A PROBLEM OF 'SYNONYMS' IN THE TIBETAN
LANGUAGE:
BSGOM PA AND GOMS PA

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When in summer 1951 in Berkeley, California, I first became acquainted with (now Professor) Thubten Norbu by his alternate name Taktser Rinpoche, I checked out for his use from the University of California’s Tibetan collection the Gsuh 'bum of Kloñ-rdol Bla-ma Ngä-sbang-blo-bzañ. This 18th century savant had written a series of survey works on the principal topics of study in the Gelugpa monasteries. Thereby, Taktser could quickly review his entire course of monastic training.

Section Ba of Kloñ-rdol Bla-ma’s treatise is devoted to grammatical topics (sgra rig pa). Using the edition by Ven. Dalama (Mussoori, 1965), Vol. I, p. 404, we find several synonymous terms mentioned, as in my translation:

(They) say that the two expressions don go ba and don rtags pa have the same significance (viz., “understanding the meaning”). Likewise, that “reaching the depth of dharma by realizing directly the true nature (dharmatā)” has the same significance as “understanding by realizing directly the true nature.” They say that bsgom pa (“cultivation”) and goms pa (“repeated practice”) have the same significance; but that is the case when applying (the terms) to the path, while there is no certainty in other (contexts). [a]

To begin to appreciate the observations of that passage, it could be mentioned that a book by Dhadphale about synonyms in the Pāli Buddhist canon has been published in India. The author, in this fascinating work, seems to take the terms as either synonymous or not. But Kloth-rdol Bla-ma describes a situation where terms may be synonymous in some context and not so in another context. My approach is to first consider how
the Tibetan translators from Sanskrit used the terms *bsgom pa* and *sgom pa* to render Sanskrit terms. Such data will serve as a basis for coming to conclusions.

Notice that in the *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālakāra*, either *goms pa* or *sgom pa* renders abhyāsa (repeated practice), and so *goms pa* is equivalent to *sgom pa* in such a context. *Sgom pa* also renders bhāvanā (cultivation). In the same text, *bsgom pa las byun* renders bhāvanāmāyī (consisting of cultivation, or of intense contemplation); and *bsgoms par bya, bhāvayitavya* (to be cultivated, or to be intensely contemplated)\(^2\)

In translating the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, the term *sgom pa'i lam* is used for bhāvanāmārga (path of cultivation); and both *sgom pas sphan bar bya ba* and *bsgom pas sphan bar bya ba* render bhāvanāmārga (path of cultivation); and both *sgom pas sphan bar bya ba* and *bsgom pas sphan bar bya ba* render bhāvanā-heya. Also, the expression *bsgoms pa las byun ba* occurs. *Goms pa* is used for both abhyāsa and bhāvanā\(^3\).

The *Bodhicaryāvatāra-pañjikā* on Chap. IX, uses *bsgom pa'i lam* for bhāvanāmārga\(^4\).

It promptly follows that *goms pa* (or *sgom pa*) and *bsgom pa* are replaceable in translating bhāvanā-mārga or bhāvanā-heya. However, only *goms pa* (or *sgom pa*) renders abhyāsa, and only *bsgom pa* (or, *bsgoms pa*) renders bhāvanāmāyī ([the insight] arising from, or involved with bhāvanā). This data supports Kloṅ-rdol Bla-ma's observations, since *sgom pa* (or *goms pa*) and *bsgom pa* are synonymous in the terminology of the path, i.e. 'path of cultivation' (bhāvanā-mārga) and 'what is to be eliminated by cultivation' (bhāvanā-heya), namely, on the path of accepting the good and rejecting the bad. But there is no certainty of their like significance when *goms pa* means 'repeated practice' (abhyāsa) and when *bsgom pa* occurs in the compound bhāvanāmāyī ("consisting of cultivation").

The distinction of using such terms both to apply and not to apply to the Buddhist path is clarified by a passage in Asaṅga's *Yogācārabhāmi*. His verse treatise on the three 'instructions' of Buddhism, a treatise entitled Ābhīprāyikārtha-gāthā, gave a problem to the translators. The Tibetan translator is the celebrated Ye-šes-sde and the Indian pandit for this part was probably Jinamitra. Asaṅga had used two Sanskrit terms to indicate the difference between a path description and a non-path description. The usual literal renditions of Sanskrit terms were in this case abandoned, and the Tibetan expressions are the ones of interest here: *dren mo* (guiding) and *so so* (respective)\(^5\).

The Three Instructions are of Morality, Mind training, and Insight. In consideration that the Buddhist path requires a sequence of members, e.g., the Eightfold Noble Path, or the Ten-
Stage path of the Bodhisattva, it follows that any discussion that does not 'mix' them, i.e., consider them in relation to others, is not necessarily a path discussion; and in such a case, the members are referred to as so so. When one does consider them as members of a path, it is necessary to deal with such topics as whether one of them could be practiced by itself without the others; and in such a case, the explanations are 'dren mo.

When one uses such a distinction of terms for the terms bsgom pa and goms pa, it follows that the case when they are synonymous is when the discussion is guidance on the Buddhist path. However, when goms pa (or sgom pa) renders abhyāsa (repeated practice), this might be just repeated practice of one member of the path, such as 'morality'. And when bsgom pa renders part of bhāvanāmayi, one of the three levels of educated insight (śes rab), namely, 'hearing' (thos pa las byun ba'i śes rab), 'pondering' (bsam pa las byun ba'i śes rab), and 'intense contemplation' (bsgom pa las byun ba'i śes rab), it is also indeterminate, since if this bsgom pa kind of śes rab is preceded by the previous two levels of śes rab, it applies to the path; but if this bsgom pa is not 'mixed' with those two, it is 'respective', not applicable to the path.

Now, for some evidence from the Tibetan dictionaries. I shall employ three: the Bṛha dag míth tshig gsal ba by Dge-bses chos-kyi-grags-pa; the Daq yig mā nor lam bzaṇ by Jampa Chogyal; the three-volume Bod rgya tshig másod chen mo.6

The first one, by Geshe Chos-grags, is doubtless a fine dictionary, but it is surprisingly feeble for these particular terms. For goms pa, it states, chuṅ hu nas 'dris pa'am goms pa, "Starting from a meager (ability) to become familiarized (or accustomed); or goms pa." For sgom pa it has sgom bzin pa, directing the reader to its sgom entry, which is: dpjad sgom dahn 'jog sgom lta bu, "e.g., the 'examining-cultivation' and the 'stoppage-cultivation'," which is terminology of the path.7 It has no entry for bsgom-pa but does have bsgoms-pa, saying: sgom bsgoms zin pa, "sgom which has ended is bsgoms," and sgom pa.

The second one, by Jampa Chogyal, is very helpful. By having an entry for goms, but none for sgom in this syllable dictionary, there is the compiler's suggestion that sgom and goms differ only in the position of the 's' by metathesis. This is perhaps also Klördol Bla-ma's interpretation by his using the form goms pa instead of sgom pa in the passage I cited at the outset. Jampa Chogyal also appears to associate goms with gom pa ('step' or 'pace'), perhaps in the sense of steps of the path. The dictionary has for goms:
Starting from a meager (ability) to become familiarized (or accustomed); or to practice in steps; or to habituate the mind and have familiar practice; or, with a causal step to conclude the practice in the manner of steps; or repeated practice with the meaning of pondering.

The dictionary has for bsgom:

To familiarize (oneself) by repeated practice as though the topic of cultivation were a god, and to (properly) orient the mind again and again.

The dictionary has for bsgoms:

Compassion finished is bsgoms; causing the practice; the topic of cultivation, the imperative, Practice it!, and when applied to the path, the two, cultivation (bsgom pa) and repeated practice (goms pa) have the same meaning.

Turning to the third dictionary, the relevant entries are in the first volume of the Bod rgya tshig mabs chen mo, namely in the Stod cha. The entry for goms pa is in two parts:

(1) Learning; repeatedly reviewing the knowledge in hand, one becomes a pandit; the manner of conducting livelihood; newly practicing. (2) familiarity in becoming enlightened; practice of the good; practice of the bad; having trained many times, to become an expert.

The entry for sgom pa is also in two parts:

(1) either bsgoms pa, bsgom pa, or sgoms; to familiarize the mind again and again with the meaning of pondering; practice of samādhi; practice of forbearance. (2) the knowledge of means habituated in mind; one of the respective three of the theory-systems, namely, views, conduct, and pondering (sgom); having dwelt in one-pointedness of mind, to cast pondering (sgom) [upon the meditative object].

For bsgom pa, this dictionary has: sgom pa'i ma obs pa, “future (tense) of sgom pa.” This is the interpretation of the 'b' prefix as a sign of future tense. Thus bsgom pa is the culmination of sgom pa. For bsgoms pa it has: sgom pa'i das pa, “past (tense) of sgom pa.” For sgoms, it has: sgom pa'i skul tshig, “imperative mood of sgom pa.” Apparently, it is the intention of this imperative mood to be in present tense.

Some of the foregoing usages are illustrated in verses of Dharmakīrti’s Pramāṇavārttika, Pratyakṣa chapter, the Tibetan versions.
This appearance on it as a formation, or the apprehension of the external entity as real—is a delusion, manifested by repeated practice (goms, S. abhyāsa) of views for immemorial time.[g]

Even when one regards the non-genuine 'totalities' of earth, etc. as uncleanness, they clearly appear and without (using) discursive thought, manifested by the power of having contemplated (bsgoms pa, S. bhāvanā).[h]

Therefore, whether it be the genuine or the non-genuine which one has contemplated (bsgoms gyur pa), when one perfects the pondering (sgom pa, S. bhāvanā) (or, cultivation), it is the result of the clear non-discursive mind.[i]

Here, whatever be the non-deception like the previously explained given thing, we claim it to be the authority of perception arisen from what was pondered (bsgoms byaṭ, S. bhāvanīja). The rest is distorted [e.g., the uncleanness, the 'totalities' of earth, etc.][j]

The foregoing should clarify some of the usages of the terms in Klong-rdol Bla-ma’s passage.

NOTES

1. M. G. Dhadphale, Synonymic Collocations in the Tripiṭaka: a Study (Bhandarker Oriental Research Institute, Poona, India, 1980).
3. Akira Hirakawa, et. al., Index to the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya, Part Three, Tibetan-Sanskrit (Daizo Shuppan Kabushikikaisha, Tokyo, 1978).
4. Takashi Hirano, An Index to the Bodhicaryāvatāra Pañjikā, Chapter IX (Suzuki Research Foundation, Tokyo, 1966).
5. Cf. Buddhist Insight; Essays by Alex Wayman, ed. by George R. Elder (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1984), pp. 338–39. The Sanskrit for 'dren mo is sānkhīnna; for so so is abhīnna.
6. The Geshe Chos-grags dictionary is well known; I have the original Lhasa edition in two volumes with Tibetan paper, the edition published in Peking with Chinese translation, and the North India reprint of the Tibetan in a Western-style book. The Jampa Chogyal dictionary was published in 1969 by the Jayyed Press, Delhi. The Bod rgya rtsig mad shod chen mo in three large volumes is a recent committee publication at the Mi-rigs-dpe-skre-n-khaṅ, Peking, with Chinese translations of the Tibetan definitions.
7. Cf. Alex Wayman, translator, *Calming the Mind and Discerning the Real: Buddhist Meditation and the Middle View*, from the *Lam rim chen mo* of Tson-kha-pa (Columbia University Press, New York, 1978). The two Tibetan terms are used for the two main sections of Buddhist meditation: the 'jog-sgom for žig-gnas (S. śamatha), "calming (the mind)"; the dpyad-sgom for lhag-mthoṅ (S. vipaśyanā), "discerning (the real)."