

sGam po pa's Doctrinal System: A Programmatic Way to Buddhahood for Beings of Varying Capacity, Both Gradual and Sudden?

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Introduction

The Tibetan master sGam po pa bSod nam Rin chen (1079–1153) was an influential figure and important systematiser during the second spread of Buddhism in Tibet and is considered to be the founding father of the different Dwags po bKa' brgyud traditions. This paper aims at presenting the overall gradual (*rim gyis*) character of his doctrinal system, exemplified with the help of commentaries on the *Four Dharmas of sGam po pa* (*Dwags po chos bzhi*) preserved in the different versions within the so-called *Collected Works of sGam po pa* (*Dwags po'i bka' 'bum*).² It will further show that sGam po pa's gradual approach is not necessarily at odds with a sudden or instantaneous (*cig car*) approach, and will present how sGam po pa manages to reconcile these two on a practical level so that they form a whole by integrating them into a system for beings of varying capacity.

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² For an overview and discussion of the different editions of the *Collected Works of sGam po pa*, see Kragh 2015: 156–199.

1. *sGam po pa's Gradual Doctrinal System*

Present-day Tibetan Buddhist traditions commonly agree that a practitioner reaches the goal of Buddhist soteriology, Buddhahood, at some point in the future through a primarily gradual process of development. This can be achieved by following the path of the *sūtras*, the Pāramitānaya, or of the *tantras*, the Mantranaya. While the non-tantric approach is generally considered to span over very long periods of time involving many lifetimes of training, that is, up to three eons, it is argued in the context of the Buddhist *tantras*, that one might be able to achieve this goal within a few lifetimes or even a single lifetime. Even though the tantric approach can therefore be considered very rapid, this does not imply that a practitioner leaps over certain phases of development during his or her religious career, but that the specific methods of the *tantras*, if practiced in union with higher knowledge, allow for an accelerated development. Hence, the *tantras* still involve a gradual process composed of several methods that need to be mastered in succession.

sGam po pa is also well-known for teaching such a gradual approach, as witnessed in his influential magnum opus, the *Dwags po thar rgyan*, commonly known in English as *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*.³ Out of the twenty-one chapters that make up this work, sixteen chapters are dedicated to explanations on the instructions of the spiritual teacher,⁴ that is, the path. The *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* employs a gradual soteriology involving different methods that are to be practiced one after the other in order to attain Buddhahood. Its fourth chapter on impermanence thus begins with a short introduction on the whole section that makes up the instructions of the spiritual teacher, which discusses four obstacles to attaining Buddhahood (*sangs rgyas mi thob pa'i gegs bzhi*) and their respective remedies (see Table 1). These are then explained in detail throughout chapters four to nineteen.⁵

³ The Tibetan full title of this work is *Dam chos yid bzhin gyi nor bu thar pa rin po che'i rgyan*. See *Dwags po'i bka' 'bum*, L 0595/1, 562b1–L 0596/1, 206a7. Cf. *Dwags po lha rje'i bka' 'bum*, vol. 11, 273.1–505.5. For an English translation, see Guenther 1959.

⁴ These are chapters four to nineteen of the *Dwags po'i thar rgyan*. *Dwags po'i bka' 'bum*, L 0595/1, 580a7–L 0596/1, 157a6. Cf. *Dwags po lha rje'i bka' 'bum*, vol. 11, 301.6–489.4.

⁵ For a short presentation of these four obstacles, see Scheuermann 2013: 469–470.

Obstacles	Remedies
1. attachment to the sphere of this life's activities (<i>tshe 'di'i spyod yul la chags pa</i>)	meditating on impermanence (<i>mi rtag pa sgom pa</i>)
2. attachment to well-being within (saṃsāric) existence (<i>srid pa'i bde ba la chags pa</i>)	meditating on the shortcomings of cyclic existence as well as [of] cause and effect (<i>'khor ba'i nyes dmigs las 'bras dang bcas pa sgom</i>)
3. attachment to the well-being of the peace (of nirvāṇa) (<i>zhi ba'i bde ba la chags pa</i>)	meditating on loving kindness and compassion (<i>byams pa dang snying rje sgom pa</i>)
4. not knowing the means for attaining awakening (<i>sangs rgyas sgrub pa'i thabs mi shes pa</i>)	generating the <i>dharmas</i> of supreme bodhicitta (<i>byang chub mchog tu sems bskyed pa chos rnam</i> s)

Table 1: The Four Obstacles to Attaining Buddhahood
in the *Dwags po thar rgyan*

sGam po pa's famous *Four Dharmas of sGam po pa* is a short instruction made up of four slogans said to summarize his doctrinal system. Tradition therefore considers it to be a concise summary of presentations found in longer works such as the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*. The *Collected Works of sGam po pa* contain six short passages that comment on the four *dharmas*. None of them are actual compositions of sGam po pa, but are teachings attributed to him that were recorded by disciples. However, the wordings of the four slogans that make up the *Four Dharmas of sGam po pa* are consistent throughout. Here is a short translation of the formulations as we find them in the *Chos bzhi mdor bsdus pa legs* or *Excellent Synopsis of the Four Dharmas*:⁶

⁶ *Chos bzhi mdor bsdus pa legs*, L 0595/1, 401a6: *chos chos su 'gro ba/ chos lam du 'gro ba/ lam 'khrul pa sel ba/ 'khrul pa ye shes su 'char ba zhig* [text: *cig*] *dgos gsung/ /*.

[sGam po pa] says that one needs:

- [1.] A *dharma* that turns toward the *dharma*,
- [2.] A *dharma* that turns toward the path,
- [3.] A path that dispels delusions,
- [4.] And delusions that appear as wisdom.

Particularly the explanations on the third *dharma*, the “path that dispels delusions” are of interest here, since they usually explain the function of the methods, that is, how the path dispels the delusions. It should also be mentioned that the fourth *dharma* is also equated with a sudden or instantaneous path in the commentary on the *Four Dharmas of sGam po pa* by La yag pa Byang chub dngos grub (12th cent.),⁷ a direct disciple of both sGam po pa and his nephew, sGam po Tshul khriims snying po (1116–1169). While the formulation of the fourth *dharma*, “delusions that appear as wisdom” (*’khrul pa ye shes su ’char ba*), invites such an interpretation, it is generally presented as an explanation of the result throughout the commentaries found in the *Collected Works of sGam po pa*.

A detailed presentation of the third *dharma* is found in the *Chos bzhi mdor bsdus pa legs*:

First, one dispels the delusion of attachment to this life by meditating on impermanence. One dispels the delusion of bad views by meditating on *karman* and effect. One dispels the delusion of clinging to cyclic existence by meditating on the shortcomings of cyclic existence. One dispels the delusion of the Hinayāna by meditating on loving kindness and compassion. One dispels the delusion of clinging to things by meditating that [they] resemble dream illusions.⁸

In this passage, five delusions, which are to be dispelled along the path, are juxtaposed with their respective remedies. Following a systematic pattern, the five pairs are arranged in a sequence from coarse to subtle, which is expressed by the sentence immediately following the above quotation: “In general, it is said that by means of ever higher [practices] one dispels the ever deeper delusions.”⁹ If the five delusions of the *Chos bzhi mdor bsdus pa legs* are juxtaposed with the

⁷ *mNyam med dwags po’i chos bzhir grags pa’i gzhung gi ’grel pa snying po gsal ba’i rgyan*, 15–181.

⁸ *Chos bzhi mdor bsdus pa legs*, L 0595/1, 402b6–403a1: *dang po mi rtag pa bsgoms pas tshe ’di la zhen pa’i ’khrul pa sel/ las bras bsgoms pas/ lta ba ngan pa’i ’khrul pa sel/ ’khor ba’i nyes dmigs bsgoms pas/ ’khor ba la chags pa’i ’khrul pa sel/ byams snying rje bsgoms pas/ theg dman gyi ’khrul pa sel/ rmi lam sgyu ma lta bur bsgoms pas/ dngos por ’dzin pa’i ’khrul pa sel/*.

⁹ *Chos bzhi mdor bsdus pa legs*, L 0595/1, 403a1: *lar na gong ma gong mas/ ’og ma ’og ma’i ’khrul pa sel gsung/*.

four obstacles to attaining Buddhahood in the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* introduced earlier, the correspondence becomes apparent (see Table 2). The only major deviation is the addition of bad views in the five delusions, but the subject is also treated in the *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* in the sixth chapter dealing with the law of *karman*.¹⁰

Four Obstacles to Attaining Awakening	Five Delusions
1. attachment to the sphere of this life's activities	1. attachment to this life
	2. bad views
2. attachment to well-being within (saṃsāric) existence	3. clinging to cyclic existence
3. attachment to the well-being of the peace [of <i>nirvāṇa</i>]	4. delusion of the Hīnayāna (~ clinging to one's own benefit)
4. not knowing the means for attaining awakening	5. clinging to things

Table 2: The Four Obstacles to Attaining Buddhahood and the Five Delusions

In both cases, *sGam po pa* seems to suggest that it requires the practice of a sequence of several methods—not a single one—so that a Buddhist practitioner can progress toward Buddhahood. Even though not mentioned explicitly, order and content of the methods and remedies are in harmony with the doctrine of the three types of beings (*skyes bu gsum*) as set forth by Atiśa Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna (982–1054) in the *Bodhipathapradīpa* and its auto-commentary, the *Bodhimārgapradīpa-pañjikā*. The three types of beings are:¹¹

1. beings of lesser capacity (*skyes bu chung ba*),
2. beings of middling capacity (*skyes bu 'bring ba*), and
3. beings of greater capacity (*skyes bu chen po*).

Beings of lesser capacity are said to strive for personal pleasures within cyclic existences by paying attention to abstaining from negative deeds and focusing on good deeds. This corresponds to the

¹⁰ *Dwags po thar rgyan*, L 0595/1, 606b5–618a1.

¹¹ See Eimer 1978: 104–107.

practices of meditating on impermanence and meditating on *karman* and effect, which is labelled as a mundane path. Beings of middling capacity, who are said to strive for their individual liberation, can build upon this basis. Their approach is said to consist of meditating on the defects of cyclic existence, which is defined as the path of the Hīnayāna or the lesser vehicle of Buddhism with a focus on one's own liberation. The approaches of lesser and middling beings taken together correspond to the content of the first *dharma* of the *Four Dharmas of sGam po pa*, "a *dharma* that turns toward the *dharma*" or "a *dharma* that becomes the *dharma*."¹²

The remaining two practices, developing loving kindness and compassion, and meditating that things resemble dream illusions, are then what sums up the path for beings of greater capacity, the Mahāyāna or great vehicle. This is said to correspond to the second *dharma* of the *Four Dharmas of sGam po pa*, "a *dharma* that turns toward the path" or "a *dharma* that turns into the path [to complete Buddhahood]."¹³ Depending on whether an explanation of the Buddhist *tantras* follows or not, beings of greater capacity are then also further differentiated into different degrees within this category in other works that also belong to the genre of the stages of the path (*lam rim*) literature.

2. *sGam po pa* and the *White Panacea*

sGam po pa's doctrinal system as described above is hardly compatible with an instantaneous or sudden approach, involving a mono-causal method considered sufficient to attain Buddhahood. Yet, the term *White Panacea* (*dkar po chig thub*) [also translated as *Self-Sufficient White Remedy*]¹⁴ occurs in a few of *sGam po pa*'s writings in relation to Mahāmudrā. Sa skya Paṇḍita (1182–1251) seems to have understood that the term refers to a mono-causal method that allows an individual to instantly attain Buddhahood. Consequently, he strongly criticised such a doctrine and suspected the influence of earlier Sino-Tibetan "instantaneist" (*cig car ba*) traditions advocating a sudden path to Buddhahood. David Jackson identified three main

¹² Cf. the explanations on the first *dharma* in *Chos bzhi mdor bsdu pa legs*, L 0595/1, 401a6–401b5.

¹³ Cf. the explanations on the first *dharma* in *Chos bzhi mdor bsdu pa legs*, L 0595/1, 401b5–6.

¹⁴ Cf. Jackson 1994.

criticisms raised by Sa skya Paṇḍita with respect to sGam po pa's presentation of Mahāmudrā:

1. That a single method or factor (even insight into Emptiness presented as the Great Seal) could suffice soteriologically
2. That the Gnosis (*ye shes: jñāna*) of the Great Seal could arise through an exclusively non-conceptual meditative method
3. That the Great Seal could ever be taught outside of the Mantrayāna.¹⁵

Klaus-Dieter Mathes has already shown that “both Sahajavajra’s *Tattvadaśakaṭikā* and Jñānakīrti’s *Tattvāvatāra* contain not-specifically-Tantric *mahāmudrā* teachings.”¹⁶ He has also demonstrated that a predecessor for a **sūtra-mahāmudrā* approach based on the *Ratnagotravibhāga Mahāyāna Uttaratantra* was “included in the teachings of the early Bka’ gdams pa,”¹⁷ and argued on the basis of Maitrīpa’s *Apratiṣṭhānavāda* that “the practice of *mahāmudrā* does not need to be Tantric and can be performed by not abiding in any extreme of reification or denial.”¹⁸ The discussion in this section therefore centres chiefly on Sa skya Paṇḍita’s criticism of sGam po pa’s presentation of a *White Panacea* as a single means of attaining awakening.

The following excerpt from the *rJe phag mo gru pa’i zhus lan* or *Exchanges with Phag mo gru pa* (here in David Jackson’s translation), a work considered to be a record of an exchange between sGam po pa and his disciple Phag mo gru pa rDo rje rgyal po (1110–1170), gives us an idea of how the term has been used by the early Dwags po bKa’ brgyud tradition:

Accordingly, when it has arisen, since this has become a *Self-sufficient White [Remedy]*, i.e. full liberation through knowing one thing, Buddha[h]ood is acquired in oneself. Since by that, the fetter that binds one to cyclic existence has been loosed of itself, one’s own mind achieves the level of great bliss.¹⁹

¹⁵ Jackson 1994: 72. For the discussion on the controversy surrounding the *White Panacea* or *Self-Sufficient White Remedy* and its relation to the famous bSam yas debate, see also Jackson 1982, van der Kuijp 1986, Broido 1987 and Jackson 1990.

¹⁶ Mathes 2006: 224.

¹⁷ Mathes 2015: 310.

¹⁸ Mathes 2007: 562.

¹⁹ Jackson 1994: 151. *rJe phag mo gru pa’i zhus lan*, L 0594/1, 482b4–5: *de skyes pa’i dus na/ dkar po cig thub cig shes kun grol du song bas/ sangs rgyas rang la rnyed/ des ’khor bar ’dzin pa’i sgrog rang gdal du ’gro bas/ rang sems bde ba chen po’i sa non bya ba yin gsung/*.

La yag pa Byang chub dngos grub's root verses of his commentary on the *Four Dharmas of sGam po pa*, which according to its colophon recount sGam po pa's instructions on the subject, also contain a passage on the *White Panacea*:

Ultimate reality is not the object of sophists, [and it is] inexpressible. Being like the sky, [it is] primordially pure. Wisdom which is free from birth and cessation is free from elaborations. If it is seen by itself in the way of non-seeing (*mthong med tshul du*), just like darkness [ceasing] through the dawning of the light, what is to be given up ceases, and all qualities occur. [Being like] a *White Panacea*, the Victorious Ones cannot enumerate the benefits of this approach.²⁰

In these two examples, as well as elsewhere in the *Collected Works of sGam po pa*,²¹ the term *White Panacea* is not used to describe a soteriologically self-sufficient factor or method, that is, a *Self-Sufficient White Remedy*, but rather seems to be applied as a general metaphor for Mahāmudrā. Accordingly, a short passage of the *sNying po don gyi gdam pa phyag rgya chen po'i 'bum tig* in the *Collected Works of sGam po pa* informs us that “[sGam po pa] gave [his nephew Shes rab byang chub] the pith instructions [for realising] Mahāmudrā, the *White Panacea*.”²² Like a *White Panacea* that cures all diseases once and for all, the realization of Mahāmudrā is understood to remove all obscurations so that no further remedy needs to be administered. This had already been observed by Michael Broido:

The colloquial use for *dkar-po chig-thub* is of a medical plant, perhaps ginseng. Now the point of the analogy between ginseng and *mahāmudrā* is not merely that just as ginseng cures all diseases, *mahāmudrā* cures all defects of the personality. When the bKa'-

²⁰ *mNyam med dwags po'i chos bzhir grags pa'i gzhung*, 7.2–3: *don dam rtoḡ ge'i yul min tshig bral/ /nam mkha' 'dra zhiḡ ḡzod nas dag pa/ /skye 'gag med pa'i ye shes sproḡ bral/ /mthong med tshul du rang gis mthong nal/ /snang ba shar bas mun pa bzhin du/ /spang bya 'gag cing yon tan kun 'byung/ /tshul 'di'i phan yon rgyal ba rnam kyis/ /bgrang bar mi spyod dkar po chig thub/.*

²¹ The term *dkar po chig thub* or *White Panacea* occurs in several passages within the *Collected Works of sGam po pa*: *rJe phag mo gru pa'i zhus lan*, L 0594/1, 482b5; *Duḡ gsum mkhyen pa'i zhu lan*, L 0594/1, 377a2–3; *Duḡ gsum mkhyen pa'i zhu lan*, L 0594/1, 380b7 [For translations of the first three passages along with their Tibetan texts, see Jackson 1994: 149–153.]; *sNying po don gyi gdam pa phyag rgya chen po'i 'bum tig*, L 0595/1, 128b6; *sNying po don gyi gdam pa phyag rgya chen po'i 'bum tig*, L 0595/1, fol.142b3; *gNas lugs gnyis kyi man ngag dang go cha gnyis kyi man ngag*, L 0595/1, 365b1.

²² *sNying po don gyi gdam pa phyag rgya chen po'i 'bum tig*, L 0595/1, fol.128b6: *phyag rgya chen po dkar po gcig thub man ngag gnang*. For a summary of the entire section, see Kragh 2015: 447–448.

brgyud-pas use the word on their own account, as does Zhang Tshal-pa (1123–1193) in his important *mahāmudrā* work *Phyag-chen lam-mchog mthar-thug*, the idea is rather that once the disease, whatever it was, has been cured by means of ginseng, there is no need to take any further medicine to cure it, and similarly once *mahāmudrā* has been attained there is no need to do anything further in order to remove defilements.²³

That the *White Panacea* is a metaphor for the realisation of Mahāmudrā is also maintained by Samten Karmay who further notes that “the conception of *chig thub* already occurs in songs of Mi-la ras-pa: ‘As I know one, I am learned in all’, (*gcig shes kun la mkhas pa yin /*).”²⁴ The statement attributed to Mi la ras pa corresponds to the part of the above quotation from the *rJe phag mo gru pa’i zhus lan*, which was rendered by David Jackson as “full liberation through knowing one thing” (*cig shes kun grol*).

Moreover, that this realisation of Mahāmudrā, which is likened to a *White Panacea*, is not used to express a single cause for achieving Buddhahood becomes evident from a short passage of the *sNying po don gyi gdam pa phyag rgya chen po’i ’bum tig*, where the *White Panacea* occurs in the framework of a generation stage practice involving a sequence of different methods. The following sentence concludes a section outlining the achievements that can be obtained with respect to body, speech and mind through meditating on a tutelary deity:

Concerning the mind: if one has realized the natural state due to being endowed with *dharmadhātu* pride, it is called a *White Panacea*, and all three [types of] obscurations have been purified.²⁵

3. *sGam po pa’s Doctrinal System, Both Gradual and Sudden?*

As we have seen earlier, *sGam po pa’s* doctrinal system—at least as presented in the *Four Dharmas of sGam po pa* and the *Jewel Ornament of*

²³ Broido 1987: 27–28.

²⁴ Karmay 1988: 197–198.

²⁵ *sNying po don gyi gdam pa phyag rgya chen po’i ’bum tig*, L 0595/1, fol.142b3: *yid chos nyid kyi nga rgyal dang ldan pas ni gnyug ma de rtogs na/ dkar po chig thub ces bya ste/ sgrib pa ni gsum ka byang/*. For a summary of the entire section, see Kragh 2015: 451–452. The *gNas lugs gnyis kyi man ngag dang go cha gnyis kyi man ngag* contains an almost verbatim identical passage, which also identifies the *White Panacea* with the state of realisation. *gNas lugs gnyis kyi man ngag dang go cha gnyis kyi man ngag*, L 0595/1, 364b1: *yid chos nyid kyi nga rgyal dang ldan pa ni gnyug ma’o/ rtogs na dkar po chig thub ces bya ste/ sgrib pa ni gsum ka byang ngo/*. For a summary of this section, see Kragh 2015: 538.

Liberation—forms a practical soteriological scheme of syncretic character, which is both systematic and gradual in that sGam po pa lists several delusions or obstacles to attaining awakening and explains the necessary methods to counteract them. How can such a fundamentally gradual approach involving several methods be brought into line with an instantaneous approach? How can we understand the seemingly instantaneist instructions sGam po pa is said to have presented, which might lead one to believe that he considered that a single method or factor will suffice soteriologically?

In Tibetan doctrinal debates, it is generally very important to keep in mind that differing definitions for key terminologies are used by different proponents, which is often ignored in the argumentations of polemical debates. The way in which sGam po pa defines an instantaneist is indeed very particular. At the beginning of the *Phag mo gru pa'i zhus lan*, it is said that the distinction between the gradualist (*rim gyis pa*) and the instantaneist amounts to the “difference in the degree to which both have purified themselves.”²⁶

In another passage discussing the differences between gradualists and instantaneists within the *Tshogs chos yon tan phun tshogs* or *Teachings to the Assembly, an Abundance of Qualities* this is formulated even more clearly:

An individual who has reduced discordant habitual tendencies like afflictions and so on, and has developed deep habitual tendencies for the *dharma* can be called an instantaneist.²⁷

A very clear definition of an instantaneist attributed to Phag mo gru pa is again found in a commentary on the *Four Dharmas of sGam po pa* by sPyan snga ba Shes rab 'byung gnas (1187–1241):

Phag mo gru pa stated: “Instantaneists, those with the highest faculties, who in their former lifetimes underwent immeasurable purifications, are said to realise the meaning of emptiness in this life, just by hearing the name of the guru, seeing [his] face or immediately upon being instructed. [Still,] on the basis of [their] purifications in former lifetimes, they are also gradualists.”²⁸

²⁶ rJe phag mo gru pa'i zhus lan, L 0594/01, 482a1: de gnyis la sbyangs pa che chung cig gi khyad yin tel.

²⁷ Tshogs chos yon tan phun tshogs, L 0594/01, 277a5–6: cig char ba ni/ nyon mongs pa la sogs pa mi mthun pa'i bag chag bsrabs [text: bsrab] pa/ chos kyi [text: kyis] bag chags mthug pa sbyangs pa can gyi [text: gyis] gang zag ka zer ba yin tel. A very similar passage is also found in the *Dus gsum mkhyen pa'i zhu lan*, L 0594/1, 440b3–4: cig char ba ni nyon mongs pa'i bag chags srab pa/ chos kyi bag chags 'thug pa'i sbyangs ba can gyi gang zag la zer ba yin tel.

²⁸ rJe dwags po'i thugs kyi yang snying cho bzhi'i rnam bshad, 205.5–206.1: cig char ba ni gang zag dbang po rab skye ba snga ma phan chad du sbyangs pa dpag tu med pa song ba

According to these definitions, for sGam po pa and Phag mo gru pa, the term instantaneist describes a practitioner who, in this lifetime, does not need any further preparatory training by means of different successive methods. Still, at the same time it presupposes that the individual underwent a gradual development throughout former lifetimes. Although an instantaneist can rapidly progress toward awakening by relying on a single method in this life, this neither implies a non-gradual or a mono-causal approach. It is rather precisely the prior gradual training throughout former lifetimes, involving a multitude of factors, that allows the instantaneist to take this 'short-cut' now in this life.

That sGam po pa does not consider this to be an approach for the average student becomes clear from a sentence following the above quotation recorded in the *Tshogs chos yon tan phun tshogs*, where he adds: "This is very difficult [to achieve]. I [sGam po pa] should be considered a gradualist."²⁹

rnam tshe 'dir bla ma'i mtshan thos pa'am/ zhal mthong ba'am khrid byas ma thag tsam gyis stong nyid kyi don rtogs pa la zer te/ snga ma'i sbyangs pa la ltos nas de yang rim gyis pa yin pa rje phag mo gru pas bzhed do//.

²⁹ *Tshogs chos yon tan phun tshogs*, L 0594/01, 277a6: *de shin tu bka' ba yin/ nga ni rims kyi par 'dod pa yin/* The following parallel passage of the *Dus gsum mkhyen pa'i zhu lan* elaborates this even further. *Dus gsum mkhyen pa'i zhu lan*, L 0594/1, 440b4-7: *shin tu dka' ba yin gsung/ bla ma'i zhal nas nga ni rims kyi par 'dod pa yin gsung/ ngas bla ma mi la'i drung du mi mang rab cig yong pa'i dus su/ rdzogs chen 'di ci rtsug lags zhus pas/ bla ma mar pa'i zhal nas chos men pa skad zer te/ chos men par mi 'dug/ sa drug pa bdun pa yan chad gyi chos su 'dug gsung/ de nas byis pa lo lnga tsam lon pa zhig [text: cig] la 'dzub mo btsugs nas/ rdzogs chen pa rnam 'di dang 'dra ba yin te/ byis pa 'di na re nga la skyes bu lo nyi shu rtsa lnga lon pa'i nus pa yong zer ba dang 'dra ba yin/ rdzogs chen pa rnam kyang da lta sangs rgyas pa skad zer te/ don dang mi ldan gsung//.*

Jackson 1994: 30, n. 71, recounts this passage as follows: "sGam-po-pa maintains that there are three paths (Pāramitāyāna, Mantra and Mahāmudrā), and also two individuals (*rim-gyis-pa* and *cig-car-ba*), but states that the latter approach is extremely difficult and that he considers himself a 'gradualist' (*rim-gyis-pa*). He goes on to relate that, once, when Mi-la ras-pa was in the company of many people, sGam-po-pa asked him what rDzogs-chen was like, to which Mi-la replied that his teacher Mar-pa had said: 'Though some people say it is not the *Dharma* (*chos men pa*), that is not [so], but it is a *dharma* belonging to the sixth or seventh *bhūmi* and above.' Then [Mi-la] pointed to a little boy of about five years of age and said, 'The followers of the rDzogs-chen are like him. It is like this child saying that he has the powers of a twenty-five-year-old [adult]. The followers of the rDzogs-chen too speak of 'Buddhahood now, 'but it is not really meaningful.'"

Conclusion

In sGam po pa's doctrinal system, so-called instantaneist instructions are restricted to the training of highly developed individuals and find their place within an overall gradual soteriology. They do not fulfil the criterion criticised by Sa skya Paṇḍita of constituting a single method or factor considered to suffice for achieving Buddhahood. To the contrary, being a person competent enough to use these methods requires training along a gradual path throughout previous lifetimes involving many factors.

Out of a chain of methods, instantaneist instructions are the last ones to be applied. At the end of this process, through directly recognising the true nature of the mind, the basis, that is, deluded states of mind, is instantaneously transformed, and the practitioner immediately understands the nature of the basis. Hence, the practitioner is considered as seeing directly that deluded and undeluded states of mind share the same basis, that is, he or she has attained what is explained in the fourth *dharma* of the *Four Dharmas of sGam po pa*, "delusions that appear as wisdom." Even though it can be argued that it is indeed possible to achieve the result quickly by using such a method, it is only a sudden or instantaneous result from the perspective of the present lifetime of a given practitioner. Thus the instruction is still in perfect harmony with the otherwise gradual doctrinal system of sGam po pa.

Whether intended or not, such a soteriological model constitutes a clever strategy to avert possible criticism directed at the use of instantaneist methods that were very popular during the time of sGam po pa. Any Buddhist critique of these methods would have to accept the principle of reincarnation and its implications for the possible degrees of individuals' capacities. Whatever his motives may have been, by placing such a method at the top of his syncretic doctrinal system, it allowed sGam po pa, on a very practical level, to teach a gradual doctrinal system for the masses without having to deviate from guiding an exclusive circle of students by means of instantaneist methods.

When looking at beings of greater capacity, the highest category within the system of the three types of beings, sGam po pa's doctrinal system seems to suggest yet a further threefold subdivision of this category: those who are capable of following the path of the *sūtras*, that is, the Pāramitānaya, those who are capable of following the path of the *tantras*, that is, the Mantranaya, and the extremely developed individuals who are capable of practicing the instantaneist approach.

This corresponds also to sGam po pa's famous teaching on the three paths (*lam gsum*), consisting of the path of inference (*rjes dpag*

lam), the path of blessing (*byin rlabs kyi lam*) and the path of direct perception (*mngon sum lam*). A brief presentation of the three paths is recorded in the *Dus gsum mkhyen pa'i zhu lan* or *Exchanges with Dus gsum mkhyen pa*. In this work, sGam po pa equates the path of inference with the Pāramitānaya, the path of blessing with the creation and completion stage practices of the Buddhist *tantras*, and the path of direct perception with luminous co-emergence.³⁰ In another passage of that work that also discusses the three paths, they are presented as approaches for beings of varying capacities: the Pāramitānaya is described as an approach for beings with dull capacities, the Buddhist *tantras* as an approach for beings with middling capacities, and Mahāmudrā, which probably relates here to the path of direct perception, as an approach for beings with sharp capacities.³¹

Furthermore, sGam po pa's definition of an instantaneist presupposes that there are extremely gifted students who are far advanced due to their earlier training. They do not need to follow the path of ordinary students and can therefore be subjected to a special religious fast-track education, that is, they can directly practice instantaneist methods. This may be seen in fact as an antecedent of the Tibetan system of identifying tulkus (*sprul sku*)³² or reincarnations of previous masters who, because of their training in previous lifetimes, are said to require a special treatment.

Traditional Tibetan accounts often consider the Karma pa lineage of the Karma bKa' brgyud tradition to be the oldest reincarnation lineage. This custom is believed to have started with the second Karma pa, Karma Pakṣi (1204/6–1283), who was considered to be the

³⁰ *Dus gsum mkhyen pa'i zhu lan*, L 0594/1, 440b1–3: *rin po che'i zhal nas lam rnam pa gsum du 'gro dgos gsung ngo/ rjes dpag lam du byed pa dang/ byin rlabs lam du byed pa dang/ mngon sum lam du byed pa gsum yin gsung/ mtshan nyid dam pha rol du phyin pa ni rjes dpag lam du byed pa bya ba yin/ theg pa chen po gsangs sngags ni bskyed rādzogs gnyis la bsten nas byin rlabs lam du byed pa yin/ mngon sum lam du byed pa ni lhan cig skyes pa 'od gsal bya ba yin gsung/*. A translation of another presentation of the three paths in sGam po pa's *Tshogs chos chen mo* or the *Great Teachings to the Assembly* is found in Mathes 2006: 202–203.

³¹ *Dus gsum mkhyen pa'i zhu lan*, L 0594/1, 419a2–3: *yang gsum ste dbang po brtul po dad pa can tshogs kyi lam du 'jug pa ni pha rol tu phyin pa'o/ 'bring rtog pa dang nyon mongs pa can thabs kyi lam du 'jug pa ni gsang sngags so/ dbang po rnon po shes rab can de kho na nyid la 'jug pa ni phyag rgya chen po'o/*

³² This term is the Tibetan standard translation for *nirmāṇakāya*, one of the three bodies of a *buddha* in the *trikāya* or *three body* doctrine of the Mahāyāna. In the context of the *trikāya* doctrine, the *nirmāṇakāya* describes the way how a *buddha* manifests for ordinary beings in order to guide them along the path to Buddhahood. See Harvey 1990: 126–128. With the development of reincarnation lineages in Tibet, the term *sprul sku* underwent a semantic change and was eventually used also to refer to reincarnations of deceased masters.

reincarnation of one of sGam po pa's main disciples, Dus gsum mkhyen pa (1110–1193).³³ Leonard van der Kuijp has already noted that there is “ample evidence that a number of other individuals had been considered tülkus during the 13th century,” and that several bKa' gdams teachers of the 12th century were considered reincarnations of past masters.³⁴

While there may have been other early instances of Tibetan masters being identified as manifestations or emanations of bodhisattvas, reincarnations of deceased masters or even attempts to create reincarnation lineages, it was particularly in the bKa' brgyud tradition that this system became predominant as a succession policy with the establishment of the successive Karma pa reincarnation lineage. One of the reasons—among others, a political dimension should be considered—why the tulku concept may have fallen on fertile ground in the environment of the early bKa' brgyud tradition may lie in sGam po pa's approach of harmonising gradual and instantaneist currents within a single doctrinal system. While it may not have caused it, sGam po pa's syncretic doctrinal system may have nevertheless facilitated this development.

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³³ See Ray 1986: 46f and van der Kuijp 2005: 28.

³⁴ Van der Kuijp 2005: 28–29. Ruth Gamble drew my attention to the need to carefully examine the usage of the term *sprul sku* as an epithet for a Buddhist master, particularly in texts of the 13th and 14th centuries. During this period, the term may not yet denote the reincarnation of a deceased Buddhist master. Berounsky 2010: 19 already demonstrated that the term also occurs as an epithet referring to the magical abilities of an individual.

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