

# Some Notes on Kamalaśīla's Understanding of Insight Considered as the Discernment of Reality (*bh ta-pratyavek* )

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ABSTRACT: The present article aims to explain Kamalaśīla's understanding of the nature of insight, specifically considering it as the 'discernment of reality' (*bh ta-pratyavek* ) – a technical term identified with insight (*vipaśyanā* ) in the author's well known *Bh van krama* texts. The article approaches the analysis of *bh ta-pratyavek* from three different angles. It begins by providing a rationale for its translation. This

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Grammatically *bh ta* is the past passive participle of the verbal root *bh* . Taken substantively, it can refer to anything that is the result of a natural process of becoming (*bh va*). In most instances the word would not in itself be understood as referring to something that results from a process of *deliberate* cultivation (*bh van* ); in that case we would expect to find the causal sense reflected in a strengthened base: '*bh vita*' as opposed to *bh ta*. Thus initially, in the context of meditation, it seems most appropriate to take the word as referring either to the elements of conventional reality (*dharmas*), which arise on their own – or else to some aspect of these elements that is real irrespective of one's realization of it. In M dhyamika hermeneutics the term *bh ta* is associated with the meaning that is *ultimately* real, i.e. the 'object' indicated in *nt rtha* teachings (see Thurman

connotations.<sup>5</sup> In the present context this is highly desirable. The Sanskrit word is derived from the verbal root *k*, which means to see, behold, perceive, view, observe, look or gaze at. It is combined with the *upas rga* prefix

not between a nonconceptual *sam dhi* and an ordinary inferential process; it is, rather, between a conceptual *sam dhi*

It is very apparent that in this passage the analyses of experienced *dharma*s are considered parts of a process of meditation (*bh van krama*) – the inferences comprising the analyses are not simply instances of intellectual understanding or *cint may prajñ*. They compose a system of progressively more subtle insights into the nature of reality. While they clearly possess the character of wisdom (*prajñ*), because they are undertaken in a condition of *sam dhi* they are properly considered instances of *bh van may prajñ*. They are distinct from cases of ordinary intellectual inference insofar as they are directly 'based upon' objects being concurrently experienced in meditation. The meditator remains one-pointedly focused upon these mental images, holding them in view while simultaneously 'analysing' them. In brief: one looks, recognizes the object, and continues to analyse it while holding one's gaze. Recognizing its unreality, one abandons it. The process might be thought of as analogous to research undertaken with a microscope: one focuses, recognizes the object one wishes to observe, and makes one's observations. After drawing one's conclusions about the object, one lets go of it. One then looks again with a new, revised object in mind – one's new observations being based upon the conclusions reached thus far.<sup>10</sup> The conclusion drawn in each instance is that the observed object is not real. One moves on to the next purported 'reality' at a level that is one step more subtle and profound than the preceding. But here, recalling the Buddhist context, it is important to recognize that there is an active aspect to this process that is missing in the scientific analogy; for in recognizing the unreality of an object the meditator is also recognizing that it is not worthy of attachment, that such attachment would only lead to *du kha*. One knows and sees that the object is not to be held onto, and so one lets go of it. Thus the process of is one of ever-deepening non-attachment.

In the above passage, the meditator begins by examining *dharma*s with material form in terms of their constituent atoms. Upon breaking these atoms down further into their constituent parts he realizes that no separate external reality remains, not even the atoms themselves. Articulating this, he concludes that all so-called material *dharma*s do not exist; they are, in fact, mental in nature. The fact that the analysis described here is not a case of ordinary reasoning is reflected in the language employed: the objects of analysis (*dharma*s with material form) are 'broken down' or dissolved (*vibh vya*, T. *rnam par bshig bya*) before the mind's eye, as it were.<sup>11</sup> In general, each object of the progressively subtle

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*ni chos gzugs can la rnam par rtog pa spong ba'o zhes bya ba'i tha tshig go / dmigs su rung ba'i mtshan nyid du gyur pa de dag rnam par dpyad na mi dmigs pa'i phyir ro / de ltar chos gzugs can rnam par bshig nas gzugs can ma yin pa rnam par bshig par bya ste /*

10. Or to use Kamala la's own example, it might be likened to the process of looking at one's face in a mirror. See Adam (2006, n.31). Had microscopes or telescopes been known to Kamala la, he might have preferred such metaphors as they suggest the possibility of a progressive deepening of one's observations.
11. In this connection we may notice that the verb employed for this experiential analysis of *dharma*s is rendered in Tibetan as *rnam par bshig* 'to destroy, dismantle, break, break down'. On these occasions the Sanskrit is either *vibh vya*, or *vic rayet*.

analysis might be thought of as constituting the experiential subject term of a subsequent analytic judgment directed 'at' or 'towards' it. The inferences based upon these meditation objects can thus be considered instances of a special kind of perceptual or quasi-perceptual judgment, which results in an increasing non-attachment on the part of the meditator.<sup>12</sup>

While it seems clear that Kamalaśīla regarded this mental process as perceptual or quasi-perceptual in nature, such a notion might not be intuitively obvious to a modern western interpreter. The inclination might be to think of the whole procedure as basically one of ordinary rational thought (*cint may prajñ*). One would then want to translate *bh tapratyavek* accordingly as 'correct analysis'. But it should now be clear that taking this phrase to refer to a purely rational process would be to significantly impoverish Kamalaśīla's account. Such an interpretation would miss both the affective and the perceptual dimensions of the process.

That such an understanding does not accurately reflect Kamalaśīla's own views can be seen clearly in the passages that follow. Therein a meditative analysis is performed on mental *dharma*s. A conclusion is reached that the subject side of the subject-object dichotomy is just as illusory as the object-side, upon which it depends. Mind is recognized as nondual. This 'conclusion' is clearly regarded by Kamalaśīla as an experience. It is a realization, one that forms the basis for the next 'inference', (or better, perhaps, 'movement') – the recognition that goes beyond the dualistic knowledge of a nondual mind to enter into a knowledge that is without any appearance of duality whatsoever. Ultimately, Kamalaśīla states, one should not even be attached to this nondual knowledge of nonduality, since it too has arisen in dependence upon subject and object – which have already been established as unreal.<sup>13</sup> Abiding in such a state, one has come to experience the emptiness of all *dharma*s, up to and including even the knowledge of nonduality:

The meaning is that there too one should abandon attachment to the substantiality of this knowledge of nonduality; one should remain in the knowledge that definitely has no appearance of the knowledge of nonduality. When this is so, one abides in the practical realization of the lack of inherent existence of all *dharma*s. Because the one who abides there enters ultimate truth, there is the entry into nonconceptual *sam dhi*. And thus, when the yogin abides in the knowledge that has no appearance of nondual knowledge, then, due to his state of abiding in the ultimate truth he sees the Mahāyāna.<sup>14</sup>

12. Because the Buddhist tradition regards the mind as a sixth sense organ, it seems appropriate to refer to these as perceptual or quasi-perceptual judgements, difficult though such a notion may be.

13. This is a synopsis of Bhk 1 211.4–14, D 33b1–33b4.

14. Bhk 1 211.14–20: *tatr py advayajñ ne vast459 0 TD(y)Tjt--12a97586y: one should remain in the*

Thus according to Kamala la it is through this conceptual process of meditative insight that one experiences the lack of independent existence of persons and *dharma*s. One then enters into a direct nonconceptual realization of the ultimate truth, a realization here identified with the very Mah y na itself.

### 3. THE DISCERNMENT OF REALITY IN ARGUMENTS AGAINST MO HO YEN

Here one must recall that the very purpose of the *Bh van kramas* is to introduce the proper way of practice to those who are entering into the Mah y na (Adam 2006, 80). In the context of what may have been a very intense polemical atmos-





no alternate method lacking in the discernment of reality by means of

Classically, in the context of Buddhist meditation, *sm ti* is a term closely connected to the four foundations of mindfulness (*sm tyupasth nas*, *P. satipa h nas*). Mindfulness practices involve cultivating awareness of the body, feelings, mind and mental contents (*dharmas*). Mindfulness is also the first limb of Awakening (*bodhya ga*), upon which the discrimination of *dharmas* is based. There is no explicit discussion of this relationship in exactly these terms in the *Bh van kramas*. However, given the strong association of mindfulness and attention it seems likely that Kamala la understood *manasik ra* and *dharmapravacaya* as referring to the same process, one that occurs on the basis of *sm ti*.

The term *manasik ra* is somewhat ambiguous. Among the translations it has received we find 'mentation' (Ruegg 1989, 94 *et passim*), 'mental activity' (and mentation; Higgins 2008) and 'conscious mental acts' (Gomez 1987, 108). Gomez (1983, 405) has also translated *manasik ra* as 'the act of bringing to mind (attention)' and this is how I have understood the term in its most general and ordinary sense: it refers to a conscious and deliberate act of paying attention to something.<sup>19</sup> As well, it can indicate mental activity based upon such attention.<sup>20</sup> But in the context of our concern, the discernment of reality, *manasik ra* appears to have a very specific reference. This is indicated by Kamala la's qualification of it as 'wise' or 'properly grounded' (*yoni o*). Here I will argue that the qualified term refers to a special kind of attention, identical to the meditative analysis or practice-based perceptual judgement discussed by Kamala la in the context of the *La k vat ra S tra*.

It has not, to my knowledge, been pointed out that Kamala la may have viewed (*yoni o*) *manasik ra* as paralleling another well-known Buddhist meditation term, one that is considerably less prominent in the *Bh van kramas*: *sa prajanya* (T. *shes bzhin*) or 'clear comprehension'. This technical term refers to the comparatively passive activity of continuously noticing or being aware of whatever one is doing,

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*na manasik r bh vam tram / na hy asa jñisam patty dir iva an dik liko r p dyabhinive o manasik raparivarjanam tr t prah yate. D 34b2-4: rnam par mi rtog pa la 'jug pa'i gzungs las yid la mi byed pas gzugs la sogs pa'i mtshan ma spong ngo zhes gsungs pa gang yin pa de yang shes rab kyis brtags na mi dmigs pa gang yin pa de / der yid la mi byed par dgongs kyis / yid la byed pa med pa tsam ni ma yin te / 'du shes med pa'i snyoms par 'jug pa la sogs pa ltar thog ma med pa'i dus gnas gzugs la sogs pa la mngon par zhen pa'i yid la byed pa spangs pa tsam gyis spong ba ni ma yin no /*

On this passage, and more generally on *amanasik ra* in the Indo-Tibetan tradition, see Higgins (2008).

19. Prof. K. N. Mishra of the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies has pointed out that this sense is immediately apparent to speakers of modern Indic languages such as Hindi (personal exchange). Similar expressions are found in English. Compare: 'I don't mind', 'Mind your step', 'I wouldn't pay it any mind', etc.
20. This two-fold sense is apparent in Higgins's discussion (2008) of the variant term *manask ra* as it appears in the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*:

As the natural culmination of the third omni-present mental factor 'intentionality' (*cetan*) which describes the general object-directedness of mind, *manask ra* has the function of 'bringing to mind' or 'setting one's mind upon' (focusing on) a particular object and remaining involved (conceptually and actively) with it. (Emphasis added)



This amounts to analysing *dharmas* in a way that leads to an experience of their most important soteriological aspect: their lack of self, or emptiness.<sup>26</sup> Such meditative attention is wise because it sees things as they really are.<sup>27</sup>

These terms indicate aspects of a conceptual process that ultimately gives rise to a nonconceptual knowledge of emptiness. Although positive in the sense of being noetic, this nonconceptual realization is not the same as the positive conceptual process that precedes and gives rise to it.<sup>28</sup> By pointing back toward their

26. In the *Itivuttika* (no. 16) wise attention is given the following description:

This was said by the Lord ... 'Bhikkhus, in regard to internal factors, I do not perceive another single factor so helpful as wise attention to a bhikkhu who is a learner, who has not attained perfection but lives aspiring for the supreme security from bondage. Bhikkhus, a bhikkhu who wisely attends abandons what is unwholesome and develops what is wholesome.

For a bhikkhu who is a learner  
There is no other thing so helpful  
For reaching the highest goal  
As the factor wise attention.  
Wisely striving a bhikkhu may attain  
The destruction of all suffering'.

The translator adds that *yoniso manasikāra* is explained in the commentaries as attending to things and situations as impermanent, unsatisfactory, without self, and foul (rather than their opposites) and avoiding fruitless speculation. Supreme security from bondage is release from the four bonds of sensual desire, desire for being, views and ignorance (Ireland 1991, 11–12, 93–4). Thus wise attention is an essential condition for the attainment of *nibbāna*. See note 29 below. For a fuller description of *yoniso manasikāra* in the Pāli tradition see *MN 2*.

27. Other possible translations for *yoniso* include 'appropriate', 'fundamental', 'careful', and 'systematic'. The term is an interesting one, with mystical connotations. The term '*yoniso*' refers to the female organs of generation, which in the Mahāyāna context are associated with emptiness and wisdom. The suffix '*as*' indicates being 'in the manner of'. I have chosen to translate the expression as 'wise'. In this specific Buddhist context the word implies that the mental activity it qualifies is founded on a correct experiential understanding of the way things actually are (i.e. empty of inherent existence). This is *bhāvanāyama*. In addition, because it conforms to the conclusions already reached through scripture and reason, *yoniso manasikāra* may also be seen as properly grounded in *śūnyatā* and *cintāyama*. Finally, although this may not have been intended, such attention might be considered wise in the sense of being properly grounded in morality, which is to say, based in method. Kamalaśīla is adamant that the pursuit of wisdom without method is not a proper practice for *bodhisattvas*. More generally, as indicated in the preceding note, such attention can be characterized as wise in the sense that it is focused on developing wholesome or skillful (*kusala*) *dharmas* and discouraging those that are unwholesome or unskillful (*akusala*).
28. Such a conception of the necessity of *manasikāra* is not without precedent. See *Mahāvedāla Sutta*, *Majjhima Nikāya* 43, sections 26f. Two conditions are given for the attainment of 'signless deliverance of mind', (*animittā cetovimutti*) which is identifiable as the attainment of fruition: 'Friend, there are two conditions for the attainment of the signless deliverance of the mind: nonattention (*amanasikāro*) to all signs and attention to the signless element' (*MN 43.27*). Two further conditions are listed for the emergence from the signless deliverance of mind: 'Friend, there are two conditions for emergence from the signless deliverance of mind: attention (*manasikāro*) to all signs and nonattention to the signless element' (*MN 43.29*). This inversion implies that *manasikāra* also precedes the establishment of *amanasikāra*. Note also the displacement of *nibbāna* by *niyata* in the role of 'the signless element' in our present context.

roots, the negative designations 'nonmindfulness' and 'nonattention' indicate the transcendent nondual character of a *sam dhi* that is also *jñ na*. While positive, because this realization is nonconceptual (*nirvikalpajñ na*), it defies adequate description.

Thus, in stages, the process of insight meditation eventually *issues* in a nonconceptual realization or gnosis, and it is this realization that eliminates fundamental ignorance. This ineluctable nonconceptual state marks the definitive turning point for the *bodhisattva*, the beginning of the path of seeing. Quoting from the *Kāyapāparivāra* of the *Ratnakūṭa*, this final result of insight meditation is vividly described in the second *Bhava-krama* :

One who only cultivates the mere rejection of mental activity, but who does not meditate having analysed (*so sor brtags*) the nature of entities with wisdom, will never eliminate concepts and will not come to realize the absence of inherent existence – on account of the absence of the light of wisdom. Thus it was stated by the Illustrious One: 'When the fire of knowing reality as it is arises from the very discernment of reality (*yang dag par so sor rtog pa nyid*), it incinerates the wood of concepts (*rtog pa'i shing*), just as the fire of fire-sticks rubbed together [consumes the sticks themselves].'<sup>29</sup>

The *nonconceptual* nature of this realization is clear. The following passage indicates that it is also *nonperceptual*.<sup>30</sup> At this stage all forms of dualistic awareness have been transcended. Again, this paradoxical realization is identified with the Mahāyāna itself.

It is exactly this seeing of ultimate truth that is called the Mahāyāna. And the seeing of ultimate truth is precisely a non-seeing [of anything, *Ti ci yang*], which occurs when there is the dawning of genuine knowledge for one who is examining all *dharma*s with the eye of wisdom. And thus it is said in the *śāstra*, 'What is the seeing of the ultimate truth? It is the nonseeing of all *dharma*s'.<sup>31</sup>

29. Bhk 2 D 49b5–b6: *gang shes rab kyis dngos pa'i ngo bo nyid so sor brtags nas mi bsgom gyi / yid la byed pa yongs su spong ba tsam 'ba' zhis sgom par byed pa de'i rnam par rtog pa nam yang mi ldog cing ngo bo nyid med pa nyid rtogs* (NP: *rtog*) *par yang mi 'gyur te / shes rab kyi snang ba med pa'i phyir ro // 'di lta' "yang dag par so sor rtog pa nyid las yang dag pa ji lta ba bzhin du shes pa'i me byung na gtsubs shing gtsubs pa'i me bzhin du rtog pa'i shing sreg go" zhes bcom ldan 'das kyis bka' stsal to // Cf. Bhk 3 30.8–11, D 64a4–5.*

30. Compare Gunaratana (1985, 144–5) on Buddhaghosa's understanding of *paññā*: as a mode of knowing (*jñāna*) distinct from and superior to the modes of perceiving (*sañjñāna*) and cognizing (*vijñāna*). What distinguishes wisdom from these forms of cognition is its ability to comprehend the characteristics of impermanence, suffering and selflessness and to bring about the manifestation of the supramundane path.

31. Bhk 1: 211.20–212.3: *etad eva tan mahāyānam ucyate yat paramatattvadarānam / etad eva tat paramatattvadarāna yat sarvadharmān prajñācakṣurān nirpayata samyagjñāna valoke satyadarānam / tathā cōktam s tre "katama paramā rthadarānam / sarvadharmā madarānam / iti /*



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