

SOME DWAGS PO MAHĀMUDRĀ RESPONSES TO SA SKYA PAṆḌITA'S CRITIQUE AT "PRESENT-DAY MAHĀMUDRĀ"¹

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Considering the extent of Sa skya Paṇḍita's² (1182–1251) scholastic and political influence in Tibet, it is not surprising that criticisms voiced by him had a strong and lasting impact. Especially influential were his *Sdom gsum rab dbye*³ and his *Thub pa'i dgongs gsal*⁴ treatises in which the Sa skya hierarch criticized philosophical views and religious practices which in his eyes deviated from authentic Indian Buddhist traditions. In terms of the Bka' brgyud pa tradition his criticism mainly targeted Sgam po pa's (1079–1153) way of teaching Mahāmudrā. As the textual material shows, followers of Dwags po Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā felt the need to respond to his criticisms and were increasingly in a position to do so as their institutional networks and religious influence expanded.⁵

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² Sa skya Paṇḍita was certainly one of the most influential figures in the 13th century in Central Tibet. While his erudition earned him recognition as the fourth of the "five venerable supreme Sa skya masters," his influence also had a well-known political side. In the course of his alliance with the Mongolian prince Göden (1206–1251), a grandson of Genghis Khan (1162?–1227), he was given the political authority over Central Tibet. His full name was Kun dga' rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po.

³ In terms of Dwags po Mahāmudrā related issues, criticism is mainly found in *Sdom gsum rab dbye* III. 124, 160–167, 171–181, 211–212, 347–349, 396, 445–447, 497, 506. See also the English rendering of the verses in Rhoton 2002.

⁴ *Thub pa'i dgongs pa rab tu gsal ba'i bstan bcos* 105₁₅–106₁₆. See also D. Jackson's translation of this text in *Stages of the Buddha's Teachings* (Jackson 2015).

⁵ In particular during the 15th and 16th centuries there was a noticeable increase in Bka' brgyud responses to Sa skya Paṇḍita's criticism. This undoubtedly reflects significant changes in the Tibetan socio-religious atmosphere. Following the collapse of the Sa skya hegemony and ascendancy of the Phag mo gru dynasty (strong supporters of the Bka' brgyud schools), several Bka' brgyud lineages (most notably the Karma Bka' brgyud)

According to Sa skya Paṇḍita, *mahāmudrā* cannot be realized independently of the highest tantras, since it marks the culmination of the four tantric empowerments and the tantric series of the four *mudrās*. Therefore, *mahāmudrā* was, in his eyes, inextricably embedded in Buddhist tantric theory and practice. It was from this standpoint that Sa skya Paṇḍita rejected what he disparagingly called the “present-day Mahāmudrā” (*da lta'i phyag rgya chen po*) taught by Sgam po pa and his followers which claimed to offer aspirants of highest acumen a direct approach to goal-realization by means of the Guru's direct introduction, an approach which in certain cases could circumvent the tantric preliminaries and the gradualist paradigm of goal-realization. Regarding the issue of whether *mahāmudrā* is only found in the context of the highest tantras and involves a *karmamudrā* (tantric consort) as prerequisite, there were already different opinions in India. The most famous opposing view is probably found in Saraha's *Dohākoṣa*.⁶ He regards the unity of compassion and emptiness as the main pathway to attain spiritual freedom,⁷ pointing out that the teacher's qualities enter the disciple's heart without any mantra and tantra involved.⁸ Moreover, although Sa skya Paṇḍita in his critique of “present-day Mahāmudrā” refers to the *Caturmudrānvaya* attributed to the tantric Nāgārjuna as his main scriptural support for the view that tantra and a *karmamudrā* are indispensable for *mahāmudrā*,⁹ it was later pointed out by the Fourth 'Brug chen Padma dkar po that this

enjoyed a period of unprecedented religious authority and institutional support under the patronage of a powerful Tibetan aristocratic clan.

⁶ Mathes 2013: 277–278.

⁷ *Dohā skor gsum gyi tīkā 'bring po*, 21_{12–13}: “Those who abide in emptiness while devoid of compassion, do not find the supreme path. Yet, those who cultivate compassion only, stay in *saṃsāra* and will not attain liberation.” *snying rje dang bral stong pa nyid zhugs gang // des ni lam mchog rnyed pa ma yin no // on te snying rje 'ba' zhig bsgoms na yang // 'khor ba 'dir gnas thar pa thob mi 'gyur //* See also note 15, Maitrīpa's definition of *amanasikāra* as nondual continuity which unites emptiness and compassion.

⁸ Ibid., 44_{14–17}: “When the genuine mind has been purified, the qualities of the spiritual teacher will enter your heart. Having [achieved] realization in this way, [I] Saraha sing this song; [I] have not seen a single mantra and tantra.” *gnyug ma'i yid ni gang tshe sbyangs gyur pa // de tshe bla ma'i yon tan snying la 'jug par 'gyur // 'di ltar rtogs nas mda' bsnun glu len te // sngags dang rgyud rnam gcig kyang ma mthong ngo //*

⁹ In his *Sdom gsum rab dbye* III.178, Sa paṇ backs his rejection of Sgam po pa's Mahāmudrā system with his rendering of the *Caturmudrānvaya*. For details see Mathes 2013: 269–270.

is a serious misreading of the text in question, as recently corroborated by Mathes with the help of an extant Sanskrit manuscript. What the *Caturmudrānvaya* in fact states is that the actual source for *mahāmudrā* is the uncontrived *dharmamudrā* and not the contrived *karmamudrā*.¹⁰ Thus, Sa paṇ's scriptural source seems to support, rather than invalidate, Sgam po pa's nongradual Mahāmudrā teachings.¹¹

¹⁰ Mathes 2013: 267–274. See also Higgins and Draszczyk 2016, vol. I: 134.

¹¹ Karma pa Mi bskyod rdo rje also points out that Mahāmudrā instructions closely associated with sūtric sources was, in fact, very common in Tibet. Widely acknowledged Indian Mahāsiddhas and Paṇḍitas such as Pha dam pa sangs rgyas (12th c.), Mitra Dzoki [Mitrayogi] (12th c.), Śākya Śrī (12th c.), or Vanaratna (1384–1468) who were all active in Tibet taught this way, and that is how it became the practice in various Bka' brgyud lineages as well as other esoteric traditions with an Indian pedigree, such as the Gcod system. Therefore, to Mi bskyod rdo rje it appears that Sa skya Paṇḍita's way of identifying the Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā with the 'sudden enlightenment' position ascribed to the 8th century Chinese master Heshang was just a pretense to discredit the efficacy and popularity of Dwags po Mahāmudrā. *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, 15₁–16₂: "This [Mahāmudrā] doctrinal system had a great and vast dissemination in this Snowy Plateau [Tibet], not only in this precious [Bka' brgyud] lineage. It also appeared as the three so-called 'early, later and middling' [transmissions] known as 'the noble doctrine of Pacification (*zhi byed*) of Suffering' which was transmitted through the master Dam pa from India. And, in particular, it appears that the Mahāmudrā instructions given by many great Siddhas and Paṇḍitas from India such as the Mahāsiddha Mitra Dzoki [Mitrayogi] and Paṇ chen Śākya Śrī etc. to the great Bodhisattva Khro lo [Khro phu lo tsā ba Byams pa dpal] were precisely this doctrinal system. In later times, when the Mahāpaṇḍita Vanaratna (Nags rin) came to Tibet, he passed on this very doctrinal system – a synopsis of Mahāmudrā in [the form of] personal instructions – to the translators Byams pa gling pa, Gzhon nu dpal, Khrus khang and others. This being the case, the ways of expressing the single real meaning of [this] *dharmā* by each of these different individuals have had [much] in common. Why then do the Sa [skya pa], Dge [lugs pa], and Dol [po pa] say that just the view and meditation of the precious Bka' brgyud pa are the view and meditation of Heshang, and why do they not say the same about the systems of these other noble individuals?" *chos tshul 'di gangs can gyi ljongs 'dir brgyud pa rin po che 'dir ma zad spel ba po ches mang bar byung ste / rje btsun dam pa rgya gar nas brgyud pa'i dam chos sdug bsngal zhi byed par grags pa snga phyi bar gsum du byon pa dang / khyad par grub chen mi tra dzo ki dang paṇ chen shākya shrī sogs rgya gar gyi paṇ grub ches mang bas kyang byang chub sems dpa' chen po khro lo la gdams pa'i phyag chen de dag kyang chos tshul 'di nyid du snang la / dus phyis paṇ chen nags rin bod du byon nas lo chen byams pa'i gling pa lo chen gzhon nu dpal / khrims khang lo chen sogs la gdams pa'i phyag chen de'i phyogs gcig chos tshul 'di nyid du gda' 'o / de lta na chos kyi don po gcig gang zag mi 'dra ba so sos brjod tshul mthung par byung ba la / sa dge bo dol rnam kyis bka' rgyud rin po che kho na'i phyag chen gyi lta sgom 'di hwa shang gi lta sgom yin zhes kha zer la skye bu dam pa gzhon de dag gi lugs la de ltar mi zer ba cis khums zhe na /*

Sa skya Paṇḍita had further condemned the “present-day Mahāmudrā” as being no different than the religious *amanasikāra* teachings – the practice of mental nonengagement – of the Chinese Chan master Heshang, a tradition which was (incorrectly) said to have been banished from Tibet as a result of the Bsam yas debate in the 8th century.¹² Yet as will become clear below, Sgam po pa’s primary influences are Indian. In particular, he bases himself on those *amanasikāra* teachings that were brought to Tibet by Mar pa (1012–1097), the translator, in the 11th century and thus on later Indian Siddha *amanasikāra* traditions.¹³ Their teachings are indebted to the type of oral precepts transmitted through masters such as Saraha (ca. 8th c.) and Maitrīpa (ca. 1007–1085) advocating nonconceptual direct modes of meditation. Also, they are said to have close philosophical affinities with Indian *śāstras* such as the *Ratnagotravibhāga*.¹⁴ From this perspective too, Sa skya Paṇḍita’s criticism fails to really hit the target of portraying Sgam po pa’s Mahāmudrā teaching as some kind of Tibetan fabrication (*rang bzo*) having no valid Indian pedigree.

While the discussion of a Mahāmudrā system which is not exclusively tantric has been discussed in detail by Mathes,¹⁵ this paper mainly deals with Bka’ brgyud responses to Sa skya Paṇḍita’s criticism of *mahāmudrā* as consisting in a blank-minded type of mental nonengagement akin to the type of meditation ascribed to the Chinese master Heshang. First and foremost, we will consider the responses of Karma pa Mi bskyod rdo rje (1507–1554), one of the most outspoken voices in Tibetan Buddhism. To provide further doctrinal context for his views, we shall also go back to

¹² See for example Meinert 2002: 289.

¹³ It appears that Sa skya Paṇḍita in his critique did not distinguish between earlier and later *amanasikāra* traditions. There are no critical comments known by him regarding for example the Indian Siddha Virūpa who is essential for the Sa skya lineage. In line with other Indian Siddhas, Virūpa also taught that the realization of *mahāmudrā* is equivalent with mental nonengagement. See Higgins and Draszczuk 2016, vol. I: 327ff.

¹⁴ For example in *Deb ther sngon po*, 632–633: “Regarding the *Uttaratantra*, Rje Sgam po pa said: ‘The [important] treatise on these Mahāmudrā instructions is the *Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra* composed by the Bhagavan Maitreya.’” *’o skol gyi phyag rgya chen po ’di’i gzhung ni bcom ldan ’das byams pas mdzad pa’i theg pa chen po rgyud bla ma’i bstan bcos ’di yin zhes gsung shing* / See also Roerich 1979: 734. Even though this is regularly quoted, the statement cannot be found in the extant *Collected Works of Sgam po pa*.

¹⁵ Mathes 2013.

some Indian and Tibetan forefathers of this tradition and show that *mahāmudrā* as proper mental nonengagement is an essential element of both sūtric practices in the context of the Pāramitāyāna and tantric practices, i.e., the generation and completion stages of the Mantrayāna. In light of Mi bskyod rdo rje's views, we shall also briefly summarize the defenses of Dwags po Mahāmudrā by a few other authors: Shākya mchog ldan (1428–1507), Zhwa dmar Chos grags ye shes (1453–1524), and Karma phrin las pa Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1456–1539). All of them played a decisive role in clarifying and systematizing Dwags po Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā teachings. The paper shows that they unequivocally reject the criticism that Dwags po Mahāmudrā and its practice of mental nonengagement would lead to a blank-minded condition of cognitive oblivion. Toward this end, they follow Maitrīpa's interpretation of *amanasikāra* or mental nonengagement to be a correct mental engagement with reality which leads to nonconceptual realization.¹⁶

Let us first consider Sa skya Paṇḍita's criticism in this regard. He says:

Even if they meditate on the Great Seal, they cultivate in meditation only a restriction of conceptual thought ...¹⁷

¹⁶ See Mathes 2008: 17–29 on the interpretation of mental disengagement, i.e., *amanasikāra*, according to Maitrīpa. *Amanasikāra* is taken in the sense of an affirming negation, i.e., as correct mental engagement which is a direct experience of emptiness or of non-origination implied by the privative *a-* on the basis of having become mentally disengaged from holding on to dualistic appearances and characteristic signs and thus being free from abiding in any extremes. Maitrīpa reads “non-arising” (*anutpāda*) into the privative *a-*, taking *amanasikāra* as a compound where the middle word was dropped (*madhyapadalopī samāsa*). Moreover, alluding to the *Hevajratāntra* he interprets the *a-* as luminosity and thus as the manner in which emptiness is realized directly, while *manasikāra* – just as in its positive meaning in the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* – stands for cultivating nonconceptual wisdom and is equated with the originally tantric term *svādhiṣṭhāna* or “self-blessing.” All in all Maitrīpa takes *amanasikāra* as nondual continuity which unites emptiness and compassion. See also Maitrīpa's *Tattvadaśaka* D 2236 and Sahajavajra's *Tattvadaśakaṭīkā* (*De kho na nyid bcu pa'i grel pa*) D 2254; P 3099, 190b₁₋₂: yang 'dir rgyu mtshan yongs su spangs pas yid la mi byed pa zhes bya ba ni / 'dir mig btsuns pa ltar bum pa dang snam bu la sogs pa ci yang mi mthong ba ni yid la byed pa ni med do // yang ni rnam par dpyad pa'am bla ma'i man ngag gis dngos po mi dmigs pa nyid ni yid la mi byed pa'o //

¹⁷ *Sdom gsum rab dbye* III.160 (Rhoton 2002: 303): phyag rgya chen po bsgom na yang // rtog pa kha 'tshom nyid bsgom gyi // For an English translation see Rhoton 2002: 117.

The Great Seal meditation of the ignorant, it is taught, usually becomes a cause of animal birth. If not that, then they are born in the realm lacking even fine matter (*arūpadhātu*), or else they fall into the Disciples' cessation.¹⁸

No substantial difference exists between the present-day Great Seal and the Great Perfection (Rdzogs chen) of the Chinese tradition, other than a change in names ...¹⁹

The expression “the Chinese tradition” (*rgya nag lugs*) supposedly refers to a type of view wherein no emphasis is put on the gradual accumulation of merit and wisdom and wherein meditation basically consists in some kind of blankness of the mind achieved by stilling all thought. Now, the 8th Karma pa Mi bskyod rdo rje rightly observes that despite all the attention given to the views and practices of Heshang, no one in fact possessed a clear knowledge of the precise sources and doctrines of this Chinese tradition which was active in Tibet during the time of King Khri srong lde bstan (8th c.).²⁰

All that said, in order to understand why proper mental nonengagement is considered an essential feature of Dwags po Mahāmudrā, we take a look at some of Mi bskyod rdo rje's comments on Dwags po Mahāmudrā or *Phyag chen lhan cig skyes sbyor*, i.e. Mahāmudrā, the practice of coemergence, as Sgam po pa chose to call it.

In the introduction to his commentary on the *Madhyamakāvatāra* – which is generally considered to be among the author's later works²¹ – Mi bskyod rdo rje contends that Sgam po pa's Mahāmudrā is not to be confined to the tantric methods, but constitutes a tradition of mental

¹⁸ *Sdom gsum rab dbye* III.161 (Rhoton 2002: 303): *blun po phyag rgya che bsgom pa // phal cher dud 'gro'i rgyu ru gsungs // min na gzugs med kham su skye // yang na nyan thos 'gog par ltung* // For an English translation see Rhoton 2002: 117.

¹⁹ *Sdom gsum rab dbye* III.167 (Rhoton 2002: 303): *da lta'i phyag rgya chen po dang // rgya nag lugs kyi rdzogs chen la // ming 'dogs bsgyur ba ma gtogs pa // don la khyad par dbye ba med* // For an English translation see Rhoton 2002: 118.

²⁰ *Dgongs gcig 'grel pa* VI, MKsb vol. 6, 101₁₋₂: “Apart from merely what is known from old historical documents of former times and ancient chronicles, it is not clear at present to whom the [so-called] treatises of Heshang [can be attributed].” *hwa shang gis ji ltar 'dod ngar gyi chos 'byung gi yi ge snying pa dang / gna' gtam du grags pa tsam las ma gtogs pa'i hwa shang gi bstan bcos ni da lta su la yang mi gsal la* / See also Higgins and Draszczuk 2016, vol. I: 339 and vol. II: 152.

²¹ See also Higgins and Draszczuk 2016, vol. I: 20.

training in direct perception that accompanies them. He says that even for those who gain deep experiences through the practice of the highest tantras, what is transmitted through Sgam po pa's Mahāmudrā is essential in clearing away latent obstructions that still burden the mind stream. It is for this reason, he says, that the metaphor for this Mahāmudrā as the "Self-Sufficient White Medicine" which has the power to cure all kinds of afflictions is applied.²² In this way, the practice of mental nonengagement, i.e. nonconceptual direct perception, is the essential criterion determining how the practice in either the sūtric or the tantric context is to be conducted. Proper mental nonengagement is thus a way of cultivating wisdom irrespective of whether the techniques applied are more sūtric, i.e. the Mahāmudrā type of calm abiding and deep insight, or tantric, i.e. comprising the generation and completion stages.²³ To limit this cultivation of wisdom to a restriction of conceptual thought as put forth by Sa skya Paṇḍita therefore misses the point altogether.

According to Karma pa Mi bskyod rdo rje, Sgam po pa has applied the term Mahāmudrā, which in the context of the Yoganiruttaratāntra denotes the wisdom of bliss and emptiness, for the definitive view of the Madhyamaka of the profound sūtras (*zab pa mdo'i dbu ma*). Mi bskyod rdo rje labels the realization of this definitive view of the Madhyamaka "actualizing natural awareness" (*tha mal gyi shes pa mngon du mdzad pa*) or "making the *dharmakāya* directly [manifest]" (*chos sku mngon sum du byas*).²⁴ For him this definitely requires a practice of direct

²² *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, 12₂₋₃: "It is instructed that even if great experiences of the tantric wisdom of the inseparability of bliss and emptiness have arisen, still, as a remedy to clear out the hidden and destructive tendencies of elaborations this very view and meditation are praised as highly required. This is because through this, just like the self-sufficient white medicine, all obscurations are totally dispelled." *gsang sngags kyi bde stong dbyer med kyi ye shes sogs kyi nyams myong chos bzang bzang po skyes pa la'ang da dung spros pa'i bag nyal dang gnas ngan len yod pa sel byed kyi gnyen por lta sgom 'di nyid cher dgos par bsngags te / 'di dper na sman dkar po chig thub dang 'dra bar sgrib pa thams cad rmeg nas bsal bar byed pa'i phyir / zhes gdams pa yin no /*

²³ It is interesting to note that Indian sources such as the *Jñānālokālamkāra* attempted to show how the originally tantric term *mahāmudrā* is attested in the sūtras, and how mental nonengagement (*amanasikāra*) thus correlates with Prajñāpāramitā, despite the obvious lack of historical connection between these traditions.

²⁴ *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, 11₆–12₃: "Moreover, this master was greatly praised in the *Samādhirājasūtra* of the sugata [as the one who would] diffuse Madhyamaka which is

perception and of mental nonengagement as understood in this Dwags po Bka' brgyud tradition.²⁵ This becomes clear for example from his *Outline on Mental Nonengagement* where he contrasts this with a general Madhyamaka saying:

By depending [only] on Madhyamaka reasoning, apart from [getting] merely a general idea (*don spyi*) of it, the suchness which is directly perceived, being free from obscuration, is unable to manifest.²⁶

A clear reference for this approach is the Indian master Maitrīpa and his disciple Sahajavajra (11th c.) who taught a type of Madhyamaka based Mahāmudrā that is not purely tantric. A key point made, for example, in Sahajavajra's *Tattvadaśakaṭikā* is that in this Mahāmudrā tradition of Maitrīpa, since it is given as a direct instruction, no secret mantra empowerment is bestowed. Moreover, he explains that there are three

the meaning of the *Samādhisūtra*. To this *dharma*-tradition of Madhyamaka he gave the name Mahāmudrā which is known from the Mahāmudrā of the wisdom of bliss-emptiness occurring in the unsurpassable secret mantra [system]. When the view of this Madhyamaka has arisen in the mind stream, this is called 'actualizing natural awareness' and 'making the *dharmakāya* directly [manifest].' When it is realized that phenomena (*dharmā*), such as sprouts and thoughts, are not established as anything else but their true nature (*dharmatā*), the term 'thoughts appear as *dharmakāya*' is used. Also when an excellent dharma practice in terms of experiences such as the wisdom of inseparable bliss-emptiness [by virtue of the] secret mantras has arisen, still, as an antidote to remove existing hidden patterns of elaborations and negative tendencies, it is said that this view and meditation is absolutely essential. This is for example similar to the self-sufficient white medicine." *de'ang rje 'di la bde bar gshegs pa'i ting nge 'dzin gyi rgyal po'i mdo nas ting nge 'dzin gyi mdo don gyi dbu ma rgyas byed du ches bsngags pa nyid kyi phyir dbu ma'i chos tshul 'di la mtshan gsang sngags bla med nas 'byung ba'i bde stong gi ye shes la phyag chen du grags pa'i phyag chen de ming du 'dogs par mdzad pa dang / 'di'i dbu ma'i lta brgyud la skyes pa na tha mal gyi shes pa mngon du mdzad ces pa dang / chos sku mngon sum du byas zer ba dang / chos can myu gu dang rnam rtoḡ sogs de dag de'i chos nyid las gzhan du ma grub par rtoḡs pa na rnam rtoḡ chos skur shar ba zhes tha snyad mdzad nas / gsang sngags kyi bde stong dbyer med kyi ye shes sogs kyi nyams myong chos bzang bzang po skyes pa la 'ang da dung spros pa'i bag nyal dang gnas ngan len yod pa sel byed kyi ngyen por lta sgom 'di nyid cher dgos par bsngags te / 'di dper na sman dkar po chig thub dang 'dra bar ... / See also Higgins and Draszczuk 2016, vol. I: 283 and n. 808.*

²⁵ *Yid la mi byed pa'i zur khra*, MKsb vol. 15, 1096; "Here in this [Bka' brgyud tradition] mental nonengagement has the sense of 'immediacy;' hence, to not conceptualize the flow of lucid awareness, to not put into words [thought] fluctuations and [their] latent impressions." (English translation David Higgins.) *de la 'dir yid la mi byed pa'i don / de ma thag pas dus rgyun du shes pa gsal la mi rtoḡ pa g.yo bar byed cing bag chags brjod du mi 'jug par byed pas so /*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1096; *dbu ma'i gtan tshigs la brten nas don spyi tsam ma gtogs mngon sum gyi sgrib bral du de bzhin nyid 'char ma thub pa ni /* English translation David Higgins.

features to it, in that its nature is *pāramitā*, it corresponds with the mantras and it carries the name Mahāmudrā.²⁷ Mi bskyod rdo rje, when explaining the statement that this Mahāmudrā tradition of Maitrīpa corresponds with the mantras, says in his *Commentary on the Direct Introduction to the Three Kāyas*:

The Practice of Coemergence known in the precious Bka' brgyud is in accordance with the profound path of mantras, because on the mantra path the fruition, i.e. the four *kāyas* as such, are made the essence of the cause and path.²⁸

So much is clear, but what, in Mi bskyod rdo rje's view, is taken as the cause and path when it comes to the mental nonengagement of direct perception, i.e. Sgam po pa's Mahāmudrā system which is not limited to tantric methods? In his *Commentary on the Direct Introduction to the Three Kāyas*, Mi bskyod rdo rje remarks for example that the Dwags po Bka' brgyud pas use the term "the fruit has arrived on the ground" for the "yoga of the unity of *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* as luminosity."²⁹ He thereby indicates that this fruit, i.e. the state of unity which is free from any elaborations, is what is cultivated on this path. Moreover, also in his *Commentary on the Direct Introduction to the Three Kāyas*, Mi bskyod rdo rje recalls a statement by the master La yag pa Byang chub dngos grub (12th c.). In the context of Dwags po Bka' brgyud instructions on *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*, the latter is said to have explained that the method which allows for the realization of the four *kāyas* consists in maintaining a view and meditation which are in accordance with fruition.³⁰ Mi bskyod rdo rje explains:

²⁷ See Mathes 2006: 202.

²⁸ *Sku gsum ngo sprod rnam bshad*, MKsb vol. 21, 263₄₋₅: *bka' brgyud rin po che la grags pa'i lhan cig skyes sbyor 'di nyid zab mo sngags kyi theg pa dang rjes su mthun pa yin te / sngags kyi theg pa 'bras bu sku bzhi nyid rgyu lam gyi ngo bor byed pa de'i phyir /*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 246₂₋₃: "The Dwags po Bka' brgyud pas use for the unity of the two: manifold appearances and the primordial nonorigination of appearances, which is known as the 'yoga of the unity of *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* as luminosity' ... the term 'the fruit has arrived on the ground'." *sna tshogs su snang ba dang snang ba gdod nas skye ba med pa gnyis zung du 'jug par 'od gsal bar zhi lhag zung 'jug gi rnal 'byor zhes bya ste ... 'bras bu gzhi thog na phebs pa zhes dpal dwags po bka' brgyud pa dag tha snyad mdzad pa yin /*

³⁰ *Sku gsum ngo sprod rnam bshad*, MKsb vol. 21, 254₂₋₃: "The method which awakens one's mind to the essence of the four *kāyas* is to purify this present mind right from now on such that the cause is the fruition or by having a view and meditation that is in

As in the case of presently experiencing the four and three *kāyas* in one's own mind-stream, when one has perfectly practiced view and meditation and finalized the freedom from stains, one awakens into the four *kāyas*. Yet, primordially the actual four *kāyas* are present in [one's] genuine mind without any increase or decrease, [without] adding [qualities] or diminishing [errors].³¹

These statements from the *Commentary on the Direct Introduction to the Three Kāyas* point to the proximity of the fruit, i.e. the four *kāyas*, with the cause and the path, thus conveying the central tenet of the Buddhist tantras, namely, “making the fruition the path,” without, however, resorting to special tantric means. We can also look at the above question with reference to Sahajavajra who in Mi bskyod rdo rje's interpretation takes as the explicit teaching (*dnegos bstan*) of this Mahāmudrā the Madhyamaka view of emptiness, freedom from reifications, of the sūtra tradition, and who takes as its implicit teaching (*shugs las*) the ultimate profound meaning of the sūtras and tantras, i.e., the ordinary and extraordinary *sugatagarbha*.³² With respect to buddha nature, one may note that for

conformity with the fruition as such. Then one's own mind will be purified from all stains and is liberated as the essence of the four *kāyas*. This was [stated] by the master La yag pa in his commentary on the *Four Dharmas* [by Sgam po pa].” *rang sems sku bzhi'i ngo bor 'tshang rgya ba'i thabs da lta'i sems 'di la da lta nyid nas rgyu 'bras bur sbyang ba'am 'bras bu nyid dang mthun par lta sgom du byas pas rang sems dri ma thams cad dang bral ba sku bzhi'i ngo bor grol ba yin zhes rje btsun la yag pas chos bzhi'i 'grel par ...*

³¹ Ibid., 254–255: *sku bzhi dang gsum po rang rgyud la da lta nyams su myong ba ltar yang dag par lta sgom byas nas dri bral mthar thug pa na sku bzhi 'tshang rgya la de lta na'ang gnyugs ma'i yid la don gyi sku bzhi dang gdod nas 'du 'bral med par 'phel 'grib par gzhugs pa ni /*

³² *Dwags brgyud grub pa'i shing rta*, 135–141: “In the *Tattvadaśaka* commentary composed by Sahajavajra it is said regarding [*mahāmudrā*]: ‘There are three features; its nature is *pāramitā*, it corresponds with the mantras and it carries the name *mahāmudrā*.’ In this dharma tradition of *mahāmudrā*, as it is given as experience-instructions, secret mantra empowerments are not bestowed. The explicit teaching of this *mahāmudrā* is the Madhyamaka of emptiness free from reifications of the sūtra tradition and implicit it is the ultimate profound meaning of the sūtras and tantras the ordinary and extraordinary *sugatagarbha*.” *De kho na nyid bcu pa'i 'grel pa lhan cig skyes pa'i rdo rje mdzad par yang / ngo bo pha rol tu phyin pa sngags dang rjes su mthun pa / ming phyag rgya chen po zhes khyad par gsum ldan du yang gsungs so / phyag rgya chen po'i chos tshul 'di nang myong khrid 'debs par mdzad pa la gsang sngags kyi dbang bskur ba yang mi dzad la / phyag chen 'di'i dnegos bstan mdo lugs kyi spros bral stong pa nyid kyi dbu ma dang shugs*

Mi bskyod rdo rje, buddha nature is simply buddha[hood] itself even though it is obscured by adventitious stains.³³ Consequently, just as on the mantra path the fruition of the four *kāyas* is taken as the cause and the path, likewise, in Dwags po Mahāmudrā buddha nature, i.e. buddhahood or the ultimate state of unity, is taken as the cause and the path through mental nonengagement or nonconceptual direct perception. In this context, one can also understand the statement attributed to Sgam po pa that the *Ratnagotravibhāga* is the important treatise on this Mahāmudrā,³⁴ given its focus on the unchanging continuum of buddha nature in the causal phase, on the path, and in the fruition.

As pointed out above, Maitrīpa and his interpretation of mental non-engagement is an important source for the Bka' brgyud tradition in Tibet. Maitrīpa was one of the main Indian teachers of Mar pa, the Tibetan forefather of the Tibetan Bka' brgyud tradition. Mar pa received the Siddha Mahāmudrā teachings from him, and in one of his songs (*mgur*) he advises one to “directly recognize the Mahāmudrā teaching, the quintessential meaning which is the culmination of the *yānas*.”³⁵ With respect to this Mahāmudrā teaching in the sense of a key-instruction, he says:

Even if you emptied out the minds of the buddhas of the three times ...
There is nothing more ultimate than this.³⁶

The context and content of this passage suggests that this statement does not refer to particular tantric method but to a direct introduction to *mahāmudrā* which is a hallmark of the Buddhist Siddha tradition.

In addition to Mar pa and his teacher Maitrīpa, one might also briefly consider Mar pa's other important teacher, Nāropa (1016–1100), from whom he received the tantric yogas. When Nāropa taught his *Synopsis of Mahāmudrā* to Mar pa, he made the following statement:

las mdo sngags kyi zab don mthar thug bde gshegs snying po thun mongs dang thun mongs min pa ston pa la ...

³³ See Higgins and Draszczuk 2016, vol. I: 271–272.

³⁴ See n. 13.

³⁵ *Rain of Wisdom*, 151–153; *Bka' brgyud mgur mdzod*, 64a₅₋₆: *theg pa'i mthar thug snying po'i don // chos phyag rgya che la ngo sprod bgyis //*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 64b₃: *dus gsum sangs rgyas thugs phyung yang // mthar thug de las med do gsungs //* English translation Sherpa 2004: 166–167.

Being free from intellectual thought and without mental engagement,
This is the path of all buddhas.³⁷

This again confirms freedom from mental engagement as the central method of mental training, regardless of which other sūtric or tantric teachings are employed to support it.

Other examples are found in the teachings by the renowned *yogin* Mi la ras pa (1040–1123), spiritual heir of Mar pa and guru of Sgam po pa, who was famous for his accomplishment of the tantric practice of heat yoga. As a heart instruction and farewell song upon Sgam po pa's return to Central Tibet, Mi la advised his disciple that regarding his *mahāmudrā* practice, he should focus on abiding in the unfabricated innate state, in the wisdom of nonthought, an instruction that can well be understood in the sense of mental nonengagement:

... Do not follow sophistries ... do not set up logical connections ... There is the danger of falling into nihilistic emptiness. ... When you are practicing *mahāmudrā*, do not busy yourself in body and speech with daily rituals. There is the danger that the wisdom of nonthought might vanish. Son, rest in the unfabricated innate state ...³⁸

³⁷ *Phyag rgya chen po tshigs bsdus*, Msb vol. 2, 30_{15–16}: *chos rnams rang rang so sos stong // stong par 'dzin blo rang sar dag // blo bral yid la mi byed pa // 'di ni sangs rgyas kun gyi lam* // The entire passage reads, Msb vol. 2, 29–30: “For someone who beholding suchness realizes [it] without trying to improve or modify it, the entire world of appearances is *mahāmudrā*. [He] abides in the great all-encompassing expanse of the *dharmakāya*, resting naturally in the uncontrived nature, the inconceivable *dharmakāya*. Settling [in that] without searching [for anything else] is the meditation, whereas searching and meditating is a mental state of delusion. Space and whatever [there is in terms of] manifestations not being two [in terms of] meditation and no-meditation, where should there be a separation or nonseparation from [the *dharmakāya*]? ... Phenomena are empty of themselves. The perception that clings to them as being empty purifies itself in its own place. Being free from intellectual thought and without mental engagement, this is the path of all buddhas.” *de la bcos shing bsgyur du med // gang gis de nyid mthong rtogs na // snang srid thams cad phyag rgya che // chos sku gdal khyab chen por gnas // rang bzhin ma bcos lhug par bzhag // bsam du med pa chos kyi sku // ma btsal bzhag na bsgom pa ste // btsal zhing bsgom pa 'khrul pa 'i blo // mkha' dang cho 'phrul ji lta bar // bsgom dang ma bsgoms gnyis med pa // bral dang ma bral ga la yod // rnal 'byor pas ni de ltar rtogs // ... 30_{14–16}: chos rnams rang rang so sos stong // stong par 'dzin blo rang sar dag // blo bral yid la mi byed pa // 'di ni sangs rgyas kun gyi lam* //

³⁸ *Rain of Wisdom*, 236–237; *Bka' brgyud mgur mdzod*, 113a₄–b₅: *tha snyad tshig phyir ma 'brang zhig // ... tshad ma 'i sbyor ba ma bkod cig // ... chad pa 'i stong nyid du 'gro nyen yod // ... phyag rgya chen po sgom dus su // lus ngag gi dge sbyor ma brtson zhig // mi rtog ye shes yal nyen yod // bu ma bcos gnyug ma 'i ngang la zhog //*

Based on this rich heritage of sūtric teachings, tantric Mahāmudrā teachings, and Siddha Mahāmudrā *upadeśas*, Sgam po pa, the lineage holder of Mi la ras pa, systematized the various approaches, incorporating them in a path with three facets. He distinguished between a sūtric path of inference, a tantric path of mantra, and the path of direct perception that works with coemergent luminosity:

The path is said to have to follow three aspects: inference taken as a path, blessing taken as a path, and direct perception taken as a path. It is said that the philosophical path of the perfections takes inference as the path, that the Mahāyāna-Mantra takes blessing as the path on the basis of the Generation and Completion phases, and that the direct perception as the path uses coemergent luminosity.³⁹

This short excursion into the views of the early founders of the Bka' brgyud tradition has shown that not just in Maitrīpa's teachings but also in the context of the tantric *mahāmudrā* practice of Nāropa, Mar pa and Mi la ras pa, the practices of mental nonengagement and unmediated direct perception play an essential role.

³⁹ *Dus gsum mkhyen pa'i zhu lan*, 226_{2,4}: *lam rnam pa gsum du 'gro gsung ngo / rjes dpag lam du byed pa dang / byin brlabs lam du byed pa dang / mngon sum lam du byed pa gsum yin gsung / mtshan nyid lam pha rol tu phyin pa ni rjes dpag lam du byed pa bya ba yin / theg pa chen po gsang sngags ni bskyed rdzogs gnyis la brten nas byin brlabs lam du byed pa yin / mngon sum lam du byed pa ni lhan cig skyes pa 'od gsal bya ba yin gsung /*

A similar remark is found in Sgam po pa's *Tshogs chos yon tan phun tshogs*, 556₃–557₂: English translation by Mathes (2006: 202–203): “As to taking inference as [one's] path, having examined all phenomena by arguments, [such as] being beyond one and many, one says that there is no other [ontological] possibility and posits that everything is empty. [This is the path of] inference. [The practice of] inner channels, energies and drops, the recitation of mantras, and so forth, based on the stage consisting of the generation of the deity's body is the path of blessing. As to taking direct perceptions for [one's] path, the right guru teaches one's coemergent mind-essence to be the *dharmakāya* in terms of luminosity. Having thus been given an accurate pith-instruction of definitive meaning, one takes, with regard to this 'coemergent mind' (*shes pa lhan cig skyes pa*) which has been ascertained in oneself, the natural mind as the path, without being separated from any of the three: view, conduct and meditation.” *de la rjes dpag lam du byed pa ni / chos thams cad gcig dang du bral gyi gtan tshigs kyis gzhig* [text: *gzhigs*] *nas / 'gro sa 'di las med zer nas thams cad stong par byas nas 'jog pa ni rjes dpag go / lha'i sku bskyed pa'i rim pa la brten nas rtsa rlung dang thig le dang / sngags kyi bzlas brjod la sogs pa byin brlabs kyi lam mo // mngon sum lam du byed pa ni bla ma dam pa cig gis sems nyid lhan cig skyes pa chos kyi sku 'od gsal bya ba yin gsung ba de lta bu nges pa'i don gyi gdams ngag phyin ci ma log bstan pas / rang la nges pa'i shes pa lhan cig skyes pa de la lta spyod sgom gsum ya ma bral bar gnyug ma'i shes pa lam du khyer ba ...* See also translation by D. Jackson (1994: 26).

Let us now return to Mi bskyod rdo rje's view with respect to mental nonengagement and his rejection of Sa skya Paṇḍita's criticism. We may recall that he follows Maitrīpa and Sahajavajra in taking *amanasikāra* as a direct experience of emptiness and clarity⁴⁰ and not as a state of blankness or the type of mental suppression censured by Sa skya Paṇḍita.⁴¹ This becomes obvious in various contexts, especially when Mi bskyod rdo rje elucidates the process of Dwags po Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā practice, even though he does not always explicitly call it the practice of *mahāmudrā*.

Two examples from his works may be cited in this regard: In his commentary to the *Single Intent* of 'Jig rten gsum mgon (1143–1217), Mi bskyod rdo rje describes the process by which a realized teacher guides a gifted disciple.⁴² The teacher makes the student understand that all outer and inner phenomena are beyond existence and nonexistence, permanence and impermanence, beyond being conditioned and unconditioned, and thus supports the disciple to release both imputations and deprecations regarding all phenomena. He considers this view and associated practices to be a direct approach, beyond (customary) mental engagements (*vid la byed pa*) and mindfulness (*dran pa*), which is based on Maitrīpa's *amanasikāra* cycle. When – having been introduced into this understanding – a special experience free from any elaborations arises in the practitioner's mind, this, Mi bskyod rdo rje explains, is what the Dwags po Bka' brgyud pas mean when they speak of beholding mind's abiding nature or actualizing natural *prajñāpāramitā* or as “losing oneself in the vast expanse of uncontrived *mahāmudrā*.”⁴³ He thus takes

⁴⁰ See note 15.

⁴¹ See note 16.

⁴² See Higgins and Draszczuk 2016, vol. II: 151–155 for the translation and edited text of the section of the work from which the following excerpt is taken.

⁴³ See 'Bri gung bka' brgyud chos mdzod las karma [pa] mi bskyod rdo rje'i dgongs gcig 'grel chen pod ca pa, 118₃–119₅: “When a Guru who has gained realization directly introduces ... a fortunate disciple to the state of profound emptiness wherein all external and internal phenomena, however they may arise, are beyond all that is established in terms of modes of being and [thus] free from the entire [range] of existence and nonexistence, arising and ceasing, permanence and impermanence, substantiality and insubstantiality, and the conditioned and unconditioned, then for such a disciple all the bonds of wayward projections that are the great hidden flaw of delusion regarding all conventional phenomena, external and internal, are destroyed. [The disciple will also be] liberated from the great

up Sgam po pa's threefold distinction, arriving at a *mahāmudrā* which irrespective of sūtric or tantric methods emphasizes the inner experiences or realization which is grounded in mental nonengagement, nonarising and states of mind beyond dualistic mentation, or in short: in a non-conceptual realization of reality.

More specifically, in his *Outline of Mental Nonengagement*, Mi bskyod rdo rje points out that for a Mahāmudrā practitioner, mental nonengagement means to set the mind in its natural state. Each mere movement of the mind is to be known in the very first moment and not to be appropriated. The perceptual objects are not to be intellectually arranged, nor should one limit oneself within the framework of one's intellect. One should not be attached to the bliss of luminosity and not be carried away by the qualities of experiences and realizations. Without trying to reign in

abyss of deprecation because there arises a special experiential understanding and realization that all phenomena are already pure of all discursive elaborations of the threefold nexus [of act, object and subject] like dust in the sky, such that they are not existent, not non-existent, and their being concomitantly both existent and non-existent, or their being neither, are eliminated. On that occasion, in regard to that [disciple] who is nakedly immersed in the abiding nature which is not amenable to any mental engagement at all, the illustrious Dwags po bka' brgyud have spoken of 'seeing the abiding nature of mind' or 'eliciting the perfection of wisdom nature' ... and as 'losing oneself in the vast expanse of uncontrived *mahāmudrā*.' ... Regarding this [direct] method of view and meditation, the methods of spiritual praxis which accord with sūtras and tantras are something unrivalled because those eloquent instructions by the Great Master Maitrīpa which emphasized mental nonengagement, nonorigination, and transcending the intellect are present [in his] so-called 'Amanasi[kāra] doctrinal cycle'." *bla ma rtogs pa dang ldan pa zhig gis / slob ma skal ldan ... zhig la phyi nang gi chos thams cad / ji tsam snang ba bzhin sdod lugs kyis grub pa thams cad dang bral ba'i yod med skye 'gag rtag mi rtag dngos po dang dngos med 'dus byas ma byas thams cad las grol ba'i zab mo stong pa nyid kyi ngang tshul lam ring lugs de lung dang man ngag gis brda legs par sprad pa na / slob ma des phyi nang gis bsdu pa'i kun rdzob kyi chos thams cad kyi 'khrul pa'i mtshang chen po 'chor sgro 'dogs kyi mdud pa thams cad zhig / skur 'debs kyi g.yang sa chen po nas thar te / chos thams cad la yod min dang med min / yod med gnyis ka yin pa'i rjes 'gro dang / gnyis ka min pa'i ldog gyur gyi phung gsum gyi spros pa thams cad nam mkha' g.ya' dag pa ltar song ba'i go rtogs myong ba khyad par can skye la / de'i tshe gnas lugs kyi steng du yid kyi byed pa ci yang ma btub par rjen cer gyis 'gro ba de la / dpal ldan dwags po bka' brgyud pa dag sems kyi gnas lugs mthong bya ba'am rang bzhin sher phyin mngon du byas zer ba'am / ... phyag rgya chen po ma bcos rgya 'byams su shor zhes pa'i tha snyad mḍad pa yin la / ... lta sgom gyi tshul 'di ni mdo sngags thun mong ba'i nyams su len tshul zla dang bral ba zhig yin te / jo bo chen po mai tri pas yid la mi byed skye med blo 'das a ma na si'i chos skor zhes rtsal du bton te legs par gdams pa de nyid du gnas pa'i phyr /*

unobstructed appearances or to block self-luminous objects, the practitioner is advised to set the mind directly in emptiness without intellectual conditioning.⁴⁴ Mi bskyod rdo rje thus associates mental nonengagement with a nonconceptual direct perception of mind's true nature. Without referring to Sa skya Paṇḍita's criticism directly (as he does elsewhere), he nonetheless clearly rejects any attempt to present Dwags po Mahāmudrā as an approach advocating the voluntary suppression of conceptual thought.

In the generation before Mi bskyod rdo rje, the Sa skya polymath Shākya mchog ldan (1428–1507) had, in the later phase of his life, become an outspoken defender of Dwags po Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā, even though this meant going against his own tradition and the polemical stance of its supreme intellectual and spiritual authority, Sa skya Paṇḍita. In one of his three texts on Dwags po Mahāmudrā, *Distinguishing Mahāmudrā*,⁴⁵ Shākya mchog ldan explicitly argues that Dwags po Mahāmudrā can be both tantric as well as sūtric and that it was legitimate

⁴⁴ *Yid la mi byed pa'i zur khra*, MKsb vol. 15, 1099₂₋₄: "When it comes to what is known as 'taking this ego-mind as what is not ego-mind' the way of describing it is 'to settle [the mind] in its natural state' which was very popular among the Indian and Tibetan Mahāmudrā practitioners. In this regard, the way of setting [the mind] is as follows: for all the individual mental movements that emerge, [some say] they should be investigated thoroughly; [some] that their essence is to be looked at, and [others that] one allows them to freely resolve themselves etc. All these partial ways are to be avoided. The mere movement in its first moment is to be known and thus not to be appropriated. Don't intellectually arrange objects of perception. Don't be established in [your] own intellect. Don't be attached to the bliss and happiness of luminosity. Don't be carried away by the qualities of experiences and realizations. Don't try to reign in unobstructed appearances. Don't block self-luminous objects. Settle in emptiness without [intellectual] conditioning. This is to be practiced. [This is] the method to practice freedom from intellect and mental engagement." *yid de yid ma yin par byed gyur na / zhes pa'i zhes tshul ni rang babs su 'jog ces pa rgya bod kyi phyag chen po rnams la grags che zhing / de yang 'jog tshul ni / yid kyi 'gyu ba re langs pas / de dag rtsad bcad pa dang / ngo lta dang / rang zhir 'gro bcug pa la sogs pa sogs phyogs re ba spangs te / 'gyu tsam gyis skad cig dang po shes pas bdag gnyer mi bya / dmigs bya'i yul la mi bkram / nyid kyi blo la mi 'god / gsal ba'i dga' bde la mi zhen no / nyams rtogs kyi yon tan la mi brod par / rnam pa 'gag med kyi phyir mi 'breng rang gsal gyi yul mi dgag / stong nyid la 'du mi bya bar 'jog pa'o // zhes grub pa'o // yid byed blo dang bral ba'i nyams len thabs //*

⁴⁵ *Phyag rgya chen po'i shan 'byed or Lung rigs gnyis kyi phyag rgya chen po'i bzhed tshul la 'khrul pa sel ba'i bstan bcos zung 'jug gi gru chen, Distinguishing Mahāmudrā or The Great Ship of Unity, a Treatise to Clarify Errors in the Manner of Asserting the Mahāmudrā of Scriptural Authority and Reasoning*, see bibliography. For a translation and critical edition of these three treatises, see Higgins and Draszczuk 2016, vol. II: 11–85.

for Sgam po pa to compare it to the Self-sufficient White Medicine (*dkar po gcig thub*), thus defending two points that had been sharply criticized by Sa skya Paṇḍita:

In short, [*mahāmudrā*] is ascertained simply as the modes of abiding (*gnas lugs*), emptiness (*stong lugs*) and realization (*rtogs lugs*) which are of definitive meaning as these are found in the tantra corpus, the Maitreya works, and the *Dohā Trilogy*. It was in this sense that previous teachers of the Mudrā [tradition] used the designation Mahāmudrā. For this the designation “emptiness endowed with the excellence of all aspects” is also attested in both the Mantra[yāna] and the Pāramitā[yāna]. The understanding of it is such that when one has arrived at the supramundane path, then the entire spectrum of qualities conducive to purification such as the [thirty-seven factors] of awakening, loving kindness, compassion and the rest, which are termed “great bliss” are of one taste with the essence of the *dharmadhātu* wisdom. In that instance, this was definitely asserted in the statement that [Mahāmudrā] is similar to a Self-sufficient White Remedy.⁴⁶

For Shākya mchog ldan, as for Mi bskyod rdo rje, Mahāmudrā is not predominantly contingent upon particular sūtric or tantric techniques, but depends rather on cultivating nonconceptual states of mind which make definitive goal-realization possible.

Shākya mchog ldan also goes into the issue of mental nonengagement which he discusses in a number of his writings. In his *Answers to the Rinpungs sde pa Shākya rgyal mtshan*, he explains that contrary to the allegation that any system which teaches mental nonengagement automatically resembles Heshang’s tradition, correct mental nonengagement is, in fact, an important factor in mainstream Mahāyāna meditation practice: indeed, mental nonengagement in the sense of being a direct experience of emptiness acts as a remedy against the clinging to a self; this remedy need not involve conceptual analysis. If conceptual analysis

⁴⁶ *Phyag rgya chen po'i shan 'byed*, SCsb_(B) vol. 17, 390–391; *mdor na rgyud sde dang // byams chos dang // dva ha skor gsum nas 'byung ba'i nges don gyi gnas lugs // stong lugs dang // rtogs lugs 'di kho nar nges la // don 'di la phyag rgya'i bla ma gong ma rnams kyi phyag rgya chen po'i tha snyad mdzad pa yin no / 'di la ni nram kun mchog ldan gyi stong pa nyid ces bya ba'i tha snyad kyang sngags dang phar phyin gnyis nas 'byung ba yin la // de'i go ba ni / 'jig rten las 'das pa'i lam du slebs pa na // byang phyogs dang byams snying rje sogs rnam byang gi yon tan ji snyed pa // bde ba chen po'i ming can chos dbyings ye shes kyi ngo bo ro gcig pa'i phyir ro // de'i tshe sman dkar po chig thub dang 'dra ba yin no // zhes bya ba 'di bzhed par nges so //*

alone were a sufficient antidote to self-clinging, then the nonconceptual yogic perception would not counteract self-clinging. Regarding the view that conceptual analysis is the sole and indispensable remedy to self-clinging, not even a buddha's wisdom of the way things are would qualify as deep insight (*vipaśyanā*) given that it is free from all conceptualizations. All in all, from his point of view, correct mental nonengagement is the essential quality of the actual meditation practice.⁴⁷ Apart from his rejection of any identification of Dwags po Mahāmudrā with the practice advocated by Heshang, he also points out that the views of Heshang and Sgam po pa cannot be the same because the latter taught in his *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*⁴⁸ the gradual path of loving kindness, compassion, bodhicitta, and the entire series of *pāramitās*.⁴⁹

A younger contemporary of Shākya mchog ldan, Zhwa dmar Chos grags ye shes (1453–1524), was another outspoken Bka' brgyud respondent to Sa skya Paṇ ḍi ta's critique of Sgam po pa's Mahāmudrā system.

⁴⁷ *Sa chen skyong mdzad rin spungs sde pa shākya rgyal mtshan gyi zhus lan dang sde pa sgar pa'i zhus lan sogs*, SCsb_(B) vol. 17, 640₁–641₂: “First [as to the criticism that] mental nonengagement does not work as a remedy for the clinging to a self, and that clear insight must necessarily be conceptual analysis: In general, direct yogic cognition and in particular a buddha's wisdom of the way things are would then be no remedy for self-clinging and no clear insight, because the settling in the direct yogic direct perception is free from concepts.” *dang po yid byed dang bral ba bdag 'dzin gyi gnyen por mi 'gro ba dang / lhag mthong la sor rtog shes rab kyi khyab na / spyir rnal 'byor mngon sum dang / bye brag sangs rgyas kyi ye shes ji snyed pa bdag 'dzin gyi gnyen po dang / lhag mthong ma yin par 'gyur te / rnal 'byor mngon sum du 'jog pa la rtog pa dang bral ba zhiḡ nges par dgos pa'i phyir ro /*

⁴⁸ *Phyag rgya chen po'i shan 'byed*, SCsb vol. 17_(B), 387₄–387₅: “The view of Heshang and the view of Sgam po pa are not the same, because in the *Ornament of Liberation of the Supreme Path* composed by Sgam po pa concerning the view of *prajñāpāramitā*, the way of preparing the analysis of discriminating wisdom is taught in detail.” *yang hwa shang gi lta ba dang rje dwags po'i lta ba don gcig pa min te // rje dwags pos mdzad pa'i lam mchog thar pa'i rgyan las // sher phyin gyi lta ba la so sor rtog pa'i shes rab kyi dpyad pa sngon du 'gro ba'i tshul rgyas par gsungs pa'i phyir /*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 386₄–386₆: “Moreover, if there was no difference between the ‘descent from above’ view of Mahāmudrā and Heshang's view of a simultaneist path, the consequence would be that the Mahāmudrā propounders would not maintain loving kindness and compassion, the five perfections, the development of bodhicitta etc. as a path. If one was to assert that, it would contradict the [fact that] Mahāmudrā propounders teach the aspect of method as having a very high value.” *phyag chen yas 'bab kyi lta ba dang / hwa shang gi lam cig car ba'i lta ba khyad med na / phyag chen pas / byams pa snying rje pha rol tu phyin pa lnga dang / byang chub sems dpa'i sems bskyed sogs lam du mi 'dod par 'gyur la / 'dod na phyag chen pas thabs kyi cha de dag la shin tu gces spras che bar bshad pa dang 'gal /*

In his *Sixty Verses on Mahāmudrā*, he counters Sa paṇ's criticisms regarding mental nonengagement and other Bka' brgyud instructions by showing their consistency with the Mahāmudrā views outlined in Sahajavajra's *Tattvadaśakaṭikā*. Drawing upon an analogy used by Sahajavajra, Chos grags ye shes maintains that, contrary to its critics, mental nonengagement does not signify not knowing or not seeing, as in the case of someone who has closed his eyes and therefore does not see a vase and other objects. He explains that instead it refers to a nondual state of mind which does not impute an artificial duality between objects of knowledge and a knowing subject. It thus describes a state of mind which is aware of the nonobservability of phenomena. This is called mental nonengagement in the sense of knowing that there is nothing to analyze. In other words, the suchness of nonorigination or emptiness is directly realized the way it is, which is nothing but a well-founded mental engagement in reality by way of nonconceptual direct perception.

With eyes closed, a vase is not seen, likewise mere nonthought is not the [Buddha's] intent. What is relinquished instead is the clinging to knower and objects of knowledge as separate. This, the [ultimate] mind of enlightenment which is nondual regarding all sentient beings, is not an object of thought and expression. For that reason it is called "mental nonengagement," because there is nothing to analyze. [This is] explained by Maitrī and Sahajavajra.⁵⁰

Chos grags ye shes goes on to point out that if one deprecates "not conceptualizing anything," a phrase popular in Dwags po Mahāmudrā circles, one by the same token rejects Atiśa's instructions in the *Madhyamakopadeśa* and the *Gītis* by Mahāsiddhas such as Saraha which likewise advocate not conceptualizing anything.⁵¹

⁵⁰ *Phyag rgya chen po drug bcu pa*, in: *Zhwa dmar bzhi pa spyen snga chos kyi grags pa'i gsung 'bum*, vol. 6, 322₁₂₋₁₅: ... mig btsuns pa na bum pa mi mthong ltar // bsam med kho na dgong pa ma yin te // shes dang shes bya so sor 'dzin pa spong // 'gro kun gnyis su med pa'i byang chub sems // de ni bsam dang brjod pa'i yul min pas // dpyad du med phyir yid la mi byed ces // me tri pa dang lhan skyes rdo rjes bshad //

⁵¹ Ibid., 323₄₋₇: "If one negates the not conceptualizing anything, not conceptualizing anything, not grasping at anything, one [thus] relinquishes mindfulness and all mental engagements. [This is stated in] the *Madhyamakopadeśa* by Atiśa and the *Gītis* by the Mahāsiddhas such as Saraha; how is it possible for you to repudiate these?" *gal te cir yang*

Moreover, in a series of three verses, Zhwa dmar Chos grags ye shes goes on to discuss Sa skya Paṇ ḍi ta's criticism⁵² that Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā – if practiced adequately – is nothing but Madhyamaka meditation.⁵³ In fact, Chos grags ye shes does not consider this to be an affront because to him Mahāmudrā is Madhyamaka, and to be precise, Yoganaddhāpratiṣṭhāna Madhyamaka. He says that according to wise men with integrity, this Nonfoundational Madhyamaka of Unity, i.e. Mahāmudrā, is a method which is superior to the other Madhyamaka traditions. He further explains this in his *General Presentation of the Sūtras* where he points out that the nature of the unity of arising and nonarising is to be understood as suchness and not just as nonarising. This suchness which, to him, is the intent of the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, is not found through analytical reasoning but through nonanalytical direct perception (*ma dpyad pa'i mngon sum*) which he considers to be the more effective of the two approaches.⁵⁴

mi rtog pa 'gog na // cir yang mi rtog cir yang mi 'dzin par // dran dang yid byed thams cad spong ngo zhes // a ti sha yi dbu ma'i man ngag dang // sa ra ha sogs grub chen rnams kyi glu // khyed cag rnams kyis dgag par ga la nus //

⁵² *Sdom gsum rab dbye* III.162: "Even if that meditation may be excellent, it is no more than a Madhyamaka meditation. The latter meditation, while very good it itself, is nevertheless extremely difficult to accomplish." *gal te de ni bsgom legs kyang // dbu ma'i bsgom las lhag pa med // dbu ma'i bsgom de bzang mod kyi // 'on kyang 'grub pa shin tu dka' //* See Rhoton 2002:303 (Tib.); 117 (English).

⁵³ *Phyag rgya chen po drug bcu pa*, in: Zhwa dmar bzhi pa spyan snga chos kyi grags pa'i gsung 'bum, vol. 6, 323₁₀–323₁₅: "Some proclaim 'even though this is a good way to meditate, it is nothing higher than Madhyamaka meditation.' By the intended meaning of you talking about this Madhyamaka meditation it is reasonable to analyze what it is: Emptiness which is analyzed through inferential reasoning and the direct view of natural luminosity, these two; through meditating, the experiences will be seen infallibly. In particular wise man with integrity also say that this Nonfoundational Madhyamaka of Unity the glorious Dwags po Bka' brgyud coming from the noble Saraha, father and sons, is a method which is superior to the other Madhyamaka traditions." *la las 'di ni ji ltar sgom legs kyang // dbu ma'i sgoms las lhag pa med ces sgrog // khyed kyis dbu ma'i sgom zhes gsungs pa yi // dgongs don de ni gang yin dpyad par rigs // rjes dpag rigs pas dpyad pa'i stong nyid dang // rang bzhin 'od gsal mngon sum lta ba gnyis // bsgoms pas nyams su myong rnams tshad mas mthong // khyad par gzu bo'i mkhas pa dag kyang gsung // zung 'jug rab tu mi gnas dbu ma ni // rje btsun sa ra ha pa yab sras nas // dpal ldan dwags po'i bka' brgyud 'di dag bzhed // de ni dbu ma gzhana las lhag pa'i tshul //*

⁵⁴ *Mdo sde spyi'i rnam bzag*, in: Zhwa dmar bzhi pa spyan snga chos kyi grags pa'i gsung 'bum, vol. 3, 152_{16–20}: "Thus, the very nature of the unity of arising and nonarising is to be understood as suchness, and not just as 'nonarising,' as it is taught in detail in the

The last scholar to consider is Karma phrin las pa Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1456–1539), one of Mi bskyod rdo rje's principal teachers. In one of his *vajra* songs, Karma phrin las succinctly argues that Dwags po Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā is not – as indicated by Sa skya Paṇḍita – similar to the view of Heshang. Rather:

This view which is without limitations and bias – which cannot be touched by the intellect and has no artificial quality – this very *dharma* is different from the Chinese tradition. The meditation [cultivated] in this system is a path of direct perception. It is beyond all striving, fear, hopes, and characteristics; yet, nonthought alone is not what is cultivated. Thus, just because knowing and the known are not apprehended as being distinct, you cannot say that this is [therefore] similar to the view of Heshang. The reality (*don*) which is inconceivable by conceptual thought, though it cannot be expressed in conventional terms, is precisely what is to be personally realized. Therefore it is superior to the Heshang view. The definitive meaning is empty of a view and a viewer. When wishing to behold this reality, the meaning of the mode of abiding, this mind itself which is profound, peaceful, and free from elaborations is the view as well as the object of the view.⁵⁵

For Karma phrin las, the crucial aspect of Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā is that it is a path of direct perception whereby self-awareness directly

scriptures which say 'associated with nonarising is the arising; this is well-known.' In this way, the 'suchness of unity' (*zung 'jug pa'i de kho na nyid*) even though it is not the suchness that is found through reasoning, is the suchness that is found through direct perception without analysis (*ma dpyad pa'i mngon sum*), and from among these two, the latter is viewed to be superior. That is also the intent of the *Uttaratantra*.⁵⁶ *skye ba dang skye ba med pa zung du 'jug pa de nyid de kho na nyid du rtogs par bya yi / skye ba med tsam ni ma yin te / skye ba med pa'i sbyor ba yis / skye ba 'di ni rab tu bsgrags / shes pa'i gsung rab las so // zhes sogs rgyas par bshad pa de ltar zung du 'jug pa'i de kho na nyid ni / rigs pas rnyed pa'i de kho na nyid ma yin kyang / ma dpyad pa'i mngon sum gyis rnyed pa'i de kho na nyid yin la / de gnyis kyi phyi ma mchog tu bzhed de / rgyud bla ma'i dgongs pa yang yin.*

⁵⁵ *Chos rjes karma phrin las pa'i gsung 'bum las rdo rje mgur kyi 'phreng ba rnams*, vol. ga, 106–113: *rgya chad phyogs lhung spangs pa'i lta ba 'di // blo yis ma reg bcos ma'i chos min kyang // rgya nag lugs dang khyad par 'byed pa'i chos // 'di nyid bsgoms dang mngon sum lam yin no // bya rtsol re dogs mtshan ma las 'das kyang // bsam med kho na sgom du mi byed pas // shes dang shes bya so sor mi 'dzin pa // tsam gyis hwa shang lta dang mtshungs ma lags // rnam par rtog pas bsam mi khyab pa'i don // tha snyad tshig gis brjod par mi nus kyang // so so rang gis rig par bya ba nyid // yin phyir hwa shang blta las khyad par 'phags // nges pa'i don la lta dang lta bas dben // de don mthong bar 'dod na gnas lugs don // zab zhi spros dang bral ba'i sems nyid 'di // lta ba yin zhing lta ba'i yul yang de //*

beholds the nondual nature of mind which cannot be conceived by conceptual thought and cannot be labelled using conventional terms. Like his student Mi bskyod rdo rje and contemporaries Shākya mchog ldan and Chos grags ye shes, Karma phrin las identifies this goal of nondual awareness with *mahāmudrā* itself and maintains that its realization may occur independently of sūtric (intellectualistic) or tantric (ritualistic) techniques when a fortunate student is directly introduced to it through a qualified teacher's skillful means.

Conclusion

The Dwags po Mahāmudrā understanding of mental nonengagement as reflected in the views of the authors considered above appears to support Maitrīpa's interpretation of *amanasikāra* as mental engagement (*manasikāra*) of nonorigination, a mental nonengagement that, in fact, is nonorigination and thus not confined to dualistic appearances.⁵⁶ Moreover, being free from abiding in any extremes, this mental nonengagement is, at least by Chos grags ye shes, explicitly taken as the Madhyamaka view of Yūganaddhāpratiṣṭhāna, the nonfoundational Madhyamaka of Unity. Irrespective of whether the adept is involved in elaborate tantric practices or not, the practitioner is encouraged to engage in a direct realization of ultimate reality – emptiness or selflessness which is indicated by the privative “a” of *a-manasikāra*. The famous Bka' brgyud polymath Si tu Paṇ chen Chos kyi 'byung gnas (1700–1774), who worked on translations from Sanskrit into Tibetan, interpreted *amanasikāra* in this way too. In his commentary on the well-known *Mahāmudrā Prayer* by Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339), Chos kyi 'byung gnas emphasizes that the syllable *a-* of *amanasikāra* signifies emptiness free from all elaborations while *manasikāra* (*vid la byed pa*) points to mental engagement which is free from being mentally engaged in the sense of any clinging to emptiness, but rather is properly related to emptiness by directly realizing it:

The “a” of the Sanskrit [word] *amanasikāra* signifies the meaning of essencelessness, nonarising etc., emptiness, that is beyond all elaborations,

⁵⁶ See Higgins and Draszczuk 2016, vol. I: 344.

while the other syllables [*manasikāra*] signify mental engagement which is free from being mentally engaged in clinging to this empti[ness] in any way.⁵⁷

It is only through this immediacy in contemplative practice that the adept can get in touch with reality as it is. We may conclude by noting that the Bka' brgyud and Rnying ma master Rtse le Sna tshogs rang grol (1608–?) considered this Aṃanasiḱāra tradition of Saraha and Maitrīpa to be one of the two major strands of Indian Mahāmudrā which was also called “awareness-emptiness Mahāmudrā” (*rig stong phyag chen*).⁵⁸ He adds that it is this approach which was emphasized by Sgam po pa in his Mahāmudrā, the practice of coemergence (*phyag chen lhan cig skye sbyor*).⁵⁹

⁵⁷ *Nges don phyag rgya chen po'i smon lam gyi 'grel ba grub pa mchog gi zhal lung*, 1779–14: *legs sbyar gyi skad du a man si kar zhes 'byung ba'i a yig gis bdag med dang skye med la sogs pa spros pa thams cad las 'das pa'i stong nyid kyi don ston la / yi ge lhaq ma rnams kyi stong pa de nyid la 'ang zhen pa med par yid byed dang bral ba'i yid la byed pa ston pa /*

⁵⁸ The other is, according to Rtse le Sna tshogs rang grol, Mahāmudrā as coemergent wisdom of bliss and emptiness (*bde stong lhan skyes kyi ye shes*).

⁵⁹ *Smin byed kyi dbang dang grol lam phyag rgya chen po'i gnad don gyi dri ba lan du phul ba skal bzang dga' byed bdud rtsi'i 'dod 'jo*, 84–85: “Concerning this ‘mahāmudrā meditation’ which is as renowned as the sun and moon, there are many divergent expositions according to the [differing] systems of recognizing [mind itself]. Even in India, Nāropa together with his guru Tilopa primarily emphasized skillful means (*thabs*) based on the two aspects of means and insight (*thabs shes*). They expounded Mahāmudrā as coemergent wisdom of bliss and emptiness (*bde stong lhan skyes kyi ye shes*). The tradition of going to the very heart of the path of skillful means through direct experience was taken up by Mar pa, Mi la, Ras chung and others. Maitrīpa and his teacher Śavaripa (*ri khrod dbang phyug*), together with the latter’s teacher Saraha primarily emphasized discerning insight and emptiness (*shes rab stong pa nyid*) which they called Mahāmudrā of awareness and emptiness (*rig stong phyag rgya chen po*) or *amanasikāra* [i.e., ‘mental nonengagement’]. This tradition of expounding *mahāmudrā* as the real primordial knowing (*don gyi ye shes*) of merely abiding in [this] uncontrived state that continued from Mar[pa] to Mi[la] was made to flourish by the incomparable Sgam po pa.” *sgom phyag rgya chen po zhes nyi zla ltar grags pa 'di nyid la yang ngos 'dzin lugs kyi bzhed pa mi gcig pa mang ste / rgya gar du yang nā ro pa dang de nyid kyi bla ma til li pa dang bcas pa ni / thabs shes gnyis las thabs gtso bor mdzad de / bde stong lhan skyes kyi ye shes la phyag rgya chen por bzhed cing / nyams len kyang thabs lam la gnad du bsnun par mdzad pa'i phyag srol mar pa mi la ras chung sogs kyi 'dzi pa dang / mai tri pa dang de'i bla ma ri khrod dbang phyug / de'i bla ma sa ra ha dang bcas pas ni shes rab stong pa nyid gtso bor mdzad de / rig stong phyag rgya chen po'am / a ma na si kā ra ste / yid la mi byed pa ces bya ba ma bcas sor 'dzag kha na'i don gyi ye shes la phyag rgya chen por bzhed pa'i phyag srol mar mi nas brgyud de mnyam med sgam po pas spel bar mdzad la //* tr. David Higgins, see Higgins and Draszczzyk 2016 vol. 1: 362–363.

As this short journey through some of the defenses of Sgam po pa's Bka' brgyud Mahāmudrā teachings advanced by Karma pa Mi bskyod rdo rje, Shākya mchog ldan, Zhwa dmar Chos grags ye shes and Karma phrin las pa has attempted to show, these scholars (among many others) stood united in rejecting Sa skya Paṇḍita's criticism of so-called "present-day Mahāmudrā" as being similar to Heshang's teaching system insofar as it advocates mental nonengagement (*amanasikāra*) in the sense of self-induced blank mindedness achieved through stilling all thought activity. They unanimously interpreted mental nonengagement not as a perpetual and total cessation of all mental activity,⁶⁰ but rather as the well-founded awareness of the unity of appearance and emptiness which prevails when dualistic thoughts have ceased. They also followed the Indian Buddhist Siddha tradition in maintaining that the realization of *mahāmudrā* depends more on the affective and intersubjective factors that come into play during personal instructions – where the student's devotion and teacher's blessing converge – than on the respective methods applied in mainstream sūtric and tantric traditions.

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Abbreviations

- D Derge edition of Bstan 'gyur. *The Tibetan Tripiṭaka*, Taipei Edition. Taipei, Taiwan: SMC Publishing, 1992.
- MKsb Karma pa Mi bskyod rdo rje (the Eighth Karma pa), *Dpal rgyal ba karma pa sku 'phreng brgyad pa mi bskyod rdo rje gsung 'bum*, 26 vols., ed. by Karma Bde legs. Lhasa, 2004.
- Msb Mar pa chos kyi blo gros, *Gsung 'bum Chos kyi blo gros, (Lho brag mar pa lo tswa'i gsung 'bum)*. Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skun khang, 2011.
- P Peking edition of Bstan 'gyur. *The Tibetan Tripiṭaka*, Peking Edition. Tokyo/Kyoto: Tibetan Tripiṭaka Research Institute, 1957.
- SCsb Shākya mchog ldan, *Collected Writings of Gser mdog paṇ chen Shākya mchog ldan*: SCsb_(A) Delhi: Ngagwang Topgyal, 1995; SCsb_(B) Kathmandu, Nepal, Sachen International, 2008; SCsb_(C) Rdzong Sar Khams bye, Tibet: Slob gling thub stan dar gyas gling, 2006–2007.

⁶⁰ See the article by David Higgins in this volume.

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ABSTRACT

One of the more influential responses to the 8th century Tibetan Bsam yas Debate was Sa skya Paṇḍita's (1182–1251) critique of "present day" non-gradual Mahāmudrā teachings as promoting the same kind of *amanasikāra* (mental non-engagement) involving the cessation of all thought activity that was attributed to the Chinese Chan contestant Heshang Moheyan. While the historical background and reasons for Sa Paṇ's pointed criticism have been well-documented by D. Jackson, the extensive and often illuminating responses by Bka' brgyud pa

scholars of the classical period have received little attention. This paper examines responses by certain renowned Bka' brgyud pa masters from the 15th and 16th centuries, with a particular emphasis on the issue of *amanasikāra* teachings as taught in the Dwags po Mahāmudrā tradition originating from Sgam po pa Bsod nams rin chen (1079–1153). A survey of writings on this subject by the Eighth Karma pa Mi bskyod rdo rje (1507–1554), Shākya mchog ldan (1428–1507), Zhwa dmar Chos grags ye shes (1453–1524), and Karma phrin las pa Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1456–1539), confirm that the Dwags po Mahāmudrā approach to mental nonengagement is in line with Maitrīpa's interpretation of *amanasikāra* as an unmediated direct perception of reality. In other words, *amanasikāra* stands for a well-founded awareness of the unity of appearance and emptiness which prevails when dualistic thoughts have ceased. These authors are unanimous that when Sgam po pa emphasized, for those of highest acumen, a nongradual path of direct perception of ultimate reality which does not necessarily involve elaborate tantric practices, he was simply elaborating a system of thought and practice that was already well-established by the Indian Buddhist siddhas and their commentators.