Buddhism and Poetry in Tibet:  
A Study of Tsong kha pa’s rTen 'brel bstdod pa

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1. Introduction

From the 13th century onward, Sanskrit poetic theory was transmitted to Tibet through Dandin’s Kavyadarśa, the only Indian treatise on poetics translated into Tibetan. Since then, the Tibetan version of the Kavyadarśa (sNyin ngag me long) has been widely studied in the Tibetan scholastic world. It has often been the case that a Tibetan Buddhist monk scholar is well versed in poetics and composes ornate poems by himself. Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa (1357–1419), the founder of the dGe lugs pa tradition, is undoubtedly one such monk scholar. It was around the age of 41 that Tsong kha pa composed the rTen 'brel bstdod pa (“Praise [to the Buddha, the teacher who taught] dependent arising”), in which he gave a lucid exposition of the Madhyamaka idea of dependent arising and emptiness while at the same time praising the Buddha, who taught that idea. The rTen 'brel bstdod pa can be seen as an embodiment of both Tsong kha pa’s interpretation of Madhyamaka philosophy and his knowledge of poetics. In what follows, this paper examines the overall idea underlying the rTen 'brel bstdod pa and its related texts, and thereby offers a clear understanding of the relationship between Buddhist thought and poetry in Tibet.

2. Tsong kha pa’s View of Logic, Poetry, and Buddhist Doctrine

Tsong kha pa’s view of logic, poetry, and Buddhist doctrine is briefly described in his Rin po che gsum gyi gtam gyi sbyor ba (“A series of discourses on the three gems”) as follows:

There are three kinds of gems shining on earth: [1] a means of investigation to analyze subtle paths of reasoning; [2] spiritual practice [that is done after] knowing philosophical tenets to be instructions [to achieve liberation]; and [3] majesty of words combined with the right method of composition. 2)
Here, “a means of investigation” refers to analytical thinking obtained through the study of logic; “spiritual practice” refers to the stage of spiritual paths that is aimed at achieving enlightenment; and “majesty of words” refers to ornate poems composed in accordance with poetic theory. What the passage makes clear is that Tsong kha pa attaches great importance to logic, poetics, and Buddhist doctrine equally. As we will see below, the rTen 'brel bstd pa is the work that vividly reflects his attitude toward the three branches of science.

3. The Overall Idea behind the rTen 'brel bstd pa

The rTen 'brel bstd pa consists of praise to the Buddha who taught the idea of dependent arising, which is, as the following verses state, the core of his teaching. 3)

It is said that whatever depends upon conditions is empty of intrinsic being. How could there be a marvelous good method of instruction other than this statement? (v. 5)

By grasping that, foolish men fasten their fetters of extremism. But for wise men, the same thing serves as a means of severing the net of proliferation entirely. (v. 6)

Verse 5 describes the Madhyamaka view that whatever arises dependently is empty of intrinsic being. Verse 6 contrasts the Madhyamaka standpoint with that of non-Madhyamaka schools, that is, the proponent of real entities (dngos por smra ba). As this verse says, while non-Madhyamaka Buddhist schools assert that things are endowed with intrinsic being because they arise dependently, the Madhyamaka maintains that things are devoid of intrinsic being exactly because they arise dependently. What Tsong kha pa has in mind is a probative argument like this: 4)

[Thesis:] A sprout is empty of intrinsic being. [Reason:] Because it arises dependently. [Example:] Just like a reflection in a mirror.

It is only when the argument is presented to a Madhyamaka opponent that the reason “dependent arising” serves as a proper inferential sign (rtags yang dag) for establishing the thesis. Otherwise, if the argument is given to a non-Buddhist opponent, the reason does not serve as a proper sign since the opponent considers it to be an unestablished reason (ma grub pa) for proving the thesis; and if the argument is given to a non-Madhyamaka Buddhist opponent, the reason fails to establish the thesis since he considers it to be a contradictory reason ('gal ba), which proves the opposite of the
Buddhism and Poetry in Tibet (NEMOTO) (243)

thesis. Tsong kha pa discusses this issue later in his Lam rim chen mo and Lam rim chung ba and develops the theory of argumentation for the Madhyamaka. In the rTen 'brel bston pa, we find more than a germ of his theory.

Tsong kha pa presents a brief description of the Madhyamaka idea of dependent arising in the first half of the work (vv. 1–30). Then, one can find poetic elements in the latter half of the work (vv. 31–58). One of the most noticeable of these elements is the depiction of the moonlight. In verses 42–43, Tsong kha pa laments that he had no chance to hear the teaching from the Buddha himself, saying that his mind is not freed from the power of this sorrow. In verses 44–45, Tsong kha pa visualizes the Buddha discoursing in a melodious voice and receives blessings that temper the heat of his sorrow. He compares these blessings to the moonlight that soothes the torment of heat. In verses 49–51, Tsong kha pa explains how his mind arrived at rest when he acquired a deeper understanding of Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka thought with the help of Candrakīrti’s commentary.

The kumuda garden of the thought of Nāgārjuna, who is prophesied to explain the theory of your [i.e., the Buddha’s] highest vehicle (khyod kyi bla med theg pa'i tshul) correctly while abandoning the extreme of existence and that of nonexistence, is illuminated by the garland of white light of good explanations of the glorious Candra—the moon—who, with the widening circle of immaculate wisdom, runs through the sky of the Buddha’s teachings unimpededly, eliminating the darkness of the mind grasping extremes, and overwhelming the stars of wrong views. When I saw this, thanks to my teacher, I found peace of mind. (vv. 49–51)

Tsong kha pa compares Nāgārjuna’s thought to a garden of kumuda flowers, Candrakīrti (zla ba grags pa) to the moon (zla ba), and his commentary to the moonlight that makes the flowers bloom at night. It is clear that Tsong kha pa carefully uses the term zla ba to convey a double meaning, namely, Candrā[-kīrti] and the moon. The figure of speech used here is a “punned metaphor” (Skt. śīṣṭarūpaka, Tib. sbyar ba'i gzugs can), which is defined in Daṇḍin’s Kāvyādāra II 87. It is thus obvious that Tsong kha pa makes full use of his knowledge of poetic theory.

4. Purpose of Poetry

Tsong kha pa’s rTen 'brel bston pa, which praises the Buddha while elucidating his teaching of dependent arising, became a model for the later dGe lugs pa’s literature. For
example, Gung thang dkon mchog bstan pa'i sgron me (1762–1823) wrote a hymn to Tsong kha pa entitled bsTo d pa don ldan ma (“Meaningful praise”), in which he presents a summary of Tsong kha pa’s unique interpretation of Buddhist thought by emulating the style of the rTen ’brel bstod pa; and Co ne bla ma blo bzung rgya mtsho (d. 1923) composed the sPel mar bstod pa (“Intertwined praise”), which consists of a mixture of original verses from the rTen ’brel bstod pa and Co ne bla ba’s own verses.

After Tsong kha pa, with the rise of the commentarial tradition of the Kāvyādārśa, the idea of uniting Buddhism and poetry came to be accepted by not only the dGe lugs pa but also other schools. The bKa’ brgyud pa scholar Bod mkhas pa mi pham dge legs rnam rgyal (1618–1685), in his commentary entitled Daṇḍī’i dgos rgyan, discusses the purpose (dgos pa) and the ultimate purpose (nying dgos) of the Kāvyādārśa from two different perspectives.8) From the perspective of conventionality, the purpose of the treatise is to make the readers understand the method of the body (lus) and ornamentation (rgyan) of poetry; and its ultimate purpose is to lead them to attain renown as a scholar or, alternatively, to make them understand what one should accept and reject in order to achieve the four objects of life (sde bzhi’i blang dor gyi gnas) of Hindus, i.e., artha, kāma, dharma, and mokṣa. However, from the Buddhist point of view, these are merely provisional purposes (gnas skabs tsam); for the real purpose of the treatise is to learn the method of writing poems praising the Three Jewels, and then accumulate good qualities for attaining supreme enlightenment. In order to demonstrate this, Bod mkhas pa cites a passage from a certain (yet unidentified) sūtra:9)

Write a poem to clarify the highest doctrine. Make a hymn to the Three Jewels. Then you shall attain supreme enlightenment.

It is to be noted, however, that there is a tendency in Buddhism to prohibit engaging in poetry. Bod mkhas pa is fully aware of this fact and therefore examines a passage from Candragomin’s Śisyalekha, which runs as follows:10)

There is a terrible fruit of the lie of poets who compare the bodies of women, which are [in fact] stinking, putrid, and disgusting, to an aravinda lotus, the moon, and an indīvara lotus: that is, they enter the residence of the womb in their [bodies]. (v. 90)

Here, we notice, Candragomin criticizes poets for presenting false statements praising beautiful women although they are in fact impure by nature. He asserts that those
poets cannot escape from the suffering of rebirth and cyclic existence. However, as Bod mkhas pa says, Candragomin never prohibits writing a poem in general but instead merely criticizes poetry dealing with love stories (‘dod pa’i gtsam gyi snyan ngag). Bod mkhas pa therefore considers that there is no fault in composing ornate poems glorifying the Buddha, and attaches great importance to poetry as long as it is relevant to Buddhist practice.

5. Poetry and Logic

We must not forget the fact that Tibet has a long tradition of mgur ma, “songs of experience,” which is formed under the influence of dohā, caryāgīti, or vajra gīti sung by Indian siddhas to express their spiritual realizations. It was especially the bKa’ brgyud pa ascetics, like Mi la ras pa, who composed such songs to express their individual experience by using many colloquial words that are easily understood without any knowledge of poetic theory. When we look at the dGe lugs pa tradition, we can find a few important works composed in the mgur ma style, such as lTa mgur (“The songs of the view”) written by Icang skya rol pa’i rdo rje (1717–1786), and a group of songs entitled mGur ‘bum (“The hundred thousand songs”) written by Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho (1607–1677). However, what is important to note is that mgur ma never played an important role in the dGe lugs pa tradition as a medium for expressing this school’s understanding of Buddhist thought. The following is a passage from the bsTod pa don ldan ma by Gung thang, which is relevant to this issue: 1)

There are many points of going astray in a dose of medicine (chig thang) bearing the mark of a spiritual experience, although it may take effect in some cases. But these words of yours [i.e., Tsong kha pa’s] cure every [patient] who wishes to attain liberation, since they are endowed with all means of argumentation and refutation.

Gung thang here criticizes the writings of other schools, that is, bKa’ brgyud pa, rNying ma pa, and Sa skya pa, and expresses praise to those of Tsong kha pa. “A dose of a medicine” is a metaphor for the works of those schools that express their experience of the Buddhist path and their method of practice. This medicine is effective only for those having a specific symptom; but if those having a serious illness take the medicine, it becomes the cause of other diseases. What Gung thang means to say is that the writing expressing the author’s spiritual realization is only beneficial to a specific
reader and hence has no universality. He goes on to say that Tsong kha pa's writings are beneficial to every reader since they are endowed with all means of argumentation and refutation, which have universal power to lead one to achieve liberation from suffering. Gung thang's statement is suggestive in that it reveals the characteristic feature of the writings of Tsong kha pa and his successors of the dGe lugs pa, that is, the usage of argumentation and refutation based on logic. We find this element in many of Tsong kha pa's works, even in a poetic work like rTen 'brel bstod pa, as we have seen. In this respect, it is easy to understand why mgur ma has never become a primary tool for expressing the Buddhist thought of the dGe lugs pa school. What is important for dGe lugs pa scholars is to convey their thought by means of logic, which is the only way that leads every practitioner to achieve liberation.

6. Conclusion

What is characteristic of Tsong kha pa's view of learning is that it emphasizes the importance of logic, poetry, and Buddhist doctrine equally. What we find in his rTen 'brel bstod pa is the elements of each of the three. The rTen 'brel bstod pa has been accepted as one of the core text in the dGe lugs pa tradition. Furthermore, it supplied a model for later Buddhist literature of the dGe lugs pa and promoted the unification of poetry and Buddhist doctrine in Tibetan culture. It is to be noted that mgur ma ("songs of experience") was not employed as a primary means of conveying the dGe lugs pa's idea. Rather, it was logic and poetry that played an important role in the dGe lugs pa school as a medium for expressing this school's understanding of Buddhist thought. In this respect, it is concluded that the rTen 'brel bstod pa is precisely the work that embodies the ideal of Tsong kha pa and his successors of the dGe lugs pa.

Notes
1) See Nemoto 2013.
2) gTam sbyor 58a5: rigs lam phra mo phyed pa'i rnam dpyod dang // gzhung lugs gdams par shar ba'i nyams len dang // tshig sbyor tshul la mkhas pa'i ngag gi dpal // sa steng 'di na rin chen rnam gsum snang
3) rTen 'brel bstod pa 13b1–2: gang gang rkyen la rag las pa // de de rang bzhi'n gyis stong zhes // gsung ba* di las ya mthshan pa'i // legs 'doms tshul ni ci zhi k yod // (*gsung ba ] Σ; gsungs pa 'Od dkar.) gang du bzung bas byis pa rnas // mthar 'dzin 'ching ba brtan byed pa // de nyid mkhas la spros pa yi* // dra ba ma lus gcod pa'i sgo // (*yi ] Σ; yis 'Od dkar.)
4) See Nemoto 2015.
5) See rTen 'brel bston pa 13b3-4.
7) KĀ II 87: rājaḥaṃsopabhogārham bhramaraprārthyasaurabham / sakhi vaṃkṛtājyam idaṃ tāvati sliṣṭārūpakaṃ //
9) dGongs rgyan 114.6–8: dam pa'i chos gsal bar bya' ba'i snyan ngag bya' Ω // dkon mchog gsum la bston pa bya' Ω // de las bla na med pa'i byang chub thob pa 'gyur ro //
10) ŚL v. 90: durgandhipūtiwijñār aravindam indum indivaram ca tulayanti yad aṅgananāgaiḥ / tasyānṛtasya phalam ugram idāṃ kavināṁ tāsv eva garbhanilayaṃ yad ami viśanti //; dGongs rgyan 114.16–18: bud med yan lag dri nga rul ba mi sdug pa // padma zla ba utpal dag tu snyoms byed pa // snyan ngag mkhan gyis brdzun de'i 'bras bu mi bjad pa // de dag de yi mngal nas jug pa de bzhin no //
11) De nyid snang ba 40b5–6: nyams myong brda yi chig thang de // phan 'ga' srid kyang go bai mang // dgag sgrub sbyor ba kun tshang ba // khyod gsum thar 'dod yongs kyi gos //

Abbreviations
dGongs rgyan  sNyans ngag gi bstan bcos chen po me long la 'jug pa'i bshad sbyar daṇḍi'i dGongs rgyan (Bod mkhas pa mi pham dge legs rnam rgyal). Xining: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2004.
gTam sbyor  Bła na med pa'i rin po che gsum gi qta m gi sbyor ba (Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa). Zhol ed. Kha (thor bu) 58a2–59b4. Tohoku no. 5275 (60).
De nyid snang ba  'jam mgon rgyal ba gnyis po la bstan pa'i snying po gsal bar mdzad pa'i tshul las brtsams te bston pa don dang ldan pa'i rgya cher 'grel ba bstan pa'i de nyid snang ba (Gung thang dkon mchog bstan pa'i sgron me). Zhol ed. Ka.
Bang mdzod  rTen 'brel bston pa'i ŋkka legs bshad nor bu'i bang mdzod (IČang skya rol pa'i rdo

--- 1289 ---
Buddhism and Poetry in Tibet (NEMOTO)


'Od dkar

Rin phreng
rTen 'brel bstod pa'i dka' gnas las brtams pa'i don 'grel rin chen phreng ba (A lag sha bstan dar lha rams pa). sKu 'bum byams pa gling ed. Da.

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(This research was supported in part by JSPS KAKENHI, Grant Number 26884031.)

Key words Tsong kha pa, Tibetan literature, snyan ngag, rTen 'brel bstod pa

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