

***Śamatha* and its Relation to the Mundane and Supra-mundane Paths According to Geluk Traditions of Tibetan Buddhism**

James Blumenthal
Oregon State University and Maitripa College

The achievement of *śamatha*, a state of meditative-stabilization marked by single-pointed concentration and mental and physical dexterity signifies a critical juncture in the Buddhist paths according to Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) and his followers from the Geluk (*dGe lugs*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.¹ Their path-system literature indicates that the achievement of *śamatha* signifies the beginning point of the first *dhyāna* or meditative absorption (Tib. *bsam gtan*, Pāli. *jhāna*) of the form realm (Skt. *rūpadhātu*, Tib. *gzugs kyi khams*, Pāli *rūpaloka*). The achievement of such a state, while not unique to Buddhism, opens new potential avenues of practice for Buddhists including those that lead to liberation. Tsongkhapa argues that such a path – one leading to liberation - is not possible before the achievement of *śamatha*. In this short paper I will briefly describe three potential avenues of practice a Buddhist might take upon the achievement of *śamatha* according to Tsongkhapa. In the process this paper will examine some of the psychological, philosophical, and soteriological issues at stake according to Tsongkhapa and his followers, thus drawing out aspects of the relationship between theory and practice in his system. The three potential avenues of practice are described as the mundane path, which is not entirely unique to Buddhists, and two types of supermundane paths; gradual and simultaneous, both of which are said to be unique to Buddhists and lead to liberation.

This paper primarily draws from the “*Śamatha*” (*Zhi gnas*) chapter of Tsongkhapa’s monumental work, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (*Byang chub lam rim chen mo*, hereafter, *The Great Treatise*) and aims to present and discuss these topics as represented in that text specifically, though at points I will draw from the larger body of Geluk commentarial literature.² Tsongkhapa’s work draws heavily on both *sūtra* and *śāstra* literature from his Indian predecessors including frequent citations from figures such as Śāntideva, Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, Kamalaśīla, and Ratnākaraśānti among others.

According to Tsongkhapa one is only able to successfully engage in either the mundane or supermundane approaches to the path described in his treatise after the achievement of *śamatha*. It is only on the basis of a concentrated, single-pointed mind-state that one can maintain the sort of focus and mental dexterity required to progress further along the path. Although the achievement of *śamatha* alone is not said to be an exclusively Buddhist achievement, according to Tsongkhapa one can only fully successfully engage in *vipāsanā* and hope to achieve a direct realization of selflessness

¹ While one would be well-advised to not presume univocality within the Geluk tradition on matters of doctrine or the interpretation of Tsongkhapa’s ideas, there is general agreement across the Geluk tradition found on the topics at hand in this paper. The most famous contemporary figure from the Geluk tradition is His Holiness the Dalai Lama XIV.

² See fn. 1.

(*anatman*, *bdag med pa*) or emptiness (*śūnyatā*, *stong pa nyid*), the basis upon which liberation is possible, by having first cultivated *śamatha*. One can realize selflessness conceptually before cultivating *śamatha*, but cannot cultivate a direct realization without a stable mind.³

The three potential paths upon which a Buddhist may choose to embark upon achieving *śamatha* are framed in the context of Buddhist psychological/cosmological descriptions of the three realms: the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm, the later two of which are each divided into four successive levels of meditative absorptions. I will begin by giving some theoretical background to help contextualize Tsongkhapa's way of presenting the three meditative options for a yogi on achievement of *śamatha*. Tsongkhapa describes each of the four levels of the form realm and four levels of the formless realm as divided into preparatory and actual levels. At the first achievement of *śamatha*, the yogi is said to have achieved the preparatory level of the first *dhyāna* of the form realm. The yogi who achieves this state has choices to make regarding the type of practice of the path s/he intends to pursue going forward. Drawing from fundamental path system descriptions of the mind such as found in *Abhisamalāṃkāra* and its commentaries⁴ and Kamalaśīla's *Bhāvanākramas*, Tsongkhapa explains that there are nine different levels of mental dispositions. There is one in the desire realm, four in the form realm, and four in the formless realm. The desire realm is further divided into nine meditative stages, often referred to as the nine stages of training culminating in *śamatha*, but we will have to leave the details of the nine stages for another time.⁵

Having progressed through the nine stages, when *śamatha* is then first achieved, that is said to mark the beginning point of the first meditative stabilization⁶ of the form realm. According to Tsongkhapa even in this desire realm life, our mental state can be that of the first *dhyāna* of the form realm once *śamatha* is achieved. In other words, though we may still physically be in this human body, once we have achieved actual *śamatha*, our mental state is that of a higher level such as the first meditative stabilization of the form realm. Thus our mind or mental state is then part of, or associated with the upper realm.

In distinguishing between the mental states of the preparatory and actual levels of the form and formless realms, Tsongkhapa does not intend to imply that the “preparatory meditative stabilization” is not a part of the first *dhyāna*. Once one has achieved *śamatha*, that mind is a mind of the first *dhyāna* by definition. But it differs from the

³ If *śamatha* is held by the thought of renunciation, that primary motivation which is striving for complete liberation from *samsāra* including all its fleeting pleasures - from the depths of the so-called hell realms to the peak of cyclic existence – it is said to be a Buddhist path. Renunciation is cultivated by proper understanding of the faults of *samsāra*, all of which are based on the self-centered, egotistic view. Thus wisdom realizing selfless or emptiness will ultimately be necessary for liberation. When a person has renunciation, if they use *śamatha* it becomes the real path, one of the five paths (paths of accumulation, preparation, seeing, mediation, and no more learning) of the Buddhist path system. If the mind holds the thought of *bodhicitta*, the altruistic, compassionate mind that wants to obtain Buddhahood for the purpose of being maximally beneficial and effective in assisting others on the path to liberation, then it becomes a Mahāyāna path.

⁴ The most commonly cited of the twenty-one Indian commentaries on the *Abhisamalāṃkāra* by Tsongkhapa and his followers are those by Haribhadra: *Sphuṭārthā* and *Abhisamayālamkāraloka*.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the nine stages of *śamatha* training see Sopa, Geshe Lhundup and James Blumenthal. *Steps on the Path to Enlightenment: A Commentary on the “Śamatha” chapter of Lamrim Chenmo: Vol. 4*. Boston: Wisdom Publications (at press).

⁶ *dhyāna*, *jhāna*, *bsam gtan*

actual in that after attaining the actual mental state which is also part of the first meditative stabilization, then you can use that to start to remove afflictions⁷ like desire, hatred, jealousy, pride, and so forth from the root.

The first of the three approaches described by Tsongkhapa in the “*Śāmatha*” chapter of *The Great Treatise* is what he refers to as the mundane path (*jig rten pa'i lam*). The type of preparatory practice meditation that is utilized for this purpose on the first *dhyāna* is called a “mundane” path because it merely temporarily subdues the afflictions that belong to the desire realm, but this practice does not culminate in the lasting peace of liberation from *samsāra*. Thus while first preparatory practices of the first *dhyāna* are very effective for temporarily subduing these afflictions, they are unable to remove the afflictions from the root or seed (*bīja, sa bon*) because that requires a realization of emptiness. The seeds of the afflictions still remain during the preparatory stage. From the achievement of *śamatha*, until that point where all nine desire realm afflictions are removed, it is called the preparatory level of the first *dhyāna*.

The mundane path is a path that utilizes a form of meditation that compares the relative ease and peace of the first *dhyāna* with the gross, negative qualities of the desire realm. The rough afflictions of the desire realm can be subdued on the first *dhyāna* temporarily by use of this type of comparison meditation even without very deep realizations such as the realization of emptiness, the lack of an inherent enduring nature (*svabhāva, rang bzhin*) in phenomena. The faults of the desire realm are said to include misery, suffering, short lifespans, ugliness, impurity and an undesirable environment. The first *dhyāna*, while not perfect is immensely better than the desire realm. Qualities of the first meditative stabilization include: long life, a more subtle body, freedom from physical misery, purity, relative peacefulness, and so forth. The afflictions in the desire realm like desire and hatred are explained to be much rougher and cause more profound suffering than the afflictions of the upper realms.

When contemplating the differences in meditation, the attachment to desire realm will slowly lessen due to understanding the comparative superiority of the first *dhyāna*. Slowly the nine types of afflictions of the desire realm like hatred, jealousy, attachment to wealth, and so forth are lessened in this preparatory level. Finally by way of this comparison meditation, the *yogi* will subdue all these desire realm afflictions. They are thoroughly suppressed, though only temporarily since they have not yet been removed from the root. Once the desire realm afflictions are subdued in this way through comparison meditation, the *yogi* proceeds to do a similar comparison meditation by comparing the relative peace of the second *dhyāna* compared with the first. They can then temporarily subdue the afflictions of the first *dhyāna* in that way. This comparison method can be utilized all the way up to the highest level of the formless realm. However, since this method merely compares one part of *samsāra* with another and because there is nothing more pleasant in *samsāra* to use for comparison purposes once one is at the fourth and highest formless level, there is no way to subdue those afflictions. For this reason, and because it does not remove these afflictions from the root, thus leaving the *yogi* incapable of being liberated from *samsāra* by relying only on this

⁷ *kleśa, nyon mongs*. This term is frequently translated as “afflictive emotions”, “delusions”, “disturbing emotions”, “deluded afflictions”, “dysfunctional tendency” and so forth. It refers to the disturbing emotional states that are grounded on a fundamental ignorance that grasps at the self as enduring and is likewise mistaken about all phenomena and the nature of reality.

method, it is called a mundane path. The afflictions can only be removed from the root on the basis of applying a stabilized mind with a direct realization of emptiness according to Tsongkhapa. When a *yogi* removes the nine desire realm afflictions from the root through the realization of emptiness, then this is called the “actual first meditative stabilization”. The same would be true for the other progressive levels. The mundane path only leads to preparatory levels all the way through the form and formless realms according to Tsongkhapa.

The two supermundane methods approach the path in an entirely different manner according to Tsongkhapa. The supermundane path does not merely subdue afflictions by comparing them with something better in *samsāra*, but removes them from the root by turning to emptiness as the object of meditation. One is described as a noble being or *ārya* when they have cultivated a direct realization of the four noble truths, emptiness, and so forth. According to Tsongkhapa this realization is first achieved on the preparatory stage of the first *dhyāna* of the form realm. The preparatory stage of the first *dhyāna* is said to have two divisions: contaminated and uncontaminated. All the preparatory stages for the subsequent levels of the upper realms are only contaminated. The reason is that the first preparatory meditative concentration has an *ārya* path which is a supermundane path, in addition to the corollary mundane path. They are distinguished based on the objects of meditation. If the object is selflessness or emptiness, it is supermundane. If it is another sort of object, then it is mundane. The rest of the preparatory meditative concentrations have only mundane paths because those who take the supermundane route on the first preparatory level proceed directly to the actual states of each of the subsequent form and formless levels, bypassing preparatory stages from that point onwards. They are able to do this because actual states are achieved on the basis of removing afflictions from the root which they can do by way of meditation on emptiness, but followers of the mundane path cannot accomplish by means of mere comparison meditation. In other words when one attains the actual first meditative concentration of the form realm, one uses that instead of second or third preparatory stages for progression upward. Non-*āryas* can utilize these preparatory stages, but once one is on the *ārya* path and has achieved the actual first *dhyāna*, there is no reason for such *āryas* to utilize the preparatory stages at the levels of the higher meditative stabilizations any longer since those only temporarily subdue the corresponding afflictions. On the supermundane path, one just proceeds from the actual first *dhyāna* of the form realm to the actual second concentration of the form realm, as so forth. It is only on the first *dhyāna* that the preparatory level can be utilized to transition from the mundane to supermundane level. This is why the preparatory level of the first *dhyāna* has an uncontaminated aspect to it. When that achieved level of concentration is utilized to cultivate a direct realization of selflessness or emptiness, then it is uncontaminated and part of a supermundane path. The realization of emptiness does not change at higher levels. There is no further wisdom. The object of that meditation on emptiness changes, but the realization does not.

As mentioned above, there are two approaches to the supermundane path that can be utilized on the basis of meditation on emptiness which uproots the afflictions: the gradual approach and the simultaneous approach. According to Tsongkhapa practitioners taking a non-Mahāyāna path who achieve the state of an *ārya* by direct realization of the four noble truths, and so forth, and then meditate on selflessness, gradually remove the

afflictions belonging to the desire realm. When all nine are removed, then when s/he dies, s/he does not need to be reborn in the desire realm again. If one achieves this while still in a desire realm body, one cannot change the body immediately because that body is the fruit of past karma. You cannot control the fruits that have already become manifest. But they will not be compelled to take desire realm rebirth again at death because they are no longer under the power of desire realm afflictions. They then proceed through each of the four form realm levels and formless realm levels removing each respective affliction one by one until eventually all are removed and they achieve the liberated state of an arhat. This is the gradual supermundane approach.

Tsongkhapa argues that the sharpest *yogis* can remove deluded afflictions of the desire realm, form, and formless realms at once through the application of a direct realization of emptiness. They are called, “the ones who abandon all afflictions simultaneously”. A bit of background may be required to explain this variety of the supermundane approach. Drawing from *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* and its commentaries and related literature, Tsongkhapa explains that in the desire realm and each of the four levels of the form realm and four levels of the formless realm there are nine afflictions, constituting eighty-one altogether. They are frequently described simply as big, medium, and small. The big or gross ones are further divided as big-big, big-medium, and big-small. The medium and small afflictions are similarly subdivided into three (e.g. medium-big, medium-medium, medium-small, and so forth). Thus when sharp *yogis* are referred to as the ones who abandon all afflictions simultaneously, it means that they first remove all the biggest or grossest afflictions (i.e., the “big-big” afflictions) from the desire realm, the four levels of the form realms, and the four levels of the formless realm simultaneously. They remove nine afflictions (one each from the desire realm and each of the eight levels of upper realms) at once. Then, they remove all the nine big-medium ones simultaneously. In this way they remove the eighty-one afflictions in nine steps beginning with grossest of each of the nine levels of the three realms and with each step removing the progressively more subtle ones from each of the realms. This way of uprooting the afflictions is said to be much faster than the alternative method, which is to first eliminate desire realm afflictions one at a time, then the form realm afflictions one at a time, and finally the formless realm afflictions one at a time. They do not remove all eighty-one afflictions at once, but rather in groups of nine. When sharp *yogis* utilize this quicker method and all eighty-one are finally removed by removing the most subtle afflictions from all nine levels and they obtain the actual first *dhyāna* they really achieve all the *dhyānas* and formless realms levels at once. This is the case because the last and most subtle of the desire realm afflictions is removed (and the first form realm level is achieved) simultaneously with last and most subtle of afflictions from all the other realms.

To summarize, there are both mundane and supermundane approaches to the path upon the achievement of *śamatha* according to Tsongkhapa. The mundane approach is always a gradual approach and utilizes comparison meditation. It compares the characteristics of the lower level of *samsāra* with the relatively better qualities of the level immediately above it. In this way the practitioner is able to temporarily subdue the afflictions of the lower level by lessening attachment to them. It is called a mundane approach because it does not serve to cultivate renunciation of *samsāra* altogether, but just lessens attachment to one part of *samsāra* in comparison with another. Because it is

not based on a direct realization of the nature of reality it is unable to completely uproot the afflictions and thus unable to lead to liberation. In contrast the supermundane approaches are based on a realization of the nature of reality, do uproot the afflictions, and thus do lead to liberation and arhatship. There are two ways to go about this according to Tsongkhapa, by means of a gradual approach and by means of what is referred to as a simultaneous approach. The gradual approach uproots the afflictions one-by-one in order from the desire realm up through the last, most subtle affliction of the highest level of the formless realm. Thus the meditator achieves each the nine levels of the three realms in order from grossest to most subtle. The simultaneous approach removes nine afflictions at a time, one from each level. Thus the practitioner who utilizes the simultaneous method achieves each of the actual levels and is actually liberated simultaneously.

The methods described by Tsongkhapa in the soteriological movement to liberation draw heavily from theoretical descriptions of psychological or mental states of achievement as one progresses on the path. Philosophical descriptions of the nature of reality, emptiness (*śūnyatā*, *stong pa nyid*), and the means by which such insight facilitates liberation are inextricably tied to his presentation and understanding. The relationship between these theoretical descriptions found in Tsongkhapa's work and those of his Geluk followers and what they actually do in terms of meditation practice in the real world are interesting. The higher meditation practices and tantric yogas utilized extensively in the tradition certainly draw from the theoretical grounding found in expositions like those I have attempted to explain here, but practically utilize ideas and techniques that stretch far beyond the common bounds of *śamatha* and *vipassanā* as found in sutra expositions. For Tsongkhapa the correct sutra view, the view of the emptiness of an inherent nature in all phenomena (for him expressed in his *Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka* presentation) and the view and practice of tantra are utterly compatible and point to the same fundamental nature and realizations. Perhaps it is best left for another day to discuss the precise relationship between *sūtra* theories and tantric practices of the Geluk tradition.

Bibliography

Haribhadra. Abhisamayālaṃkāṛāloka. mNgon par rtogs pa'i rgyan gyi snang ba. P 5192.

Haribhadra. Sphuṭārthā/ Abhisamayālaṃkāranāmaprajñāpāramitopadeśāśtravṛtti, 'Grel pa don gsal/ shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i rgyal ces bya ba'i 'grel pa. P5191.

Kamalaśīla. Bhāvanākrama I, II, III, sGom pa'i rim pa. P 5310-12.

Maitreya. Abhisamayālaṃkāra. mNgon par rtogs pa'i gyan. P 5184.

Maitreya. Madhyāntavibhaṅga. dbUs dang mtha' rnam par 'byed pa. P5522.

Śāntideva. Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra. Byang chub sems pa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa. P5272.

Sopa, Geshe Lhundup and James Blumenthal. (2012, at press) Steps on the Path to Enlightenment: A Commentary on the "Śamatha" Chapter of Lamrim Chenmo: Vol. 4. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa. Byang chub lam rim chen mo. Sarnath: dGe lugs pa Student Welfare Committee, 1991.

Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa. dbU ma la 'jug pa'i rgya cher bshad pa dgongs pa rab gsal. Sarnath: Pleasure of Elegant Sayings Press, 1973; Bylakuppe: Sera Je Library Project, 1999.