

## **PHD IN ASIA AFRICA E MEDITERRANEO**

### **1- TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT**

**“The Development of Madhyamaka Philosophy in Tibet from the XIV-XIX century.”**

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### **2- SCIENTIFIC-DISCIPLINARY SECTOR TO WHICH THE PROJECT REFERS**

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### **3- PROJECT ABSTRACT**

After the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism spread throughout the plateau. In the following centuries, the Tibetans took on the task of translating the entire Buddhist scriptural canon into their own language and several Tibetan scholars began to elaborate their own indigenous corpus of exegetical literature.

It is since the time of Tsong kha pa (1357-1419) that one notices a considerable difference in the presentation of certain specific Buddhist topics, especially Madhyamaka theories.

Madhyamaka, or Middle-way, is a Buddhist philosophical tradition founded by the Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna (c. 150-250 CE). Central to this speculation is the notion of *śūnyatā*, "emptiness" that goes beyond the two dogmatic extremes of eternalism (*śassatavāda*) and nihilism (*ucchedavāda*). It advocates an alternative "middle path" (*madhyama pratipada*) that lies between these two.

Over the following centuries, Indian Madhyamaka philosophy developed further, as several different scholars commented Nāgārjuna's works. Differences in interpretation resulted in various exegetical tradition of Madhyamaka. Among those, the "dialecticist" (*prāsaṅgika*) tradition, initiated by the seventh century Indian philosopher Candrakīrti, became predominant amongst Tibetan authors.<sup>1</sup>

Much like what happened in India, Tibetan Buddhist thinkers developed hermeneutics that fostered both the continuity and the renewal of Madhyamaka philosophy. They largely divided into two exegetical traditions; the "Former lineage holders" (*sNga rabs pa*) with authors such

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<sup>1</sup> Duckworth 2001, p.86

as Go rams pa (1429-1489) and by Mi pham (1849-1912) on the one hand, and the “Later lineage holders” (*Phyi rabs pa*) represented by Tsong kha pa. The latter interprets *śūnyatā*, merely as a non-affirming negation (*med dgag*) of ‘self-characteristics’ (*rang mtshan*), while both Go rams pa and Mi pham describe *śūnyatā* as that which is ‘free of elaborations’ (*spros bral*)—the four extremes of ‘existence’, ‘non-existence’, ‘both’ and ‘neither’. They therefore claim that Tsong kha pa’s understanding of *śūnyatā* is incomplete as it only negates the first of these four extremes.<sup>2</sup>

In my research I propose to trace the different Tibetan interpretations of the *prāsaṅgika* notion of *śūnyatā* back to their Indian sources.

An interesting starting point of my research will be the analysis of Tsong kha pa’s “Eight crucial points of Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka” found in the *dKa’ gnad brGyad kyi zin bris (Notes on the Eight Difficult points)* written by his disciple rGyal tshab Dar ma Rin chen. Using his interpretation of emptiness, Tsong kha pa proceeds to demonstrate how eight ontological key points develop.<sup>3</sup> His understanding of Madhyamaka reflects his deep-going philosophical exegesis and hermeneutical “reading” of the two foundational Indian works of his school, namely Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and Candrakīrti’s *Prasannapadā Mūlamadhyamakavṛttiḥ*, and his incorporation into it of later philosophical materials.<sup>4</sup>

Since these complex and very interesting features of Tsong kha pa’s interpretation of Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka became the base of philosophical controversies, mainly by authors such as Go rams pa and Mi pham,<sup>5</sup> they represents, in my view, an important starting point to analyse the hermeneutical scriptures that gave origins to the two principal Tibetan Madhyamaka exegetical traditions, the former and the later lineage holders, thus giving me the opportunity to shed some light on the Tibetan intellectual history from the XIV to the XIX century.

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#### 4-STATE OF THE ART

The three Tibetan authors I intend to analyse have been studied by different scholars but no specific research has been carried out so far to trace their hermeneutics back to the Indian textual sources.

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<sup>2</sup> These extremes are logical necessities that follow from accepting phenomena as real. They are the *Catuṣkoṭi* found in Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

<sup>3</sup> Jinpa 2002, p.49

<sup>4</sup> Petit 1999, p.29

<sup>5</sup> See Petit 1999 p.118 and p.123, Cabezon 2007 p.62, Duckworth 2001 p.92

Jinpa's (2002) study of Tsong kha pa's interpretation of Madhyamaka draws from almost all of Tsong kha pa's writings on the topic. Jinpa shows how Tsong kha pa attributes his views to the writings of Nāgārjuna, Bhāviveka, Candrakīrti and others, although his hermeneutical approach was different from his Tibetan contemporaries.<sup>6</sup>

Jose Cabezon (2007) notices how Tsong kha pa repeatedly refers to Indian texts to legitimize his conclusion of emptiness logically negating the notion of self-characteristics, while Mi pham and Go rams pa attempt to justify their positions by citing the statements of authoritative Indian masters.<sup>7</sup>

Not explicitly related, but fundamental to the discussion of the eight key features is the presentation of the Buddhist doctrine of the "two truths", the provisional, or conventional (*saṃvṛti*) truth, and the "ultimate" (*paramārtha*) truth. A comprehensive analysis of the different Tibetan interpretations of the "two truths" is provided by Thakchoe (2007).<sup>8</sup> According to Tsong kha pa, the validity of the conventional truth is established according to worldly conventions. They are 'empty' of any self-characteristics and this 'empty' nature is their ultimate mode of existence and the ultimate truth. Any complete presentation of the conventional truth, therefore, is intimately tied to how one interprets the ultimate truth.

Jinpa (2002) discusses how Tsong kha pa's understanding stems from a clear division of what is negated and what remains as a result of such a negation. Thus, we have the "distinctive" nature of his "eight features", most of which deal with what kind of conventional truths are logically feasible after such a negation.

Both Mi pham and Go rams pa refuted some of these eight features because differ from Tsong kha pa's presentation of the ultimate truth. Duckworth's work (2001) looks at some of these aspects of Mi pham's interpretations of Madhyamaka. He deals with issues such as Mi pham's attempt to reconcile the Yogācāra school with the Madhyamaka view and his interpretation of it as the highest conventional presentation.<sup>9</sup> This is radically different from

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<sup>6</sup> Jinpa 2002, p.29

<sup>7</sup> Cabezon 2007, p.52 and p.57

<sup>8</sup> Thakchoe 2007 provides a comprehensive analysis of the different Tibetan interpretations of the Two Truths. Even though the text deals primarily with Go rams pa and Tsong kha pa, it brings up the salient features of all schools with regard to the Two Truths.

<sup>9</sup> Duckworth 2001 p.77

Tsong kha pa, who sees the Yogācāra understanding of conventionality to be flawed because of their incomplete presentation of the ultimate truth.

Jose Cabezon (2007) provides an overview of the history of polemic literature in India. In analysing Indian Madhyamaka, he brings to light the importance of debate in classical India for the development of new sub-schools. This tradition of polemical controversies was inherited in Tibet and Cabezon culminated his work with the analysis of the dispute between Go rams pa and Tsong kha pa.

Tsong kha pa's particular presentation of the ultimate truth results in his insistence on explaining the conventional nature of phenomena without reflexive awareness (*svasaṃvedana*, *rang rig*) and the ground consciousness (*ālāyavijñāna*, *kun gzhi*)—both themes of the Eight Distinctive features. Mi pham and Go rams pa, on the other hand, stress the need to posit both these features for a cohesive conventional explanation of phenomena.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, they all quote Candrakīrti to demonstrate their 'validity'!

Another point of controversy between these Tibetan schools of thought is the interpretation of autonomous reasons by the Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika. This issue has been dealt with extensively in the Indian context by Seyfort Reugg (2006) and George Dreyfus (2003).<sup>11</sup> In the Tibetan context this issue has been discussed by the aforementioned authors.<sup>12</sup> Tsong kha pa insists that it is a subtlety of views between Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgikas that results in Candrakīrti's refutation of autonomous reasons.<sup>13</sup> Mi pham and Go rams pa disagree; they interpret Candrakīrti's refutation as a reflection of a different approach towards establishing emptiness.<sup>14</sup>

Despite their divergent views, all three Tibetan authors claim their hermeneutical approaches to be 'correct' interpretations of Madhyamaka by quoting the original Indian sources, such as Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti extensively. Identifying the specific texts consulted by these Tibetan scholars on such pivotal questions and then tracing the evolution of their views from these works of Nāgārjuna, Bhāviveka and Candrakīrti can

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid p.91

<sup>11</sup> See Bibliography

<sup>12</sup> See Jinpa 2002, p.36, Petit 1999, p.58, Duckworth 2001 p.87, Cabezon 2007, p.63

<sup>13</sup> Jinpa 2002, p.67

<sup>14</sup> Cabezon 2007, p.63

contribute to the understanding of Madhyamaka philosophy as it migrated from India to Tibet.

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## 6- PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The history of the Madhyamaka as a distinct school is difficult to identify owing to the obscurity of the lives, works and chronology of its commentators and texts. The writings of Nāgārjuna are the first of any scholar to deal at length with the concepts of emptiness and interdependence that are found in the *Prajñāpāramitā* sutras. The centrality of these themes in the Mādhyamika texts of later scholars, all of whom claim to clarify the meaning of both the *Prajñāpāramitā* sutras and the works of Nāgārjuna has led to Nāgārjuna being commonly considered the founder of the Madhyamaka school.<sup>15</sup>

With commentaries to Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* written by Buddhapālita (470-550) which was later refuted by Bhāviveka (500-578), there begins to emerge the first difference in interpretation of Madhyamaka. With the arrival of Candrakīrti in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, we have what is posthumously considered the first clear division of Madhyamaka into two distinct schools, the Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika schools. These were to develop into further sub-groups<sup>16</sup> over time so that by the time Buddhism was introduced to Tibet there were already

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the origins of Madhyamaka in India see Seyfort Ruegg 1981, p.4-9

<sup>16</sup> For the development of Indian Madhyamaka into different schools see Seyfort Ruegg 1981



differences in how Nāgārjuna's matrix Madhyamaka had been interpreted in India.

It is important to note that the manner of establishing 'authenticity' of each presentation is based on Scriptural authority (*āgama, rlung*) and reasoning (*yukti, rigs pa*). Most Indian Buddhist philosophical treatises that claim allegiance to a particular school of thought, such as Madhyamaka or Yogācāra, follow a similar method of establishing one's position through reasoning supported with citations from the group of *sūtra* and *śāstra* to which the author identifies. In this method of presentation, reasoning or the 'parameters' of a correct syllogism must be accepted by both parties engaged in debate. This shared framework is the Buddhist Pramāṇa tradition (*tshad ma*), or logic and epistemology, that began to develop around the 4<sup>th</sup> century in India.<sup>17</sup> The first Pramāṇa texts to systematically outline the 'rules' of Buddhist logic and syllogisms were written by Dignāga (5<sup>th</sup> century) and clarified by Dharmakīrti (7<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>18</sup>

With the introduction of Madhyamaka in Tibet, Tibetan authors followed this dual method of reasoning and citations to show the validity of their interpretations. Even though they have different presentations, "in their different ways, all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism have adopted the Prāsaṅgika approach to the teaching of Nagarjuna, as interpreted by Candrakīrti as the highest view".<sup>19</sup> Inheriting the tradition of the Indian masters, the Tibetans continued the same tradition by demonstrating the authenticity of their Madhyamaka understanding by quoting from the Indian treatises of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti and demonstrating the validity of their writings through the use of reason.

Differences in philosophical interpretations led to the eventual emergence of different doctrinal 'schools'. Gene Smith observes that "doctrinal systematisation reached a high point in Tibet during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries."<sup>20</sup> By the end of the fifteenth century this evolution had developed into the different lineages or 'schools' that are today known as the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism; rNying ma, bKa' brgyud, Sa sKya and dGe lugs.

An important development of Buddhism in Tibet along with these different schools was also the double role of certain masters as both religious and

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<sup>17</sup> Petitt 1999, p.60

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid* .

<sup>19</sup> Candrakīrti 2005, p.34

<sup>20</sup> Smith 2001, p.241

political figures. This happened either because of their influential nature or the patronage of important leaders. This is evident with the spread of dGe lugs pa dominance after the merging of spiritual and temporal power of Tibet under the Fifth Dalai Lama with Mongol support.<sup>21</sup> This often led to an overwhelming presence of one school over another that resulted in the decline of opposing schools and near extinction of the not-so-popular lineages

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a strong wish to preserve the dwindling traditions of Buddhism in Tibet which led to the beginning of the Ris med movement with 'Jam dByangs mKhyen brtse dBang po and 'Jam mGon Kong sPrul being its strongest proponents. Seeing how Mi pham is commanded by his teacher, 'Jam dByangs mKhyen brtse dBang po, to write "textbooks for our tradition", the distinctive feature of which is the Great Perfection,<sup>22</sup> indicates the concern not only to preserve but ensure the flourishing of these traditions.

There are different views regarding the reason for the birth of the Ris med movement. On the one hand, a common concern of all four schools, being all followers of the Buddha's teachings, is the removal of mental afflictions through study, reflection and meditation. Since a fundamental feature of Buddhism is the acceptance that different paths are appropriate for different types of people, different lineages came into being even among followers of the same teachings. Seen in this way, the purpose of Ris med would be "basically an appreciation of their differences and an acknowledgement of the importance of variety to benefit practitioners with different needs."<sup>23</sup>

The other reading of Ris med is not one of mutual respect and understanding but "a reaction against the dGe lugs, a deliberate challenge to its ascendancy through the strengthening of the other schools and the preservation of once-endangered lineages."<sup>24</sup> I believe that seen from a historical or political lens will necessarily seem different when seen solely from a soteriological or philosophical perspective. However, growing interest about this phenomenon in the world of Tibetan and Buddhist studies is developing necessarily along both these lines which will give a more complete picture.

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<sup>21</sup> Smith 2001, p.242

<sup>22</sup> Petitt 1999, p.94

<sup>23</sup> Ringu Tulku 2006, p.3

<sup>24</sup> Adam S. Percy, 2016. *Approaches to non-sectarianism*.

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I propose to look at one particular philosophical aspect: how did these different Tibetan interpretations of the Madhyamaka notion of *śūnyatā* develop in Tibet? I would like to do this by identifying the Indian sources used by these three Tibetan authors and analysing how they derive their specific understanding from this common corpus of Indian Mādhyamika literature. As mentioned above, I propose basing this research on Tsong kha pa's Eight distinctive features.

I believe here lies somewhat of a 'missing link' between the two great worlds of Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka. Borrowing the words of Thubten Jinpa:

“One of the greatest difficulties lies in the fact that to understand this history it is not adequate simply to trace the lineage of the Indian Madhyamaka texts in Tibet. It is also necessary to reconstruct the evolution of Madhyamaka thought in Tibet. By 'evolution' I am referring to the question of how Tibetan interpreters of the Madhyamaka tradition appropriated the tenets of the Indian Madhyamaka school.”<sup>25</sup>

Tsong kha pa was a strong proponent for the use of critical reasoning in establishing a valid interpretation of Madhyamaka. As Thupten Jinpa says about Tsong kha pa, it was “his novel interpretation of the Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika philosophy, and his marriage of Dharmakīrti epistemology to Nagarjuna's philosophy of emptiness as read through Candrakīrti have all led to the emergence of a highly influential trend of philosophical thinking in Tibet.” (2002, p.24) This marriage was kept alive by both Go rams pa and Mi pham who, however, were strong critics of Tson kha pa's interpretation. They both had a similar formulation of Madhyamaka amongst them<sup>26</sup> and also resorted to the use of epistemology in Madhyamaka to demonstrate the validity of their presentation.

Listed below are eight distinctive features of Prāsaṅgika that Tsong kha pa speaks of in his *dBu ma dGongs pa Rab gSal*, a commentary to Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*. He writes:

“In interpreting the treatise of Ārya [Nāgārjuna] there exists a unique approach whereby the text can be read in such a way that all transactions

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<sup>25</sup> Jinpa 2002, p.27

<sup>26</sup> Petit 1999, p.124

can be maintained although not even an atom exists by means of self-defining characteristics. Because of this, this system [Prāsaṅgika] has many flawless tenets that distinguish it from other interpretations of [Nāgārjuna],

‘What are they?’

[Answer:] For the time being, I shall state the principal ones:

1. the rejection of a foundational consciousness (*kun gzhi*) separate from the six classes of consciousness;
2. a unique system of refuting the [concept of] a self-cognising, apperceptive faculty of consciousness (*rang rig*);
3. the rejection of the autonomous syllogism as a means of generating insight into the nature of reality;
4. the acceptance of the reality of external objects as much as as the reality of consciousness;
5. the assertion that Śrāvaka and Pratyekabuddhas cognize the absence of intrinsic existence of phenomena;
6. the assertion that grasping at the self-existence of phenomena is an afflictive obstruction;
7. the position that the cessation is a conditioned phenomenon; and thus,
8. a unique presentation of the nature of the three [tenses of] time.”<sup>27</sup>

Elsewhere, Tsong kha pa’s disciple rGyal tshab noted down a teaching by Tsong kha pa that is a text known as *dKa’ gnad brGyad kyi zin bris* (*Notes on the Eight Difficult points*). This text lists eight points that are the same as the above except for points 7 and 8 that are replaced with: the rejection of the notion of ‘self-defining characteristics,’ and a unique way of understanding the Buddha’s perception of the relative world of multiplicity.<sup>28</sup> Combining these two one gets ten points that are the essence of Tsong kha pa’s reading of Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka.

I would like to focus on these points because they are a concise summation of Tsong kha pa’s view and are strongly opposed by both Go rams pa and Mip ham. Therefore, these points comprise the fundamental issues of contention between these divergent interpretations of Madhyamaka in Tibet. Tsong kha pa believes all these points stem from the rejection of the notion of self-defining characteristics, which then directly has implications

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<sup>27</sup> Jinpa 2002, p. 42

<sup>28</sup> Jinpa 2002, p.43

on the presentation of conventionality. Tsong kha pa also uses Indian sources extensively to support each of these points making it easy to access the Indian literature relevant to each topic.

Go rams pa's writing on Madhyamaka are relevant in this context because "the bulk of his discussion is devoted to analysing and refuting Tsong kha pa's interpretation of Prāsaṅgika, especially the points covered in the *dKa' ba'i gnas chen po brgyad*."<sup>29</sup> Even Mi pham's *Nge shes sgron me* can be read in connection with Tsong kha pa's eight points where Mi pham disagrees with almost all of them.<sup>30</sup>

Based on the above considerations, a close reading of these points and its interpretation by these three authors has the ability to shed light on both the following issues; firstly, how they present their tradition's understanding of Madhyamaka and, secondly, how they interpret the same Indian Madhyamaka texts to validate their different positions. As observed by Tom Tillemans, "a study of how Tsong kha pa interpreted Indian texts, both from a historical and philosophical point of view, could help to demystify significantly Tsong kha pa's role in the history of Tibetan philosophy."<sup>31</sup> I believe a similar study of the alternate interpretation of Madhyamaka by also looking at Go rams pa and Mi pham would help connect the evolution of Tibetan Madhyamaka from its Indian ancestors into two distinct branches.

The primary texts I would deal with are the Madhyamaka works of these three authors cited in the bibliography. However, because all three are motivated by different 'reasons', references to other works would have to be made. Mi pham, for instance, is entrusted with commenting the Indian texts according to the Dzogchen view, a hallmark of Mi pham's rNying ma tradition. Klong chen Rab byams had already attempted this merging of Dzogchen and Madhyamaka in his works. Since Mi pham upholds the same tradition, texts such as Klong chen pa's *Yid bzhin mdzod* and *Chos dByings mDzod* would assist in understanding Mipham's position.<sup>32</sup>

Go rams pa came at a time when Tsong kha pa had already refuted the Sa skya Mādhyamika view. None of the previous scholars had set out their works as a full-scale defence of the Sa skya position as Go rams pa. Go rams pa's *Distinguishing the Views* can be seen as "a defence of the tradition in

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<sup>29</sup> Pettit 1999, p.124.

<sup>30</sup> Pettit 1999, p.118

<sup>31</sup> Jinpa 2002, p.165

<sup>32</sup> Pettit 1999, p. 89

the wake of other scholars' prior challenges."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, to understand Gorampa's Madhyamaka tradition, texts of previous Sa skya scholars such as Sakya Pandita and Rong sTon Shes bya kun rig might need to be consulted.

Tsong kha pa, being chronologically the first of the three, was no longer present to defend his position from future scholars. This task was taken up by future dGe lugs authors such as mKhas Grub, Pan Chen Blo bZang Chos rGyan, dPa' Ri Rab gSal and others who took it upon themselves to respond to Go rams pa and Mi pham.<sup>34</sup> This polemical literature is known as *'gal lan* which roughly translates to 'answers to objections'. Looking at these works could shed light on the finer points of contention.

This project will trace the scriptural continuity of Madhyamaka from India to Tibet in an attempt to analyse how these two such divergent and often controversial interpretations—which continue to compete today—came about. It will shed light on the understanding of how Madhyamaka evolved as a philosophical school, and enable a more comprehensive understanding of the specific moment of its transition from India to Tibet.

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## 7- EXPECTED RESULTS AND APPLICATION EFFECTS

The aim of my research is to understand if Tibetans developed different exegetical Buddhist traditions—reconfiguring in a renewed form the main philosophical tenets; or developed new ideas, expressing them in a quite traditional form.

Both suppositions could also be confirmed.

These two hypotheses can be assessed philosophically and historically by comparing Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti's treatises on Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka with Tsong kha pa's works on the one hand, and his opponents on the other.

This comparison will enable me to study and research how knowledge systems and thought processes in Tibet have developed through renewal and innovation in a continuous dialectic exchange within the different traditions.

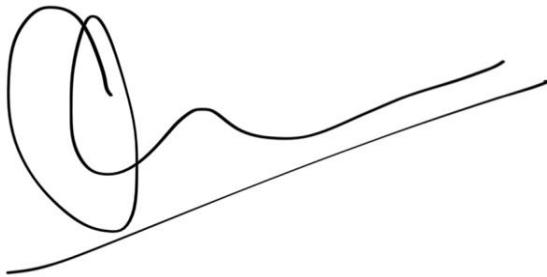
Some of these processes involved broadening the horizon while retaining a recognizable connexion with the relevant tradition; others represented

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<sup>33</sup> Cabezon 2007, p.53

<sup>34</sup> Cabezon 2007, p.41

paradigm shifts and alterations in systemic equilibrium and philosophical configuration while also remaining recognizably attached to tradition. In either case it has to be kept in mind that Buddhist philosophical thought has regularly conjoined tradition (*āgama, rlung*) and reasoning (*yukti, rigs pa*), the latter fostering both updating and creativity within tradition. I hope, in this way, to contribute to the study of the development of Tibetan history of ideas from the XIV to the XIX centuries.



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