantras. This may help to explain why Rong-zom-pa occasionally—for example, in his *dKon mchog 'grel*—speaks of common (*thun mong*) and uncommon or special (*thun mong ma yin pa*) Mahāyāna. A distinction between the two is clearly made in accordance with the degree of doctrinal conservatism. By “special Mahāyāna,” he means a school of Buddhist thought which postulates the idea of the indivisibility of the two kinds of truth (*bden pa rnam pa gnyis dbyer med pa*), that is, the idea that there is in reality one single truth, and that its division into conventional and absolute is merely a device for enabling access to that single truth. This “special Mahāyāna” of Rong-zom-pa includes both tantric and non-tantric forms. To the group of scriptures of the “special Mahāyāna” belong both sūtras, such as the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra* and *Ratnagūṇasaṃcayagāthā*, and tantras, such as the **Guhyagarbhatantra*. According to him, the “special Mahāyāna” is special for five reasons, which may be explicated as follows:³⁵

(a) It is special because it proposes a special kind of ontology. Specifically, the only viable ontological reality is what the author calls “mere appearance” (*snang ba tsam*), behind the facade of which there is nothing. Even this “mere appearance” may or may not endure depending upon the presence or absence of necessary and sufficient causes and conditions.

(b) It is special because it proposes a special kind of soteriology. According to this special soteriological model, one sees and seeks a solution in the problem itself, *nirvāṇa* in *samsāra* itself; release in

³⁵ *dKon mchog 'grel* (pp. 42.2–43.13). For a critical edition of the pertinent text and an English translation, see Almogi 2006: 468–470 (text), 319–322 (translation).

bondage itself. In other words, the very *duḥkhasatya* is seen as a *nirodhasatya*; the very *samudayasatya* as a *mārgasatya*.

(c) It is special because it proposes a special kind of gnoseology. Seeing (or, knowing) the gnosis through which release is attained (*vimukti-jñānadarśana: rnam par grol ba'i ye shes mthong ba*)³⁶ is special, because this gnosis is not conceived as something that can be attained or generated at a certain stage, place, and time but as being immanent here and now, for our ordinary minds and mental associates are by nature self-occurring gnosis (*svayambhūjñāna: rang byung gi ye shes*).

(d) It is special because it proposes a special kind of epistemology. It offers, that is, a unique theory of perception in regard to the scope and validity of the various human and non-human, yogic and non-yogic perceptions. This is one of the sources feeding into the relativity theory of the purity and validity of perception. We shall return to it later.

(e) I am not sure how best the fifth aspect of the special Mahāyāna can be expressed. The author apparently alludes to a special spiritual proclivity or disposition within the person, namely, the uniqueness of his or her cognitive, conative, and emotive faculty which allows access to the so-called “non-dual mode” (*gnyis su med pa'i tshul*), clearly meaning the indivisibility of the two kinds of truth referred to above.

5. THE PHILOSOPHICAL-DOCTRINAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THE THEORY

The theory of the purity and validity of perception proposed by Rongzom-pa can perhaps be best understood against the backdrop of three kinds of presuppositions, namely, his concept of ontology, soteriology, and epistemology. I employ the term “perception” in the sense of the Tibetan terms *mthong ba* (or *gzigs pa*) and *snang ba*. Tibetan *mthong ba* seems to mean primarily the “perception of an appearance” and secondarily the “perceived or perceptible appearance” whereas *snang ba* seems to mean primarily “perceived or perceptible appearance,” and secondarily “perception of an appearance.” A direct ontic-epistemic correspondence between appearance and perception is presupposed by most Tibetan scholars, since only that which is ontologically possible is epistemically cognisable; and only that which appears is perceived or perceptible.

³⁶ Negi 1993–2005: s.v.

(a) *The Ontological Presuppositions of the Theory*

One cannot talk about the theory of perception or knowledge if no knowable or perceptible is presupposed. Various Buddhist systems may argue about the ontological status of the knowable, but I would assert that within the Buddhist systems one tacitly assumes that there is a kind of reality, or nature to phenomena (whatever it may be) that is cognisable, timeless, and independent of being cognised and the person who cognises it.³⁷ It is said that *buddhas* may come and go, but the truth remains as it is (*yathābhūtam*), unaffected by its occasional rediscovery or oblivion. This idea can be found in non-Mahāyāna sources (such as the *Samyuttanikāya* and *Āṅguttaranikāya*), in non-tantric Mahāyāna literature (such as the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*, and *Jñānālokālaṃkārasūtra*), and tantric sources (such as the *Vairocanaḥhisambodhitānta*).³⁸ As we have just seen, for Rong-zom-pa, the only ontological reality is what he calls “mere appearance” (*snang ba tsam*). It is conceived of as being totally hollow, without any defining characteristics whatsoever, rootless, bottomless, invariable, and soteriologically neutral, and yet it is (i) the only viable basis for bondage and release, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāna*;³⁹ (ii) the basis of defining characteristics (*mtshan gzhi*), that is, the basis for assigning various defining characteristics (*mtshan nyid sna tshogs*),⁴⁰ (iii) the only viable premise allowing for a dialogue between sentient beings of the six realms; yogins and non-yogins; experts and non-experts; (iv) the only viable shared object of independent perceptions.

³⁷ See Vetter’s remark in Bsteh 2000: 48.

³⁸ For the universality of reality and its being independent of the appearance of a *tathāgata* in both non-Mahāyāna and Mahāyāna sources, see Wangchuk 2007: 41–42, 78, n. 24.

³⁹ Rong-zom-pa, *Theg tshul* (p. 513.4–6): *mdor na gzhi gcig la rnam par dag pa’i ’jig rten du snang ba dang | ma dag pa’i ’jig rten du snang ba ste | de la ma dag par snang ba ni | bslad pas bsgrubs pa yin no zhe’o ||*; *ibid.* (p. 513.20–22): *snang ba de nyid kyang byang grol dang ’ching ba gnyis ga’i rkyen du ’gyur bar mnyam pas | tshul gnyi’ ga ltar yang bsgrub du [= tu] rung bar snang ngo ||*; *ibid.* (p. 522.4–5): *snang ba la skyon med na sems can gang gis bslus te ’khor zhe na |*.

⁴⁰ Rong-zom-pa, *Theg tshul* (p. 465.20–24): *snang ba tsam ni mkhas pa paṅ ṭi [= ḍi] ta nas blun mo [= po] ba glang rdzi yan chad gang yang rung ste | las kyi bsgo skal la spyod pa mthun par snang ba dang | yongs su dag pa dang ma dag pa la stsogs pa snang ba bye brag mthun pa rnam la snang ngo zhes bsgrub mi dgos te | mtshan nyid sna tshogs rnam par ’jog pa’i mtshan [= mtshon?] gzhi yin no || mtshan nyid ni ji ltar snang ba de ltar bsgrub pa rdul ’phra’ mo tsam yang myed do ||*.

Why can a nondescript appearance appear as various specific appearances, such as pus, water, nectar, and so forth? Mi-pham's main argument is that where there is appearance-and-emptiness, everything is possible, and where there is no appearance-and-emptiness, nothing is possible.⁴¹ Except for a slight modification in the wording, this is a clear reference to *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.14, according to which everything is possible for anything that exists in harmony with emptiness.⁴² According to Rong-zom-pa,⁴³ appearances (*snang ba*) appear (*snang*) on account of (a) the power of delusion (*'khrul pa'i dbang*), (b) the power of self-cognition (*rang rig pa'i dbang*), and (c) the power of the non-origination of true reality (*chos nyid skye ba med pa'i dbang*). These three causes or factors of appearances (*snang ba'i rgyu/rkyen gsum*) have been explained as follows: First, the power of delusion is for all practical purposes the diverse latent tendencies implanted in the *ālayavijñāna* ("fundamental mind") by the deluded mind (*'khrul pa'i shes pa*). Second, the power of self-cognition is explained as the ability of the mind to cognise itself; that is, mind, being always self-cognitive, is not an inanimate entity (*bem po*) and offers no physical resistance (*rdos can*). If the mind were not self-cognitive or devoid of any cognitive characteristics (*shes rig gyi mtshan nyid dang*

⁴¹ Mi-pham, *Nges shes sgron me* (p. 101.4–5):

des na rang gi lugs la ni ||
snang stong ris su ma chad pa'i ||
gzhi nyid cir yang ma grub pa ||
gang snang kun la mnyam pa'i phyir ||
dngos gcig sna tshogs par yang snang ||
gang la snang stong rung ba na ||
de la thams cad rung bar 'gyur ||
gang la snang stong mi rung ba ||
de la thams cad rung mi 'gyur ||

For an English translation, see Pettit 1999: 220–221.

⁴² Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.14 (cf. *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 70). See, for example, the *Tshig don mdzod* (pp. 7.3–29.2), where Klong-chen-pa discusses seven positions on the universal basis (*gzhi*), alluding thereby to several rDzogs-chen tantras. It is explained that the universal basis is neither (1) spontaneously present (*lhun grub*), (2) indeterminate (*ma nges pa*), (3) determinate (*nges pa*), (4) malleable (*cir yang bsgyur du btub pa*), (5) arbitrary (*cir yang khas blang du btub pa*), nor (6) manifold (*sna tshogs*), but (7) primordially pure (*ka dag*). The primordially pure universal basis is said to consist of the three inseparable qualities of emptiness, luminosity, and all-embracing compassion.

⁴³ *Rang byung ye shes* (pp. 120.16–123.21).

bral ba zhig), nothing would appear. Third, the power of the non-origination of true reality is also explained as the natural and intrinsic purity (*rang bzhin gyis rnam par dag pa / ngo bo nyid kyis rnam par dag pa*) of all phenomena. Phenomena, not being anything (*cir yang ma yin pa*), can appear in any way (*cir yang snang du rung ba*), for they are devoid of resistance (*gegs med pa*).

Of the three factors of appearances, purity and the ability of the mind to cognise itself are the dominant conditions for appearances of both “pollution” (*saṃkleśa: kun nas nyon mongs pa*) and “purification” (*vyavadāna: rnam par byang ba*). The latent tendencies form the general conditions for the appearance of both pollution and purification. Nonetheless, those appearances that are caused by negative latent tendencies (*nag po'i bag chags*) are called deceptive (*slu ba*), untrue (*mi bden pa*), fallacious (*'khrul pa*), and unreliable (*yid brtan du mi rung ba*), whereas those appearances that are caused by positive latent tendencies (*dkar po'i bag chags*) are called non-deceptive (*mi slu ba*), true (*bden pa*), non-fallacious (*ma 'khrul pa*), and reliable (*yid brtan du rung ba*). Although none of the appearances is ultimately true (*yang dag par bden pa*), the less deceptive ones are provisionally regarded as non-deceptive by the wise, for they are non-deceiving to the extent that they bring about salvation.

(b) *The Soteriological Presuppositions of the Theory*

The main soteriological presupposition of the theory is that at least in principle anybody, at any given point in time and space, can gain full access to true reality by means of meditative insight, and the correct cognition or insightful penetration of the truth has a soteriological or salvific effect on the person who cognises or penetrates it. In other words, a person is liberated by gaining meditative insight into the truth. For most Buddhist scholars and mystics, it is the correct cognition of true reality, regardless of how it is defined by the various Buddhist systems, that makes the spiritual or soteriological breakthrough possible, and that the gnosis (*jñāna: ye shes*) of a *buddha* is by definition direct valid cognition (*pramāṇa: tshad ma*). This notion of release upon seeing true reality is found in tantric sources such as the *Caryā-melāpakapradīpa*, and also in non-tantric Mahāyāna sources such as the

Abhisamayālaṃkāra and *Ratnagotravibhāga*.⁴⁴ According to Rong-zom-pa, release upon seeing true reality is an idea common to all Buddhist systems,⁴⁵ which implies that the actual spiritual breakthrough in Buddhism is intellectual and not emotional.⁴⁶

(c) *The Epistemological Presuppositions of the Theory*

The basic epistemological assumption is that a variety of perceptions of one and the same entity “x” is possible. If all sentient beings of the six realms (or yogins and non-yogins) were to perceive an entity or reality “x” in an identical way, there would be no need for a dialogue. The main point of divergence among sentient beings of the six realms (or yogins and non-yogins) is the characteristics of a so-called “mere appearance” as it appears to various beings in various degrees of impurity and purity. Rong-zom-pa explains that (1) hungry ghosts perceive water as extremely impure (*shin tu ma dag par snang*); (2) human beings as somewhat impure (*cung zad ma dag par snang*), (3) individuals of the pure realms as pure (*dag par snang*), (4) yogins or *vidyādharas* (“knowledge bearers”), who have command over phenomena, as extremely pure (*shin tu dag par snang*), and that (5) those who have exhausted all latent tendencies, clearly meaning *buddhas*, are free from all appearances (*snang ba thams cad dang bral*), since for them all manifoldness has undergone complete cessation (*spros pa thams cad yongs su zhi bar gyur*). If all these perceptions were equally valid or invalid, it would mean that there would be nothing that one could call reality. If there were no such standard as the validity or invalidity of perception, there would be no incentive for a dialogue. Rong-zom-pa thus rejects the arbitrariness of perceptual validity.

6. THE THEORY

Rong-zom-pa’s position is that in general no perception is independently valid or invalid. Depending on the varying degree of

⁴⁴ For several primary sources, see Wangchuk 2007: 199–200, n. 11.

⁴⁵ *bDen gnyis 'jog tshul* (p. 32.6–8): 'di ltar nyan thos kyi theg pa nas gzhi bzung nas | rdzogs pa chen po'i mthar thug gi bar du | gang zhig yang dag pa'i don mthong na rnam par grol lo zhes thun mong du grags pa yin la |.

⁴⁶ See also Wangchuk 2007: 43–45, 199–200.

purity and impurity of perception, there is only a relative validity of perception; that is, the human perception of appearance “x” as water is pure, and thus valid, when compared to the *preta*’s perception of it as pus, but is impure when compared to the god’s perception of it as nectar, and thus invalid. The most maculate and thus the most invalid perception of all is that of a hell-being, whereas the most immaculate and thus the most valid perception of all is that of one who is subject to no obscuration whatsoever. It is this theory that I call the relativity theory of the purity and validity of perception, and it can be formulated as: “The validity of perception is directly proportional to the purity of perception.”⁴⁷

7. THE INDIAN BACKGROUND OF THE THEORY

While Rong-zom-pa certainly deserves credit for suggesting that the degree of purity of perception determines the degree of its validity, it is clear that he drew his inspiration from Indian sources, particularly regarding the validity of yogic versus non-yogic perceptions. The idea that the perception of a person who has attained salvific release can invalidate the perception of a person who is still bound can also be found in several Indian sources. For example, Candrakīrti argued that a non-yogin who has no gnosis and is not released is not an authority, and that if this were not the case, it would imply that such a person has perceived true reality and eliminated ignorance, and this in turn would

⁴⁷ Rong-zom-pa, *dKon mchog 'grel* (p. 43.6–7): “It should be known that if one evaluates objectively, the purer these perceptions (*snang ba*), the truer (*bden pa*) [they are]” (*gzu bo'i blos gzhal na snang ba de dag kyang ji lta ji ltar dag pa de lta de ltar bden par shes par bya'o* ||). *Ibid.* (p. 104.4–7): “If these are evaluated with an objective mind, the purer the perceptions (*mtshong ba*), the truer (*bden pa*) [they are], inasmuch as [the objects of valid perceptions] are objects [perceived by] the lords among those who have purified the obscurations (*āvaraṇa: sgrib pa*), and because [perceptions] are relatively (*ltos te rnam par bzhag na*) enduring and non-deceiving (*brtan zhing mi bslu ba*)” (*de rnam la gzu bo'i blos gzhal bar byas na | ji ltar ji ltar mtshong ba dag pa de ltar de ltar bden pa yin te | sgrib pa'i dri ma dag pa rnam kyi dbang po rnam kyi yul yin pa'i phyir dang | ltos te rnam par bzhag na brtan zhing mi bslu ba'i phyir ro* ||). *Ibid.* (p. 105.2–3): “... if an objective assessment is made, as [stated] above, the [degree of] correctness corresponds to the [degree of] purity” (... *gzu bo'i blos rnam par gzhal na | ji ltar dag pa ltar rig [= rigs] pa che ba ni snga ma bzhin no* ||).

imply the redundancy of the spiritual paths of the noble ones (*ārya-mārga*: 'phags pa'i lam).⁴⁸ That an undefiled cognition of a yogin can invalidate the defiled cognition of a non-yogin and not vice versa has been clearly stated by him in his *Madhyamakāvātāra*:⁴⁹

The perception of eyes with a *timira* [disorder]
 Does not invalidate the perception [of eyes] without a *timira* [disorder].
 Similarly, a cognition that is devoid of immaculate gnosis
 Does not invalidate an immaculate cognition.

He also states that only the gnosis of a *buddha*, and not other types of gnosis, given their limitation (*ekadeśatva*: *nyi tshe ba nyid*), can be *pratyakṣa*.⁵⁰ Veridical relativism is also suggested by Śāntideva in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 9.3–4ab. According to him, people (*loka*: 'jig rten) are of two kinds: ordinary people (*prākṛtako lokaḥ*: 'jig rten phal pa) and people who are yogins (*yogiloka*: *rnal 'byor 'jig rten*). The perception or knowledge (*dhī*: *blo*) of the ordinary world can be invalidated by that of the *yogiloka*, but not vice versa, as made explicit by Prajñākaramati.⁵¹ A qualitative distinction is also made among the perceptions of the various yogins, with the perceptions of the more advanced yogins successively able to invalidate the perceptions of the less advanced yogins. Following this logic, *buddhajñāna*, or the *yogipratyakṣa* of a *buddha*, will certainly be assumed to be the supreme cognition that can invalidate the perceptions of all yogins who have not yet attained Buddhahood.⁵² In particular, Mañjuśrīmitra's *Bodhicittabhāvanā* and *Bodhicittabhāvanānirdeśa* (also attributed to him) seem to have directly inspired Rong-zom-pa.⁵³

⁴⁸ Candrakīrti, *Madhyamakāvātāra* 6.30.

⁴⁹ *Madhyamakāvātāra* 6.27:

mig ni rab rib can gyi dmigs pa yis ||
rab rib med shes la gnod min ji ltar ||
de bzhin dri med ye shes spangs pa'i blos ||
dri med blo la gnod pa yod ma yin||.

⁵⁰ *Madhyamakāvātāra* 6.214.

⁵¹ *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā* (p. 158.11).

⁵² Cf. Nāgārjuna, *Ratnāvalī* 4.91.

⁵³ *Bodhicittabhāvanā* (P, fols. 2b7–3a2; D, fol. 2b1–3; S, vol. 33, pp. 810.18–811.5); *Bodhicittabhāvanānirdeśa* (P, fol. 59a5–b5; D, fol. 48a1–7; S, vol. 33, pp. 188.20–189.20). See particularly the latter (P, fol. 59a8; D, fol. 48a3; S, vol. 33, p. 189.6–7): *sems can gyis mthong ba rnam ni 'khrul pa yin par mngon no ||*; *ibid.* (P, fol. 59b5; D, fol. 48a7; S, vol. 33, p. 189.18–20): *de ltar sems can gyis mthong ba rnam ni rig*

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have seen that the only feasible ontology for Rong-zom-pa is mere appearance, which is rootless, unrestricted, invariable, soteriologically neutral, and yet the only viable basis for *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. Strikingly, for him, mere appearance, like a mirage, operates in accordance with the principle of dependent origination (*rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba: pratītyasamutpāda*). Depending on the presence or absence of causes and conditions, it may appear or disappear. What he does seem to posit is the sphere in which the mere appearance operates, namely, the *dharmadhātu*, the sphere of reality itself, just as he posits the space in which mirages appear or disappear. According to his epistemology, a mere appearance may be perceived as extremely impure, somewhat impure, pure, extremely pure, or not perceived at all, and the degree of the purity of perception determines the degree of its validity. Here the person by whom mere appearance is not perceived at all is a *buddha*, whose gnosis (if it exists at all)⁵⁴ represents the upper limit of the perceptual scale. Just as a mirage is an optical illusion and the perception of it a perceptual delusion, a mere appearance is an illusion, and the perception of it, no matter how pure or impure, ultimately a mere delusion. A *buddha*, being free from all delusions, perceives no illusions. Not perceiving an optical illusion such as a mirage in the open air may be designated as seeing space. Similarly, not perceiving any mere appearance in the *dharmadhātu*, the sphere of reality, is clearly designated as perceiving the *dharmadhātu*.

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- Almogi 2006 Id., *Rong-zom-pa's Discourses on Traditional Buddhism: A Study of the Development of the Concept of Buddhahood with Special Reference to the Controversy Surrounding the Existence of Gnosis (ye shes: jñāna) at the Stage of a Buddha*. Doctoral Dissertation. Hamburg: University of Hamburg, 2006.

[= rigs] *pas kyang 'khrul par [ba D] mngon zhing | sangs rgyas kyi lung las kyang 'khrul pa yin par gsungs so ||*.

⁵⁴ On the Indian and Tibetan controversies on whether a *buddha* possesses gnosis (*jñāna: ye shes*), see Almogi 2006.

- Baghrmian 2004 Maria Baghrmian, *Relativism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.
- bDen gnyis 'jog tshul* Rong-zom Chos-kyi-bzang-po, *Grub mtha' so so'i bden gnyis kyi 'jog tshul*. In *RS*, vol. 2, pp. 29–34.
- Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā* P. L. Vaidya, ed., *Bodhicaryāvatāra of Śāntideva with the Commentary Pañjikā of Prajñākaramati*. Buddhist Sanskrit Texts 12. Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute, 1960.
- Bodhicittabhāvanā* Mañjuśrīmitra, *Bodhicittabhāvanā*. P 3418; D 2591; S 1497, vol. 33.
- Bodhicittabhāvanānirdeśa* Id. (ascribed), *Bodhicittabhāvanādvādaśārthanirdeśa*. P 3405; D, 2578; S 1484, vol. 33.
- Bodhisattvabhūmi* Unrai Wogihara, ed., *Bodhisattvabhūmi: A Statement of Whole Course of the Bodhisattva (being fifteenth section of Yogācārabhūmi)*. 1930–36. Reprint: Tokyo: Sankibo Buddhist Book Store, 1971.
- bsTan pa'i mdzes rgyan* mKhan-po Kun-bzang-dpal-ldan, *Gangs ri'i khrod kyi smra ba'i seng ge gcig pu 'jam mgon mi pham rgya mtsho'i rnam thar snying po bsdu pa dang gsung rab kyi dkar chag snga 'gyur bstan pa'i mdzes rgyan*. In *MS*, vol. 8/*hūm*, pp. 621–731.
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