The Structure of the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*:

From the Interpretation of a Tibetan Commentary

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1. Introduction

The *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* (*-bhāṣya*) (*MSA*) is one of the major treatises of the early Yogācāra School. This treatise consists of many sections and deals with a range of topics, the commentaries of which begin with the phrases like “there are a number of verses concerning something.” These sections do not appear to be arranged according to any structure, with the result that the treatise has been said to resemble a patchwork.¹⁾

Nonetheless, a number of studies have pointed to some correspondence between the structure of the *MSA* and that of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, the 44 *manaskāras* found in the Chapter XI, that of the Chapter IX, and so forth.²⁾ These studies suggest that the *MSA* was written according to a plan of some sort and to have had a multilayered structure.³⁾

In order to elucidate this structure, we need to examine carefully all the related material. Thankfully, many Tibetan commentaries are now widely available as a result of the recent publishing of the *bKa' gdams gsung 'bum*.

In this paper, I examine an interpretation of the *MSA* that appears in one such Tibetan commentary contained in the *bKa' gdams gsung 'bum*, namely, that written by rNgog lo tsa' ba Blo ldan shes rab (1059–1109).

2. Available Tibetan Commentaries

Before beginning the examination, I would like to survey the Tibetan commentaries of the *MSA*. Ten or so Tibetan commentaries are known through the catalog of rare texts (*Tho yig*) written by A khu rin po che, but only a few of them are available. Odani's work (1984), thought to be the most notable study of the Tibetan commentaries on the *MSA*, also refers to the *Tho yig*, and makes use of the two commentaries found there and two other commentaries written by dPal man dkon mchog rgyal mtshan and Mi pham rin po

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che (pp. 48–84).

In addition to these four works, there are 10 commentaries in the *bKa' gdams gsung 'bum*.⁴⁾ The next section will examine one of the commentaries contained in the *bKa' gdams gsung 'bum*, namely, *mDo sde rgyan gyi don bsdud* (*Don bsdus*), written by rNgog lo tsa' ba Blo ldan shes rab.⁵⁾

There also appears to be another commentary that is a summary of the *Don bsdus*, mentioned by Kanō (2007, p. 118, n. 26). This means there are at least 15 commentaries now available.

3. Outline of the *Don bsdus*

The *Don bsdus* consists of 23 folios and is composed of three components: beginning verses, a main body, and ending verses. It opens with the line, “The *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* composed of three parts of contents: (1) establishing the occasion (*skabs sgrub pa*), (2) bringing the joy (*spro ba bskyed pa*), and (3) explaining the teaching (*chos brjod pa*).” (*Don bsdus* (2009, 478.11–12)⁶⁾) The *MSA* is thus divided into three parts.⁷⁾

The *Don bsdus* explains the first part, (1) “establishing the occasion,” by reference to the first three verses of the *MSA*. The rough outline of this part is as follows (with locations in *Don bsdus* (2009)):

1	establishing the occasion	478.11	I, kk. 1–3
1.1	perfection of purpose of the treatise	478.15	I, k. 1
1.1.1	meaning of purpose		
1.1.2	meaning of words		
1.1.3	summarized meaning		
1.2	perfection of subject matter	482.14	I, k. 2
1.2.1	substance of the Mahāyāna		
1.2.2	practices to carry out the meaning of the Mahāyāna		
1.3	perfection of the meanings of terms	487.10	I, k. 3

The first division of this part, (1.1) “perfection of purpose of the treatise” (*bstan bcos kyi dgos pa phun sum tshogs pa*), explains the purpose of the treatise, relating to I, k. 1 of the *MSA*, through the eight kinds of *kāpadeśa*.⁸⁾ In this case “purpose” means why the author is writing the treatise. One of the aspects of this purpose, namely, aspect as a result, is explained four ways: in terms of (a) subject matter (*brjod par bya ba*, that which is to be re-

lated), in terms of (b) the purpose (*gdos pa*), in terms of (c) the purpose of the purpose (*gdos pa'i gdos pa*) and in terms of (d) a particular relationship (*'brel ba'i khyad par*). According to the explanation (*Don bsdus* (2009, 481.1ff.)), these four ways represent, respectively, efficacy, practicability, necessity, and the absence of any easier approach, and thus they draw the reader into the treatise.⁹⁾

Division (1.2), “perfection of subject matter” (*brjod bya phun sum tshogs pa*), presents the subject matter of the treatise, relating to I, k. 2 of the *MSA*. This will be discussed below.

Division (1.3), “perfection of meanings of terms” (*ming gi don phun sum tshogs pa*), explains the inclusion of the word “*rgyan*” in the title, although the explanation is not detailed.

The *Don bsdus* includes the observation here with reference to the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* that “learning is of three kinds: what to learn, how to learn, and who learns” (*Don bsdus* (2009: 487.16ff.)).

Next, the *Don bsdus* discusses the second part of the *MSA*, (2) “bringing the joy.” This part has two divisions, as follows:

2	bringing the joy	490.21	I, kk. 4–21
2.1	explanation of greatness	490.22	I, kk. 4–6
2.2	establishment of being the words [of the Buddha]	491.1	I, kk. 7–21

This part is related to the latter part of Chapter I. Previous studies have often observed that Chapter I in Lévi’s edition of the *MSA* is divided into two parts: the first part, kk. 1–6, plays the role of an introduction for the whole treatise, while the second, kk. 7–21, treats the authenticity of the Mahāyāna. The *Don bsdus*, by contrast, tends to divide it into the two parts of kk. 1–3 and kk. 4–21. This seems quite reasonable given the perspective of the initial introduction of the whole treatise and its presumed discussions.

Having finished a somewhat detailed explanation of this section, the *Don bsdus* says, “(The above is) the opportunity for the establishment of the Mahāyāna. The teaching to discriminate the taking of refuge (**śaraṇagamana*) is briefly shown as follows” Hereafter, the *Don bsdus* begins to annotate the *MSA* with the concluding sentence, in most cases, of the chapter names or the topic names enumerated in (1.2), as discussed in the next section. Although the description of Part (3), “explaining of the teaching,” seems not to be presented explicitly, the remaining annotation could be said to correspond to it.

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4. Flow Presented by the *Don bsdus*

As mentioned above, the annotation of the *MSA* from Chapter II onward can be said to accord with the flow explained in (1.2). The k. 2 of Chapter I, to which (1.2) is related, features five similes that correspond to the whole treatise, as other commentaries show. The outline of (1.2) is as follows:

1.2	perfection of subject matter	482.15	I, k. 2
1.2.1	substance of the Mahāyāna:	482.20	(II–IX)
	1: <i>skyabs su 'gro ba</i> , 2: <i>rigs</i> , 3: <i>sems bskyed pa</i> , 4: <i>sgrub pa</i> , 5: <i>de kho na mthong ba</i> , 6: <i>sems can smin pa</i> , 7: <i>byang chub</i>		
1.2.2	practice to carry out the meaning of the Mahāyāna	482.22	(XV–XIX)
1.2.2.1	practice to enter the <i>dharma</i> :	482.24	(X–XIV)
	1: <i>theg pa chen po'i chos la mos pa</i> , 2: <i>thos pa dang bsam pas chos yongs su 'tshol ba</i> , 3: <i>gzhan la ston pa</i> , 4: <i>bdag nyid sgrub pa</i> , 5: <i>gdams ngag thob pa</i>		
1.2.2.2	practice to enter the meaning:	483.2	
	1: <i>thun mong gi ngo bo thabs dang ldan pa'i las</i> , 2: <i>pha rol tu phyin pa'i spyod pa</i> , 3: <i>byang chub kyi phyogs dang mthun pa'i spyod pa</i>		
1.2.2.3	<i>dharma</i> of virtues those who practice must have	483.18	
	1: <i>rang dang gzhan gyi don phun sum tshogs pa</i> , 2: <i>chos dang don phun sum tshogs pa</i> , 3: <i>gang zag gi rang bzhin phun sum tshogs pa</i>		
1.2.3	result acquired by practice	484.11	(XX–XXI)
	1: <i>gnas skabs kyi 'bras bu</i> , 2: <i>thar thug kyi 'bras bu</i>		

In (1.2.1), seven topics are enumerated as the substance of the Mahāyāna (*theg pa chen po'i rang bzhin*). These seven almost correspond to chapter names of the *MSA*: II: *skyabs su 'gro ba* (*śaraṇagamana*); III: *rigs* (*gotra*); IV: *sems bskyed pa* (*cittotpāda*); V: *sgrub pa* (*pratipatti*); VI: *de kho na nyid* (*tattva*); VIII: *yongs su smin pa* (*paripāka*); and IX:

byang chub (*bodhi*). Chapter VII, *mtshu* (*prabhāva*), is missing, however.

In fact, the *Don bsdud* also relates these topics to chapters. For example, (1.2.1.6), *sems can smin pa*, is divided into three: a method, an agent, and an object. The first corresponds to Chapter VII, and the latter two to the Chapter VIII. Similarly (1.2.2.1) corresponds to Chapters X–XIV. Although (1.2.2.2) and (1.2.2.3) do not have such a straightforward correspondence with chapters, each topic seems to be found in the subdivisions of Chapters XV–XIX. Last (1.2.3) corresponds to Chapters XX–XXI.

As mentioned above, the topics enumerated here does not necessarily accord with the chapter names. The *Don bsdus* can be regarded as having been constructed by Blo ldan shes rab in accordance with the topics to teach or to practice, rather than the chapters of the *MSA* themselves. His interpretation of the structure of the *MSA* may also be seen that way.

5. Conclusions

So far, I have surveyed the Tibetan commentaries now available on the *MSA*, and outlined one of them, *mDo sde rgyan gyi don bsdus*, written by Blo ldan shes rab.

According to his commentary, the *MSA* originally had a sequence of the topics to teach, to learn, or to practice, and the structure of the *MSA* is based on this sequence. It is as a consequence of this same structure that the *MSA* has a multilayered structure.

Of course, this interpretation is not necessarily the same as the original “intention” of the *MSA*, but it seems quite reasonable to argue that there is a particular sequence of topics to the *MSA*, on the basis of which it has been constructed.

I would like to proceed to an examination of the relationship of this structure to that of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, in line with this interpretation, and to compare *mDo sde rgyan gyi don bsdus* with other Tibetan commentaries.

1) See Hakamaya and Arai (1993).

2) Sylvain Lévi, Hakuju Ui and Osamu Hayashima points these out. See Hakamaya and Arai (1993) for the bibliography. As for the last, see Naitō (2009).

3) See also the two commentaries left only in Tibetan translation, **Ādiślokadvayavyākhyāna* and **Sūtrālamkārapīṇḍārtha*.

4) These are contained in the *bKa'gdams gsung 'bum*, vols. 1, 7 (2), 18, 22, 25, 29, 50, 60, 61. See *bKa'gdams dkar chag* vols. 1–3 and Kanō (2007, 2009) for details.

5) As for the brief descriptions on *bKa'gdams gsung 'bum* and Blo ldan shes rab, see Kanō (2007) and so on.

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6) All quotations are translated by the author.

7) Although synopses (*sa bcas*) are presented by the editors in *Don bsdus* (2006, 2009), neither is appropriate for the structure of the *Don bsdus*.

8) *Kāpadeśa* is often described as having seven kinds, but in fact it is composed of eight interrogatives of seven cases and *kati* (how many), as the commentaries say.

9) These four divisions correspond to those found in the Indian commentaries: *abhidheya*, *prayojana*, *prayojanaprayojana* and *saṃbandha*. This formula on the necessary elements for the treatise often appears in many Buddhist and non-Buddhist texts, with some variations.

〈Texts and Abbreviations〉

Don bsdus (*mDo sde rgyan gyi don bsdus*) (2006): *bkha' gdams gsung 'bum*. Vol. 1, pp. 203–252.

Don bsdus (2009): *rNgog lo tsa' ba Blo ldan shes rab kyi gsung 'bum*. Vol. 3. Beijing, 2009, pp. 478–544.

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