

# Other-Emptiness Madhyamaka and its Application in Meditation in the Eyes of Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas\*

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**Abstract:** Fully in line with the *ris med* approach that Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899) shaped decisively, he was very appreciative of the different strands of *gzhan stong* views which can be detected in Tibetan Buddhism. In his view, "*gzhan stong* Madhyamaka arose according to circumstances," a standpoint which allows him to equally praise Rang byung rdo rje, Dol po pa, Long chen pa, Chos grags rgya mtsho, Shākya mchog ldan, Tāranātha, and Si tu bstan pa'i nyin byed as *gzhan stong* proponents.

In Kong sprul's retrospective view, the works of these masters give full support to *gzhan stong*, even though one can assume that not all of them would necessarily have shared this opinion. In his own *gzhan stong* writings, Kong sprul distances himself from a few points which were important in Dol po pa's and Tāranātha's approach. Dol po pa, for example, maintains an unconditioned *dharmakāya* which according to Kong sprul would lead to internal contradictions in that the *dharmakāya* is endowed with knowledge, compassion, and power and can therefore not be entirely unconditioned. Moreover, instead of following Dol po pa's and Tāranātha's *Bṛhaṭṭīkā* based view that — in terms of the three natures — the perfect nature is empty of the dependent and the imagined natures, he seems to favor the more progressive three-nature model in accordance with the *Madhyāntavibhāga* that the dependent nature empty of the imagined is the perfect nature. By doing so he closely follows Shākya mchog ldan to whom the syllogism implied in the view that posits an absolute beyond the dependent nature is defective in that it tries to prove what is already ascertained in the subject-basis. He also goes along Shākya mchog ldan's view who considers

both the self-empty apophatic approach of Madhyamaka as well as the other-empty cataphatic approach as adequate methods of approaching the ultimate. Yet, just as the latter master, Kong sprul points out that the *gzhan stong* view goes deeper in reflecting the authentic mode of being because a non-affirming negation would reduce emptiness to a mere conceptual nothingness.

In my paper I will show how, with this perspective, Kong sprul makes the link to Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā where the unity of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is advocated and where it is emphasized that the actual nature of concepts is the *dharmakāya*. This, while constituting a major difference to Dol po pa who insists on the fundamental difference between a buddha's wisdom and consciousness, comparing it to the opposite nature of light and darkness or nectar and poison, is fully in line with Rang byung rdo rje's position of equating the true nature of phenomena with the union of appearance and emptiness which in turn is considered as nothing other but natural awareness, a main theme of Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā.

The selection of treatises that 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899)<sup>1</sup> commented on, his own works such as for example the *Immaculate Vajra Moonrays*<sup>2</sup>, and the variety of meditation-related instructions that fill his *Collected Works*<sup>3</sup> illustrate that for Kong sprul, philosophical studies mainly serve the aim to implement the view in meditation. Thus it appears that as an author and teacher Kong sprul's focus was to find the best philosophical template for meditation and this, for him, is the affirmative approach of Other-Emptiness or *Gzhan stong* Madhyamaka.

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1 Born in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Kham, 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas became one of the most active and prominent Buddhist masters of his time. Along with and often under the guidance of the famous and well-established 'Jam dbyangs Mkhyen brtse'i dbang po (1820–1892), he decisively contributed to the so-called *ris med*-movement, the main vision of which was to secure and maintain Buddhist traditions in all their aspects that were extant in Tibet. This also meant that they focused on Buddhists traditions that for socio-political or other reasons had been marginalized and were in danger of disappearance. While the overall approach was non-sectarian, emphasis was on the Bka' brgyud-, Rnying ma-, Sa skya-and Jo nang-traditions. The legacy of Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas consists mainly in the so-called *Five Great Treasures (mdzod lnga)* in which he collected a great number of texts by various authors as well as his own writings. Many teachers of the above mentioned traditions today rely on these compilations.

2 *Gzhan stong lta khrid*. Full title: *Gzhan stong dbu ma chen po'i lta khrid rdo rje zla ba dri ma med pa'i 'od zer zhes bya ba bzhugs so*. The *Immaculate Vajra Moonrays*, an Instruction for the View of *Gzhan stong*, the Great Madhyamaka.

3 *'Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas kyi gsung 'bum rgya chen bka' mdzod*. The expanded edition of the writings of 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas. 13 vols. [abbrev. KD] Reproduced from the dPal spungs xylographs from Eastern Tibet. Delhi: Shechen Publication, 2002.

In his *Treasury of Knowledge*,<sup>4</sup> Kong sprul presents the essence of all systems of Madhyamaka — whether they offer a nonaffirming or an affirming approach toward reality — from the perspective of the ground, the path, and the fruition:

Not denying relative [phenomena] the way they appear and being free from all proliferations as to the true nature, is the ground.

Relinquishing the apprehension of characteristics through profound wisdom and to act for the benefit of others with compassion, thus amassing the accumulations [of wisdom and merit], is the path.

Pacification, the perfect *dharmakāya*, and the form *kāyas* which non-conceptually benefit others, is the fruition.

The [meaning of the] Mādhyamikas' teachings is contained in these [three points].<sup>5</sup>

While outlining these three main points regarding the ground, the path, and the fruition, Kong sprul offers a number of variations for subdividing different Madhyamaka perspectives. He distinguishes between a general Sūtra-Madhyamaka and a profound secret Mantra-Madhyamaka.<sup>6</sup> He further subdivides the propounders of the general Sūtra-Madhyamaka into those Mādhyamikas who maintain the view of essencelessness (*ngo bo nyid med par smra ba'i dbu ma pa; niḥsvabhāvavāda mādhyamika*) and the Yogācāra-Mādhyamikas (*rnal 'byor spyod pa'i dbu ma pa*), explaining that Bhavya etc. referred to them as broad and subtle or outer and inner respectively and that in Tibet, since the time of Dol po pa (1292–1361) these were known as those who propound self-emptiness (*rang stong pa*), and those who propound

4 *Shes bya kun khyab mdzod*, the encyclopedic magnum opus and one of the *Five Great Treasures* of Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas. It comprises both root verses as well as a comprehensive auto-commentary. All in all it consists of ten books or sections covering a broad spectrum of Buddhist history, philosophy and practice from the perspective of Tibetan Buddhism. Upon the initiative of the late Kalu Rinpoche (1905–1989) it was translated into English. All ten books, having as their main title *The Treasury of Knowledge* along with the respective subtitles of the ten sections are by now available through Snow Lion Publications.

5 *Shes bya kun khyab mdzod*, vol. 2: 559<sub>10-14</sub>; *kun rdzob ji ltar snang la skur mi 'debs || gnas lugs spros mtha' kun dang bral ba gzhi || shes rab zab mos mtshan mar 'dzin pa spong || snying rjes gzhan don tshogs rnams gsog pa lam || zhi ba chos sku mthar phyin gzugs kyi sku || rtog med 'gro don mdzad pa 'bras bu ste || dbu ma rnams kyi bstan bya der 'dus so ||*. translation is my own. See also (tr.) Callahan 2007: 272.

6 *Shes bya kun khyab mdzod*, vol. 2: 512<sub>14</sub>; *dbye sgo mang yang mdo sngags dbu ma gnyis |*. "Even though there are many ways of distinguishing, there are the two sūtra and mantra Madhyamaka."

other-emptiness (*gzhan stong pa*) respectively.<sup>7</sup> It is important to keep in mind that for Kong sprul "Yogācāra-Mādhyamika" is thus a synonym for *gzhan stong pa* or the proponents of other-emptiness, also called "Great Madhyamaka" and that it pertains to those who — based in the view of the essencelessness of all phenomena — acknowledge that while mind's true nature is empty of adventitious defilements it is not empty of enlightened qualities. As will become clear below, according to Kong sprul, this true nature of mind — in other words \**sugatagarbha* — is to be taken as the substratum for the meditative path. Through that approach the adept can actualize buddhahood precisely for the reason that enlightened qualities, being innate to mind's true nature, are "merely" to be discovered by way of a process of spiritual training that makes all obscurations that obstruct it dissipate. Thus for him the Yogācāra-Madhyamaka view, that is strongly based in the third dharma wheel, surpasses the one of the Niḥsvabhāvavāda Mādhyamikas who maintain but the view of essencelessness being grounded in the second wheel of dharma. The latter, with its focus on logic and reasoning easily seduces the adept to settle for a mere negation of reality which is just another conceptual elaboration instead of relating to mind's true nature without any fabrications and thereby letting its innate virtue be revealed. It is for this reason that in his *Immaculate Vajra Moonrays* Kong sprul, when discussing these Madhyamaka-approaches in the context of the three dharmacakras, maintains in accordance with the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* that only the sūtras of the third cycle — and consequently the associated treatises and teachings — convey the unsurpassable definitive meaning in that they make the precise distinction between existence and nonexistence, being and nonbeing of the true nature.<sup>8</sup> To him, the sūtras of the middle wheel and their associated commentaries comprise a mixture of the provisional and the definitive meaning of the Buddha's

7 *Shes bya kun khyab mdzod*, vol. 2: 513<sub>15-22</sub>: *theg pa chen po'i mdo sde rnams kyi dgongs pa 'grel pa'i tshul lam lugs srol cung zad mi 'dra ba'i dbang gis ngo bo nyid med par smra ba'i dbu ma dang | rnal 'byor spyod pa'i dbu ma pa gnyis su rigs nges shing | de dag la kha cig gis dbu ma pa gtso phal gnyis kyi brda sbyar la | slob dpon bha bya sogs kyis phyi ma la phra ba nang gi dbu ma dang | snga ma la rags pa phyi'i dbu ma zhes pa'i brda la sogs pa yang sbyor zhing | bod du jo nang chos rje kun mkhyen chen po phyin chad nas dbu ma rang stong gzhan stong gi lugs zhes yongs su grags so ||. For the precise translation see Callahan 2007:*

8 See also the Fourth Zhwa dmar pa Chos grags ye shes (1453–1524) in his *Mdo sde spyi'i rnam bzhag*, CYSb vol. 3, 161<sub>9-10</sub>: "The difference is that the middle [dharmacakra] explains emptiness which negates all elaborations and the last [dharmacakra] [buddha]nature which is free from apprehending characteristics of it being empty or not empty." *bar pa spros pa mtha' dag bkag pa'i stong pa nyid dang | tha mas stong mi stong gi mtshan 'dzin las grol ba'i snying po ston pa'i khyad yod |.*

teachings<sup>9</sup> and are thus not perfectly definitive.<sup>10</sup>

It is from this perspective, that in his *Immaculate Vajra Moonrays*, which is considered to be one of Kong sprul's main instructions for the view of *gzhan stong* and its application in meditation, he honors a number of teachers as *gzhan stong* proponents. He praises the Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339), Dol po pa (1292–1361) and even Klong chen pa (1308–1363) as the three great pioneers of *gzhan stong*. Moreover, he praises the Seventh Karma pa Chos grags rgya mtsho (1454–1506), Shākya mchog ldan (1428–1507), Tāranātha (1575–1634), and Si tu bstan pa'i nyin byed (1700–1774) as equally authentic *gzhan*

9 *Gzhan stong lta khrid*, 736<sub>2</sub>-737<sub>3</sub>: "[Just as with] children [who are first fed with milk and eventual with solid] food, by way of the first cycle of the [Buddha's] words, renunciation of *samsāra* is attained, through the middle [cycle] the clinging to characteristics is counteracted, and with the last existence and nonexistence, being and nonbeing etc. are precisely distinguished with regard to the actuality of the mode of being. Thus according to the [authoritative] statements of the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* etc. the first [cycle] is established to be of provisional meaning, the middle to be a mixture of provisional and definitive meaning, and the last to be of unsurpassable definitive meaning. [Moreover] it is not just impossible to ignore these presentations of the victor and his successors, but direct cognition proves that the actuality of profundity is [through these progressive cycles] more and more clear and complete." *byis pa la zas snyod pa'i tshul gyis | bka' khor lo dang pos 'khor ba las nges par 'byin | bar pas mtshan 'dzin zlog | tha mas gnas lugs kyi don yod med yin min sogs legs par phye bas | dang po drang don | bar pa drang nges 'dres pa | tha ma nges don bla med du mdo sde dgongs pa nges 'grel lung gis grub pa sogs rgyal ba sras bcas kyis rnam par bzhag pa las 'gongs mi nus pa ma zad | zab mo'i don rim par gsal zhing yongs su rdzogs par mngon sum gyis kyang grub phyr ro ||*

See for example also Shākya mchog ldan's position — an author highly venerated by Kong sprul — in that regard in his *Phyag rgya chen po'i shan 'byed*, PCks, Higgins and Draszczyk tr. 2016, vol. II: 51, critical ed.: 73: "Not only is there a difference in terms of the view of the experiencer but the latter [system, i.e. Yogācāra-Madhyamaka] is also superior in terms of the definitive meaning of the experienced object because the emptiness as a nonaffirming negation of the former tradition, [i.e., the Niḥsvabhāvavāda-Mādhyamikas of the Lakṣaṇayāna] is explained as conventional truth since it is nothing other than nonexistence and abstraction. Hence it does not qualify as being of definitive meaning and does not go beyond the conceptualizing mind of the subject (*yul can*)." *myong byed kyi lta ba la khyad par yod pa kho nar ma zad nyams su myong bya'i nges don de yang phyi ma khyad par du 'phags pa yin te | lugs snga ma'i stong nyid med dgag de ni dngos por med pa dang spyi mtshan las ma 'das pas kun rdzob bden par bshad pa yin gyi | nges don du mi rung ba'i phyr dang | yul can blo rtog pa las ma 'das pa'i phyr ||*

10 See also the Fourth Zhwa dmar pa Chos grags ye shes in his *Mdo sde spyi'i rnam bzhag*, CYSb vol. 3, 161<sub>12-15</sub>: "The middle dharmacakra — in relation to the last one — is of provisional definitive meaning, in that its topic and its formulations are not fully perfect. The third dharmacakra — as there is nothing else that would be superior to it — is of ultimate definitive meaning, in that its topic and formulations are fully perfect. [This] difference should be comprehended." *chos 'khor bar pa de phyi ma la ltos nas gnas skabs kyi nges don te | mrjod bya rjod byed yongs su ma rdzogs pa dang | chos 'khor gsum pa de las mchog tu gyur pa gzhan med pas mthar thug gi nges don te | brjod bya rjod byed yongs su rdzogs pa'i khyad par khong du chud par bya'o ||*. And, *ibid*, 164<sub>3-5</sub>: "... thus the statement "the first dharmacakra is of provisional meaning, the middle one of not fully complete definitive meaning, and the last one is of fully perfect definitive meaning" which is appropriate to be maintained by intelligent people was well explained."... *de bas na 'khor lo dang po drang don | bar pa nges don yongs su ma rdzogs pa | tha ma nges don yongs su rdzogs pa yin no zhes blo dang ldan pa rnam kyis bzung bar 'os pa'i legs par bshad pa'o ||*

*stong* master<sup>11</sup> and mentions that the differences in their views merely arose according to circumstances.

Based on the twenty sūtras on the essence of the definitive meaning [considered to belong to] the last wheel of dharma, as well as on the five treatises by Maitreya and the teaching systems of Nāgārjuna und Asaṅga and their successors, here in Tibet as well — since the two the translator Gzu and Btsan — the study- and teaching tradition of what is known as *Gzhan stong* Madhyamaka arose according to circumstances until today. Among [the Tibetan teachers] the three great pioneers of the [*gzhan stong*-] teaching tradition — the all-knowing [Karma pa] Rang byung rdo rje, the all-knowing Dol po pa and the all-knowing [Klong chen pa] Dri med 'od zer — but also [teachers] such as the Seventh Master [Karma pa Chos grags rgya mtsho], [Shākya mchog ldan] Zi lung paṅ chen, Tāranātha, and [Si tu] Bstan pa'i nyin byed, [all] of whom were definitely on the level of noble ones and who [as] spiritual friends of the teachings in their entirety had an unbiased eye of dharma, ascertained [the *gzhan stong*-teachings] through the three listening, teaching and meditating. This is backed by all of their excellent writings. Moreover, the ultimate intention of all noble individuals who,

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11 The Third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339) was retrospectively often called a *gzhan stong* master even though he himself did never use the term *gzhan stong* and did not explicitly posit himself in this way. Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan (1292–1361) first established himself as a great scholar based in the Sa skya school and became widely accepted as a so-called omniscient one. Having been deeply touched by the meditative practice in the Jo nang system, he later on developed the so-called *gzhan stong* approach and taught this widely. He attracted huge attention, probably also due to his accepted position. After his death, the *gzhan stong* approach, not being compatible with the general view held within the Dge lugs pa tradition, was heavily attacked by several of their representatives. Klong chen pa (1308–1363) who is one of the main philosophers in the Rnying ma school did, just as Rang byung rdo rje, not teach *gzhan stong* but rather focussed on the *rang stong* or self-emptiness perspective. Yet, in his Dzogs chen teachings he explains, just as Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje in his Mahāmudrā teachings, that the mind as such is the ground for *samsāra* und *nirvāṇa*, that luminosity or buddha nature are free from all defilements and that innate wisdom is actualized through a fundamental change of state. The Seventh Karma pa Chos grags rgya mtsho (1454–1506) is usually considered a *gzhan stong* representative due to certain passages in his famous work on the theory of perception and due to descriptions of his view given by his student Karma phrin las pa. Shākya mchog ldan (1428–1507), considered to be one of the so-called six ornaments of Tibet, became an outspoken proponent of *gzhan stong* which he taught in a way that synthesized *gzhan stong* with Dwags po Mahāmudrā and thus varies greatly from Dol po pa's *gzhan stong*. His works were also not tolerated in Tibet and therefore were not extant until a few years ago. Tāranātha (1575–1634) is considered the one who revived Dol po pa's *gzhan stong* view after it had been pushed into the background for approx. two-hundred years. However his writings met the same fate as Shākya mchog ldan's in that their reprint was prohibited in Tibet. Si tu bstan pa'i nyin byed (1700–1774) was acknowledged as one of the most important scholars during his days. It is said that he propagated the *gzhan stong* as taught within the Karma Bka' brgyud tradition and that his teaching activity had a strong impact on the revival of *gzhan stong* views in particular in Kham. For more information regarding the *gzhan stong* positions of these authors see Draszczyk 2015: 116-94.

having united listening, contemplating, and meditating, behold the true mode of being unmistakenly cannot but lead into that.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, in Kong sprul's retrospective view, the works of these masters give full support to *gzhan stong*, even though one can assume that not all of them would necessarily have shared this opinion.<sup>13</sup> As is commonly known, neither Rang byung rdo rje nor Klong chen pa made ever use of the term *gzhan stong*. Moreover as will become clear below in his own presentations, Kong sprul at times diverts quite substantially from certain positions of Dol po pa's and Tāranātha's *gzhan stong* system.

All in all, he certainly highly appreciates Tāranātha's expositions of other-emptiness as is demonstrated by the fact that Kong sprul in his *Treasury of Knowledge* in the section on the three vehicles (*theg pa*; *yāna*) and the four tenets (*grub mtha'*; *siddhānta*), quotes him extensively. From Tāranātha's *Essence of Other-Emptiness*<sup>14</sup> he takes for example a long section which addresses the topic of the Yogācāra linked threefold nature model, i.e., the imagined, the dependent and the perfect nature (*kun brtags*, *gzhan dbang*, *yongs grub*; *parikalpita*,

12 *Gzhan stong lta khrid*, 738<sub>1,5</sub>; *de la 'khor lo tha ma nges don snying po'i mdo sde nyi shu* | *byams chos sde lnga* | *klu thogs yab sras kyi gzhung lugs la brten* | *lo tswā ba gzu btsan rnam gnyis nas bzung da lta'i bar du bod kyi yul 'dir yang gzhan stong dbu mar grags pa'i 'chad nyan srol ka ci rigs par byung ba las* | *shing rta'i srol 'byed chen po ni* | *thams cad mkhyen pa rang byung rdo rje* | *kun mkhyen dol po pa* | *kun mkhyen dri med 'od zer dang gsum po yin la* | *rje bdun pa* | *zi lung paṅ chen* | *tā ra nā tha* | *bstan pa'i nyin byed sogs 'phags pa'i sa la nges par bzhugs shing bstan pa yongs rdzogs kyi bshes gnyen phyogs rer ma lhungs pa'i chos kyi spyān ldan rnams kyis kyang nyan bshad sgom gsum gyis gtan la phab cing* | *de dag gi gsung rab thams cad 'di'i rgyab brten tu 'byon no* | *der ma zad thos bsam sgom pa zung 'brel gyis gnas lugs phyin ci ma log par gzigs pa'i skye 'phags rnams kyi mthar thug dgongs pa ni 'di kho nar 'bab dgos so* | |.

13 In the "*History of the Ris med Movement*," a text composed by Kong sprul and contained in his *Rgya chen bka' mdzod*, vol. 5, *Ris med chos 'byung*, 888<sub>1,4</sub>, he goes even further saying: "The scholars and siddhas of the secret mantra tradition of the Rnying ma [pas] such as the all-knowing [Klong chen pa] Dri med 'od zer, followers of the Great One from O rgyan, the scholars and siddhas of the four major and eight minor Bka' brgyud [pas], starting with the three Mar [pa], Mi [la ras pa], and Dwags po [pa], and all later spiritual masters of these teachings until the all-knowing [Si tu] Chos kyi 'byung nas, as well as the Sa [skya] uncle and nephew [Grags pa rgyal mtshan and Sa skya Paṅḍita], Bo dong pa ['Phyogs las mnam rgyal] and in particular the great Dol po pa, a buddha of the three times, the all-knowing one, and the great master Tāranāthā who clarified his intent and other great beings who successively appeared in the Jo nang and Bka' brgyud [traditions] — the view and practice of them all was *gzhan stong* Madhyamaka alone." *o rgyan chen po'i rjes 'brang kun mkhyen dri med 'od zer sogs gsang sngags rnying ma'i mkhas grub rnams dang* | *mar mi dwags gsum nas bzung* | *phyis yongs rdzogs bstan pa'i bshes gnyen kun gzigs chos kyi 'byung gnas kyi bar du byon pa'i bka' brgyud che bzhi chung brgyad kyi mkhas grub rnams dang* | *sa chen khung dpon rnams dang* | *zi lung paṅ chen* | *bo dong pa* | *khyad par kun mkhyen dus gsum sangs rgyas dol po pa chen po de'i dgongs pa gsal byed* | *rje bisun chen po tā ra nā tha sogs jo nang bka' brgyud kyi skyes chen rim byon thams cad kyi lta grub ni gzhan stong kho na yin la* | *nang gses bzhed tshul gyi khyad par mi 'dra ba cung zad yod de* | |. translation is my own. See also (tr.) van der Kuijp 1983: 41.

14 *Gzhan stong snying po*, 186<sub>5</sub>-190<sub>6</sub>. See also (tr.) Hopkins 2007: 93-102.



*paratantra, pariniṣpanna*).<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Kong sprul deliberately leaves out the entire part of the "extraordinary meaning of Madhyamaka" (*thun mong ma yin pa'i don*) from the above mentioned text in which Tāranātha stresses Dol po pa's view that the perfect nature is empty of the imagined and the dependent nature; by restricting the perfect nature to its unchangeable aspect, the *Brhaṭṭīkā*<sup>16</sup> based view of the theory of the three natures (*trisvabhāva*) — stressed by Dol po pa — the perfect nature is brought strongly into line with that of buddha nature (*tathāgatagarbha*).<sup>17</sup> In regard to the three natures, Kong sprul, however, rather appears to prefer the more progressive model in accordance with the *Madhyāntavibhāga*<sup>18</sup> that the dependent nature empty of the imagined is the perfect nature which by the way is also taught by Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje. As well, it is the favorite model of Shākya mchog ldan. This becomes all the more clear when looking at another part of the *Treasury of Knowledge* in which Kong sprul goes into distinguishing between the definitive (*nges don; nītārtha*) and expedient meaning (*drang don, neyārtha*) in the three cycles of the Buddha's teachings. Even though in his encyclopedic root text he says according to Dol po pa's and Tāranātha's *gzhan stong* view: "The basis for negation is the perfect, the object of negation is the imagined and the dependent; the Yogācāras propound that [it] is empty of these,"<sup>19</sup> the explanations he gives right after provide a different picture. He quotes Shākya mchog ldan endorsing him saying that the basis of emptiness is the dependent, i.e., the limitless aspects of consciousness of dualistic clinging, that the object of refutation is the imagined, i.e., the distinction into subject and object, and that the essence of the consciousness of dualistic appearances, in other words the dependent nature, is the mere knowing and vivid experiencing of non-dual wisdom.<sup>20</sup>

Citations from Kong sprul's *Immaculate Vajra Moonrays* point into the same direction, identifying the dependent nature, i.e., the eightfold aspects of consciousness, to be empty of the

15 See *Shes bya kun khyab mdzod*, vol. 2, 548<sub>1-10</sub>. See also (tr.) Callahan 2007: 249-68.

16 *Brhaṭṭīkā*, short for *Śatasāhasrikāpañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāṣṭādaśasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitābrhaṭṭīkā* by Daṃṣṭrāsena or Vasubandhu, D 3808.

17 Mathes 2004: 294.

18 Mathes 2008: 69 and note 363, "Emptiness refers to this false imagining (*abhūtaparikalpa*) that is free from the relation between a perceived and a perceiver."

19 *Shes bya kun khyab mdzod*, vol. 3: 61<sub>17-18</sub>: *dgag gzhi yongs grub dgag bya brtags dang gzhan | de yis stong zhes rnal 'byor spyod rnams sbra* |. See also (tr.) Barron 2012: 139-40.

20 *Shes bya kun khyab mdzod*, vol. 3, 62<sub>1-10</sub>: "The ground of emptiness is the dependent, that is to say the infinite [aspects of] consciousness of dualistic appearances. The object of negation is the imagined, that is to say the two, the distinction of the apprehender and the apprehended. ... If one wonders, what the essence itself of these consciousnesses of dualistic appearances is, [the reply is that] it is nondual wisdom, the mere knowing and vivid experiencing of knowables." *gang stong pa'i gzhi ni gzhan dbang ste gzung 'dzin gnyis snang can gyi shes pa mtha' dag go | dgag bya ni kun brtags pa ste gzung ba dang 'dzin pa'i dbye bas gnyis yin la ... gnyis snang gi shes pa de'i rang gi ngo bo gang zhe na | gnyis med kyi ye shes shes bya myong ba rig cing gsal tsaṃ de nyid do* |. See also *ibid.*, vol. 3: 140.



dualistic notions of the imagined nature. That the dependent nature is empty of the imagined nature — this to him is wisdom, the absolute truth, or natural luminosity. Kong sprul points out that prior to engaging in meditation, a practitioner should develop this view:

Since beginningless [time] one's own mind appears due to adventitious stains, the aspect of ignorance, to a not investigating, not analyzing [perception] as manifold [things] like delusions in a dream. If analyzed, all appearances are nothing but manifestations of mind because, not existing in any way, they are empty of their own respective entities. Therefore, the true mode of being of relative truth is that grasped objects appear as if they were outer things, yet, resembling the moon in water, they are empty of a self-nature in their manifestation; the grasping mind as well which abides nowhere, neither outside nor inside, which is not established as an entity with shape and color, with its eightfold aspects of consciousness that arise from the continuum of self-clinging that mistakes what is nonexistent as an existent, is primordially empty like a sky flower. Yet, it is wisdom empty of grasped and grasping, *dharmatā*, encompassing everyone, from the Buddha until an [ordinary] sentient being. [This is] the mode of being of absolute truth, *\*sugatagarbha*, natural luminosity, primordially uncontaminated by adventitious stains. Having correctly understood this [i.e., the mode of being of relative and absolute truth], to settle in this state in meditative concentration is the intent of Maitreya's works.

Just that much analysis must definitely be gone through in preparation. Having thus ascertained the freedom from extremes, [one trains] in what is called the "practice of unity" [i.e.,] one abides in the self-arisen wisdom, the natural mode of being and [realizes] that the mode of emptiness is [its] being empty of conceptualizing that clings to the extremes of discursive elaborations. [Its] mode of realization is

realization through personally experienced wisdom.<sup>21</sup>

Thus Kong sprul presents the true nature of the dependent nature, i.e., it being empty of the imagined nature — or in other words, empty of all adventitious — , as absolute truth, natural luminosity or *\*sugatagarbha* and thus as perfect nature.

Furthermore, as we can see from his commentary on Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje's *Revealing Buddha Nature (Snying po bstan pa)*, for Kong sprul, this true nature of phenomena, i.e., buddha nature, is equated with the union of appearance and emptiness:

Thus, the nature of the union of appearance and emptiness — just this natural awareness in its genuine state, uncontrived by philosophical systems and remedies — is called by many names, such as the "expanse of phenomena" (*dharmadhātu*), "*dharmakāya*," "great bliss," the "perfection of insight" (*prajñāpāramitā*) and "heart of the victors" (*rgyal ba'i snying po*), but their meaning is just a single one, that is, mind as such, mind in its genuine state. Except for the mere difference of whether one is aware of this or not, it is the nature of phenomena whose essence is unchanging.<sup>22</sup>

With this perspective, Kong sprul makes the link to the Dwags po Bka' brgyud pa teaching

21 *Gzhan stong lta khrid*, 741<sub>6</sub>-742<sub>6</sub>: *thog ma med pa nas rang sems ma rig pa'i cha glo bur dri ma la brten nas ma brtags ma dpyad pa'i ngor rmi lam gyi 'khrul pa ltar sna tshogs su snang yang | dpyad na cir yang ma grub par rang rang gi ngo bos stong pa'i phyir snang ba thams cad ni sems kho na'i cho 'phrul yin pas | phyi don ltar shar ba'i gzung ba snang la rang bzhin med pa chu nang gi zla ba lta bu kun rdzob bden pa'i gnas lugs dang | 'dzin pa'i sems kyang phyi nang gang du'ang ma gnas shing dbyibs kha dog dngos por ma grub la med pa la yod par ltar 'khrul pa'i bdag 'dzin gyi rgyun las byung ba'i tshogs bryad cha dang bcas pa nam mkha'i me tog ltar gdod nas stong yang gzung 'dzin gnyis stong gi ye shes sangs rgyas nas sems can gyi bar thams cad la khyab pa'i chos nyid bde gshes snying po rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba | glo bur dri mas gdod nas gos ma myong ba don dam bden pa'i gnas lugs de nyid yang dag par ngo shes nas de'i ngang du mnyam par 'jog pa ni byams chos kyi dgongs pa ste | dpyad pa de tsam ni nges par sngon tu 'gro dgos te mtha' bral du gtan la phab nas | zung 'jug tu nyams su len pa zhes bya ba gnas lugs gnyug ma rang byung gi ye shes su gnas | stong lugs spros pa'i mthar 'dzin pa'i rtog pas stong | rtogs lugs so so rang rig pa'i ye shes kyis rtogs pa zhes bya'o ||. The last part "the mode of emptiness is [its] being empty of conceptualizing that clings to the extremes of discursive elaborations. [Its] mode of realization is realization through personally experienced wisdom" is a quote from one of Shākya mchog ldan's texts on Dwags po Mahāmudrā *Distinguishing Mahāmudrā [or The Great Ship of Unity: A Treatise Dispelling Errors in the Interpretation of Mahāmudrā of Scripture and Reasoning]*. See (tr.) Higgins and Draszczyk 2016, vol. 2: 47-71. Critical edition of the Tibetan text, *ibid.* 71-85.*

22 *Dgongs gsal*, 145<sub>13</sub>-145<sub>7</sub>; *de ltar snang stong zung 'jug gi rang bzhin | grub mtha' dang gnyen pos ma bcos pa'i tha mal gnyug ma'i shes pa de nyid la | chos dbyings dang | chos sku dang | bde ba chen po dang | shes rab phar phyin dang | rgyal ba'i snying po la sogs pa ming du ma zer te | don sems nyid gnyug ma'i shes pa gcig kho na yin la | de nyid rig dang ma rig gi khyad par tsam ma gtogs ngo bo 'gyur ba med pa'i chos nyid yin pas ...* (tr.) Brunnhölzl 2009: 217.

of Mahāmudrā where the unity of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* is advocated and where it is emphasized that thoughts are the *dharmakāya*. In that regard, the First Karma phrin las pa (1456–1539) a prominent *gzhan stong* master in the Bka' brgyud tradition and one of the teachers of the Eight Karma pa Mi bskyod rdo rje for example explains:

The unimpeded expressive energy of mind is the thoughts, while the fundamental nature of the mind is the unborn *dharmakāya*. Because they are inseparable like the sun and its rays, it is said that thoughts are *dharmakāya*. "*Saṃsāra*" is the aspect of clarity of the mind, while "*nirvāṇa*" is the aspect of its emptiness. It is on account of the unity of being clear and empty that [mind] is actually present as the "inseparability of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*."<sup>23</sup>

This position constitutes a major difference to Dol po pa's *gzhan stong* view who insists on the fundamental difference between a buddha's wisdom and consciousness and compares this to the opposite nature of light and darkness or nectar and poison.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, in the so-called extraordinary meaning of Madhyamaka (*thun mong ma yin pa'i don*) from Tāranātha's *Essence of Other-Emptiness* which Kong sprul, as pointed out above, skips in his *Treasury of Knowledge*, Tāranātha emphasizes that buddha nature is the "ultimate unconditioned" (*don dam pa'i 'dus ma byas*).<sup>25</sup> This reflects another difference between Kong sprul's and Dol po pa's views regarding their explanation of unconditioned buddhahood. Prof. Mathes has already pointed to that in his *Direct Path to the Buddha Within*. For Dol po pa, and he explains this in his commentary on *Ratnagotravibhāga* verse I.6 by quoting the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, the *dharmakāya* is unconditioned in that it is not momentary but permanent. Kong sprul, however, in his commentary on the same verse, after quoting Rong ston's (1367–1449) distinction of the four types of being unconditioned, points out that even though the *dharmakāya* has an unconditioned quality to it, by virtue of it possessing knowledge, compassion, and power it is not entirely unconditioned as this would otherwise entail an internal contradiction.<sup>26</sup>

23 *Dri lan drang ba dang nges pa'i don gyi snang byed ces bya ba ngo gro bla ma'i dris lan bzhugs*, KPdl, 109<sub>2,3</sub>: 'gag med sems kyi rtsal ni rnam par rtog || sems kyi gshis ni skye med chos kyi sku || nyi ma dang ni de yi 'od zer bzhin || dbye ba med phyir rnam rtog chos skur gsungs || 'khor ba zhes bya sems kyi gsal cha ste || sems kyi stong pa'i cha ni myang 'das so || gsal dang stong pa zung du 'jug pas na || 'khor 'das dbyer med nyid du don la gnas ||. For more information on this topic see Higgins and Draszcyk 2016, vol. 1: 210-17.

24 See Stearns 2010: 106-10.

25 *Gzhan stong snying po*, 187<sub>3,4</sub>: "This *tathāgatagarbha* is free from both being an entity and a nonentity. Therefore it is the actual unconditionedness, the ultimate unconditioned." *de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po 'di dngos po dang dngos med gnyis car las grol bas | 'dus ma byas dngos don dam pa'i 'dus ma byas so ||*.

26 Mathes 2008: 56.

On top of that, it is striking that in the *Treasury of Knowledge*, right in the middle of an earlier quote from Tāranātha's *Essence of Other-Emptiness*, Kong sprul simply leaves out yet another section where Tāranātha describes self-emptiness as contradictory in itself.<sup>27</sup> This seems to be vital, because as Kong sprul clearly shows in his *Immaculate Vajra Moonrays*, to him — despite considering self-emptiness to be of but provisional definitive meaning and other-emptiness as of ultimate definitive meaning — both are appropriate teaching models in the process of accessing mind's true nature, a point that will be looked at a bit more closer below.

In his *Treasury of Knowledge*, in the context of how extreme views are avoided, Kong sprul therefore praises the entire Madhyamaka system as the view which is truthful in this regard:

The Mādhyamikas [propounding self-emptiness] avoid the extreme of permanence by [teaching] the natural freedom from proliferations, and they avoid the extreme of extinction by [understanding] that the relative is dependent arising. The [Mādhyamikas propounding] other-emptiness avoid the extreme of permanence by [teaching] that the relative, all phenomena which arise from other are primordially not established, and they avoid the extreme of extinction by [understanding] that the absolute, the unchanging, self-arisen *\*sugatagarbha* abides as the fundamental nature.

Therefore, while among them [i.e., in other teaching traditions which do not avoid the two extremes] there is much truth [but] untruth [as well], the Madhyamaka-tradition is truthful in every regard, because it understands as abiding nature the freedom from proliferations and as manner of appearance the dependent arising.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, in his *Treasury of Knowledge* — again conforming with Shākya mchog ldan's view — Kong sprul points out that the differences between self- and other-emptiness Madhyamaka concern on the one hand the conventional level of reality and thus the conceptual presentations in post-meditation (*rjes thob; prṣṭhalabdha*) saying:

There is a system of using conventional terminology where, in the context when in post-meditation tenets are distinguished — just as a verbal convention — [*Gzhan stong* Mādhyamikas] say that suchness, the true nature of phenomena (*dharmatā*),

27 *Gzhan stong snying po*, 185<sub>5</sub>: "In the system known as rang stong there are internal contradictions." ... *rang stong par grags pa'i lugs la nang 'gal yod do* ... See also: *Shes bya kun khyab mdzod* vol. 2: 5497-11.

28 *Shes bya kun khyab mdzod*, vol. 3, 56<sub>12-19</sub>: *dbu ma pas ni rang bzhin spros pa dang bral bas rtag pa'i mtha' spong la | kun rdzob rien cing 'brel bar 'byung bas chad pa'i mtha' spong ngo | gzhan stong pas kun rdzob gzhan byung du gyur pa'i chos thams cad gdod nas ma grub pas rtag mtha' spong la | don dam rang byung mi 'gyur ba'i bde gshegs snying po gshis lugs su gnas pas chad mtha' spong ngo | de phyir de dag bden dang mi bden mang | gnas lugs spros bral snang tshul rien 'brel du | rtogs phyir thams cad bden pa dbu ma'i lugs ||*. translation is my own. See also (tr.) Barron 2012: 133.

exists and [*Rang stong* Mādhyamikas] say it does not exist.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, the two perspectives differ also in terms of whether, at the point of final analysis by means of reasoning, the absolute, non-dual wisdom is found to be established as what is ultimate truth or not. From the perspective of other-emptiness Madhyamaka, the absolute is wisdom as it is personally experienced; it is empty of the duality of perceived and perceiver and cannot be equated with a non-affirming negation, since this limits emptiness to a mere conceptual nothingness. As this presentation accords with the tantras, the view of other-emptiness is, according to Kong sprul, said to form the pinnacle of the various Madhyamaka systems and to constitute the profound view connecting the sūtras and the tantras.<sup>30</sup>

At this point it might also be helpful to have a short look at the term "established as ultimate truth." For that purpose let's again have a look at an explanation provided by Karma phrin las pa regarding the meaning of this term in the context of *gzhan stong* as taught by Bka' bgyud masters:

While the statement that "nondual wisdom is established as ultimate truth means 'established as what is ultimate truth', it does *not* assert it is 'truly established', [i.e.,] permanent, stable, and enduring." Some think that if [something] is established as ultimate truth, then it must be truly established. These [people] did not investigate [the matter]; they are just confused about the term 'truth'. It is for example just [as follows]: Even though [something is] established as conventional truth, it is not required that it is therefore truly established. Hence, the general *gzhan stong*

29 *Shes bya kun khyab mdzod*, vol. 2: 550<sub>13-15</sub>: *rjes thob grub mtha' shan 'byed pa'i skabs tha snyad kyi khas len tsam du chos nyid de bzhin nyid yod do zhes pa dang | med do zhes pa'i shes brjod kyi tha snyad 'dogs tshul dang |*

30 *Shes bya kun khyab mdzod*, vol. 2: 550<sub>15</sub>–551<sub>17</sub>: "[They also] differ in the view of — whether at the time of final analysis through reasonings that analyze the ultimate — nondual wisdom is established or not established as what is [ultimate] truth. Therefore, *gzhan stong* proponents maintain that the two the imputed and the dependent are the conventional, and the perfect nature is the ultimate truth. They also assert that viewing [the ultimate] just as a mere negation which is established as [ultimate] truth is an inanimate [way of being] empty. This is the way in which conventionalities are empty, but it is not the mode of abiding of ultimate emptiness. In short, wisdom which is devoid of the duality of apprehender and apprehended is personally experienced self-awareness. They maintain that the system that posits it in this way is in utter harmony with the intend of the great tantras and that it is therefore the pinnacle of all Madhyamaka systems, the profound view that links the two the sūtras and the tantras." *don dam dpyod byed kyi rigs pas dpyad pa mthar thug pa'i tshe na gnyis med kyi ye shes bden par grub pa dang ma grub pa'i lta ba'i khyad par yod do | des na gzhan stong smra ba rnams kyi ni | kun brtags gzhan dbang gnyis kun rdzob | yongs grub don dam bden par bzhed cing de'ang bden par ma grub pa'i med dgag tsam du lta ba ni bem stong ste kun rdzob kyi stong tshul yin gyi don dam stong pa nyid kyi gnas lugs ni ma yin par 'dod cing | de ni mdor na gzung 'dzin gnyis stong gi ye shes so so rang rig pa la 'jog lugs 'di ni rgyud sde chen po rnams kyi dgongs pa dang ches mthun pas mdo sngags gnyis mtshams shyor ba'i zab mo'i lta ba dbu ma'i lugs srol rnams kyi rtse mor son pa'ang bzhed do ||.*

proponents these days and the writings of the glorious Rang byung differ. Also the statement of my *bla ma*, the All-knowing One [i.e., the Seventh Karma pa Chos grags rgya mtsho], that self-emptiness and other-emptiness are not in contradiction, is well-taught so that this meaning can be understood. So, buddha nature that is existent as the unity of the two truths, the inseparability of appearance and emptiness, the great freedom from extremes, is to be explained in this way.<sup>31</sup>

In the same text Karma phrin las pa says:

It is said that *\*sugatagarbha*, the element of sentient beings which is beyond concepts, exists. Thus, it is the nature of mind which is unconditioned and spontaneously present. It is the *dharmakāya* which, being beyond the entire net of elaborations has an all-encompassing nature that is like the sky. This is the meaning of the expression "existent as ultimate truth," which did not, however, indicate that *\*sugatagarbha* is something truly established, permanent, stable, and enduring.<sup>32</sup>

To return to Tāranathā's above mentioned remark that *rang stong* and *gzhan stong* are contradictory; as we saw before this is not what proponents of *gzhan stong* within the Bka' bgyud school purport: Following the lead of Shākya mchog ldan who considers both the self-empty apophatic approach of Madhyamaka as well as the other-empty cataphatic approach as adequate methods of intellectually relating to the ultimate, for Kong sprul as well, self-emptiness Madhyamaka is an approach towards reality via the path of negation which is required in order to relinquish the clinging to the two types of identity, i.e., to the individual and to phenomena in general (*gang zag gi bdag; chos kyi bdag*). On the basis of this knowledge, the focus of the Madhyamaka of other-emptiness lies on seeking direct insight into the true,

31 *Zab mo nang don gyi rnam bshad snying po*, in RDSb vol. 14: 396<sub>4</sub>-397<sub>3</sub>; *rig[s] gzung rgya mtsho las | gnyis med kyi ye shes don dam pa'i bden par grub par gsungs pa yang | de don dam bden pa yin par grub ces pa'i don yin gyi | de bden grub rtag brtan ther zug tu bzhed pa ma yin no || kha cig | don dam pa'i bden par grub na bden par grub dgos so snyam pa de dag ni ma brtags pa ste | bden pa zhes pa'i ming tsam la 'khrul par zad pas so | dper na | kun rdzob pa'i bden par grub kyang bden par grub mi dgos pa bzhin no || de'i phyir | ding sang gi gzhan stong smra ba phal dang | dpal rang byung gi bzhed pa la khyad par yod pa ste | bdag gi bla ma thams cad mkhyen pa'i zhal snga nas | rang stong gzhan stong mi 'gal zhes gsung pa 'ang don 'di thugs su byon pa'i legs par bshad pa'o || de ltar na mtha bral chen po snang stong dbyer med bden gnyis zung 'jug tu yod pa'i sangs rgyas kyi snying po de'i tshul brjod par bya'o |. See also Higgins and Draszcyk 2016: 176.*

32 *Zab mo nang don gyi rnam bshad snying po*, in RDSb vol. 14: 396<sub>3,4</sub>; *kham bde gshegs snying po ni yod pas shes gsungs pa ni 'dus ma byas shing lhun gyis grub pa'i sems nyid chos kyi sku spros pa'i dra ba thams cad las 'das pa nam mkha' lta bur kun la khyab pa'i rang bzhin can de ni don dam pa'i bden par yod ces pa'i don yin gyi | bde gshegs snying po bden grub rtag brtan ther zug tu bstan pa ni ma yin no ||. See also Higgins and Draszcyk 2016: 171.*

absolute nature of mind, buddha nature, free from all mental proliferations. In this sense, self-emptiness and other-emptiness are considered to be supplementary rather than contradictory. Still, both Shākya mchog ldan and Kong sprul consider the *gzhan stong* view as going deeper in reflecting the authentic mode of being. In fact, Kong sprul recommends followers of the Yogācāra-Madhyamaka which for him, as pointed out above, is the same as *Gzhan stong* Madhyamaka, to first generate the intellectual understanding and analytical meditation in accordance with the Niḥsvabhāvavāda-Madhyamaka and to consequently deepen the meditation through the *gzhan stong* approach. Kong sprul therefore considers self-emptiness to be an essential element of other-emptiness. He points out that the Madhyamaka of negation is helpful in arriving at a proper understanding of essencelessness, however, that it involves the risk of clinging to a mere negation instead of allowing the adept to arrive at a direct experience of mind's non-dual nature and its inherent qualities. Profound instructions from a qualified teacher and precision in view and meditation by the student are essential to avoid this danger. The Yogācāra-Madhyamaka does according to Kong sprul not involve this risk in so far as its focus lies on mind's empty yet luminous quality and thereby takes a positively defined buddha nature as the substratum of practice without, however, reifying its existence.

Even though Kong sprul with respect to taking both, Niḥsvabhāvavāda-Madhyamaka and Yogācāra-Madhyamaka as possible approaches, shares much of Shākya mchog ldan's views, there is again still an essential difference to the latter's position. For Shākya mchog ldan, both the *rang stong* and the *gzhan stong* view are limited in that they are intellectually fabricated (*blos byas*). Thus holding on to these views as to reality is detrimental when wishing to cultivate direct insight into mind's true nature. Therefore, in this regard — in particular in the context of Dwags po Mahāmudrā — he even calls both of them poisoned (*dug can*). Shākya mchog ldan emphasizes that only once any conceptual constructs are overcome through the first-hand experience (*nyams su myong ba'i lugs*) based in meditation (*sgom*) the genuine unity beyond extremes can be realized.<sup>33</sup>

For Kong sprul, however, *gzhan stong* is not just the intellectual background, it rather is the access in meditation, as he explains in his *Ascertaining the View*:

When all relative proliferations have been negated by means of the Prāsaṅgika's

33 See Higgins and Draszcyk 2016, vol. 2: 83: "From among the two, the system of severing superimpositions and the system of experiencing, this tradition of the [Mahā]mudrā practitioner is the latter. Concerning the former, there are the two great traditions, the system of Self-emptiness and the system of Other-emptiness. However, the [Mahā]mudrā practitioner follows neither. The view of severing superimpositions by means of studying and thinking is taken [by him or her] to be an intellectually fabricated view and a poisonous view." *sgro 'dogs gcod lugs dang | nyams su myong lugs gnyis las | phyag rgya ba'i lugs 'di phyi ma de yin | snga ma de la rang stong pa'i lugs dang | gzhan stong pa'i lugs srol chen po gnyis yod kyang | phyag rgya ba gnyis ka'i rjes su mi 'jug | thos bsam gyis sgro 'dogs bead pa'i lta ba de blos byas kyi lta ba dang dug can gyi lta bar bzhed pa yin |*



analysis, one trains in the core point of the Madhyamaka of definitive meaning [i.e., *Gzhan stong* Madhyamaka] in order to find access in one's meditation. The substrate of purification is \**sugatagarbha*, the process of purification is the path of *vajrayoga*, the fruition of purification is the *dharmakāya*.<sup>34</sup>

He is even more explicit in this regard in one of his *Songs of [Meditative] Experience* (*nyams mgur*). There, Kong sprul sums up in a few verses how he himself applies these various perspectives in his view and practice:

All phenomena are emptiness, having never arisen,  
They come nowhere to an end, [and] are without any abode.  
[They are] unobstructed mere appearance, the actuality of dependent arising.  
The view (*lta ba*) of me, the *yogin*,<sup>35</sup> is self-emptiness.

Though inexpressible, [it] is the ground for all expression,  
The luminous nature, encompassing all, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*,  
Not to be pointed out by examining, untouched by the analytical mind.  
The meditation (*sgom pa*) of me, the *yogin*, is other-emptiness.

The unfabricated ordinary mind is momentary;  
Simultaneously realizing and liberating;<sup>36</sup>  
Whatever appears is the *dharmakāya*,

34 *Lta ba gtan la 'bebs pa*, 834<sub>2,4</sub>: *kun rdzob spros pa ji snyed pa || thal 'gyur dpyad pas bkag nas ni || bsgom pa'i tshul la 'jug pa'i phyir || nges don dbu ma'i gnad la bslab || sbyang gzhi bde gshegs snying po ste || sbyong byed rdo rje'i rnal 'byor lam || sbyang ba'i bral 'bras chos sku'o ||*.

35 *Rnal 'byor* abbreviates *rnal 'byor pa*.

36 In his *Thun min zhal gdams kyi rim pa rnams phyogs gcig tu bsdebs pa nges don bdud rtsi'i gter mdzod*, the Ninth Si tu pad ma nyin byed dbang po (1774–1853) for example says in SPsb vol. 1: 448<sub>2</sub>: "The simultaneity of realization and liberation is the ultimate realization." *rtogs grol dus mnyam rtogs pa mthar thug bzhed* | See also a statement by Zhang tshal pa (1123–1193) in his expositions on Mahāmudrā: "In the moment of realizing [the true nature] of your own mind, all "white" (i.e., excellent, virtuous) qualities without exception are effortlessly completed simultaneously." *rang sems rtogs pa'i skad cig mar || dkar po'i yon tan ma lus pa || bsgrub pa med par dus gcig rdzogs ||* (tr.) by Jackson 1994: 155.

Non-distraction,<sup>37</sup> non-meditation,<sup>38</sup> the course of the natural flow.

The integration of experiences (*nyams len*) of me, the *yogin*, is Mahāmudrā.<sup>39</sup>

A further point in his *Immaculate Vajra Moonrays* is that Kong sprul shows that other-emptiness is part of both the sūtras, i.e., the general Mahāyāna, as well as the tantras. For both levels he first stresses what should be understood prior to the meditative training. In the context of the general Mahāyāna he first emphasizes the worldly (*'jig rten pa; laukika*) path based on ethics and calm abiding (*zhi gnas; samatha*) as a foundation for the other-worldly (*'jig rten las 'das pa; lokottara*) path which is associated with deep insight (*lhag mthong; vipaśyanā*). With respect to the other-worldly path in the context of the sūtras, he stresses that only the Yogācāra-Mādhyamikas and the Niḥsvabhāvavāda-Mādhyamikas who have purified their mind through a special way of listening, reflecting and meditating will be able to arrive at the nondual wisdom by means of which the attainment of Buddhahood is possible. He first gives some guidance for analytical meditation (*dpyod sgom*), followed by instructions on nonconceptual abiding meditation (*'jog sgom*).

Having in accordance with the instruction texts [for meditation] searched for the mind, there arises certainty that its nature has always been free from proliferations. [Due to this certainty that] other than just realizing [this] actuality of freedom from proliferations there is nothing else to meditate on, [you] cultivate constant mindfulness of it.<sup>40</sup>

37 In the so-called *Rdo rje 'chang thung ma*, 6<sub>12-13</sub>, composed by Kun mkhyen 'Jam dpal bzang po (15./16. cen.), lineage holder of the Mahāmudrā tradition of the Karma bka' bgyud pa school between the Sixth and the Seventh Karma pa, it is said: "Non-distraction is said to be the actual mediation. A great meditator settles without fabrications right on the natural essence of any concept that arises. Please give me your blessing so that what is to be meditated on is free from intellectualization." *yengs med sgom gyi dngos gzhir gsungs pa bzhin || gang shar rtogs pa'i ngo bo so ma de || ma bcos de kar 'jog pa'i sgom chen la || bsgom bya blo dang bral bar byin gyis rlobs ||*.

38 As for the connection between nonmeditation and the *dharmakāya*, Dwags po Bkra shis rnam rgyal (1513–1587) says in his *Phyag chen zla ba'i 'od zer*, 491<sub>11</sub>: "nonmeditation is the actual *dharmakāya*." *sgom med chos sku dngos yin |*.

39 *Nyams mgur*, 40<sub>2-6</sub>: *chos kun gdod nas ma skyes stong pa nyid || gar yang mi 'gag cir yang gnas pa med || snang tsam ma 'gags rten cing 'brel 'byung tshul || rnal 'byor nga yi la ba rang stong yin || brjod du med kyang brjod pa kun gyi gzhi || 'od gsal rang bzhin 'khor 'das kun la khyab || brtag pas mi mtshon dpyad pa'i blos mi reg || rnal 'byor nga yi sgom pa g-zhan stong yin || ... ma bcos tha mal shes pa skad cig ma || rtogs grol dus mnyam gang shar chos kyi sku || yengs med sgom med rang bab gnyug ma'i 'gros || rnal 'byor nga yi nyams len phyag chen yin ||*.

40 *G-zhan stong la khrid*, 745<sub>4-5</sub>: *de nas khrid g-zhung rnam las 'byung ba ltar sems tshol byas rang bzhin gdod nas spros pa dang bral ba la thag chod skye zhing | gnas lugs spros bral de la ngo shes gcig bu ma gtogs logs su bsgom rgyu med pas 'bral med kyi dran pa bsten |*.

On the basis of the view of Yogācāra-Madhyamaka which as we saw earlier at best is grounded in the view of Niḥsvabhāvavāda-Madhyamaka, Kong sprul continues to guide the adept by employing a series of terms common to the terminology of the Mahāmudrā of the Dwags po bka' brgyud pa tradition in order to define this abiding meditation (*'jog sgom*) which unites the practices of *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*:

This has been taught as being unfabricated, as freshness, as the innate in whatever arises. Therefore, [remain] unfabricated in the clarity and emptiness of [your] own mind, without grasping, in precisely that which appears, whether it is abiding or movement, joy or suffering. Not being fettered by the search for what is to be relinquished and an antidote, [you] place [your]self in no-training, in a state of awareness which is without support. Thereby perfect calm abiding (*śamatha*) and deep insight (*vipaśyanā*) according to the Mahāyāna will arise.<sup>41</sup>

It is upon this ground that the adept is finally instructed to differentiate that, which is unreal, i.e., adventitious obscurations, from absolute truth, i.e., buddha nature so that a process can unfold by means of which buddha nature with its qualities is eventually actualized. Kong sprul hints at this development in the sense of an unfolding of innate qualities, already in the preparatory part in his *Immaculate Vajra Moonrays* where he compares buddha nature with the well-known image of a jewel hidden in sediment which is to be cleansed:

\**Sugatagarbha* is like a wish-fulfilling jewel that is to be purified from coarse, fine and extremely subtle impurities.<sup>42</sup>

The precondition for this process is stability in *śamatha* and a clear focus in *vipaśyanā*. From Kong sprul's point of view, an experience or realization which is free from proliferations should simultaneously be the experience of mind's luminosity, not in the sense of a subject-object dichotomy, but in the sense of a nondual self-aware and self-luminous wisdom. He also emphasizes:

... that without being taken in by the mistake of incompatibility one comprehends mind's nature despite it being labeled by a variety of terms such as "emptiness

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41 *Gzhan stong lta khrid*, 745<sub>3,6</sub>: *de'ang ma bcos so ma dang | gang shar gnyug mar gsungs pas rang sems gsal stong 'dzin med de nyid gnas 'gyu dga' sdug ci ltar shar ba de ka ma bcos par skyong ba las spang bya dang gnyen po'i rtsol bas mi 'chings par rten med rig pa sgom med du 'jog pas theg chen zhi lhag mthar phyin pa 'byung |.*

42 *Gzhan stong lta khrid*, 742<sub>3</sub>-743<sub>1</sub>: *bde gshegs snying po yid bzhin gyi nor bu lta bu'i dri ma rags pa dang phra ba dang shin tu phra ba rnam sbyong ba ...*

endowed with the most excellence of all aspects" (*sarvākāravopetāsūnyatā*), "natural luminosity", "*tathāgatagarbha*", "emptiness", "*mahāmudrā*", "*ahaṃ*" and so forth. Thereby one is free from the mistake about which it was said: "All of the Buddha's teachings elucidate emptiness and essencelessness. Simple-minded people [however], who do not understand the meaning of emptiness and essencelessness, fail."<sup>43</sup>

As indicated earlier already, Kong sprul warns that a *yogin* who, in the framework of the Madhyamaka of essencelessness, focusses in his meditation on the process of reasoning and analysis mistakes his experiences that phenomena are empty — i.e., his nonaffirming negation — for the actual true nature of phenomena, for *dharmatā*. He calls this the loss of the path of emptiness. Likewise the adept might mistake his registering of the transitoriness of mental impulses for *mahāmudrā*. This he calls the loss of the state of emptiness which consists in stable experiences.<sup>44</sup> He therefore admonishes the *yogin* to be very precise in his understanding and approach.

Thus, employing the third cycle of the Buddha's teachings or in other words the *gzhan stong* view means to counteract these possible mistakes and to make luminosity, i.e., buddha nature, the actual substrate for meditative training.

The ground for such specific features is *\*sugatagarbha*. The specific features, such as being endowed with the various buddha qualities of freedom are now, [in the impure state], self-aware wisdom, a clear, unimpeded and natural innateness, which is experienced by way of studying, reflecting, and meditating. Precisely this is abiding in the ground of purification. When the adventitious defilements that are to be purified are removed, the result of purification, the mode of abiding that is present within, becomes manifest. This is called the "*dharmakāya* free from defilements." Even though it appears with all the aspects of the entire *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, this mere

43 *Gzhan stong lta khrid*, 746<sub>3,5</sub>: *sems kyi ngo bo rnam kun mchog ldan gyi stong pa nyid rang bzhin gyi 'od gsal ba de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po de bzhin nyid dang stong pa nyid dang phyag rgya chen mo dang a ham la sogs mtshan gyi rnam grangs du mas bstan yang 'gal 'dus skyon gyis ma reg par khong du chud nas | ji skad du | sangs rgyas kyi gsung thams cad las ni stong pa nyid dang bdag med pa ston to | stong pa nyid dang bdag med pa'i don mi shes pa'i mi blun po rnam ni nyams par 'gyur ro | zhes pa. See for the quote also the *Mahābherīkaparivartasūtra*, MPv, 108a.*

44 *Gzhan stong lta khrid*, 740<sub>6</sub>-741<sub>5</sub>: "Some pride themselves on [their] experiences of emptiness [as they arise through] examining and analyzing, [taking them] to be *dharmatā*. [This is] the loss of the path [of emptiness]. Some mistake the registering of the arising and ceasing [of thoughts] for *mahāmudrā* without letting them unravel in their own nature beyond the intellect. [This is] the loss of the state [of emptiness] which consists in stable experiences." *rtog dpyod kyi stong nyams la chos nyid du rloms pa kha cig | ... lam shor dang | kha cig rang gi ngo bo blo 'das su ma grol bar skye 'gag grangs su 'debs pa la phyag rgya chen por 'khrul te myong ba britan pa'i gshis shor ba ... |*

appearance does not deviate from the ground, just as in a stainless crystal ball various reflections appear, however, in this mere appearance, the crystal and the reflections do not mingle together. Likewise, whichever appearances of the three, *saṃsāra*, *nirvāṇa* and the path may arise, in self-aware direct clarity and emptiness, in the self-manifest, self-liberated essence there is never any contamination. Therefore, there are not the slightest tendencies of views and deficiency to remove, nor is it necessary to newly add any specific feature, which was not there before. Thus having made the wisdom of the noble ones the actual substrate of the meditative concentration of emptiness, meditation is cultivated in sessions as appropriate.<sup>45</sup>

With this understanding, buddha nature is the substrate of the meditative training which ultimately consists in letting whatever appears to the mind liberate itself (*gang shar rang grol*) and to abide directly in the self-aware and self-luminous nonconceptual nature of mind. Kong sprul quotes verse I.154 from the *Ratnagotravibhāga* in this sense and thereby attunes *Gzhan stong* Madhyamaka with Dwags po Mahāmudrā:

There is nothing to be removed from it  
 And nothing to be added.  
 The real should be seen as real,  
 And seeing the real, you become liberated.<sup>46</sup>

As pointed out earlier, Kong sprul in his *Immaculate Vajra Moonrays* also goes into *gzhan stong* in the framework of the Buddhist tantras. He first gives some general instructions from the perspective of the Yoganiruttaratanttras (*rnal 'byor bla na med pa'i rgyud*) which, according to the *gsar ma* tradition, are considered the highest of the four classes of tantra (*rgyud sde bzhi*). He defines buddha nature in this context as follows:

45 *Gzhan stong lta khrid*, 751<sub>1-5</sub>: *de lta bu'i khyad gzhi bde gshegs snying po | khyad chos sangs rgyas kyi bral ba'i yon tan du ma dang bcas pa da ltar rang rig pa'i ye shes gsal la ma 'gag pa gnyug ma lhan cig skyes pa thos bsam bsgom gsum gyis nyams su myong ba 'di nyid sbyang gzhir bzhugs pa la | sbyang bya glo bur ba'i dri ma dag nas | sbyangs 'bras rang la bzhugs pa'i gnas lugs de nyid mngon tu gyur pa ni dri bral chos sku zhes btags te | 'khor 'das kun gyi rnam pa thams cad par 'char yang shar tsam nyid nas zhi las ma g.yogs pa dri ma med pa'i shel gong la gzugs brnyan gyi rnam pa sna tshogs su snang yang | snang tsam nyid nas shel dang gzugs brnyan ma 'dres pa ltar | rang rig gsal stong rjen par bud pa la 'khor 'das lam gsum gyis snang ba ci ltar shar rang grol ngo bo la nam yang gos pa med pas lta ba dang nyes pa'i bag chags bsal bar bya ba ci'ang med cing | sngar med kyi khyad chos gsar du ci'ang bsnan ma dgos par phags pa'i ye shes stong pa nyid la mnyam bzhag gi dngos gzhir byas nas thun ci rigs su bsgom ||.*

46 RGV, I.154: *nāpaneyam atah kiṃcid upaneyam na kiṃcana | draṣṭavyam bhūtato bhūtaṃ bhūtadarśi vimucyate ||* (tr.) Mathes 2008: 8.

All this is the supreme unchangeable wisdom, suchness, the self-illumination, self-radiance of \**sugatagarbha*, the *dharmakāya* as such that appears as all of these aspects [of the *maṇḍala*]. [This] absolute *dharmadhātu*, the unity of bliss and emptiness, being unchanging as to its nature has an uninterrupted continuum. Therefore, this is said to be the meaning of "tantra" [i.e., continuum]. Moreover, [\**sugatagarbha* in the sense of] the defiled suchness in the phase of the ground is called the "causal continuum." [In the sense of] the gradual appearance of the actuality of *dharmatā* during the path, it is called the "continuum of skillful means" on the spiritual levels and paths. And in the sense of perfect purity, when the two types of purity have become manifest, it is called the "fruition continuum."<sup>47</sup>

The main practice is presented in the context of the completion phase (*rdzogs rim; niṣpannakrama*) of the Kālacakra tantra (*dus kyi 'khor lo'i rgyud*), i.e., the six-fold *yoga* (*yan lag drug pa'i rnal 'byor; ṣaḍaṅgayoga*). An analysis of the *gzhan stong* practice in this tantric system is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that Kong sprul emphasizes the efficiency of this way of *gzhan stong* practice as follows:

The path described above of the independent sūtra tradition takes a long time. If, however, the meditative concentration of the sixfold *vajrayoga* is applied, which is the most supreme of all tantra paths characterized by empowerment and *samaya*, realization comes easily, in short time and with little effort.<sup>48</sup>

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### Abbreviations

CYsb Chos grags ye shes (the Fourth Zhwa dmar pa), *Thams cad mkhyen pa zhwa dmar bzhi pa spyan snga chos kyi grags pa'i gsung 'bum bzhugs so*. 6 vols. Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2009.

D Derge edition of Bstan 'gyur. *The Tibetan Tripiṭaka*, Taipei Edition. Taipei, Taiwan:

47 *Gzhan stong lta khrid*, 757<sub>1,3</sub>: *de kho na nyid bde gshegs snying po'i rang 'od rang mdangs chos kyi sku nyid rnam pa thams cad par shar ba mchog tu mi 'gyur ba'i ye shes | don dam chos kyi dbyings bde stong zung 'jug rang bzhin 'gyur ba med la rgyun mi chad pas rgyud kyi don tu gsungs shing | de'ang gzhi'i gnas skabs dri bcas de bzhin nyid la rgyu'i rgyud dang | lam dus chos nyid kyi don rim par snang bas lam thabs kyi rgyud dang | dag pa dnyis ldan mngon tu 'gyur ba na shin tu rnam dag 'bras bu'i rgyud ces bya ste |.*

48 *Gzhan stong lta khrid*, 757<sub>4,6</sub>: *gong smos mdo lugs rang rkang gi lam des kyang yun ring por 'gor ba yin pas | dbang dang dam tshig gis khyad par du byas ba'i sngags kyi lam mtha' dag las khyad par du 'phags pa rdo rje'i rnal 'byor yan lag drug la mnyam par bzhag pa na dus thung ngur tsheg chung dus bde blag tu rtogs par 'gyur pa yin no ||.*

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- KD 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas. (the First Kong sprul). *'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas kyi gsung 'bum rgya chen bka' mdzod. The expanded edition of the writings of 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas.* 13 vols. Reproduced from the dPal spungs xylographs from Eastern Tibet. Delhi, Kathmandu: Shechen Publication, 2002.
- KPsb Karma phrin las pa Phyogs las rnam rgyal (the First Karma phrin las pa), *Chos rjes karma phrin las pa'i gsung 'bum las rdo rje mgur kyi 'phreng ba rnams. Chos rjes karma phrin las pa'i gsung 'bum las rdo rje mgur kyi 'phreng ba rnams.* In *The Songs of Esoteric Practice (Mgur) and Replies to Doctrinal Questions (Dris-lan) of Karma-phrin-las-pa.* New Delhi: Ngawang Topgay (Reproduced from Prints of the 1539 Rinchen-ri-bo Blocks, 1975).
- MPv *Mahābherīkaparivartasūtra*, D222.
- MSA *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*. Maitreya (ascribed). Ed. S. Bagchi. Buddhist Sanskrit Texts 13. Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute, 1970.
- RDSb Rang byung rdo rje (the Third Karma pa). *Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje gsung 'bum.* 16 vols. Ziling: mTshur phu mkhan po lo yag bkra shis, 2006.
- RGV *Ratnagotravibhāga Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra*. Maitreya (ascribed). Ed. Edward H. Johnston. Patna: Bihar Research Society, 1950. (Includes the *Ratnagotravibhāga-vyākhyā*).
- SCsb: *Shākya mchog ldan gsung 'bum.* 24 vols. Full title: *Paṇ chen Shākya mchog ldan gyi gsung 'bum legs bshad gser gyi bdud rtsi.* Editions:  
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