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# On Being 'Impartial' (*ris med*): From Non-Sectarianism to the Great Perfection\*

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## Introduction: Impartiality and the History of Buddhism *The Terms phyogs/ris med in the History of Tibetan Buddhism*

 The Tibetan expression *phyogs ris su med pa* (including abbreviations or variations like: *phyogs ris med*, *phyogs med*, *ris med*, etc.) has come to describe an important Buddhist contemplative revival in 19th century Khams. In a famous article, the late E. Gene Smith (1970, 2001) introduced scholars to what he termed the “nonsectarian movement,” with its great saints and cultural heroes. “Nonsectarian” was Smith’s translation of *ris med*, while other scholars have used also a variety of terms like “ecumenical,” “eclectic,” or even “universalist,” the latter describing the intent to encompass all Buddhist lineages or teachings. More generally, *phyogs/ris med* can be translated as “impartial,” the most literal and inclusive translation. This rendition has also the advantage to highlight the fundamental Buddhist notion behind –and beyond– the so-called *ris med* movement: the virtue of impartiality.

In previous works, I have made my own modest contribution to the political and religious history of the so-called *ris med* approach in Tibet, focusing on the period of the intensification of sectarianism, the 16th century. Here, the intent of this paper is rather to illuminate this external history by focusing on the transformative power of ideals and related praxis, as well as the symbolic web of resources for the making of meaning and guidelines for action. Rather than etc,

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the perspective here will be emic. Moreover, the ideal of impartiality is not a mere product of social conditions but it can actually transform or reform them. As a prescriptive ideal, it is an injunction to exercise one's own freedom and an effort to free oneself from partiality. In this way, I hope thus to offer a perspective avoiding both the extreme of "naïve idealism," taking impartiality for granted and ignoring the actual inner transformation it takes, as well as the complexity of its implications in a given singular historical context (with the problem of "disguised ideology" or the attempt, conscious or not, to hide selfish interests behind supposed universal values); and the other extreme of "naïve realism," according to which all philosophical and religious ideas could/should be explained externally by the sole terms of their supposed social causes and conditions of origination. Stated simply, impartiality is a dynamic process along the contemplative life that cannot be reduced simply to a form of social diplomacy, negotiation of alliances or feigned tolerance (even if it has also been and can still occasionally be). By showing the contemplative dimension of the terms of *phyogs/ris med*, with special reference to the Great Perfection (*rDzogs chen*), we will see that at the heart of this ideal of impartiality actually lies the notion of intrinsic freedom (*rang grol*): the innate and mysterious<sup>1</sup> capacity to free oneself from the power of external conditions and oppositions, while becoming simply and fully aware of their dynamic play.

### *The Notion of Impartiality in East and West*

In a seminal paper, Paul Demiéville discussed the importance of the "impartial benevolence" in Asian civilizations.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the notion of impartiality or the neutrality of the sage appears to be a common ideal in Asia, Buddhism being here especially credited by Demiéville for its emphasis on a universally positive attitude including friends, neutral persons, enemies, and ultimately all sentient beings through

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<sup>1</sup> While referring to a different context, the Pāli tradition, Bikkhu Anālayo (2003, p. 60), makes the interesting comment which is significant here as well: "This 'bare attention' aspect of *sati* [mindfulness] has an intriguing potential since it is capable of leading to a 'de-automatization' of mental mechanisms [including reactions of attraction, aversion or ignorance]." And by the capacity of changing one's own reaction, it is possible to change the whole relational system.

<sup>2</sup> In his article entitled "L'esprit de bienfaisance impartiale dans les civilisations anciennes de l'Extrême-Orient." He wrote (Demiéville 1973 p. 113): "La notion de l'impartialité ou de la neutralité du sage est fort ancienne et assez générale dans ces civilisations, en particulier dans les deux principales d'entre elles, celle de l'Inde et de la Chine, d'où les pays voisins ont tiré les leurs. Quand au principe de la sympathie ou de la pitié, il y est surtout le fait du bouddhisme."

the praxis of the four immeasurables (P. *appamaññā*; Sk. *apramāṇa*): loving-kindness (*mettā*, *maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), altruistic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*, *upekṣā*).<sup>3</sup>

In the West, Pierre Hadot's far-reaching redefinition of ancient *philosophia* as a "spiritual exercise," has allowed us to re-envision the common quest of its various schools: the transcendence of passions and egocentrism, and the attainment of what he has called "a universal perspective" beyond partisan and partial points of view.<sup>4</sup> In a series of contributions, Matthew T. Kapstein (2000, 2013a, 2013b) has shown the relevance of Hadot's definition of philosophy for the study of Buddhism. Hadot himself also noted some striking parallels between ancient *philosophia* and Asian wisdom traditions. In this regard, he noted specifically the common importance of "indifference."<sup>5</sup> Here of course, it is not the negative type of indifference discussed in Buddhism, but rather the equanimity, the transcendence of self-centered judgments. *Im-partiality* is thus to adopt a universal perspective, that is to say, etymologically and philosophically, the per-

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<sup>3</sup> Those practices might not have been restricted to Buddhism in India, but it is certainly through Buddhism that they were propagated and cultivated in the rest of Asia.

<sup>4</sup> Hadot 1995, pp. 291-292: "Presque toutes les écoles proposent des exercices d'ascèse (le mot grec *askesis* signifie précisément 'exercice') et de maîtrise de soi [...]. [Leurs différentes méthodes d'ascèse] supposent toutes un certain dédoublement, par lequel le moi refuse de se confondre avec ses désirs et ses appétits, prend de la distance par rapport aux objets de ses convoitises et prend conscience de son pouvoir de s'en détacher. Il s'élève ainsi d'un point de vue partiel et partiel à une perspective universelle, qu'elle soit celle de la nature ou de l'esprit." (For an English translation, see Hadot 2002, pp. 189-191.) See also this passage, p. 415: "Vue de cette manière, la pratique de la philosophie dépasse donc les oppositions des philosophies particulières. Elle est essentiellement un effort pour prendre conscience de nous-mêmes, de notre être-au-monde, de notre être-avec-autrui, un effort aussi pour 'réapprendre à voir le monde,' comme disait Merleau-Ponty, pour atteindre aussi à une vision universelle, grâce à laquelle nous pourrions nous mettre à la place des autres et dépasser notre propre partialité." (English translation, Hadot 2002, p. 276.)

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 419-420: "Il est très intéressant de constater que dans la Grèce, l'Inde et la Chine, une des voies qui mènent à la sagesse consiste dans l'indifférence, c'est-à-dire dans le refus d'attribuer aux choses des différences de valeur qui exprimeraient le point de vue de l'individu, égoïste, partiel et limité, le point de vue de la 'grenouille au fond de son puits' ou de la 'mouche au fond d'une cuve,' dont parle Tchouang-tseu [...]. Ce désintéressement et cette indifférence ramènent ainsi à un état originel : la quiétude, la paix, qui au fond de nous, existe antérieurement à l'affirmation de notre individualité contre le monde et contre autrui, antérieurement à cet égoïsme et cet égocentrisme qui nous séparent de l'univers [...]." (English translation, Hadot 2002, pp. 278-279.)

spective of universe, i.e. of the *totality*.<sup>6</sup> Such a state, Hadot tells us, is actually our original condition, prior to the affirmation of the ego against the world and the fragmentation of conscious experience. And a whole life following the “love of wisdom” is thus dedicated to regain and re-access it as much as it is possible. The important point is that it demands not simply wholesome intention, but actually a lifelong *askesis*, or “spiritual exercises,” involving in many ways the transformation of the whole subject practicing them.

***The Founding Gesture of the Historical Buddha:  
Impartiality in the Aṭṭhakavagga***

The attitude of impartiality is a key element in the founding gesture of Śākyamuni’s teachings, with deep implications in terms of pedagogy, ethics, psychology, epistemology and soteriology. It is also a clearly defined topic in the Pāli collection of the *Suttanipāta*, and especially in its fourth part, the *Aṭṭhakavagga*<sup>7</sup>, which is considered to belong to the oldest strata of texts that we currently have. As shown by Bikkhu Bodhi (2017), we find in the *Suttanipāta* the recurrent use of the term *tadī* in order to express the ideal of impartiality. It can be a simple term of reference or have an elevated meaning to express the idea of impartiality.<sup>8</sup> In this last sense, as Bikkhu Bodhi explains according to the Pāli commentarial literature, “one might be called *tadī*: because one is impartial toward the desirable and the undesirable; impartial because one has renounced; impartial because one has crossed over; impartial because one is freed; and impartial as a descriptive term.”

Especially, the unifying theme of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* can be described “as the detached stance the sage takes toward debates and doctrinal views” (Bodhi 2017, pp. 138-144). These ancient sources describe a historical context plagued by all sorts of conflicts, including those among ascetics debating, arguing the superiority of their own doctrinal views and trying to defeat each other. This idea of impartiality is thus both descriptive of the state of the sage, and pre-

<sup>6</sup> The Latin *universum* came with Ciceron to translate the Greek *to holon*, the totality. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine. Histoire des mots*, par A. Ernout et A. Meillet. Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1951, pp. 1322-1323.

<sup>7</sup> This text has also a Chinese parallel (*Yizu-jing*, 義足經, T. 198) and thus can also be understood in a way as a common heritage of Indian Buddhist schools.

<sup>8</sup> Bikkhu Bodhi 2017, pp. 60-61: The usual sense of *tadī* is a “simple term of reference, a demonstrative meaning ‘such a person, a person like that,’ referring to one previously described.” And for the translator of these Pāli texts, “it is not always easy to determine in any particular instance whether *tadī* is being used with [the] elevated meaning [of impartiality] or as a simple term of reference.”

scriptive for those who aspire to peace and serenity, freedom and wisdom. It has also deep epistemological and psychological implications: the identification of oneself to one's own doctrinal views or faction, together with the opposition to others, is seen as the very hallmark of delusion.<sup>9</sup>

Such Pāli texts magnify a heroic spiritual effort and radical choice of life: the ethos of complete detachment concerning all possessions and places, with the insistence on solitary wandering or retreat, control of sense perceptions, as well as constant vigilance. The Buddha teaches to avoid any dispute: the sage is said to be without prejudice and free, to own no school or sect, and to hold no views (*Aṭṭhakavagga*, 800). The eighth *sutta* of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* (*Pasūrasutta*, 824-834) is entirely dedicated to the total discard of sectarian positions, considered to be the sole expressions of passions and attachment. The next (*Magāndiyasutta*, 835-847) further insists on the eradication of any "view" (*diṭṭhi*) and "ideation" (*sañña*). Thus is found the "peace of mind" (*ajjhattasanti*, 838).<sup>10</sup> Similar statements are also found in the overall *Aṭṭhakavagga*, showing eloquently how the Buddhist sage avoids any position and "sees security everywhere" (*khemaṃ passati sabbadhi*, 953). We shall see below in this paper how the latter statement has eloquent parallels in the literature of the Great Perfection.

### *Features of the Historical Development of Buddhism: Ideals and Their Periodic Revivals*

These Pāli *sutta*-s elevate the ideal of the forest-dwelling monks

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<sup>9</sup> Such attachment interplays with feelings of insecurity, compulsive thinking, anxiety, and leads to conceit and conflicts. It is clear and eloquently said in numerous Buddhist scriptures that the identification of concepts of self and others with notions of right vs. wrong, good vs. bad, represents the very knot of the three poisons (attraction, aversion and ignorance), entangling human beings to countless sufferings. In *The Sutta of the Brahma Net (Brahmajāla Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya 1*, translated in Walshe 2012, pp. 67-90), the Buddha has even classified all the main doctrinal views of his time according to their perceived underlying attitudes in terms of craving for existence or for non-existence, presenting in a sense a proto-psychoanalysis of dogmatism.

<sup>10</sup> But as Bikkhu Bodhi (2017, p. 144) rightly points out, there is still the need to establish the "right view" of the Buddhist path. "Right view differs from the kind of views repudiated in the *Aṭṭhakavagga* in that it is offered not as an object of intellectual consent but as a guideline to experiential insight. [...] Thus the enlightened sage, unlike the philosophical skeptic, is not committed to a perpetual aporia. What distinguishes the munis of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* is that, having fulfilled the function of right view, they do not grasp upon views and thus they abide in peace and equanimity." And as shown below in Tibetan contemplative literature, the supreme view is said to be *phyogs ris med*, "without bias."

(*āraññika/āraṇyaka*) or rag robe-wearing monks (*pāmsu-/pāmsu-kūlikā*), that came to be differentiated to town-dwelling monks (*gāma-vāsin*), monks residing in monasteries and who devote a more considerable part of their time to scholastic exegesis and rituals for the laity. This is why the epistemological distinction between scholastic study and contemplative insight can be paralleled respectively with the sociological difference of status between town-dwelling monks and forest-dwelling monks. Nevertheless, these are not exclusive activities or roles, and at both individual and collective levels, what matters most is to elucidate the transformative power of their dynamic interplay. According to Rupert Gethin:

The history of Buddhist monasticism can be seen in the light of a continued interplay, and sometimes tension, between the town-dwelling monks and the forest monks, between the scholar monks and the practitioners. Although the former may have been numerically more significant, the ideal of the forest saint has continued to exercise a considerable power over the imaginations of both the Saṅgha and the laity down to the present day, with the consequence that there have been significant attempts to put that ideal into practice.<sup>11</sup>

Gethin also points out that the tension between the Indian Buddhist philosophical schools of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra seem to follow this same pattern, since we can see them as respectively emphasizing analytical investigation on one hand, and the “practice of yoga,” i.e. the direct exploration of deep psychological and meditative states, on the other hand. Gethin even goes on by considering some of the debates in Tibet as the continuation of this tension, illustrated by the philosophical debate on intrinsic/extrinsic emptiness (*rang/gzhan stong*), in connection with the sociological differences between schools emphasizing scholasticism (especially the dGe lugs pa and Sa skya pa) or yogic practices (especially bKa’ brgyud pa and rNying ma pa).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Gethin 1998, p. 105. He also writes, p. 99 : “the ideal of the wanderer intent on the Buddhist monk’s traditional spiritual quest continued to be seen as embodied in the forest-dwelling or rag robe-wearing monk, and the periodic attempt to re-establish the ancient ascetic ideal is one of the defining features of the history of Buddhist monasticism. But [...] it is the spirit of that ancient ideal that inspires the tradition, not the letter.”

<sup>12</sup> This idea is actually coming from Tibetan authors themselves, as Kong sprul shows in his *Shes bya mdzod* about the reception of Indian Buddhism in Tibet (SK, vol. 1, p. 504): *phyis nas bshad bka’ gtso bor sa dge gnyis / / sgrub brgyud bka’ rnying dag la babs ltar snang / Auto-commentary: bstan pa phyi dar chos lugs tha dad du gyes pa nas brtsams thams cad la bshad sgrub gnyis ka yod mod kyang / bshad bka’ ni gtso bor*

*Phyogs/ris med as Tibetan Contemplative Terms and Ideals*

From the general history of Buddhism, the 19th century so-called *ris med* movement may also be seen as another attempt to come back to this ancient ideal of contemplative life, within the specific historical context of 19th century sDe dge kingdom in Khams. To illustrate this, we will show here that the terms *phyogs/ris med* belong actually rather to contemplative literature from where they draw their main inspirational power and spiritual guidance. Such terms are actually canonical since we find them already in the *bKa' 'gyur* and *bsTan 'gyur*. I will also show that they play an important role in the Tibetan contemplative indigenous literature, with special reference to the Great Perfection (*rDzogs chen*), because of its importance for 19th century *ris med* teachers. While the various contexts and meanings are not homogeneous and must be distinguished, elucidating a wider semantic web for such terms shall enable us to get a deeper understanding of the notion of impartiality as a symbolic resource in the intellectual background of the *ris med* luminaries of Tibet.

But before envisioning the possibility to overcome gravity thanks to the wings of contemplation, and to enjoy even for brief moments the "view from above," so to speak, we shall first firmly ground our investigation on the very land of Tibet and the socio-historical realities of the context-based singularity of the 19th century *ris med* movement, its specific responses and achievements.

**I. The "Impartial" (*ris med*) Approach in Tibet**

The so-called "impartial" (*ris med*) movement was a trans-sectarian<sup>13</sup> activity of collection, revelation, compilation and transmission of various Tibetan lineages and teachings, mainly led by the spiritual trio named *mKhyen Kong mChog sde gsum*, composed by 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po (1820-1892), 'Jam mgon Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas (1813-1899) and mChog 'gyur bde chen gling pa (1829-1870), supported by the network of Sa skya, bKa' brgyud, rNying ma, Jo nang, Bon po monasteries and even dGe lugs figures of sDe dge kingdom, in Khams, Eastern Tibet.

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*sa dge gnyis la babs pa dang / sgrub brgyud kyi bka' ni gtso bor bka' brgyud dang rnying ma dag la babs pa ltar snang ngo /*

<sup>13</sup> "Trans-sectarian" rather than "non-sectarian" in the sense that key actors still belonged to their own "sects" (*chos lugs*), had to deal with sectarian issues, and did so especially by establishing communications and exchanges "across sects," through the transmission of "lineages" (*brgyud*), and while not mixing them but maintaining coherent and distinct systems of exegesis and practice.



Considering his literary production (his “five great collections,” *mdzod chen lnga*), Kong sprul may be arguably considered as the main compiler of the “movement” which is not to be understood as any institution whatsoever, but as the *activity of a network of people*. With this reservation in mind, I decide to keep the word “movement,” in order to bear in mind the very fact that something specific happened in 19th century, something of which the literary production of Kong sprul is a concrete and singular outcome. When I use the term “approach,” it is to refer to similar tendencies that are found in the overall history of Tibetan Buddhism and form antecedents of the 19th century “movement” or “activity.” Kong sprul in his autobiography chooses the terms *phyogs med* and *ris med* to designate himself<sup>14</sup> and he is also the author of a short historiographical and doxographical work of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, as well as *Bon*, called *The Impartial History of Buddhism (Ris med chos 'byung)*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> As my colleague Dr. Michael Sheehy has investigated (personal communication, Vienna, August 2014), the use of these terms for self-designation by Tibetan authors began to appear quite frequently in the 15th century onwards, and mainly in the colophons of their works.

<sup>15</sup> Kong sprul was actually following a long tradition of Tibetan authors who were able to approach various lineages and teachings beyond the progressive solidification of the borders of the instituted schools. In this context, the term *ris med* could refer for example to an absence of bias concerning either the ancient school (*rnying ma*) tracing its origins back to the first diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet (7th-8th c.) or the new schools (*gsar ma*) of the second diffusion (10th-11th). Kong sprul's eclecticism includes as well both Buddhism and *Bon*, like others did before, especially treasure-revealers (*gter ston*). Regarding traditions in Tibet, *The Impartial History of Buddhism* is arguably a work transcending the opposition of one's own camp (*svapakṣa*, *rang phyogs*) and the other camp (*parapakṣa*, *gzhan phyogs*). The crystallization of Tibetan Buddhist sectarian identities became most salient from the 15th century onwards, where Tibet entered in a period of two centuries of recurrent civil wars, in which religious orders aligned themselves with their rival patrons, until the establishment of the reign of the 5th Dalai Lama Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho (1617-1682) who reunified Tibet in 1642 with Mongol support and established the hegemony of the dGe lugs school. In a sense the *Ris med* movement can be seen as the revival of non-dGe lugs traditions that were able to reaffirm and reorganize themselves in the more pluralist context of sDe dge kingdom. But, it seems exaggerated to reduce the *ris med* movement only as an anti-dGe lugs pa coalition. If it is so to some extent and in some cases (even today), it is more largely because this trend is reminiscent of the time when those non-dGe lugs schools were almost all aligned in political opposition to the rising school of the dGe lugs pa, or dGa' ldan pa, who eventually triumphed politically over all. Geoffrey Samuel (1993) used to refer to dGe lugs power and *ris med* synthesis in order to describe the dialectic between what we could also term two opposite kinds of “universalism”: imperialism/hegemony in the first case, eclecticism/ecumenism in the second case. And the factors differentiating the two are rather of socio-political nature. Samuel made also the distinction between clerical and shamanic tendencies in Tibetan Buddhism. We shall see them as the key fea-

A very significant pluralist compilation of Tibetan contemplative traditions is shown by Kong sprul in his *Treasury of Spiritual Instructions* (*gDams ngag mdzod*) which Smith (1970, 2001) considered especially important to understand the intentions of Kong sprul and his colleagues. Following Kapstein (1996, 2007), I have shown elsewhere (2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2013, forthcoming) that the classificatory model of this exceptional collection is the "Eight Great Lineages of Practice," originally authored by the eclectic figure Prajñāraśmi ('Phreng po *gter ston* Shes rab 'od zer, 1518-1584), living historically and geographically in the very midst of the intensification of sectarianism in central Tibet. In his epistles of the *Ambrosia of Study, Reflection and Meditation* (*Thos bsam dang sgom pa 'chi med kyi bdud rtsi*), he encompasses all exegetic and yogic lineages. In this work, we often find the expression *phyogs lung med pa* (literally "not to fall into partiality") exhorting his people to embrace without bias the whole Indian Buddhist legacy transmitted and kept alive in Tibet.<sup>16</sup> For Prajñāraśmi, the Eight Lineages represent the quintessence of the 84 000 collections of the *Dharma*. Moreover, he makes the following claim about their unity in terms of ultimate view and intent:

This gnosis which is knowledge, clear, vivid, and non-conceptual,  
Introduced as the primordial gnosis itself,  
Free from all the elaborations of the subject/object duality made by  
the mind,  
Is the main teaching of all the lineages of practice.<sup>17</sup>

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ture of Buddhist history again at play: the dynamic relation between monastics living in monasteries and ascetics-yogins dwelling in retreat places.

<sup>16</sup> The progression of study (*thos pa = śruta*), reflection (*bsam pa = cintā*) and meditation (*sgom pa = bhāvanā*), the three steps of the development of wisdom, insists of the conjunction of logical reason and contemplative insight. On the basis of the so-called "Ten Pillars of Exegesis," the model of the "Eight Lineages of Practice" encompasses all the esoteric lineages (*brgyud*) at the source of Tibetan Buddhist orders (*chos lugs*), and through the notion of spiritual exercise or practice (*sgrub*) emphasizes their original soteriological aim. As remarked by David Snellgrove, in Tibet, in contradistinction with China and Japan, Buddhist orders did not establish themselves around a specific scripture or set of scriptures, but around various lineages who systematized tantric practice, the so-called "practice lineages" or "lineages of attainment" (*sgrub brgyud*). Thus the model of the Eight lineages of practice forms a remarkable trans-sectarian genealogy of Tibetan Buddhism. See Snellgrove 1987, pp. 486-487: "Tibetan religious orders developed [...] based upon the transmission of particular late Indian Buddhist tantric traditions, which happened to have been favoured by certain renowned teachers, who in retrospect may be regarded as their 'founders.'"

<sup>17</sup> GCD, 254.2-3: *blos byas gzung 'dzin spros pa kun bral ba'i || gnyug ma'i ye shes rang ngo 'phrod pa yi || shes pa gsal d[wl]angs rtog med ye shes de || sgrub rgyud kun gyi bstan pa'i gtso bo yin [//]*

If we understand the *Treasury of Spiritual Instructions* (*gDams ngag mdzod*) as the exemplifier of the *Ris med* movement, this key instruction on its core paradigm —the Eight Lineages of Practice—, indicates the central value of “direct introduction” (*ngo sprod*) for Tibetan eclectic or non-sectarian approaches, specially connected to the methodology of the Great Seal (in the *bKa’ brgyud* traditions) and the Great Perfection (of the *rNying ma pa* and *Bon po*). This indicates the heartfelt presentation done by a teacher to his students and aimed at the recognition of “mind itself” (*sems nyid, cittatva*) or “gnosis” (*ye shes, jñāna*). The interesting point is that in the contemplative literature of such direct introduction, the terms *phyogs/ris med* are mainly used to describe the state of pure awareness itself. But before focusing on this aspect, we shall first trace back some significant uses of *phyogs/ris med* in Tibetan Buddhist canonical literature, with no claim to be exhaustive.

## II. The Terms *phyogs/ris med* in Tibetan (Indic) Canonical Literature

In the context of Buddhist soteriology, we shall first remark that the terms *phyogs/ris med*, as a negation, belongs to the Buddhist *via negativa* or apophatic way to describe the absolute and its realization. In this line of thought, an interesting passage of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāra-mitā* states that the perfection of wisdom is to be observed according to the fact that, through the analysis of the five aggregates, all phenomena are by the essence of their nature “non-existent as objects” (*adeśa, yul med*) and “without directions” (*apradeśa, phyogs med*).<sup>18</sup> These two expressions are rather synonymous, here character-

<sup>18</sup> Sanskrit text by P. L. Vaidya, Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute, 1960, p. 235: *sarvadharmādeśāpradeśataḥ prajñāpāramitā anugantavyā / tat kasya hetoh ? rūpaṃ hi subhūte adeśam apradeśam prakṛtisvabhāvataḥ / evaṃ vedanā saṃjñā saṃskārāḥ / vijñānam hi subhūte adeśam apradeśam prakṛ[si]tisvabhāvataḥ sarvadharmānirōdhaprahādanatvād iti prajñāpāramitā anugantavyā /* [D. 258a6] *chos thams cad yul med cing phyogs med pa’i phyir shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin par rjes su rig par bya’o // de ci’i phyir zhe na / rab ’byor gzugs ni rang bzhin gyi ngo bo nyid kyis yul dang phyogs med pa’o // rab ’byor* [D. 258a7] *de bzhin du tshor ba dang ’du shes dang ’du byed rnam dang rnam par shes pa ni rang bzhin gyi ngo bo nyid kyis yul dang phyogs med pa’o // chos thams cad ’gog pa rab tu sim par byed pa’i phyir shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin par rjes su rig par bya’o //* “The perfection of wisdom is to be observed according to the fact that all phenomena are non-existent as objects and without direction [or atomic individuality]. What is the reason of this? Ô Subhūti, form is by the essence of its nature non-existent as an object and without direction [or atomic individuality]. Ô Subhūti, similarly, feelings, thoughts, volitional factors and consciousness are by the essence of their nature non-existent as objects and without direction [or atomic individuality]. The perfection of wisdom is to be observed

izing the Great Vehicle's philosophical view and contemplative insight of emptiness or universal insubstantiality.

In the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*, the term *phyogs med* is the Tibetan translation for the Sanskrit *apakṣapāta* (Ch. *wu pian* 無偏): "impartiality." It is used in reference to the notion of the "sameness of mind" (*samacittatā*, *sems mnyam pa*, *ping deng sin* 平等心) of the *bodhisattva* and specifically how it is applied to the six perfections. Impartiality here refers specifically to the sameness of mind in the virtue of giving.<sup>19</sup> Like in the *śloka* mentioning that for *bodhisattvas*, love or affection (*sneha*, *byams pa*, *ai* 愛) is bestowed universally to all beings, the terms *phyogs/ris med* are also found in Tibetan translations of different *śāstra*-s, particularly commentaries of the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* to express the idea of universal love and compassion. For example, it is said: "what is called great love is an impartial and immeasurable love."<sup>20</sup> The same terms applied also to the metaphor of the sun, par-

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according to the fact that all phenomena are [by the essence of their nature the truth of] cessation and the source of great joy."

<sup>19</sup> Translation and Sk. ed. by Sylvain Lévi, 19.5-7; Ch. T. 1604, 650b17-25; Tib. Tg sems tsam phi 240b1-3:

*na tathātmani dāreṣu sutamitreṣu bandhuṣu |*  
*satvānāṃ pragataḥ sneho yathā satveṣu dhimatām || 5 ||*

(17) 菩薩愛衆生 不同生五愛

(18) 自身與眷屬 子友及諸親

*ji (2) ltar blo ldan sems can la || rab tu byams par gyur pa ltar ||*

*sems can bdag dang chung ma dang || bu bshes gnyen la de lta min ||*

*arthiṣv apakṣapātās ca śīlasyākhaṇḍanā dhruvaṃ |*  
*kṣāntiḥ sarvatra satvārthaṃ sarvārthaṃ vīryārambho mahān api || 6 ||*

(24) 無偏及無犯 遍忍起善利

*don gnyer ba la phyogs med dang || tshul khrims rtag tu mnyams dang ||*

*kun tu bzod cing thams cad phyir || brtson 'grus chen po (3) rtsom pa dang ||*

*dhyānaṃ ca kuśalaṃ nityaṃ prajñā caivāvikalpikā |*  
*vijñeyā bodhisatvānāṃ tāsū eva samacittatā || 7 ||*

(25) 禪亦無分別 六度心平等

*rtag tu bsam gtan dge ba dang || shes rab rnam par mi rtoḡ nyid ||*

*byang chub sems dpa' de dag la || de ltar sems mnyam shes par bya ||*

French translation:

"5. L'affection des êtres ne va pas à soi, à l'épouse, au fils, à l'ami, au parent, comme l'affection des Sages va aux êtres.

6. Point de partialité en fait de sollicitateur, respect intégral de l'Idéal toujours, Patience partout, grande entreprise d'Énergie dans le Sens des créatures,

7. extase perpétuellement bonne, et Sapience sans différenciation, voilà en quoi consiste l'égalité de Pensée des Bodhisattvas."

<sup>20</sup> *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti-nāma-mahāṭika*: (D. 179b3) *byams chen zhes pa ni phyogs ris med* (D. 179b4) *pa ste dpag tu med pa'i byams pa'o //*

ticularly connected to love and compassion,<sup>21</sup> and to the metaphor of space that can express emptiness or the state of total liberation when all veils and passions have been removed.<sup>22</sup>

Kong sprul uses also in the catalogue (*dkar chag*) of his *Treasury of Spiritual Instructions* a quotation from the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*<sup>23</sup> which describes the primordial Buddha qualified in the Tibetan translation with the term *ris med*:

Buddhahood is without beginning or end.  
The primordial Buddha is without bias (*ris med*).<sup>24</sup>

The Sanskrit is here *niranvaya*, “unconnected,” “unrelated,” “without retinue,” “unaccompanied” according to Monier Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary. Other Tibetan versions give different translations: *rigs med*, “without lineage/generation” (Pekin) or according to Wayman, *rgyud med*, “without cause” (modern version of Dharamsala). In the Tibetan translation of the *Vimalaprabhā*, commentary of the *Kālacakrantra* and ascribed to Kalkin Śrī Puṇḍarīka, *ris med* is also sometimes used to translate the term *niranvaya*, a negative definition of the primordial buddha.<sup>25</sup>

A *dākinītantra* found in *bKa' 'gyur*,<sup>26</sup> and for which I have not found a Sanskrit original, contains interesting passages including *phyogs ris med*. This expression is here an epithet for the supreme view, explained to be inconceivable (*bsam gyis mi khyab*, \**acintya*), like the su-

<sup>21</sup> *Āryamañjuśrīnāmasaṃgītyupadeśavṛtti-nāma*: (D. 138b3) *des 'gro ba drug la nyi ma bzhin du phyogs ris med pas na 'gro na gdugs gcig yangs pa ste / byams dang snying* (D. 138b4) *rje'i dkyil 'khor can tshad med bas gang ba'o //*

<sup>22</sup> Idem: (D135a6) *des na sgrub pa kun nas nyon mongs pa la sogs pa spangs nas phyogs ris med pa nam mkha' ltar gnas so //*

<sup>23</sup> *Mañjuśrī-jñānasattvasya-paramārtha-nāmasaṃgīti* ('Jam dpal ye shes sems dpa'i don dam pa'i mtshan yang dag par brjod pa), P. Otani n° 2, vol. 1, pp. 117.1.1-124.3.6. See also Davidson 1981, Wayman 1985.

<sup>24</sup> Kong sprul, DNgDzK, p. 385.1: *sangs rgyas thog ma tha ma med / dang po'i sangs rgyas ris med pa / Pekin, op. cit., 120.4.6-5.1: rigs med*. Wayman, *op. cit.*, p. 93: *anādinidhano buddha ādibuddho niranvayah* (chap. VIII, st. 24).

<sup>25</sup> For example: Ed. p. 45

*uddhṛtam mañjuvajreṇa ādibuddhat niranvayāt |  
lakṣaṇam buddhakāyaṇam caturṇām tat vitanyate | |  
(D. 212b1) dang po'i sangs rgyas ris med las // 'jam pa'i rdo rjes rab phyung ba //  
sangs rgyas rnam kyis sku bzhi yi // mtshan nyid de ni dgrol bar bya //  
“Mañjuvajra explains these defining characteristics of the four buddha-bodies extracted from the Ādibuddha which is niranvaya.”*

<sup>26</sup> *Dākinīsarvacittadvayācintyājñānavajravārahitantra*. (L. 539a4) *mkha' 'gro ma thams cad kyi thugs gnyis su med pa bsam gyis mi khyab pa'i ye shes rdo rje phag mo mngon par 'byung ba'i rgyud* (L. 539a5) *kyi rgyal po zhes bya ba /*

preme conduct.<sup>27</sup> Then view, meditation and conduct are all qualified through negations, of respectively bias, reference points and preferences:

This view without bias (*phyogs ris med*),  
 See it with the primordial mind!  
 The meditation without reference points  
 Is to be meditated with the primordial intellect.  
 The supreme conduct without disapproval or approval  
 Is to be conducted with the primordial intellect.<sup>28</sup>

What next follows in the text is an interesting explanation of the supreme view, each dimension of its quality being compared first with the five elements, then with natural elements (mountain, ocean, rainbow, etc.) and animals. Here is the description through the five elements:

Know the supreme view without bias (*phyogs ris med*) to be like space!  
 Know the supreme view supporting everything to be like the basis of earth!  
 Know the supreme view collecting everything to be like the water element!  
 Know the supreme view burning all passions to be like the fire element!  
 Know the supreme view, ungraspable, to be like the wind element!<sup>29</sup>

This quotation indicates thus a useful comparison about how we should understand the terms *phyogs ris med* in this context. The example is like space, which is all-pervading, neutral, equal, or isotropic. This use is a characteristic of literature of direct introduction that we shall examine now in further detail. In the oral practice lineage of the Shangs pa (which Kong sprul strongly revitalized), dating back to the Tibetan yogin Khyung po rnal 'byor (circa 1050-circa 1140), we find a special instruction of one of the teachers he met in India, the *ḍākinī* Sukhasiddhi, in a text called *The Direct Introduction to*

<sup>27</sup> (L. 540a2) *phyogs ris med pa lta ba'i mchog / [b]sam gyis mi khyab bshad du gsol // dgag sgrub med pa spyod pa'i mchog / bsam gyis mi* (L. 540a3) *khyab bshad du gsol //*.

<sup>28</sup> (L. 540b1) *phyogs ris med pa'i lta ba de // gnyug ma'i sems kyis blta bar gyis // dmigs gtad med pa'i sgom pa ni // gnyug* (L. 540b2) *ma'i yid kyis bsgom par bya // dgag sgrub med pa spyod pa'i mchog / gnyug ma'i yid kyis spyad par bya //*.

<sup>29</sup> (L. 540b6) *phyogs ris med pa lta ba'i mchog / nam mkha' lta bu shes par gyis // thams cad* (L. 540b7) *'dogs pa lta ba'i mchog / sa gzhi lta bu shes par gyis // thams cad sdud pa lta ba'i mchog / 'byung ba chu ltar shes par gyis // nyon mongs sreg pa lta ba'i mchog / 'byung* (L. 541a1) *// ba me ltar shes par gyis // ngos bzung med pa lta ba'i mchog / 'byung ba lung ltar shes par gyis //*.

*Mahāmudrā* by *Sukhasiddhi*.<sup>30</sup> Here, *ris med* also defines the supreme view, the empty aspect of the nature of mind, similar to space:

This is the *ḍākinī*'s direct introduction to pure awareness (*rig pa*):  
 In the empty space without bias (*ris med*),  
 Focus on the root of mind which is aware.  
 Focusing on the root, rest naturally.<sup>31</sup>

Like the *Mahāmudrā* of the *bKa' brgyud pa*, the *Mahāmudrā* of the *Shangs pa* is not understood to be solely the final phase or resultant experience of tantric gradual meditation (as it is for the *Sa skya pa* and the *dGe lugs pa*). It is rather a non-gradual path of self-recognition through direct introduction. This pure enlightened state to be discovered is here expressed by the term *rig pa*, "pure awareness." It transcends completely the mind (*citta*, *sems*) based on the duality of subject and object, self and others, and the discursive intellect (*buddhi*, *blo*) judging by means of opposite conceptual categories.

The only *tantra* of *rDzogs chen* kept in the *bKa' 'gyur*, the *tantra* of the *All-Accomplishing King* (\**Kulayarājantra*, *Kun byed rgyal po'i rgyud*) displays three occurrences of *phyogs ris med*. The "All-Accomplishing King" is this enlightened mind, source of everything, to be recognized and cultivated. Speaking in the first person in this *tantra*, this universal king proclaims that from his ultimate perspective, there are no more sacred commitments (*samaya*, *dam tshig*) to keep or not, and nobody to keep them or not. The expression *phyogs ris med* is here used to describe a state beyond dualistic alternatives.<sup>32</sup> It serves thus to express the transcendence of all pairs of opposite, as well as the limitations of lower vehicles. In another passage *Sattvavajra* praises the All-Accomplishing King as the ultimate enlightened state which compassion is said to be *phyogs ris med*, without bias or universally caring, never leaving cyclic existence.<sup>33</sup> Finally the same

<sup>30</sup> *Su kha ma siddhi'i phyag rgya chen po'i ngo sprod*. In DNgDz, vol. 12: pp. 329-330.

<sup>31</sup> Op. cit., 329.1: *mkha' 'gro rig pa'i ngo sprod ni // nam mkha' ris med stong pa la // rig bcas sems kyi rtsa ba gcun // rtsa ba gcun nas rang sor [sar] zhog /*.

<sup>32</sup> "This sacred commitment of the All-Accomplishing King  
 Is taught to be without the bias (*phyogs ris med pa*) of protecting or not protecting.  
 To realize that there is nobody who protects or does not protect,  
 Is the realization of the sacred commitment of I, the All-Accomplishing King."  
 (L. 96a3) *kun byed rgyal po'i dam tshig 'di // bsrung dang mi srung phyogs ris med par bstan // gang gi bsrung dang mi srung med* (L. 96a4) *rtogs pa // kun byed nga yi dam tshig rtogs pa yin //*.

<sup>33</sup> "Then, *Sattvavajra* praised with respect the Enlightened Mind which is the All-Accomplishing King:  
 Kye, master of the masters, you, All-Accomplishing King,  
 Are the Nature of the Victorious of the three times, *Dharmadhātu*,

expression is used to explain the absence of obscuration and the entirely clear nature of self-originated gnosis, without bias, partiality or limitation.<sup>34</sup>

As we have seen through this brief survey of Tibetan canonical literature, the terms *phyogs/ris med*:

- (1) do not deal with the level of religious tolerance;
- (2) render a variety of Sanskrit terms;
- (3) apply as epithets to different soteriological ideas;
- (4) and through the negation of bias express non-dual, transcendental or "universal" perspectives.

### III. Impartiality in the Soteriology of the Great Perfection: an Analysis of the *Treasury of the Dharmadhātu*

Klong chen rab 'byams' (1308-1364) *Treasury of the Dharmadhātu* (*Chos dbyings mdzod*), with its auto-commentary of the *Treasure Trove of Scriptural Transmission* (*Lung gi gter mdzod*), shows a remarkable number of occurrences of the terms *phyogs/ris med* from the point of view of pure noetics and soteriology. It is an indigenous Tibetan work highly revered in the Ancients' (*rNying ma*) tradition, and represents the essence of the view of *rDzogs chen* according to its three series ("mind," *sems sde*; "space," *klong sde*; and "special instructions," *man ngag sde*), with special relevance to the contemplative praxis of *khregs chod*, the recognition and cultivation of the state of pure awareness in which all "bonds are cut." In itself, this text is thus an extensive "direct introduction," to which the auto-commentary adds a richness of quotations from the *tantra-s* of *rDzogs chen*, only remaining available to us in Tibetan language. We shall explore in this text

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Great compassion without bias (*phyogs ris med*) who do not abandon cyclic existence.

To you, master All-Accomplishing King, I pay homage."

(L. 119a6) *de nas byang chub* (L. 119b1) *kyi sems kun byed rgyal po la sems dpa' rdo rjes gus pa'i tshul gyis bstod pa / kye / ston pa'i ston pa kun byed rgyal po khyod // dus gsum rgyal ba'i rang bzhin chos kyi dbyings //* (L. 119b2) *'khor ba mi spong thugs rje phyogs ris med // ston pa kun byed rgyal po khyod la 'dud //*.

<sup>34</sup> "Within reality (*dharmata*, *chos nyid*) which is primordially established without origination,

This essence, without cause or effect, without effort,

Being unobscured and illuminating all without bias (*phyogs ris med*),

Is taught to be the "natural gnosis."

(L. 122a2) *skye med gdod nas grub pa'i chos nyid la // rgyu dang rkyen med btsal med snying po 'di // ma bsgribs* (L. 122a3) *kun la phyogs ris med gsal bas // rang 'byung ye shes zhes su bstan pa yin //*.



the semantic network of the terms *phyogs/ris med* and the role they play in such a “direct introduction” (*ngo sprod*) to the enlightened mind, that is for Prajñāraśmi the common ultimate view of all the contemplative lineages of Tibet, and from the perspective of the Great Perfection, the essence of all spiritual paths.

Among the various uses of these terms, two refer to the qualification of either emptiness or compassion, compared respectively to the space and the sun. The particularity of the *rDzogs chen* view is to integrate these two levels through the so-called conjunction of (1) primordial purity (*ka dag*), corresponding to emptiness; and (2) spontaneous presence (*lhun grub*), i.e. the dynamism of manifestation together with the corresponding enlightened compassionate responsiveness. The conjunction of these two aspects defines the all-including enlightened state of the Great Perfection. We shall thus examine how the terms *phyogs/ris med* serve to express the various facets of such “universal” or “impartial” perspective.

#### (a) Indeterminate/Infinite Space

According to this text, the enlightened mind is similar to space, without restrictions or bias (*rgya chad phyogs lhung med*) and complete liberation.<sup>35</sup> The nature of this fundamental element (*dhātu, dbyings*) is that it is primordially and spontaneously present. It is described to be all-including and all-pervading without inside or outside. It is beyond limits of extremes, as well as all directions, up, down or intermediates. This pure awareness is beyond the notions of large or narrow, it is empty space.<sup>36</sup> This nature is thus similar to space encompassing all directions (*phyogs 'byams*).<sup>37</sup> “Encompassing all directions” (*phyogs 'byams*) or “without direction” (*phyogs med*) points to a similar idea: infinite and total space beyond arbitrary, conventional distinctions of directions and reference points.

#### (b) Timeless Presence

Primordially present or presence since the origin (*gdod nas*), must be understood here as timeless. *Ris med* indicates especially the absence

<sup>35</sup> ChByDz, 3.10-11: *mkha' bzhin rnam dag rgya chad phyogs lhung bral // 'di ni yongs grol ka dag dgongs pa'o //*.

<sup>36</sup> 3-17.19: *dbyings kyi rang bzhin gdod nas lhun grub la // phyi dang nang med kun tu khyab par gdal // mtha' yi mu med steng 'og phyogs mtshams 'das // yangs dog gnyis med rig pa mkha' ltar dag //*.

<sup>37</sup> 4.2: *phyogs 'byams nam mkha' 'dra ba'i rang bzhin la //*.

of temporal succession: the space of the enlightened mind is without the orientation or reference (*ris med*) to before or after, it does not come or go, it includes all.<sup>38</sup> Without bias (*ris med*) opposing before and after, it is a spacious and vast equanimity.<sup>39</sup>

### (c) *Equanimity*

This notion of equality or equanimity (*mnyam nyid*) is decisive here. No parts can be found is the basis of suchness, it is without parts or center (*phyogs cha dbus med*). It has no object or objectification, i.e. separation, either. But it includes all manifestation while not interrupting its continuity in any way but embracing it in an equal expanse.<sup>40</sup> All phenomena are said to have the nature of equality. There is no one that does not remain in this equal expanse.<sup>41</sup> If objects are examined to be equal in their bias (*ris mnyam*), they simply leave no traces in the enlightened mind.<sup>42</sup>

### (d) *Ultimate Fortress*

Freedom, security or peace is not found by rejecting anything but by transcending the very realm of opposition or conflict and embracing the perspective of the totality. Because in the state of equanimity, there is no interruption of the continuity of manifestation, it is the "fortress spontaneously present, encompassing everything impartially (*phyogs med*)," "the fortress of the primordial infinite expanse," "the fortress of the *dharmakāya*."<sup>43</sup> Poetically, on the infinite basis all-encompassing impartially (*phyogs med*), is built the stronghold of the enlightened mind which has no bias (*ris med*) neither for cyclic existence nor extinction.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>38</sup> 4.5-6: *snga phyi ris med byang chub sems kyi klong // 'gro dang 'ong med kun tu khyab par gdal //*.

<sup>39</sup> 20.20: *snga phyi ris med mkha' mnyam yangs pa nyid //*.

<sup>40</sup> 4.9-10: *phyogs cha dbus med de bzhin nyid kyi gzhi // dmigs med rgyun chad med de mnyam pa'i klong //*.

<sup>41</sup> 4.10-11: *thams cad chos nyid mnyam pa'i rang gzhi las // mnyam pa'i klong na mi gnas gcig kyang med //*.

<sup>42</sup> 32.14-15: *yul rnamis ris mnyam gzhigs na rjes med tsam //*.

<sup>43</sup> 4.13-16: *mnyam nyid ngang la rgyun chad med pa'i phyir // lhun grub phyogs med kun khyab gdal ba'i rdzong // steng 'og bar med ye klong yangs pa'i rdzong // phyogs med kun shong skye med chos sku'i rdzong //*.

<sup>44</sup> 4.17-18: *phyogs med kun khyab gdal ba'i sa gzhi la // 'khor 'das ris med byang chub sems kyi mkhar //*. This may remind us the idea seen above that the Buddhist sage avoids any position and "sees security everywhere" (*Atthakavagga*, 953). We

*(e) Non-Duality*

Everything is included in the great equanimity without bias (*ris med*). Equal and infinite, this is the very expanse without subject-object duality.<sup>45</sup> Vajrasattva has exposed that non-duality is realized when there is no bias (*ris med*) distinguishing anything as “this,” that is to say as something separate, and that everything is equal, without objectification.<sup>46</sup> Because primordial gnosis is without partiality of bias, it cannot be shown as “this.” Within it all concepts of a nature are pacified.<sup>47</sup> Everything is transcended in an equal state not subjected to bias (*ris med*).<sup>48</sup>

*(f) Beyond Oppositions or Extremes*

In the essence of phenomena, there is no bias (*ris med*) of distinction or negation.<sup>49</sup> Pure awareness is not limited by the limitations or bias (*rgya chad phyogs lhung med*) of oppositions such as spaciousness versus narrowness, high or low. The *yogin* is exhorted to abandon all such reference points which function by affirming something in opposition to something else.<sup>50</sup> This state transcends all contraries: it is beyond the opposition between appearance and emptiness. In harmony with the Middle Way (*Madhyamaka*), it is neither existent nor non-existent; natural gnosis is unbiased by the extremes of eternity or annihilation.<sup>51</sup> Spontaneous and equal, the primordial element is not partial or biased (*phyogs dang ris med*), without any basis, root or sub-

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would also consider the notion of the “inner citadel” used by Pierre Hadot in his interpretation of the Stoic philosophy of Marcus Aurelius, in which the notion of the *hégemonikon*, the ruling faculty of the mind, through the rectification of its own judgment has the capacity to remain unaffected by suffering. In the above-mentioned paper of Paul Demiéville, it was recognized in both Daoism and Buddhism that impartiality is what makes the sage invincible since he/she perceives nothing as an enemy, but embraces everything equally.

<sup>45</sup> 6.20-7.1: *ris med mnyam pa chen por 'ub chub pas // phyam gdal gzung 'dzin med pa'i klong nyid do //*.

<sup>46</sup> 19.2-4: *gang tshe 'di zhes tha dad ris med cing // thams cad phyam mnyam dmigs gtad med pa na // gnyis med rtogs zhes rdo rje sems dpas gsungs //*.

<sup>47</sup> 28.2-3: *rang 'byung ye shes phyogs dang ris med pas // 'di zhes mi mtshon rang bzhin spros kun zhi //*.

<sup>48</sup> 22.13-15: *thams cad ris med mnyam par phyam 'das pa //*.

<sup>49</sup> 23.16-17: *chos nyid ngang du dbye bsal ris med pas //*.

<sup>50</sup> 21.5-6: *yangs dog mtho dman med pa'i rig pa la // rgya chad phyogs lhung med kyis dmigs gtad shol //*.

<sup>51</sup> 39.3: *rang byung ye shes rtag chad phyogs lhung med //*.

stance.<sup>52</sup> Similar to space and pure, it has no birth or death, joy or sorrow. It is not biased (*ris med*) by the grasping of substances, or reified objects, and is free from the phenomena of cyclic existence or extinction.<sup>53</sup>

### (g) *Continuous Contemplation*

Without bias (*ris med*) opposing view and meditation, the intellect with its fixations and desires is destroyed.<sup>54</sup> This all-including state is thus beyond formal spiritual practice, beyond the opposition (*phyogs ris med*) between meditation and post-meditation,<sup>55</sup> or beyond the separation (*ris med*) between day and night: it is an equal overarching state of unity. In this state, cyclic existence, defined as the fixation on referential objects and characteristics of substantiality, is purified.<sup>56</sup>

### (h) *Shining Infinitely*

But the expense of the enlightened mind is not only static, or simply empty. It contains the potency (*rtsal*) of all manifestation. And from the perspective of the enlightened mind, that is to say of the totality, there is no opposition between manifestation and its absence: from the very moment when appearances manifest due to this dynamic power, there is no partiality or bias (*phyogs dang ris med pa*) opposing such a manifestation to non-manifestation. This power is not an essence whatsoever existing separately from the enlightened mind. Using a separate word is just a linguistic convention we use to refer to this intrinsic power. The enlightened mind is in itself a state not subject to change but it includes all possibility of change: there is actually not even an atom straying from it.<sup>57</sup> The essence is like the sun, it is illuminating the expense of the *Dharmadhātu*. The dynamic power (*rtsal*) is like the rays, they shine manifest everywhere, without

<sup>52</sup> 8.18-19: *yod med ma yin lhun mnyam gdod ma'i dbyings // phyogs dang ris med gzhi rtsa dngos po med //*.

<sup>53</sup> 6.2-4: *sems nyid byang chud sems kyi rang bzhin ni // mkha' ltar dag pas skye shi bde sdug med // dngos po ris med 'khor 'das chos las grol //*.

<sup>54</sup> 22.3-4: *lta sgom ris med ched 'dzin 'dod blo zhig /*.

<sup>55</sup> 18.3-4: *nyams len ma shes thun mtshams phyogs ris med //*.

<sup>56</sup> 18.10-12: *nyin mtshan ris med mnyam par phyam gcig pas // dmigs gtad mtshan mar 'dzin pa'i 'khor ba sangs //*.

<sup>57</sup> 8.10-13: *rtsal las shar bar snang ba'i rang dus nas // shar dang ma shar phyogs dang ris med pas // rtsal yang brda tsam ngo bo 'ga' med pas // thams cad rtag tu 'pho 'gyur med pa'i ngang // byang chub sems las g.yos pa rdul tsam med //*.

bias (*ris med*).<sup>58</sup> Without the recognition of emptiness, this display produces the dualistic appearances. But as long as endures cyclic existence, enlightened actions are performed as well. They are the manifestation of an impartial compassion which is the dynamic power coming from the essence of the naturally settled state. This display (*rol pa*) accomplishes the benefit of others and all what is excellent.<sup>59</sup>

**(i) The Perspective of the Totality  
or the Unique Sphere (*thig le nyag gcig*)**

The *rDzogs chen* notion of the “unique sphere without edges or corners” (*thig le nyag gcig grwa zur med pa*) expresses perfectly this perspective of the totality. Everything, as it is, is circled in this expanse which has no division or exclusion.<sup>60</sup> The ultimate meaning of the primordial gnosis which has no rival, no opposition is included in the unique sphere without origination or cessation. It is without determination, all-including, the absence of all directions or extremes (*phyogs mtha' yongs kyi med*).<sup>61</sup>

**(j) The Central Question of *rDzogs chen* Soteriology**

The nature of phenomena, which is spontaneously present, has no limitation and is not biased.<sup>62</sup> People who are attached by their biased perception of what is actually unbiased do not understand their own nature and are exiled from it.<sup>63</sup> Beyond the possibility of limitations or biases, one rests in one's own nature, as it is.<sup>64</sup> Without partiality, one is free. Spontaneous presence is free in the expanse.<sup>65</sup> Finally, the following quotation brilliantly encapsulates all the various facets explored here and it places the problem of partiality at the very center of *rDzogs chen* soteriology: partiality is the self-created

<sup>58</sup> 38.2-3: *ngo bo nyi bzhin chos dbyings klong na gsal // rtsal las zer bzhin kun shar ris med pas [...]*.

<sup>59</sup> 38.16-19: *'khor ba ji srid mdzad pa nye bar ston // 'di ni rang bzhin babs kyi ngo bo las // rtsal kyi thugs rje phyogs med shar ba ste // rol pas gzhan don phun sum tshogs pa yin //*.

<sup>60</sup> 5.8-9: *grwa zur med pa'i thig le zlum pas na // ji bzhin dbye bsal med pa'i klong du 'khyil //*.

<sup>61</sup> 9.1-3: *rang byung ye shes ye zla med pa'i don // mi skye mi 'gag thig le gcig tu 'dus // ma nges kun khyab phyogs mtha' yongs kyi med //*.

<sup>62</sup> 40.1-2: *mi g.yo lhun gyis grub pa'i chos nyid la // rgya chad med cing phyogs lhung bral bar gyur //*.

<sup>63</sup> 35.3-4: *phyogs med phyogs su 'dzin pas bcings pa nmams // rang bzhin ma shes [...]*.

<sup>64</sup> 36.14: *rgya chad phyogs lhung mi srid rang bzhin babs //*.

<sup>65</sup> 37.7: *phyogs med grol lo lhun grub klong du grol //*.

trap of the mind but the true nature of the mind is said to remain impartial, infinite, all-encompassing and free. Klong chen pa writes the following exhortations:

The unique sphere has no edges or corners (*grwa zur med pa*).  
 What perceives it as one or different is the deluded mind.  
 Natural gnosis is without causes or effects.  
 To perceive it in the path of cyclic existence is the obstacle to enlightenment.  
 Spontaneous presence is impartial (*phyogs med*) and free from extremes.  
 To fixate on the extremes of partial views (*phyogs lta*) is the demon of pride.  
 Emptiness without the characteristics of substances is uninterrupted.  
 What imputes existence or nonexistence, appearance or emptiness is the mistaken mind.  
 Thus, abandon the trap of whatever partiality or bias (*phyogs ris*) you hold!  
 Know spontaneous presence without partiality (*phyogs med*) to be like space!<sup>66</sup>

### Conclusion: The Inspirational Power of the Great Perfection

Returning to the general question of impartiality, Paul Demiéville remarked that in Daoism, impartiality had a “metaphysical basis,” the Dao itself.<sup>67</sup> I would like to argue that similarly, in Tibetan Bud-

<sup>66</sup> 35.12-18: *thig le nyag gcig grwa zur med pa la // gcig dang tha dad 'dzin pa 'khrul pa'i sems // rang byung ye shes rgyu rkyen med pa la // 'khor ba'i lam du 'dzin pa byang chub gegs // lhun grub phyogs med mtha' dang bral ba la // phyogs lta'i mtha' la zhen pa snyems byed bdud // dngos mtshan med pa'i stong pa 'gag med la // yod med snang stong 'dogs pa log pa'i blo // des na gang 'dod phyogs ris gzeb bor la // lhun grub phyogs med nam mkha' ltar shes byos //.*

<sup>67</sup> *Choix d'études sinologiques*, p. 118: “Le Tao, l'absolu, est par définition une synthèse en laquelle se résolvent les contraires, les oppositions, les mille différences que constituent le monde. Il est tout ensemble l'un et le tout, comme l'axe qui commande la roue, mais qui reste ce point immobile au centre du mouvement. C'est en ce point axial que doit se placer le sage, qui doit rester impartial au milieu des conflits et des antagonismes [...].” In another insightful article about the spiritual metaphor of the mirror in East and West, Paul Demiéville demonstrated how the mirror expressed in Daoism the virtue of impartiality and non-action. See in particular “Le miroir spirituel,” Demiéville 1973b, pp. 136-137: “Tchouang-tseu recourt fréquemment à l'image du miroir pour illustrer l'impassibilité, la passivité, l'apathie, le désintéressement du saint taoïste, qui réagit à la nature, mais sans jamais agir pour son propre compte. [...] Quiet est l'esprit du Saint, *miroir du Ciel et de la Terre*, qui reflète toute la multiplicité des

dhism, the religious tolerance or eclecticism of the so-called *ris med* movement has its soteriological and epistemological foundation in the “proof of the great equanimity which is impartial” (*ris med mnyam pa chen po'i gtan tshigs*, LTDz, p. 84.6-7), the all-encompassing enlightened mind described in the Great Perfection as the “unique sphere without edges or corners” (*thig le nyag gcig grwa zur med pa*). Karmay, Samuel, Petit and others have remarked that *rDzogs chen* with its emphasis on an all-including state, provided the basis for the synthetic orientation and development of the *ris med* movement.<sup>68</sup> I have tried to show in this study that the same terms *phyogs/ris med* actually qualify in classical *rDzogs chen* literature this pure contemplative state. We may use thus the following categories to distinguish different levels of definition of being impartial (*ris med*): absolute or relative, view or conduct, internal or external. In this paper, I have thus focused mainly on the first aspects of those pairs, since we may say that the view comes first, and this is especially true in the Great Perfection: it introduces directly to the ultimate wisdom, the cultivation of which is then taken as the path. Its *modus operandi* thus transcends the dualistic/partial/partisan mind at the very outset.

As such, the Great Perfection is thus considered as the highest vehicle (in *rNying ma* and *Bon po* doxographies), the essence of all paths, the perspective embracing all other teachings and levels of realization.<sup>69</sup> Often intertwined with the Great Seal of the *bKa'*

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choses!''' (Tchouang-tseu, XIII A). In his time, if Demiéville had been more familiar with *rDzogs chen*, he would certainly have included it too in his discussion, given the centrality of the metaphor of the mirror for this tradition: like the mirror, the nature of mind is said to be empty and clear. It has the capacity to reflect everything, but in itself, is never affected by its reflections.

<sup>68</sup> Karmay 2007 (1988), pp. 13-14: “In spite of the aloofness of the *rDzogs chen* philosophy, it always had a leaning toward eclecticism, perhaps due to the positive character of its philosophical outlook. A number of Tibet’s great luminaries and eclectic figures are to be found within this tradition. [...] This universal tendency was further enhanced by the nineteenth century Eclectic movement led by such great masters, ‘Jam-dbyangs mkhyen-brtse (1820-1892) and Kong-sprul Yon-tan rgya-mtsho (1813-1899) and on the Bonpo side, Shar-rdza bKra-shis rgyal-mtshan (1859-1934).” Samuel 1993, p. 538: “It can be seen why *Dzogchen* appealed to the *Ris med* masters; its emphasis on an unlimited, all-embracing Enlightened state within which all partial teachings could find their goal provided the basis for their synthetic orientation”. Petit 1999, p. 99: “Traditionally, it is said that the Great Perfection is the pinnacle of vehicles, providing a unified vista of all philosophical systems and spiritual attainments of the various paths. It would seem to be in this spirit that the *Ris med* tendency developed.”

<sup>69</sup> This idea is poetically expressed by *Klong chen pa* in the work studied here: When one attain the summit of a majestic mountain, one can contemplate all the valleys below at the same time, while from the valleys, one is deprived from the vision of the nature of the summit. Similarly, the Great Perfection, the indestructible heart essence, is the pinnacle vehicle and sees clearly the meaning of all

brgyud pa or of the Shangs pa, the Great Perfection represents in Tibet an epitome of the contemplative ideal of impartiality<sup>70</sup> with a constant emphasis on direct introduction, heartfelt instructions and direct experience. It is this way that we must also acknowledge its inspirational power for the spiritual revival in 19th century Khams. In Buddhist epistemology and soteriology, direct perception, and indeed especially yogic direct perception (*yogi-pratyakṣa*, *rnal 'byor mngon sum*), is considered as supreme, being directly in touch with reality, life itself, a life felt from within, always fresh, new, moment by moment.<sup>71</sup> Such experiences may be seen as giving access to a creative, nurturing, and regenerative spiritual power, reviving constantly the tradition and its transmission. Following the view of the Great Perfection, the nature of mind is not simply empty; it is also endowed with all qualities shining spontaneously. Thus, if we have insisted here on the "neutral" contemplative attitude of impartiality, it would be mistaken to see it simply as a passive state. To the contrary, it must be finally said that such an attitude seems to have been the source of a considerable dynamism and energy in the history of Buddhism, not to mention the itinerant life and teaching activity of the historical Buddha himself. It is in this way that we may consider the very active and dynamic aspects of the 19th century *ris med* movement not specifically addressed here, but of crucial importance: the

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[...]” *Op. cit.*: 15.11-14: *ji ltar ri rgyal rtse mor phyin pa na // dma' ba'i lung rnamdus gcig mthong ba ste // lung gi rtse mo'i rang bzhin mthong dang bral // de bshin a ti rdo rje snying po ni // theg pa'i yang rtse don kun gsal bar mthong l.*

<sup>70</sup> Even if its elevated role of the ninth and supreme vehicle can indeed also give rise to discourses of superiority, if not of sectarianism. On the other hand, even if *ris med* discourses (in the external sense of “non-sectarian”) can be associated with an emphasis on the unity of the ultimate intent of *Madhyamaka*, *Mahāmudrā* and *rDzogs chen* (a theme which has a long history in itself), it is also clear that *rDzogs chen* is practically given the highest position in those associated trends, as it is evident in the context of their contemplative retreat programs (with a progression following actually the order *Madhyamaka*, *Mahāmudrā* and *rDzogs chen*). Thus, we have focused here on *rDzogs chen* as providing the unified vista and inspiration, or “ultimate *ris med*.” The paradox between, on one hand, the right view (leading to a hierarchy of vehicles and their respective views, up to the ultimate view of *rDzogs chen* for rNying ma pa and Bon po), and on the other hand, the “absence of grasping at a view” is only apparent. The progression of views is precisely defined as a progressive disappearance of grasping (i.e. of using the dualistic mind). And on the way of this progression, the methodology of the *Madhyamaka* is particularly eloquent and sophisticated.

<sup>71</sup> The contemplative life in the tradition of the Great Perfection may lead to embracing solitude in mountain hermitages, opening one's self to the immensity of the sky; or retreating into the dark, revealing the secret luminosity of the nature of mind; but beyond fixed roles, places or activities, the fundamental retreat place of the Great Perfection, “the fortress of the *dharmakaya*,” the place of intrinsic freedom, appears to be always accessible here and now, anytime and anywhere.



intense collaborative activity of revealing the treasures of Padmasambhava (*gter ma*) and the huge collective effort to collect and revitalize the various ancient lineages and traditions of Tibet for future generations.

#### ABSTRACT

The Tibetan expression *phyogs/ris med* ("impartial") and its variations have come to describe a Tibetan Buddhist revival in 19th century Khams with E. Gene Smith's translation as "non-sectarian." In an effort to avoid both naïve idealism and naïve realism, this paper argues that so-called non-sectarianism in Tibet, as a ethical attitude and social response to the limitations inherent to the institutionalization of Buddhist traditions, draws its inspiration from a more fundamental and inner Buddhist value: impartiality. While this represents a core element of the teachings of the historical Buddha, it is not only descriptive of the state of the sage but also prescriptive for the aspirants to freedom and wisdom. In this way, such a prescription is actually deeply rooted in the exercises of contemplation, with major psychological and epistemological implications. This fact is illustrated here by showing how the terms *phyogs/ris med* play actually an important role in the phenomenological descriptions and injunctions of Tibetan contemplative lineages and literature, with special reference to the Great Perfection (*rDzogs chen*). If a distinctive feature of the general history of Buddhism has been the periodic revivals of the ideal of contemplative life and impartiality, in Tibet, the Great Perfection, emphasizing direct perception and instantaneous realization of an all-encompassing state, represented a major resource for the eclectic luminaries of 19th century Khams, empowering their vast activity of revitalization of Tibetan traditions.

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