

dGe 'dun Chos 'phel's Position on *Vigrahavyāvartinī* 29

Donald S. Lopez, Jr.

The veritable explosion of interest, both scholarly and otherwise, in Tibetan exegetical literature that has evolved in Europe and North America since the early 1970s may cause us to forget how rare and difficult such work had been just ten years before. We may too easily forget as well that it was Professor Ruegg who revitalized this broad and fertile field within Buddhist Studies that had lain largely dormant since the death of Obermiller. Like Obermiller, Professor Ruegg not only perceived the benefits of the study of Tibetan literature for our understanding of Indian culture, but also discerned, and has eloquently elaborated time and again, the significant role played by Tibetan masters, not only in the preservation, but in the creation of modes of Buddhist thought and practice as well. And like Obermiller, Ruegg has deemed it an essential part of his research method to consult with eminent Tibetan scholars, such as the Mongolian *dge bshes* Ngag dbang Nyi rna, in the preparation of his studies, a practice that has gained wide currency in the present generation of scholars.

Among Professor Ruegg's signal contributions to Buddhist Studies has been, of course, his work in Madhyamaka and his demonstration of the value of Tibetan scholastic literature in the articulation and clarification of issues upon which the Indian sources remain either cryptic or mute. One of Professor Ruegg's most valuable studies in this regard is his 1983 article, "On the Thesis and Assertion in the Madhyamaka / dBu ma".¹ In this work, he takes up the oft-cited statement of Nāgārjuna, echoed by Āryadeva² and Candrakīrti,³ that the

¹ D. Ruegg, "On the Thesis and Assertion in the Madhyamaka / dBu rna", in E. Steinkellner & H. Tauscher, eds., *Contributions on Tibetan and Buddhist Religion and Philosophy*, Wien, 1983, 205–241. Professor Ruegg later published a briefer version of the same article as "Does the Mādhyamika have a Thesis and Philosophical Position?", in B.K. Matilal & R.D. Evans, eds., *Buddhist Logic and Epistemology: Studies in the Buddhist Analysis of Inference and Language*, Dordrecht, 1986, 229–237.

² At *Catuḥśataka* XVI, 25, Āryadeva says, "Even if [one tries] for a long time, it is impossible to criticize someone who has no position on existence, non-existence, [or both] existence and non-existence." The Sanskrit is: *sad asat sadasac ceti yasya pakṣo na vidyate | upāmbhaś cireṇāpi tasya vaktuṃ na śakyate* || For an edition of the Tibetan and the available Sanskrit as well as an English translation, see Karen Lang, *Āryadeva's Catuḥśataka: On the Bodhisattva's Cultivation of Merit and Knowledge*, Indistudier, 7, Copenhagen, 1986.

³ See, for example, Candrakīrti's comments on *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* IV, 8–9 in the *Prasannapadā*.

Mādhyaṃika has no thesis (*pratijñā, dam bca*'), a pronouncement whose interpretation seems to have been as vexing and controversial among Tibetan scholiasts of the fourteenth century⁴ as it has been for modern scholars.⁵ The passage in question is *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 29. To very briefly set the scene, in the first *śloka* of the work, the opponent states that if it is true, as Nāgārjuna claims, that all things lack *svabhāva*, then Nāgārjuna's own statement must also lack *svabhāva*, in which case the statement cannot deny the *svabhāva* of things.⁶ At *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 29, Nāgārjuna responds: "If I had some thesis, I would incur that fault; because I have no thesis I am faultless."⁷ The autocomentary explains that there can be no *pratijñā* when all things are empty, utterly quiescent, and naturally pristine (*prakṛtyivivikṭeṣu*). Therefore, because he has no *pratijñā*, no mark of a *pratijñā* (*pratijñālakṣaṇa*) is entailed by his previous statement that all things lack *svabhāva*.⁸

⁴ In "On the Thesis and Assertion in the Madhyamaka / dBu rna", Professor Ruegg discusses the postllons and possible identity of Tsong kha pa's four unnamed *purvapakṣas*, as well as the views of Sa skya Paṇḍi ta Kun dga' rgyal mtshan, Ngag dbang chos grags, and dBus pa blo gsal. Further information on the identity of Tsong kha pa's *purvapakṣas* is provided in the valuable article by P. Williams, "rMa bya pa Byang chub brtson'grus on Madhyamaka Method", *JIP*, 13, 1985, 205–225.

⁵ Among modern treatments of the question of the existence of the Madhyamika's thesis and, especially, of *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 29, are C. Gudmunsen, *Wittgenstein and Buddhism*, New York, 1977, 44; J. Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness*, London, 1983, 471–475, 550–551, 585; C.W. Huntington, Jr. & Geshe Namgyal Wangchen, *The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyaṃikas*, Honolulu, 1989, 28; D. J. Kalupahana, *Nāgārjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, Albany, New York, 1986, 92–93; D. S. Lopez, Jr., *A Study of Svātantrika*, Ithaca, New York, 1987, 47–54; E. Napper, *Dependent-Arising and Emptiness*, Boston, 1989, 116–122; F. Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, Berkeley, 1975, 45; R.A.F. Thurman, *Tsong Khapa's Speech of Gold in the Essence of True Eloquence*, Princeton, 1984. Modern declarations that the Madhyamika has no thesis have been gathered by E. Napper; see *Dependent-Arising and Emptiness*, 700–701, note 208.

⁶ The Sanskrit is: *sarveṣāṃ bhāvābāṃ sarvatra na vidyate svabhāvaścet | tvadvacanamasvabhāvaṃ na nivartayituṃ svabhāvamalam ||* For a Sanskrit edition, see E.H. Johnston & A. Kunst, "The *Vigrahavyāvartinī* of Nāgārjuna with the Author's Commentary," *MCB*, 9, 1948–1951, 99–152. The Johnston & Kunst edition has been reprinted with a translation by Kamaleswar Bhattacharya in K. Bhattacharya, E.H. Johnston & A. Kunst, *The Dialectical Method of Nāgārjuna (Vigrahavyāvartanī)*, Delhi, 1978.

⁷ *yadi kācana pratijñā syānme tata eṣa me bhaveddoṣaḥ | nāsti ca mama pratijñā tasmānnaivāsti me doṣaḥ ||*

⁸ For the Sanskrit of the autocomentary, see Bhattacharya, Johnston & Kunst, 29. The issue of the *pratijñālakṣaṇa* is raised by the opponent at *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, 4.

Professor Ruegg surveys a range of related statements from the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, the *Yuktiṣaṣṭika*, the *Ratnāvalī*, the *Catuḥśataka*, and the *Prasannapadā* in an effort to determine how the term *pratijñā* was understood by Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva, and Candrakīrti. He discerns two senses. In some cases, the term *pratijñā* refers to a propositional statement positing the existence of an independent entity (*bhāva*); it is this type of *pratijñā* that Nāgārjuna rejects at *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 29. There is, however, a second usage. For example, Candrakīrti describes the famous declaration of the *catuṣkoṭi* that begins the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* as *apratijñā*, obviously without regarding it as positing the existence of any intrinsically existing entity. It seems, therefore, that there are two ways in which *pratijñā* is understood in the works of the early Indian Mādhyamikas: (1) as a thesis put forth by an opponent which postulates the independent existence of an entity; such theses are invariably rejected by the Mādhyamika, and (2) as a statement of the Mādhyamika's own position.

Professor Ruegg's careful study of the relevant sources thus easily puts to rest the repeated claim that Nāgārjuna's statement that he has no *pratijñā* is somehow a paradox. Nāgārjuna has no propositional thesis that entails the existence of independent entities, but he has many philosophical theses (*pratijñā* in the sense of *darśana* or *vāda*). Hence, Professor Ruegg concludes that "no logical inconsistency need therefore exist between Nāgārjuna's statement in *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 29 and the actual procedure of this philosopher and other Mādhyamikas."⁹ Indeed, "although the statements of the Mādhyamika are clearly not supposed to be factitive or to possess apodictic and probative force in virtue of a formal process of independent inference or deduction, they equally clearly have an indicative and communicative (*jñāpaka*) value revealing a philosophical content: the Emptiness of all entities."¹⁰

Professor Ruegg next turns to Tibet, and the discussion of the question of the Mādhyamika thesis by the dGe lugs master and disciple of Tsong kha pa, mKhas grub rje (1385–1483) in his *sTong thun chen mo*.¹¹ mKhas grub's treatment of the issue is based squarely on that of Tsong kha pa in the *lhag mthong* section of the *Lam rim chen mo*. Professor Ruegg also discusses Tsong kha pa's treatment of the question in his last major philosophical work, the *Legs bshad snying po*. mKhas grub takes as his opponent the Tibetans of his day who would claim that

⁹ D. Ruegg, "On the Thesis and Assertion in the Madhyamaka I dBu Ma", 215.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 225.

¹¹ Although widely known simply as *sTong thun chen mo*, the actual title of the work is *Zab mo stong pa nyid kyi de kho na nyid rab tu gsal bar byed pa 'i bstan chos skal bzang mig 'byed* (TTD, 5459). It appears in the first volume (Ka) of the Lhasa edition of his collected works. The *sTong thun chen mo* has recently been translated by J.I. Cabezón as *A Dose of Emptiness: An Annotated Translation of the sTong thun chen mo of mKhas grub dGe legs dpal bzang*, Albany, New York, 1992.

the Mādhyamikas have no system of their own (*rang lugs*), no thesis (*dam bca'*), and no assertion (*khas len*), even on the conventional level. In the course of his response, mKhas grub cites a number of statements by Nāgārjuna which affirmatively set forth specific doctrines in order to indicate to his Tibetan opponents that Mādhyamikas have doctrines which they both accept and actively expound. mKhas grub reads *Vigrahavyārtanī* 29 to say that if the Mādhyamika held that the statement that everything lacks intrinsic nature itself possessed intrinsic nature, then the fault of internal inconsistency would indeed be entailed. However, Nāgārjuna states that he has no thesis, meaning that he has no thesis which itself is intrinsically established (*rang bzhin gyis grub pa*).¹² In addition to countering the claim that the Mādhyamika has no assertions from a perspective that might be termed “philosophical”, mKhas grub also considers the negative consequences of such a claim from the perspective of Buddhist practice, arguing that without assenting to and upholding certain statements it would be impossible to go for refuge to the Three Jewels, to create *bodhicitta*, to take and maintain the *prātimokṣa* vows, in short, it would be impossible to practice the Buddhist path.¹³ mKhas grub’s argument here is already familiar from the final section of the *Lhag mthong chen mo* and, before that, from the *Bhāvanākrama*, such that it is not at all surprising when he associates those who would claim otherwise with the position of the Hva shang Mahāyāna.¹⁴

Professor Ruegg concludes his discussion of the early dGe lugs position on the question of the Mādhyamika assertion with the following observation, “For both mKhas grub and his teacher Tsoñ kha pa, then, the question whether the Mādhyamika entertains a propositional thesis, assertion and tenet is no longer mainly a logical and methodological problem. It has acquired an epistemological, or rather gnoseological, significance, of the most fundamental importance.”¹⁵ It is to this gnoseological significance to which I would now like to turn, first by examining briefly another treatment of the issue of the Mādhyamika’s thesis in a work by Tsong kha pa not discussed in Professor Ruegg’s article, and then moving to consider the discussion of the issue by a renowned scholar of the present century, considered by many a renegade dGe lugs pa, dGe ’dun Chos ’phel.

¹² See *The Collected Works of the Lord Mkhas-grub rje dge-legs-dpal-bzan-po*, Vol. 1, New Delhi, Mongolian Lama Guru Deva, 1980, 150a1–3 and Ruegg, “On the Thesis and Assertion”, 219.

¹³ *ibid.*, 151b6–152a6 and Ruegg, 222–223.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 152b2 and Ruegg, 223. For a brief discussion of the polemical strategy of associating one’s opponent with the Hva-shang, see our “Polemical Literature” in R. Jackson & J. Cabezón, eds., *Tibetan Literature*, Ithaca, New York, forthcoming.

¹⁵ D. Ruegg, *ibid.*, 227.

Among the genres of Tibetan Buddhist literature associated with dGe lugs, one of the most prodigious and persistent is that of the *lta khrid*, the “instructions on the [Madhyamaka] view”. Whether or not Tsong kha pa himself can be credited with its creation, it is certainly the case that, following his example, one or more *lta khrid* texts became a standard component of the collected writings of the dGe lugs polymath.¹⁶ The texts generally seem intended as practical instructions for gaining meditational experience of *anātman*, instructions free from the philosophical intricacies that characterize the discussion of the topic in other, more exegetical, genres. Three such works appear in the collected writings of Tsong kha pa, the longest of which is simply entitled *dBu ma'i lta ba 'i khrid yig*.¹⁷

¹⁶ In A Khu rin po che Shes rab rgya mtsho's (1803–1875) *dPe rgyan dkon pa'ga'zhig gi tho yig don nyer yid kyi kunda bzhad pa'i zla 'od 'bum gyi nye rna*, a list of works deemed rare in the mid-nineteenth century, we find a listing of fifty-three *lta khrid* texts. See Lokesh Chandra, *Materials for a History of Tibetan Literature*, Part 3, New Delhi, 1963, 521–522.

¹⁷ *dBu ma'i lta ba'i khrid yig* (TTD 5405, TTP 6140, Lokesh Chandra, *Materials*, 13943) occurs in the fifteenth volume (Ba) of the Lhasa edition of his collected works. See *The Collected Works (gsun 'bum) of the Incomparable Lord Tson-kha-pa bLo-bzañ-grags-pa (Khams gsum chos kyi [sic] rgyal po shar tsong kha pa chen po 'i gsung 'bum)*, New Delhi, Mongolian Lama Guru Deva, 1978, 1–24a (723–769 in the Guru Deva edition). In addition to its discussion of the issue of the Mādhyamikas thesis, this work is noteworthy for its instructions on *zhi gnas* drawn from the *Guhyasamāja* system. It is perhaps this section (see, for example, 6b5–6) that Pañ chen I, bLo bzang Chos kyi rgyal mtshan has mind when he includes *dBu ma'i lta khrid* in his list of *mahāmudrā* works at the beginning of his *dGe ldan bka brgyud rin po che'i phyag chen rtsa ba rgyal ba'i gzhung lam*. On this point, see also Gung thang dKon mchog bstan pa'i sgron me's *dGe ldan phyag rgya chen po'i khrid kyi zin bris zhal lung bdud rtsi'i thigs phreng* in *The Collected Works of Gung-thang dKon-mchog-bstan-pa'i-sgron-me*, Gedan Sungrab Minyam Gyunphel Series, Vol. 35, New Delhi, 1972, Vol. 3, 597. The Gung thang reference appears in Samten Gyaltzen Karmay, *The Great Perfection: A Philosophical and Meditative Teaching of Tibetan Buddhism*, Leiden, 1988, 144, n. 47.

The second of the *lta khrid* works attributed to Tsong kha pa is found in volume *Tsha* of the Lhasa edition of his collected works and is entitled *dBu ma'i thal'gyur ba'i lugs kyi zab lam dbu ma'i lta khrid ces bya ba bzhugs pa'i be'u bum* (TTD 5418, Lokesh Chandra, *Materials*, 13957) 1–7b (819–832 in the Guru Deva edition). The same work appears in the final volume (A) of mKhas grub's collected works (TTD 5508). This work seems to have provided the model for later dGe lugs *lta khrid* texts in that here we find the familiar procedure of meditating on *anātman* through the procedure of the four essentials (*gnad gzhi*), in this case using the reasoning of the I being neither the same nor different from the aggregates, the four being: (1) *dgag bya nges pa*, (2) *khyab pa nges pa*, (3) *phyogs chos nges pa*, and (4) *dgag bya rnam par bcad pa*. The final *lta khrid* work, also in volume *Tsha* is entitled *rJe rinpo ches gnang ba'i dbu ma'i lta khrid bsdus pa* (TTD 5419, TTP 6140, Lokesh Chandra, *Materials*, 13958) 1–6b, (833–844 in the Guru Deva edition) and appears quite anomalous to a genre generally seen to be devoted to practical instructions for meditation on emptiness, containing an extremely dense and sophisticated proof of *pudgalanairātmya* and lacking any instructions on the practice of meditation.

Because of its purported “practical” approach, one might imagine it unlikely that one should discover any discussion of the existence of the Mādhyamika’s thesis here. However, in the final pages of the work, we find one of Tsong kha pa’s most emphatic statements on the topic, attesting to Professor Ruegg’s identification of the gnoseological implications of *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 29 for Tsong kha pa and his disciples. Before proceeding to consider the passage, it is perhaps important to recall that, according to his secret biography (*gsang ba’i rnam thar*), Tsong kha pa himself once held that Mādhyamikas have no assertions and strove to be such a Mādhyamika, changing his position not through a careful study of the autocommentary to the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* but rather after being rather rudely corrected in a vision by Mañjuśrī.¹⁸

The *dBu ma’i lta ba’i khrid yig* concludes with a discussion of *dharmanairātmya*, under three headings: (1) demonstrating that phenomena are unproduced, (2) eliminating the misconceptions of those who find it unbearable that the nature of reality (*gnas lugs*) is unproduced, and (3) mercifully destroying the conceptions (*kun rtog*) of transmigrators and establishing them in liberation.¹⁹ It is when he reaches this third topic that Tsong kha pa states, “Although we make proofs and refutations about what is and is not the meaning of reality (*yang dag pa’i don*), our own system has no assertions.” (For a complete translation of this section, see Appendix I.) He then presents a challenge from an opponent who begins by stating that the Mādhyamikas prove that all phenomena are empty of any intrinsic nature. They must, therefore, admit the existence of an ascertaining consciousness (*nges shes*) which determines that phenomena are indeed empty. That consciousness, furthermore, must be produced from causes. But any entity (*ngo bo*) produced from causes, the opponent claims, must be intrinsically established (*rang bzhin gyis grub pa*), in which case all phenomena would be intrinsically established, thus rendering all of the Mādhyamika’s refutations and proofs meaningless. If, to avoid such a conclusion, the Mādhyamikas were to claim that there is no consciousness which determined that phenomena lack any intrinsic nature, then they could not have determined that this is indeed the case and so could not bring others to the same determination, again rendering all of their refutations, proofs, and treatises meaningless.²⁰

¹⁸ See *rJe rin po che’i gsang ba ’imam thar rgya mtsho lta bu las cha shas nyung ngu zhig yongs su brjod pa’i gtam rin bo che’i snye ma* (TTD 5261, Lokesh Chandra, *Materials*, 13806) in volume *Ka* of the Lhasa edition of Tsong kha pa’s collected works, 2b4–5.

¹⁹ *dBu ma’i lta ba’i khrid yig*, 18a 1–2.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 20b1–6.

We find in the opponent's position a noteworthy twist on *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 1. There, Nāgārjuna's opponent argued that the statement that all things lack *svabhāva* must also lack *svabhāva*, and therefore, must lack all probative force. Here, the opponent moves a step prior, to the consciousness that discovers emptiness. But this opponent makes, from the Mādhyamika's perspective, the same mistake that Nāgārjuna's opponent made: assuming that anything that is a viable, that is, causally efficient, entity must possess *svabhāva*. Thus, if the consciousness which discerns emptiness is causally created, it must be endowed with *svabhāva* in which case all products must be endowed with *svabhāva*. If the ascertaining consciousness is itself devoid of *svabhāva*, then it is impotent, incapable, like Nāgārjuna's alleged *pratijñā*, of proving anything.

One might expect that Tsong kha pa would respond by explaining that it is emptiness that makes causation possible, that the lack of *svabhāva* does not prevent efficiency, that emptiness and conventional validity are compatible, in short to reiterate the views so easily associated with him. However, he does none of this, responding instead with one of the more apophatic declarations on Madhyamaka to be found in his writings. Speaking immediately from the perspective of *paramārtha*, he declares that because Mādhyamikas have no uncertainty, no doubt, and no indecision, how could they possibly have any determination decision, or assertion? The mind is inseparable from the absence of elaboration (*spros bral*); there has never been any sign (*mtshan ma*) of subject and object, knower and known.

“Thus because there is no ascertainment, decision, assertion, or believing that ‘this is’, neither production from the causes and conditions of an ascertaining consciousness nor such an entity are established; because the horns of a rabbit are not perceived, its causes and conditions and entity are not perceived.”²¹

Employing the familiar negative rhetoric of the Mādhyamika, Tsongkha pa here responds to the opponent's question about the ascertaining consciousness by proclaiming that there is no ascertaining consciousness and, therefore, there need be no concern about the causes or nature of such a consciousness. Not unexpectedly, he next quotes *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 29–30 and *Catuhśataka* XVI, 25, but both without comment, with none of the glossing of “I have no thesis” as “I have no intrinsically existent thesis” that one finds in the *Lhag mthong chen mo* and the *rTsa shes tik chen*.

Tsong kha pa next concedes that although Mādhyamikas have no assertions in their own system, they do indeed speak of such things as is and is not, empty and not empty, self and not self, with the essential purpose (*nying dgos*) of pacifying

²¹ *ibid.*, 21a2–3.

all conceptions of sentient beings and establishing them in omniscience. He follows with more quotations, again without comment, this time from *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (XXII, 11; XVIII, 6–8). Not only do the Mādhyamikas speak of such things, they will also debate about them, but again, with the full understanding that neither their probandum nor the opponent’s negatum exists and always with the purpose of quelling the conceptions of sentient beings. Attempts to prove one’s own probandum and maliciously challenge the negatum of the opponent, however, simply serve to multiply conceptions. This is followed by five more quotations, yet again uncommented upon: the vexing line from the *Samyuttanikāya* in which the Buddha says that he has no quarrel with the world; *Catuḥśataka* XX, 15 (“the buddhas do not set forth this doctrine for the sake of argument, yet it destroys the opponent like fire does fuel”), *Madhyamakāvātāra* VI, 118–119 (Candrakīrti’s somewhat coy statement that Madhyamaka analysis is undertaken for the purpose of liberation and not out of any love for disputation. If the philosophical systems of others are destroyed in the process, it is not his fault); and two related statements from the *Prasannapadā*.

Tsong kha pa concludes with the admonishment to understand that although for the perception of others, Mādhyamikas make assertions in accordance with conventional usage, in their own system they have not a single thesis. And it is with this emphatic statement that Tsong kha pa ends his discussion of the issue of the Mādhyamika thesis. This is also the last statement before the colophon and concluding prayer in the *dBu ma’I lta ba’i khrid yig*.

Tsong kha pa is clearly speaking here from the standpoint of what Professor Ruegg terms the gnoseological, rather uncharacteristically allowing what he considers some of the most widely misinterpreted statements of Indian Madhyamaka to stand without comment, perhaps, at least in this context, finding their rhetorical power to be more important than their systematic exegesis, each quotation evoking, in one way or another, the noble silence of the Buddha. We will find a similar preference for evocation over exegesis as we turn finally to dGe ’dun Chos ’phel.

dGe ’dun Chos ’phel was born in Amdo in 1903 and received his early monastic education at bLa brang, before journeying to Lhasa and enrolling at sGo mang College of ’Bras spung in 1927. There he completed the curricula in logic and epistemology (*tshad ma*), the taxonomy of the path (*phar phyin*), and Madhyamaka (*dbu ma*), gaining wide repute for his skill in debate. He abandoned his formal studies in 1934 and accompanied Rahul Sankrityayan to India. During the next twelve years, he travelled extensively through India and Sri Lanka, studied Sanskrit, Pāli, and English, and collaborated closely with Sankrityayan in his search for Sanskrit manuscripts in southern Tibet and with George Roerich in the translation of the *Blue Annals* (*Deb ther sngon po*). dGe

'dun Chos 'phel did a good deal of writing and translating while in India, including a translation of the *Dhammapada* from Pāli into Tibetan, an English translation (now lost) of Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*, and also composed his own treatise on the erotic arts, the *'Dod pa'i bstan bcos*. In addition, he studied several Tun-huang manuscripts on the Tibetan dynastic period which served as the basis for his unfinished history of early Tibet, the *Deb ther dkar po*. His contact with the Indian independence movement and his associations with Indian Marxists such as Sankrityayan led him to become involved with an incipient Tibetan political party in Kalimpong, the Tibet Improvement Party. Upon returning to Tibet in 1946, he was arrested on what appears to be the fabricated charge of counterfeiting Tibetan currency and was sentenced to three years in prison. He lived only two years after his release, dying of uncertain causes in 1951.²²

Shortly before his imprisonment, dGe 'dun Chos 'phel gave instructions in Madhyamaka to the rNying rma lama Zla ba bzang po. Prior to his death, dGe 'dun Chos 'phel instructed his student to compile his notes, which, according to the colophon, were edited by Zla ba bzang po in 1952 under the title *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan* (*Nāgārjuna's Intention Adorned*) and published with the sponsorship of the rNying ma hierarch bDud 'joms Rin po che. As dGe 'dun Chos 'phel had predicted, upon its publication, *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan* became regarded as a controversial work for its critique of much of dGe lugs interpretation of Madhyamaka, and eventually elicited at least three polemical responses.²³

Many of the most sacrosanct domains of dGe lugs scholastic philosophy are the targets of dGe 'dun Chos 'phel's attack in the work, beginning with the topic of *pramāṇa*. One of the hallmarks of Tsong kha pa's philosophy is his attempt to harmonize the topics of *pramāṇa* and *madhyamaka*, that is, to set forth a system that was simultaneously able to posit a basis of valid knowledge while upholding the doctrine of the emptiness of all phenomena. dGe 'dun Chos 'phel rejects such a harmony outright, and it is this rejection of the ability of benighted sentient beings to think or speak accurately about anything, most of all the enlightened state, that underlies the various arguments presented in the *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan*, including the discussion of the existence of the Mādhyamika's thesis.

²² On the life of dGe 'dun Chos 'phel, see H. Stoddard's fascinating biography, *Le mendiant de l'Amdo*, Paris, 1985. See also, K. Dhondup, "Gedun Choephel: The Man Behind the Legend", *Tibetan Review*, 1978, 10–18. For additional information on dGe 'dun Chos 'phel and the Tibet Improvement Party, see M. Goldstein, *A Modern History of Tibet, 1913–1951: The Fall of the Lamaist State*, Berkeley, 1989, 449–463. For an insightful reflection on dGe 'dun Chos 'phel's life and work, see Professor Ruegg's review article of Stoddard's biography, "A Tibetan's Odyssey: A Review Article", *JRAS*, 1989, 304–311.

²³ See H. Stoddard, *op. cit.*, 351 and Ruegg, "A Tibetan's Odyssey", 309.

dGe 'dun Chos 'phel raises the question of the Mādhyamika's thesis at seven points in the *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan*²⁴ (the longest of these is translated in Appendix 2). In his discussion of the topic, as he does throughout the work, dGe 'dun Chos 'phel defers to the enlightened state as the privileged locus of authority and scathingly lampoons those who would assert that the unenlightened mind can have valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*). He particularly condemns those who would eviscerate the statements of the Mādhyamika masters of all rhetorical potency in an effort to bring them into line with some narrowly conceived doctrinal consistency:

“When the scholars of today hear a scripture which refers to neither existence nor non-existence, they first seek out the identity of the author. If the passage is a statement by an earlier Tibetan scholar, they scornfully say, ‘The person who said something like that is a nihilistic fool.’ If the scripture is identified as a statement of the Buddha, Nāgārjuna, etc., they patch it up with words like ‘does not truly exist’ is the meaning of the statement ‘does not exist’ and ‘not conventionally non-existent’ is the meaning of ‘not non-existent’ so that it fits with their own assertions. In fact, the only difference is that if they direct refutations at the Buddha, they fear being called evil persons [with] evil views [whereas] if they are able to refute the earlier Tibetans, they are called heroic scholars.”²⁵

²⁴ In the 1951 edition from Mani Printing Works in Kalimpong, these passages occur at 16a4–17a6, 19a4–21a6, 24a3–4, 31b4–32a6, 34a3–34b6, 41a2–4, and 59b5–6. The second of these is translated in Appendix 2. Because of the content of the work (a sustained attack on many of the fundamental canons of the dGe lugs scholastic tradition) and the circumstances of its composition (the teaching of a highly controversial scholar trained at 'Bras spungs given shortly before his imprisonment to a rNying rna lama, those teachings then compiled and edited by said rNying rna lama on paper provided by bDud 'joms Rin po che), there has been a good deal of controversy over the issue of how much of the *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan* represents the position of dGe 'dun Chos 'phel and how much of it represents the anti-dGe lugs polemic of his student, Zla ba bzung po. In *dGe 'dun Chos 'phel gyi lo rgyus* (Dharamsala, 1980), bKras mthong thub bstan chos dar claims that of the entire work, only the poetry at 17a6–19a4 (Kalimpong edition) and certain portions of the poem that concludes the work are the statements of dGe 'dun Chos 'phel; see 193–198. However, bLa chung A pho reports that after his return to Lhasa in 1947, dGe 'dun Chos 'phel presented him with roughly the first third of the *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan* written in his own hand on an Elephant Brand pad. This portion of the text runs in the Kalimpong edition from 2b2 (*rang cag gis yin min thag bcaad pa tham cad kyang*) to 18a2 (presumably he is referring to the last of the eight occurrences of the phrase *tha snyad tshad grub 'jog la blo rna bde*). According to bLa chung A pho, the remainder of the work is based on notes taken by Zla ba bzung po; see Lama Khetsun Zangpo, *Biographical Dictionary of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism*, V, Delhi, 1973, 644–647.

²⁵ dGe 'dun Chos 'phel, *dBu ma'i zab gnad snying por dril ba'i legs bshad klu sgrub dgongs rgyan*, Kalimpong, Mani Printing Works, 1951, 11a4–b2.

For dGe 'dun Chos 'phel, the primary referent of the Mādhyamika's having no assertion is the silence of the Buddha; all subsequent speech is merely a compassionate concession to the ignorant world:

“That the Tathāgata remained under the bodhi tree for a week without shutting his eyes is our own system, which has no assertions. That he turned the *dharmacakra* of the four truths so that that very view could be understood is his compassionate participation in the assertions of others.”²⁶

dGe 'dun Chos 'phel thus has little patience with those who would make the statement, “I have no assertion” into a topic of disputation on the debating courtyard, arguing about whether the declaration that one has no assertion is, in fact, itself an assertion. Such disputation makes a joke out of what for dGe 'dun Chos 'phel is one of Nāgārjuna's most powerful statements. dGe 'dun Chos 'phel here is not condemning debate. He was renowned as one of the most masterful and creative debaters of his age; the story is told of how he once disguised himself as a *ldap ldop* and then challenged and defeated a brilliant scholar who would go on to become abbot of sGo mang, the Mongolian Ngag dbang legs ldan.²⁷ On the question of the Mādhyamika's assertion, dGe 'dun Chos 'phel speaks approvingly of using reasoning to destroy reasoning, “but when it is used as a tool for damaging the view of having no assertion, there is no method for entering the *dharmadhātu*.”²⁸

Thus, rather than “patching” Nāgārjuna's statement that, “I have no assertion” with words like, “I have no intrinsically existent assertion” as one finds in the *Lhag mthong chen mo* and in the *sTong thun chen mo*, dGe 'dun Chos 'phel prefers to consider the possibility that to have no assertion means, from the ultimate perspective, literally to remain silent. He recalls those occasions in which the Buddha said nothing when asked a question and notes the powerful effect of that silence. When asked about the fourteen unindicated views (*avyākṛta*), the Buddha remained silent. (He cites here *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XI, 1.²⁹) The *Vinayāgama* reports that the Buddha effected the ultimate defeat of his *tīrthika* challengers by giving no answer. Therefore, Nāgārjuna praises the Buddha at *Ratnāvalī* I, 74 for not teaching those incapable of understanding. And when

²⁶ *ibid.*, 16b3–5.

²⁷ H. Stoddard, *op. cit.*, 150. This is not the same Ngag dbang legs ldan of sGo mang who became abbot of rGyud smad and later worked with Professor Ruegg and with Jeffrey Hopkins. Stoddard mentions him on 151, mistakenly identifying him as a Mongolian.

²⁸ dGe 'dun Chos 'phel, 17a5.

²⁹ See note 52 below.

Anāthapiṇḍada invited the Bhagavan to his grove for the noon-meal, the Buddha said nothing, indicating his assent.

Although dGe 'dun Chos 'phel might recoil at the suggestion, it is difficult to resist the urge to interpret these silences, each of which seems to have a different meaning. The meaning of the fourteen *avyākṛta* has certainly been the object of a great deal of speculation, from the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (e.g., XXII, 14 and XXV, 17–24) to the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* (commenting on V, 22 and in IX³⁰) to T.R.V. Murti. In *Ratnāvalī* I, 74, Nāgārjuna does not say that the Buddha did not speak, but that he did not teach the profound doctrine to those who were not suitable vessels (*abhājana*) for it. And when the Buddha did not reply to Anāthapiṇḍada's invitation, it simply signified acceptance of the invitation. But the “meanings” of these various silences does not seem to be dGe 'dun Chos 'phel's point here. He appears instead to be offering the reminder that there were occasions when the Buddha did not speak, often with devastating effect; he is suggesting, then, that there is something to be gained in taking Nāgārjuna's statement that he has no assertion quite literally: “If you understand this, the very fact that there is no assertion will itself be capable of creating the correct view in your mind”.³¹

But dGe 'dun Chos 'phel is not one to say that the Buddha never spoke, that Candrakīrti never said, “This is Nalanda monastery”. They clearly did speak. The question, then, is of the status of their utterances. Here, dGe 'dun Chos 'phel remarks that once one makes their utterances the subject of logical analysis, once one begins to consider whether the statement “I have no thesis” is itself a thesis, then one has entered the realm of conventional analysis. And here, the Mādhyamika's method is provided by the Buddha, “Whatever the world says exists, I also say exists”.³² He likens the Mādhyamika's situation to that of a person who has been captured by a Khams pa chieftain who demands to know, apparently on the threat of losing one's life, whether he (that is, the chieftain) is a *cakravartin*. When, upon answering in the affirmative, he demands to know, “Is that what you really believe?” (literally, “Do you assert that as your own system?” *khyod kyis rang lugs su khas len pa yin nam*), one has no recourse but to say that this is one's own conviction, despite the fact that one does not believe it; “Such an assertion is made powerlessly out of fear of Bu-long-ma [the chieftain]”.³³

³⁰ See P. Pradhan, ed., *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu*, Patna, 1975, 470–1.

³¹ dGe 'dun Chos 'phel, 20a2.

³² *ibid.*, 20a5–6.

³³ *ibid.*, 20b2–3.

This is the situation of the Mādhyamika, who asserts what is necessary only in terms of the assertions of others, despite claiming it to be his own view. When the magician who creates an illusory elephant is asked by the credulous audience whether the elephant is real, he must say that it is.³⁴ dGe 'dun Chos 'phel would seem to say, then, that everything which the Mādhyamika asserts is asserted for others, or what he also terms “asserted powerlessly” (*dbang med du*), that is, asserted without personal conviction. He also suggests, however, that the Mādhyamika must also decide what is and is not to be asserted for others. How is the Mādhyamika to make such a decision? This would seem inevitably to raise the issue of *neyārtha* and *nītārtha*.

There are those who respond to the declaration that the Mādhyamikas have no assertion by noting the existence of many statements attributed to Nāgārjuna and asking: “If they are not Nāgārjuna’s statements, whose are they?” dGe 'dun Chos 'phel mocks such people as being no different from fools who say:

“There are sutras which teach that the self exists and that external objects and three final vehicles are truly established. If these are not the statements of the Tathāgata, whose statements are they?”³⁵

That is, they do not understand the difference between the literal and the non-literal, the definitive and the provisional (topics on which Professor Ruegg has written seminal studies).³⁶ This would imply that dGe 'dun Chos 'phel accepts the existence of criteria for determining which of the Buddha’s statements can be accepted literally and which are intentional (*ābhīprāyika*, *dgongs pa can*). Yet earlier in the *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan*, he has called into question the entire process of scriptural interpretation:

“Correct reasoning is found in the definitive scriptures; the provisional and definitive are differentiated by stainless reasoning. If one understands with reasoning, why search for the definitive meaning? If one does not understand with reasoning, how does one find the definitive meaning?”³⁷

This statement, combined with his general critique of the very notion of valid knowledge for unenlightened beings, would seem to imply that there is no

³⁴ *ibid.*, 34a3–5.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 41a3–4.

³⁶ See his “Allusiveness and Obliqueness in Buddhist Texts: *Samdhi*, *Samdhyā*, and *Abhisamdhi*” in C. Caillat, ed., *Dialectes dan les litteratures indo-aryennes*, Paris, 1989, 295–327; “Purport, Implicature, and Presupposition, Sanskrit *Abhiprāya* and Tibetan *Dgoñs pa/dgoñs gzi* as Hermeneutical Concepts”, *JIP*, 13, 1985, 309–325; “An Indian Source for the Tibetan Hermeneutical Term *Dgoñs gzi* ‘Intentional Ground’”, *JIP*, 16, 1988, 1–4; and “The Buddhist Notion of an ‘Immanent Absolute’ (*tathāgatagarbha*) as a Problem in Hermeneutics”, in T. Skorupski, ed., *The Buddhist Heritage*, Tring, 1989, 229–246.

³⁷ dGe 'dun Chos 'phel, 18a3-4.

means, short of becoming enlightened oneself (or, at least, reaching the bodhisattva *bhūmis*), for distinguishing the literal from the non-literal, for determining what is and is not to be asserted by Mādhyamikas for the sake of others, because, in the end, all assertions are merely provisional; the Mādhyamika has no assertion.

It is simply impossible for common beings (*prthagjana*) to make such determinations. They are like the northern nomads who know only the flavours of milk and yogurt; when given sugar for the first time, all they can say is that it tastes like milk.³⁸ He writes:

“All the thoughts that are experienced by cats and dogs are expressed through no more than three or four ways of changing their voices; they have no other method. We common beings, relative to Bodhisattvas who have attained power [that is, one of the *bhūmis*], do not even reach the level of dogs and cats. How could [the question of whether] the great sky of the *dharmadhātu*, free from extremes and seen by the knowledge of all aspects, is a non-affirming negative (*med dgag*, *prasajyapratishedha*) or an affirming negative (*ma yin gag*, *paryudāsapratishedha*) fit into the tiny hole of our thoughts?”³⁹

It is clear, then, that dGe ’dun Chos ’phel places little stock in thought (*vikalpa*, *rtog pa*), that which for the dGe lugs pas provides the invaluable conduit to the direct realization of emptiness. His devaluation of thought is further evinced in his gloss of the Mādhyamika’s lack of any assertion. An assertion, for dGe ’dun Chos ’phel, is a verbal statement that the speaker believes; a Mādhyamika has no assertion because he never makes statements derived from his own thoughts (*bsampa*).⁴⁰

“A yogin who understands reality does not accept as his own system a single object, in the way that [that object is] perceived and conceived by common beings. This is the meaning of the Prāsaṅgika not taking his own position. When an opponent who has assertions uses scripture and reasoning to debate with a [Prāsaṅgika] opponent without assertions who abides in a state of equipoise (*mnyam gzhas*), free from speech, then whatever answers [the Prāsaṅgika] gives become mere assertions [made for the opponent]. Therefore, there is no place to contain this view of no assertions among words, terms, and particularly, sophistic reasoning (*rtog ke’i rigs pa*).”⁴¹

³⁸ *ibid.*, 21a4–5.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 21a2–4.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 32a4–5, 59b5–6.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 16a6–16b2.

Two questions seem to remain for dGe 'dun Chos 'phel. The first is the question or the nature of the passage, once the storied dGe lugs path of reasoning has been rejected, from the conceptual to the non-conceptual, from the unenlightened to the enlightened state. He offers no direct answer to this question in the *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan*; his answer would seem to lie instead in the *'Dod pa'i bstan bcos*, with its exaltation of the sexual yogas of the Anuttarayoga tantras as the supreme means of passing into a state beyond thought.⁴² The other question, alluded to above, is that of the principles which guide the Mādhyamika's strategy of making assertions for others. What is and what is not to be asserted for others? For an answer to this question, dGe 'dun Chos 'phel refers us, perhaps surprisingly, to Tsong kha pa, who seems once again left with the task of negotiating between the conventional and the ultimate. dGe 'dun Chos 'phel says:

“Although it is true that these external potencies [such as the four elements] must be asserted powerlessly, one must distinguish what does not need to be asserted in one own's system [as presented to others]. This point is made very clearly in the foremost lama's answers to Red mda' ba's questions. Be impartial and look there.”⁴³

Unfortunately, dGe 'dun Chos 'phel does not provide a more specific reference. If we are to judge simply by the titles, there are several works to which he may be referring; a perusal of their contents yields two possibilities, which contain an identical passage on the question of the Mādhyamika's thesis.⁴⁴ In it, Tsong kha pa takes up the question of the assertions of the Prāsaṅgika who has not yet attained direct understanding of emptiness. He explains that for the *ārya* Prāsaṅgika, all assertions are destroyed in the state of meditative equipoise (*mnyam gzhaḡ*). In the subsequent state (*rjes thob*), all dependently arisen phenomena appear like reflections and are not negated. For the *prthagjana* Prāsaṅgika, the situation is quite different. Such a person determines, apparently through reasoning, that dependently arisen phenomena lack any intrinsic nature and are like reflections. Having made this determination, the *prthagjana*

⁴² For an English translation of this work, see: Gedun Chopel, *Tibetan Arts of Love*, tr. by J. Hopkins & Dorje Yuthok, Ithaca, New York, 1992.

⁴³ dGe 'dun Chos 'phel, 20b3–4.

⁴⁴ The first work is entitled *rJe btsun red mda' ba chen pos skyan bzhuḡs pa'i drung du 'bul ba la rtog ldan byang seng ba groḡs mched btad pa'i dus kyi zhu yig* and is located among the miscellaneous works (*thor bu*) in the second volume (*Kha*) of the Lhasa edition at 62b4–68b 1 (322–334 in the Guru Deva edition). The second work is entitled *rJe btsun 'jam pa'i dbyangs kyi lam gyi gnad rje red mtha' ba la shog dril du phul ba* and occurs in the fourteenth volume (*Pha*) of the Lhasa edition from 1–6a1 (671 in the Guru Deva edition). The relevant passage occurs at 65a1–5 in the first work and at 4b3–5a3 in the second.

Prāsaṅgika must not only accept (*'dod*) this as his own system but must also assert (*khas blangs*) that this is the case. Although this entails that the Mādhyamika have an assertion, Tsong kha pa declares that possession of an assertion does not become a fault for the time being (*re zhig*). The *pṛthagjana* Prāsaṅgika has not yet attained the vision of emptiness in which the reflection-like appearance of dependently arisen phenomena will be refuted. He must, therefore, uphold it.

Tsong kha pa and dGe 'dun Chos 'phel then seem to be in agreement on the referent of the statement that the Mādhyamika has no thesis; both say that it is the direct yogic perception of emptiness that constitutes the noble silence from which the Mādhyamika does not speak. They would seem to differ on the technique for reaching that state. But prior to attaining that silence, the Mādhyamika must speak. dGe 'dun Chos 'phel has said that all of the assertions made by the Mādhyamika are assertions for others, but the question remains of what precisely is to be asserted. Tsong kha pa also addresses that question in his answers to Red mda' ba.

His point is a familiar one: that the Prāsaṅgika analyzes the ideas of the opponent and then crafts assertions which are the opposite of what the opponent holds, but adapted in such a way that the opponent may perceive his own error. Tsong kha pa thus moves the question of the Mādhyamika's assertions entirely into the sphere of philosophic contestation. He emphasizes that the assertions of the Mādhyamika are not randomly chosen from a survey of the tenets of all philosophical schools, beginning with the Nihilists (*rgyang phan*). Instead, the assertions are situationally determined. Thus, the opponent's eventually coming to perceive the sublation of his own assertions and the Mādhyamika's positing of his own system are similar.

“Furthermore, until [the Mādhyamika] sees the faults in both positions [his own and those of the opponent], it is said that one must act as if it were one's own position; it is unsuitable to say: ‘It is merely an assertion for others; it is not my assertion.’”⁴⁵

It is clear why dGe 'dun Chos 'phel would find Tsong kha pa's statement appealing. It confirms his reading of *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 29 as a reference to the silent vision of emptiness. It explains how the assertions of the Mādhyamika who has yet to perceive emptiness directly are derived, that is, in specific opposition to the assertions of the opponent. And, finally, it instructs such a Mādhyamika to act as if the assertions were his own, without claiming that they are made merely for others, much like dGe 'dun Chos 'phel's admonition to tell the threatening chieftain what he wants to hear. On this point, however, there

⁴⁵ *rJe btsun red mda 'ba chen pos skyan bzugs pa'i drung du 'bul ba la rtog ldan byang seng ba grogs mched btad pa'i dus kyi zhu yig*, 65a5.

appears to be a difference in implication between dGe 'dun Chos 'phel and Tsong kha pa, with dGe 'dun Chos 'phel portraying the Mādhyamika's statement as a lie told for a noble purpose: he has no assertion but claims that he does in order to defeat the opponent. Tsong kha pa seems instead to suggest that it is only the *ārya* Prāsaṅgika who has gained the right to say that he has no assertion; the *prthagjana* Prāsaṅgika is obliged to uphold the reflection-like appearances of dependently arisen phenomena until the point of gaining the direct vision of emptiness in which all appearances are destroyed.

There is obviously a great deal more to be explored. dGe 'dun Chos 'phel's position on *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 29 cannot adequately be treated in isolation from a wide range of issues which he takes up in the *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan*, most obviously the problem of the common appearance of the subject (*chos can mthrun snang*) in a debate between a Mādhyamika and a non-Mādhyamika (a question that dGe 'dun Chos 'phel considers at some length). The present study has been devoted to the simpler task of reporting dGe 'dun Chos 'phel's various more or less direct comments on the question of the existence of the Mādhyamika thesis. The *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan* is not a systematic work, structured instead as disconnected excursions of varying length on a constellation of issues in Madhyamaka. To determine fully dGe 'dun Chos 'phel's position on a particular issue is, therefore, a complicated task, requiring a good deal of reconstructive speculation.

The present more modest study has, however, demonstrated a greater affinity between Tsong kha pa and dGe 'dun Chos 'phel, at least on the topic of the Mādhyamika's assertion, than one might imagine, at least a greater affinity with Tsong kha pa's statements on the topic that occur outside of his exegetical writings, in works such as the *dBu ma'i lta ba'i khrid yig*. Whether this represents a different view of *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 29 than what occurs, for example, in the *Lhag mthong chen mo*, or simply a difference in emphasis is a subject for further study. Further study may also demonstrate that the opposition to Tsong kha pa often attributed to the *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan*, although certainly present on several major issues, is by no means thoroughgoing; dGe 'dun Chos 'phel's most vituperative contempt is reserved not for Tsong kha pa but for the complacent scholastics who claim to preserve his thought.

We find in dGe 'dun Chos 'phel's treatment of the Mādhyamika's thesis certain themes that recur throughout the *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan*, most notably the constant pressure, whatever the issue may be, towards the level of *paramārtha*. dGe 'dun Chos 'phel seems to long ever for the non-conceptual state where interpretation is finally obviated. Although frustrated by the constraints of language, he also writes most eloquently about that state and shows a profound appreciation for the rhetorical power of the statements from

the *sūtras* and *śāstras* that evoke the ultimate, as well as a profound annoyance with the small-minded interpreters who seek only doctrinal correctness. When the Mādhyamika must speak, dGe 'dun Chos 'phel seems quite content to follow the conventions of the world. It is in the intermediary moment, however, when the Mādhyamika must speak not simply of worldly conventions, but must use language to bring others to the silence of emptiness, that we find the crux of dGe 'dun Chos 'phel's dilemma for, as he says,

“Without this presentation of assertions for others, how can the opportunity arise for the speaking of one word of dharma between the Buddha who perceives the universe as infinitely pure and common beings who perceive everything as defiled and contaminated?”⁴⁶

It is difficult to leave dGe 'dun Chos 'phel without a passing comment on the question of modernity. In this his last work, we find little evidence of dGe 'dun Chos 'phel's remarkable encounter with the modern world during his twelve years outside Tibet. He mentions the Koran and he cites Buddhaghosa, whom he apparently read in the Pāli, but, beyond that, we see no immediate evidence of his travels. Heather Stoddard, the author of a fascinating life of dGe 'dun Chos 'phel, says that in writing the *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan*, he believed that he had succeeded in the presenting Madhyamaka in terms adapted to his age and that the scandal it created only testified to his success.⁴⁷ Whether dGe 'dun Chos 'phel believed this or not, there appears to be nothing in the work that is marked by such modernity. As Professor Ruegg noted in his review of Stoddard's book, it will require a good deal more research to determine whether the ideas set forth in the *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan* derive from the rNying ma/dGe lugs synthesis that was being attempted by several prominent lamas in Amdo at the turn of the century; whether they derive from some of the criticisms leveled at Tsong kha pa by scholars of other sects, many of whom dGe 'dun Chos 'phel shows evidence of having read (such as Go bo rab 'byams pa bSod nams seng ge (1429–1489)); or whether they were (and I use the term advisedly) “unique to him”, the result of a somehow new reading of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti. What is striking, however, is that a scholar who had such a strong interest in history and historical research, who sought out editions of texts and hunted through archives for materials which would allow him to write an accurate history of Tibet, seems to have so little use for history here, presenting a transhistorical and transrational vision of enlightenment that seems rather radical even in Buddhist terms, especially because it appears to be grounded in no conventional practice.

In discussing his notion of doxa, Pierre Bourdieu writes:

⁴⁶ dGe 'dun Chos 'phel, 34b5–6.

⁴⁷ H. Stoddard, *op. cit.*, 275.

“The critique which brings the undiscussed into discussion, the unformulated into formulation, has as the condition of its possibility objective crisis, which, in breaking the immediate fit between the subjective structures and the objective structures, destroys self-evidence practically... It follows that the would-be most radical critique always has the limits that are assigned to it by the objective conditions. Crisis is a necessary condition for a questioning of doxa but it is not in itself a sufficient condition for the production of a critical discourse.”⁴⁸

This is a statement that can be fruitfully pondered in the case of dGe ’dun Chos ’phel. He is a person regarded today as having held the most radical of views among the Tibetan community of his day, a community at the brink of the greatest crisis in its history. Yet, perhaps in testimony to the power of what Bourdieu calls the “objective conditions”, the question remains of whether dGe ’dun Chos ’phel succeeded (and whether this was his intention is quite another matter) in questioning the doxa of Tibetan Buddhism. What he did do was question the orthodoxy and, by his doing so, we are better able to perceive the outlines of the universe of possible discourse, to perceive the boundary between the universe of things that can be stated and the universe which cannot be spoken because it cannot be thought, a universe quite different from the inconceivable realm about which dGe ’dun Chos ’phel, nonetheless, so eloquently wrote.

* * *

Appendix 1

*Excerpt from Tsang kha pa’s dBu ma’i lta ba’i khrid yig*⁴⁹

Third, in order mercifully to destroy all the conceptions of transmigrators and establish them in liberation, it is set forth that although we refute and prove what is and is not the meaning of reality, our own system has no assertion. This has two parts, the question and the answer.

First (the question): You Mādhyamikas prove that all phenomena are empty, free of elaborations, and without intrinsic nature. Thus, it is suitable that the ascertaining consciousness that decides that all phenomena are empty be produced from some cause and condition. That which is produced as some entity would be established intrinsically. Therefore, all phenomena would, in a similar manner, be established intrinsically, and all of your proofs and refutations that [things] do not intrinsically exist become simply meaningless. If [on the other hand] such an ascertaining consciousness does not exist for you, then (the absence of intrinsic nature) is not ascertained by you, in which case it is impossible [for you] to pro-

⁴⁸ P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, 1977, 168–169.

⁴⁹ Tsong kha pa, *dBu rna’i lta ba’i khrid yig*, 20b1–22b3.

duce such an ascertaining consciousness in others. Therefore, all such refutations and proofs and composing of treatises become meaningless. Thus, because it lacks viability, this Madhyamaka system is not correct.

Second, (the answer to this): The Mādhyamikas have no uncertainty, no doubt, and no indecision. Therefore, how can they have any opinion, the ascertaining consciousness of the three [modes of the syllogism], decision, or assertion? There is nothing whatsoever by which any phenomenon is intrinsically established at all, because [all phenomena] are devoid of all elaborations. The mind does not observe the nature of anything because even the mind has become indivisible from the absence of elaboration. Therefore, the signs of object and subject, object of knowledge and knower, have never existed. Thus, because there is no ascertainment, decision, assertion, or believing that ‘this is’, neither production from the causes and conditions of an ascertaining consciousness nor such an entity are established; because the horns of a rabbit are not perceived, its causes and conditions and entity are not perceived.

The Ārya said [at *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 29–30], “I am only without fault; I do not have a single assertion. If I had an assertion, I would incur this fault. If I had observed something through direct perception and so forth and then proved it or refuted it [your criticism would pertain]. Because they do not exist, I am blameless.”⁵⁰ As the master Āryadeva said [at *Catuhśataka* XVI, 25], “Even if [one tries] for a long time, it is impossible to criticize someone who has no position on existence, non-existence, [or both] existence and non-existence.” Although Mādhyamikas have no assertions in their own system, in having the need to clear away conceptions of sentient beings about a variety of things, such as existence and non-existence, is [and is not], permanence and annihilation, they speak of a variety of things, such as existence and non-existence, is and is not, empty and not empty, self and non-self, free and not free from elaboration, appearance, emptiness, the ultimate, the conventional, *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. Based upon these [statements], sentient beings understand that all phenomena are free from elaboration and through pacifying conceptions, their actions and afflictions are

⁵⁰ Tsong kha pa’s versions of Tibetan renderings of this passage and the others below often differ significantly both from the Sanskrit (where available) and from the Tibetan translations of the passages that appear in the sDe dge and Peking editions. The Lhasa edition of Tsong kha pa’s collected works is also often quite corrupt. Because at the time of this writing I do not have available to me another edition of Tsong kha pa’s collected works, I have refrained from citing variants in the Tibetan translation of the Indian passages occurring among (1) those in the Lhasa edition of Tsong kha pa’s collected works, (2) those in other editions of his collected works, and (3) those that appear in editions of the *bsTan ’gyur*, opting instead to simply translate the passages as they appear in the Lhasa edition. I apologize for any inconvenience this may cause the reader and hope to correct this omission in a future study of Tsong kha pa’s *lta khrid* texts.

purified, they are freed from the sufferings of saṃsāra, and established in liberation and omniscience. This is the essential purpose.

The Ārya said [at *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XXII, 11]: “Do not say ‘empty’, do not say ‘not empty’; do not say both or neither. They are stated for the purpose of designation” and [at *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XVIII, 6]: “[Some] imagine ‘the self exists’. [Others] teach that ‘the self does not exist’. The buddhas teach neither self nor the refutation of self.” And [at *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XVIII, 7–8], “The object of expression is negated; the sphere of the mind is negated. The *dharmatā*, unproduced and unceased, is similar to *nirvāṇa*. The Buddha teaches that everything is real, not real, [both] real and not real, neither not real nor real.” Thus, in whatever debates about refutation and proof in which Mādhyamikas participate, neither the predicate of their probandum nor the predicate of the negatum of the other party exists at all. Therefore, they are not observed. However, there are debates and negations and proofs that have the purpose of pacifying the conceptions of sentient beings. Otherwise, proving that the predicate of one’s own probandum is [true], debating maliciously about the predicate of the negatum of the other position, and having refutations and proofs are causes that increase conceptions. How could they have a great purpose?

Sūtra says: “The world quarrels with me. I do not quarrel with the world. What is asserted to exist in the world, I also assert to exist. What is asserted not to exist in the world, I also assert not to exist.” Āryadeva says [at *Catuḥśataka*, XII, 15]: “The buddhas do not set forth this doctrine for the sake of argument. However, this destroys the opponent like fire does fuel.” The glorious Candrakīrti says [at *Madhyamakāvatāra* VI, 118–119]: “The analysis in [Nāgārjuna’s *Madhyamaka*] *śāstra* was not done out of attachment to argumentation; it was set forth for the purpose of liberation. However, if, when reality is explained, the systems of others are destroyed, there is no fault. Attachment to one’s own view and anger at the views of others are conceptions. Therefore, those who analyze eradicate desire and hatred and are quickly liberated.” And [he says in the *Prasannapadā*]: “If one is a Mādhyamika, one does not use autonomous theses because of not having assertions about the positions of others.” And: “We do not assert non-existence because we wish to eradicate the position of what others assert to exist. We do not assert existence because we wish to eradicate the position of what others assert not to exist.” Mādhyamikas who assert what is renowned to the world and thoroughly non-abiding Mādhyamikas are synonyms. Such Mādhyamikas are the system renowned as the Prāsaṅgikas. You must understand that for the perception of others, they assert things in accordance with the conventions of the world, but in their own system they do not assert even a single thesis.

Appendix 2

Excerpt from *dGe 'dun Chos 'phel's Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan*⁵¹

That which is referred to as the Mādhyamika's having no assertion does not mean that a Mādhyamika does not speak for his entire life. Even Candrakīrti certainly made assertions such as “This is Nalanda monastery”, “I am Candrakīrti”, “These are my monk's robes”, and [*Madhyamakāvātāra* I, 1], “Buddhas are born from Bodhisattvas”. However, it is necessary to distinguish the contexts of ultimate and conventional analysis. [Some] say that the statement: “I have no assertion in the context of ultimate analysis”, is itself an assertion. If you say: “Don't say anything, I am going to sleep”, [someone] without heeding [what you said] makes a joke and says: “The very fact that you said, ‘Don't say anything’ is a sign that you are not going to sleep.” [To say that “I have no assertion” is itself an assertion] is like that. What is the point? Long ago, when a flock of storks was flying, the leader of storks said: “Don't talk. If we talk, we will be killed”. So they all said, “Don't talk, don't talk” [*mi grags mi grags*, pronounced *mi dak mi dak*] and they have been very famous since ancient times for the sound “*mi dang mi dang* [*mi grang mi grang*]. This is like that.

In brief, if the vow of silence during a fast is possible and the Bhagavan's not indicating anything whatsoever about the fourteen unindicated [*avyākṛta*] views is possible, then the view of having no assertion is possible. Furthermore, it is explained [at *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XI, 1] that, “When asked whether the beginning could be known, the great sage remained silent”⁵² and it is explained in the *Vinayāgama* that, “Not giving an answer is the ultimate of all defeats [of his

⁵¹ dGe 'dun Chos 'phel, 19a4–21a6.

⁵² There are two significant variants that occur in dGe 'dun Chos 'phel's version of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XI, 1a. The Sanskrit reads: *pūrvā prajñāyate koṭir nety uvāca mahāmuniḥ*. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XI, 1a appears in the sDe dge edition (TTD 3824, *dBu ma, Tsa, 7a7*) as *sngon mtha' mngon nam zhes zhus tshe*. The Kalimpong edition of the *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan*, however, reads *sngon rnams*, making the passage read something like: “When he was asked about the beginning by the ancients”. This error would suggest either that dGe 'dun Chos 'phel's memory of the passage had grown dim or that the passage was dictated to someone who did not know the passage. In translating the passage here, I have taken it as a scribal error and translated the passage according to the sDe dge. The second variant is a more creative misreading. The *Klu sgrub dgongs rgyan* reads *thub pa chen pos mi gsungs bzhugs*, “the great sage remained without speaking”. The sDe dge, following the Sanskrit, says: *thub pa chen pos min zhes gzungs* [“when asked whether the beginning could be known], the great sage said that it could not.” Here dGe 'dun Chos 'phel seems intentionally to modify the passage to make it serve as an example of the Buddha's silence. I have therefore translated *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XI, 1b following his reading.

opponents by the Buddha].” Therefore, one must uphold the propriety of this by which the Bhagavan defeated [his opponents] at all times and in all situations and must not be proud about it. The Ārya praises the very fact that he did not answer [at *Ratnāvalī* I, 74] : “Thus, he did not speak of the profound doctrine to transmigrators who were not vessels. Therefore, the wise know the teacher to be omniscient.” If one has understanding, the very fact that there is no assertion will itself be able to create the correct view in one’s mind. The Ārya said: “the discipline of not speaking”; what more need be said about it being an essential point of profound meaning? Anāthapiṇḍada asked the Bhagavan: “May I invite you to my grove for tomorrow’s noon-time meal?” Because the Bhagavan did not say anything, [Anāthapiṇḍada] understood that it was acceptable. It is simply that [others] have not seen such explanations.

Therefore, as long as someone says: “I have no thesis” it is a case of analyzing the ultimate. From the point at which the lack of a thesis is made into a subject [for debate] and analyzed as to whether or not it is a thesis, etc., it is then a case of analyzing the conventional. From that point on, what other method is there than this set forth by the Sugata himself: “Whatever the world says exists, I also say exists. What they say does not exist, I also say does not exist”. Saying to Nyag sked Bu long rna [a Khams pa chieftain], “You are a *cakravartin*” is an assertion. When Bu long rna says, “Do you really believe that, [literally, “Do you assert that as your own system?” (*khyod kyis rang lugs su khas len pa yin nam*)] or are you just flattering me?” there is no other recourse but to say, “I am not flattering you at all; it is my own belief [literally, “my own system” (*rang gi lugs*)]. Such an assertion is asserted powerlessly out of fear of the Bu long rna, without believing it in the least in one’s own mind. In the same way, such things as being burned by fire, cooled by water, and moved by wind are like Bu long rna; although it is true that these external potencies [such as the four elements] must be asserted powerlessly, one must distinguish what does not need to be asserted in one’s own system. This point is made very clearly in the foremost lama’s answers to Red mda’ ba’s questions. Be impartial and look there. In brief, of all the thoughts in this present way of thinking, there does not appear to be even one which is not rooted in desire, hatred, and delusion. And if it were the case that there was a single correct reason among the confines of these ordinary thoughts of ours, there is nothing more amazing than that we have not improved any more than this, although we had grown accustomed [to that reason] for countless aeons from beginningless *samsāra*. All the thoughts that are experienced by cats and dogs are expressed through no more than three or four ways of changing their voices; they have no other method. We common beings, relative to Bodhisattvas who have attained power [that is, one of the *bhūmis*], do not even reach the level of dogs and cats. How could [the question of whether]

the great sky of the *dharmadhātu*, free from extremes and seen by the knowledge of all aspects, is a non-affirming negative (*med dgag, prasajyapraṭiṣedha*) or an affirming negative (*ma yin gag, paryudāsapraṭiṣedha*) fit into the tiny hole of our thoughts? To say that to have no assertion is itself an assertion is to be stubborn, like the [people] in the land of the northern nomads, mentioned above,⁵³ who have no acquaintance with sugar and who decide that the taste of sugar, which [in fact] is neither yogurt nor milk, must be milk. The size of a reflection accords with the size of the mirror; it is nothing more than that. To assert that everything which does not fit inside that [mirror] is merely an object for reasoned negation should be understood to be an impediment to creating a natural understanding of all profound doctrines.

⁵³ dGe 'dun Chos 'phel, 10b2–3.