

# Prāsaṅgika, Pramāṇa and the Problem of Foundations: Taktshang and Tsongkhapa on Epistemology

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## **1. Taktshang's Critique of Tsongkhapa's Project: The Big Picture**

Taktshang Lotsawa Sherab Rinchen (sTag Tshang lo tsa' ba shes rab rin chen, 1405-c. 1460) is a Sakya scholar best known for his ferocious critique of Tsongkhapa's (Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa, 1357-1419) epistemology through the section of Chapter 5 of his text on tenet systems, *Freedom From Extremes Accomplished Through Knowledge of All Philosophies* (*Grub mtha' kun shes nas mtha' bral sgrub pa'i bstan bcos*) entitled *18 Great Contradictions in the Thought of Tsongkhapa*. Through that set of alleged inconsistencies in Tsongkhapa's philosophy, Taktshang accuses Tsongkhapa of error at two levels: first, he accuses him of misunderstanding the thought of Candrakīrti, both with respect to his analysis of the two truths and with respect to his account of knowledge in the conventional realm; second, he accuses Tsongkhapa of concocting an incoherent mixture of an anti-foundationalist Prāsaṅgika ontology derived from Candrakīrti and a foundationalist *pramāṇavāda* epistemology derived from Dharmakīrti.

I will argue that while there are passages in Candrakīrti's treatises (in particular *Lucid Exposition* (*Prasannapadā*) and *Introduction to the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakāvatāra*) that support each reading, on balance, while Tsongkhapa has a better reading of Candrakīrti's ontology, Taktshang's understanding of Candrakīrti's epistemology is to be preferred. Moreover, I will argue, Taktshang's systematic critique of Tsongkhapa's project of welding Dharmakīrti's epistemology to Candrakīrti's ontology is successful. A Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika should indeed reject Dharmakīrti's *pramāṇa* theory in favor of the more liberal account favored by Candrakīrti. But the devil is in the details, and there are lots of details to consider.

Nonetheless, it will be easier to follow the dialectic if we first paint in broad strokes. Candrakīrti, in *Lucid Exposition*, glosses *conventional truth* (*samvṛti-satya*) in three distinct ways: truth by general agreement or convention (*lokavyāvahāra*), mutual dependence, and *concealing* or *obscurational* truth—that is, as something that is in fact false but presents itself as true. (Tsongkhapa 2006, pp. 479-480, Cowherds 2011, pp. 12-13) Depending on which of these analyses one foregrounds, it is possible to read Candrakīrti as arguing that conventional truth is really true, or that conventional truth is entirely false. We will see that Tsongkhapa takes the first option, while Taktshang takes the second.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, Candrakīrti explicitly rejects Dignāga’s and Dharmakīrti’s argument that there are only two *pramāṇas*, viz., perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference ( *anumāṇa*), asserting both that Buddhists can also admit such *pramāṇas* as testimony (*śabda*) and analogy (*upamaṇa*), without explicitly ruling out others. (Candrakīrti 2003, p. 55, Cowherds 2011, p. 54) He also endorses Nāgārjuna’s explicit rejection of a foundationalist account of *pramāṇa* in *Reply to Objections* (*Vigrahavyāvartanī* 40, 41; Westerhoff 2010), suggesting that no *pramāṇa* is self-authenticating, and that knowledge has no foundations. Dharmakīrti, on the other hand, is explicit about the foundational and self-authenticating status of perception and inference. (Dreyfus 1997, pp. 343-344; 348ff; 359-360)

One can see the attraction of Dharmakīrti’s insistence on the foundational status of the *pramāṇas*. Madhyamaka always raises the specter of relativism: if all truth is merely conventional, what is to stop us from accepting whatever anyone says as true, so long as at least a few people agree, thus establishing a convention? This would end all rational discourse, and undermine all confidence in any claims, leading to what the Cowherds have called “the dismal slough” wherein there is no difference between truth and falsehood, and so no reason or meaning at all.

Dharmakīrti, by insisting that perception and inference put us in direct contact with reality and are intrinsically justificatory, provides an alternative. While Tsongkhapa endorses the Prāsaṅgika ontology defended by Candrakīrti, and the status of

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<sup>1</sup> See Cowherds (2011) for a discussion of this range of readings.

conventional truth as a genuine truth, he also defends Dharmakīrti's foundationalist epistemology as a bulwark against relativism.

Taktshang rejects this strategy. He argues against Tsongkhapa's approach on two grounds, one reflecting their divergent readings of Candrakīrti on conventional truth, and the other reflecting his view that no Prāsaṅgika can be an epistemological foundationalist. First, he argues, since conventional truth is deceptive, it is entirely false, and not a genuine truth at all. *Pramāṇas* in Dharmakīrti's sense, he argues, are meant to get at truth, not falsehood, and so no *pramāṇas* in Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's sense have any place in the context of conventional truth. Second, he argues, to take *pramāṇas* as foundational is to take them as having intrinsic validity; to take them as having intrinsic validity is to take them as having a status that transcends all mundane convention. But, he argues, for a Prāsaṅgika, nothing transcends convention. So, there can be no foundationalism in epistemology consistent with the Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka system.

Several scholars in the Geluk tradition laid out a number of responses to Taktshang, but those will not concern us here. I want to focus simply on three questions: Does Taktshang or Tsongkhapa have the better reading of Candrakīrti? Is it in fact cogent to weld Dharmakīrti's epistemology onto Candrakīrti's ontology? Finally, what is Taktshang's own account of knowledge in the conventional realm, and is it cogent and consistent with Madhyamaka? We begin with a closer look at Candrakīrti's attitude towards epistemology.

## **2. Candrakīrti's Epistemology: Pramāṇa and Anti-Foundationalism**

As I noted above, there are two crucial aspects to Candrakīrti's epistemology: his refusal to limit the *pramāṇas* to perception and inference, with an explicit acknowledgment of testimony and analogy as additional *pramāṇas*, leaving open the possibility of others; and his rejection of foundationalism. These ideas are actually closely intertwined. Let us begin with the question of the number of *pramāṇas*.

Dignāga and Dharmakīrti limit the *pramāṇas* to perception and inference. Their account is simply reductionist, but not eliminativist. That is, they can acknowledge

testimony, analogy or other *pramāṇas* as epistemic instruments or warrants, but each of them as an instrument is reducible, somehow, to perception or inference. So, for instance, when I know something via testimony, I know it by *perceiving* sounds or letters on a page, and by *inferring* that those sounds or letters are caused by the thing to which they bear witness and by the intentions of their creators, of which they are also signs. And the *warrant* of testimony is conferred by the intrinsically warranting perception and inference to which it reduces. This apparently irenic approach to *pramāṇa* theory appears to leave in place any *pramāṇa* one would like, but accounts for the efficacy and normative force of all other *pramāṇas* by reducing them to perception and inference.

Unfortunately, however, as Candrakīrti saw, this is not a stable position. For one can ask fairly how we know that perception and inference are the most basic *pramāṇas*. We cannot come to this knowledge simply by perceiving and inferring. We need others to confirm that our perception and our inference are veridical; this is what schooling, training, debate and criticism are about. We learn to infer, and when to trust our senses by our judgments and practices being confirmed by those of others (testimony). And we can only extend what we learn in one case to another by recognizing analogies. We cannot even apply what we know about inference or perception in individual cases to more general cases without analogical reasoning. So, Candrakīrti, insists, to learn how to come to know is to learn a wide battery of cognitive skills, which support one another, to use an analogy of Dignāga's, like three sheaves of grain stacked in a pyramid support one another.

To insist that only perception and inference are any good requires that we see them as intrinsically self-validating, not requiring other instruments of knowledge to secure their warrant or instrumentality. It is also to see epistemic normativity as a fundamentally individualistic, as opposed to a social, or conventional matter. It derives simply from the individual powers of the sense faculties and intellect, unsupported by language or collective epistemic practices. But to know is to be justified, and justification requires an understanding of normativity, and that

requires participation in a community that institutes practices and constitutes norms regarding those practices.

We can put this another way, in terms of two different approaches to epistemology, which we might distinguish as *analytical* and *anthropological* approaches. Dignāga, Dharmakīrti and Tsongkhapa take the first, and Candrakīrti and Taktshang the second. On the analytical approach to epistemology, we ask what knowledge *must* be like, *a priori*, and then produce an account of the ideal epistemic practices that would generate knowledge so conceived. So, Dignāga distinguishes two kinds of objects of knowledge—particulars and universals—and argues that to know particulars is to be in direct causal contact with them through perception, and that to know universals is to engage with them conceptually through inference. Knowledge, then, consists in the appropriate use of these two epistemic instruments, and they, when correctly used, warrant belief and action. On this approach to epistemology, normativity precedes and governs practice.

The anthropological approach, on the other hand, takes knowledge acquisition to be one of the many human norm-governed practices, and asks empirically how we engage in that practice. The methods of knowledge acquisition and justification are then simply those we in fact use in our epistemic activities. So Candrakīrti examines ordinary conventions regarding information gathering and justification and concludes that we generally do that in at least four ways—perception, inference, testimony and analogy. On this approach to epistemology, normativity emerges from practice; it does not precede it.

Candrakīrti sees conventional truth as collectively constituted through conceptual designation and through agreement in practices. The *pramāṇas*, as part of conventional truth, must therefore also be so constituted, and to ask what counts as a warrant, or as an instrument of knowledge—the two principle senses of *pramāṇa*—is then simply to ask what people take to be warranting, and what instruments are actually used in the construction of knowledge. That is an empirical question about actual human epistemic conventions and practices, and Candrakīrti

answers empirically: we ordinary epistemic agents use and recognize four principle means of knowledge, at least. None are privileged.

This connects directly to the issue about foundationalism. Candrakīrti follows Nāgārjuna as a coherentist. In *Reply to Objections*, he asks whether *pramāṇas* are foundational and self-warranting. He responds that they are not. The *pramāṇas*, he says, are justified by the objects of knowledge (*prameyas*) they deliver, just as the *prameyas* are warranted by the *pramāṇas* (40, 41) How do I know that my eyes are good? Because they deliver visible objects reliably? How do I know what visible objects are around me? Because I know that my eyes are good. Candrakīrti would add that I also require the judgment of my ophthalmologist (testimony) and the confidence that this visual situation is just like the one in which he asserted that my eyes functioned well (analogy). The mutual interdependence of all phenomena that is the hallmark doctrine of Madhyamaka Buddhism thus entails a broad coherentism and conventionalism in epistemology. It also suggests an anthropological, as opposed to an analytical approach to epistemology.

### **3. Candrakīrti on *Samvṛti*: Avoiding the Dismal Slough**

This conventionalism, however—introduced when we locate testimony at the heart of epistemology—always threatens to degenerate into relativism, and to drive us into the dismal slough in which to be true or to be justified is just to be what everyone, or most everyone believes. Conventions, one might say, are good for some things, like deciding on which side of the road to drive, but they do not determine what is morally acceptable, or what the nature of the universe is, or, to get to the present subject, what actually counts as justificatory. It is acceptable that the correct side of the road on which to drive is the right in the USA and the left in Australia, and that that is simply determined by agreement. It was once agreed by many that human chattel slavery is acceptable and that whales are fish.

Anthropology is descriptive, not primitively normative, and so can describe terrible epistemic practices as well as successful ones. And none of us believes that mere agreement is sufficient to establish such matters of moral or empirical fact or that

*modus ponens* is valid, and affirming the consequent is not. How do we avoid this kind of rank relativism if we take the *conventional* in conventional truth seriously? To answer this question requires us to consider both the recursive character of conventions, and the ways that normativity can emerge from pragmatic success (as, for instance, Millikan (1989) has argued in her accounts of proper function).

The Sanskrit *samvṛti-satya* probably derives from the Pāli *sammati-sacca*. *Satya* and *sacca* each mean *truth* or *reality*. *Sammati* in Pāli means *determined by agreement*, *functional*, or *constituted by the mind*.<sup>2</sup> It is a clear antecedent to *one* of the principal meanings of *samvṛti*—the reading as *lokavyāvahāra* that underlies Candrakīrti's insistence that conventional truth is a kind of *truth*, and his taking seriously the distinction between truth and falsity within the conventional domain. It is also the sense that underlies the robust realism about the conventional we find in Tsongkhapa's philosophy and so in the Geluk tradition. Families, nations, currencies and colleges are all established by convention; they are all functional; they are all constituted by collective cognitive activity. But they are not for that reason *unreal*, or *deceptive*; that is their mode of *reality*.

But the translation of *sammati* into *samvṛti* brings, via homonymy, a second meaning, and that is *concealing*, *occluding*. In this sense, to be *samvṛti* is essentially to be *deceptive*, and so, in an important sense, to be *false*, as in a false friend, a false ceiling, or a false start; it is a way of being *unreal*. As we will see, this new meaning, and the ambiguity in the Sanskrit term will be crucial in the disagreement between Taktshang and Tsongkhapa.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Hayes (private communication)

<sup>3</sup> This situation gets even worse in Tibetan. Tibetan translators responded to the ambiguity in *samvṛti* by introducing two translations. The term *tha snyad* means *nominal* or *conventional*, and mirrors the sense of *lokavyāvahāra* quite well. The term *kun rdzob* literally means *costumed* and captures the sense of *samvṛti* as *deceptive*. This would seem to help matters. Unfortunately, however, these translations are used unsystematically, with *kun rdzob* being used far more frequently, and so the dominant sense in much Tibetan literature of *conventional* is *superficial*, or *deceptive*. Tsongkhapa's ontological semi-realism, therefore, which is in fact much closer to Candrakīrti's view and the original sense of the term, seems somewhat radical in the Tibetan context. See Garfield (2015).

We agree about many things, including not only on what side of the road to drive, or how to value our currency, but also on what constitutes a reasonable epistemic practice, how to engage in argument, and how to proceed with moral criticism. But if this agreement is to be more than *mere agreement*—if it is to be norm-constituting—it must not be *arbitrary*. For the Prāsaṅgika, the escape from arbitrariness is by reference to the degree to which such agreement facilitates our achieving our goals, our *puruṣārthas*. Successful conventions persist, and unsuccessful ones do not, and this convention itself persists because it is successful. This bootstrapping into conventions that we not only adopt, but reflectively endorse, is the hallmark of epistemological and ethical activity. Conventions must be justified by their place in a network of conventions, a network that includes conventions for the maintenance and revision of conventions. Stability within that network constitutes genuine normativity.

Agreeing about these things is hence what brings normativity into existence. For we end up agreeing that certain forms of argument are probative; that certain kinds of considerations are determinative, that certain kinds of evidence count, and that certain practices are to be approved and encouraged and certain others are to be disapproved and to be punished. And we agree that this agreement will bind us. Importantly, these practices themselves—the practices that in effect constitute our linguistic, moral, aesthetic and epistemic lives—are reflexive, allowing us to criticize our current normative standards and to revise them. Hence our norms themselves are subject to normative assessment. Once we buy into the realm of norms—the space of reasons—there is no turning back. This pragmatism is implicit in the Prāsaṅgika program.

The kind of conventionalism associated with Madhyamaka could appear to license both arbitrariness and conservatism, and this is the source of much anxiety about the Madhyamaka project. For it could appear that whatever a community decides to believe is thereby to be accepted as true, and it could appear that there are no grounds for revision of even the craziest or most morally retrograde beliefs and practices if what justifies them is mere agreement. But this pragmatic spin avoids



these dangers. For normativity itself requires the institution of practices that reflect upon themselves, and collective participation in critical practices leads us inevitably to greater efficacy, to more success in advancing the *puruṣārthas*. That is why it is so important to Candrakīrti that the *pramāṇas* themselves are conventional and mutually supportive. If they were not, nothing could explain their normative force, except seeing them as transcending the conventional altogether, a status no Mādhyamika can grant *anything*. Epistemic practice is thereby guaranteed to be self-correcting and progressive, even if not perfect.

#### **4. Tsongkhapa, Dharmakīrti and Foundationalism**

Tsongkhapa is not so sanguine about this approach to fending off relativism. He is writing at a time in Tibet at which monastic discipline was apparently in serious decline, and certainly a time when Buddhist doctrine was often read as undermining the status of the everyday world as a reality. These two developments, Tsongkhapa appears to have thought, went hand in hand. The disparagement of the ontological and epistemological status of conventional truth or reality meant that what one *actually does* in the actual world is not all that important; the everyday world is regarded as merely *kun rdzob*, deceptive, not real, and so of no great moment. Tsongkhapa's diagnosis of the decline of the monastic community was therefore that it was the ethical aspect of a descent into the dismal slough, the consequence of not taking the distinction between truth and falsity, good and evil, seriously enough. His solution was to defend a robustly realistic reading of Candrakīrti's ontology—emphasizing the empirical reality of the conventional world as a basis for the ultimate—but also a foundationalist epistemology that could guarantee non-relativistic certainty. That he found in the *pramāṇavāda* tradition. His philosophical program then came to be the fusion of Madhyamaka ontology and Dharmakīrti's epistemology.

Tsongkhapa argues that while all phenomena are merely conventionally existent, the fact that, following Candrakīrti, we can draw a distinction between truth and falsity within the conventional, means that there is a non-relative standard for that

distinction. And he follows Candrakīrti again in taking conventional reality to be confirmation by conventional *pramāṇa*, and not being undermined by any conventional *pramāṇa*. That is, if a conventional instrument of knowledge warrants our belief in the existence of something, or the claim that some entity has some property, and if no other conventional epistemic instrument undermines that claim, we are justified in taking it to be true, or in taking that thing to be real.

But it was also important to Tsongkhapa that there be only one correct account of truth in conventional reality, and the best way to achieve that goal is to take the biologically determined *pramāṇa* of perception that puts our sense organs into direct causal contact with the world and the logically determinate *pramāṇa* of inference in the classical Indian form that allows us to move from perceptual knowledge to knowledge about the unperceived, as the only two *pramāṇas*. The less restrictive instruments of testimony and analogy, that open the possibility for multiple views and multiple perspectives could then be banished in favor of a more austere and more rigorous account of the measure of the real and the true.

Tsongkhapa then argued that Dharmakīrti's account of *pramāṇa* gives us the criterion for judging conventional truth. With this criterion in hand, Tsongkhapa is in a position to distinguish conventional truth from conventional falsity with rigor, and to argue that there is nothing non-arbitrary about the views he advances.

### **5. Taktshang's Critique: Hermeneutics, convention and foundations**

We are now in a position to appreciate the structure of Taktshang's critique of Tsongkhapa's epistemological program. Although it is expressed through a list of eighteen alleged inconsistencies in Tsongkhapa's thought, it resolves into three principal lines of argument. First, Taktshang attacks Tsongkhapa's interpretation of Candrakīrti's ontology and epistemology: Taktshang disputes both Tsongkhapa's realistic reading of Candrakīrti's account of conventional truth and his analytical reading of Candrakīrti's epistemology. Second, Taktshang attacks Tsongkhapa's understanding of the nature of conventional truth. Whereas Tsongkhapa takes it to be a kind of *truth*, Taktshang takes it to be entirely false. Third, Taktshang disagrees

about whether epistemology should be analytical and foundationalist or anthropological and pragmatist.

Tsongkhapa takes seriously Candrakīrti's claim that all phenomena have two natures—a conventional nature and an ultimate nature (*MaV ##*)—and his claim that we can distinguish between what is true and false conventionally, although both conventional truth and falsity are false from the ultimate perspective. ## He reads this in conjunction with Nāgārjuna's assertion of the identity of the two truths, of the assertion of the necessity of understanding the conventional in order to understand the ultimate and the equation of emptiness and dependent origination (*MMK XXIV*) to entail the reality of the conventional truth and the possibility of knowing it correctly. (*Ocean ##*)

Taktshang disagrees dramatically with this reading of Candrakīrti. He writes:

Candrakīrti repeatedly explains that for as long as the causes of delusion endure, the horses and elephants in a dream are just as existent as the ones we may encounter when awake. Once the causes of delusion cease, both are equally nonexistent. Therefore, it is accurate to say that in our own Madhyamaka system there is no distinction between correct and incorrect obscurational truth. (16)

Now, there are, to be sure, arguments to be made either way, depending on which passages in Candrakīrti's corpus one takes as the most explicit. We can see how Taktshang is arguing. From the claim that dream horses and elephants are just as real as seen horses and elephants, and from the nonexistence of dream horses and elephants, he infers that Candrakīrti concludes that conventional reality is entirely nonexistent.

On the other hand, Tsongkhapa seems to have the better case here. First of all, we must read the claim “that in our own Madhyamaka system there is no distinction between correct and incorrect obscurational truth” in the context of Candrakīrti's other assertions about the reality of conventional truth and the distinction between conventional truth and falsehood, and in the context of his definitions of *samvṛti*. First, we note that Candrakīrti clearly commits himself to the claim that “each

phenomenon has two natures—a conventional nature and an ultimate nature” (*MaV##*) and insists that these are two actual natures, not two distinct perspectives on a single nature, and he also clearly distinguishes between conventional truth and conventional falsehood. (See Cowherds 2011 for an extended discussion of this issue.) Second, given that two of Candrakīrti’s definitions of *samvṛti* advert to its real status—as that which is interdependent, and as that which is nominally designated—it would be inappropriate to rely only on the third definition (as *concealing*) to interpret his account of conventional truth. I therefore makes very good hermeneutical sense to read the phrase “in our own Madhyamaka system” as indicating “ultimately,” a hermeneutical strategy that Tsongkhapa may overuse at times, but which is perfectly apposite in this case.

Moreover, even taken on its own, this claim does not go as far as Taktshang wants to take it. For the statement, “once the causes of delusion cease, both are equally nonexistent” is a pretty clear paraphrase of the statement that these are equally nonexistent ultimately. Everyone grants that. The question is what the status is of the conventional, and this statement about dream horses and elephants is one of the many similes for the mind- or convention-dependence of the conventional. That, however, is not tantamount to nonexistence. Dreams, after all, are real dreams.

But ontology is one thing and epistemology quite another. Taktshang also takes Tsongkhapa to task for his reading of Candrakīrti’s epistemology. Let us first consider a passage he cites from the *Introduction to the Middle Way*:

...[T]o claim that according to the glorious Candrakīrti’s system a buddha’s comprehensive insight is an epistemic instrument that examines obscured reality is a fundamental contradiction. As *Introduction to the Middle Way* says, “it is obscurational because it obscures the nature of things.” [VI:28]... Thus, the obscurational truth is taken to be obscurationally true by the power of afflictive ignorance. [11]

Let us parse this brief passage with care. Taktshang is correct in asserting that Tsongkhapa accepts that inasmuch as conventional phenomena are objects of knowledge, and inasmuch as a buddha is omniscient, a buddha must know both

conventional and ultimate truths, albeit, in a different way from that in which we ordinary beings know things. If he did not know them, he would not be omniscient; if he knew them in the way that ordinary beings do, he would be deluded.

(##Moonshadows) But, Taktshang, objects, if to be conventional (*samvṛti*) is to be *deceptive, false, obscurational*, then a buddha can't know conventional phenomena *at all*, as that would involve being deceived, believing in false things, having an obscured consciousness, since to be *samvṛti* is to be deceptive. And if a buddha can't know these things, then, since a buddha must be omniscient, they can't be objects of knowledge. And, if they are not objects of knowledge, then *we* can't know them either—so, given this analysis of the nature of *samvṛti-satya*, emphasizing the reading of *samvṛti* as *kun rdzob*, as entirely deceptive and obscuring, it appears that we can make no sense of knowledge in the conventional, and so there can be no room for conventional *pramāṇas* at all. Taktshang also cites this passage from Candrakīrti's commentary on Āryadeva's *400 Stanzas* in this context:

Therefore, to ascribe the status of perception to sensory cognitions and to think that those cognitions function as epistemic warrants for their objects is utterly indefensible. From a mundane perspective an epistemic warrant is regarded as a nondeceptive cognition. The Blessed One has taught that cognition is a conditioned phenomenon. It is therefore false and deceptive, just like an illusion.... Therefore, it is not reasonable to regard such a cognition as an epistemic warrant because then all cognitions would end up being epistemic warrants.  
[197b] (17)

Here things are a bit trickier for one who would defend Tsongkhapa, but still, on reflection, it looks like Taktshang fails to score points. Nonetheless, this discussion is telling regarding the project of integrating Dharmakīrti's *pramāṇavāda* with Candrakīrti's view. Candrakīrti here makes the point that to take *pramāṇas* as *nondeceptive*, that is, as self-validating measures of reality, as foundations of knowledge, as Dignāga and Dharmakīrti understand them, is indefensible. For sensory cognitions themselves are both unreliable (subject to illusion) and are deceptive (that is, we don't know how they work). So, from the point of view of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka, to pick sensory perception—the basic *pramāṇa* of the

*pramāṇavāda* tradition—and to give it foundational status is inadmissible. Nothing, from that standpoint, can serve as an autonomous foundation. Now, this does not show that Candrakīrti eschews all talk of knowing conventional reality, as Taktshang takes it to show, but it does show that Candrakīrti was hostile to the very kind of foundationalism that Tsongkhapa in fact adopted. Instead, this passage suggests a middle path: Candrakīrti is no foundationalist, but he does think that knowledge is nonetheless possible, and that we can talk about better or worse epistemic activity conventionally (that is, we can talk about these *as the world does*, but talk is cheap; such talk is not our own final stance).

We now turn directly to Taktshang’s critique not of Tsongkhapa’s reading of Candrakīrti, but rather of Tsongkhapa’s own account of conventional truth. Taktshang attacks Tsongkhapa’s realism in the following discussion:

...[T]his idea that the insight of the buddhas is the *primary epistemic warrant* for discerning the relative truth is a *primary flaw* of this system. Qualifying the obscurational with the mundane—as in “the mundane truth of the world...” would have no bite. ... In other words, the obscurational truth is referred to as confusion, it is constituted by mundane innate ego-grasping, and it is not seen by pure insight. (14-15)

Here Taktshang claims that the phrase “the mundane truth of the world,” that is, *lokavyāvahāra*, is meaningless. There is in actuality no *true* conventional world., only what ordinary people *accept as true*. But no Mādhyamika could take *that* to be *truth* in any non-anthropological sense. Now here we have a fight not over how to read Candrakīrti, but about how to understand reality. And of course that is a long fight reflecting the very different perspectives of Geluk and Sakya scholars regarding the status of the conventional—not a fight we need to decide here. We only note here that from the standpoint of ontology, Tsongkhapa is much closer to Candrakīrti is Taktshang. That is made clear by this remarkable claim of Taktshang’s:

*Not being substantially existent contradicts being an entity.* 14d

In any philosophical system, to be substantially existent and to be an entity are the same thing. (23)

This statement is in fact manifestly false. There are many philosophical systems in which entities—conventional entities—fail to be substantially existent. And arguably, one of those systems is Candrakīrti's. For Candrakīrti, like Tsongkhapa, holds that to be substantially existent (*dravyasāt/ rdzes su yod pa*) is a synonym for being *essentially* or *intrinsically* existent, and that no entity exists in that way, but that all exist dependently, conventionally. (*Ocean##*) Only on a fairly radical and restrictive notion of what it is to be an entity would be true that to be an entity is to be substantially existent.

We now can finally turn to Taktshang's critique of Tsongkhapa's epistemology, and here we will see that even if we grant that Tsongkhapa is right with respect to his reading of Candrakīrti and with respect to his account of Madhyamaka ontology, his epistemology is inconsistent with his ontology and with Candrakīrti's own epistemology. Here is how Taktshang puts the critique:

...[N]ot being true contradicts being epistemically warranted; for to be epistemically warranted means to be nondeceptive, and being nondeceptive means nothing more than being foundational. [11]

Here Taktshang is homing in on the core commitments of the *pramāṇavāda* school regarding what it is to be a *pramāṇa*. To be a *pramāṇa* is to be nondeceptive, and to provide a foundation for knowledge. Given Candrakīrti's account of conventional reality as collectively constituted, and given his account of our actual instruments of knowledge and justificatory practices as fallible, mutually supporting and collectively constituted, the foundationalism to which Dharmakīrti subscribes must be anathema to a Prāsaṅgika. Taktshang considers a possible objection:

At this point it might be objected: ... [I]n *Lucid Exposition* four epistemic warrants are accepted: perception, inference, testimony and analogy. That is the genuine Prāsaṅgika way. Therefore, the early Tibetans were correct to draw the Prāsaṅgika/Svātantrika distinction in terms of the number of epistemic warrants accepted. In other

words, Prāsaṅgikas are those who accept four, whereas Svātantrikas will assert only perception and inference following the *Commentary on the Compendium of Epistemology*. (15)

Here Taktshang imagines an objection from the Geluk partisan: Candrakīrti, after all, in *Lucid Exposition*, explicitly acknowledges four pramāṇas when he rejects the restriction to two by Dignāga. So, even if we reject that restriction, there is nothing about taking *pramāṇas* as fundamental that is inconsistent with the Prāsaṅgika system. He replies:

But neither these earlier Tibetans nor these later ones understood this point. The four epistemic warrants are simply presented as the way ordinary people talk. It is not a presentation of the Prāsaṅgika's own system. That is why the same treatise concludes, "Therefore, to understand things through four epistemic warrants is the mundane framework." (Candrakīrti 2003, p. 54) (15)

But, Taktshang emphasizes, this would be a serious misreading of Candrakīrti's purport: Candrakīrti is doing what we called an *anthropology* of epistemology, not a prescriptive analysis of knowledge. He is not presenting an epistemological *system* so much as *reporting* on what people actually do in their epistemic lives, and how they talk about that activity. And Taktshang gets this exactly right. Candrakīrti's insistence on the reality, but merely conventional status of the conventional world extends to knowledge and to the *pramāṇas*. He does not use this term in the same sense that Dignāga and Dharmakīrti do—to indicate nondeceptive foundations for all of our knowledge, but rather as a Prāsaṅgika must, to indicate the ordinary practices of ordinary cognitive agents. That is the cogent approach for a Mādhyamika epistemologist, and a middle way between epistemic nihilism and the essentialism of *pramāṇavāda*. Taktshang drives this home in the following remarks:



*All objects being false contradicts their subjects being undeceived. 13a*

...This is because when the object is a deceptive phenomenon its cognition cannot possibly be an epistemic warrant. For example, consider a cognition to which illusory hairs appear. To claim that the appearance of those hairs or of a double moon is an epistemic warrant would be to reify more than any realist does. (16)

The point here is simple: Given the fundamentally deceptive nature of conventional reality (a nature that even a realist like Tsongkhapa must accept if he is a Mādhyamika), and the fallible nature of subjects of knowledge, it makes no sense to talk about nondeceptive *pramāṇas*. So, even if we grant Tsongkhapa his semi-realist understanding of Madhyamaka ontology—as I believe we must—and even if we grant that Tsongkhapa sometimes reads Candrakīrti on convention better than does Taktshang—as I believe we also must—Taktshang is nonetheless correct that only Candrakīrti’s fallibilist, conventionalist, pragmatist epistemology, pursued as an anthropological, rather than an analytic project, makes any sense for a Prāsaṅgika. To graft the Dignāga-Dharmakīrti epistemology onto Madhyamaka ontology must be a failed project.

## **6. Pramāṇa for Prāsaṅgikas**

What do we learn from this element of the debate between Taktshang and Tsongkhapa? First, conventional truth is a kind of truth, and so knowledge within the bounds of convention must make sense. And that means that there must be some means for acquiring knowledge and for warranting claims—some kind of account of *pramāṇa*. About this, Tsongkhapa is clearly correct.

This does not, however, entail that the correct approach to epistemology is analytic, or that the ensuing epistemology is foundationalist. Taktshang is clearly correct about this. For a Mādhyamika, the appropriate way to do epistemology is anthropological, and descriptive, and the ensuing epistemology is pragmatist and fallibilist, incorporating a description of the full range of means that people use to obtain knowledge and to justify their claims, means that are mutually supportive and that are calibrated by the degree to which they enable successful lives in the

conventional world. That is all that *knowledge* can ever mean. Knowledge so conceived is plenty good enough for our purposes, for everything from buying groceries to interpreting Indian texts to doing mathematics or theoretical physics. And anything more than this is chimerical. We conclude with Taktshang's diagnosis of the drive for greater certainty, greater determinateness, a final analysis and unshakeable foundations for conventional reality and our knowledge of it:

The reason for this heavy burden of contradictions  
Is their harping on a purely mundane and nonanalytic perspective  
While at the same time rationalizing with justifications and proofs  
Because of their logic habit. (18) (27)

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