

**A PROBLEM OF 'SYNONYMS' IN THE TIBETAN  
LANGUAGE:  
BSGOM PA AND GOMS PA**

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When in summer 1951 in Berkeley, California, I first became acquainted with (now Professor) Thubten Norbu by his alternate name Taktser Rinpoche, I checked out for his use from the University of California's Tibetan collection the *Gsuñ 'bum* of Kloñ-rdol Bla-ma Ņag-dbañ-blo-bzañ. This 18th century savant had written a series of survey works on the principal topics of study in the Gelugpa monasteries. Thereby, Taktser could quickly review his entire course of monastic training.

Section Ba of Kloñ-rdol Bla-ma's treatise is devoted to grammatical topics (*sgra rig pa*). Using the edition by Ven. Dalama (Mussoori, 1963), Vol. I, p. 404, we find several synonymous terms mentioned, as in my translation:

(They) say that the two expressions *don go ba* and *don rtogs pa* have the same significance (viz., "understanding the meaning"). Likewise, that "reaching the depth of *dharma* by realizing directly the true nature (*dharma-tā*)" has the same significance as "understanding by realizing directly the true nature." They say that *bsgom pa* ("cultivation") and *goms pa* ("repeated practice") have the same significance; but that is the case when applying (the terms) to the path, while there is no certainty in other (contexts). [a]

To begin to appreciate the observations of that passage, it could be mentioned that a book by Dhadphale about synonyms in the Pāli Buddhist canon has been published in India.<sup>1</sup> The author, in this fascinating work, seems to take the terms as either synonymous or not. But Kloñ-rdol Bla-ma describes a situation where terms may be synonymous in some context and not so in another context. My approach is to first consider how

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the Tibetan translators from Sanskrit used the terms *bsgom pa* and *sgom pa* to render Sanskrit terms. Such data will serve as a basis for coming to conclusions.

Notice that in the *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālamkāra*, either *goms pa* or *sgom pa* renders *abhyāsa* (repeated practice), and so *goms pa* is equivalent to *sgom pa* in such a context. *Sgom pa* also renders *bhāvanā* (cultivation). In the same text, *bsgom pa las byuñ* renders *bhāvanāmayī* (consisting of cultivation, or of intense contemplation); and *bsgoms par bya*, *bhāvayitavya* (to be cultivated, or to be intensely contemplated).<sup>2</sup>

In translating the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, the term *sgom pa'i lam* is used for *bhāvanāmārga* (path of cultivation); and both *sgom pas spañ bar bya ba* and *bsgom pas spañ bar bya ba* render *bhāvanāmārga* (path of cultivation); and both *sgom pas spañ bar bya ba* and *bsgom pas spañ bar bya ba* render *bhāvanā-heya*. Also, the expression *bsgoms pa las byuñ ba* occurs. *Goms pa* is used for both *abhyāsa* and *bhāvanā*.<sup>3</sup>

The *Bodhicaryāvatāra-pañjikā* on Chap. IX, uses *bsgom pa'i lam* for *bhāvanāmārga*.<sup>4</sup>

It promptly follows that *goms pa* (or *sgom pa*) and *bsgom pa* are replaceable in translating *bhāvanā-mārga* or *bhāvanā-heya*. However, only *goms pa* (or *sgom pa*) renders *abhyāsa*, and only *bsgom pa* (or, *bsgoms pa*) renders *bhāvanāmayī* ([the insight] arising from, or involved with *bhāvanā*). This data supports Kloñ-rdol Bla-ma's observations, since *sgom pa* (or *goms pa*) and *bsgom pa* are synonymous in the terminology of the path, i.e. 'path of cultivation' (*bhāvanā-mārga*) and 'what is to be eliminated by cultivation' (*bhāvanā-heya*), namely, on the path of accepting the good and rejecting the bad. But there is no certainty of their like significance when *goms pa* means 'repeated practice' (*abhyāsa*) and when *bsgom pa* occurs in the compound *bhāvanāmayī* ('consisting of cultivation').

The distinction of using such terms both to apply and not to apply to the Buddhist path is clarified by a passage in Asaṅga's *Yogācārabhūmi*. His verse treatise on the three 'instructions' of Buddhism, a treatise entitled *Āhiprāyikārtha-gāthā*, gave a problem to the translators. The Tibetan translator is the celebrated Ye-śes-sde and the Indian pandit for this part was probably Jinamitra. Asaṅga had used two Sanskrit terms to indicate the difference between a path description and a non-path description. The usual literal renditions of Sanskrit terms were in this case abandoned, and the Tibetan expressions are the ones of interest here: *'dren mo* (guiding) and *so so* (respective).<sup>5</sup> The Three Instructions are of Morality, Mind training, and Insight. In consideration that the Buddhist path requires a sequence of members, e.g., the Eightfold Noble Path, or the Ten-

Stage path of the Bodhisattva, it follows that any discussion that does not 'mix' them, i.e., consider them in relation to others, is not necessarily a path discussion; and in such a case, the members are referred to as *so so*. When one does consider them as members of a path, it is necessary to deal with such topics as whether one of them could be practiced by itself without the others; and in such a case, the explanations are *'dren mo*.

When one uses such a distinction of terms for the terms *bsgom pa* and *goms pa*, it follows that the case when they are synonymous is when the discussion is guidance on the Buddhist path. However, when *goms pa* (or *sgom pa*) renders *abhyāsa* (repeated practice), this might be just repeated practice of one member of the path, such as 'morality'. And when *bsgom pa* renders part of *bhāvanāmayī*, one of the three levels of educated insight (*śes rab*), namely, 'hearing' (*thos pa las byuñ ba'i śes rab*), 'pondering' (*bsam pa las byuñ ba'i śes rab*), and 'intense contemplation' (*bsgom pa las byuñ ba'i śes rab*), it is also indeterminate, since if this *bsgom pa* kind of *śes rab* is preceded by the previous two levels of *śes rab*, it applies to the path; but if this *bsgom pa* is not 'mixed' with those two, it is 'respective', not applicable to the path.

Now, for some evidence from the Tibetan dictionaries. I shall employ three: the *Brda dag miñ tshig gsal ba* by Dge-bses chos-kyi-grags-pa; the *Dag yig ma nor lam bzañ* by Jampa Chogyal; the three-volume *Bod rgya tshig mdsod chen mo*.<sup>6</sup>

The first one, by Geshe Chos-grags, is doubtless a fine dictionary, but it is surprisingly feeble for these particular terms. For *goms pa*, it states, *chuñ ñu nas 'dris pa'am goms pa*, "Starting from a meager (ability) to become familiarized (or accustomed); or *goms pa*." For *sgom pa* it has *sgom bzin pa*, directing the reader to its *sgom* entry, which is: *dpyad sgom dan 'jog sgom lta bu*, "e.g., the 'examining-cultivation' and the 'stoppage-cultivation'," which is terminology of the path.<sup>7</sup> It has no entry for *bsgom-pa* but does have *bsgoms-pa*, saying: *sgom bsgoms zin pa*, "sgom which has ended is *bsgoms*," and *sgom pa*.

The second one, by Jampa Chogyal, is very helpful. By having an entry for *goms*, but none for *sgom* in this syllable dictionary, there is the compiler's suggestion that *sgom* and *goms* differ only in the position of the 's' by metathesis. This is perhaps also Kloñrdol Bla-ma's interpretation by his using the form *goms pa* instead of *sgom pa* in the passage I cited at the outset. Jampa Chogyal also appears to associate *goms* with *gom pa* ('step' or 'pace'), perhaps in the sense of steps of the path. The dictionary has for *goms*:

Starting from a meager (ability) to become familiarized (or accustomed); or to practice in steps; or to habituate the mind and have familiar practice; or, with a causal step to conclude the practice in the manner of steps; or repeated practice with the meaning of pondering.[b]

The dictionary has for *bsgom*:

To familiarize (oneself) by repeated practice as though the topic of cultivation were a god, and to (properly) orient the mind again and again.[c]

The dictionary has for *bsgoms*:

Compassion finished is *bsgoms*; causing the practice; the topic of cultivation; the imperative, 'Practice it!'; and when applied to the path, the two, cultivation (*bsgom pa*) and repeated practice (*goms pa*) have the same meaning.[d]

Turning to the third dictionary, the relevant entries are in the first volume of the *Bod rgya tshig mdsod chen mo*, namely in the *Stod cha*. The entry for *goms pa* is in two parts:

(1) Learning; repeatedly reviewing the knowledge in hand, one becomes a pandit; the manner of conducting livelihood; newly practicing. (2) familiarity in becoming enlightened; practice of the good; practice of the bad; having trained many times, to become an expert.[c]

The entry for *sgom pa* is also in two parts:

(1) either *bsgoms pa*, *bsgom pa*, or *sgoms*; to familiarize the mind again and again with the meaning of pondering; practice of *samādhi*; practice of forbearance. (2) the knowledge of means habituated in mind; one of the respective three of the theory-systems, namely, views, conduct, and pondering (*sgom*); having dwelt in one-pointedness of mind, to cast pondering (*sgom*) [upon the meditative object].[f]

For *bsgom pa*, this dictionary has: *sgom pa'i ma oñs pa*, "future (tense) of *sgom pa*." This is the interpretation of the 'b' prefix as a sign of future tense. Thus *bsgom pa* is the culmination of *sgom pa*. For *bsgoms pa* it has: *sgom pa'i 'das pa*, "past (tense) of *sgom pa*." For *sgoms*, it has: *sgom pa'i skul tshig*, "imperative mood of *sgom pa*." Apparently, it is the intention of this imperative mood to be in present tense.

Some of the foregoing usages are illustrated in verses of Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*, *Pratyakṣa* chapter, the Tibetan versions:<sup>8</sup>

k.29 This appearance on it as a formation, or the apprehension of the external entity as real—is a delusion, manifested by repeated practice (*goms*, S. *abhyāsa*) of views for immemorial time.[g]

k.284 Even when one regards the non-genuine 'totalities' of earth, etc. as uncleanliness, they clearly appear and without (using) discursive thought, manifested by the power of having contemplated (*bsgoms pa*, S. *bhāvanā*).[h]

k.285 Therefore, whether it be the genuine or the non-genuine which one has contemplated (*bsgoms gyur pa*), when one perfects the pondering (*sgom pa*, S. *bhāvanā*) (or, cultivation), it is the result of the clear non-discursive mind.[i]

k. 286 Here, whatever be the non-deception like the previously explained given thing, we claim it to be the authority of perception arisen from what was pondered (*bsgoms byuñ*, S. *bhāvanāja*). The rest is distorted [e.g., the uncleanliness, the 'totalities' of earth, etc.].[j]

The foregoing should clarify some of the usages of the terms in Kloñ-rdol Bla-ma's passage.

#### NOTES

1. M. G. Dhadphale, *Synonymic Collocations in the Tipiṭaka: a Study* (Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, India, 1980).
  2. Gadjin M. Nagao, *Index to the Māhāyana-Sūtrālaṅkāra*, Part Two, Tibetan-Sanskrit & Chinese-Sanskrit (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, Tokyo, 1961).
  3. Akira Hirakawa, et. al., *Index to the Abhidharmakośabhaṣya*, Part Three, Tibetan-Sanskrit (Daizo Shuppan Kabushikikaisha, Tokyo, 1978).
  4. Takashi Hirano, *An Index to the Bodhicaryāvatāra Pañjikā*, Chapter IX (Suzuki Research Foundation, Tokyo, 1966).
  5. Cf. *Buddhist Insight; Essays by Alex Wayman*, ed. by George R. Elder (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1984), pp. 338–39. The Sanskrit for 'dren mo is *sañbhinna*; for so so is *abhinna*.
  6. The Geshe Chos-grags dictionary is well known; I have the original Lhasa edition in two volumes with Tibetan paper, the edition published in Peking with Chinese translation, and the North India reprint of the Tibetan in a Western-style book. The Jampa Chogyal dictionary was published in 1969 by the Jayed Press, Delhi. The *Bod rgya tshig mdsod chen mo* in three large volumes is a recent committee publication at the Mi-rigs-dpe-skrun-khañ, Peijing, with Chinese translations of the Tibetan definitions.
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7. Cf. Alex Wayman, translator, *Calming the Mind and Discerning the Real; Buddhist Meditation and the Middle View*, from the *Lam rim chen mo* of Tsoñ-kha-pa (Columbia University Press, New York, 1978). The two Tibetan terms are used for the two main sections of Buddhist meditation: the 'jog-sgom for *zi-gnas* (S. *śamatha*), "calming (the mind)"; the *dpyad-sgom* for *lhag-mthoñ* (S. *vipaśyanā*), "discerning (the real)."

8. Yūsho Miyasaka, "An Index to the *Pramāṇavārttikā-kārikā*," Part II, Tibetan-Sanskrit Section, *Acta Indologica*, IV (Naritasan Shinshoji, Japan, 1976/9). I also use the 1974 edition of the Tibetan at Sarnath, Varanasi, India; and the 1968 Varanasi edition of the Sanskrit with the Manorathanandin commentary.

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