



FREEDOM
— FROM —
EXTREMES

GORAMPA'S
"DISTINGUISHING
THE VIEWS"
and the
POLEMICS
OF EMPTINESS

JOSÉ IGNACIO CABEZÓN
GESHE LOBSANG DARGYAY

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STUDIES IN INDIAN AND TIBETAN BUDDHISM

FREEDOM
FROM EXTREMES

*Gorampa's "Distinguishing the Views" and
the Polemics of Emptiness*

José Ignacio Cabezón *and*
Geshe Lobsang Dargyay



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Contents

Preface	
<i>by José Ignacio Cabezón</i>	vii
In Memoriam: Geshe Lobsang Dargyay (1935–94)	
<i>by Eva Neumaier</i>	xi
Introduction	I
DISTINGUISHING THE VIEWS OF EMPTINESS: MOONLIGHT TO ILLUMINATE THE MAIN POINTS OF THE SUPREME PATH	
<i>Thematic Subdivisions of the Text</i>	63
Chapter 1	
<i>Three Ways of Understanding the Madhyamaka</i>	69
Chapter 2	
<i>The Refutation of Dol po pa</i>	97
Chapter 3	
<i>The Refutation of Tsong kha pa</i>	115
Chapter 4	
<i>The Middle Way as Freedom from Extremes</i>	203
Abbreviations	239
Notes	243
Bibliography	337
Index	383

Preface

José Ignacio Cabezón

IN THE EARLY 1980s, I lived and studied at Sera Monastery in India while I was preparing my translation of Khedrub Jé's (Mkhas grub rje) classic of Middle Way (Madhyamaka) philosophy, the *Stong thun chen mo*. One of the great challenges I faced in my research involved identifying Khedrub Jé's unnamed opponents. This led me to read more broadly in the field of Tibetan Madhyamaka, and this, in turn, eventually led me to the work of the great Sakya scholar Gorampa Sönam Sengé (Go rams pa Bsod nams seng ge, 1429–89). In the course of reading Gorampa's writings, I came upon his *Distinguishing the Views* (*Lta ba'i shan 'byed*), the work translated in these pages. It immediately became clear to me why the text was considered by many scholars, both classical and contemporary, to be a work of tremendous power and, among other things, to be one of the most important critiques of Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka views. Concise, clear, elegant in style, and powerful in its argumentation, *Distinguishing the Views* is one of Gorampa's most famous works. I had not yet finished reading the text when I decided to translate it. By the early 1990s I had a draft in hand.

I was not then aware that Geshe Lobsang Dargyay (Dge bshes Blo bzang dar rgyas), working in Hamburg, had already completed his own draft translation of Gorampa's text several years earlier. From 1994 to 1995, I had the good fortune to be a visiting research scholar at the Institut für Kultur und Geschichte Indiens und Tibets at the University of Hamburg. I first learned of Geshe Dargyay's work from my colleague in Hamburg, Prof. David Jackson. While in Hamburg, Prof. Lambert Schmithausen urged me to contact Geshe Dargyay about possibly collaborating on the translation, a suggestion that I welcomed. I soon learned, much to my regret, that Geshe-la had passed away just a short time earlier, a great loss to the field, and particularly sad news for me since I never had the opportunity to meet this fine scholar. My query, however, was answered by Prof. Eva Neumaier,

the executor of Geshe Dargyay's estate, who was enthusiastic about my proposal to combine our work—mine and Geshe Dargyay's—to publish a translation of Gorampa's text under both our names. Over the many years since I first got her approval to proceed with this joint venture, Prof. Neumaier has been a model of supportiveness and patience. I also wish to thank her for contributing the brief life story of Geshe Dargyay found in these pages.

The work that you have before you is truly collaborative. While it fell on me to make the final decisions about the manuscript, I consulted Geshe Dargyay's text at every turn. In several instances, Geshe-la's translation allowed me to correct my own, and I consider myself fortunate to have had his text as a conversation partner and sounding board. Geshe Dargyay, in turn, had earlier benefited from the comments and guidance of Prof. Schmithausen. Prof. Schmithausen should therefore be seen not only as the impetus behind this cooperative undertaking but also as a contributor. However, the final responsibility for decisions fell upon me. Therefore, as the last (if not the only) scholar to work on this translation, I take responsibility for any faults and shortcomings.

Geshe Dargyay wished to thank the following individuals and institutions, the acknowledgement of which I take verbatim from his manuscript. "My deepest gratitude is due to Prof. Dr. L. Schmithausen for his readiness to take responsibility vis-à-vis the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), for checking and correcting my translation item by item, and for his many suggestions. Words of thanks to Prof. Dr. Eva Dargyay, too, are inadequate for her unflinching support of this work. I also wish to thank Prof. Dr. Leslie Kawamura for his support. Among institutions, thanks are due to the DFG, to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and also to the Calgary Institute for the Humanities. My gratitude also goes out to Mrs. Gerry Dyer for typing the first draft of the translation, and is also extended to my students who contributed to this project: Susan Hutchison, Kay Wong, Windsor Viney, and especially Donald Hamilton for his patience and readiness to spend many hours correcting my English and proofreading the text. Without their support, this work would never have been completed."

From my side, over the last decade I have had the good fortune to reread portions of Gorampa's text with students in Hamburg, Denver, and Santa Barbara. Dan Arnold helped with research on the first chapter. Most recently, two students, Michael Cox and Zoran Lasovich, have spent many hours with the English and Tibetan texts, getting them ready

for publication. Several colleagues have taken time out of busy schedules to offer me feedback on the introduction or portions of the translation, among them David Jackson, Dan Martin, Gene Smith, and Tom Tillemans. Finally, the work could never have been completed without the generous support given to me by the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung and by the Religious Studies Department of the University of California Santa Barbara. To the many individuals and institutions who have made this work possible, I express my sincere gratitude.

There is a certain irony that a work so critical of Tsongkhapa (Tsong kha pa)—the founder of the Gelug school—should have been translated and brought to the attention of a Western audience by two scholars trained in the great Gelug academies (Geshe Dargyay at Drepung and I at Sera). It is perhaps doubly ironic since the work translated here was, before 1959, actually banned by the Ganden Potrang (Dga' ldan pho brang), the Gelug-backed Tibetan government. (More on this in the introduction.) A great deal has changed since 1959. Books like *Distinguishing the Views* are no longer banned (either in Tibet or in exile). They are readily accessible and are today widely read by monks of all of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism, including Gelupas. But the irony persists in large part because of how different things were just one generation ago.

There are many ways to engage a work like Gorampa's *Distinguishing the Views*. Because Geshe Dargyay and I were trained as exegetes and philosophers, this has been our main mode of engaging the work. We have, first and foremost, sought to understand what Gorampa himself was saying and to present Gorampa's views as accurately as possible. In the notes our goal has been to identify the works of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism that influenced our author, to find parallel passages and arguments in his other works, to find places in the works of his opponents where these same issues are addressed, and occasionally even to offer our own appraisals of Gorampa's views.

Some might think it inappropriate for scholars to make normative evaluations of the text or author they are translating. We should remember, however, that Gorampa's text is *itself* making normative evaluations of the texts and views of other authors. Rather than remaining aloof—as historians of religion are often wont to do, usually in the name of “objectivity”—aloof to the philosophical drama being played out in *Distinguishing the Views*, we have chosen to treat Gorampa's text as a living text with an intellectual agenda that calls out for assessment on the part of readers, even to this day. For better or worse, it is usually difference rather than similarity

that catches the eye of the philosophically minded scholar, and thus our normative assessments are usually critical. Gorampa himself does not celebrate the points of agreement between his own tradition and that of the two figures he chooses to critique. Rather, he homes in on the differences, on the points of disagreement. That is simply the way philosophers operate, and perhaps that is as it should be, since agreement is, after all, the end of dialogue. Once you agree with someone, not much more is left to be said.

For the record—and here I (Cabezón) speak only for myself—I agree with much, perhaps even with *most* of what Gorampa has to say in *Distinguishing the Views*. From his more natural (and less tortured) interpretation of the tetralemma to his critique of the notion of “real destruction” (*zhig pa dngos po*), I find Gorampa convincing. The occasional quip against Gorampa should be seen in the context of what is a broad sympathy for his views and methods. Our main goal, as we’ve said, is not to assess Gorampa’s views but rather to present his views as fairly and as accurately as possible, giving this great scholar the benefit of the doubt and allowing the subtlety and power of his arguments to shine through. Of course, it is up to the reader to decide whether we have succeeded in this task, just as it is up to the reader to decide whether Gorampa himself has succeeded in his.

In Memoriam: Geshe Lobsang Dargyay (1935–94)

Eva Neumaier

WITH THE WORDS “rdzogs so” and the final gesture of a *mudrā*, Geshe Lobsang Dargyay’s mind began to leave his body on October 4, 1994 after a prolonged illness. His life is a testimony to the enormous changes the Tibetan people experienced during the course of the twentieth century.

Geshe-la was born in 1935 in Kartö (Kar stod), a small village in the principality of Gyalrong in Kham, part of the province of Sichuan, to parents who made a living as semi-nomads (*sa ma ’brog*). His birth name was Orgyen Hegya (O rgyan Hre rgya). He was the first of his mother’s children to survive. Geshe-la had endless stories to tell about his childhood, the pranks he played, the scolding he received from his mother and, above all, the enduring love of his grandparents, to whom he was very attached. Early on, his mother and grandmother kindled in him the desire to embrace a religious life. He dreamed of becoming a *yogi*, living in a cave and emulating the life of Milarepa, the famous Tibetan poet-saint. While still a small boy, he ran away from home to seek spiritual instruction at the monastery of Rahor. This Nyingma monastery, small by traditional Tibetan standards, had a reputation as a place where the tantric practice of the Old School (*nying ma*) was combined with the scholastic and philosophical training characteristic of the Gelug monasteries. Monastic discipline and rigorous learning were mandatory. In this monastery he received his monastic name, Blo bzang dar rgyas. Here he learned to read and write, and to memorize the basic religious texts, but he also trained in the practice of *gtum mo*, the fabled ability to increase one’s body temperature.

Years later Lobsang Dargyay accompanied his cousin Rahor Rinpoche Thubten Kalsang (Ra hor Rin po che Thub bstan skal bzang), head of Rahor Monastery, Lhasa, to Drepung Monastery where they both continued their study of Buddhist philosophy. Lobsang Dargyay put all his efforts

into absorbing the traditional five subjects of the scholastic training. Among his teachers one finds some of the intellectual elite of the Tibetan monastic system at that time. During the New Year's celebration of 1958, he demonstrated his competence in Buddhist philosophy during a public debate in the Jokhang temple of Lhasa. He was subsequently awarded the degree of geshe (*dge bshes*).

His intention to further his studies at Drepung before returning to his home monastery was shattered when the political events of the late 1950s forced him (together with Rahor Rinpoche and a group of other monks and lay people from the same area) to leave Lhasa. During the winter of 1958–59 they traveled through the northern steppes (*byang thang*) before turning south to cross the Tsangpo River, heading toward Nepal and India, where they were granted asylum. There they learned about the March uprising in Lhasa and about the flight of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The years of immersing himself in the depth of Buddhist philosophy and the joy he had experienced in exploring and understanding the intricacies of texts like the one presented here in translation came to an abrupt end. He had not only lost his native land and family but also the community of monks and the comfort it provided him, a loss that inflicted on him continuous pain.

In India he settled first in Kalimpong, in the midst of a large number of other Tibetan refugees. He continued to hope that he might return to Tibet in the near future. As he waited, he spent the days learning English and furthering his studies of Buddhist thought. As time progressed, it became clear that a return to Tibet would not happen so soon. The Tibetans started to establish themselves in India and to make their culture and Buddhist heritage known. Geshe Lobsang Dargyay was sent to Punjabi University as lecturer in Tibetan. He began to adjust to a secular life, keeping his monastic practice to himself and hidden from the eyes of those who comprised his new surroundings. As the years passed, he achieved a certain comfort by teaching Tibetan to Indian students, learning English and Hindi, and building a supportive community of colleagues and friends around him. Suddenly, Geshe-la was called to Dharamsala to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama. To his great surprise, His Holiness told him that he would be sent as religious teacher to a group of Kalmyks living as refugees in Germany. While many Tibetans would have welcomed the chance to move to a Western country, Geshe-la anticipated with anxiety this renewed disruption of his life.

Geshe-la arrived at Frankfurt airport in the late fall of 1967, dressed in cotton robes more suitable for an Indian climate than for a German winter.

German was a language unknown to him. In Ludwigsfeld, a suburb of Munich, he was offered accommodation in barracks that had housed prisoners of war during World War II. Gradually he began to sort out this new and totally unfamiliar environment. The older Kalmyks, who were devout Buddhists, spoke only their own Mongolian language and a few words of Russian; the younger ones spoke German and had little interest in a religion that seemed foreign to them. The old Kalmyk monk, known only by his title “Baksha,” knew a few Tibetan words from his prayer texts. From modest beginnings, Geshe-la built a lively community of Buddhists, most of them Germans. He organized teachings, invited learned monks—for instance, Geshe Ngawang Nyima (Dge gshes Ngag dbang nyi ma), who later became abbot at the rebuilt Drepung Monastery in India—and held workshops on meditation. He joined the Department of Indian and Iranian Studies at the Ludwig Maximilians Universität in Munich as a research scholar, where his responsibilities included cataloging the *Rin chen gter mdzod*. In 1969 he was admitted as a doctoral student into the program of Buddhist and Tibetan Studies at the Ludwig Maximilians Universität. In 1974 he was the first Tibetan to receive his doctoral degree (*cum laude*) based on his dissertation, *Die Legende von den sieben Prinzessinnen (Saptakumārikā-Avadhāna)*. This work was subsequently published in *Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde*, Heft 2 (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetischen und Buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien, 1978). Geshe-la then took up a position as *Wissenschaftlicher Assistent* at the Institut für Südasiens-, Buddhismus- und Tibetkunde at the University of Vienna, Austria. He worked closely with Dr. Ernst Steinkellner (University of Vienna), Dr. Michael Hahn (University of Bonn), and Dr. Dieter Schlingloff (University of Munich), who had also supervised Geshe-la’s dissertation. At the University of Vienna, Geshe-la taught literary as well as modern Tibetan. Together with myself, Geshe-la conducted fieldwork in Zanskar, Ladakh, during 1978–79.

After the unexpected and premature death of Geshe Gendün Lodrö (Dge bshes Dge ’dun blo gros), Geshe-la taught at the University of Hamburg, Germany, where he started to work on Gorampa’s *Lta ba’i shan ’byed*. Dr. Lambert Schmithausen provided immeasurable support and advice for this project. The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation) financed the project for several years. Geshe-la’s immigration to Canada in 1981 slowed the work down but did not bring it to a halt.

In Canada, Geshe-la had to adjust again to a new environment. He taught Tibetan language in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Calgary, and became fellow at the Calgary Institute for the

Humanities. He benefited from working with Dr. Leslie Kawamura and Dr. Harold Coward, both at the University of Calgary. A group of interested students studied a number of seminal Tibetan texts under Geshe-la's guidance; some of them were published. During these years, the translation of Gorampa's work continued, with many versions being exchanged between Geshe-la and Dr. Schmithausen.

In 1990 Geshe-la visited Tibet for the first time since he had left in 1958. He returned to his birthplace in Kham. Meeting his family and his half-brother (also a monk) and seeing the rebuilt Rahor Monastery and the rebirth of religious life at this institution brought him great joy. He loved talking about the sturdy horses and the wildflowers carpeting the grassy slopes of his native place. He also relished the ease of living again among people who spoke his own tongue. Happily he conversed with old and young monks and gave advice and encouragement to his numerous nephews and nieces. He was considering returning to Tibet for good, but his karma took a different turn: in January 1991, he was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. Chemotherapy and radiation therapy slowed the disease but could not halt it. Despite his illness, which impaired his ability to swallow solid food, he returned to Kham in 1993. During the customary rainy retreat, he taught Buddhist philosophy for several months to the monks of Rahor. Although weakened by his illness, he experienced the fulfillment of his dreams when he was formally installed as abbot (*mkhan po*) for philosophical studies (*mtshsan nyid grva tshang*) at Rahor Monastery. Finally, he had returned home, in both body and spirit. He selected a piece of land upon which he wanted to build his own little house, and he received permission from the Sichuan Government to settle for good in Rahor. He returned to Canada intending to prepare for his move to Tibet, but his illness worsened dramatically. He spent the last months of his life meditating and preparing himself for the great transition. When he was not meditating, he composed a history of Rahor Monastery. He passed away in Edmonton, Alberta, on October 4, 1994, comforted by friends and students. His ashes were taken back to Rahor Monastery together with some personal belongings.

Introduction¹

THE INDIAN AND TIBETAN BUDDHIST sources tell us that the purpose of life is to attain enlightenment for the sake of others. But ignorance—the *mis*understanding of reality—stands in the way of achieving that goal of enlightenment. One of the more urgent aims of Buddhist practice, then, is to overcome ignorance by cultivating an understanding of reality, the ultimate truth, the final nature of the self and the world. The Mahāyāna sūtras use a variety of terms to designate this profound truth: *the sphere of dharma* (Skt. *dharmadhātu*; Tib. *chos kyi dbyings*), *phenomena in themselves* (*dharmatā*; *chos nyid*), *reality* or *thusness* (*tathātā*; *de bzhin nyid*), and of course *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*; *stong pa nyid*). The Madhyamaka (*dbu ma*), or “Middle Way,” is the name of the Buddhist philosophical tradition whose chief concern is the *view* or *theory* (*lta ba*) of that reality known as emptiness.² The Middle Way is so called because it is said to be a middle ground between two false extremes—the extremes of eternalism and nihilism. Some of the greatest minds in the history of Indian Buddhism have devoted a good deal of philosophical writing to delineating this Middle Way.

When the Tibetan court officially “adopted” Buddhism as the state religion, the Madhyamaka quickly became a part of the Tibetan intellectual landscape. Several accounts tell us that when king Khri srong lde’u btsan (eighth century) opted for the Indian over the Chinese form of Buddhism as the model of Buddhism that Tibetans would follow, he specifically mentioned the Madhyamaka as the school of thought that should be propagated.³ Although there are some indigenous Tibetan works dealing with the subject of Madhyamaka that date from the “early dissemination period” or *snga dar* (seventh to mid-tenth centuries), it is not until the so-called “later dissemination period” or *phyi dar* (mid-tenth century onward) that Madhyamaka really emerges as a distinct field of Tibetan

philosophical speculation. And even then, it is not until the fourteenth century that Middle Way philosophy becomes incorporated into the curriculum of the great monastic academies.

As was the case in India, Tibetans were not of one mind concerning the interpretation of emptiness, disagreeing—at times vehemently—over what constitutes the Middle Way. These arguments usually took place on the debate grounds of the great monasteries. As oral exchanges, these debates have been for the most part lost to us,⁴ but at times the disputes made their way to the printed page. Those that did represent one of our most important sources for understanding Madhyamaka thought. *Distinguishing the Views (Lta ba'i shan 'byed)*, by the great Sa skya pa scholar Go bo Rab 'byams pa Bsod nams seng ge (or Go rams pa; 1429–89), is one of the most renowned and important works of Tibetan Madhyamaka. It is a work that highlights these differences in interpretation, and a work that therefore belongs to the genre of polemics, representing one of the highpoints in the history of this genre.⁵

*On Polemics*⁶

All knowledge—and this includes philosophy—is polemical by nature.

Johan Huizinga⁷

The great German Indologist Max Mueller once wrote, “To know one is to know none.” For Mueller, knowledge is comparative. To know a thing—a text, a practice, a culture—it is necessary to see how the thing relates to other things. It is by understanding the nexus of relationships between things that knowledge arises. And if, as Peirce puts it, “a thing without oppositions, *ipso facto*, does not exist,”⁸ then one can only conclude that knowledge not only has a positive (*cataphatic*) aspect, but also a negative (*apophatic*) one.⁹ To know something requires that one understand both what a thing is and what it is *not*. Comprehension is a relational act. It requires that one be able to relate a given thing to other things that are similar, but also that one have an awareness of the way in which a given thing *differs* from other things. Knowing things in themselves—as isolates—is an incomplete form of knowledge. “To know one is to know none.” If something is to be fully known, it is necessary to understand how it relates to other things. More specifically, true knowledge requires the ability not only to chart similarities, but also to notice differences and contrasts.

Just as in the field of epistemology (the theory of knowledge), so too in the field of literary studies. Some types of writing tend to approach their subject matter cataphatically, focusing on a given subject and treating it as an isolated, self-enclosed, discrete subject matter. Connections may be made to other areas, but only insofar as they contribute to understanding the thing that one is analyzing. In this mode, resemblance is the guiding principle of interpretation. Other texts may be referred to, but the emphasis is on proof texts—works that positively support the position that one is trying to defend. The goal is to get at what the thing is by charting similarities rather than by noting differences. *Expository commentary* is a good example of cataphatic literary discourse. The focus in a commentary is on a given text as a self-enclosed, discrete whole. The goal is to explain the meaning of the text by glossing words and passages using words that resemble (that is, that are synonyms of) the ones in the text itself. Commentators do look to other texts, but they are concerned with them chiefly to the extent that they support their own interpretation. The emphasis is on charting similarities. The tone is *irenic*.

Apophatic forms of literary discourse focus on differences. Here the goal is to get at the thing by contrasting it to what it is *not*. To that end, literary apophatists are more interested in the texts and traditions that *do not* resemble their own. This form of discourse must, of necessity, look outside of itself, to texts and doctrines that are different. Views that are dissimilar to one's own are carefully considered so as to create a stark contrast between self and other. The truth is arrived at through the negation of what is false/other. Apophatists are masters of negation and contrast. They have a keen eye for what is different, they are skilled in the techniques that bring out those differences, and they are accomplished in the logical strategies that repudiate what is other so as to make the self/same emerge as the only viable possibility. *Polemics* is a good example of apophatic literary discourse. In a polemical treatise, the object of analysis is the heterodox: the views (and sometimes practices) of others. These views are rhetorically constructed in a way that makes them easy (or at least possible) to refute. A variety of rhetorical strategies are used to repudiate opponents' views, and in the end the reader is left with the polemicist's own position as the only plausible alternative. The emphasis in polemical discourse is on differences. The tone is *agonistic*.

Now cataphatic and apophatic forms of literary discourse as we have just characterized them are what Max Weber would call *ideal types*. They are purely formal distinctions that exist only in the space of theory, and not in

the real world of historically situated texts. No real-life literary work is purely cataphatic or apophatic. Rather, as ideal forms, the *cataphatic* and the *apophatic* occupy two poles on a spectrum; real-world literary texts always fall somewhere in between the two poles. Having said that, it is clear that some texts lie closer to the cataphatic end of the spectrum, while others are closer to the apophatic extreme. In this study, we are concerned with polemics as a form of apophatic literary discourse. Polemics is one of the most lively and interesting forms of religious-philosophical literature, and one of the most well known. Of the tens of thousands of volumes that constitute the Tibetan literary canon, the few dozen (or perhaps few hundred) works that are principally polemical are among the most popular.

What makes a polemic memorable? What makes it have an importance to a degree disproportionate to the space that works of this genre occupy within the literary canon? At least part of the reason has to do with who authored these works. Often the great luminaries of a tradition are its polemicists. Moreover, polemical works concern themselves for the most part with issues that are of central concern to a tradition. Even if polemicists sometimes get distracted by trivialities once they get going, what sets them on the path of polemics in the first place is inevitably an issue whose resolution is seen as vital, a rival's position that is seen as a threat. This fact has led some scholars to conclude that polemics—and not imitation—is the sincerest form of flattery, for why argue against someone over an issue that one deems insignificant, or—despite the rhetoric that polemicists often use—a position that one considers truly indefensible.¹⁰ We might also add that the scholars who are the holders of these “false and dangerous” views—the polemicist's opponents—are themselves usually major players in their respective traditions. Once again, why expend energy battling an opponent one believes is incapable of influencing others? Polemics is spectacle: the greats in conversation with the greats about issues that are central to a tradition.

Just as in the contemporary Western academic world,¹¹ in Tibet reputations were made by attacking the views of a renowned scholar, whether on the debate ground (the professional meeting) or through the written word (the review). That Western academics have their own way of playing the game of polemics is witnessed by the way that careers are sometimes launched or buttressed on the basis of critical reviews of the work of others. In some circles this is even a rite of passage for the scholar. Of course, there is always a price to pay, for when polemicists are successful, they will always cause someone pain, even if—as they usually declare at the beginning of

their works—their intentions are honorable, even if their criticism is directed at a specific view and not at the tradition as a whole, aimed at the position and not at the man, at the sin and not at the sinner. For the fact is that it is difficult—especially for philosophers, and especially when they are the target of the polemicist’s pen—to think that one is not one’s views. Part of it is simply human nature: our intense aversion to criticism. But it also has a lot to do with the *public* nature of polemical criticism. It is one thing to disagree with someone in the context of a private conversation, and quite another to make one’s disagreement known publicly and in print. Joseph Agassi, in the introduction to his collected reviews, *The Gentle Art of Philosophical Polemics*, recounts the way in which he became estranged from his mentor, Karl Popper, precisely on these grounds:

It must be seen that polemics is a ramification, in public, of criticism which may very well be offered in private. I report that many a time I had occasion to criticize publicly and did so privately—with the resultant gratitude, at times indicated or hinted at, at times expressed quite explicitly. I can also report that Popper’s enormous annoyance at my public criticism of his ideas is rooted in his opinion that I should have offered him the criticism in private.¹²

But polemicists’ estrangement from others, their regret at having caused others pain (Agassi: “to the extent my criticisms...have caused pain, I do sincerely express my genuine regret”)—all of this obviously causes them distress and uncertainty (Agassi again: “Was I in error causing the pain that I caused? Was it avoidable? I do not know.”). But in the end, it would seem that estrangement does not cause polemicists *so much* distress as to prevent them from continuing to write in this vein. Most polemicists publish more than one polemical work; they are “repeat offenders.” (In Agassi’s case, his uncertainties did not prevent him from republishing his polemical reviews in the aforementioned volume!) Is polemicizing a compulsive activity? Whether or not it is pathological, it certainly appears to be an activity that causes the polemicist some anguish. Even the great Tibetan scholar Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga’ rgyal msthan (1182–1251) feels this:

When I announce [my views] publicly, those who do not know the Tantras become angry. Who is right, those angry ones or I? O Conquerors and their Sons, I pray that you consider [this].¹³

It is simply a fact of the matter: polemics is criticism, criticism is painful, pain causes anger and resentment, and this causes estrangement.¹⁴ It takes a certain amount of mental fortitude and stamina on the part of the polemicist to withstand the kind of backlash that usually results from their writing, but then polemicists are strong-willed people, and they can usually stand the heat.¹⁵ In any case, whatever rift might ensue between polemicists and their opponents is usually made up for by the status that polemicists gain within their own communities—that is, among those who are partisan to *their* views. Indeed, many religious polemicists see their work as an act of devotion (to the founders of their traditions, to their present communities, and to future generations).¹⁶

Yet another reason for the genre's popularity, therefore, has to do with the role that it plays in forming and nourishing a sense of identity and belonging. Polemics is both the parent and the child of sectarian identity-formation. When such an identity becomes important to a culture—as it did in Tibet during the “later propagation period”—scholars will often resort to polemics to create a sense of distinctiveness for their particular school. Followers of that school will in turn look to polemical works to give them a sense of identity: to show them how their school differs from and is superior to that of their rivals. Polemical literature is extremely effective in this regard for, as a form of apophatic discourse, its emphasis is precisely on differentiation. It makes sectarian distinctions real by introducing actually instantiated alternative views, but also safeguards sectarian identity by undercutting the alternatives that it introduces. Thus, it provides the partisans of a given theory or school with exposure to opponents' views; but because it embeds those views in a larger context that includes their refutation, it becomes a “safe haven” in which to explore alterity. All of this is to say that polemics is an important factor not only in “the invention of tradition,” but also in perpetuating tradition.

It would be misleading, however, to see polemics as invariably directed *externally*—that is, outside of a given tradition. Not all polemics are *inter*-sectarian. One has only to think of the intra-disciplinary disputes that exist within the Western academy, or the schisms that have plagued the Buddhist tradition since its founding, not to mention the battles that have been waged (or are still being waged) *within* many of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism to see that polemics—and sometimes the most bitter polemics—can be *intra*-sectarian.¹⁷ And one wonders, for example, if there are specific historical, political, and economic conditions that favor the emergence of inter- versus intra-sectarian polemics. Although it is

tempting to think that intra-sectarian polemic always postdates the inter-sectarian variety, this does not seem to be the case, given that there are frequently bitter squabbles that arise in the very formation of religious sects.¹⁸ But despite the fact that controversy is rampant within religious traditions—during, but not limited to, the time of their founding—the *occlusion* of controversy (for example, the suppression of intra-sectarian polemical texts) can also be an important strategy in the formation and preservation of sectarian identity. If there is a generalization that *can* be made here, perhaps it is that inter-sectarian polemical literature is more likely to become public and to survive as a cultural artifact than its intra-sectarian equivalent, for no other reason than that traditions are loathe to hang their dirty laundry out to dry.¹⁹

Let us digress for a moment to ask a question that is most urgent. Is sectarian differentiation really such a good thing? Should a literature that encourages sectarian distinction be promoted, either in its own right or indirectly, by making it into the object of the scholar's gaze? What of inter-sectarian strife? We would argue, stipulatively, that there is a difference between "sectarian differentiation" and "sectarianism." The former is simply an inevitable historical development that arises out of human beings' desire to create and nurture social and institutional structures of belonging—intellectual and spiritual homes, places where we share common goals and a common language—in a word, *traditions*. Sectarianism, by contrast, is a pathological outgrowth of sectarian differentiation wherein traditions become static and reified, and wherein dogmatism prevails. Here dialogue gives way to monologue. In its more extreme form, raw forms of power (legal, military, etc.) are used to enforce the will of the hegemony. True, sectarian differentiation often gives rise to sectarianism, but the latter is not an inevitable outcome of the former. As we shall see below, Tibetan culture has seen periods where sectarian developments have been a condition for tremendous intellectual and spiritual flourishing. It has also seen periods when the society has been ravaged by sectarian violence and bloodshed. In large part due to the catholicity of the present Dalai Lama, the ethos in the Tibetan religious world today is one of relative harmony and mutual tolerance. Bon (Tibet's indigenous religion), Tibetan Islam, and the "canonical" schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Rnying ma, Bka' brgyud, Sa skya, and Dge lugs) have been relatively successful at recouping their respective cultural legacies, both in the diaspora and (to a lesser extent) in Chinese-occupied Tibet. While these traditions retain a strong sense of identity, they live side-by-side in relative harmony. Sometimes there is dialogue and cross-fertilization although, as the

Dalai Lama frequently points out, perhaps not enough. Of course, there are always occasions when the peace breaks down; but if nothing else, the present ecumenical climate shows us that strong sectarian differentiation need not always culminate in the social pathology of sectarian *ism*.

Let us grant that polemical literature is important in sectarian identity-formation. Is this the most relevant reason for the genre's popularity? In the final analysis it may be *style* more than anything else that explains the disproportionate appeal of such works. Polemical literature has glitz. It is to philosophy what action movies are to the film industry. A polemical work entices by titillating. It uses caricature, exaggerating the boundary between good and evil. It employs invective, insult, and at times even overtly violent language. And in the end the "bad guys" get reduced to dust. Is it not the case that the instinct that keeps us glued to the screen when we are watching *Mad Max* or *The Terminator* is the same instinct that also makes us enjoy a good polemical tract?

Socio-historical and psycho-analogical explanations for the popularity of the genre notwithstanding, there are good *philosophical* reasons for why polemics has been (and should continue to be) at the forefront of our study of Buddhist thought. So obvious that it may go unnoticed is the fact that polemical discourse is *dialogical*.²⁰ It introduces the voice of the other, and not just any other, but an other that occupies the position of challenger. Of course, not all polemical writing actually identifies the opponent by name. Keeping one's rivals anonymous is a well-known rhetorical strategy for denying them power and intellectual plausibility. (It is always easier and safer to dismiss an unattributed view than it is to reject the position of a known scholar who has a reputation.) But even when the opponent is *not* named, a polemical work by its very nature shows us that there is more than one side to a given issue, that things are not quite as simple as they appear to be on the surface, that there are others in the world who hold views different from the author's own, and that they have their reasons for doing so. True, the opponent is portrayed for the sake of being refuted, but a polemicist does not have a completely free hand in the way he depicts his adversary. Polemicists must tread a fine line, for if they caricature the opponent's stance—if they paint a picture of their opponent that is inaccurate and extreme—the intelligent reader will pick up on this. The refutation of straw men quickly turns philosophy into farce. So the position of the polemicist's opponent must always seem plausible, at least plausible enough that it appears worth refuting. Otherwise, why compose the work in the first place? Of course, polemics is also dangerous and risky. When confronted

with plausible opponents, there is always the chance that readers will side *with them*, and that they will find the arguments offered by the polemicist to fall short of their mark. And this, as we know, is the one of the reasons why polemics is a *controlled* genre, why polemical works are frequently banned, why students are discouraged from reading such tracts until they are “intellectually well-formed” and until sectarian identity has been firmly inculcated in them. Polemics, therefore, is a literature that is intended “for mature audiences only.”

Good philosophers are like good chess players, and much of philosophy unfolds in the way that an imaginary game of chess does. The scholar makes a move in his mind, always anticipating how an opponent will react, constructing hypothetical objections and dispatching them. But of course not every imagined countermove will be made in a real game. In the end, the imaginary game may turn out to be just that—the playing out of possibilities that will never occur in a real-life confrontation. When the game of philosophy (or chess) is played out in the mind of a single individual, there are no constraints, nothing to curb the imaginative (some would say “paranoid”) impulse. It is this, in part, that has led to the charge that much of philosophy is nothing but mental masturbation. But polemics is a different kind of philosophy from the one just described. Polemics is more like playing a *real* game of chess, since it engages a real-life opponent.²¹ Here the philosopher/player is responding to views/moves that are actually instantiated by a real opponent in history. And even if the polemicist’s opponent/interlocutor has long since passed away, the disputant can expect a response from the latter-day followers of his adversary. This grounds polemics and gives it an air of reality that is missing from more speculative, monological forms of philosophical discourse.

The rhetoric of a polemical treatise also engages the reader in a more active fashion than simple expository and speculative prose. Polemics demands a more immediate response from the reader. It constructs a world in which there is a sense of urgency, a real need for evaluation: “You are either with us or against us. Decide now!” All of this gives it an immediacy lacking in other forms of philosophical prose.

Of course, polemicists are often given to excess. They sometimes *do* caricature their opponents’ positions. They exaggerate, and at times even misrepresent, their rivals. In their exuberance to “neutralize” the views of their opponents, their logic is sometimes less than flawless. And the motives of polemicists are in many cases far from noble. A desire for reputation, patronage, power, and followers is in some cases more evident as the driving force

than a desire for the truth. All of these facts—none of which, of course, can be denied—have led some scholars to paint a bleak picture of the genre. The words of Dan Martin are not atypical of the critics of polemics:

...polemic is extreme testimony produced under a state of duress and usually put forward to induce a state of duress. Polemic does its best to undo the background and authority of a tradition as it understands itself, and in various ways remake that background into something disreputable and unworthy of further interest. Seeing this delegitimizing motive behind polemics, we may yet at times find truths in them, but they should hardly be our primary sources of truths. At best they can only occasionally, and that despite their designs, supply some useful points of secondary verification. In any case, we will keep polemics filed away in a folder clearly marked with the words “hostile testimony.”²²

Martin’s somewhat hyperbolic rhetoric—his polemic against polemics, as it were—is, if nothing else, at least consistent with his view of what polemics is,²³ and of how it should be done. But the bleak picture that he paints of the genre is of course a caricature. There is obviously bad polemical literature but there is also, happily, a more noble variety. At its worst, polemics exaggerates and misrepresents. It is sophistic and at times even petulant. Instead of bringing about positive change, it causes views to become entrenched, and is therefore counterproductive.²⁴ It is all of the things that Martin says it is in this passage, and more. But there is also a more dignified variety of the genre: polemics that is truly motivated by the desire to know the truth, that is fair to the opponent, that is concerned with the issues and not with *ad hominem* attack, that relies on sound logic and arguments that are subtle and even convincing.²⁵ But in the end, perhaps the truth lies somewhere between Martin’s view and my own. Idealistic portrayals of a genre (whether as good or as evil), while useful heuristically, always fall short of the mark if our goal is to understand real historical examples. And it may be that polemical literature, like all things human, probably has something of both the demon and the angel in it. But even in its more demonic forms, we would maintain, polemics is an unprecedented source for exploring religious-philosophical thought, for it is always possible, as Martin reminds us, that even in the worst of cases, “we may yet at times find truths” in these texts.²⁶

*Religious Polemics in Tibet*²⁷

As one of the world's great religious-philosophical systems, the Tibetan tradition is sufficiently rich that its literature spans the entire cataphatic-apophatic spectrum. At the cataphatic end, we find expository works epitomized by the genres of *word-commentary* (*tshig 'grel*) or *commentary qua annotations* (*mchan 'grel*), which, as the names imply, provides the reader with glosses of a classical (Indian or Tibetan) text, elucidating the internal structure of a work, analyzing its terminology, providing definitions, expanding on arguments, and providing additional proof texts.²⁸ At the apophatic end of the spectrum are polemical works whose primary goal is to refute opponents (on which, see below).²⁹ And then, of course, there is much that falls in between: works that have dual agendas—to set forth one's own system, but in the process to repudiate the views of philosophical competitors, or to respond to their objections.³⁰ An example of this latter, mixed-genre is the so-called *Collected Topics* (*bsdus grwa*) literature,³¹ which actually codifies both the apophatic and cataphatic elements into the very structure of the text. In *Collected Topics* texts, each subject is treated in three modes: through the refutation of others' positions (*gzhan lugs dgag pa*), through the establishment of one's own position (*rang lugs gzbag pa*), and through the rebuttal of others' objections to one's own position (*spong ba*).³² Despite the clearly apophatic dimension of the *Collected Topics* texts—the truth is partially arrived at by engaging and repudiating what is false—the genre is not, strictly speaking, polemical. In its post-fifteenth century Dge lugs form, which is the main form of this literature available to us today, it is a pedagogical genre used to teach students the art of debate. In most instances, the “others' positions” are considered not so much because they represent the positions of real opponents, but because they are heuristically useful to the overarching goal of giving students an overview of the important topics of Buddhist doctrine and of training students in the art of doctrinal disputation.

Since the text of *Go rams pa* translated here is a polemical work, we now turn to considering Tibetan polemics in more detail. Our purpose is to contextualize *Go rams pa*'s work by situating it within the broader field of literature to which it belongs. We begin with a general, synchronic discussion of polemics as a genre of Tibetan literature, discussing some of the nomenclature used in the titles of these texts, as well as some of their structural features and rhetoric. In the following section we consider Tibetan polemics from a more diachronic perspective, offering a brief (and admittedly impressionistic) historical overview of the genre.

The corpus of Tibetan polemical writings appears to be relatively small. A search of the most complete digital bibliographical database of Tibetan literature yet compiled, that of the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (TBRC),³³ reveals that of the more than 28,000 volumes listed, less than one percent of the works can be considered overtly polemical based on their titles.³⁴ Of these about half are philosophical, and about one quarter deal with tantra. The rest range across all fields of Tibetan learning, from monastic discipline to medicine to grammar.³⁵

Despite the relative paucity of polemical texts in the Tibetan literary corpus, however, the genre is one of the most important and popular. Some of the most significant and renowned texts in Tibetan literature are polemical. And mixed-genre works—texts that are only partially polemical—are often remembered more for their polemical than for their irenic prose. We shall consider some of the more important examples of the genre in the following section. Here, we are concerned with the more general features of such works.

Polemical passages can be found in a variety of texts of different genres. And sometimes we find an entire work of a genre that is otherwise non-polemical used for polemical ends. For example, the ordinance (*bka' shog*),³⁶ the epistle (*spring yig*),³⁷ and a genre known as “replies to questions” (*dris lan, zhus lan*)³⁸ have all been used to launch broadsides against opponents. But there *is* a class of texts in Tibetan literature that might be termed “polemics,” even if Tibetan authors use a variety of different words to refer to it. The indigenous Tibetan nomenclature used to designate a literary work as polemical is twofold: (a) terms that are used to refer to works that bring forth charges (of inconsistencies, fallacies, etc.) against opponents, and that therefore initiate polemical exchanges, and (b) terms that are used to refer to works that respond to the charges made by others. As examples of the former—what we might call the accusatorial moment that initiates a polemical exchange—we find terms like “debate/dispute/argument” (*rtsod pa*), “disputational document or record” (*rtsod yig*),³⁹ “refutation” (*dgag pa*), “record of a refutation” (*dgag yig*), “adversarial speech” (*rgol ngag*), and “critique/repudiation” (*sun 'byin*). As examples of the latter terms—the terms used to designate the responsorial moments in polemical exchanges—we find words like “response to a dispute/argument” (*rtsod lan*), “countering/overturning an argument” (*rtsod spong, rtsod bzlog*), “response to a refutation” (*dgag lan, honorific gsung lan*), and “rebuttal” (*brgal lan*).⁴⁰ To use the analogy of warfare, the first type of text—the one that initiates an exchange—might be likened unto an offensive, while the second type is more defensive.⁴¹ The fact that polemics as a genre is bifurcated in this way

means that Tibetans view polemics chiefly as exchanges or dialogues, not unlike the exchanges that take place in oral debates. A polemicist will initiate an exchange by writing a text that is critical of a particular figure, of the texts that that figure follows, and/or the views that he holds. Later followers of the scholar being attacked will respond. Each moment in the exchange may be separated by centuries and the subsequent responses and rebuttals may go on for hundreds of years—indeed, indefinitely.

In general, the titles of indigenous Tibetan literary compositions have two parts. The first part is usually informational. It provides the reader with the gist of the subject matter of the text. The second part of a title is more poetic, a flourish that, despite its being encoded in the language of metaphor, nonetheless gives one an indication of the subject matter and genre of the work. In the case of polemical texts, the words just mentioned—“argument,” “refutation,” “rebuttal,” “confutation,” etc.—are frequently found in the informational portion of the title. For example, a polemical work on pilgrimage written in 1617 by Rig ’dzin Chos kyi grags pa (1595–1659) is known under two titles. The longer one reads *An Eloquent Disquisition Aimed at Destroying Another’s Adversarial Claim: A Necklace for Those Who Preach Scripture and Reasoning (Gzhan gyi rgol ngag ’joms pa’i legs bshad lung rigs smra ba’i mgul rgyan)*. The alternate title condenses the first (that is, the informational) part of the longer title, and reads *A Response to a Refutation: A Necklace for Those Who Preach Scripture and Reasoning (Dgag lan lung rigs smra ba’i mgul rgyan)*. From the informational part of the title, then, the reader gleans that this is a polemical text and, more specifically, that it is a work belonging to what we are calling the second (*responsorial* or *defensive*) moment in a polemical exchange. In the informational part of a title, we often find opponents’ views characterized as exemplifying ignorance (*ma rig*), error (*’khrul pa*), evil (*ngan pa*), falsity (*log rtog*), and lies (*log smra*). The polemicist’s text is then characterized as what overcomes (*’joms*) or destroys (*tshar gcod*) that error.

The poetical or ornamental part of the title of polemical works can also be indicative of their genre, though in this case one gleans this through metaphorical allusions in which the opponent’s views are likened, for example, unto darkness (*mun pa*) and the polemicists’ treatise is portrayed as a lamp that clears away that darkness (*mun sel sgron me*). Throughout history, Tibetan polemicists have been fond of portraying themselves as fierce animals—lions (*seng ge*), dragons (*brug*), etc.—who can easily subdue their prey, and whose roar brings fear into the hearts of all who hear it. And they have used a wide variety of metaphors for their texts, calling them “diamond

scepters” (*lag nyal*), “diamond particles” (*rdo rje gzegs ma*), “diamond weapons” (*pha lam rdo rje’i mtshon cha*), “meteors” (*gnam lcags*), “lightning” (*me char*), “thunder” (*’brug sgra*), “large drums” (*rnga chen*), and so forth—all of which are seen as having the capacity to destroy opponents’ views, or to drown out their speech.⁴² Take, for example, a defense of the Rnying ma tradition against its critics written by ’Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub (1761–1829), *A Meteor that Overturns [The Views of] a Critique: The Roar of Wild Laughter of a Hundred Dragons (Rtsod bzlog gnam lcags ’brug brya dgod pa’i nga ro)*. While the author resorts to a variety of metaphors—indeed, to more than do most texts—the reader will get a sense of how poetic images are used to convey the agonistic character of a polemical text. Of course, not all polemical works contain such metaphors. For example, the work of Go rams pa translated here is entitled *Distinguishing the Views: Moonlight [to Illuminate] the Main Points of the Supreme Path (Lta ba’i shan ’byed theg mchog gnad kyi zla zer)*. So while it is true that many polemical texts inscribe their genre into their title, we should not think that this is an invariable rule of the genre.

Turning now from the title to the body of polemical works, it is not uncommon for polemicists to begin (or end) their works by expressing a certain degree of trepidation at the task that is before them (or the task that they have just completed). They often bemoan the condition of the world in which they live. It is the degeneration (*snyigs ma*) of the present age that has caused false views to arise, they tell us, for we live in “an evil time, a time of disputatiousness” (*dus ngan rtsod pa’i dus*).⁴³ While reluctant to engage in the task of refuting “false views,” thereby adding to the contentiousness that already exists in the world, it is nonetheless the polemicist’s duty, or burden (*khur*), to do so. Put another way, a certain rhetorical ambivalence or hesitation is required on the part of the polemicist, lest it appear they enjoy their work. This usually gives way to a discussion of motivations. Polemicists are all too aware of the fact that not everyone who engages in controversy is operating with the best of intentions. Listen to the warning of Bu ston Rin chen grub:

Those who, desiring one’s own fame at the expense of others,
Who with craft, deceit, harsh words and evil intentions,
Engage in various forms of prattle that hurts the minds of others—
Polemics of this kind are the cause [to be reborn in] hell.⁴⁴

Is publicly challenging the views of others then worth the risk? Chag lo tsā ba believes that it is, because, as he says,

...there is great purpose in doing so. Not out of jealousy or pride, or to vanquish others, but so as to protect the teachings of the Buddha, so as to make the Dharma flourish, so as to repudiate false and impure doctrines, and so as to clear away the veil of misconceptions.⁴⁵

Another author tells us that “it is out of compassion for sentient beings that we have spoken up.”⁴⁶ If left unchallenged, wrong views will proliferate, especially among those of inferior intellect (*blo dman*). Altruism is therefore the polemicists’ ostensible motivation, but of course we know that there are always other motives—political, economic, etc.—also at work.⁴⁷

Tibetan polemicists rhetorically construct their audience as being very broad—all sentient beings, all Tibetans, all “holy beings” (*skyes bu dam pa*), and, on one occasion at least, all Buddhas and bodhisattvas⁴⁸—but it doesn’t take a great deal of discernment to see that their audiences are really much more local than their rhetoric suggests. Sometimes polemicists write to their opponents in the second person, directing their criticisms at a specific person or school: “You claim (or you do) X, but this is not right for Y and Z reasons.” But as often as not, they will simply deal with issues impersonally: “X is false for Y and Z reasons.” This does not mean, however, that Tibetan polemics operates with an abstract notion of truth, the way that post-Enlightenment Western philosophy does.⁴⁹ As Stephen Toulmin reminds us, a nowhere-situated reasoning that is in search of an abstract, disembodied truth is a relatively recent development, even in the history of Western thought;⁵⁰ and as Talal Asad has shown, this model of reasoning is hardly the model that is operative in all cultures.⁵¹ Closer to the concerns of this volume, as Georges Dreyfus has observed, because the Tibetan scholastic tradition is heavily commentarial, “any philosophical elaboration must be presented as a commentary on an authoritative text” so that “views could never be presented on their own philosophical merits but only as authoritative commentary.”⁵² This is an important point to keep in mind, especially as we turn to the work of Go rams pa. Classical Tibetan scholars were operating with a set of assumptions—and were bound by a set of rules—that are different from those of modern Western scholars. For example, most of the Tibetan debates presume as a ground-rule the validity of Indian Buddhism, even if what Indian Buddhism *is* is often up for grabs. This is understandable, given the widespread Tibetan assumption (at least from the eighth century on) that Indian Buddhism is the *traditio franca*, the common source of all true doctrine and praxis.⁵³ The point is that

“truth,” “reasoning,” and “argumentation” simply mean different things in a tradition that is committed to working within the bounds of a religious canon.⁵⁴ But this insight must be tempered through some further observations, lest it be thought that Tibetan polemics is nothing but dogmatics. First, we must bear in mind that the Tibetan canon is vast. A wide range of views are to be found within its thousands of texts. Scholars could therefore find scriptural warrant for many different positions, *and they did*. Second, the Tibetan imagination is subtle and profound. Trained exegetes could always find clever ways of creatively “interpreting” texts so as to bend them to their will, a project that has sometimes been called *eisegesis* (“reading into”) as opposed to *exegesis* (“reading [the meaning] out of [the text]”). So even if truth always had to be presented in a way that was responsive (and responsible) to the tradition, there was a great deal of wiggle-room. This also allowed for innovation and, *inter alia*, for the radically divergent views that the reader will see presented in texts such as Go rams pa’s. Finally, we must not forget that for Tibetans “religious experience” (*nyams pa*, *nyams rtogs*) came to be considered another way of legitimating innovation. While the tradition may be loathe to admit that experience is a way of injecting novelty into the system, it is nonetheless the case that Tibetan thinkers have often resorted to visionary and other forms of “mystical” experience to validate new intellectual agendas—to create theories and practices for which it would be difficult to find canonical warrant.⁵⁵ All of this is to say that while it is true that the canon serves as the rhetorical boundary for Tibetan polemical speculation, there existed mechanisms for transcending that boundary.

In the following section, the reader will get a sense of the range of topics debated by Tibetan polemicists. Here we simply note that Tibetan religious polemics has three major foci: practices, texts, and doctrines. Debates center, for example, on whether certain *practices* (both ritual and meditative) are truly Buddhist, or whether they have been “adulterated” or influenced by non-Buddhist (chiefly Bon and “Hindu”) customs or traditions. *Textual disputes* are concerned with the authenticity of specific literary works (chiefly, though not exclusively,⁵⁶ tantras), and with questions of interpretation. *Doctrinal* controversies focus on the question of whether certain doctrines are consistent (internally consistent, consistent with our experience of the world, with the teachings of Buddhism, etc.).⁵⁷

While it is true that Tibetan religious polemics is mostly issue-focused, we do not want to paint a picture of polemics as a lofty and objective exchange between two parties. Passions were involved, and not infrequently

authors succumbed to the temptation to attack their opponents *ad hominem*, or to engage in any one of a number of forms of argument that in Western logic are classified under the rubric of *informal fallacies*.⁵⁸ There is plenty of unconvincing argumentation that takes place in these texts, and plenty of name-calling. In fact, there are probably few cultures that have mastered the art of the polemical insult to the extent that Tibetans have. And this undoubtedly is part of what makes the genre a spectacle, and therefore what makes it popular. Tibetan polemicists sometimes claim that their opponents are under the influence of drugs, or of various diseases, or worse, that they are possessed by demons—for why else would they be babbling nonsense. They compare them to dumb animals (sheep is the preferred species). They accuse them of pride, but too stupid to know even *how* to boast, they do their “dance” with “the decapitated head [rather than the tail] of a peacock hung from their behinds.”⁵⁹ Consider these lines by one of the great masters of invective, Mkhas grub Dge legs dpal bzang (1385–1438):

Your sophistry...has spoiled the Conqueror's vast teachings.
 It is the banner of demons, the messenger of evil spirits...
 But you, thief of the doctrine, who spread your demonic words
 in all directions,
 Cannot resist the profound doctrine, which, like a diamond,
 I now use to pierce your heart.

Perpetually drunk on the evil fluids of jealousy,
 You give yourself over to the recitation of spells that harm the
 holy ones.
 Fooled by devils, mistaken are those poor beings
 Who consider such prattle to be the advice of a virtuous friend.⁶⁰

And this is just the tip of the iceberg! Even as serious a scholar as Go rams pa cannot resist suggesting, for example, that Tsong kha pa's supposed conversations with Mañjuśrī may have been a dialogue with a demon instead. Obviously, comments like these ruffled feathers, especially when they were directed at the great saints or founding figures of a tradition. But from their years on the debate grounds of Tibet's great monasteries, Tibetan scholars also learned to take such comments in stride. All that said, if one generalization can be made about the historical development of Tibetan polemics, it is probably that there is an increasing tendency to focus on issues. This is not to say that name-calling—polemics as vilification—ever ceases. If

anything, it becomes more refined and vicious over time. It is to say that, in the words of the old Buddhist adage, scholars increasingly “focus on the issue (*chos*) rather than on the person (*gang zag*).” As this happens, the genre becomes increasingly more rationalistic. This will become clear in the following section, as we turn to a historical overview of Tibetan religious polemics. A word of warning, however: Tibetan literature is vast, and Western scholars have barely begun to scratch the surface of this rich corpus of writings. The overview that follows, then, is of necessity impressionistic. Still, it will give the reader a general idea of the way that polemical literature has evolved over the centuries in Tibet. It is meant to provide a context for understanding Go rams pa’s own work as one of the highpoints of the genre.

A Brief History of Tibetan Polemical Literature

As with most things Tibetan, the art of polemics is heavily influenced by the Indian Buddhist tradition. Polemics was a part of Buddhism from the earliest times. A variety of issues, both doctrinal and ethical, were debated in the centuries after the Buddha’s death, and in some instances these led to permanent schisms in the monastic community.⁶¹ Indian Buddhism eventually developed both a theory and a formal practice of oral disputation.⁶² Some Indian Buddhist literary theories—Vasubandhu’s rules for a commentator, for example—even considered the response to opponents’ objections an essential aspect of more cataphatic genres like commentary.⁶³ And we know, of course, that Indian scholars wrote entire texts that were polemical in tone.⁶⁴ The point is that there is substantial Indian precedent for the Tibetan art of polemics within both the theory and practice of oral and literary forms of disputation.

The adoption of Buddhism by the Tibetan imperial court in the eighth century was not unproblematic. Tibet was not a religious *tabula rasa*. Bon, even if it was not yet a systematized tradition, was nonetheless a part of Tibetan life at various levels of the culture. It was also an important component of Tibetan ethnic and social identity. Even if, as Dan Martin puts it, “the internal Tibetan dialectic between Bon and Chos [i.e., Buddhism]” is already attested to in a Dunhuang text,⁶⁵ there appear to be no examples of Buddhist anti-Bon or Bon anti-Buddhist polemical (or even mixed-genre) texts dating to the early dissemination period (*snga dar*).⁶⁶ While it seems clear that some sort of public Buddhist-Bon confrontation took place

in the court of Khri song lde'u btsan in the mid-eighth century, we have little knowledge of what, if anything, was actually debated. Indeed, the Bon po and Buddhist sources differ as to whether it was chiefly a contest of words (*ngag nus 'gran*) or of the magical abilities of each side.⁶⁷ In any case, we have no early polemical work that purports to be a record of this encounter. A Buddhist anti-Bon polemic does arise in the “later propagation period,”⁶⁸ and it continues throughout the centuries.⁶⁹ Some would argue that it is even implicit in contemporary Western academic writing on Bon.⁷⁰ The Bon anti-Buddhist polemic seems to begin only in the fourteenth century.⁷¹

If there is one doctrinal conflict that epitomizes the polemical impulse during the early dissemination period, it is not the Buddhist-Bon confrontation, but rather the Chinese-Indian Buddhist one or, as Seyfort Ruegg aptly puts it, the Sino-Tibetan vs. Indo-Tibetan one. In the so-called “Great Debate” that the sources tell us took place at the then newly founded monastery of Bsam yas between 792 and 794 C.E., the renowned Indian scholar Kamalaśīla is supposed to have debated the Chinese Ch'an master, Hwa shang Mahāyāna. The Tibetan sources tell us that the debate (*shags*) took place before the emperor. Kamalaśīla was the advocate of a “gradualist” (*rim gyis pa*) position, the view that enlightenment is attained through the incremental purification of the mind that takes place by the practice of the six perfections. This path, he held, requires analytical mental activity and a commitment to the intentional accumulation of merit. Hwa shang held the “simultaneist” (*cig car ba*) view—that (for advanced adepts at least) enlightenment is *not* attained gradually through the purification of the mind, that for these individuals analytical activity is a distraction and the accumulation of merit unnecessary. Instead, he claimed, enlightenment, as something that is already immanent in the individual, can immediately be accessed by directing the mind internally, by ceasing mentation, and by becoming aware of the nature of mind itself. Most of the Tibetan accounts tell us that Kamalaśīla won the debate, and this is said to have sealed the fate of Tibetan Buddhism forever. King Khri song lde'u btsan, who served as “arbiter” or “judge” (*dpang po*) in the debate, declared that henceforth Tibetans would follow the Indian Buddhist tradition, in particular the system of Nāgārjuna. Many of the accounts also add that when he returned to China, Hwa shang left behind one of his shoes, an omen of the fact that his views would someday return to Tibet.

Western-trained scholars have been embroiled for decades in a controversy of their own concerning, among other things, whether the Bsam yas

debate ever actually took place.⁷² Those who deny the historicity of the debate note that the Tibetan sources that mention it date to the twelfth century or later.⁷³ This is true. There are no early Tibetan texts of a strictly polemical genre that give us a blow-by-blow account of the debate. That later Tibetan scholars should have written about Hwa shang Mahāyāna and his school in historical works—rather than as the object of an ongoing polemic—is not surprising, for by the time these authors were writing (post twelfth century), there were no longer any real proponents of Ch’an in Tibet, at least none that were considered a major “threat.” The views of Hwa shang *are* treated more philosophically and polemically, however, when Tibetan doctrinal developments (Rdzogs chen, Mahāmudrā, and certain interpretations of Madhyamaka) come to be seen as the re-emergence of Hwa shang’s views—the fulfillment of the prophecy implicit in the shoe he left behind. But in most instances, these invocations of Hwa shang represent formulaic and rhetorical moves, rather than actual philosophical engagements with real opponents. Over the centuries, Hwa shang has become the quintessential philosophical other. As Seyfort Ruegg puts it, “his teachings have come to fulfil a particularly emblematic function, one that may in fact be somewhat different from the position actually occupied by the historical *ho-shang* Mo-ho-yen.”⁷⁴

While it is true that most of our sources concerning the dispute between the gradualist and simultaneist camps at Bsam yas are historical rather than polemical, there *do* exist several early texts (or portions of texts) that deal with the doctrinal issues of the debate. Taken together, these works give us a broad picture of the controversy. Representative of the gradualist side, there is Kamalaśīla’s *Bhāvanākrama* (Stages of meditation). Written in Sanskrit, and in three parts, it was translated into Tibetan. It is especially the third of these *Bhāvanākramas* that, although it never mentions Hwa shang by name, takes up what is evidently the position of Hwa shang’s school with the goal of refuting it.⁷⁵ From the Chinese side, one might mention a Chinese text recovered at Dunhuang, Wang Hsi’s *Ratification of the True Principles of the Great Vehicle of Sudden Awakening* (*Tun wu ta cheng cheng li chueh*), a work that delineates and defends the views of Hwa shang and declares *him* the victor in the debate. Also representative of the simultaneist position are the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of the *Bka’ thang sde lnga* (The narrative of the five groups),⁷⁶ a treasure text (*gter ma*)⁷⁷ that, while not compiled/discovered until the fourteenth century, appears to be derived from early traditions, so that one must agree with Tucci that the work “preserves many old fragments pieced together.”⁷⁸ An exposition and defense of

the simultaneist position, it states that the king opted for “the Madhyamaka,” but then goes on to equate that Madhyamaka with the simultaneist view. The text clearly portrays Kamalaśīla as having the inferior philosophical/doctrinal position. These and other works like the *Eye-Lamp of Dhyāna* (*Bsam gtan mig sgron*), allow us to piece together the controversy from various viewpoints.

True, none of these texts are polemical *in their entirety*. They clearly have other agendas over and above that of countering the views of the opponent—agendas that are catechetical, historical, hagiographical, and political. Moreover, two of these texts are not even of Tibetan origin. Taken together, though, they represent literary records of a polemic that was a landmark in Tibetan religious history. In particular, Kamalaśīla’s *Bhāvanākramas* became for later Tibetan polemicists a model of what a sophisticated doctrinal/philosophical polemical text should look like. When doctrinal issues (rather than the authenticity of texts or practices) became the focus of disputes several centuries later, polemicists would follow the lead of Kamalaśīla in the way they formulated arguments. In many instances, they would simply quote or paraphrase him.⁷⁹ This is not to say that later Tibetan polemicists are not innovative or original, or that it is a single set of issues that are played out again and again. There is no question but that there are issues and methods of argumentation that we find in later Tibetan polemical works that are *not* presaged in the *Bhāvanākramas*. It *is* to say that just as Hwa shang becomes the paradigmatic “other,” Kamalaśīla becomes in some ways the paradigmatic defender of the faith, especially when the issue has to do, as it often does, with the question of quietism. Hwa shang’s shoe may continually haunt Tibet—or at least the imagination of its scholars—but so too does Kamalaśīla’s spirit.

Even if it may have been written in part as a response to events that took place in Tibet, the *Bhāvanākrama* is not, as has been mentioned, an indigenous Tibetan work. What probably *does* deserve the title of the earliest polemical document in the history of Tibetan literature, the *Ordinance of Lha bla ma Ye shes ’od*, is written at the beginning of the next major period, the *later dissemination* period, or *phyi dar*. The document in some ways *defines*—at least for *us*, and in retrospect—this next period in Tibetan religious history. Let us first set the background for the writing of this work. With the murder of the emperor Glang dar ma by a Buddhist monk in the year 842, there was a resurgence of Buddhism in Tibet. But since the murder of Glang dar ma also brought with it the demise of the Tibetan empire, in the absence of unified patronage, Buddhism became decentralized and

many different traditions began to flourish. The Buddhism practiced in the seats of power—in the courts of local rulers, in the houses of the nobles, and in more urbanized areas—was more “classical,” which is to say more monastic and more Indian. But the *villages* were the realm of the tantric priests (*sngags pa*), who practiced an amalgam of Indian tantra and Bon that was concerned with the enactment of practical, ecstatic—and at times, it would seem, even orgiastic—rituals: in short, with magic. We know from various hagiographical texts that a certain skepticism about the way that tantra was being practiced in Tibet at this time was growing among the elites.⁸⁰

One of the best examples of this discontent with village religion,⁸¹ and one of the most important documents of the early *phyi dar*, is the *Ordinance* (*Bka’ shog*) of Ye shes ’od, the king of Pu hrang in northwestern Tibet, who lived in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries.⁸² Only a few pages long, the document is a polemic against the practices of “the priests and tantrikas who live in the villages” (*grong na gnas pa’i mkhan po sngags pa rnams*). Various kinds of practices are condemned: sex (“union,” *sbyor*), the killing of animals (“liberation,” *sgrol*), ritual human sacrifice (“the offering ritual,” *mchod sgrub*), as well as other magical practices like the creation of ritually empowered herbal medicines (*sman bsgrub*) and the magical manipulation of corpses (*bam sgrub*), though of course we do not know how much the text exaggerates.⁸³ That the work is polemical is clear not only from its style—from its arguments and its invective tone—but also from the fact that it was considered an anti-Rnying ma polemic (*dgag yig*) by later Rnying ma pa apologists like Sog zlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552–1624), who, even some six centuries after Ye shes ’od’s document first appeared, considered it a significant enough attack on his school that he felt the need to include a response to it in his broader defense (*dgag lan*)⁸⁴ of the Rnying ma tradition.⁸⁵

Slightly later than Ye shes ’od’s *Ordinance*, and considerably more sophisticated, is *The Testament of the Pillar* (*Bka’ chems ka khol ma*), which is said to have been “discovered as treasure” (*gter nas bton pa*) by the Indian scholar/saint Atiśa (b. 972/982) in the Lhasa Jokhang temple. The polemical section of the work is quite short,⁸⁶ but it reiterates some of the same concerns of Ye shes ’od’s *Ordinance*—to wit, the need to turn away from false practices (*log spyod*). It also, however, departs from the *Ordinance* insofar as it is concerned not only with othopraxis, but also with proper beliefs, that is, with *orthodoxy*. Hence, it decries the proliferation of false or demonic *doctrines* (*dre chos*) among “a variety of sects” (*dra min chos lugs*)—

doctrines like the “nihilism, that, grasping onto the empty aspect [of things], is especially effective at destroying the conventional truth, and at obstructing ascetic practices of body and speech [i.e., monasticism].”⁸⁷ If *The Testament* dates to the middle of the eleventh century, as many scholars believe, then it represents one of the earliest *doctrinal* polemics of the *phyi dar*.⁸⁸

Ye shes ’od invested a great deal of capital into the reforms for which he was spokesman. He founded the monastery of Tho ling,⁸⁹ financed the translation of Sanskrit texts, and funded young Tibetans to study Buddhism in India. Among these young men was Rin chen bzang po (958–1055), who is known to have carried on the campaign of his patron. Whereas Ye shes ’od’s polemic centered on the critique of tantric *practices*, however, the one initiated by Rin chen bzang po focuses on the critique of tantric *texts*.⁹⁰ Ye shes ’od’s grand nephew, Pho brang Zhi ba ’od (second half of the eleventh century), who identifies himself as a Bka’ gdams pa, wrote his own ordinance, which, true to this new focus, is a polemic aimed at false *texts*. It consists principally of the charge that many of the works central to what would eventually become the Rnying ma school (Zhi ba ’od’s *Ordinance* is chiefly a list of these works) are apocryphal,⁹¹ which is to say that they were not translations from Indian Sanskrit originals. The *Testament of the Pillar* calls these works “demon tantras” (*dre rgyud*). The charge that many of the texts that formed the basis for tantric practice during this time are in fact the fabrications (*rang bzo*) of Tibetans is subsequently taken up by ’Gos Khug pa lhas btsas (b. eleventh century),⁹² a student of Atiśa. It is repeated in the thirteenth century by Chag lo tsā ba Chos rje dpal (1197–1264) in his *Sword of Wisdom that Refutes the False Tantras* (*Sngags log sun ’byin shes rab ral gri*),⁹³ and by Sa skya Paṇḍita in his *Differentiating the Three Vows* (*Sdom gsum rab dbye*).⁹⁴ When the Buddhist scriptural canon (the Bka’ ’gyur) was compiled by Bu ston Rin chen grub in the fourteenth century, he excluded the vast majority of the Rnying ma tantras from the canon.⁹⁵ Such critiques, through word and (editorial) deed, of the authenticity of these tantras, and of the Rnying ma revealed *treasures* (*gter ma*), are found throughout the centuries,⁹⁶ down to the time of the Dge lugs apologist Pha bong kha Bde chen snying po (1878–1941).⁹⁷

Charges that texts are apocryphal are relatively easy to make. Since the Sanskrit originals of the works that had been translated into Tibetan in the early dissemination period were for the most part no longer extant, these charges were also difficult to respond to. But sometimes the charge that a text was inauthentic simply backfired, as in the case of the *Guhyagarbha*

Tantra, a work whose authenticity was widely denied by critics of the Rnying ma pas—until, that is, the Bka' gdams ba scholar Bcom ldan rig pa'i ral gri Dar ma rgyal mtshan (1227–1305) discovered the Sanskrit original!⁹⁸ And, of course, where there is a critique there is usually a response. Hence, there is a Rnying ma counter-polemical literature that addresses the charges that their tantras are apocryphal. This begins, perhaps, with Rog Shes rab 'od (b. 1166).⁹⁹ About a century later, O rgyan Rin chen dpal (1230–1309) writes a similar defense.¹⁰⁰ Klong chen rab 'byams pa Dri med 'od zer (1308–64) pens a defense of the Rnying ma tradition in his *Treatise to Eradicate Evil Misconceptions (Log rtog ngan pa'i bstan bcos)*.¹⁰¹ 'Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal (1392–1481), in his magnum opus, *The Blue Annals (Deb sngon)*, replies to Bu ston briefly by noting that the latter had included in his catalogue of authentic texts a tantra that quotes extensively from one of the tantras he refused to recognize.¹⁰² In his treatises on the “three vows”—the *Sdom gsum rnam nges* and its autocommentary—Mnga' ris Pañ chen Padma dbang rgyal (1487–1542) briefly responds to these same types of critics.¹⁰³ Perhaps the most extensive response from a Rnying ma scholar is found in the wide-ranging work of Sog zlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552–1624).¹⁰⁴ Over a century later, 'Jigs med gling pa (1729/30–98) responds to 'Gos Khug pa lhas btsas's charge that the *Guhya-garbha* is apocryphal in his *Response to Questions Concerning the Tantric Corpus (Rgyud 'bum dri lan)*.¹⁰⁵ In the first decade of the nineteenth century, the great Rnying ma historian Gu ru bkra shis (b. eighteenth century) shows how all of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism have adopted Rnying ma tantric practices, implying that to question the authenticity of the Rnying ma tantras is tantamount to a criticism of all schools.¹⁰⁶ As with the critiques, apologists who argue for the authenticity of the Rnying ma tantras are found all the way up to the twentieth century. For example, Bdud 'joms rin po che's (1904–88) *History of the Nyingma* contains an entire chapter in which he responds to critiques of this kind.¹⁰⁷

Nor is it the case that the defenders of the Rnying ma tantras and *gter ma* are exclusively Rnying ma pas. The great Dge lugs scholar Thu'u bkwan, for example, actually wrote an important defense of the Rnying ma tradition in response to an anti-Rnying ma polemic written by one of his own teachers, Sum pa mkhan po (1704–88).¹⁰⁸

It is also important to realize that it was not only the Rnying ma pas who were challenged in regard to the authenticity of their texts and practices. From as early as the twelfth century, followers of the new translations (*gsar ma pa*) became the object of Rnying ma pas' polemical writings.¹⁰⁹ Chag lo

tsā ba not only criticized the Rnying ma tantras, he also argued that (at least certain forms of) the practice of *cutting* (*gcod*) and *pacification* (*zhi byed*), propounded in Tibet by eleventh-century Indian master Pha Dam pa sang rgyas, were “heathen” practices in Buddhist guise.¹¹⁰ The Sa skya pas also faced similar challenges, for example in a work by Rngog Nyi ma seng ge (twelfth century) entitled *The Thornbush: A Treatise Refuting the Hevajra and Lam 'Bras [Traditions]* (*Dgyes rdor dang lam 'bras 'gog pa'i bstan bcos gze ma ra mgo*).¹¹¹ Around this same time, Sa chen Kun dga' snying po (1092–1158) and his son Bsod nams rtse mo (1142–82) were writing a defense of tantra in general against unnamed opponents, identified only as “followers of the perfections” (*pha rol tu phin pa po*).¹¹² In the first decade of the fifteenth century, the great Sa skya pa scholar Ngor chen kun bzang found himself having to write a series of apologetical defenses of the tantras in general, and of the Hevajra (the chief tantric cycle practiced in the Sa skya school) in particular.¹¹³ As for the Bka' brgyud pas, Bdud 'joms rin po che reminds us that the Golden Doctrines of the Shangs pas were also challenged,¹¹⁴ being excluded from at least one version of the commentarial portion of the Tibetan Buddhist canon, the Bstan 'gyur.¹¹⁵ Even the relatively late Dga' ldan pas were not immune to criticism. For example, Ngorchon and his followers were vehement in their criticism of the Dga' ldan pa tradition of Yamāntaka.¹¹⁶

Nor was it only *texts*—for example, the Rnying ma tantras and the revealed treasures (*gter ma*)—that were an object of dispute. Starting in the mid-eleventh century, *doctrines*¹¹⁷ increasingly become an object of controversy. We have already mentioned that the *Testament of the Pillar* was concerned as much with orthodoxy as with orthopraxis. In his *Ordinance*, Zhi ba 'od, almost as an afterthought, reviles the Great Perfection (*Rdzogs chen*), claiming that “its theoretical base has been mixed up with the system of the non-Buddhists, and therefore to engage in this practice causes one to be reborn in the lower realms.”¹¹⁸ Many of these early condemnations of doctrines, however, are more impetuous than they are reasoned. They resort to a rhetoric of intimidation—threatening those who uphold and practice them with dire consequences in the afterlife—but they do not actually engage the doctrines that they are condemning *qua* doctrine, nor do they usually offer reasons for why they are false (*chos log, chos min*).¹¹⁹ The same might be said of those who argue for the fact that the Rnying ma is concocted (*rang bzo*) on the basis of the novel terminology found in its texts, another common charge.¹²⁰ Neither of these forms of argument are very sophisticated or philosophically interesting. In other parts of Tibet, however, things were taking a somewhat different turn.

While the debate over the authenticity of texts was taking place in western Tibet, something quite unprecedented was happening in central Tibet. There the stage was being set for a more rationalist form of polemics—one that focuses on philosophical issues rather than on questions of authenticity. In 1073, Rngog Legs pa'i shes rab,¹²¹ a student of Atiśa (982–1054), founded Gsang phu Monastery. His nephew Rngog lo tsā ba—Rngog the translator—Blo ldan shes rab (1059–1109), often called the father of Tibetan scholasticism, continued the legacy of his uncle, and in short order Gsang phu became one of the greatest centers of textual learning in all of Tibet, with a curriculum that eventually became the model for some of the country's great monastic academies. Unfortunately, very few of the Madhyamaka works of these important figures survived, but we know that they were the founding figures of Svātantrika Madhyamaka exegesis in Tibet.¹²² Recently, however, a work of another early abbot of Gsang phu, the influential Phya pa Chos kyi seng ge (1109–69), has been discovered and published.¹²³ Written in the first half of the twelfth century, the *Dbu ma shar gsum* is one of the earliest examples of a developed, indigenous Tibetan *philosophical* polemic that is available to us.¹²⁴ The text belongs to the field of Madhyamaka, and it is interesting not only because of its polemical character, but also because it is in large part a refutation of the Indian Madhyamaka philosopher, Candrakīrti, a figure whose work was considered (by Tibetans, at least) the quintessential example of the other major branch of the Madhyamaka, the Prāsaṅgika. This is extremely interesting because the great scholars of India rarely became the targets of Tibetan critiques, much less of full-blown polemics. So Phya pa is unusual in this regard. This does demonstrate, however, that Phya pa was an innovator, which is important to understanding his other major contribution, in the area of logic/epistemology (*tshad ma*).

The Madhyamaka was not the only topic to become an object of polemic during the early scholastic period. The first abbots of Gsang phu were also responsible for inaugurating a new tradition of epistemological studies that focused on the works of the Indian scholar Dharmakīrti (600–660), and there developed among them an interpretation of Dharmakīrti that would have tremendous influence, extending, *inter alia*, to the Dga' ldan pas. It has recently become clear that, despite a certain degree of homogeneity in the formal structure of some of the Gsang phu works on logic—the so-called *synopses* (*bsdus pa*) and the works that derive from them—there was also a substantial degree of doctrinal disagreement, a fact that led to a considerable amount of polemical exchange.¹²⁵ The greatest early challenge to the Gsang

phu epistemological tradition, however, is to be found in the work of the next major player in the field of philosophical polemics, Sa skya Paṇḍita (more on this figure below). Sixty years after Sa paṇ, the great Bka' gdams pa scholar Bcom ldan rig ral would enter these debates, taking on the Gsang phu tradition as well.¹²⁶ The points of contention were hermeneutical, doxographical, epistemological, and ontological: Which of Dharmakīrti's texts should be given precedence? How literally should Dharmakīrti be taken? What is the doctrinal affiliation, or *grub mtha'*, of Dharmakīrti? How should one differentiate direct from indirect cognition? Are universals real?¹²⁷

Given the pivotal role that Sa skya Paṇḍita played in a variety of different polemical arenas,¹²⁸ a few additional words about this important figure are in order. Sa paṇ is more concerned with refuting what he considers false *views and practices* than with identifying false or apocryphal *texts*.¹²⁹ As Dreyfus shows, Sa paṇ's *Treasure of Reasoning (Rigs gter)*¹³⁰ is, *inter alia*, a critique of Phya pa and his school—a multi-faceted critique, but one that in the end really boils down to a criticism of Phya pa's innovations. Sa paṇ is a traditionalist who wishes to adhere more closely to Dharmakīrti's texts (and to Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika* in particular), and he therefore finds Phya pa's innovations problematic. Nor is Phya pa the only target of Sa paṇ's polemical quill in the field of logic. As Gene Smith has noted, 'Jig rten mgon po (1143–1217), who “tried to deny to ordinary mortals the possession of ‘real’ logic, defining *pramana* as the enlightened awareness (*jñāna*) of an omniscient being,” is also refuted in Sa paṇ's *Rigs gter*.¹³¹

Nor, for that matter, did Sa paṇ limit himself to epistemological polemics. Although ostensibly written as an exposition of the pratimokṣa, bodhisattva, and tantric vows, his *Differentiation of the Three Vows (Sdom gsum rab dbye)* is a polemic against many different practices and doctrines prevalent in Sa paṇ's day. For example, his criticism of pilgrimage as it was then practiced in Tibet, though not often mentioned, is intriguing.¹³² But, as we have said, Sa paṇ is principally known as a *doctrinal* polemicist. His critique of Phya pa in the field of logic we have already mentioned, but he was also known for his critique of a certain kind of Mahāmudrā theory and practice. The Great Seal (Mahāmudrā) is of course a doctrine that has Indian roots. It became a specialty of the Bka' brgyud pa tradition founded by the great translator Mar pa Chos kyi blo gros (d. 1097) and his student Mi la ras pa (1052–1135). Sa paṇ did not direct his critique at the views of these two founding figures of the Bka' brgyud lineage, however. Instead, his polemic was principally directed at the doctrine of Mahāmudrā in its *White Panacea (dkar po chig thub)* formulation.¹³³ The White Panacea, or “self-sufficient white remedy,”

is the doctrine that “the realization of the nature of mind is sufficient in and of itself to bring about spontaneously and instantaneously the simultaneous consummation of all virtuous qualities, including Buddhahood itself.”¹³⁴ Among the advocates of this view, devotion to the spiritual master, leading to his grace, was often singled out as the chief cause of that direct realization of the nature of mind. Several authors, including Sa paṅ himself, have noted the similarity between this doctrine and certain Ch’an views that were circulating in Tibet as early as the imperial era. Sa paṅ focused his critique on the formulation of the White Panacea as it was expounded by Mi la ras pa’s student, Sgam po pa (1079–1153), and by the latter’s disciple, Zhang Tshal pa (1123–93). David Jackson has analyzed this controversy in detail, making it unnecessary to go into details here.¹³⁵ Suffice it to say that Sa paṅ’s critique of the Mahāmudrā was influential, especially among later Dge lugs scholars: for example, it influenced the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–82),¹³⁶ Jam dbyangs bzhad pa Ngag dbang brtson ’grus (1648–1721), and Dbal mang Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan (1764–1853).¹³⁷

As the *gsar ma* (or New Translation) schools developed distinct institutional identities, polemics became a vehicle through which the leading figures of these various sects differentiated their doctrines from those of their rivals. While tantra continues to be a central concern for these authors, esoteric doctrinal controversies also emerge—or re-emerge in new and more sophisticated ways—across a wide range of topics, from the character of the buddha’s bodies¹³⁸ to the interpretation of the buddha-nature to the Madhyamaka.¹³⁹ Unfortunately, many of the most important Madhyamaka works written from the twelfth through fourteenth centuries have been lost to us, leaving us no choice but to glean their views from the way in which these are paraphrased in later sources.¹⁴⁰ This situation changes, however, when we come to the fourteenth century.

Through a rather long and circuitous route, we have finally come to the two individuals who are the objects of Go rams pa’s critique in *Distinguishing the Views*. These are, of course, Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan (1292–1361) and Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa (1357–1419). While these two figures held quite different philosophical views, they also shared a great deal in common. Each was the founder/systematizer of a major school of Tibetan Buddhism. Dol po pa was the chief systematizer of the Jo nang pa, Tsong kha pa the founder of the Dga’ ldan pa (later called the Dge lugs pa). Both wrote extensively on a wide range of doctrinal topics—both esoteric and exoteric. Each of them showed a special interest in Madhyamaka. Their rivals held that each of the two figures was

also an innovator, propounding controversial theories that were departures from the Indian and Tibetan tradition that had preceded them.¹⁴¹

Dol po pa's theory of Madhyamaka came to be known as "the emptiness of what is other" (*gzhan stong*), so-called because it maintained that the ultimate (*don dam*), while empty of all things different from itself (*rang ma yin pas stong pa = gzhan stong*), is not empty of itself (*rang stong ma yin*). In Dol po pa's view, the ultimate, which he equates with the buddha nature (*bde bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po = rigs*) and gnosis (*ye shes*), is a positive reality beyond intellectual comprehension. It is a radiant, permanent, stable unity that is self-sufficient. It can never be understood in terms of the deconstructionist and reductive dialectic of the negationist (*chad pa'i*) branch of the Madhyamaka tradition epitomized in the *rationalist* works (*rigs tshogs*) of Nāgārjuna. Rather, says Dol po pa, it is the positivist tradition found, for example, in Nāgārjuna's "corpus of hymns" or "praises" (*bstod tshogs*) that is the best source for understanding the ultimate.

Tsong kha pa's Madhyamaka theory has come to be known simply as the *Prāsaṅgika*. Like many of the luminaries of Tibetan scholasticism before him, Tsong kha pa saw the great texts of Indian Buddhism as the foundation for Buddhist theory and practice. As regards the doctrine of emptiness, he cast his lot with Indian Mādhyamika thinkers like Buddhapālita, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva, claiming that it was *their* interpretation of Nāgārjuna, and their interpretation *alone*, that constituted the correct theory (*yang dag pa'i lta ba*) of the nature of things. Tsong kha pa maintained that emptiness, the ultimate truth, was an absolute negation (*med dgag*)—the negation of inherent existence—and that nothing was exempt from being empty, including emptiness itself. The ultimate truth, he claimed, could be understood conceptually, and while that conceptual understanding needed to be transformed through meditation into a deeper and more transformatively efficacious mode of cognition (the gnosis of the āryan, the direct realization of emptiness; *'phags pa'i mnyam bzhag ye shes = stong nyid mngon sum du rtogs pa'i blo*), he believed that the object of the conceptual understanding of the ultimate and the object of gnosis *were no different*. Moreover, he believed that since emptiness is a truth that is not evident, it could only be approached (at least initially) through the path of reasoning, that is, through the Madhyamaka dialectical strategies. The logic of the Madhyamaka, he felt, was not fundamentally inconsistent with the theories of Buddhist logicians like Dharmakīrti.¹⁴²

Now Dol po pa and Tsong kha pa are important in the history of Tibetan Madhyamaka polemics not because they were themselves major

polemicalists, but because they were the *object of others' polemics*. Not that Dol po pa and Tsong kha pa completely refrained from criticizing other scholars—far from it—but these criticisms occur more in the context of other agendas than they do in major, independent polemical works. Dol po pa *did* write at least two clearly polemical minor works in the field of Madhyamaka, about which we will have more to say below. Tsong kha pa, on the other hand, usually treated the theories of his philosophical rivals in passing, leaving the defense of his tradition to a later generation of scholars.¹⁴³ Go rams pa mentions some of the critics of Dol po pa in *Distinguishing the Views*, among them his own teacher, Rong ston Shes bya kun rig (1367–1450), and another great master of the Sa skya school, Red mda' ba Gzhon nu blo gros (1349–1412), who was also a teacher of Tsong kha pa. And of course it is well-known that Tsong kha pa himself criticized the views of Dol po pa in such works as *The Essence of Eloquent Discourse* (*Legs bshad snying po*). The great Dge lugs textbook author 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa Ngag dbang brtson 'grus (1648–1721) also devotes several pages of his *Great Treatise on the Philosophical Schools* (*Grub mtha' chen mo*) to a critique of Dol po pa.¹⁴⁴

The most famous classical critics of Tsong kha pa were Stag tshang lo tsā ba Shes rab rin chen (b. 1405),¹⁴⁵ the Eighth Karma pa Mi bskyod rdo rje (1507–54),¹⁴⁶ Shākya mchog ldan (1428–1507),¹⁴⁷ Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846–1912),¹⁴⁸ and of course Go rams pa.¹⁴⁹ These figures, in turn, were responded to by later generations of Dge lugs polemicalists. Stag tshang lo tsā ba was responded to, for example, by the First Paṅ chen bla ma Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1570–1662), by 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa Ngag dbang brtson 'grus (1648–1721), and by Phur lcog Ngag dbang byams pa (1682–1762).¹⁵⁰ Rje btsun Chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1469–1544/6) responded to the Eighth Karma pa in his *Ornament to the Intention of Nāgārjuna: A Response to Honorable Speech* (*Gsung lan klu sgrub dgons rgyan*).¹⁵¹ 'Jam dbyangs dga' ba'i blo gros (1429–1503)¹⁵² and Lcang lung paṅḍita (1770–1845)¹⁵³ both wrote apologetical works responding to Go rams pa's attack on Tsong kha pa. The most extensive and detailed critiques of Go rams pa and Shākya mchog ldan, however, are the two parts of a single work called *Eliminating the Darkness of Bad Views* (*Lta ba ngan pa'i mun sel*), more colloquially known as *The Reply to Go* and *The Reply to Shāk* (*Go lan, Shāk lan*).¹⁵⁴ Ju Mi pham rgya mtsho was responded to by a variety of Dge lugs apologists such as Dpa' ri(s) Blo bzang rab gsal (b. 1840),¹⁵⁵ Brag dkar sprul sku (1866–1928),¹⁵⁶ and Ldan ma Blo bzang chos dbyings (b. nineteenth century).¹⁵⁷

One final thought before moving on: the discussion up to this point makes it seem as though the various polemical texts, responses, and counter-responses mentioned in this section were written and disseminated in a free society where the expression of views was always tolerated and freedom of speech was the norm. But we know this to be far from true in Tibet throughout much of its history. For example, after the victory of the Fifth Dalai Lama's Dge lugs school and the rise of the Dga' ldan pho brang as the government of central and western Tibet in the mid seventeenth century, there was a concerted effort to control religious institutions that had previously opposed the Dge lugs pas or that were seen as rivals. Many monasteries in central and western Tibet—especially Bka' brgyud and Jo nang ones—were forcibly converted into Dge lugs institutions. And as with institutions, so too with the written word: texts critical of Dge lugs views and practices were suppressed—their copying and printing were banned, and the copies of the texts that already existed were either destroyed or sealed in storerooms. Many important works—sometimes the entire collected works of renowned scholars, and even the works of Dge lugs scholars who were seen to diverge from the Dge lugs mainstream—simply stopped circulating in central and western Tibet from the beginning of the eighteenth century as the result of censorship. But because the government of the Dalai Lamas was always weaker in some of the eastern frontier regions of Khams and A mdo, many of these persecuted schools and texts managed to survive in these regions. Such was the fate, for example, of the Jo nang school and of the works of the great Jo nang masters Dol po pa and Tāranātha (1575–1634). Suppressed for all intents and purposes in their homeland in Gtsang, Jo nang pas came to flourish in places like 'Dzam thang in eastern Tibet, where they preserved and transmitted the collected works of their most famous lineage lamas. We have them today thanks in large part to their preservation in these remote regions.

While Sa skya monasteries were not, on the whole, subject to the same degree of persecution as the Jo nang pas, individual Sa skya authors *were* targeted for censorship. The works of Go rams pa—principally because of his critique of Tsong kha pa—were banned and probably circulated only secretly in areas controlled by the Dga' ldan pho brang. The situation in eastern Tibet was different, however. Manuscript copies of Go rams pa's works must have been in circulation in eastern Tibet for centuries, and it seems that reading transmissions (*lung*) of his collected works exists to the present day.¹⁵⁸ It is a tribute to the scholars of the Sa skya tradition that they were able to preserve the texts of Go rams pa and to propagate their formal

transmission for centuries in a milieu of censorship, without access to blockprinted works. The blocks for Go rams pa's collected works, the source of the earliest edition of *Distinguishing the Views* available to us, were only carved in Sde dge in the first decade of the twentieth century.¹⁵⁹

The suppression of the works of Go rams pa and of his erudite contemporary Shākya mchog ldan meant that Sa skya institutions in central Tibet were denied access to works that today are seen as the very core of Sa skya scholastic studies. This lack of access to Go rams pa's works, combined with fear of reprisals from Dga' ldan pho brang officials, probably goes a long way to explaining the dearth of Sa skya polemical replies to those Dge lugs scholars who wrote against Go rams pa. It was a risky business to defend the views of a banned author, especially one who had taken on the founder of the Dge lugs school. Defending Go rams pa in print was risky; defending his views on the debate courtyard was probably something that happened with greater frequency. One wonders, for example, how often the views of Go rams pa became the object of discussion at institutions like Rgyal rtse Dpal 'khor chos sde in western Tibet, where Dge lugs, Sa skya, and Zha lu pa monks lived and studied side by side in the same monastery (as they do to this day). It appears that the views of scholars like Go rams pa also made their way into the debate courtyards of eastern Tibet. David Jackson recounts the story of a Sa skya scholar, Lama Gendun, who challenged the monks of Ra nyag, a Dge lugs pa institution, to debate:

At the debate he [Lama Gendun] defeated one of the monastery's best geshes, and in victory he rode around the courtyard on the shoulders of his disgraced opponent. He said, "This being able to ride on the nape of a first-class geshe from the Central Tibetan seminaries is due to the grace (*bka' drin*) of Go rams pa."¹⁶⁰

If nothing else this story shows us that in certain areas of Khams, Dge lugs and Sa skya monks felt free to engage each other and to debate controversial subjects. It also tells us the extent to which Sa skya pas associated the name of Go rams pa with doctrinal victory over Dge lugs pas.

Go rams pa may be the most famous of Tsong kha pa's classical critics, but his most famous contemporary critic of Tsong kha pa is the brilliant Amdo eccentric Dge 'dun chos 'phel (1903–51), whose work represents one of those relatively rare instances in the history of Tibetan philosophical speculation in which a scholar overtly critiques the views of the founder of the school in which he was trained.¹⁶¹ Dge 'dun chos 'phel, in turn, was

responded to by another renowned Dge lugs scholar of the modern period, Dge bshes Shes rab rgya mtsho (1884–1968),¹⁶² and more recently by Dze smad rin po che Blo bzang dpal ldan bstan ’dzin dar rgyas (1927–68).¹⁶³

Go rams pa, as far as we know, never experienced reprisals against his person because of the views he held or because of the writings he published. The same cannot be said of Dge ’dun chos ’phel, who spent years in a Lhasa prison—perhaps because of his critique of Tsong kha pa, perhaps because of his left-leaning political views, or perhaps for both reasons. Even in twentieth-century Tibet, being an anti-Dge lugs polemicist carried with it substantial risk.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have seen the writing of a tremendous amount of polemical literature in all branches of Tibet’s religious and secular sciences. Even the nonsectarian (*ris med*) movement that began in Khams in the nineteenth century,¹⁶⁴ known for its inclusivistic views and for its appreciation of the teachings of all of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism, had its apologists.¹⁶⁵ So vast is the literature of the modern period, however, that it is impossible to analyze it within the scope of this introduction. Suffice it to conclude by simply noting that the genre of Tibetan polemics is very much alive and well. While polemical monographs continue to be written on religious subjects,¹⁶⁶ the last decade has begun to see Tibetan-language periodicals as a venue for polemical exchanges, where the topics debated range from politics to poetry.¹⁶⁷ A great deal more could be said regarding the history of polemics in Tibet, but perhaps this brief overview is sufficient to see that Go rams pa is part of a very long and honorable tradition.

*The Life and Works of Go rams pa*¹⁶⁸

Go rams pa was born in ’Bom lung mda’ in the Go bo area of Khams, eastern Tibet, in 1429. His father’s name was Ru tsha Zhang skyabs, and his mother’s name was Rgyal ba sman. The tradition considers him the reincarnation of the famed Sa skya hierarch, Rje btsun Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1147–1216), though it is not clear that anything like a formal recognition ever took place in his lifetime. At the age of ten, Go rams pa took novice ordination from his tutor, Kun dga’ ’bum, the monk responsible for his initial training.¹⁶⁹ It was at this time that Go rams pa received the monastic name of Bsod nams seng ge. During these early years, he also studied under and received empowerments from other teachers like Go bo rab ’byams pa Shes

rab dpal and Bka' bcu pa Sbyin bzang. The biographies tell us that his teachers were impressed with his intellectual abilities, and it appears that it was during this time that he began to be called *rab 'byams pa*—literally “[a master of] a vast array [of scriptures],” but actually a formal title.¹⁷⁰

In 1447, at the age of nineteen, Go rams pa traveled to Nalendra Monastery in Central Tibet to study under the great Rong ston Shes bya kun rig,¹⁷¹ who was the teacher of several of his teachers in Khams. By the time he arrived, however, Rong ston pa was seriously ill. He in fact died the following year, and although Go rams pa is sometimes considered “Rong ston pa’s last student,” one wonders how much interaction there actually was between Go rams pa and Rong ston pa in this, the final year of his life.

The year after Rong ston pa’s death, Go rams pa traveled first to Lhasa and then to the recently founded monastic college of 'Bras yul Skyed tshal¹⁷² to study under Byams chen rab 'byams pa Sangs rgyas 'phel (1411–85),¹⁷³ “the best of the learned.” Under him Go rams pa studied many of the classical subjects of scholastic learning: Prajñāpāramitā, Vinaya, Abhidharma, etc., all of which he is said to have quickly mastered. For some of his contemporaries, this is said to have further confirmed the idea that he was the reincarnation of a great former lama.

Four years later, at age twenty-five, Go rams pa decided to do a “monastic debate tour” (*grwa skor*) of some of the more important monastic centers of central and western Tibet, but illness prohibited him from doing so. It appears that it was in part to counteract the illness that he decided to more seriously pursue the study of tantra. And so in the winter of 1453 he went to the famous monastery of Ngor E vam chos ldan to pursue tantric studies.¹⁷⁴ Under Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po (1382–1456),¹⁷⁵ the founder of that monastery, he twice received the instructions on the *Path and Its Result* (*lam 'bras*), the main practice tradition of the Sa skya school. This took almost four years. During this time he also pursued other tantric studies related to the deities Cakrasaṃvara, Guhyasamāja, and Red Yamāntaka, receiving initiations into each of these tantric cycles, along with instructions (*khrid*) on the sādhanas (*sgrub thabs*). At age twenty-six, Go rams pa became a fully ordained monk under Ngor chen.¹⁷⁶ While Ngor chen was his main teacher during this period, Go rams pa also studied under several of Ngor chen’s senior students. For example, he pursued more intensive tantric study under Mus chen Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan (1388–1469),¹⁷⁷ who gave him initiations and oral transmissions (*dbang dang lung*). During his stay at Ngor Monastery, he also received many profound instructions from Mkhan chen Kha phyar ba and from Gung ru Shes rab bzang po (1411–75). Gung ru ba was one of the main

students of Rong ston, Ngor chen, and Mus chen, and the person whom Go rams pa credits with motivating him to compose *Distinguishing the Views*.¹⁷⁸

After Ngor chen passed away in 1456 (*me pho byi ba'i lo*) Go rams pa continued to study various tantric practices under Mus chen, receiving many initiations and teachings during this period. He also broadened his knowledge of the Sa skya tradition by studying the collected works of the “five great lords of the Sa skya school” (*Rje btsun gong ma lnga*)¹⁷⁹ and listened to lectures on the collected works of Rgyal sras Thogs med pa (1295–1369)¹⁸⁰ and the works of Ngor chen.

When Go rams pa was thirty-two, at the prodding of his half-brother, he decided to return to Khams. On his way back home, he visited 'Bras yul Skyed tshal, where he had studied eleven years earlier. After seeing his tremendous mastery of the texts, his former teacher, Byams chen rab 'byams pa, the abbot of this monastery, asked Go rams pa to stay to assist him in teaching the younger monks. One source tells us that during his periods of teaching he taught ten classes every day!¹⁸¹ While at Skyed tshal, however, he also spent time in meditation and writing. It was during this time, for example, that he wrote his major commentaries on the *Abhisamayālamkāra*, the *Yum don rab gsal*, and his two most important commentaries on Sa paṅ's *Sdom gsum rab dbye*. After several years, Byams chen rab 'byams pa retreated to Mus, and Go rams pa replaced him as head of the monastery. In his new position as abbot, he taught Prajñāpāramitā, Pramāṇa, Vinaya, and Abhidharma, in each case starting with the great commentaries on these subjects and progressing to the root texts. His students advanced in knowledge, and this added to his already increasing fame. Go rams pa left 'Bras yul Skyed tshal after some time and went to Mus to see his teacher, from whom he received teachings, particularly on Cakrasaṃvara.

At age thirty-eight, Go rams pa accompanied Mus chen on his trip to Byang Ngam ring, which the latter undertook at the invitation of the local ruler Rnam rgyal grags pa and his son. While at Ngam ring, Go rams pa taught about forty students and his fame grew. Shortly after this time, in the year 1466, Go rams pa founded Rta nag gser gling Monastery.¹⁸² Go rams pa appears to have been in residence at Gser gling most of the time for the next seven years, although the colophons to several of the texts he composed during this time attest to the fact that he travelled to other monasteries as well.¹⁸³ It was during these travels that he saw his teachers Mus chen and Gung ru ba for the last time, and it was perhaps at this, his last meeting with Gung ru ba, that he was instructed by him to compose *Distinguishing the Views*. In any case, as far as writing is concerned, it is clear that this was one

of his more productive periods. For example, *Distinguishing the Views* was written during this time, as were other important works on Prajñāpāramitā and Pramāṇa philosophy. In the construction of the monastery, Go rams pa received support from aristocrats affiliated with the Rin spungs court.¹⁸⁴

In 1473 Go rams pa founded another monastery in Rta nag, Thub bstan rnam rgyal. After construction was completed, he established a curriculum of sūtra and tantric studies. Just the exoteric subjects and texts that he taught constitute an impressive list:¹⁸⁵

Prajñāpāramitā Samcayagāthā
Abhisamayālaṅkāra together with *Sphuṭārtha*, and the remaining
 works of Maitreya
Abhidharmakośa
Abhidharmasamuccaya
 The five Madhyamaka treatises of Nāgārjuna
Catuḥśataka
Madhyamakāvatāra
Bodhicaryāvatāra
Vinayasūtra
Pramāṇavārttika, together with Sa paṅ's *Rig gter*, and
 The *Sdom gsum rab dbye*, also of Sa paṅ

Of course Go rams pa also taught tantra extensively at his new monastery. It appears that he remained at Thub bstan rnam rgyal for almost a decade after founding the monastery.

Because we know that Go rams pa wrote one of his *Prajñāpāramitā* commentaries at Ngor Monastery in 1481, it would appear that he had already left Rta nag sometime before this point.¹⁸⁶ In any case, we know for certain that in 1483 Go rams pa became the sixth abbot of Ngor, replacing another of his teachers, Dpal ldan rdo rje (1411–82). Go rams pa remained at Ngor until 1486, teaching in great detail the Lam 'bras system as well as other topics of both sūtra and tantra.¹⁸⁷ He then enthroned Dkon mchog 'phel (1445–1514) as his successor at Ngor and returned to his own monastery in Rta nag. There he instructed his disciples in many different subjects. In his spare time, he performed empowerments (*dbang*), permissions (*rjes gnang*), blessings (*rab gnas*), and burnt offering rituals (*sbyin sreg*). He also composed many treatises during this time. His writings are known for their excellent style and lucidity. His major exoteric works, listed below, basically fall into seven categories:

(1) *Middle-Way (Madhyamaka; Dbu ma) works*

Dbu ma rtsa ba'i shes rab kyi rnam par bshad pa yang dag lta ba'i' 'od zer (incomplete), a commentary on Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* *Rgyal ba thams cad kyi dgongs pa zab mo dbu ma'i de kho na nyid spyi'i ngag gis ston pa nges don rab gsal*,¹⁸⁸ also known as the *Dbu ma'i spyi don*, a general, synthetic exposition of the Madhyamaka with a strong polemical element¹⁸⁹

Lta ba'i shan 'byed theg mchog gnad kyi zla zer, his polemic against Dol po pa and Tsong kha pa (translated in this volume), written at the beginning of 1469

Dbu ma la 'jug pa'i dkyus kyi sa bcad pa dang gzhung so so'i dka' ba'i gnas la dpyad pa lta ba ngan sel,¹⁹⁰ a quasi-polemical commentary that focuses on the difficult points of Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvātāra*, taking issue with many of Tsong kha pa's interpretations

(2) *Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā; Phar phyin) works*

Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan 'grel pa dang bcas pa'i dka' ba'i gnas rnam par bshad pa yum don rab gsal, a commentary on the *Abhisamayālamkāra*, with an emphasis on its difficult points, written in 1464 at Skyed tshal

Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan gyi gzhung snga phyi'i 'grel dang dka' gnas la dpyad pa sbas don zab mo'i gter gyi kha 'byed, another commentary on the *Abhisamayālamkāra* with an emphasis on the views of earlier and later commentators and on its difficult points, written in 1470 at Rta nag

Grel pa don gsal gyi ngag don, a commentary on Haribhadra's *Sphu-tārtha*, written in 1481 at Ngor E vam chos ldan

Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan gyi mtshon byed kyi chos rnams kyi yan lag khyad par bshad pa sbas don rab gsal, a commentary on some ancillary points in the *Abhisamayālamkāra*, written in 1472 at Rta nag

Zhugs gnas kyi rnam gzhag skyes bu mchog gi gsal byed, a treatise on those who “enter and abide” in the different fruits of the path (stream-enterer, etc.), written in 1470 at Rta nag

Mthar gyi gnas pa'i snyom par 'jug pa'i rnam bshad snyoms 'jug rab gsal,¹⁹¹ a treatise on the advanced meditative states of the form and formless realms, written in 1470 at Rta nag

Rten 'brel gyi rnam par bzbag pa 'khor 'das rab gsal, a treatise on dependent arising, written in 1470 at Rta nag

(3) *Epistemo-Logical (Pramāṇa; Tshad ma) works*

Rgyas pa'i bstan bcos tshad ma rnam 'grel gyi rnam par bshad pa kun tu bzang po'i 'od zer, an extensive commentary on Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*, composed in 1474¹⁹²

Rgyas pa'i bstan bcos tshad ma rnam 'grel gyi ngag don kun tu bzang po'i nyi ma, a shorter commentary on the *Pramāṇavārttika*, written at Rta nag

Sde bdun mdo dang bcas pa'i dgongs pa phyin ci ma log par 'grel pa tshad ma rig[s] pa'i gter gyi don gsal bar byed pa, a commentary on the seven treatises of logic in connection with an elucidation of Sa paṅ's *Tshad ma rigs gter*

Tshad ma rigs pa'i gter gyi dka' gnas rnam par bshad pa sde bdun rab gsal, a commentary on Sa paṅ's *Tshad ma rigs gter* that emphasizes the difficult points of the text, composed in 1471 at Dga' ba tshal Monastery

(4) *Vinaya ('Dul ba) works*

'Dul ba mdo rtsa'i rgyas 'grel (no longer extant), an extensive commentary on the *Vinaya Sūtra* of Guṇaprabhā

Rab tu byung ba rnam kyī bslab bya nyams su blang ba'i chos 'dul ba rgya mtsho'i snying po, advice to monks, written in 1481 at Rta nag

(5) *Abhidharma (Mdzod) works*

Chos mngon pa mdzod kyī bshad thabs kyī man ngag ngo mtshar gsum ldan (incomplete), a commentary to the *Abhidharmakośa*

Phung kham skye mched kyī rnam gzhag ji snyed shes bya'i sgo 'byed, a treatise on the aggregates, elements, and spheres, written in 1472 at Rta nag

(6) *Works having to do with the three vows (Sdom gsum skor)*

Sdom pa gsum gyi rab tu dbye ba'i rnam bshad rgyal ba'i gsung rab kyī

dgongs pa gsal ba, an extensive commentary on Sa paṅ's *Sdom gsum rab dbye*, written in 1463 at Skyed tshal

Sdom gsum rab dbye'i spyi don yid bzhin nor bu, a general, synthetic treatise on the *Sdom gsum rab dbye*, written in 1461 at Skyed tshal

Sdom pa sgum gyi bstan bcos la dris shing rtsod pa'i lan sdom gsum 'khrul spong, a polemical work defending the *Sdom gsum rab dbye*, written in 1476 at Rta nag

Sdom pa gsum gyi rab tu dbye ba'i kha skong legs bshad 'od kyi snang ba,¹⁹³ a supplement to the *Sdom gsum rab dbye* that is in large part polemical, written in 1478 at Rta nag

Sdom gsum kha skong gi bsdus don, an abbreviated version of the supplement to the *Sdom gsum rab dbye*, written at Rta nag

(7) *Miscellaneous texts*

Blo sbyong zhen pa bzhi bral byi kbrid yig zab don gnad kyi lde'u mig, a commentary on the famous short text, *Abandoning the Four Attachments*

Rgyud bla'i 'grel pa rtsom 'phro, an incomplete commentary on the *Uttaratantra*

In addition to these works, in the thirteen volumes of his collected works, there are many expository works on tantra, as well as liturgical and devotional texts.

Like many of the great scholars of his day, Go rams pa was also a visionary. For example, he had vivid dreams of Mus chen instructing him in the doctrine while he was composing one of his polemical texts, the *Gzhan phan 'od zer gyi rtsod spong*.¹⁹⁴ Such visionary dreams were frequent in Go rams pa's life, especially when he was about to begin a new writing project. The wrathful protector Four-Faced Mahākāla (*Gdong bzhi pa*) played a role on more than one occasion. Go rams pa also had the gift of foretelling future events. In the eyes of his biographers these are, of course, also considered signs of his holiness.

In 1488, Go rams pa decided to make a trip to Sa skya, but his trip was initially blocked by some nobles who spread rumors that he was going to engage in "rituals of propitiation and exorcism for the gZhi-kha-ba [Rin-spungs-pa]."¹⁹⁵ Go rams pa responds that his trip was "not aimed merely at doing ritual propitiations and supportive practices to aid the ruler [Rin-spungs-pa]," but rather "aimed at helping in general the doctrine

and sentient beings, and in particular I am going there to offer prayers for the pacification of the political disturbances and the happiness of the domain because my mind cannot bear the great political disturbances that are existing nowadays.”¹⁹⁶ In the end, Go rams pa was given permission to visit Sa skya. This episode shows us the extent of Go rams pa’s affiliation (or perhaps others’ perceptions of his affiliation) to the Rin spungs court. It also shows us the role that magic played in the politics of the day, and the power that Go rams pa was seen to have in this regard. When he finished his work at Sa skya, Go rams pa set out for Thub bstan rnam rgyal, but had to first stop at the monastery in Sngon mo rdzong at the request of its monks. He took ill at Sngon mo rdzong and his condition quickly got worse. He died on the twenty-first day of the *cho ’phrul* month of the Earth-Bird year of the eighth *rab byung* (1489). His body was transported to Thub bstan rnam rgyal, where it was eventually cremated. His remains were partially made into funerary clay tablets, and partially housed inside a large Buddha statue that was created in his memory. Sadly, the monastery of Rta nag and all of its art, including the statue that contained the relics of Go rams pa, were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

After Go rams pa’s death his “spiritual son,” Kong ston Dbang phyug grub (b. fifteenth century), became his successor at Rta nag.¹⁹⁷ Of course, given Go rams pa’s reputation, he had vast numbers of students. Many of them went on to become abbots of some of Tibet’s most important monasteries, including Dpal ’khor bde chen, Ngam ring, Nalendra, Ngor E vam chos ldan, the Gling stod and Gling smad colleges of Gsang phu, and many others. The following disciples, perhaps, are especially worthy of mention:¹⁹⁸

Yongs ’dzin Dkon mchog ’phel, who succeeded Go rams pa on the throne of Ngor

’Bum phrag gsum pa (1432/33–1504), the author of a commentary on the *Tshad ma rigs gter*

’Jam dbyangs kun dga’ chos bzang (1433–1503), the author of an important work on the Vinaya, and of a commentary on the *Pramāṇavārttikam*

Mus chen Sangs rgyas rin chen (1450–1524), the author of a recently discovered biography of Go rams pa,¹⁹⁹ of several liturgical works, and of a Lam ’bras instructional manual

Mus chen Thugs rje dpal bzang (b. fifteenth century), the author of three major commentaries—on the *Abidharmakośa*, on the *Abhisamayālamkāra*, and on the *Tshad ma rigs gter*; he was also the founder of

the monastery of 'Jad Thub bstan yangs pa can in central Tibet. Thugs rje dpal bzang's *supplements (kha skong)* to Go rams pa's texts are used in Sa skya pa educational institutions to this day.

Glo bo mkhan chen Bsod nams lhun grub (1456–1532), though not a student of Go rams pa, was influenced by him and was the author of many important works, including a biography of Go rams pa.²⁰⁰

Given his vast literary output, Go rams pa has had a tremendous influence on the Sa skya tradition up to the present day. The curriculum of studies at the philosophical college of Sa skya, for example, apparently followed the curriculum set up by Go rams pa at Rta nag,²⁰¹ and even today his works are extensively used at many Sa skya pa monastic institutions, like the Sa skya College in Dehra Dun, India.²⁰² Go rams pa must therefore be counted as one of the great systematizers of the Sa skya pa exoteric tradition. Following in the steps of his teacher, Rong ston, he has provided countless generations of Sa skya pa scholars with sources that form the basis for their curriculum of scholastic study, without a doubt the reason that he came to be known among the Sa skya pas as one of the six “Ornaments of Tibet.” Unlike Rong ston, however, Go rams pa is also known as one of the tradition's greatest polemicists, composing polemical works in many fields, from logic and epistemology to tantra. Among these, *Distinguishing the Views* is undoubtedly his most important and influential work.

Distinguishing the Views

The Socio-Political Background

Distinguishing the Views [of Emptiness]: Moonlight [To Illuminate] the Main Points of the Supreme Path (Lta ba'i shan 'byed theg mchog gnad kyi zla zer)—*Distinguishing the Views* for short—is one of Go rams pa's most famous works. Its subject is the philosophy of the Middle Way. Before we turn to the text itself, it may be worth rehearsing something of the conditions under which it was written. Go rams pa's opponents in this text are, as we have mentioned, two of the most important figures in the history of Tibetan religious thought: Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan, the first great systematizer of the Jo nang pa school, and Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa, the founder of the Dga' ldan pa school. The fact that the Jo nang pas and Dga' ldan pas were relative newcomers to the Tibetan religious scene at this point in time

is important for understanding the dynamics of the exchange that takes place in Go rams pa's text.

In Tibet, as elsewhere, the success of new religious institutions depended upon a variety of factors: spiritual, intellectual, economic, and of course political. The financial support of patrons was essential, but this, in turn, depended upon other factors: the charisma and vision of the founding figure; the commitment, persistence, and intellectual abilities of his successors; the public perception of the order's monks; their perceived ability to enact rituals that brought about the goals of patrons, and so forth. These were some of the factors that attracted not only patrons but also prospective monks to newly founded monasteries. It is clear that Dol po pa and Tsong kha pa had at the very least created the infrastructure for highly successful institutions. And at the time that Go rams pa was writing, both the Jo nang pa and Dga' ldan pa schools were flourishing.

By the mid-fifteenth century, the major Dga' ldan pa monastic universities had all been founded. The three great monasteries of the order in central Tibet—Dga' ldan (founded in 1409), 'Bras spungs (in 1416), and Se ra (in 1419)—although still fledgling institutions, were by all accounts thriving. The Dga' ldan pas also had a new seat in Gtsang, in Western Tibet—the monastery of Bkra shis lhun po, founded in 1447 by one of Tsong kha pa's disciples, Dge 'dun grub (1391–1474). Moreover, the monastic university of Gsang phu ne'u thog, where Go rams pa actually stayed for a period of several months in 1453, had become factionalized in such a way that a large portion of the institution had aligned itself with the new Dga' ldan pa tradition.²⁰³ What is more, several of Tsong kha pa's disciples had by this time already established monasteries in Khams, Go rams pa's home region. Finally, it is perhaps no accident that during Go rams pa's lifetime a young boy *from his own village of Rta nag* was identified as the reincarnation of the first Dalai Lama, Dge 'dun grub.²⁰⁴ Go rams pa was undoubtedly aware of all of these developments.

On the intellectual front, some of Tsong kha pa's most influential students—Mkhas grub rje and Dge 'dun grub among them—were attempting to create a separate identity for their new school, which involved distancing themselves from their Sa skya roots. Mkhas grub rje, in fact, had already attempted (apparently unsuccessfully) to engage Go rams pa's teacher, Rong ston pa, in debate. In “inventing tradition,” early Dga' ldan pas were following in the footsteps of Tsong kha pa, who had already begun the process of breaking with the Sa skya pas philosophically by repudiating, for example, their theory of Madhyamaka.²⁰⁵

Although Dol po pa had died more than a century earlier, his school was

still basking in the glory it had achieved under its charismatic founder.²⁰⁶ Like Tsong kha pa, Dol po pa also wrote against the Sa skya pa interpretation of the Madhyamaka (on which, see below). And as with the Dga' ldan pas, the Jo nang pas had *their* apologists—the brilliant Sa bzang Ma ti pan chen (1294–1376) and, a generation later, the erudite Nya dbon Kun dga' dpal (1345–1439)—each of whom would take up the challenge of defending the views of Dol po pa. Clearly, then, both the Dga' ldan pas and Jo nang pas were attempting to create identities for themselves apophatically—by distinguishing themselves from their rivals, and among those rivals were the Sa skya pas.²⁰⁷ Although the debates between these various schools covered many different topics, one of the most important sets of debates took place in the field of Madhyamaka.

There were many great scholars among the Sa skya pas in the generation just prior to Go rams pa, but none appear to have emerged as the great defender of the Sa skya tradition in the face of critics. Rong ston pa, a great scholar and a prolific writer, produced very learned students like Byams chen rab 'byams pa Sangs rgyas 'phel, but neither Rong ston pa nor Byams chen pa was a polemicist.²⁰⁸ The great Sa skya pa scholar Red mda' ba (1349–1412) was in his maturity known as a staunch critic of the Jo nang pas, but it is not clear how widely his polemical texts circulated—no polemical work of Red mda' ba is extant.²⁰⁹ The time was therefore ripe for a committed Sa skya pa intellectual to step up and offer a defense of the classical Sa skya tradition as a whole.²¹⁰ Go rams pa had all the qualifications: he had received a classical Sa skya pa education at the feet of some of the greatest teachers in the tradition; he was a brilliant thinker whose knowledge of the philosophical tradition was both broad and deep; and he was a renowned debater who possessed that important critical edge that makes for a good polemicist. Go rams pa took up the challenge, and responded to critics of his tradition across the entire range of Tibetan religious studies, from tantra to epistemology to Madhyamaka.

The hundred years prior to the writing of *Distinguishing the Views* was a period of great political upheaval in Tibet. The middle of the fourteenth century saw the decline and eventually the end of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China, and with it, the end of a hundred-year period of Sa skya pa hegemony over Tibet. In 1350, Tai situ Byang chub rgyal mtshan (1302–64) was able to wrest power from the Sakyapas, thereby establishing the Phag mo gru pas as the rulers of Tibet, a situation that would last for the next hundred years. By the time that Go rams pa arrived in central Tibet in 1447, however, things were changing. While the Phag mo gru pas still had control over most of central Tibet, the so-called Rin spungs princes, although

relatives of the Phag mo gru pas, had established independent power over major regions of Gtsang.”²¹¹ We know from Go rams pa’s biographies and other documents that the Rin spungs pa hierarch Nor bu bzang po (d. 1466)²¹² and his son Don grub rdo rje²¹³ acted as Go rams pa’s patrons. They provided him and one attendant with a lifelong stipend, and later with the funds to build the monastery of Rta nag gser gling.

Bsod nams grags pa’s (1478–1554) *New Red Annals (Deb ther dmar po gсар ma)* recounts an interesting meeting between Nor bzang pa and Go rams pa’s teacher, Ngor chen Kun dga’ bzang po, the founder of Ngor Monastery, a confrontation that took place just a few years prior to Go rams pa’s arrival at Ngor. The account begins by informing us that Nor bzang pa “had faith in the Sa skya pas and in the bKa’ brgyud pas,” but that “he also looked kindly upon the dGe ldan pas.”²¹⁴ Once, when Nor bzang pa requested instruction from Ngor chen, the latter replied that he would grant the ruler’s wish only on the condition that he increase his financial support for Ngor Monastery, and, more important, only if “all the dGe ldan pas under his [Nor bzang pa’s] rule were converted to Sa skya pas, and if he stopped the bKa’ bcu pa dGe ’dun grub pa from building his monastery.”²¹⁵ Nor bzang pa refused. The monastery in question could be none other than Bkra shis lhun po (built by Dge ’dun grub pa in 1447). There is reason to question the veracity of Bsod nams grags pa’s account of this episode,²¹⁶ but even if a politically motivated exaggeration, it tells us something of the perceived tensions that existed between Sa skya pas and Dge lugs pas in the mind of an author writing just forty years after Go rams pa. It also gives us some socio-political perspective on why Go rams pa should have seen fit to polemicize against Tsong kha pa, the founder of a school that by this time was seen as presenting a major challenge to Sa skya pa doctrinal views.

To summarize, Go rams pa was writing in the wake of the loss of Sa skya pa political hegemony in Tibet, in a period in which rival schools were vying with one another for the support of patrons, and at a time of great political instability, where an institution’s affiliation with one political faction could cause retaliation from others.²¹⁷ He was writing at a time when new sects like the Jo nang pas and the Dga’ ldan pas were gaining in popularity, and at a time when Sa skya pa philosophical views were coming under increasing attack from these new sects. None of the Sa skya pa scholars of his day appear to have offered a full-scale defense of the tradition (at least none that have survived), creating an intellectual vacuum in Sa skya pa philosophical literature that Go rams pa had all the qualifications to fill. Finally, we must remember that Go rams pa wrote *Distinguishing the Views* just as his new

monastery of Rta nag gser gling was being built. The text was therefore written at a time when he must have been trying to bring greater attention to himself as the great defender of the Sa skya faith, and greater visibility to his new institution as a bastion of Sa skya pa orthodoxy. With this by way of background, we turn finally to the text.

Intertextuality

*Distinguishing the Views*²¹⁸ is ostensibly written as an assault against the Madhyamaka views of Dol po pa and Tsong kha pa. As such, it seems at first glance to be a work of the first type described above: a text that initiates a polemic, an offensive move against opponents. Since Dol po pa and Tsong kha pa had already penned refutations of Sa skya pa Madhyamaka views, however, there is reason to believe that *Distinguishing the Views* is also a text of the second type—a defense of the tradition in the wake of other scholars’ prior challenges. Tsong kha pa, as we have mentioned, never wrote a philosophical work that was polemical in its entirety, but he did write critiques of Sa skya pa views in several of his Madhyamaka treatises. Although he rarely mentions his opponents by name, we know, for example, that it is the Sa skya pas that Tsong kha pa has in mind when he refutes what he calls the “view that things are neither existent nor nonexistent” (*yod min med min gyi lta ba*).²¹⁹ In his *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path* (*Lam rim chen mo*), for example, Tsong kha pa lays out this position in some detail, and then attempts to show how it is in contradiction to both “scripture and reasoning.” For Tsong kha pa, the view represents a faulty understanding of emptiness, one that “goes too far” (*khyab che ba*) in its negation of the “object to be refuted” (*dgag bya*).²²⁰ By denying existence altogether, he claims, it falls into the extreme of nihilism. Because it repudiates *the law of double negation* (*dgag pa gnyis kyi rnal ma go ba*), he says that it flies in the face of our ordinary understanding of the workings of language, wherein the negation of the existence of something necessarily implies the affirmation of its *nonexistence*. This is but one example of the ways in which Tsong kha pa takes on the Sa skya pas. There are others as well. Taken together, they constitute a critique of the mainstream Sa skya pa interpretation of the Middle Way.

Because they were suppressed by the Dga’ ldan pho brang, the collected works of Dol po pa have only been available to Western scholars for about a decade, and it is for this reason that his writings have yet to be fully explored. But thanks to the work of Matthew Kapstein, both the collected works and a catalogue are currently available.²²¹ And it is now possible to say that, unlike

Tsong kha pa, Dol po pa *did* write at least two short Madhyamaka works that are polemical in their entirety. The first is entitled *Clearing Away the Darkness of Bad Views*.²²² The second work, though shorter, is arguably more relevant to the present study if for no other reason than that the first portion of its title is *identical* to that of Go rams pa's *Distinguishing*. Dol po pa's text is called *Distinguishing²²³ the Views: Clearing Away Mental Darkness*.²²⁴ That the Sa skya pas are the object of Dol po pa's critique in his *Distinguishing the Views* is clear from several passages. Consider, for example, this passage, in which Dol po pa contends with an opponent:

An opponent takes the *gotra* [i.e., the buddha nature] *qua* support
 To be [identical to] the ultimate of the Madhyamaka *qua* freedom
 from extremes,
 Which is known to be neither existent nor non-existent,
 Neither permanent nor annihilated,
 And neither true nor false.
 But if the ultimate does not exist,
 Neither could it be understood.²²⁵

Dol po pa then goes on to say that if the ultimate is not understood, then there could be no gnosis, since gnosis is, by definition, the understanding of the ultimate. If there is no gnosis, then there could be no buddhahood, and if there is no buddhahood, then those who claim to have realized such a state would have to be mistaken.²²⁶

Go rams pa in fact calls his version of the Madhyamaka “the Middle Way *qua* freedom from extremes” (*mtha' bral dbu ma*), and, just like the opponent being portrayed here, he claims that the real ultimate truth (*don dam mtshan nyid pa*) of this Madhyamaka view is ineffable—beyond predication, and beyond characterization as either *existent*, *nonexistent*, and so forth. It seems clear, therefore, that it is the Sa skya pa theory of the Madhyamaka (or something very close to it) that is being represented and “refuted” here. Another passage sheds more light on the identity of Dol po pa's opponent:

If even [the Madhyamaka] does not exist [as you claim],
 Then, once again, it follows, absurdly, that the Madhyamaka [is tan-
 tantamount to] the extreme of nihilism,
 For nothing exists, whether in the extremes or in the middle (*dbu ma*),
 And it is *you* who ends up “cycling the three cycles,” [a fault that you
 accused us of].²²⁷

And [if you claim that] these [i.e., the Madhyamaka and the extremes] are not nonexistent, [then I reply:]
 Based on your [claim] that they are not nonexistent and not [not nonexistent],
 Is there a negation of non-existence or not?
 If so, then they are not nonexistent,
 Which means that they must exist, no?
 Doesn't the law of double negation apply?
 The negation of a negation yields an affirmation,
 And the negation of an affirmation, a negation,
 This is the way existence functions.
 It is a tradition among scholars.²²⁸

Once again, it is essentially the type of view espoused by Go rams pa—a theory that Go rams pa says is the Sa skya pa mainstream view—that Dol po pa is arguing against here. What is perhaps most interesting about this passage is that the argument that Dol po pa makes against the Sa skya pa position is precisely the type of argument that Tsong kha pa will make decades later. Since Tsong kha pa was familiar with the writings of Dol po pa, it is not inconceivable that he borrowed these arguments from the Jo nang pa tradition.²²⁹ Equally interesting is the fact that Go rams pa uses arguments like those found in Tsong kha pa against Dol po pa, arguments that Tsong kha pa, in turn, may have borrowed from one of *his* Sa skya pa teachers, Red mda' ba. When we remember that Go rams pa calls his text by the same name that Dol po pa uses for his—*Distinguishing the Views*—then the irony is all the more striking, for we have one scholar (Go rams pa) borrowing the name of the text that critiques his own school to name the text that responds to that very critique. Jo nang pas critique Sa skya pas. Dga' ldan pas use arguments popular among Jo nang pas to critique Sa skya pas, and arguments popular among Sa skya pas to critique Jo nang pas. And Sa skya pas possibly borrow arguments from Dga' ldan pas (who might have borrowed them from Sa skya pas) to critique the Jo nang pas. Western scholars have come to refer to this type of mutual textual referencing as *intertextuality*. “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another,” Julia Kristeva says.²³⁰ Tibetan philosophical polemics is obviously a fine example of this phenomenon.

The Structure and Contents of Go rams pa's Text

*Distinguishing the Views*²³¹ is a middling-size work that Go rams pa says was influenced by the Madhyamaka teachings he received from Byams chen rab 'byams pa, and by the oral commentary on the texts of the founders (*gong ma*)²³² of the Sa skya school he received from the “great Mus pa,” who, from the language that Go rams pa uses, may have been ill at the time of composition of the work. (We know that Mus chen died that same year.) Go rams pa was urged to write the work by another of his teachers, Gung ru Shes rab bzang po. Gung ru ba had a reputation as a polemicist, and so it is not surprising that he should have been the force behind the composition of *Distinguishing the Views*.²³³ The work was completed within a short timespan in late January or early February of 1469 at Go rams pa's home monastery of Rta nag gser gling in the midst of a phase of tremendous literary activity that coincided with the period during which the monastery was being constructed.²³⁴ The scribe was Chos rje Dgon po dbang phyug, whom Gdong thog Bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan lists as one of Go rams pa's twelve chief students.²³⁵

The text is lucid and structurally very simple, with little complexity in its subdivisions (*sa bcad*). It can roughly be divided into seven parts: three short sections that describe, respectively, Dol po pa's, Tsong kha pa's, and Go rams pa's own views, followed by three much longer sections in which he refutes each of the first two views and sets forth his own position in more detail, responding to possible objections along the way. The seventh and last section of the work consists of 36 stanzas summarizing his arguments. Since these verses—probably meant as a mnemonic device to help students retain the gist of the arguments—add little to what is found in the already lucid prose text, we do not translate them here.

Go rams pa uses as a structural device the widely accepted Buddhist notion that in philosophy, as in ethics, one should follow a middle way (*madhyamaka*, *dbu ma*) between extremes.²³⁶ *Distinguishing the Views* is then structured so as to demonstrate how Go rams pa's interpretation of the Indian Madhyamaka, which he calls the “Madhyamaka *qua* freedom from proliferations” (*spros bral kyī dbu ma*) or “Madhyamaka *qua* freedom from extremes” (*mtha' bral dbu ma*), is the true middle way between two extremist views prevalent in his day: the *eternalistic* view of the Jo nang pas, and the *nihilistic* view of the Dga' ldan pas. The expression “freedom from proliferations” or *spros bral* (*niṣprapañca*) has a long history in the Madhyamaka literature of both India and Tibet.²³⁷ Go rams pa, however, uses the term as much denominatively as descriptively, which is to say that he uses the term

to designate his particular brand of Madhyamaka—that is, as an appellation or trademark for a lineage of Madhyamaka philosophical speculation that includes, but is not limited to, the Sa skya paś—in much the same way as *emptiness of what is other* (*gzhan stong*) came to be the trademark of the Jo nang pas, and *Prāsaṅgika* that of the Dge lugs pas.²³⁸

It is clear that Go rams pa believes that his theory of emptiness represents the orthodox Sa skya pa interpretation. This does not mean that Go rams pa relies only on Sa skya pa sources. The lineage of the Madhyamaka that he describes in the text is exceedingly eclectic but, he says, quite old, including both the Rngog (eleventh century) and Pa tshab (b. 1055) lineages, and even Mar pa and his student Mi la ras pa. Although he mentions Rngog’s Gsang phu lineage,²³⁹ Go rams pa calls Pa tshab Nyi ma grags “the one who introduced the Madhyamaka as freedom from extremes [into Tibet],” indicating his greater allegiance to Pa tshab, and therefore to the tradition of Candrakīrti.²⁴⁰ Despite his proclivity for Pa tshab’s lineage—that is, for the *Prāsaṅgika* view—Go rams pa is reticent to identify himself as exclusively *Prāsaṅgika*, and there are probably several reasons for this. First, Tsong kha pa had already co-opted this term, and Go rams pa obviously wished to distance his interpretation of the Madhyamaka from that of the Dga’ ldan pas. Secondly, Go rams pa’s unequivocal adherence to the “freedom from extremes” doctrine precludes advocating any strong duality, even the Svātantrika/ *Prāsaṅgika* one.

Both the grasping at duality and at nonduality must be negated, so that any object that is grasped in terms of the four extremes cannot be found. It is the non-grasping [of things] in those [terms] that we call “the realization of the Madhyamaka view.” But if there arises a one-sided grasping of the form “this is the Madhyamaka view,” then whether one grasps things as empty or as not empty, one has not gone beyond grasping at extremes, and this is not the Middle Way.

Finally, Go rams pa has a wide-ranging and holistic view of the Madhyamaka that permits his reliance on Indian texts usually classified in Tibet as Svātantrika—for example, Jñānagarbha’s *Satyadvayaivibhaṅga*—making it difficult for him to side with Candrakīrti’s *Prāsaṅgika* to the exclusion of other Madhyamaka systems of thought.

Go rams pa’s interpretation of Madhyamaka is committed to a more literal reading of the Indian sources than either Dol po pa’s or Tsong kha pa’s, which is to say that it tends to take the Indian texts at face value. For example, Go

rams pa believes that the fourfold negation found in the tetralemma or *catuṣkoṭi*—not x, not non-x, not both, and not neither—is to be taken literally as a repudiation of, for example, existence, nonexistence, both, and neither *without the need for qualification*. Hence, contra Tsong kha pa, existence *itself* is an object of negation for him, there being no need to add the qualifier “ultimate” (as in “ultimate existence”) to make this negation palatable.

To explain how existence can be repudiated, Go rams pa resorts to a theory that bifurcates the ultimate truth into two parts. Emptiness for him is therefore of two kinds: the emptiness that is the endpoint of rational analysis, and the emptiness that yogis fathom by means of their own individual gnosis.²⁴¹ The first of these—the emptiness that is arrived at rationally—is of two kinds: the selflessness of persons and the selflessness of phenomena. Emptiness as the byproduct of rational analysis—that is, the emptiness of truth—is not the real ultimate truth, but only an analogue (*rjes mthun*) thereof, or, put another way, it is the ultimate truth in name only (*rnam grangs pa*). Since the cognition of this quasi-ultimate requires that the mind entertain the empty/nonempty dichotomy, where the first element of the pair is privileged, the conceptual understanding of emptiness must eventually be negated in order to achieve an understanding of the highest form of emptiness that is the object of yogic gnosis. This latter form of emptiness—the emptiness that is mystically fathomed—is the real ultimate truth (*don dam dngos, don dam mtshan nyid pa*). Being ineffable, it cannot be expressed in linguistic terms, since it is beyond all proliferative dichotomizing. Nonetheless, for Go rams pa understanding emptiness rationally is a necessary prerequisite to understanding it in its true, nonanalytical form.

The style of *Distinguishing the Views* is quasi-formal and philosophical.²⁴² As a scholastic, Go rams pa shares a great deal in common with his opponents—both doctrinally and methodologically—making it unnecessary for him to prove petty points on which he knows there is bound to be agreement. Where there *is* disagreement, Go rams pa gives reasons—reasons for why his opponents’ views are implausible and for why his views are superior. In some instances, he shows how a view subscribed to by his opponent is internally inconsistent. In other cases, he argues that a view is contradictory to the positions of texts that are considered authoritative (the texts of Indian Buddhism—that is, scriptures or the writings of the great Indian philosophers). Much of *Distinguishing the Views* is in fact concerned with arguments of this kind, and so it is as much a polemic over the interpretation of texts as it is a polemic over tenets.

The Refutation of Dol po pa

Go rams pa makes it clear that his refutation of Dol po pa's theory of emptiness is based on Red mda' ba's critique of the Jo nang pas. His goal is to demonstrate that the Jo nang pa view is non-Buddhist:²⁴³

It is not the purport of any of the sūtra traditions, whether Mahā or Hīna yānist. It is incompatible with all of the four [Buddhist] philosophical schools, and it is not accepted by any Mahāyānist, whether Indian or Chinese. Hence, it cannot but fall outside of the [bounds of the] Buddhist tradition.

Dol po pa's theory of emptiness is not consistent with the view of the Hīnayāna schools, says Go rams pa, because Hīnayānists do not accept the fact that conventional things are empty of their own nature. Hīnayānists would thus reject Dol po pa's claim that some things are "empty of themselves" (*rang stong*). Dol po pa's theory is not consistent with the views of Nāgārjuna, Go rams pa claims, because by exempting the ultimate from the same negative dialectic that deconstructs conventional reality, Dol po pa's theory implies that there is a form of emptiness that is different from any of the three forms explained above.²⁴⁴ Finally, he says, it is not consistent with the views of Maitreya, Asaṅga, and Vasubandhu because it insists that the dependent is empty of its own nature, whereas the Cittamātra maintains that the dependent exists substantially. Go rams pa then invokes the opinion of his teacher Rong ston pa to the effect that the Jo nang pa is a "system that, while having strong affinities to the Cittamātra, never manages to reach the Middle Way." This section concludes with Go rams pa's jibes at what is perhaps the position of his rival, Shākya mchog ldan, a scholar who, while never abandoning his Sa skya pa affiliation, is known to have had strong affinities for the *emptiness of what is other* perspective of the Jo nang pas:

Certain persons of coarse mental faculty, holding the eternalistic view [of the Jo nang pas] secretly in their hearts, take sides with the philosophical views of others for the sake of diplomacy, and claim that the Sa skya and Jo nang pa schools are not incompatible as regards their philosophical views.

Go rams pa sees this as a sellout of the Sa skya tradition, and in support of

his position he cites Rje btsun Grags pa rgyal tshan so as to demonstrate that even the great founders of the tradition were aware of Jo nang pa-like views, and rejected them.

The Refutation of Tsong kha pa

Go rams pa was not the first critic of Tsong kha pa in the field of Madhyamaka. Five years prior to the composition of *Distinguishing the Views*, the founder of Dga' ldan had already been the object of a polemical attack by Stag tshang lo tsā ba in his famous *Grub mtha' kun shes* (written in 1463).²⁴⁵ But even if it is not the first Madhyamaka polemic directed at Tsong kha pa, *Distinguishing the Views* is arguably the more wide-ranging. Go rams pa's refutation of Tsong kha pa is extensive—much more extensive than his treatment of Dol po pa, for example. It is also very detailed and complex. It would be beyond the scope of this introduction to discuss it in its entirety. Suffice it to mention some highlights of the argument, using Go rams pa's own outline as a basis.

Go rams pa accuses Tsong kha pa of holding a nihilistic interpretation of the Madhyamaka. This is somewhat ironic, given that this is precisely the charge that Tsong kha pa levels against the *neither existence nor nonexistence* (*yod min med min*) view to which Go rams pa subscribes. In one sense at least, Go rams pa's accusations of nihilism are puzzling, for his central thesis is that Tsong kha pa and his followers *do not go far enough* in their negation. While agreeing with the Dga' ldan pas concerning the need to repudiate true existence, Go rams pa maintains that both the emptiness that is that very negation and its apprehension/conceptualization must also be negated, a view that is anathema to Tsong kha pa. But according to Go rams pa it is precisely this—Tsong kha pa's grasping at emptiness—that makes him a nihilist. As Go rams pa says, "Those who grasp at emptiness have not gone beyond falling into the extreme of nihilism."

For Tsong kha pa, the object of the analytical/rational/conceptual understanding of emptiness is the real ultimate truth. For Go rams pa it is a conventional (and *not* an ultimate) truth. Put another way, for Tsong kha pa, both inference and yogic gnosis understand the same object—emptiness—albeit in different ways. For Go rams pa only yogic gnosis, which is non-analytical and nonconceptual, is capable of perceiving the true (*mtshan nyid pa*) ultimate. In Go rams pa's view, the dichotomizing tendency of the mind that culminates in extremist proliferations (existence/nonexistence, and so

forth) is built into the very structure of conceptual thought and, as such, any object of conceptual thought, even emptiness, is of necessity contaminated with the type of dualistic proliferation that is the Madhyamaka's object of negation. That is why emptiness as the object of conceptual thought cannot be the real ultimate truth:

In brief, if one accepts that the direct object of the conceptual thought that apprehends things as truthless...is the real ultimate truth, then one would have to accept that the generic image (*don spyi*) of the ultimate truth is the ultimate truth. It would be like accepting the generic image of the pot to be the pot.

Hence, everything, including emptiness *qua* object of conceptual thought, is an object of the Madhyamaka critique, and this means that it must be negated—not simply negated as lacking mere inherent existence (as Tsong kha pa maintains), but negated *in toto* through the fourfold dialectic.

Go rams pa is astute in anticipating the Dge lugs objection to this view. Like Go rams pa, Tsong kha pa also believes that emptiness is the object of the Madhyamaka critique, not because it is itself to be negated, but because its *true existence* is to be negated. Go rams pa, however, calls this “the deceptive blithering of individuals of little intelligence and merit, the demonic words that slander the ‘freedom from proliferations view,’ which is the heart of the teachings.” His reason for leveling this invective against Tsong kha pa is interesting. Why should the Madhyamaka texts claim that *all* views and conceptual constructs are to be abandoned if there is one—emptiness—that should not? Go rams pa implies that Tsong kha pa's view makes the fourfold structure of the *catuṣkoṭi* meaningless because it subsumes the entire Madhyamaka critique into a qualified first *koṭi* (the negation of *true existence*), making the other three *koṭis* (the negation of nonexistence, both, and neither) pointless. For Go rams pa, the truth of things comes to be negated (and their illusory nature understood) not through the negation of true existence, but through the negation of *all four* extremes—existence, nonexistence, both, and neither—*without the need for any qualification*. For Tsong kha pa, the problem of ignorance lies in the fact that the mind improperly reifies objects, imputing real or inherent existence to things that lack it. For Go rams pa, the chief problem lies in the fact that the mind operates through a dichotomizing filter that continuously splits the world into dualities (existent/nonexistent, permanent/impermanent, and so forth). Put another way, for Tsong kha pa the problem lies with the false quality

that the mind attributes to objects, whereas for Go rams pa it lies with the very proliferative character of the conceptual mind itself, an aspect of mental functioning that cannot be entirely eliminated through the selective negation of a specific quality (true existence), requiring instead the use of a method (the complete negation of all extremes) that brings dualistic thinking to a halt.

Given this view, it is not surprising that Go rams pa should repudiate the *law of double negation*, for clearly the negation of existence does not for him imply the acceptance of nonexistence. He also rejects the Dga' ldan pa charge that the *yod min med min* view is tantamount to the view of Hwa shang—that is, to quietism—claiming that this charge “comes about due to the blessing of demons for the purpose of degenerating the essence of the doctrine.” His defense against this charge is, again, quite interesting:

The Chinese H[w]a shang [believes] that, without analyzing the object, reality, one should negate ordinary conceptual thoughts and think of nothing whatsoever, and this he accepts to be the realization of the ultimate view... We, on the other hand, set forth reality as an object using the reasoning that is explained in the Madhyamaka textual tradition. In so doing, we individually repudiate each of the conceptions [of the various thoughts] that grasp at extremes, and at the end [of this process] we reserve the term *realization of the Madhyamaka view* to refer to precisely that not-finding of any of the extremes of proliferation, such as existence and nonexistence.

Hence, the Hwa shang view repudiates the very process of analysis, while Go rams pa sees analysis as a necessary prerequisite, but one that must be transcended through such techniques as the *catuṣkoṭi*.

These are some of the main points of Go rams pa's critique of Tsong kha pa's theory of emptiness, but Go rams pa's critique does not end here, for he also finds fault with Tsong kha pa's views *of the conventional*. For example, Go rams pa criticizes Tsong kha pa

for not properly understanding the meaning of the Madhyamaka claim that conventional things are *mere labels*;
 for accepting the *destruction of things* to be a real entity (*zhig pa dngos po ba*), a tenet that he says is more heterodox than Buddhist;
 and for his theory of perception across world spheres, the controversial

Dge lugs claim that in order to account for the fact that different types of beings in different realms (humans, hungry ghosts, gods, etc.) perceive the same object differently, a vessel full of liquid must be said to contain actual water, actual pus and blood, actual nectar and so forth.

Finally, Go rams pa criticizes Tsong kha pa in regard to what he calls the *five ancillary points*, the majority of which are subsumed within what the Dge lugs pas call the *eight great difficult points* (*dka' gnad chen po bryad*) of the Madhyamaka.²⁴⁶ On almost every count, Go rams pa's views stand counter to those of Tsong kha pa. For example, Go rams pa maintains:

that grasping at the truth of phenomena is an “obscuration to omniscience” (*shes sgrib*), and not an “afflicted obscuration” (*nyon sgrib*), as Tsong kha pa claims;²⁴⁷

that Tsong kha pa reifies the “mere I,” making it into a real entity that is found when the self is rationally analyzed;

that not all grasping at the self of phenomena (*chos kyi bdag 'dzin*) involves grasping at truth (*bden 'dzin*), as Tsong kha pa claims;

that, contra Tsong kha pa, śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas, while they understand the emptiness of true existence (*bden pas stong pa*), do not understand the *ultimate* truth that is the freedom from proliferations, which, as has been noted, involves more than just the negation of true existence;

that the Dga' ldan pas err in their understanding of the existence of external objects, and in their repudiation of the foundation consciousness (*kun gzhi*) and of self-reflexive cognition (*rang rig*);

that, contra Tsong kha pa, the Svātantrikas and Prāsaṅgikas *do not* differ as regards the subtlety of their object of negation; and, finally,

that Tsong kha pa has misunderstood the Prāsaṅgika repudiation of autonomous (*rang rgyud kyi*) syllogisms (*rtags*) and theses (*dam bca'*).

Entire essays could be devoted to each of these various topics, making it foolish to attempt any detailed treatment of them here. Suffice it to conclude by observing that Go rams pa's critique of Tsong kha pa is extensive, detailed, and provocative. That it was seen as a major response to the Dga' ldan pa tradition is witnessed by the fact that it has been responded to by some of the Dge lugs tradition's most important apologists. Two of them in particular are worthy of note: Rje btsun Chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1469– 1544/46) and 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa Ngag dbang brtson 'grus.²⁴⁸ Each of these figures was a writer of textbooks (*yig cha*)—the works used as the basis for the curriculum

of Dge lugs monastic universities to this day—and it would not be an understatement to say that each is also considered the greatest Dge lugs intellectual of his respective generation. We know of no Sa skya pa counter-polemical work that responds to the critiques of Rje btsun pa and 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa, though given the risks involved in attempting such a response, at least in those portions of central and western Tibet under dGe lugs rule, one cannot consider this particularly surprising.

Go rams pa's work has continued to exert a major influence in Tibetan Madhyamaka exegesis up to the twentieth century, even outside the Sa skya tradition. For example, the reviver of Rnying ma scholastic studies in Khams, Gzhan phan mtha' yas (b. 1800), held Go rams pa's work in high esteem. And a later important figure in this same tradition, Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846–1912), was also greatly influenced by the work of Go rams pa,²⁴⁹ as were other later figures in Mi pham's lineage like Bod pa sprul sku (1900/1907–59), whose most important work, *Distinguishing the Views and Practices (Lta sgrub shan 'byed)*, makes an allusion to Go rams pa's work in its very title.

Conclusion

In an article entitled “Books, Canons and the Nature of Dispute,”²⁵⁰ G. Thomas Tanselle bemoans the fact that contemporary literary criticism should have become so enmeshed in disputes—in particular, in the dispute over authorial intent, a polemic that consumed so much of the field in the late 1980s. But he bemoans this state of affairs not so much because it has distracted the discipline from other more important questions, but because of its very character as a polemic. Tanselle believes that dispute and confrontation make human beings less rational, and perhaps even less human:

The impulse to have one's own way and to deny the distasteful conclusions of others is apparently so strong as to suppress in many instances whatever desire human beings have to be coherent.²⁵¹

Perhaps the greatest irony about Tanselle's essay is that the plausibility of its premise—that polemic is less than desirable as a form of discourse—rests on his ability as a polemicist. As we have already noted, polemic can sometimes be exaggerated and grotesque. It polarizes viewpoints, people and schools. But it is precisely this type of polarization—this “differentiation”—that brings great clarity to issues. In fact, it does this for Tanselle himself, as he analyzes

the two options (social textual criticism vs. intentionalist criticism) in an attempt to come to his own literary-critical middle way. Could Tanselle have achieved such critical insight if the polemic had never occurred? Did it not crystallize for him the issues, options, and pitfalls in ways that less contentious prose could not have? It is precisely because of the polemic over authorial intention that Tanselle's essay, and its concomitant insights, were possible.

The same is true, of course, of Tibetan Madhyamaka polemical literature. It is at times filled with crass name-calling, misrepresentation, and overstatement. But even then it can act as a source of insight, as critical scholars—traditional or modern—are forced to work their way through the morass. Studying a text like *Distinguishing the Views* allows us to better understand the views of three great Tibetan scholars in their own right. But more important, it allows us to glean the most significant issues of the Madhyamaka within the context of the broader conversation to which all three figures contributed so significantly. This is the virtue of turning our attention to the polemical literature of Tibetan Madhyamaka, and to the work of Go rams pa in particular. *Du choc des opinions jaillit la vérité*. And now let the clash of opinions begin!