

Collaborations with Tibetan Colleagues in Research

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1. Informants vs colleagues

In (2001/2002, 2015a, 2015b) I argued that we in Tibetan and Buddhist Studies must self-consciously move beyond a model that we might call generously *Anthropological*, but which we might call more honestly *Orientalist* in our scholarly interaction with our traditionally educated¹ Tibetan colleagues.² On that pernicious model, we Western-educated scholars treat our Tibetan colleagues as *informants*. We study them and their utterances, mine them for data, and claim the insights and research that emerge as our own, adopting the academic subject position and implicitly relegating the traditionally educated colleague to an object position. To do this, I have argued, is pernicious morally, politically and epistemically. Morally, it denigrates our fellow scholars and amounts to theft of intellectual property; politically, it reinforces indefensible power relations between the academic communities of dominant nations and those of less powerful nations;

¹ There are lots of problematic ways of drawing the distinction I am after here, and any choice of vocabulary will require comment or qualification to avoid misstatement or misapprehension. The distinction in question is between two kinds of universities—wherever they may be located, and whoever may staff them. The first are those that follow a traditional Tibetan pattern of education, modeled on those found in such institutions as Drepung, Ganden and Sera, but also including such institutions as Sakya College, and the various Shedras and Gars in Tibet and its diaspora. Those educated in this milieu I will call *traditionally educated*. The second are those—wherever they maybe located and whoever may staff them—patterned on European universities, including not only most American and European institutions, but also such places as Lhasa University or the University of Kathmandu. Those trained in these universities I will call *Western educated*. Any choice of brief terms is problematic. Take these as names, not as descriptions.

² For the purposes of this discussion, I explicitly set aside several classes of interaction, which I think are pretty well understood, and in general, conducted appropriately, *viz.*, those involving collaborative translation, in which it is now standard practice to give joint credit to all collaborators, and collaboration with ethnically Tibetan scholars who are trained in or have spent large parts of their careers teaching in Western-patterned universities.

epistemically it perpetuates the idea that Western education is superior to traditional education and distracts us from what we can learn from the traditional scholar.

I will not rehearse the arguments for those claims here, but will take these theses to have been established. Instead, I want to talk about how to engage in collegial practice with traditionally educated scholars, using two recent case studies in which I have been involved. I will discuss how we worked, and what the benefits are to all participants of working in this collegial manner.

The first of these projects is our recently completed volume on Dignāga's *dMigs pa brtags pa/Ālamabanaparīkṣā (Investigation of the Percept)* and its Indian and Tibetan commentaries. (Duckworth et al. 2016)³ The second is an ongoing project examining the Geluk-Sakya polemics in epistemology from the 15th-18th centuries following Taksthang's elucidation of his *18 Great Contradictions in the Thought of Tsongkhapa* in the 5th chapter of his *Freedom from Extremes Accomplished by Knowledge of all Philosophies*.⁴ In each of these, Tibetan scholars are centrally involved as colleagues, and are co-authors of the resultant work. In the first of these projects, the ven Prof Geshe Yeshe Thabkhas of the Central University of Tibetan Studies (CUTS) was a member of the research team; in the second, the ven Prof Tashi Tsering and the ven Dr Lobsang Dorje Rabling, also on the faculty of CUTS, are on the research team.^{5,6}

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⁴ This research is supported by a grant from the Singapore Ministry of Education and by a grant from the Australian Research Council. The other members of the team are José Cabezón, Thomas Doctor, John Powers and Sonam Thakchöe.

⁵ A word is in order about how to think about the Central University of Tibetan Studies. One could argue that it is a Western-patterned university, in that it is part of the Indian university system, administered under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and the University Grants Council, and grants degrees from Shastri (BA) and B. Ed. Through PhD and D. Phil that are recognized by the Government of India. But this would be a superficial principle of classification, as anyone who has taught, studied or pursued research at CUTS would appreciate. The internal structure, mode of instruction, the nature of most scholarship, and in short, the entire academic culture is that of a traditional Tibetan institution, and many of the faculty are trained in monastic universities.

2. The role and value of Yeshe Thabkhas in the *dMigs pa brtags pa* project

Yeshe Thabkhas (b. 1932) was educated at Drepung Loseling monastic college in Lhasa, and recently retired from CUTS, where he taught in the *Mool Shastra* department for decades, specializing on Indian Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. His publications (all in Tibetan—he speaks no English) include a fine critical edition and commentary on Tsongkhapa’s *Essence of Hermeneutics* (*Drang nges legs bshad snying po*). He holds the oral lineage for *dMigs pa brtags pa*, a lineage he reports has been maintained continuously since the founding of Drepung.⁷

In a workshop for our project, Yeshe Thabkhas presented an extended oral commentary over four days on Dignāga’s text and the commentaries by Vinītadeva, the third Gungthang Rinpoche (18th c) and Ngawang Dendar (18th c). That oral commentary was recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were returned to Yeshe Thabkhas who then used them as a basis for writing an extensive scholarly meta-commentary on Dignāga’s text and the commentarial tradition, a commentary that is included as part of our volume. His instruction and discussion was also instrumental in the translations of and introduction to the other commentaries included in the volume.

One of the enormous benefits of having Yeshe Thabkhas on the team was his ability to take us through details of linguistic nuance that are very much internal to the literature on this text. For instance, terms such as *rdul prhen*, *rdul phra rab* and *rdzas rdul* are often treated as synonymous in Tibetan, and indeed are often used interchangeably to translate Sanskrit, but are carefully distinguished in this literature; *don, yul* and *dmigs pa* are also often taken to be synonymous, but are each used technically in different ways in these commentaries. Indeed, distinctions between *don, yul* and *dmigs pa* are often philosophically important, and one way,

⁶ Dr Sonam Thakchöe is also a member of these research teams. But while his undergraduate education was at CUTS, his PhD is from an Australian university, and he has spent his entire professional career teaching in an Australian university. So, for the purposes of this essay, he counts as a Western-educated scholar.

⁷ Yeshe Thabkhas, like many traditionally educated Tibetan scholars, will not teach any text for which he does not hold an oral lineage.

from the standpoint of the Tibetan commentarial tradition, to understand the subject matter of *dMigs pa brtags pa* is that it is concerned with establishing the relationship between the *don* (*intentional object*), *yul* (*referent*) and *dmigs pa* (*percept*). Only someone with the oral lineage can really explain these linguistic subtleties.

More importantly, the oral lineage preserves interpretative insights not present in the written commentaries. For instance, Yeshe Thabkhas, following the Loseling reading, treats what is most obviously an *epistemological* text as *primarily an ethical treatise*, taking the purport of the internal status of the percept (*dmigs pa/ālambanā*) to be that in interpersonal interactions, in morally charged perception, the way we take others is determined not by the nature of the persons we perceive, but by our dispositions and perceptual processes. To understand this, he argues, leads us to take greater responsibility for how we see the world and others, and to reduce the degree to which we impute morally salient properties to others in their own right, thereby developing our ability to be more impartial, more caring and more responsive. This is a reading of the text that would never have been available to the general public but for the participation of a traditionally educated scholar in our team.

There are other benefits to having this commentary represented in our volume. For one thing, it grants the text a legitimacy in the Tibetan scholarly community that it would not otherwise have. In a community in which lineage matters a great deal, Yeshe Thabkhas' words and his name on the cover signal that this is a volume to be taken seriously, and to the extent that we want our work to be part of a broad discussion in Buddhist and Tibetan studies, being taken seriously in the world of traditionally educated Tibetan scholars matters a great deal.

Second, the presence of Yeshe Thabkhas' commentary reminds the *Western-educated* world of two important facts about the Tibetan philosophical tradition: first, it is not only a written, but an oral tradition, and to ignore the oral tradition is to ignore a substantial portion of Tibetan philosophical literature. Second, it is a *living* tradition. When we engage with Tibetan philosophy, we are not, *ipso facto*,

engaging in the *history of philosophy*, but we are engaging with *philosophy*, prosecuted in the present as well as in the past, just as Western philosophy is prosecuted in the present as well as in the past. When our volume contains not only 6th and 18th century Tibetan language commentaries, but also a 21st century commentary, it makes a powerful methodological point.

3. **The value of Tashi Tsering and Lobsang Dorje Rabling in the Taktshang project**

Our second team project is that examining Sakya-Geluk polemics regarding Taktshang's charges against Tsongkhapa. In this project, two Tibetan scholars—one a Sakya scholar trained at Sakya College and CUTS and the other a Geluk scholar trained at Ganden and CUTS—are also integral team members. Both are named in the grants that fund the project;⁸ both will be co-authors of the publications to result. This project is very much in progress, and it will be several years before its fruits are available.

We can, however, already identify some of the many advantages of including these two eminent scholars on our research team. For one thing, just as in the case of the *dMigs pa brtags pa* project, there are terms in this complex internescine literature that have special nuance in this debate; in particular, there are terms that are understood differently in the Sakya and Geluk literature, reflecting in part distinct oral traditions. So, once again, having scholars who hold the relevant oral lineages and who are sensitive to the linguistic nuance on both sides of the debate adds a rich perspective to the team and allows much greater precision in translation and commentary and deeper collective understanding than we would otherwise have. Even such common philosophical terms as *kun rdzob* turn out to have very different resonances on the two sides of this debate, with the Sakya scholars leaning more to the sense of *concealing* or *disguised* and the Geluk scholars leaning more to the sense of *conventional*.

⁸ Yeshe Thabkhas was not named on the grant that funded the *dMigs pa brtags pa* project only because we were not sure of his availability at the time the grant application was submitted.

In this case, we also can attend to the issue of *reception*, which is important in a polemical literature. Our Tibetan colleagues bring to the project an understanding and experience of how these texts are read, taught and discussed in monastic colleges, and in what contexts and to what degree they are taken to be important, adding a level of nuance to our collective understanding. And finally, there is a subtle, hard-to-pin-down, but definite benefit to having research team members to whom the outcome of a debate really matters, and to having them on both sides. To be sure, some of the Western-educated scholars on this team have philosophical allegiances in this debate (some of them pretty obvious in our scholarship), but these pale in strength to the allegiances that Sakya scholars have to Taktsang's position and that Geluk scholars have to Tsongkhapa's. That extra *frisson* takes the arguments a bit deeper, leads to other implications in debate, and extends the project beyond its apparent boundaries.

4. The bigger picture: long term impact of scholarly practice

Up to this point, I have been talking about the immediate benefits of genuine collegial interaction between Western-educated and traditionally educated scholars on research teams to the research itself. But there are also broader, slower, but even more important long-term benefits from this kind of interaction. I close by noting some of those.

One important benefit is that the scholars who work with us, as well as those who read our work in virtue of the presence of traditionally educated scholars on our teams, are exposed to and become familiar with Western philological and philosophical technique and practice, and then bring these techniques and practices to their own scholarship. They thereby extend the range of tools available to their own tradition, both advancing its research agenda and opening it to a greater degree to Western collaborators for whom this family of techniques is normative.

This is not to say that Western academic technique is *better* than traditional Tibetan scholarly technique, only that it is *different*, and encourages a different set of questions, a different range of answers to questions, and different ways of approaching and thinking about texts and ideas. Just as I believe that we have

learned a great deal about textual scholarship and philosophy from our own interactions with Tibetan scholars, extending, rather than replacing our skill sets, our Tibetan colleagues can learn from us, extending, not replacing their own skill sets and thereby enriching the living Tibetan tradition.

That enrichment relies on an *openness* to other intellectual traditions, a trait sadly often absent both in the Western and in the Tibetan philosophical tradition. Happily, another important consequence of the kind of collaboration I am advocating is that it increases that openness on both sides of the fence. Tibetan scholars develop greater appreciation of and respect for Western scholarship and Western scholars who read our work develop a greater appreciation of and respect for contemporary Tibetan scholarship. This greater openness can only facilitate further interaction and learning.

As we have seen, this kind of collaboration also brings the extensive Tibetan oral traditions into the written literary world. As oral teachings are either literally transcribed and edited into written texts, as in the first case, or are articulated and cited in more general discussion as in the second case, their insights are disseminated beyond their immediate monastic lineages, and they come to be part of the general scholarly canon. In an age of literacy, this is essential to their preservation but also to their impact on scholarship. Moreover, the fact that contemporary traditionally educated Tibetan scholars are producing new commentaries, new philosophical treatises and conducting innovative research should go a long way to eliminating the unfortunate sense that many Western scholars have of Buddhist and Tibetan philosophy as essentially historical; this work demonstrates beyond a doubt that we are engaging with a living, progressive tradition, and hence a genuine dialogical partner.

Finally, and more materially, this kind of research, in virtue of the skills it develops, in virtue of the connections it forges, and in virtue of the recognizable credentials it generates, makes it far easier for traditionally educated Tibetan scholars to secure employment and research support in Western-style universities, giving them access to funding and prestige commensurate with their skills and training. And that is a

blow struck for equity and for greater intercultural interaction. Now, one might ask, what's the downside? I haven't seen one.

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