GORAMPA SONAM SENGE ON
THE REFUTATION OF THE FOUR EXTREMES

Constance Kassor

Gorampa Sonam Senge (Go rams pa Bsod nams seng ge, 1429-89) is regarded as one of the most influential scholars in the Sakya (Sa skya) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. A prolific writer and a renowned practitioner, he is credited with consolidating and systematizing the mainstream Sakyapa view. Some of his philosophical works were so overtly critical of Tsongkhapa (Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa, 1357-1419) and the politically dominant Gelug (Dge lugs) school that they were banned in the seventeenth century under the rule of the fifth Dalai Lama.[1] Over the past century, however, Gorampa's views have experienced a resurgence amongst many Tibetan Buddhists, particularly among followers of the so-called "nonsectarian (*ris med*) movement."[2] Both the suppression and the subsequent resurgence of Gorampa's works highlight the significance of his philosophy: his compositions were originally censored because of the threat they posed to the established religious authority, and they are currently experiencing a revival because they espouse a philosophical view that is compatible with the meditative practices of a number of schools. In both cases, it is clear that Gorampa's thought was, and continues to be, taken seriously by Tibetan Buddhists, even by those who do not belong to the Sakya school.

This essay will analyze Gorampa's treatment of the negation of the four extremes (*mtha' bzhi*) in order to suggest a possible philosophical basis for his influence across sectarian divides. By illustrating the ways in which Gorampa's negation of the four extremes leads to freedom from conceptual constructs (*spros bral*), I will indicate the extent to which his own views contrast with those of Tsongkhapa and align with those of other non-Sakyapa scholars, such as Jamgon Ju Mipham ('Jam mgon 'ju mi pham rnam rgyal rgya mtsho, 1846-1912). This illustration, in turn, will serve to suggest how Gorampa's approach to philosophy and the path supports an ecumenical vision of Buddhist practice, perhaps explaining the recent resurgence of his popularity amongst Tibetan Madhyamaka scholars from non-Sakya lineages.

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[1] Cabezón 2007: 31-33.

[2] Between 1906 and 1925, Jamgyal Rinpoche organized the editing and printing of the complete works of Gorampa in Derge, totaling 13 volumes. See Jackson 2003: 58.

Briefly, Gorampa's emphasis on *spros bral*, as demonstrated through his refutation of the four extremes, allows him to advocate a position that emphasizes logic and reasoning while simultaneously subordinating them to nonconceptual meditative practice. Gorampa's disagreement with Tsongkhapa over the purpose and function of the fourfold negation provides a useful lens through which to view the former's far-reaching influence across sectarian divides. Gorampa's method of logical reasoning is sufficiently sophisticated to refute Tsongkhapa's highly developed philosophical arguments, and his emphasis on nonconceptuality appeals to scho-lars whose traditions have historically emphasized nonconceptual meditative practices over analytical reasoning. The extent of Gorampa's philosophical influence is particularly apparent in modern-day Tibetan Buddhist institutions; Sakyapa monastic institutions, such as Sakya College in Dehradun, India, regularly educate scholars from the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions in Madhyamaka philosophy. Kagyu and Nyingma institutions, in turn, often invite Sakyapa khenpos to instruct their monks in philosophy.

Before investigating the philosophical content of Gorampa's arguments regarding the four extremes, it is important to first understand the context within which he and his texts operated. Gorampa lived during a relatively unstable time in the history of Tibetan politics, which may account – at least indirectly – for the formation of some of his views.

History and Context of Gorampa's Philosophy

Gorampa lived during a period of political instability in Tibet. From 1244 until 1354, the Sakya sect had held political control over Tibet, and was backed by the support of the Mongol army. Eventually the Mongol court's interest in Tibet weakened, and the Pagmodru (Phag mo gru) clan ascended to power. The Pagmodrupas ruled over Tibet for 130 years, but during the latter half of Gorampa's life they too fell from power, resulting in a number of groups fiercely competing for religious and political dominance in central Tibet.[3]

Gorampa composed his philosophical texts, therefore, at a time in which the Sakya sect was struggling to re-assert its political dominance. Although verifiable information about the political motivations of the Sakyapas remains elusive, the unstable political situation in Tibet could have at least partially accounted for the overtly polemical nature of some of Gorampa's Madhyamaka texts. When the Gelugpas eventually ascended to political power in the seventeenth century, the fifth Dalai Lama ordered that Gorampa's texts, which were so critical of Tsongkhapa, be destroyed or

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[3]   For more on the history of the Sakya sect, see Jackson 2003, Kapstein 2000, and Cabezón 2007.

otherwise removed from monastic institutions. However, many of Gorampa's texts continued to be studied in eastern Tibet, where the central government was unable to exert a strong influence.

Around 1905, the Sakyapa monk Jamgyal Rinpoche ('Jam rgyal rin po che) collected and republished Gorampa's extant works. Thirteen volumes of texts were recovered from monasteries throughout Tibet and were reprinted in Derge between 1905 and 1925.[4] While most of Gorampa's texts were recovered, some modern Sakyapa scholars suspect that a handful of his texts no longer exist.[5] Gorampa's extant texts, however, span a wide range of genres, indicating the scholar's mastery over a number of topics in Tibetan Buddhism. He composed treatises on the Abhidharma and Vinaya, several commentaries on the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, various practice texts based on Tantra, and a number of Madhyamaka commentaries. Gorampa's major Madhyamaka texts comprise only two of the thirteen volumes of his collected works. His three major Madhyamaka texts are:

1. *Distinguishing the Views* (*Lta ba'i shan 'byed*), a polemical text placing Gorampa's view in dialogue with the views of other Madhyamaka scholars;
2. *Removal of Wrong Views* (*Lta ba ngan sel*), a commentary on Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakā-vatāra* which responds to a number of criticisms raised by Tsongkhapa;
3. *Synopsis of Madhyamaka* (*Dbu ma'i spyi don*), an encyclopedic text outlining Gorampa's views on the major points of Madhyamaka, as well as the views of a number of Indian and Tibetan scholars with whom he both agrees and disagrees.

Although there are some subtle differences in the ways in which Gorampa presents his philosophy in each of these three texts, his explanation of the Madhyamaka view is relatively consistent throughout. Indeed, Sakyapas today consider Gorampa to be a unique scholar in so far as his views did not change over the course of his extensive philosophical career.[6] Therefore, for the purposes of

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[4]   Jackson 2003: 58.
[5]   Khenpo Ngawang Jorden, personal communication.
[6]   This view has been expressed by virtually every Sakyapa scholar with whom I have conversed. This claim appears to be true, at least with respect to the views expressed in Gorampa's three major Madhyamaka texts. Although he emphasizes different points in each of his texts, his overall philosophical view remains relatively consistent. This point is especially salient when Gorampa's works are compared to the writings of a scholar such as Tsongkhapa, whose views appeared to have changed over the course of his philosophical career (see Jinpa 2002: 18-19).

this essay, I will confine my analysis of Gorampa's treatment of the four extremes to only one of these texts: his *Dbu ma'i spyi don* (hereafter *Synopsis*).

Gorampa on the Four Extremes

In his *Synopsis*, Gorampa argues that the most significant aspect of the realization of the Madhyamaka view is freedom from all concepts.[7] Concepts, according to Gorampa, must be explained in terms of the "four extremes" (*mtha' bzhi*). These extremes are four ways in which ordinary, unenlightened beings are capable of under-standing the ontological status of things: as existent, nonexistent, both existent and nonexistent, or neither existent nor nonexistent. In other words, if one can possibly conceive of anything, that thing must be conceived of as either existent, nonexistent, both, or neither. Gorampa contends that there are no other possible ways to conceive of things, ideas, persons, or anything else in the conventional world.[8]

In his *Synopsis*, Gorampa repeatedly cites Āryadeva's *Jñānasarasamuccaya* to articulate the fourfold freedom from extreme views that constitutes the Madhyamaka position: "The reality of the learned Mādhyamikas is freedom from the four extremes: not existence, not nonexistence, not existence and nonexistence, nor the absence of the essence of both."[9] Throughout the *Synopsis*, Gorampa returns to this passage to demonstrate that a direct realization of the negation of the four extremes leads to *spros bral*.[10] This emphasis on *spros bral* is integral to Gorampa's Madhyamaka texts and can be understood as the basis upon which the rest of his philosophical views rest.

In negating the four extremes, Gorampa emphasizes that the refutations of all four positions occur at the level of the ultimate truth.[11] As will be shown below, opponents such as Tsongkhapa argue that a refutation of all four extremes at the level of ultimate

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7   *chos dbyings don dam pa'i bden pa rigs pas dpyad pa'i blo ngor rim pa ltar ram/ 'phags pa'i mnyam gzhag gi blo ngor gcig char du mtha' bzhi'i spros pa dang bral bas don dam pa'i bden pa nyid dbu ma ste/ mtha' gnyis dang bral ba la'ang dbu mar 'jog na/ mtha' thams cad dang bral ba la dbu mar 'jog pa shin du'ang 'thad pa'i phyir ro//* BPD: 48.

8   *'di ltar skye ba rgyu la ltos mi ltos gnyis las phyi ma rgyu med kyi phyogs su 'dus/ dang po la'ang rgyu de 'bras bu las tha dad mi dad gnyis su nges la/ de la'ang tha dad pa kho na las skye na gzhan skye'i phyogs su 'dus/ tha mi dad pa kho na las skye na bdag skye'i khongs su 'dus/ gnyis ka las skye na gnyis ka las skye ba'i khongs su 'dus shing/ de las gzhan pa'i mtha' mi srid pa'i phyir ro/* BPD: 257-258.

9   *yod min med min yod med min/ gnyis ka'i bdag nyid kyang min pas/ mtha' bzhi las grol dbu ma pa/ mkhas pa rnams kyis de kho na/* BPD: 173.

10 *mdor na 'phags pa'i mnyam gzhag gi blo ngo'i spros bral mtshan nyid pa gtan la phab par rlom nas rtog ngor don dam bden pa mtha' bzhi'i spros pa dang bral ba ni bsgrub bya'o/* BPD: 175.

11 *don dam pa mtha bzhi'i spros pa dang bral ba* BPD: 173.

truth makes no logical sense. Gorampa, however, contends that the tetralemma's purpose is to transcend the limits of logic. Having eliminated all possibilities for logical, conceptual thought at the ultimate level, one's only recourse is to abandon concepts completely. In other words, if one can successfully eliminate the possibility of conceiving of things as existent, nonexistent, both, and neither, then one is left with no other possible ways to conceive of things. The conclusion is that, ultimately, things cannot be conceived of at all.

In the *Synopsis*, Gorampa explains the refutation of each extreme one-by-one. In refuting the first extreme of existence, Gorampa bases his view on earlier arguments in the text, which refute the idea that things inherently exist by means of the Five Madhyamaka Reasonings (*rtan tshigs lnga*).[12] In describing the refutation of this first extreme, Gorampa and Tsongkhapa appear to be largely in agreement. Gorampa therefore turns his attention to refuting the view of Dolpopa, who is commonly associated with the "other-emptiness" (*gzhan stong*) view. While Dolpopa claims that the perfected nature (*yongs grub kyi mtshan nyid*) can withstand analysis, Gorampa reasons that *all* phenomena are subject to analysis, including emptiness itself.[13] He explains that all phenomena that appear to be ultimately existent will, through the application of the Five Madhyamaka Reasonings, be negated.[14]

The refutation of existence is extremely important here, as it serves as the basis for the refutation of the subsequent three extremes. Gorampa argues that properly negating existence actually progresses one along the Buddhist path a great deal, and that the successful elimination of just this first extreme serves as the basis for the elimination of suffering and the attainment of enlightenment.[15] He suggests that the misconception that phenomena truly exist is the basis of self-grasping. This self-grasping, in turn, is the first of the twelve links of interdependence that keep sentient beings trapped in *saṃsāra*. Therefore, in order to remove suffering and escape from *saṃsāra*, one must eliminate self-grasping by refuting the misconception that phenomena inherently exist.[16]

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[12] These are five styles of argumentation that are commonly accepted by Mādhyamikas. They are: neither one nor many (*gcig du dral*), diamond slivers (*rdo rje gzegs ma*), production and cessation of existence and nonexistence (*yod med skye 'gog*), production and cessation of the four limits (*mu bzhi skye 'gog*), and reasoning of interdependence (*rten 'brel gyi gtan tshigs*), BPD: 177. For a detailed explanation of each of these methods of reasoning, see Brunnhölzl 2004: 235-262.

[13] *spyir chos thams cad yin te/ stong gzhi'i chos can nyi shus ma bsdus pa'i chos ci yang med cing/ de dag la'ang thog mar bden pa bkag nas mthar bzhi char gyi spros bral du bya dgos pa'i phyir ro/* BPD: 180.

[14] For Gorampa's detailed explanation of the application of the Five Madhyamaka Reasonings, see BPD: 340-356.

[15] *bzhi pa [de ltar bkag pa'i dgos pa] la sdug bsngal spang ba'i dgos pa dang/ byang chub thob pa'i dgos pa gnyis,* BPD: 181.

[16] BPD: 181-183.

In order to achieve complete, Mahāyāna enlightenment, however, the refutation of existence is not enough. Gorampa asserts, "If one does not eliminate the elaborations of the four extremes, the unique Mahāyāna view will not be established."[17] One must continue from this first refutation, therefore, and eventually eliminate all four extremes in succession.

The refutation of the second extreme, nonexistence, depends upon the successful refutation of the first extreme. Gorampa cites several texts, including the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, to prove this point: "If there is no existent thing, then how can there be any nonexistent things?"[18] In other words, once the extreme of existence is negated, it makes sense that a person's mind might subsequently adhere to the extreme of nonexistence. But as Gorampa uses the above quote to suggest, without existence, there can be no nonexistence. The latter makes no sense at all unless it stands in relation to the former; the two depend on each other. This is fairly standard Madhyamaka reasoning, and Gorampa does not feel the need to elaborate the point much further.

The refutation of the third extreme (both existence and nonexistence) depends upon the refutation of the first two. In fact, all that Gorampa says with respect to the third extreme is that it is refuted by the same logical reasoning that is used to refute the first two extremes.[19] In other words, if existence and nonexistence are both refuted individually, then it makes no sense for them to somehow exist together. Gorampa apparently thinks that this position is self-evident, and he does not feel the need to explain it further anywhere in his *Synopsis*.[20]

The refutation of the fourth extreme, neither existence nor nonexistence, yet again depends upon the successful refutation of the previous three. In explaining this refutation, Gorampa argues, "If one grasps only the nonexistence of both true existence and true nonexistence, then one will remain there, due to seeing the middle as the abandonment of the two extremes. But one should not remain

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[17] *mtha' bzhi'i spros pa ma bkag na theg chen thun mong ma yin pa'i lta ba mi 'grub pa.* BPD: 184.

[18] *dngos po yod pa ma yin na/ dngos med gang gi yin par 'gyur/ ibid.*: 184. See also *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, V: 6ab.

[19] *mtha' gsum pa 'gog pa'i rigs pa ni / sngar bshad pa'i rigs pa gnyis char ro / ibid.*: 184.

[20] When summarizing the fourfold analysis in a later chapter of the *Synopsis,* Gorampa again refers to Āryadeva's *Jñānasarasamuccaya* and emphasizes that all four extremes need to be negated: *mtha' bzhi'i spros bral bstan pa'i rigs pa rnams kyi dgag bya mtha' bzhir phye ba.* When actually explaining the fourfold refutation, however, he condenses these possibilities into three, omitting the third lemma entirely: *de ltar gzhung las rnam gzhag du ma yod kyang bsdu na med pa skur 'debs kyi mtha' dang/ yod pa sgro 'dogs kyi mtha' dang/ dgag bya bkag pa'i stong nyid la mngon par zhen pa'i mtha' gsum du 'dus pa/* BPD: 304. The omission of the third lemma is not unique to Gorampa's style of reasoning. Tsongkhapa's student (and another philosophical opponent of Gorampa), Kedrup (Mkhas grub dge legs dpal bzang, 1385-1438), similarly glosses over an analysis of the third lemma in his *Stong thung chen mo* (see Cabezón 1992: 305).

there due to seeing that, because it is not established; and if it were established, it would also be an extreme."[21] This means that one should not simply refute the first two extremes of existence and nonexistence (and, by extension, the third extreme of both). If one stops analysis at this point, Gorampa argues, it is possible to cling to an idea of the ultimate truth as something that is a refutation of existence and nonexistence. And according to Gorampa's view of Madhyamaka, if one grasps to *anything*—even if it is a refutation—it is also an extreme.

It may be helpful here to use an analogy: imagine a spectrum representing all possibilities for conceptual thought, with existence at one end and nonexistence at the other. One is attempting to locate "Ultimate Truth" as a point somewhere on that spectrum through logical reasoning. One first eliminates the possibility of the point existing at the extreme end of existence, and then the possibility of its existing at the extreme end of nonexistence. Because one is searching for a single point, there is no way that it can simultaneously occupy both ends of the spectrum. So, the only remaining possibility is for the point to exist somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, between the two extremes. Gorampa argues, however, that this possibility makes no sense. If both extremes are eliminated, then there is necessarily no middle between them. There can be no point that is in the middle without the extremes of existence and nonexistence, just as there can be no gray without the extremes of black and white. When one analyzes existence in this way, one realizes that there are no extremes *and* there is no middle; the spectrum doesn't exist at all.

Based on these reasonings, Gorampa understands the realization of the refutation of the four extremes to be a process. The refutation of the first extreme is done through the Five Madhyamaka Reasonings, taking as their objects anything that is believed to be truly established. The refutations of each of the subsequent extremes, in turn, depend on the refutations of the previous ones. When one arrives at the end of the process, having completely negated all four extremes, one arrives at a direct, nonconceptual understanding of emptiness that is free from these conceptual proliferations. Understanding the fourfold negation as a process—as something that one *practices* and *experiences*—will be further explained below. First, however, in order to highlight the significance of Gorampa's approach, I would like to turn briefly to an alternative understanding of the fourfold negation, espoused by Tsongkhapa.

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[21] *bden par yod pa dang/ bden par med pa gnyis ka ma yin pa zhig tu gzung na/ mtha' gnyis spangs pa'i dbus la dmigs pa'i sgo nas gnas par 'gyur la/ de la'ang dmigs pa'i sgo nas gnas par mi bya ste/ de ma grub pa'i phyir dang/ gal te grub na de'ang mthar 'gyur ba'i phyir.* BPD: 184.

Tsongkhapa on the Four Extremes

Because Tsongkhapa was originally educated by Sakyapa masters, most notably Rendawa (Red mda' ba, 1349-1412), his philosophical views that diverge from the standard Sakya interpretation are some of Gorampa's favorite objects of critique.[22] Because Gorampa appears to have been attempting to standardize and systematize the Sakya view through his philosophical writings, his harsh criticisms of Tsongkhapa can be seen as an attempt to distance Tsongkhapa from the Sakyapas. This point becomes especially salient when we compare Gorampa's analysis of the four extremes to that of Tsongkhapa and his Gelugpa successors. Unlike Gorampa's understanding of the fourfold negation, which results in the practitioner attaining a state of *spros bral*, Tsongkhapa's interpretation culminates in the practitioner achieving a carefully constructed concept of emptiness. In other words, Gorampa argues for a method of refuting the four extremes that results in the complete elimination of *all* concepts, while Tsongkhapa argues for a method that results in the elimination of only *certain kinds* of concepts.

Gorampa presents a brief characterization of Tsongkhapa's view in the *Synopsis*, suggesting that Tsongkhapa understands not existence, but rather *trueness*, to be the object of Madhyamaka analysis. He writes that in Tsongkhapa's view, "The Madhyamaka object of negation is only truth."[23] In other words, as opposed to Gorampa, who wishes to negate all existence in its entirety, Tsongkhapa claims that the goal for a Mādhyamika is to stop grasping at things as only *truly*, or ultimately existent.

This view is based on Tsongkhapa's claim that all phenomena have one nature with distinct conceptual aspects (*ngo bo gcig la ldog pa tha dad*). A detailed analysis of this claim lies beyond the scope of the current essay, but in brief, by this Tsongkhapa means that all phenomena have both a conventional and an ultimate aspect. Unenlightened beings are only capable of perceiving a thing's conventional aspect, while enlightened beings can perceive both the conventional and ultimate aspects simultaneously.[24] By only negating *ultimate* existence, Tsongkhapa essentially argues that while an enlightened being realizes that a thing's ultimate aspect is emptiness, that thing's conventional aspect is not affected. In other words, a realization of emptiness at the ultimate level does not affect anything at the conventional level.

Based on this assertion, Tsongkhapa argues that one shouldn't read the tetralemma literally. He reads Āryadeva's assertion of "Not existent, not nonexistent, not both, nor the absence of the essence of

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[22]   For a brief biography of Tsongkhapa, see Tsong kha pa 2006: ix-xii.
[23]   *dbu ma'i dgag bya ni bden pa kho na yin*/ BPD: 187.
[24]   For more on this, see Hopkins 2003: 896ff.

both" as being qualified in specific ways.[25] Tsongkhapa explains in his *Lam rim chen mo*:

> You should understand that all methods for refuting the tetralemma […] involve some qualifier such as "essentially." Suppose that you refute the tetralemma without affixing any such qualification. You refute the position that things exist and you refute the position that things do not exist; you then say, "It is not the case that they both exist and do not exist." If you now continue with the refutation, saying, "It is also not the case that they are neither existent nor nonexistent," then you explicitly contradict your own position. If you then stubbornly insist, "Even so, there is no fallacy," then the debate is over because we do not debate with the obstinate.[26]

And in the *Lta ba'i shan 'byed*, Gorampa presents Tsongkhapa's argument as follows:

> The meaning of this is that there is no existence ultimately, and no nonexistence conventionally; therefore it is incorrect for the mind to apprehend them as such. However, it is not correct to accept the phrase "not existent, not nonexistent" literally, because by the law of double-negation (*dgag pa gnyis kyi rnal ma go ba*), if something is not existent it must be nonexistent, and if something is not nonexistent it must be existent.

In short, Tsongkhapa's view is based on the law of double-negation, which is related to the western concept of bivalence—the logical rule that the negation of one possibility necessarily implies the assertion of another. In short, bivalence implies an "either-or" scenario; there can be only two possibilities with respect to a given situation, excluding any third alternative. For example, today is *either* Monday, *or* it is some other day; there is no third possibility.

If one adheres to bivalence, then there is no way in which Āryadeva's assertion can be read literally: "Not existent, not nonexistent" is a contradiction. Because of this, Tsongkhapa reasons that the phrase "not existent" needs to be understood from the level of the ultimate truth, while "not nonexistent" should be understood from the level of the conventional. Based on this reading, Āryadeva's quote becomes, "Ultimately, things are not existent; conventionally, things are not non-existent." This reading simultaneously rejects true, ultimate existence, while leaving conventions intact.[27]

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[25] See note 6 above.
[26] Tsong kha pa 2002: 189.
[27] For Gorampa's formulation of Tsongkhapa, see BPD: 187ff.

When negations are qualified in this way, Tsongkhapa claims to be able to negate all four extremes, while preserving commonsense and the laws of logic. Tsongkhapa argues that it is necessary for a Mādhyamika to qualify the tetralemma in this way, because to negate any more than ultimate, inherent existence would lead to nihilism. If one were to deny existence, nonexistence, both, and neither altogether, without qualification, one would be effectively denying all possibility for conceptual thought. Tsongkhapa claims this to be equivalent to the view of Hwa-shang,[28] the Chinese scholar who later Tibetans insist was defeated in the "Great Debate" at Samye (Bsam yas), and whose view is nearly universally rejected by Tibetans.[29]

By upholding bivalence in the context of the four extremes, Tsongkhapa argues that he is avoiding the view that external phenomena are "neither existent nor nonexistent" (*yod min med min gyi lta ba*).[30] According to Tsongkhapa, logic must be compatible with commonsense. If one denies both existence and nonexistence altogether, one denies conceptual thought and necessarily falls into the extreme of nihilism. Negating the first two extremes of the tetralemma thereby leads to a contradiction, because if both possibilities are negated, there is no third alternative. (The same can also be said for negating the last two extremes of both and neither.)

Because he qualifies the tetralemma with respect to different perspectives, Tsongkhapa allows for the conventions of ordinary beings to continue to function in the world, even after the ultimate existence of things has been rejected. By making this philosophical move, Tsongkhapa preserves the efficacy of the conventional truth, and as such, emphasizes the importance of logical, conceptual thought in the process of realizing emptiness. Gorampa's response to Tsongkhapa, and the conclusions that he draws regarding the efficacy of conventional truth, are influential. They are what ultimately lead later non-Sakyapas, in their arguments against Tsongkhapa's views, to adopt aspects of Gorampa's philosophy.

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[28] *blos mtha' gang du'ang mi 'dzin pa dbu ma'i lta bar 'dod pa ni rgya nag ha shang gi lta ba dang mtshungs pa/* BPD: 188.

[29] There is a great deal of disagreement concerning the historicity of the debate at Samye; it is unclear whether the debate even took place. In Tibetan polemical texts, however, Hwa-shang's so-called subitist view (in opposition to Kamalaśīla's gradualist view, as articulated in his *Bhāvanākrama*) is widely rejected. Comparing an opponent's view to that of Hwa-shang is considered a severe insult. For more on Hwa-shang in Tibetan polemics, see Cabezón 2007: 19-21. For a different take on Hwa-shang's position, see Tomoko Makidono's paper in this volume.

[30] Cabezón, 2007: 45.

Gorampa's Response to Tsongkhapa[31]

Gorampa spends a significant amount of time in the *Synopsis* refuting Tsongkhapa's reading of the fourfold negation. Gorampa appears to believe that Tsongkhapa's view needs to be thoroughly refuted in order to properly demonstrate his own position. Such a refutation is also necessary, Gorampa seems to believe, in order to distance Tsongkhapa and his followers from the Sakya school.[32]

Gorampa primarily takes issue with Tsongkhapa's emphasis on refuting only ultimate, true existence. Recall that Tsongkhapa rejects ultimate, true existence because he believes that all phenomena are *ngo bo cig la ldog pa tha dad*. As such, ordinary persons only perceive the conventional aspects of objects, while enlightened beings perceive both the conventional and ultimate aspects simultaneously. Gorampa, however, does not support the claim that all objects have two aspects. Instead, he contends that the distinction between the conventional and ultimate truths is not based on external objects, but rather on the minds of apprehending subjects.[33] Ordinary persons only perceive the conventional truth, while enlightened beings *only* experience the ultimate truth. In other words, while Tsongkhapa works hard in his arguments to preserve conventions, Gorampa argues that from the standpoint of one who has realized the ultimate, there is no longer a need for such conventions.

Gorampa also argues that Tsongkhapa's qualification of each of the four extremes according to the ultimate and conventional truths goes against the very purpose of the tetralemma. He argues,

> The meaning of "not existent, not nonexistent" explained as "not ultimately existent, not conventionally nonexistent," must be explained as such when abandoning permanence and annihilation depending upon the two truths; however, when explaining freedom from proliferations of the four extremes, this explanation is incorrect. The characteristic of freedom from proliferations of the four extremes is the perspective of the uncontaminated wisdom of the *Ārya*'s meditative equipoise.[34]

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[31] It is worth mentioning here that Tsongkhapa lived just before Gorampa, and that the two scholars never engaged in any actual debates with each other. Tsongkhapa's texts respond to Gorampa's (as well as his own) Sakyapa predecessors. Gorampa's texts then respond directly to the views of Tsongkhapa. Finally, Tsongkhapa's Gelugpa followers (most notably Kedrup [*Mkhas grub*]) respond to Gorampa's criticisms, defending their interpretation of Tsongkhapa's own views.

[32] For another account of debates between Tsongkhapa and Gorampa, see Thakchoe 2007.

[33] *blo tsam dbye gzhir bzhed par snang.* BPD: 114.

[34] *yod min med min gyi don don dam du yod pa ma yin/ kun rdzob tu med pa ma yin ces pa la 'chad pa ni bden pa gnyis char la ltos nas rtag chad spang pa'i skabs 'ga' zhig tu de ltar 'chad dgos pa yod kyang/ mtha' bzhi'i spros bral gyi tshe de ltar 'chad du mi rung*

Gorampa suggests here that the tetralemma is a special kind of reasoning, distinct from the more commonsense, two-fold *di*lemma. When analyzing only two possibilities, such as permanence and annihilation, it is perfectly reasonable to qualify the possibilities according to the two truths. But because Āryadeva mentions *four* possibilities, this type of qualification is unacceptable. The fourfold negation is a type of reasoning that applies to ultimate analysis, the end result of which is the pure, nonconceptual meditative state of an *Ārya*.

Gorampa also responds to Tsongkhapa's accusations, which compare him to Hwa-shang. Gorampa contends that his own view is one that involves analysis and a gradualist path:

> The Chinese scholar Hwa-shang asserts that the ultimate view is realized when, having eliminated concepts without analyzing the truth of the nature of things, one merely does not think of anything at all. This is refuted by the scriptures and reasonings of the learned Kamalaśīla.[35] Here, having established the natural state of objects by reasoning which is explained in Madhyamaka scriptures, the conceptual objects of extremists are refuted individually, so one uses the term, "realizing the Madhya-maka view" for the mere not finding of any proliferations, such as existence and nonexistence.[36]

Here, Gorampa emphasizes that while the final, ultimate view is free from concepts, conceptual analysis is nevertheless a necessary step in realizing such a nonconceptual state. On Hwa-shang's view, one simply stops thinking, without any analysis whatsoever. Realization of the ultimate truth, however, is a mental state that only arises after analysis of each of the four extreme views.

In short, Gorampa maintains that the refutation of the four extremes occurs solely at the ultimate level, and that it therefore must occur in stages. One begins by using analysis to refute existence, then refute nonexistence, both, and neither, in turn.[37] When contrasted with Tsongkhapa's qualified treatment of the four extremes, which does not necessarily adhere to a specific sequence

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ste/ mtha' bzhi'i spros bral mtshan nyid pa ni 'phags pa'i mnyam gzhag zag pa med pa'i ye shes kyi gzigs ngo yin BPD: 192.

[35] Gorampa is most likely referring to his *Bhāvanākrama*.

[36] *rgya nag ha shang gis ni gnas lugs kyi don la brtags dpyad mi byed par rtogs pa rang dgar bkag nas ci'ang yid la mi byed pa tsam la lta ba mthar thug rtogs par 'dod pa yin zhing/ de nyid mkhas pa ka ma la shī las lung dang rigs pas sun phyung ba yin la 'dir ni dbu ma'i gzhung lugs las bshad pa'i rigs pa rnams kyis yul gyi gnas lugs gtan la phab nas mthar 'dzin gyi zhen yul re re nas sun phyung ste mthar yod med la sogs pa'i spros pa gang yang ma rnyed pa tsam la dbu ma'i lta ba rtogs zhes pa'i tha snyad mdzad pa yin pa'i phyir ro/* BPD: 194.

[37] *mdor na mtha' bzhi rim pa bzhin du 'gog pa'o/ bzhi pa phan chad kyi 'dzin stangs mi srid pas thug med du mi 'gyur ro/* BPD: 198.

by which they are to be negated, we can begin to see that these two thinkers understand the function of the tetralemma in radically different ways. Gorampa's literal, process-oriented reading of the tetralemma turns it into a soteriological tool; that is, it is something that, when used correctly, can lead a practitioner all the way to Buddhahood. Once one eliminates the four extremes of conceptual constructs and arrives at a state of *spros bral*, one directly experiences the ultimate. Tsongkhapa's interpretive reading of the tetralemma, on the other hand, makes it function as a logical tool; it is something that, when used correctly, serves to help a practitioner cultivate a specific concept of emptiness. While a correct conceptual understanding of emptiness serves as the basis for later meditative practices, it does not lead a practitioner to enlightenment on its own.

The Tetralemma as a Soteriological Tool

Gorampa's use of the tetralemma as a soteriological tool has important implications. If, contrary to Tsongkhapa, the end result of the fourfold negation is a state free from concepts, and if the result of this fourfold negation also leads a practitioner all the way to the "uncontaminated wisdom of the *Ārya*'s meditative equipoise,"[38] then an *Ārya*'s meditative state—as well as a Buddha's wisdom, which follows from that state—must be free from concepts. As Gorampa makes clear, however, the nonconceptual state that is the result of careful analysis should not be mistaken to be equivalent to the nonconceptual state claimed by those who espouse an extreme, anti-conceptual view. Logical analysis is essential on the Madhyamaka path to enlightenment, even though logic and concepts are given up at the end of this path.

Because Gorampa's arguments stress that the end result of the fourfold negation is a state of *spros bral*, entirely free from conceptual constructs, the particular methods that one employs to arrive at that state, which are based on conceptual constructs, are ultimately not important. The process of negating the four extremes is a process of cultivating an enlightened mind by means of eliminating concepts. One begins by negating the first extreme of existence, and then proceeds through the negation of nonexistence, both, and neither, in succession, until all four are realized simultaneously in their entirety. Because this approach is focused on eliminating concepts, rather than cultivating them, Gorampa acknowledges that there may be alternative methods that different practitioners can employ to arrive at the same result.

An analogy may be helpful to illustrate this point. Suppose that I wish to travel from Chicago to New York. It would be equally possible for me to travel by plane, by bus, or by car. Certain limita-

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[38] See note 34.

tions, however, such as financial or time constraints, might dictate which method I choose. Once I actually arrive in New York, however, the way that I traveled to get there is no longer relevant. My ultimate goal was to arrive in New York, and provided that I traveled within certain constraints (moving from west to east rather than from north to south, for example), I will have been able to reach my destination successfully. Certain methods of travel may be more or less efficient, or difficult, or expensive, but they are all capable of helping me to arrive at my destination. In the same way, Gorampa's method for understanding the fourfold negation allows for a multiplicity of methods for attaining the nonconceptual state, provided that those methods result in a state of *spros bral*.

Tsongkhapa's understanding of the tetralemma, however, turns it into a tool through which one cultivates one very specific concept of emptiness. For Tsongkhapa, the process is inextricably tied to the end result: a conceptual understanding of emptiness, which is the absence of ultimate, inherent existence, and the goal of specific types of reasoning. According to Tsongkhapa's model, if one fails to develop this concept correctly, one will never attain a realization of the ultimate. Tsongkhapa argues in his *Lam rim chen mo*:

> In order to be sure that a certain person is not present, you must know the absent person. Likewise, in order to be certain of the meaning of 'selflessness' or 'the lack of intrinsic existence,' you must carefully identify the self, or intrinsic nature, that does not exist.[39]

According to Tsongkhapa, one must very carefully, conceptually understand the meaning of intrinsic, ultimate existence before attaining enlightenment. This conceptual construct—intrinsic, ultimate existence—serves as the object of meditation that eventually leads a practitioner to enlightenment. The fourfold negation, however, only results in the formulation of this carefully constructed concept. It does not, like Gorampa's method, lead to enlightenment on its own.

Svātantrika, Prāsaṅgika, and *spros bral*

Gorampa's tolerance of other views is apparent in the *Synopsis* in his treatment of the distinction between the so-called Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika schools.[40] Gorampa pays a considerable amount of

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[39] Tsong kha pa 2002: 126.
[40] These two "sub-schools" of Madhyamaka are, of course, designations used by Tibetans to refer to two distinct styles of reasoning, following the Indian scholars Buddhapālita and Bhāviveka. While Tsongkhapa argues that these two schools differ in terms of their views regarding ultimate truth, Gorampa contends that their distinction is a matter of method, but not of final view. For more on these schools, see Dreyfus and McClintock 2003.

attention to delineating the differences between these two subschools, mostly in order to refute Tsongkhapa's "eight difficult points" on the same subject.[41] After painstakingly examining the differences between Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika, Gorampa concludes that the distinction between the two is only made at the conventional level.[42] Although a detailed account of Gorampa's analysis lies beyond the scope of the present essay, his conclusion is significant in light of our discussion to this point.

The Svātantrika and the Prāsaṅgika positions differ—at times greatly—with respect to the correct use of logic and conceptual constructs, and the proper methods of argumentation. Gorampa even suggests that *every single verse* in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhya-makakārikā* can be interpreted differently depending on whether one employs Svātantra or Prāsaṅga reasoning.[43] With respect to the ultimate truth, however, both schools agree that all phenomena are free from conceptual constructs.[44] Multiple methods, therefore, can be understood as being equally capable of leading a practitioner to the same ultimate result.[45]

Gorampa was not necessarily ecumenically minded. He composed his texts primarily in order to distinguish the "mainstream" Sakyapa view from the views of his philosophical opponents, after all. Still, his claim that the Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika methods are equally capable of resulting in *spros bral* is significant when understood in terms of his treatment of the fourfold negation. His conclusion about the validity of the Svātantrika and the Prāsaṅgika positions, like his conclusion about the function of the tetralemma, suggests that Gorampa was open to the possibility of multiple paths leading to the same experience of non-conceptuality.

Moreover, because Gorampa's philosophical views involve an emphasis on conceptual reasoning while simultaneously leading a practitioner toward a state that is free from concepts, his arguments are well suited to be appropriated by non-Sakyapas who similarly ephasize nonconceptuality. The early twentieth-century Nyingma scholar Jamgon Ju Mipham ('Jam mgon 'Ju mi pham, 1846-1912), for example, successfully utilizes aspects of Gorampa's philosophy without compromising the views of his own tradition. Mipham, like

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[41] For more on the Eight Difficult Points, see Ruegg 2002.

[42] *don dam gyi lta ba bskyed tshul gyi sgo nas thal 'gyur ba dang/ rang rgyud pa gnyis ste/ don dam gyi 'dod tshul la ni khyad par med do/* BPD: 59.

[43] BPD: 291.

[44] *'di gnyis kyi khyad par don dam gyi lta ba'i sgo nas 'byed pa mi 'thad de gnyis ka'ang mtha' bzhi rim pa bzhin bkag nas mtha' bzhi'i spros bral 'dod par mtshungs pa'i phyir ro/* BPD: 254.

[45] Although Gorampa expresses a certain amount of tolerance for the Svātantrika view, he by no means aligns himself with the Svātantrikas. He, like most Tibetan Buddhists, firmly aligns his own view with that of the Prāsaṅgikas. Although he understands the Prāsaṅgika school to be superior, he views the Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika distinction in terms of method, rather than final view.

Gorampa, finds fault with Tsongkhapa's emphasis on only negating ultimate existence. In his *Beacon of Certainty*, he argues that Tsongkhapa wrongly makes a distinction between an object of negation (*dgag bya*) and the basis of that negation (*dgag gzhi*). Mipham contends that because Tsongkhapa only eliminates ultimate existence but does not eliminate all aspects of existence in their entirety, he fails to eliminate the basis of negation. In other words, Tsongkhapa does not go far enough (*khyab chung ba*) in his analysis.[46]

With respect to the process of eliminating the four extremes, Mipham argues that an ordinary person cannot understand the simultaneous refutation of all four possibilities. Instead, one must begin with the analysis of the first extreme, and then realize the negation of the other three in succession. To arrive at a nonconceptual state without first performing analysis in this way would be "just like a grain of wheat producing a sprout of rice."[47] This, of course, serves as a reminder that every result must be produced from a relevant cause. Mipham's reasoning simultaneously affirms Gorampa's position, that all four extremes are to be realized in succession, and responds to Tsongkhapa's qualm, that nonconceptuality doesn't require analysis first.

A sustained analysis of Gorampa's philosophy as it might relate to Sakya, Kagyu, and Nyingma meditative practices remains to be done. However, it is clear that Gorampa's philosophical reasoning leaves open the possibility for multiple styles of practice, so long as those practices begin with logical analysis and end in a state that is free from conceptual elaborations. In short, Gorampa asserts that freedom from conceptual constructs is freedom from conceptual constructs. If one analyzes reality in a way that ultimately leads to this realization, then one is correctly following the Madhyamaka path, he contends. Unlike Tsongkhapa's analysis of the fourfold negation, which results in a singular, conceptual emptiness that is necessary for subsequent success on the path to Enlightenment, Gorampa's model allows for different methods that all lead to the same experience of *spros bral*. It doesn't matter whether one is a Svātantrika or Prāsaṅgika, practicing Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*), Mahāmudrā, or Lamdre (*lam 'bras*); it is possible for practitioners of distinct paths to reach the same ultimate result.

Abbreviations

BPD = *dbu ma'i spyi don*
MMK = *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*

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