

# SCRIPTURE, LOGIC, LANGUAGE

Essays on Dharmakīrti and His Tibetan Successors

by

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Tibetan historians (Taranatha and Buton) have it that the earth trembled, a noise resonated and light radiated all over the place when Dignāga started to write the first verse of his *Pramāṇasamuccaya*. The legendary accounts say that a certain Brahmin noticed the signs and read them as omens of an imminent threat to Brahminism. He then sneaked into Dignāga's cave, while the latter was out on his alms-round, and erased what he had written. Dignāga wrote his composition out again and again the Brahmin erased it, until Dignāga attached a note asking the culprit to stop erasing his work if it is meant to be a joke or to show himself for a debate if he meant serious business. Thus ensued a debate between the two, each "betting on his faith" – pledging to abandon his own faith and embrace that of the other upon defeat.

In the debate, the Brahmin is defeated but he refuses to admit defeat and escapes after creating a miraculous fire that destroys all Dignāga's belongings. Engulfed in fire and helpless, Dignāga despairs and is about to forsake his noble intention to serve the world (through writing his book) when Manjuśrī appears to him and encourages him to be brave and to endure such trials. Manjuśrī prophesies that his text will become the "sole eye" of future Buddhist scholarship.

Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccaya* has since then become the *locus classicus* of Buddhist studies in the field of logic and epistemology. It gained greater significance with the writing of several commentaries on it, especially *Pramāṇavārttika*, by his chief follower

Dharmakīrti, who to an extent even superceded Dignāga himself in this field. Their writings not only were the major Buddhist contributions in the discipline of logico-epistemology (*pramāṇa, tshadma*), one of the five major traditional sciences, but gave rise to a philosophical school of combined Sautrāntika and Vijñānavādin thought, which as Tillemans says (p.1) remained nameless. Since the beginning of the last century, when Dignāga and Dharmakīrti were for the first time studied by non-traditional academics, several works have been written in the West and far East. The present collection of essays by Tom Tillemans is surely the best work after George Dreyfus's *Recognizing Reality*.

Tillemans' articles deal with a wide range of topics. Although such aspects as Dharmakīrti's ontological, epistemological and soteriological theories and approaches, very crucial in understanding him, are not covered by the present collection, the articles do deal in depth and detail with all the topics that are discussed. In the first part, on scriptural inference, Tillemans has three essays: the first one juxtaposes Dharmakīrti's use of scripture as inferential reason with that of Āryadeva (and his commentator Dharmapāla) asking to what degree, if any, the latter might have influenced the former. The second paper, "How much of a Proof is Scripturally Based Inference" studies scripture based inference by discussing the infallibility of the three-fold analysis (*dpyad pa gsum*), the Tibetan acceptance of scripture based inference as "inference-like-any-other", and Dharmakīrti's pragmatism in accepting scripture based inference.

In spite of being known as rational thinkers, Tibetan scholars have always indulged in the use of scriptural quotation in their debates, whether it be inter-traditional or within one's own school. Yet, the dGe lugs pa *rtags-rigs* do not provide us with a syllogism (I am using this word arbitrarily for *rtags-byor* or *liṅgaprayoga*, although our author does not agree to the use of this word in this sense) where scriptural quotation is used as the reason, even in the case of reason based on authority (*yid ches kyi rtags*), which scholars, including Tillemans,

take as scripture based inference. The standard dGe lugs pa example of reason based on authority goes:

The *Aṣṭāsāhasrikā* teaching, the topic, is non-belying with regard to its content because it is a scripture verified through the three-fold analysis.

This is what Tsongkhapa is speaking about in the quotation discussed by the author (p.37-8).

Thus for Tsongkhapa, and for other dGe lugs pa, the reason based on authority does not have to have a scriptural quotation used as the reason (*liṅga, rtags*). The syllogism is distinguished as reason based on authority by what is to be proven (*sādhya, bsgrub bya*), which must be a radically inaccessible thing (*atyantaparokṣa, shin tu lkog gyur*), and not by the reason. For the dGe lugs pa, the above syllogism is thus like any other inferential syllogism except for its radically inaccessible inferendum, and the three characteristics could be shown objectively (*vastubalena, dngos stobs kyis*). It does not involve having a scriptural quotation as a reason to prove something; it is a syllogism assessing the validity of the scripture itself. Thus rendering the reason based on authority of the dGe lugs pa, particularly Tsongkhapa, as scriptural inference (p. 39-40) is rather misleading. How and where the hundreds of scriptural reasons the dGe lugs pa use in their works, some of which do not even have a radically inaccessible inferendum, would fit in their syllogistic taxonomy is a question for the dGe lugs pa to answer. The third paper studies the definition of thesis among pre-Dharmakīrti commentators on Dignāga, although only one person, namely Īśvarasena, is known to us. This paper would actually fit better in the following part on logic.

The section on logic covers some subtle topics of Tibetan dialectics. The first part deals with the statement of the thesis in a syllogistic argument and the author argues that Dignāga and Dharmakīrti had different viewpoints. Then, he goes on to argue against van Bijlert and others who take the Dharmakīrtian *parārthānumāna* and the Aristotelian

syllogism to be similar. The author does not however mention here the statement of the thesis in almost every argument put forth by the Tibetan followers of Dharmakīrti, although Dharmakīrti himself regarded thesis statement in a syllogistic argument as useless and redundant in articulating an argument.

The author does talk about Tibetan debate techniques and logic format in “Formal and Semantic Aspects” and credits its origin to Phya pa. Scholars like George Dreyfus and the present author have correctly pointed out that many dialectical formats, formulae, and even certain ontological assertions of the dGe lugs pa tradition, although attributed to Dharmakīrti, are originally Tibetan, introduced by thinkers like Phya pa. Yet, through their love of ascribing the origin of religious matters to the Indian precursors whose authority is often easily accepted, Tibetans have seldom accorded some of their own thinkers the respect and adoration that they deserved for innovations which form unique and fundamental components of their educational and philosophical heritage. In this respect, Phya pa, for one, is a hero neglected by his followers while his sophistry and debate format thrive in the large monasteries of Tibet in the guise of a Dharmakīrtian system.

In many of the articles, the author brings in the two major traditions of Dharmakīrti’s thought in Tibet and discusses the differences between them. These differences and the refutation and counter-refutation form the main themes of the articles entitled “On *Sapakṣa*”, “*Adṛśyānupalabdhihetu*”, and “On the So-Called Difficult Point of the *Apoha* Theory”. In the last part on philosophy of language, two articles study the understanding of Dharmakīrti’s concept of *apoha* among the dGe lugs pa and the ontological problems they face. The final paper, co-authored by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. and entitled “What Can One Reasonably Say about Nonexistence?”, is about the problem of the non-existent topic in a valid syllogism, presented from a dGe lugs pa perspective. A good translation of an excerpt from *A lag sha*

Ngag dbang bsTan dar's *gCig du bral gyi rnam bzhag* along with the transliteration of the Tibetan text is also given.

The book, covering some of the most subtle and sophisticated issues of Tibetan logic, bears the marks of high intellectual acumen and profound insight into the traditions discussed.

While on the whole this is research work meticulously undertaken to unravel the original thoughts of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti and the later interpretations and stances held by their Tibetan successors, the author also presents some of his own judgements and conclusions, which are thought provoking. The author's knowledge of Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese (the three source languages), and major European languages, coupled with his training in Western philosophy makes this an all the more rare contribution to this field. It is therefore a masterpiece that specialists in Dharmakīrtian and Tibetan epistemological studies must read and can learn from. All the articles are followed by very informative endnotes, and a handy word index and bibliography are provided. However, beginners in the field, let alone general readers who are hardly at all familiar with the field, may find it hard to understand, or even read. It is also worth mentioning that the book is very nicely produced. All in all, this is one of the very few valuable contributions in the study of Dharmakīrti and Tibetan logic and epistemology that we can gladly take with us into the new millennium.