

# Impact of Samyé Debate in Tibetan Buddhism

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## 1. Introduction of Samyé Debate

*Samyé Debate*, also known as the “Council of Lhasa,” took place in the late 8th century in Tibet, under the patronage and “witness” of Tibetan Emperor King Trisong Detsen (Tib. *Khri Srong lde btsan*), marked a pivotal event in Tibetan religious history. This two-year monastic debate, that happened around 792–794 CE, brought together Buddhist scholars from India and China at *Samyé*, deciding the theoretical and practical basis of Tibetan Buddhism.

The debate was convened at the *Samyé Monastery*, the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery constructed during King Trisong Detsen’s reign, under the oversee of Indian philosopher and scholar Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava. It is characterized by a mandalic design, in which the centre of the monastery is the Vairocana, tantric Imperial form of Śākyamuni Buddha, also can be seen as a kind of homology to the emperor himself that radiating the whole empire. His four-decade reign witnessed significant territorial expansion, with a need for a unifying cultural force to manage the diverse religions and traditions within the empire. In this context, Buddhism served as a cohesive cultural framework or consensus to harmonize dissonant cultures and practices. The establishment of Buddhism as national religion is not only to address religion issue in Tibet but also more likely a symbol that establish the emperor himself. His early exposure to Buddhism, influenced by his father—who was assassinated—along with his subsequent period of out-of-power, also made him choose Buddhism as a litmus test for those who oppose him as an anti-Buddhism atmosphere around aristocracy.

In this case, there is no doubt that *Samyé Debate* facilitated Tibetan both religiously and politically, especially for Tibetan Buddhism and its practice methods. By the late 8th century, a rich cultural exchange appeared between Tibetan, Indian, and Chinese. The forms of Buddhism in India and China have already provided a matured blueprint for the new tradition but with different interpretations of Buddhist doctrine and practice methods. Therefore, the debate was held with the aim of determining a path that would be culturally appropriate and beneficial for the Tibetan people.

The main conflict in this debate addressed perspectives on the nature of enlightenment between Indian and Chinese Chan Buddhism with its different meditation practices. Whether the “achievement of Buddhahood” (enlightenment) is the result of a gradual “step-by-step” process (gradual enlightenment), which is from Indian conventional Mahāyāna view, or it can be reached without any means (sudden enlightenment), immediately and directly “all-at-once”, which is from Chinese Mahāyāna Chan view. Both sides are often referred to as “gradualism” for Gradual School and “subitism” for Sudden School separately. This needs to be clarified because enlightenment is the ultimate goal for various Mahāyāna tradition. Different understanding of enlightenment corresponds completely two different meditation practice methods, which would shape the theoretical basis and practice methods of Tibetan Buddhism and lay a framework for its subsequent development and evolution.

King Trisong Detsen invited Buddhist dignitaries from both Indian and Chinese view, highlights the participations of Kamalaśīla, the disciple of Śāntarakṣita, representing Gradual School, and Chinese Chan monk Moheyan, representing Sudden School.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This paper addresses the following research problem: To what extent has the *Samyé Debate* influenced the 8th century of Tibetan Buddhism? It chooses hermeneutics as the methodology to interpret available textual sources on the subject. Distinguishing the different philosophical

foundations and practical methods between Gradual School and Sudden School in the case of the historical and religious Tibetan resources and literature from other scholars sheds light on this study.

### 3. Gradual Enlightenment and Sudden Enlightenment

#### 3.1. Gradual Enlightenment Rooted in Compassion with Meditation Practice on Śamatha and Vipāśyanā

Gradual School, represented by Kamalaśīla, takes compassion as the root to practice gradually. In three *Bhāvanākramas* (Stages of Meditation) written by Kamalaśīla, the very beginning of the first *Bhāvanākrama*, he states that recognizing that compassion is the fundamental source and cause from which all the qualities of the Buddha are nurtured:

*Those desirous of attaining 'sarvajñatā' (knowledge of the true nature of all phenomena) speedily should, in essence, try to practise these three things: 'Karuṇā' (compassion), 'bodhichitta' (enlightened mind) and 'pratipatti' (perception). Knowing that 'Karuṇā' is the basic root of all dharma practices of Lord Buddha's teachings, it should be contemplated or meditated upon at the very outset (trans. Parmananda, 1997, p. 13).*

Compassion is the root and basement that should be developed progressively, through a systematic and “step-by-step” approach. From the beginning, the cultivation of compassion is the basement for attaining Buddhahood. Then, the diligent practice of six *pāramitās* and cultivation of virtues are required. With adherence to six *pāramitās* and strict ethical codes, it is characterized as a long journey corresponds to the ten stages towards Buddhahood. For the gradualists, the enlightenment cannot be reached without careful consideration of the process of ascent up the Buddhist path (*marga*), a path marked by ten stages (*bhūmi*) that are described in exhaustive detail in Mahāyāna path literature, such as in the *Dasabhūmika Sūtra* (The Sutra on the Ten Stages), the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (Stages of the Bodhisattva), or the *Bodhicaiyāvātāra* (Guide to the Bodhisattvas Way of Life) (Bjerken, 2004, p. 6), which is a strict and long period.

In addition, the union of concentration (*śamatha*) and insight (*vipāśyanā*) is the core practice of the Gradual School. Kamalaśīla explained gradual practice ways on how to attain enlightenment in the second *Bhāvanākrama*: Whatever the various samādhis' of 'śrāvaka'. 'bodhisattvas' and 'Tathāgatas' have been indicated by me should always be regarded as attainable through 'śamatha' and 'vipāśyanā' (trans. Parmananda, 1997, p. 55).

This gradual approach rooted in compassion combines meditation based on both the deep concentration of mind (*śamatha*) and the examination of phenomena (*vipāśyanā*) towards wisdom. With the co-practicing and union of *śamatha*, the practicing concentration of one object to calm the mind, and the *vipāśyanā*, focusing on observing and being aware of all phenomena in a highly-concentrated, detached way, enlightenment is achievable.

Indian Gradual School, rooted in compassion, both the base and the main practice methods all contains a gradual process. It is conservative for it requires the essential role of Buddhist monastic life, ethics, ritual, doctrine that help to indicate the correct path. Without them, one may fail to attain Buddhahood.

#### 3.2. Sudden Enlightenment Rooted in the Pure Nature of Mind with Meditation Practice on Non-conceptual

The Sudden School is represented by Chinese Chan Buddhism, Moheyan. In interpreting the “subitism”, enlightenment is sudden because of the pure essence of our nature itself, which is non-conceptual, cannot arise from any intentional efforts. Thus, the rigorous training stages and practices in the Gradual School should be eliminated.

The doctrinal disputes between Kamalaśīla and Moheyan in Bu-ston's *History of Buddhism*, translated by Obermiller (1932):

*(The virtuous and the sinful deeds) are just like white and black clouds which alike obscure the sky. But he who has no thoughts and inclinations at all, can be fully delivered from Phenomenal Life. The absence of any thought, search, or investigation brings about the non-perception of the reality of separate entities. In such a manner one can attain (Buddhahood) at once, like (a Bodhisattva) who has attained the 10<sup>th</sup> stage (p. 193).*

The pure nature of our mind is defiled by any good or bad concept by ourselves, just like a white cloud obscure the sun as much as a black one. Therefore, Tucci (1980) mentioned progressive purification is unnecessary; the long career of the Bodhisattva, the gradual path, can be dispensed with (p. 13).

Enlightenment should transcend conceptual understanding and intellectual analysis in a moment of profound insight. A thorough awareness of the pure nature of mind is enough to cut all the defilements and misperceptions produced by ignorance, which leads directly to enlightenment. This awareness or transition cannot be the result of gradual practice but a gift from a sudden realization or flash of insight.

In this way, meditation practice of Sudden School more likely to be merely *vipaśyanā*, emphasizing on nonintentional or “non-conceptual” as superior and more direct to the gradual practice and union of *samatha* and *vipaśyanā*. Abandon any good or bad concept, the pure nature of mind appears. According to the *Testament of Ba* (Tib. *dBa' bzhed*), Moheyan states at the very beginning of the debate:

*[Everything] is generated as conceptualisation of the mind (sems kyi rnam par rtog pa). Due to the power of [their] virtuous and non-virtuous deeds, sentient beings [continuously] revolve in the round of migration (saṃsāra), experiencing [incessantly] the fruits of [either] higher (sugati) or lower (durgati) rebirths. Whoever does not think anything, does not do anything, will [automatically] be liberated from saṃsāra (trans. Wangdu & Diemberger, 2000, p. 80-81).*

The ultimate non-conceptual and spontaneous intuition cannot result from any intentional effort, for it is an uncaused innate state, an experiential “given” that when deliberately sought after, is lost or obscured (Bjerken 2004, p. 6). A similar description also appears from Great Chan Master Bodhidharma: “Turn in the correct direction and abandon conceptuality.” Moreover, this practice of non-conception in Chan Buddhism is not limited to a seated posture or a step-by-step progress, which can be directly practiced in all daily routine.

Compared to the root of compassion and the long and complex path towards enlightenment in Gradual School, Sudden School put the pure nature of mind of its root, which developed the direct meditation on non-conceptual.

### **3.3. The Historical Impact of Samyé Debate**

The result of *Samyé Debate* is still obscure based on different historical sources. Most scholars' records accept the standard historical narrative in Tibet, which depicts that Kamalaśīla, the Gradual School, won the debate, with the banishment of sudden enlightenment teachings from the region. However, historical sources from China, including texts such as the *Dunwu Dacheng Zhengli Jue*, and other related Dunhuang manuscripts, document that the Chinese Chan monk Moheyan won the debate.

In this case, King Trisong Detsen's declaration that the Indian Buddhist teachings were to be followed is still not enough to clarify his attitude (Tucci 1980, p. 14), as political and spiritual influences were going on simultaneously between India and China. In Contrast, Chan Buddhism did influence Tibetan Buddhism. In the literature of the Vajrayāna, related or comparable notions became especially frequent (Ruegg, 2010, p. 260). Two most crucial practice methods in Vajrayāna of Tibet, the Great Seal (Tib. *phyag chen*) and Great Perfection (Tib. *rdzogs chen*) traditions, were also thought to be influenced by Chan Buddhism. Both

theoretical and practical aspects of Tibetan Buddhism is still influenced by and engaged with the sudden enlightenment.

#### 4. Conclusion

Overall, the *Samyé Debate* was a crucial and watershed moment in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. It solidified Gradual School from India as the predominant tradition followed in Tibet, which was the turning point in Tibetan Buddhist relationship with Chinese Buddhist schools. Since then, Tibetan Buddhism began to have a distinct tradition with its own unique interpretations and practices, influenced by Indian Buddhist thought. The concept and practice method in Chan Buddhism still influences the subsequent growth and evolution of Tibetan Buddhism.

#### 5. Keywords

Buddhist History, Buddhist Meditation, Samyé Debate, Tibetan Buddhism

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