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TWO TIBETAN TEXTS ON THE "NEITHER ONE NOR MANY" ARGUMENT FOR ŚŪNYATA

INTRODUCTION

The present article is my third in a series on the Buddhist argument that entities are void (stöñ pa; sūnya) of own-nature (rañ bžin; svabhāva) because they are neither individuals (i.e. "ones") nor many different things.¹ The reason (gtan tshigs; hetu; or equivalently, rtags; liṅga) on which this argument depends, that is to say, "being neither one nor many", or more literally, "being free from one(ness) and many(ness)", comes to be known in Indian and Tibetan literature as the "neither one nor many reason" (gcig du bral gyi gtan tshigs; ekānekaviyogahetu).

Now undeniably the basic theme of this style of argumentation was used in its broad outlines by diverse branches of Buddhist philosophy, and for a variety of purposes: Vasubandhu, Dharmakīrti, and Prajñākaragupta, to take a few of the many possible examples, used it to show the impossibility of such notions as universals and partless atoms; Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti used it to analyse the relationship between the self (bdag; ātman) and the aggregates (phun po; skandha) and, in general, to reduce to absurdity the part-whole relationship.² But, although Madhyamika and non-Madhyamika alike used this argument in one form or another,³ it finds an especially sophisticated development in the Mādhyamika-Svātantrika philosopher, Śāntarakṣita, who employed it as the central idea around which he structured his influential text, the Madhyamakālamkāra.

In Tibet, a considerable indigenous literature grew up around Śāntarakṣita’s Madhyamakālamkāra. Some works, such as the dBu ma rgyan gvi rnam bṣad of the rNing ma pa scholar, Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846–1912), and the dBu ma rgyan gvi brjed byan of rGyal tshab rje (1364–1432), commented directly on Śāntarakṣita’s text, but others, in particular the dGe legs pa monastic textbooks (yig cha), combined Śāntarakṣita’s exposition of the “neither one nor many” argument with their commentary on the homage (mchod brjod) of Maitreyanātha’s Abhisamayālamkāra.⁴ As an Indian precedent for situating the “neither one nor many” argument in the context of the
Abhisamayālaṃkāra’s homage, these textbooks would cite certain passages from Haribhadra’s commentary, Sphuṭārtha.5

In my first two articles, I compared certain aspects in the Indian and Tibetan treatments of the argument, and I introduced the important themes present in the texts translated below. I had originally thought to include, in the second article, a translation of these Tibetan texts, which together give a representative sample of the dGe lugs pa discussion of the argument. But this proved to be impossible, and a third article was thus necessary.

Of the texts in question, the first, a chapter from Se ra rje btsun pa Chos kyi rgyal mtshan’s (1469–1546) commentary on the first chapter of the Abhisamayālaṃkāra, serves to explain the basic line of argumentation. The second, an excerpt from Tson kha pa’s (1357–1419) dbu ma rgyan gyi zin bris, deals with the logical fallacy of āśrayāśiddhahetu (“a reason whose locus is not established”; gzi ma grub pa’i gti tshigs), a technical problem often associated with the “neither one nor many” argument. The difficulty arises as soon as one seeks to use the argument to prove that pseudo-entities such as the Self (ātman), the Primordial Nature (prakṛti), Īśvara, etc. — in short, the various speculative fictions of the non-Buddhist schools — are in fact non-existent. How is one to avoid that all successful non-existence proofs become self-refuting, if one agrees that the loci, or subjects (chos can; dharmin) of valid proofs must in some sense exist? It is a question which has elicited much discussion from Western scholars, and perhaps Tson kha pa’s text will be useful here as it concisely presents certain important ideas of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, as well as Kamalaśīla’s basic approach to the problem in his work, the Madhyamakāloka.6

Finally, a word on the editions which I have used. The chapter from the sKabs dan po’i spyi don forms a small part of the voluminous collection of textbooks composed by Se ra Chos kyi rgyal mtshan which have recently (197?) been reprinted at Se ra byes monastery in Bylakuppe, Mysore, India. This reprint is completely identical with the text included in the United States Library of Congress Collection of Tibetan Literature in Microfiche. (Microfiche R–1021 in Tibetan Religious Works: PL 480 SFC Collections, published by the Institute for the Advanced Studies of World Religions, Stony Brook, New York.) According to the information given by E. Gene Smith on the microfiche itself, it would seem that the blocks were made in Buksa (sBag sa), Bengal during the 1960’s. At any rate, for our purposes, we shall simply speak of the “New Se ra” edition. We have also consulted the