

Debate in Tibetan Buddhism*

Learning is like a lamp for eliminating the darkness of ignorance

(Ashvaghosha, *Jatakamala*)

Background

Sentient beings suffer continuously in the prison of cyclic existence. There is no possibility for sentient beings to escape the repeated round of birth, aging, sickness, and death without actualizing in their own continuums the realizations that destroy ignorance. Buddha said:

Buddhas neither wash sins away with water,
Nor remove beings' sufferings with their hands,
Nor transfer their realizations to others; beings
Are freed through the teachings of the truth, the
nature of things.

Ignorance is the root cause of suffering, and wisdom is the antidote to ignorance. Through learning, one eventually becomes established in wisdom. Just as a lamp illumines a house so that one can see colors and shapes, so learning and wisdom enable one to see the nature of phenomena.

The essence of Buddha's doctrine and the source of all monastic studies is the Four Noble Truths. The first of these is the Truth of Suffering: all sentient beings are constantly beset by suffering. The second is the Truth of Origin: ignorance is the root cause of suffering. Ignorance is not merely not knowing something, but is an active misconception. Specifically, the subtle ignorance that is the cause of sentient beings' suffering is identified as the conception of oneself as a self-sufficient or substantially existent person which exists independently from its own side. The third is the Truth of Cessation: it is a fact that there is an utter eradication of suffering. The fourth is True Path: the way to fully realizing experientially the opposite of what ignorance conceives, which leads one to the cessation of suffering.

The religious practitioner is compared to a patient and Buddha to a doctor. Our kind teacher, the Buddha, administers the medicine of doctrine to sentient beings who suffer the illness of ignorance. The purpose for debate and all Buddhist practice is to abandon the first two truths—suffering and origin—and to attain the latter two—cessation and path.

Purpose for Debate

A Tibetan monastery is the center for the teaching of the Buddha's doctrine and a gathering place for those seeking inward peace and spiritual growth. The central purposes of Tibetan monastic debate are to defeat misconceptions, to establish the correct view, and to clear away objections to that view. To these ends, with great effort the monks of the Gelugpa Sect engage in debate diligently, seeking to learn well the words and to understand fully the meaning of the Buddhist doctrine (dharma). Debate for the monks of Tibet is not mere academics, but a way of using direct implications from the obvious in order to generate an inference of the non-obvious state of phenomena. The diligent debaters are seeking to understand the nature of reality through careful analysis of the state of existence of ordinary phenomena, the bases of reality.

Although reasoning has an essential and irreplaceable place on the path to liberation, even so, the Gelugpas place a tremendous emphasis on devotion. When one visits a monastery, one sees that the main activity there is prayer, not study and debate. Indeed, the monks identify the limits of reasoning, for even this essential component is to be transcended by the development of direct perception. Reasoning itself and the inference it produces are not the actual antidotes to cyclic existence. Only direct realization of selflessness—the wisdom realizing emptiness (*sunyata*)—is able to eradicate the foe of ignorance.

Practice of Debate

A monk hears teachings on topics of debate; then he reads the texts, memorizes the definitions and divisions; and then on his own, thinks about the meaning of what he is studying and meditates (analytical meditation) on its implications. After this preparation, he is able to debate the topic with others. He puts forth his own view or understanding of a point of doctrine, and others raise objections to that view. Similarly, one raises objections to others' interpretations or understandings. Although the monk may become very excited and object vigorously and vehemently to the views of his opponent in a debate, the purpose for his debate is not to defeat and embarrass an opponent, thereby gaining some victory for himself; rather, the purpose is to help the opponent overcome his wrong view.

Course of Study

The monks practicing debate study within a well-developed system beginning with basic logic and working up to the great texts of India, both the sutras and commentaries. Monks studying in the colleges of the Gelugpa Sect work toward the *Geshe* degree. In order to attain this, a monk must pass through a rigorous program of studies consisting of fifteen or possibly sixteen classes, some lasting for two years each.

1. Collected Topics of Valid Cognition (three classes)—the Introductory, Middling, and Greater Paths of Reasoning. (*Parana*)
2. Perfection of Wisdom (five classes). (*Prajnaparamita*)
3. Middle Way (two classes). (*Madhyamaka*)
4. Discipline (two classes). (*Vinaya*)
5. Treasury of Knowledge (two classes). (*Abhidharmakosha*)

Beyond these classes devoted to particular topics, there are two retainer classes, *Kar-um* and *Hla-ram*, in which the monks engage in lengthy review prior to their examinations for the degree of *Geshe*. All told, a monk typically studies from twenty-two to twenty-six years to achieve this degree.

Actual Debate Session

An actual session of debate involves two people, a Defender who sits and gives answers to the Challenger who stands and asks questions. The Defender puts forth assertions for which he is held accountable. The Challenger raises qualms to the Defender's assertions and is not subject to reprisal for the questions he raises. The debates usually take place outside in winter as well as in summer. The daily schedule of the monasteries re-established in India include two hours of debate in the morning and two hours in the evening after dinner, although advanced classes may extend these sessions. The disputants come to the debating courtyard with no aid but their own understanding. One does not peruse books at the time of debating and books may not be brought to the debating courtyard. There is a joke among debaters that if one has studied a topic and knows where to find the information in a text or in one's notes but is not able to explain then such a person "has his learning in a box." Rather, the debaters must depend on their memorization of the points of doctrine—definitions, illustrations, and even whole texts—together with their own measure of understanding gained from instruction and study.

At the opening of a session of debate, the standing Challenger claps his hands together and recites the seed syllable of Manjushri, "*Dhih*". Manjushri is the manifestation of the wisdom of all the Buddhas and, as such, is the special deity of debate. In debate, one must have a good motivation, the best of which is to establish all beings in liberation.

Upon first seeing a debate, the most striking characteristic is the hand gestures. When the Challenger first puts his question to the sitting Defender, his right hand is held above the shoulder at the level of his head and the left hand is stretched forward with the palm turned upward. At the end of his statement, the Challenger punctuates by loudly clapping together his hands and simultaneously stomping his left foot. Then he

immediately draws back his right hand with the palm held upward and at the same time, holds forth his left hand with the palm turned downward. This motion of drawing back and clapping is done with the flow of a dancer's movements.

Holding forth the left hand after clapping symbolizes closing the door to rebirth in the helpless state of cyclic existence. The drawing back and upraising of the right hand symbolizes one's will to raise all sentient beings up out of cyclic existence and to establish them in the omniscience of Buddhahood. The left hand represents wisdom—the actual antidote to cyclic existence. The right hand represents method—the altruistic intention to become enlightened, motivated by great love and compassion for all sentient beings. The clap represents a union of method and wisdom. In dependence on the union of method and wisdom, one is able to attain Buddhahood.

Summary

The Gelugpa Sect claims that it is the lack of analysis and investigation into the mode of existence of phenomena that draws sentient beings into suffering within cyclic existence. The valid establishment of just what does exist and in just what manner those phenomena do exist becomes of quintessential importance. Debate is a prime means for establishing the scope and nature of phenomena. By sharpening the intellect, one is eventually able to cognize selflessness with inference. Through repeated familiarization with this inferential realization, one is gradually able to realize selflessness by means of direct perception. In this process, reasoning is essential in the beginning and the middle, but eventually it is no longer necessary. For this system, debate is rigorous conceptuality for the sake of eventually transcending conceptuality.

In his Collected Topics Class (logic) students will debate these topics:

- A. Colors
- B. Established Bases
- C. Identifying Isolate
- D. Opposite from Being-Something and Opposite-From-Not Being Something
- E. The Introductory [Presentation of] Causes and Effects
- F. Generalities and Instances
- G. Substantial Phenomena and Isolate Phenomena

As the monk continues his studies, his debate topics will concern the issues he is studying in his respective classes: *Prajnaparamita*, *Madhyamaka*, *Vinaya*, and *Ahidharmakoshai*

*The above discussion has been excerpted--quoted directly or paraphrased-- from the following work by Daniel E. Perdue: *Debate in Tibetan Buddhism*. Snow Lion Publications, 1992. For ease of reading, quotation marks and page numbers have been eliminated. For exact references, please contact coordinator@gomang.org

(For a comparison and contrast of western syllogisms with Tibetan logical formulations, consult "Part Three: Conclusion" (pages 839-857).

Sample Debate (on “Colors”—a beginning debate for a young monk just learning logic.)
(C = Challenger and D=Defender)

A “hypothetical defender” has said: Whatever is a color is necessarily red,” and, as an exercise, the present Defender is trying to defend this absurd position. The Challenger is exposing this misconception, this “wrong view.” He begins with a question.

- C: *Dhiih!* The subject, in just the way [Manjushri debated]. Is whatever is a color necessarily red?
D: I accept [that whatever is a color is necessarily red].
C: It follows that whatever is a color is necessarily red.
D: I accept it.
C: It [absurdly] follows that the subject, the color of a white religious conch, is red.
D: Why [is the color a white religious conch red]?
C: Because of being a color. You asserted the pervasion [that whatever is a color is necessarily red].
D: The reason [that the color of a white religious conch is a color] is not established.
C: It follows that the subject, the color of a white religious conch, is a color because of being white.
D: The reason [that the color of a white religious conch is white] is not established.
C: It follows that the subject, the color of a white religious conch, is white because of being one with the color of a white religious conch.
D: I accept that the color of a white religious conch is white.
C: It follows that the subject, the color of a white religious conch, is a color.
D: I accept it.
C: It follows that the subject, the color of a white religious conch, is red because of being a color.
D: I accept that the color of a white religious conch is red.
C: It follows that the subject, the color of a white religious conch, is not red because of being white.
D: There is no pervasion [i.e., even though the color of a white religious conch is white, it is not the case that whatever is white is necessarily not red.]
C: It follows that whatever is white is necessarily not red because a common locus of the two, white and red, does not exist.
D: The reason [that a common locus of the two, white and red, does not exist] is not established.
C: It follows that a common locus of the two, white and red, does not exist because those two are mutually exclusive.
D: I accept that a common locus of the two, white and red, does not exist.
C: It follows that whatever is white is necessarily not red.
D: I accept it.
C: It follows that the subject, the color of a white religious conch, is not red.
D: I accept it.
C: It follows that the subject, the color of a white religious conch, is red because of being a color.
D: There is no pervasion [i.e., even though the color of a white religious conch is a color, it is not the case that whatever is a color is necessarily red].
C: It follows that whatever is a color is not necessarily red.
D: I accept it.
C: [Your] basic thesis is finished!

The Challenger shouts “finished!” three times. Also, when saying “finished!” the Challenger does not clap his hands as usual but slaps the right hand with palm upraised into the left palm.