

INTRODUCTION

It was customary in classical Buddhist India to introduce a text by identifying its "purpose" and its "ultimate purpose." Traditionally, the purpose was considered to be the elucidation (literally, "the making known") of any one of a number of religio-philosophical subjects, and the ultimate purpose (sometimes called *the purpose of the purpose*) was usually identified as the attainment of the state of human perfection known as enlightenment (*bodhi*). This work has more modest goals. It has as its purpose the description of one tradition of Indo-Tibetan scholasticism, using language as a focus of inquiry. But it also has an ultimate purpose: there is a reason for my choosing this as my subject matter. I have focused on the issue of language in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist philosophy to make a case for the fact that scholasticism as a category can, as an abstract, decontextualized notion, profitably serve as a *topos* in the comparative philosophy of religion. Therefore, this study will have been successful, that is, its two purposes will have been fulfilled, if in its wake the reader (a) will have gained some understanding of the nature and concerns of the scholastic philosophy of Buddhist India and Tibet, (b) will come to accept that it is meaningful and insightful to speak of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist philosophy as "scholastic" in character, and (c) will agree that scholasticism, as an abstract and decontextualized category, is a useful theoretical construct in the cross-cultural study of philosophy.

I. The Limits of the Study

Language is an intimate part of human experience. So integral is it to us as a species that scholars, both ancient and modern, have gone so far as to define humanity in terms of the capacity to produce and understand language. ¹ Dante, in his *De Vulgaris Eloquentia* puts it this way:

for of all beings only to man was it granted to speak, since only for him was it necessary. It was not necessary for the angels or for the lower animals to speak; rather would it have been granted to them to no purpose, a thing which Nature certainly abhors doing.²

Given the pivotal nature of both language and religion to human life, it is not surprising that notice should have been taken of the interconnection between them—that language and religion should have been perceived as intimately related.³

Religion has, from very early times, been connected to language, at first unself-consciously, as the medium for the expression of religious concepts and sentiments (our oldest literature is religious in nature). Eventually, however, religion turned its attention reflectively to language per se.⁴ When this occurred and humankind, in the process of becoming self-consciously aware of itself and its modes of communication, turned its attention to those uncommon properties of the species (language being among these), religion was at the forefront of the enterprise.⁵

Buddhism is no exception to this rule.⁶ From the outset we find tremendous interest in language on the part of Buddhists and indeed, if the sources portray this accurately, on the part of the Buddha himself.⁷ The Buddha's interest in questions related to language in the early history of the religion, combined with the subsequent pressure on the tradition to respond to the opinions of rival schools concerning the nature and functioning of language, were probably major factors serving as an impetus for the creation of what was to become a long tradition of Buddhist speculation concerning language. Ultimately, however,

Buddhism's long-standing preoccupation with language throughout its history may be simply due to the fact that "any tradition that seeks mystical silence becomes intensely involved with the question of the role of language in religion," as Luis Oscar Gómez aptly puts it. ⁸

As with Buddhist thought as a whole, the Buddhist attitude toward language was something that developed and became more sophisticated (a skeptic might say simply more technical) with time. Arguably, this reaches its high point in the philosophical speculation of Buddhist scholasticism. Given the centrality of language to scholastic philosophy⁹ and given that one of the chief concerns of this book is to characterize Indo-Tibetan Buddhist philosophy *as* scholastic, it is not surprising that language should become the central focus and organizing principle of the work.

One possible tack in the study of Buddhist views toward language might be the "history of ideas" approach,¹⁰ tracing the development of different views of language by examining the diachronic development of these positions in extant scriptural and postcanonical material.¹¹ However, because speculation about language is often only implicit in the texts,¹² the process of constructing from these pieces a complete picture of the Buddhist views toward language, both historically and in its various manifestations (as scripture, as a source of doctrinal proof, as a source of knowledge generally, as the external equivalent of thought, and as the basic substratum of the world in the nominalist schools) is an intellectual undertaking of the greatest proportions. Given the state of Buddhist studies at the present time, where a vast amount of textual material remains to be explored and analyzed, such an approach is unrealistic. This, combined with the problem of achieving an accurate (even relative) chronology of Indian Buddhist textual material, makes such an approach unfeasible.

This study, then, opts for a different approach. Instead of attempting to document the entire history of Buddhist views toward language exhaustively, I have begun the journey at the end and worked my way backward through time. In taking the

dGe lugs pa school of Tibetan Buddhism ¹³ as a focal point for this study, I have begun my work with what is arguably the most sophisticated expression of Buddhist speculation regarding language. The dGe lugs pas refined the scholastic method of their Indian predecessors to a fine art and, as is fitting of a great scholastic tradition, were from their very founding preoccupied with questions concerning language, which is, by definition, the medium of the scholastic method.¹⁴

Although this study has as its major concern dGe lugs pa exegesis on language, it also draws on the writings of other Tibetan scholastics, for example, on the Sa skya scholars, Bu ston Rin chen grub (1290-1364), Rong ston Sakya* rgyal mtshan (1367-1449), and Go ram pa bSod nams seng ge (1429-1489) as well as on the rNying ma scholar, 'Ju Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846-1912). More important, I have relied very heavily on the Indian Buddhist sources that were most influential in the formation of Tibetan views on language. My approach, however, has been to take the dGe lugs pa school as the focus of inquiry, allowing *it* to motivate what Indian and Tibetan sources are examined. This has made the task of explaining Buddhist ideas concerning language more feasible and has allowed for a more in-depth treatment of the subject than could a general historical overview.

Is it possible, however, to gain a broad view of Buddhist scholasticism by allowing the philosophical preoccupations of a sectarian tradition to motivate the questions and sources examined? This, of course, depends on one's choice of schools, on the source material, and on the methodology employed in its treatment. It is of course possible that the nexus of questions generated by examining a particular school might be neither sufficient nor interesting. Obviously, a school that casts language in a negative light—that presupposes, for example, a kind of radical ineffability (the claim that the ultimate truth and, according to some, any phenomenon cannot be expressed in words: that linguistic analysis is tantamount to bondage, the claim of *some* Zen schools)—would not be the best vantage point from which to conduct such a study. It would be like attempting to gain a view of the New York skyline from one of those odious windows in large apartment buildings that open up to a brick wall.

The dGe lugs pa school, however, does not approach the theoretical study of language with a hermeneutic of suspicion; just the opposite. By choosing this school as the focus of the study we have selected a window on language, and therefore on Buddhist scholasticism, that allows for a broad and expansive view. Consideration of the nature and function of language has infiltrated every aspect of Buddhist philosophical speculation: from epistemology and ontology to hermeneutics. Given that one of the chief characteristics of the enterprise of Tsong kha pa (1357-1419), the founder of the dGe lugs pa school, is the attempt at systematization and synthesis of these different elements into a logical, self-consistent whole that does not contradict scripture a tour de force, to say the least—it is not surprising that in the works of the dGe lugs pa school we should find one of the most complete and sophisticated elucidations of language in all of Buddhist philosophical literature. In the works of this tradition ¹⁵ we witness the dGe lugs pa exegetes' attempts at creating a formal system that can account for the validity of scripture without the religious enterprise degenerating into dogmatism; at upholding the necessity of language and conceptual thought without denying the fact that these, like the proverbial raft, are ultimately to be left behind; at cogently arguing for a philosophically nominalist viewpoint that does not become a form of ontological nihilism; at protecting from the assault of rival schools their logical method, all the while aware of its limits; and at defending their system of meditation that, especially at the early stages of the path, is believed to rely heavily on discursive analysis. Hence, there is no doubt that an examination of language from a dGe lugs pa perspective provides us with a plethora of both important and interesting questions for analysis.

II. The Plan of the Study

This book is roughly divided into three parts. Chapter One problematizes the general notion of scholasticism, setting forth a theoretical framework for understanding it as an abstract and "decontextualized"¹⁶ category. The following eight chapters

demonstrate how some of these general characteristics of scholasticism are played out in the particular Indo-Tibetan Buddhist case. In this way the bulk of the book becomes a demonstration of how the theoretical constructs developed in Chapter One are exemplified in one significant non-European case.

Chapters Two through Five examine the soteriological aspects of language, which is to say those aspects of language that, more than any other, are taken to act as a source of salvation. Under this heading we investigate the phenomenon of scripture (its nature, the theory and practice of its interpretation, and the authority with which it has been invested). In recent years there has been a great deal of interest in the subject of scripture as a major comparative and thematic topic in religious studies.¹⁷ Although there has been a great deal of work on the question of scripture in comparative perspective,¹⁸ and although among these are several works that focus on the Pali sources,¹⁹ no work of a systematic nature dealing with the question of scripture in Mahayana* Buddhism has yet appeared.²⁰ Although the present study does not deal with the Mahayana* view of the nature and function of scripture in a general way, the first four chapters do discuss some of the central issues concerning scripture that are most relevant to one strand of Buddhist scholasticism. As is the case with their views on language in general, the dGe lugs pas' views on scripture are in many ways the most sophisticated expression of Mahayana* scholastic views on the nature and function of holy writ. Hence, they provide us with a very important, albeit unilateral, perspective on scripture in Mahayana* Buddhism.

Each of Chapters Six through Nine focuses on a single philosophical issue. In Chapter Six we explore how language and what is perceived to be its psychological concomitant, conceptual thought, are upheld as modes of knowledge. Chapter Seven, focusing on the controversy concerning a form of logical syllogism called the *svatantra*, shows how the dGe lugs pas defend the view that formal²¹ logic can and does operate at the conventional level. Language and its relationship to existence is the subject of Chapter Eight. There we examine how this tradition

has defended the position of nominalism as the middle way between the two ontological extremes of nihilism and eternalism. Finally, in Chapter Nine we shall see how the dGe lugs pas' hermeneutical strategies are stretched to their limits as they repudiate the literal interpretation of the claims of ineffability that fill the corpus of Buddhist literature (both canonical and extracanonial).

Chapter Ten, the conclusion, rehearses in more detail how some of the characteristics of scholasticism in the abstract are expressed in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition and suggests directions for future research.

III. Three Positions Antithetical to dGe lugs pa Scholasticism

Controversy and polemic is part of the very warp and woof of scholasticism. If scholasticism represents the culmination of a process of religious "intellectualization," a claim that B. B. Price makes of Medieval Christian thought, it should not be surprising to find that, as this process gave rise to a variety of formulations of the religious message, a considerable amount of scholastic energy should have been directed at defending one intellectual systematization of doctrine over another. In the context of Europe the subjects of these debates are well known. They dealt with such issues as the ontological status of universals, the distinction between substance and attributes, the nature of change and motion, the relative reliability of sense consciousness and the intellect, the scope of human knowledge and the authority of the Aristotelian corpus. Although some of these same issues became objects of controversy in India and China (viz. the nature of universals and the relationship between substance and quality, respectively), South and East Asian scholastics were often concerned with questions that were very different, both from Europe and from each other. Be that as it may, identifying key polemical issues is an essential prerequisite to understanding a scholastic tradition. Let us consider briefly then what some of these issues were for the Tibetan scholastics that are our principal objects of study.

To understand the dGe lugs pas' attitudes toward language it is necessary to understand something about the philosophical positions they viewed as rival theories. Tsong kha pa and his followers identify three major doctrinally misguided intellectual currents prevalent in their day. All three are regarded as forms of skepticism or nihilism by the dGe lugs pas; all of them are intimately related to language; and all are seen as challenges to the scholastic enterprise in which they are engaged. It is often the case that the three are conflated and portrayed as the view of a single opponent, something that is clearly not the case historically.²²

The first is considered by them to be a form of quietism, which they considered a kind of soteriological nihilism. It has been variously called *the view of Hva shang*²³ or *the view that nothing is to be thought of* (*ci yang yid la mi byed pa'i lta ba*). As described by the dGe lugs pas, it maintains that discursive and analytical forms of meditation, if valid at all, are but expedients to lead the adept to the supreme form of meditation in which all thought is to be eliminated, the mind resting in the peacefulness of no-thought.²⁴

Another position repeatedly criticized by dGe lugs pa authors is a form of epistemological skepticism, a view that challenges the validity of conceptual and linguistic knowledge.²⁵ From a cognitive perspective, this view criticizes the validity of logical inference; it mistakes the Prasangika* critique of the *svatantra* form of reasoning for a critique of syllogistic reasoning in general,²⁶ and at its most extreme it repudiates the possibility of valid knowledge (*pramana**, *tshad ma*) altogether.²⁷ On the linguistic side, it upholds the doctrine of radical ineffability: that nothing can be predicated of anything else, that all descriptions of emptiness are useless, being equally distant from the ultimate; as a methodological corollary it maintains that the Prasangika* Madhyamaka, from the dGe lugs pa perspective the only completely valid exposition of the doctrine of emptiness, holds no philosophical position whatsoever.²⁸

Finally, the dGe lugs pas criticize a form of radical onto-logical nihilism known to them as *the view that things are nei-*

ther existent nor nonexistent (yod min med min kyi lta ba). According to this view, the Madhyamaka critique is to be carried out in regard to existence, causality, and so forth *in general* without the need to affix the qualifier *ultimately*, that is, without it being necessary to qualify what is being repudiated as "ultimate" existence, or "true" causality.²⁹ This view derives from a literal interpretation of certain passages in the Madhyamaka literature that, on the surface, repudiate the law of noncontradiction.³⁰

Tsong kha pa and later dGe lugs pa scholars have been consistent in claiming that these views are mutually related. If they had ever been confronted with the fact that probably no one historical figure held all of these views, they most likely would have answered that, whether or not they are ever found to be historically exemplified within the philosophy of a single school or individual, the views are nonetheless mutual corollaries of each other *in the logical sphere*. If nothing exists, they would say, nothing can be said to exist as anything else (that is, a man cannot be said to exist as an impermanent thing, for example), and if this is the case, nothing can be said *to be* anything else (predication is impossible), reducing one to the view of radical ineffability. What is more, if nothing exists and if nothing can be said or known, what method of meditation would be more appropriate than the emptying of the mind? The connection between these three views, they would claim, is obvious.

We have structured our discussions within each of the main thematic areas described earlier (scripture, epistemology, logic, ontology, and the question of ineffability) so as to characterize the dGe lugs pa's views toward language, exemplary as they are of the concerns of Buddhist scholastic philosophy. Our task has also been, however, to demonstrate the currents in *Indian* Buddhist thought concerning language that most influenced the dGe lugs pa synthesis. However, our goal has been to go beyond a mere descriptive analysis of the dGe lugs pa position and its sources by analyzing the dialectical tensions that existed between the dGe lugs pa and other currents of thought popular

in Tibet at the time (whether real or imagined). The fact that these rival theories are perceived as departures from the Indian tradition motivates the dGe lugs pas to turn to the specific Indian sources that they do. Hence, another aim of this study is to demonstrate that reliance upon a particular set of Indian texts was not an accident, nor was it a decision that occurred in a vacuum. Instead, it will become obvious that the choice of Indian texts and the particular way in which they were read was a conscious response to certain views that may have been prevalent in Tibet, views that the dGe lugs pas considered to be forms of soteriological and ontological nihilism, and epistemological skepticism. Any project that seeks to examine an issue such as language in a scholastic philosophical tradition must, it seems to me, describe the views of the particular school, discuss the sources upon which such a system is based, but more important it must explain why particular sources were relied upon and why those sources were read in the way they were.³¹

As I mentioned at the outset, this study does not have as its aim the exposition of attitudes toward language in Buddhism as a whole. Instead it proposes to discuss those movements in the intellectual history of Buddhism that influenced *one school* of Buddhist thought (the dGe lugs pa school of Tibetan Buddhism) in its attitudes toward language. It is my hope that this albeit limited contribution adds in some small measure to our knowledge of the Buddhist views of language, an area of study that is one of the most unexplored and, for me, one of the most fascinating subjects of investigation in the field of Buddhist studies. But more important, it is my hope that by examining Indo-Tibetan scholastic views on language light may be shed on the very nature of scholasticism as a general comparative category in the philosophy of religion.