

## THE TOPIC OF THE TWENTY SAṂGHAS

In Indian and Tibetan Buddhist commentarial literature on the *Prajñāpāramitā* (*Perfection of Wisdom*), the “Twenty Saṁghas” (Skt. *viṃśatiprabhedasaṁgha*; Tib. *dge 'dun nyi shu*) refers to the stages through which Noble Beings (Skt. *ārya*; Tib. *'phags pa*) may pass in their progress toward *nirvāṇa*<sup>1</sup> through various lifetimes in various cosmological realms. The Twenty Varieties of the Saṁgha is a special topic within the Tibetan monastic curriculum and is considered by Indo-Tibetan<sup>2</sup> commentators of the *The Ornament for Clear Realization* (AA; *abhisamayālaṅkāra* ≈ *mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan*) tradition to be one of the most difficult topics to comprehend. Its importance as a system reveals not only a soteriological worldview, but also shows the hermeneutical and exegetical strategies that Tibetan authors utilize to bring coherence to cryptic, terse verses found in Indian *śāstras* such as the AA. The Twenty Saṁghas in the AA represents an extension of terminology and doctrinal principles found in the *śrāvaka* vehicle employed as a skillful heuristic device to generate awareness of the *Mahāyāna Saṁgha*. As a typology of ideal figures, the Tibetan exegesis of the Twenty Saṁghas, particularly as exhibited by the savant Tsong kha pa (1357–1419), demonstrates a unity in the diversity between the vehicles of *śrāvakas*, *pratyekabuddhas*, and *bodhisattvas* illuminating the ideal of the *saṁgha*.

The subject matter of the “Twenty Saṁghas” encompasses a comprehensive list of the stages through which Noble Beings (*ārya*) may pass in their progress toward *nirvāṇa*. This typological list of twenty<sup>3</sup> does not provide a description of any one individual’s path to enlightenment; rather, it enumerates all of the *possible* stages through which any given individual might pass, depending upon factors such as that individual’s cosmological circumstances and the acuity of his or her faculties. Thus, the Twenty Saṁghas presents the defining characteristics of these individuals, providing a complete picture of all possible states on the path to enlightenment. Indian and Tibetan *Mahāyāna*

Buddhist scholars regard this topic as crucially important, and its importance is reflected in the inclusion of the Twenty *Samghas* in the ten topics of special instruction (*avavāda*) mentioned in the body of literature surrounding the AA. The exegetical system of the AA stipulates that *bodhisattvas* must train in these topics of special instruction in order to attain complete omniscience (*sarvākārajñatā*).

Although an extremely complex subject, the topic's title, the "Twenty *Samghas*" (*dge 'dun nyi shu*), is well known to Tibetan Buddhists. The topic serves as a *Mahāyāna* Buddhist instruction that centers on one of the three essential components of Tibetan Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the *Samgha*. In a public discourse on the Stages of the Path (*lam rim*), the Fourteenth Dalai Lama explains the meaning of these "Three Jewels" (Tib. *dkon mchog gsum*; Skt. *triratna*):

When one meditates on taking refuge in the Three Jewels, one should first generate a recollection of their individual qualities and potencies. . . . [T]aking refuge in the Buddha means that one should meditate on the qualities, wisdoms and powers of a Buddha's body, speech, and mind; refuge in Dharma means that one meditates on all the paths and practices leading to the truth of cessation, or the peace of Nirvāṇa; and refuge in the *Samgha* requires an awareness of the twenty types of *Samgha*. (Mullin, 1985: 108)

As the distinguished Theravādin Buddhist scholar, Walpola Rahula (1978: 55) has noted, it is important to clearly understand the distinction between what is termed the "spiritual" *saṃgha* and the "institutional" *saṃgha*. The "institutional" *saṃgha* is considered to be the Buddhist community that consists of monks (*bhikṣu*), nuns (*bhikṣuṇī*), and lay followers (*upāsaka*) who follow a code of behavior given in the monastic laws of the *Vinaya*. Custodians of the Dharma, they are the organized, visible, representative body of the *Samgha* Jewel and are responsible for its transmission and perpetuation. To understand the "spiritual" *saṃgha* requires an awareness of the twenty types of individuals who are considered to be Noble Beings (*ārya*). Noble Beings are those who have developed a cognitive and meditative understanding of reality (*tattva*) through following the practices of the Buddhist path. The insight gained in this understanding has soteriological<sup>4</sup> value and advances an individual toward *nirvāṇa*. As the renowned Tibetan scholar Geshe Sopa (1985: 156) has mentioned, when an individual attains this level of insight into reality, a stage known as the Noble Path (*āryamārga*), that individual begins to perform all the functions of the *saṃgha* within his or her own person.

The *saṃgha* in this sense refers to the twenty types of Noble Beings who are making progress toward spiritual emancipation. Therefore, Tibetan Buddhists conceive of the *saṃgha* both as an outer object of refuge and as a community of people who follow the values taught by the Buddha, a community to which they can look for guidance and fellowship. Tibetan Buddhists also understand the *saṃgha* to represent “ideal figures as the embodiment and proof of the path” (Buswell and Gimello, 1992: 10). The *saṃgha* in this sense represents those qualities of an ideal figure that provide the structure and worldview in which soteriological results of the path take place. Dreyfus has demonstrated (1997) that the study of the path is the central concept of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. As Buswell and Gimello (1992: 6) suggest, the path “incorporates, underlies, or presupposes everything else in Buddhism, from the simplest act of charity to the most refined meditative experience and the most rigorous philosophical argument. [It] . . . directs attention . . . to a general pattern of discipline encompassing both the whole life of the individual and corporate life of the whole Buddhist community.” Thus, the topic of the Twenty *Samghas* is a soteriological model that is intimately related with the study of the path to *nirvāṇa*.

While soteriologically significant, the objectified, codified, and detailed scholastic descriptions of these ideal figures do not serve as practical guides to Buddhist practice, nor do they provide details of actual spiritual experience. Rather, the topic of the Twenty *Samghas* serves as an archetypal pattern of the worldview in which spiritual liberation is possible for the individual practitioner. What Dreyfus (1997: 62) states for the AA in general, can also be applied to the AA’s special topic of the Twenty *Samghas*; namely, that it “provides the Tibetan tradition with the framework that makes a narrative of spiritual progress possible and introduces an element of closure without which the commitment required by Buddhist practices cannot be sustained.” The topic of the Twenty *Samghas* has this kind of direct soteriological meaning for the Tibetan Buddhist.

The special topic of the Twenty *Samghas* is found in the twenty-third and twenty-fourth verses of the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*. Sopa (1989: 212) give a brief description of this topic as follows:

The twenty members of the spiritual community represent a classification of the location and number of lives remaining for practitioners on the way to attaining the fruits of Stream-enterer (*śrota-āpanna*,<sup>5</sup> *rgyun du zhugs pa*), Once-returner (*sakṛdāgamin*, *lan gcig phyir ‘ong*), Never-returner (*anāgāmin*, *phyir mi ‘ong*), and Arhat (*dgra bcom pa*).

Classification into the one of the four results—Stream-enterer, Once-returned, Non-returned, and *Arhat*—is one of the oldest categorical lists found in the history of Buddhism. The topic is well known to Buddhist Studies, particularly in relation to the Pāli and the Theravādin tradition. The list of four results organizes a sequence of progressive attainments based on moral virtue, meditative cultivation, and cognitive insight through practicing the Noble Eightfold Path (*ārya-aṣṭāṅga-mārga*). In general, a Stream-enterer has fully integrated the stream of the Buddha's teaching (dharma) and is a Noble Being who will never be reborn in a lower cosmological realm as a hell-being, ghost, or animal. A Once-returned will be reborn once more in the desire realm, the ordinary world dominated by sensual gratification. A Never-returned, or Non-returned, will never be born in the desire realm but will attain liberation among the form realm heavens. *Arhats* have completely overcome karma and mental afflictions (*kleśa*) and are liberated from *saṃsāra*, the unending cycle of birth and death.

Within Tibetan monastic traditions, the Twenty Varieties of the *Samgha* is considered a special topic of investigation among the 173 topics addressed in the study of the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* and the related *Prajñāpāramitā* (*phar phyin*) literature. Within these 173 topics are four that are regarded as distinctive and difficult to comprehend (*rtogs dka' ba*): the teaching concerning dependent origination (*rten 'brel*), the teaching related to the hermeneutics of distinguishing between definitive and interpretable scriptures (*drang nges*) along with the difference between *Madhyamaka* and *Yogācāra* interpretations of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, the teachings concerning form and formless realm meditative absorption (*bsam gzugs*), and finally the topic presented *here* concerning the teaching of the Twenty Varieties of the *Samgha* (*dge 'dun nyi shu*).

#### METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Certainly we could try to interpret the earliest material concerning the Twenty *Samghas*—that is, the root verses of the AA and the prose of the *Pañcaviṃśatiprajñāpāramitāsūtra*—without recourse to any of the Indian commentaries or later Tibetan subcommentaries. However, this type of investigation has already been undertaken in the works of Edward Conze (1954b, 1957). The results of such a study appear, in the light of what the Indo-Tibetan commentarial tradition has to offer, to be superficial and even misleading. Even if Conze's readings of the verses related to the Twenty *Samghas* are historically correct and represent the author of the AA's true intention,<sup>6</sup> we do not gain any insight into the meaning these verses had for the Buddhist scholars of

this textual tradition nor the soteriological purpose in understanding them. We aim to present a detailed discussion of the subject matter that addresses these issues by following the interpretation of the AA in the later Tibetan commentaries, specifically the works of Tsong kha pa. We have in mind what Richard Gombrich speaks of when he comments that it “is not . . . that we have to accept the Buddhist tradition uncritically, but that if it interprets texts as coherent, that interpretation deserves the most serious consideration” (Gombrich, 1990: 11). Our approach to the AA by means of the Tibetan commentaries, specifically the work of Tsong kha pa, is similar in manner to the way R. M. L. Gethin has utilized subsequent Pāli commentarial literature in interpreting Buddhist material from the *Nikāyas*.<sup>7</sup> As Gethin states:

We are concerned . . . to come to grips with what actually interested the minds of those who compiled the literature . . . in the light of what is really known with any certainty about the history of early Buddhist literature, I suggest the burden of proof lies with those who might wish to say that the subsequent tradition has got it fundamentally wrong. However, in order to do so they would first have to demonstrate that they had properly appreciated what the subsequent tradition . . . has to say, and this, the world of Buddhist scholarship is not . . . in a position to do. (Gethin, 1992: 16)

I should clarify here that my approach to understanding and analyzing this material is characterized as “emic” rather than “etic.” That is, in my exegesis, I have utilized categories, terms, and structures within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist intellectual milieu in an effort to “think along”<sup>8</sup> with this tradition of scholarship.

If we were to engage in an “etic” analysis and to approach the material utilizing appropriated conceptual or linguistic apparatuses, our analysis could indeed yield interesting results. For instance, we could appropriate theoretical models from psychology and analyze the ideal figures within the Twenty *Samghas* in terms of psychological types or “case histories.”<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, amplifying upon Dreyfus’s thematic notion that the worldview we are reconstructing is a “narrative of spiritual progress,” we could approach the Twenty *Samghas* in the light of an appropriation of structuralist literary theory, particularly through the work of Roland Barthes’s structural analysis of narratives. Through this appropriation of structuralist theory, our approach to the study of the Twenty *Samghas* could be seen as a descriptive structural analysis of a multilayered narrative of Buddhist soteriology.<sup>10</sup>

However, I think that it is imperative to come to terms with the tradition’s exegesis on its own terms as a system. As Ruegg (1995: 157)

has suggested, an emic analysis “provides as good a foundation as any for generalizing and comparative study, one that will not superimpose from the outside extraneous modes of thinking and interpretative grids.” Once we are able to come to terms with a tradition’s conceptual system—in this instance the typological analysis of ideal figures found in the Twenty *Samghas*—we can then proceed to reflect upon the implications that such a system has in our understanding of that culture.

Why should we, as modern readers, have an interest in scholastic accounts of ideal figures embodied in the Twenty *Samghas*? Is this not undue attention placed, according to some scholars, on the “precise views of several obscure monk-scholars on exactly how many *Arhats* can dance on the tip of the proverbial head of an *Abhidharma* pin”? To follow the trajectories of such sentiments would lead to thinking away rather than thinking through major strands of Buddhist cultural formations.

One way to think about the relevance of ideal figures depicted in the multiple layers of the Twenty *Samghas* is by way of analogy to the structure and stages of educational progress in modern institutions of secondary education. The comparison is construed in terms of a generalization of the sociocultural markers of attainment and ideals of cultivated progress reflected between Indo-Tibetan *Mahāyāna* Buddhist cultural systems and North American modern ones. The reader should keep in mind that Indo-Tibetan Buddhist cultural systems are embedded in a worldview where multiple lifetimes, multiple cosmological realms, as well as theories and practices oriented around karma and rebirth are accepted as a given. Needless to say, such cultural formations do not underlie North American institutions.

Nevertheless, in such institutions, there are three degrees of attainment, the BA (Bachelor of Arts), MA (Master of Arts), and the most distinguished attainment—the PhD degree (Doctor of Philosophy). Progress is marked by credits achieved and knowledge gained through courses of study that may terminate in the BA, or the slightly more advanced MA. A student may become inspired to strive for the long, arduous course of study resulting in the eminent PhD degree.

Likewise in the Indo-Tibetan *Mahāyāna* Buddhist path systems of the AA, there are three analogous degrees of attainment—the *Śrāvaka Arhat* (BA), *Pratyekabuddha* (MA), and *Mahāyāna Arhat*, or Buddhahood (PhD). Progress in these degrees is marked by states of knowledge that have been realized and defilements that have been eradicated in relation to the individual’s course of study, meditative practice, and insight sustained by an ethos of moral virtue. All of these degrees have multiple stages within them that demarcate progress in attainment. Like academic honors for eminence in scholarship, some stages of attainment are marked by distinction (Tib. *khyad par can*) in their progress.

The first degree of *Śrāvaka Arhat*, like a traditional BA, has four stages marking progress in the course of this degree. There is the novice stage of Stream-enterer, like the collegiate level of freshman. Then the second stage or level of Once-returner is analogous to a sophomore. Next there is the Non-returner, like a junior pertaining to the class below that of senior in American colleges and universities. The final period of time leading up to the attainment of *Arhat* is the course of the collegiate senior. Although not the top or most esteemed achievement, the BA degree is worthy of attainment and has value. Likewise, the state of *Arhatship* attained by a *Śrāvaka*, from an Indo-Tibetan *Mahāyāna* Buddhist perspective, is a valued attainment although not the most distinguished.

The attainment of *Pratyekabuddha* is comparable to an MA degree, slightly higher than the BA; it may be preceded by the attainment of stages leading to the degree of *Śrāvaka Arhat*. The *Pratyekabuddha* is a solitary individual and achieves the degree in a manner similar to how some modern individuals may achieve the MA—through distance education, without the direct presence of a teacher.

The final degree, and most prestigious, is that of Buddhahood, full and perfectly complete awakening. The individual who undertakes the long, arduous journey to the highest degree is the *bodhisattva*. A *bodhisattva*, like a modern graduate or medical student, masters other degrees and attainments in the course of reaching Buddhahood. *Bodhisattvas* train and acquire multiple skills while self-sacrificing immediate resources toward a higher aim that accomplishes the mutual benefit of themselves and others. As Jan Nattier (2003: 134) notes, the course of a *bodhisattva*'s training is analogous to a "medical school student who devotes herself night and day to solitary study, cutting herself off from family and friends and withdrawing from normal social interactions, but with the ultimate aim of being able to use the skills she is acquiring to accomplish the healing of others." In this self-sacrificing altruistic process, advanced *bodhisattvas*, those who are Noble Beings, gain the ability to help beings and guide them in the course of their attainment. Such *bodhisattvas* are like modern graduate students who teach collegiate-level courses leading to the BA. At advanced levels, Noble Being *bodhisattvas* travel to various cosmological worlds where Buddhas are present, that is, Buddha-fields, to receive advice in furthering their training. The training of an advanced *bodhisattva* is analogous to a resident physician, who trains under the supervision of senior doctors (i.e., Buddhas), until they become fully trained and certified doctors to create their own sphere of influence and practice, that is, a Buddha-field.

Ideal figures in Buddhist discourse represent such analogous cultural values of attainment. A relative explaining around the kitchen

table that his child is a “senior” in college, may have listeners who do not fully understand all that is entailed in that classification; nevertheless, parent and listener both know that this position of an “educational aspirant” plays an important part in marking progress and attainment within a North American cultural worldview. Likewise, a classification such as Stream-enterer marks attainment and conveys the values of spiritual progress within a Buddhist cultural worldview.

Along these lines, the guidelines, accounts, and scholastic discourse for achieving the status and attainments exemplified in the ideal figures found in the topic of the Twenty *Samghas* is analogous to academic program guidelines for achieving academic degrees in secondary education. Such academic guidelines provide the ideal structures and sequence for attaining marks of progress toward the desired goal. However, such guidelines do not provide an experiential account of the daily struggles, tribulations, and triumphs of the educational process. Rather, they provide a map of how the educational process is envisioned.

Likewise, the topic of the Twenty *Samghas* in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist cultures serves as a guideline map for marking degrees of progress in the attainment of ideal goals. A map is not territory (Smith, 1978), but rather provides an abstract and reduced representation of the structures of spatial relations between locations. The lack of congruity within the territory covered is a distortion that allows for a map’s utility. For instance, a visitor to London who wishes to travel on the London Underground trains, also known as The Tube, gains intelligibility and comprehension with a map. A map of The Tube facilitates the ability to quickly convey needed, accurate information to the traveler through its use of color codes for the various routes, the labeling and depiction of stations for changing trains, and its reduction of the geography of the underground routes from the actual meandering geography of the track. Although geographically inaccurate, maps of the London Underground provide a coherent overview of a complex system. As Jonathan Z. Smith (2004: 59n115) notes, “Maps are structures of transformation, not structures of reproduction.” Likewise, the topic of the Twenty *Samghas* is a conceptual map that provides a coherent overview of the complex processes of Buddhist soteriological transformation. The topic of the Twenty *Samghas* embodies the mapping of the temporal and spatial relations and structures through which Buddhist meditative and cognitive processes are envisioned in the transformations from unenlightened states or statuses to enlightened or awakened ones.

Accounts of ideal figures in Buddhist cultures, besides mapping degrees of attainment and stages in Buddhist path systems, also serve



as sociological points of reference within Buddhist cultures. As Jan Nattier (2003: 105) has recently noted with regard to Pāli-based Buddhist cultures:

It is worth recalling that even an unactualized ideal can play a significant role in the life of a community. While few Theravāda Buddhists today, for example, would claim to have met an Arhat (much less to be one), the goal of Arhatship still serves as a point of reference and as an ultimate, if distant, value for members of that tradition.

Accounts of ideal figures, actualized or unactualized, have great purport in the history of Buddhist cultural formations. Mainstream and *Mahāyāna* forms of Buddhism, elite and popular groups, in South, Central, and East Asian forms of Buddhism have been influenced by these markers of progress and the qualities they embody. The ideal figures embodied in the Twenty *Samṅhas* serve as an indexical reference for attainment throughout Buddhist literature. In the traditional genres of the monastic code of the *Vinaya*, the discourses in the *Nikāyas*, or in the biographic morality tales of the Buddha's previous lives such as the *Divyāvadāna*, all reference such ideal figures as signifiers of Buddhist cultural values of attainment.

In Tibet, as we have noted, the Twenty *Samṅhas* is a topic of collegiate-level monastic study. The topic is mentioned in public lectures given by Tibetan Buddhist teachers to members of local communities. The Twenty *Samṅhas* finds a place even at holiday times of periodic commemoration and celebration in Tibetan Buddhist culture. The Great Prayer Festival (*mon lam chen mo*) in Lhasa would witness occasions where monks would have contests to see who could enumerate all the different potential types of ideal figures found from within the Twenty *Samṅhas* (for example, there can be over twelve thousand different types of Non-returner based on differences of faculty, realization, and cosmological location among others; Geshe Sopa oral communication).

As the world of Buddhist scholarship has neither fully investigated nor completely exposed what the subsequent Tibetan Buddhist tradition has to say about the topic of the Twenty *Samṅhas*, we will do so by means of Tsong kha pa's commentaries. Related to our concern about investigating what the Tibetan Buddhist tradition has to say concerning the Twenty *Samṅhas*, at this point I will briefly clarify some interpretative issues related to our endeavor. Principally, I wish to explain the hermeneutical situation and strategy of Tsong kha pa in interpreting the topic of the Twenty *Samṅhas*, as well as our own

hermeneutical situation and strategy in interpreting Tsong kha pa's understanding of the Twenty *Samghas*.

#### TSONG KHA PA'S HERMENEUTICAL STRATEGY

This study of the Twenty *Samghas* attempts to reconstruct Tsong kha pa's own intended standpoint with regard to the Twenty *Samghas*. The recovery of any author's "intent" is a problematic notion, particularly in relation to subtle nuances of philosophical speculation. The intentions seen in any given author's composition may be shaped by a range of unapparent forces, such as sociopolitical or economic concerns, which allow for an author's intent to be multilayered in nature. In this study of Tsong kha pa's thought on the Twenty *Samghas* I have chosen to bracket such unapparent forces and focus rather on the ostensible intention found through a bare-bones reading of the texts. Reading Tsong kha pa's texts in a manner that constructs an ostensible intention may be artificial or fictional in that the actual reality of his alleged intentions may be more complex or comprised of unapparent intentions that may contradict the ostensible. Nevertheless, such a reading of the ostensible intention of Tsong kha pa's understanding of the Twenty *Samghas* is justifiable in that it serves as a useful heuristic device that allows us to construct a plausible surface intent of what Tsong kha pa believes himself to be doing. This ostensible intent may not be the one and only real intent of Tsong kha pa's endeavor, but such a reading allows us to bracket a range of potential interpretations that are indefinite as to their plausibility.

Along these lines, the construction of an ostensible intent in regard to our Indian authors is problematic. Most notably, the author of the AA's ostensible intent in regard to the Twenty *Samghas* is not clear. As we will see in chapter 4, the AA's verses on the Twenty *Samghas* are cryptic and grammatically vague enough to support, outside the context of any commentarial input, almost any interpretative stance that one wishes to posit. Likewise, the recovery of the principal Indian commentators' (Ārya Vimuktisena, ca. sixth century, and Haribhadra, ca. eighth century) interpretative stance on the Twenty *Samghas* is also problematic. Their commentaries do provide sufficient evidence to calculate how they arrive at enumerating the Twenty *Samghas*, but there are insufficient details to allow us to understand the underlying assumptions of how they arrive at their conclusions. Tsong kha pa's interpretive stance offers a viable commentarial exegesis of the Twenty *Samghas*, which may not be *the* objectively correct interpretation (if there can be one), but certainly appears to be an

interpretation that is coherent, refined, and well informed. One could say that what I am doing is eliminating certain interpretations, and namely Tsong kha pa's interpretation, from being an unreasonable one based on the evidence we currently have.

In this regard, as Ruegg (1967: 44) has spoken eloquently of scholars within Tibetan culture as representing the "leading forerunners" of those practicing Indology, we can perhaps extend this notion of Tibetan scholarship, in this instance the Buddhist scholarship of Tsong kha pa, as representative of a leading forerunner in Buddhist Theology. Parallel to the developments in late twentieth-century North America Buddhist scholarship of a "Buddhist Theology" (see Jackson and Makransky, 2000), Tibetan scholars like Tsong kha pa are "Buddhist theologians." Innovative in their interpretation and systemization, they see themselves as rationally reconstructing the logical consequences of how Indian *Mahāyāna* Buddhist systems of thought might be expected to evolve. In this context, scholars like Tsong kha pa are specialists in internal history (Tillemans, 1990: 16; 1983: 312). That is, given the key ideas of an Indian Buddhist author, we should see Tsong kha pa as drawing logical conclusions of what could have been said, as opposed to the concern of external history, with its emphasis on what was actually said, or what actually took place.

Tsong kha pa appears to be engaged in two exegetical exercises while interpreting the Twenty *Samghas*. First, Tsong kha pa sees himself as properly recovering and presenting the intentions (*dgongs pa*) of the two principal Indian AA commentators, Ārya Vimuktisena and Haribhadra. For Tsong kha pa (*Golden Garland* 1970: 253), although "most Indian and Tibetan scholars have searched out this intention," they have not developed a clear interpretation of these commentators' exegesis. Second, Tsong kha pa sees himself as establishing "his own system" (*rang lugs*) of interpreting the Twenty *Samghas* by means of textual Buddhist hermeneutics. This is especially clear in Tsong kha pa's *Stairway* (see below), where he engages in exegesis and analysis of "textual systems" (*gzhung lugs*) in order to arrive at the proper understanding of the defining characteristics (Skt. *lakṣaṇa*; Tib. *mtshan nyid*) of ideal figures.

Tsong kha pa's analysis and exegesis is shaped by traditional Buddhist hermeneutical strategies such as the "Four Reliances"<sup>11</sup> (*rton pa bzhi, catuḥpratīsarāṇa*): "Rely on the doctrine (*dharma*) and not on the person (*pudgala*); rely on the meaning (*artha*) and not on the word (*vyāñjana*); rely on the definitive meaning (*nītārtha*) and not on the interpretable meaning (*neyārtha*); rely on direct realization (*jñāna*) and not on discursive consciousness (*vijñāna*) (*Stairway* 292)." For Tsong kha pa, the scope of this hermeneutical strategy is found in conjunction

with an explanation through the proof of scripture (*āgama*) and reasoning (*yukti*).<sup>12</sup> Traditionally, adherence to the doctrine is not dependent on human authority but is based on personal reasoning (*yukti*), on what one has oneself known (*jñāta*), seen (*dṛṣṭa*), and grasped (*vidita*).<sup>13</sup> Tsong kha pa utilizes reasoning to distinguish the proper analysis of the Buddha's scriptures (*rgyal ba'i gsung rab 'pyad pa*) along with the citation of Indian *śāstras* to verify his conclusions. Tsong kha pa's exegetical procedure therefore involves a close reading of the texts, bringing out what he sees as the correct understanding of a word's meaning to substantiate an Indian *śāstra's* intention (*bstan bcos kyi dgongs pa*).<sup>14</sup>

In this instance, Tsong kha pa walks a fine line between utilizing reasoning in determining proper textual exegesis and paying his respects to Indian Buddhist lineage figures such as Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, Haribhadra, and so on. One of the principal aims on Tsong kha pa's exegetical agenda is to establish a single unified intention between the scholastic systems of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu in constructing a coherent structure to the Twenty *Samghas*. At the same time, Tsong kha pa aims to develop a system of interpreting the Twenty *Samghas* that can be understood through multiple purviews. In other words, Tsong kha pa's exegesis is such that it produces an awareness of the Twenty *Samghas* that is coherent from the perspective of either a *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha*, or *bodhisattva* (*Stairway 270: theg pa gsum gyi gang zag rnam kyi mngon rtogs rgyud la bskyes pa'i tshul la sogs pa'i rnam gzhag*).

Thus these aforementioned hermeneutical strategies are present throughout the texts in which Tsong kha pa gives an exegesis on the Twenty *Samghas*. In utilizing these strategies, Tsong kha pa sees himself as recovering the authorial intentions of Haribhadra and Ārya Vimuktisena and, in the process, recovering the intention of the AA.

#### HERMENEUTICAL STRATEGIES IN APPROACHING THE TWENTY SAMGHAS

I should mention at the onset that our endeavor is exegetical<sup>15</sup> in nature. I have attempted to present an interpretation of Tsong kha pa's thought on the Twenty *Samghas* through a close reading of the relevant texts, along with an accumulation and ordering of philological, historical, and textual data. In evaluating Tsong kha pa's approach, I have applied my own presuppositions to his intentions based on the historical context of his life when he wrote on the Twenty *Samghas*. In this regard, when evaluating the Buddhist scholarship of Tsong kha pa we may be able to posit institutional and sociopolitical concerns,

particularly in some of Tsong kha pa's later works written at a more mature stage of his life. However, with regard to the intentions surrounding the topic of the Twenty *Samghas* that were written in his youth (see chapter 2), Tsong kha pa's concerns in this instance are at least in part to establish and develop his scholastic ability in textual hermeneutics. The exegetical strategies and techniques that Tsong kha pa employs in writing on the Twenty *Samghas* in his youth can be seen to be the foundation of the hermeneutic approach that culminates later in his life in his masterpiece of *Mahāyāna* Buddhist hermeneutics, the *Legs bshad snying po* (Thurman, 1984). In this instance of writing on the Twenty *Samghas*, Tsong kha pa's concerns are also in the soteriological implications of his reading. His primary concern is siding with an interpretation that allows for the Twenty *Samghas* to be understood as representing stages of gradual progression toward the liberation from suffering, rather than one that supports sudden, instantaneous progression, or progress that allows for one to "skip over" certain stages. How Tsong kha pa elucidates these concerns in his interpretation of the Twenty *Samghas* will be presented in later chapters and discussed in the conclusion.

Tsong kha pa is important for us in that his decisions regarding the proper interpretation of Indian texts, and in this instance, the interpretation regarding the Twenty *Samghas* in the AA, framed the interpretations for the entire *Dge lugs pa* school that followed after him. His interpretation came to shape Tibetan Buddhist's definitive understanding of one of the three essential components of the Buddhist religion, the *Samgha*. In letting Tsong kha pa speak in his own voice, without being obscured "by the lenses of Dge lug pa commentarial scholarship," (Jinpa, 2000: 5) I am trying to recover the interpretation of the "man" and not the subsequent "movement." An understanding of Tsong kha pa's manner of interpretation, rather than the interpretation of him by subsequent commentators, allows us to have insight into the formative processes that lead to what van der Kuijp (1983: 45) suggests was Tsong kha pa's great achievement, the reevaluation of Indian Buddhist *sūtras* and *śāstras* resulting in a innovative division and hierarchical arranging of texts of "definitive" and "interpretable" purport.

In this reconstruction and appropriation of a coherent presentation of Tsong kha's system of the Twenty *Samghas*, the comparative elements in our study have the nature of "intra-Buddhist" scholasticism. That is, I will be noting correspondences and comparisons with other Buddhist scholastic accounts of ideal figures. In documenting an overall uniform coherence in the scholastic Buddhist approach to categorical descriptions of ideal figures on the path, I wish to present a

system of interpretation of one man who has been greatly influential in the philosophy and practice of Buddhism in Tibet.

In a constructive postmodern<sup>16</sup> approach, one reappropriates or reconstructs traditional worldviews in a critical manner without recourse to a deconstructive, relativistic, or eliminative hermeneutic that grinds down purpose, meaning, and soteriological concerns to the point of nihilism. In other words, we are not interested in totally deconstructing Tsong kha pa's work on the Twenty *Samghas* based on minor historical, textual, or hermeneutical problems, if they should happen to appear. The context of our endeavor is to arrive at an overall understanding of the Twenty *Samghas* as a coherent system of soteriological thought within Tibetan Buddhism. In this sense our study is diachronically located in fifteenth-century Tibet. The content of the subject matter therefore consists of a synchronic analysis of materials located in this timeframe, although the continuities of the subject matter may reach back to the fifth century and the basis of the system back to the time of the Buddha (Frauwallner, 1995). Thus we avoid a deconstruction that questions the historicity of Indian Buddhist texts attributed to Maitreyaṅātha, Asaṅga, or Vasubandhu and/or the viability of Tsong kha pa's doctrinal system of the Twenty *Samghas* only in relation to Pāli *Nikāya* materials.

In the Twenty *Samghas*, there is enough textual evidence to support Tsong kha pa's presentation as being reasonable, but not necessarily *the* one and only correct interpretation of the twenty-third and twenty-fourth verse of the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*'s first chapter. Our approach therefore primarily intends to demonstrate the doctrinal importance of the Twenty *Samghas* and their soteriological significance for the Tibetan Buddhists who came to follow Tsong kha pa.

In considering the historical context to Tsong kha pa's understanding and in light of a constructive postmodern approach in interpreting the vast and complex doctrine of the Twenty *Samghas*, we have made certain choices in our exegesis, employing a range of interpretative techniques that serve to complement each other in forming our exegetical approach to the Tibetan sources.

Dreyfus refers to the worldview we are reconstructing as a "narrative of spiritual progress." Amplifying this thematic notion, the study of the Twenty *Samghas* can be seen as a descriptive analysis of a multilayered narrative of Buddhist soteriology. This descriptive analysis is accentuated by Buddhist soteriological principles as applied to the unified construct of progressing on the path to *nirvāṇa*. Viewed in this manner, the scholastic accounts of ideal figures are similar to a fictional character's soteriological narrative in progressing toward *nirvāṇa*. Drawing upon Indian Buddhist sources, Tsong kha pa pro-

vides a metaphor that illustrates our soteriological narrative, the structure of a “stairway” (Tib. *them skas*; Skt. *sopāna*).<sup>17</sup>

In Indo-Tibetan Buddhist cultures, and for Tsong kha pa, a stairway symbolizes the long and gradual step-by-step path to *nirvāṇa*. It serves as a visual metaphor for the ascensional process of mental and bodily transformation, by means of meditative cultivation and analytical insight, that Noble Beings undergo in journeying through numerous lifetimes and various cosmological realms to reach *nirvāṇa*. The stairway metaphor reflects multiple flights of steps in the narrative of this journey.

In this narrative, the central character is a Noble Being (*ārya*) who is progressing toward *nirvāṇa*. Within the narrative, Buddhist scholars demarcate elementary units of content that serve as indices in the progress to *nirvāṇa*. Such indices consist of instances of description that are placed within a hierarchical perspective. In this soteriological narrative, the units of content are the various descriptions of ideal figures such as the Stream-enterer, Once-returner, and so on that comprise the Twenty *Samṅhas*. These units, the Stream-enterer and others, serve as guidepoints to mark the psychological characteristics, traits, and other parameters that describe the character, in this case a Noble Being (*ārya*), as the narrative toward *nirvāṇa* unfolds. The indices that are comprised of the Stream-enterer and other ideal figures, while being placed in a hierarchical perspective, take on meaning only if they are integrated into a higher level of progression. In addition, this soteriological narrative, as a hierarchy of instances, consists of a discourse distributed into a limited number of classes or combination of narrative units, in this case, the limited number of narrative units that comprise the Twenty *Samṅhas*.

The soteriological narrative of the Twenty *Samṅhas* that we document is multilayered and tells two different stories depending upon the perspective that one brings to it. On one level, the indices represent guidepoints in a narrative that describes the story of ideal characters (i.e., *śrāvakas*) who wish to remove afflictional emotions, abandon the effects that arise from the karmic laws of cause and effect, and attain a state of peace, or *nirvāṇa*, that is the result of the cessation of suffering and rebirth. On another level, the indices within the soteriological narrative represents the story of ideal characters (i.e., *bodhisattvas*) who, while cultivating special wisdom in conjugation with perfecting various virtues such as generosity, patience, energy, along with compassion, voluntarily take on innumerable rebirths in order to attain an inconceivable type of *nirvāṇa* that results in supreme and perfect enlightenment (*anuttarasamyaksambodhi*).

We have also complemented Tsong kha pa’s presentation of the Twenty *Samṅhas* with an intertextualist technique, through documenting

in the notes what other Indian Buddhist scholastic traditions say about ideal figures on the path.<sup>18</sup> This enables one to understand the soteriological narrative structure of the Tibetan tradition and also to understand how Indian Buddhist scholastic traditions in general understand the narrative of Buddhist soteriology. In this way, our intertextual approach explicitly reinforces and adds validity to Tsong kha pa's construction of the soteriological narrative within the Twenty *Samghas* and implicitly demonstrates the structure of descriptive narrative accounts of ideal figures on the path in Indian Buddhism. Intertextual documentation and verification of Tsong kha pa's Indian Buddhist sources expand our exegetical horizon and allow us to have a more complete understanding of the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist's system of ideal figures' descriptions and the place they have in the narrative of Buddhist soteriology.

In our approach to the Twenty *Samghas*, we also employ the decontextualized heuristic device of "scholasticism." José Cabezón (1994) has argued for the usefulness of the notion of scholasticism as a way of understanding Indo-Tibetan thought, and in the volume *Scholasticism*, Cabezón (1998: 4–6) gives a summary of the main principles of scholasticism related to his research on the Indo-Tibetan tradition. His research concludes that scholasticism evinces eight qualities: (1) tradition, (2) a concern with language, (3) proliferativity, (4) completeness, (5) the belief that the universe is epistemologically accessible, (6) a commitment to systematicity, (7) rationalism, and (8) self-reflexivity.

A focus on several of these qualities provides a method to understand and to approach the thought exemplified in the topic of the Twenty *Samghas*. In terms of tradition, first and foremost, the Twenty *Samghas* is a specialized topic of extended doctrinal discourse located within Tibetan Buddhist scholastic traditions. The Indian Buddhist textual sources, the well-known twenty-one Indian commentaries<sup>19</sup> on the AA, discuss the Twenty *Samghas*. However, most of the Indian AA commentators give only fragmentary discussions of the topic, and their remarks are usually given in response to what other Indian commentators have stated. The works of Ārya Vimuktisena and Haribhadra are our earliest textual sources and the most fundamental of the Indian AA commentaries. They serve as the basis for subsequent Indian commentaries and present the most extended discussion of the Twenty *Samghas*. However, both of these commentaries end their discussions of the Twenty *Samghas* with a rather curious statement: "Here we will not give an extensive discussion; why grind down what is already ground?" (*atra tv asmābhir nopanyastam kiṇi piṣṭaṃ piṇṣma*; AAV, 46.5–6; AAĀ, 36.10–11).



In other words, the subject matter had already been thoroughly “worked out” within the cultural arena of Indian scholasticism. None of the early Indian AA commentators felt obligated to thoroughly discuss a “soteriological narrative” that was already well known in their scholastic arena. Because of this attitude of the early Indian sources and the lack of other early Indian AA source material, a full analysis of the Twenty *Samghas* from just the Indian Sanskrit AA sources alone may not appear as a coherent and complete system.

However, as Ruegg (1981: viii) has commented, “Tibetan scholars developed remarkable philological and interpretative methods that could well justify us in regarding them as Indologists *avant la lettre*.” Therefore, it is our contention that an investigation from the Tibetan scholastic tradition will clearly explain the meaning and significance of the Twenty *Samghas* in the context of Tibetan Buddhism and what the Tibetan tradition sees as the true Indian Buddhist context. The topic of the Twenty *Samghas* in the Tibetan Buddhist scholastic tradition developed in a different manner from that of India. After the AA’s reintroduction into Tibet in the eleventh century, each successive generation of Tibetan commentators progressively expanded upon the commentaries of the previous generation. In regard to the Twenty *Samghas*, the Tibetan scholastic tradition of commentarial expansion eventually resulted in subcommentaries that became independent treatises. Among other outcomes, this led to a genre of scholastic literature that focused exclusively on the topic of the Twenty *Samghas*. Our discussion of the Twenty *Samghas* will be derived from this unique genre of scholastic literature found in the Tibetan tradition.

The second quality in Cabezón’s list that we can utilize in approaching the Tibetan scholastic articulation of the Twenty *Samghas* is a concern with language, the language of scripture and its commentarial exegesis. The goal of scholastic language is the construction of a complete system through exegetical means. Scholastic language is elliptical, abstract, and has what Paul J. Griffiths has termed “denaturalized discourse.” The denaturalized style of language found in scholastic literature leads away from the ambiguity of everyday language and into abstract technical jargon. Scholastic jargon is developed and expanded into an unambiguous artificial lexicon of technical terminology designed to communicate in a highly efficient manner that which everyday language cannot (Griffiths, 1994: 28). We find exactly this type of denaturalized discourse utilized in the Indo-Tibetan exegesis of the Twenty *Samghas*. The list of Twenty *Samghas* itself consists of a denaturalized terminology and a large lexicon of technical jargon developed in the commentarial exegesis to elucidate the list. So for instance, among the Twenty *Samghas* we find the denaturalized term

*bhavasyāgraparamo rūparāgahāḥ* (Tib. *srid rtse'i mthar thug 'gro gzugs kyi chags bcom*),<sup>20</sup> utilized to describe the "Non-returner who has reached [by a rebirth or an attainment] the summit of existence and who is freed from all attachment regarding form." It is this type of descriptive terminology and scholastic jargon that the AA and its commentaries employ in presenting the topic of the Twenty *Samghas*.

This concern with language points to the Tibetan scholastic tradition's conviction that technically denaturalized discourse has communicative ability of soteriological value. Specifically, denaturalized discourse has the capability of encoding the spiritual path toward enlightenment through descriptive accounts of an ideal figure. As we have mentioned above, these accounts do not provide personal practical instruction on the nature of spiritual experience. Rather, when the discourse is decoded and internalized by the recipient, it serves as a guidebook to and provides a cultural worldview for a structured narrative of spiritual progress in which soteriologically valid experience is possible. There are many difficulties in finding English renderings for the artificial lexicon of technical terminology utilized by Indian and Tibetan Buddhist scholars for the denaturalized discourse related to ideal figures on the path. This is mainly because the English language has not yet fully developed its own lexicon of terminology to express the subtle nuances found in the description of Buddhist soteriological structures and meditative states.

Confidence in the ability of language to communicate information of soteriological value allows for several other qualities of scholasticism to take place. With this communicative ability, scholasticism develops the tendency for proliferativity, the third quality in Cabezón's list. Analysis of detailed and minute points of scripture and commentary expand into conceptualized ideals, categories, definitions, and divisions. This analysis and proliferativity characterizes the Tibetan commentarial exegesis of the Twenty *Samghas*, with an almost endless analysis of the material into numerous categories, divisions, and subdivisions. Again, the basis of the Twenty *Samghas* is itself a categorical list that provides a typology of individuals who embody twenty phases along the path to *nirvāṇa*. In order to understand and provide the conceptual framework for this soteriological system, each of these Twenty *Samghas* is analyzed, examined, and defined from different categorical perspectives. This methodology of analytical categorization embodies several other tendencies we find in the Tibetan treatment of the Twenty *Samghas*, the scholastic qualities of completeness, epistemological accessibility, and systematicity.

The use of denaturalized discourse in a prolific manner enables the scholiast to believe that the tradition is complete in its presenta-

tion—that is, that all major doctrinal points of soteriological value can be expressed with communicative efficiency in a compact manner. This compact and complete presentation of all necessary soteriological doctrinal points is enveloped in systematicity. This is a tendency toward a basic orderliness of presentation that communicates the complex structure of the prolific subject matter. Along with these qualities is the belief that the universe is epistemologically accessible: that the world is knowable. The Tibetan approach to the Twenty *Samghas* adheres to these scholastic qualities in that it holds that the tradition's soteriological typology is complete; namely, that nothing has been left out that is of soteriological value in describing the phases that individuals may progress through to reach *nirvāṇa*.

The aforementioned hermeneutical strategies and exegetical approaches to the Twenty *Samghas* have guided our approach. That is, in the light of a constructive postmodern approach, our endeavor contains elements of historicity, intertextuality, and scholasticism. The scholastic principles that we have briefly enumerated here will be found throughout our study of the Twenty *Samghas*. In our presentation, the scholastic principles of denaturalized discourse, systematicity, and proliferativity will become quickly evident.

Having described the approach through which Tsong kha pa and the scholastic tradition inherited, communicated, described, and analyzed the ideal figures of the path embodied in the Twenty *Samghas*, I would like to outline the sources we will use and the contribution we hope to make. With the above-mentioned scholastic factors in mind we will examine the topic of the Twenty *Samghas* from textual sources of Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa (1357–1419). This includes his *Stairway Taken by Those of Lucid Intelligence* (*blo gsal bgrod pa'i them skas* [= *Stairway*]),<sup>21</sup> and sections from his *Golden Garland of Eloquent Sayings* (*legs bshad gser phreng* [= *Golden Garland*]).<sup>22</sup> The *Dge 'dun nyi shu bsdus pa rjes gnang* (= *rjes gnang*),<sup>23</sup> "The Abbreviated Bestowal of the Twenty Varieties of the *Samgha*," will be used sparingly since it repeats material from the *Stairway*. The texts of Tsong kha pa that we will employ here explain the twenty varieties of the *Samgha* Jewel based on two verses from the first chapter of the AA.

Tsong kha pa's system of the Twenty *Samghas* embodies a worldview in which the path and its results, even if involving the instantaneous abandonment of mental defilements, is a gradual process taking many lifetimes. The path involves continual persistent effort, each stage or result from the beginning up to *nirvāṇa* is not definite unless continual application is made. For Tsong kha pa, the Twenty *Samghas* in the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* represent an extension of terminology and doctrinal principals found in the *śrāvaka* vehicle of mainstream

Buddhism employed as a skillful heuristic device to generate awareness of the *Mahāyāna saṃgha*, the community of *bodhisattvas* irreversible from the journey to complete Buddhahood. The Twenty *Saṃghas*, in light of Tsong kha pa's interpretation, therefore demonstrates a unity in diversity between the vehicles of *śrāvakas*, *pratyekabuddhas*, and *bodhisattvas* in regard to the ideal of the *saṃgha*. Thus, Tsong kha pa constructs a structural system of *Mahāyāna* scholasticism that presents the Twenty *Saṃghas* coherently from various perspectives, each unit a step upon the stairway to inconceivable and thoroughly complete awakening that results in full omniscient Buddhahood.