

**‘Tibetan Buddhism’ vs. ‘Buddhism in Tibet’: the case of Tsong
kha pa’s intellectual achievement and the question of the
Indian in relation to the Indic in Tibet**

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At various times and by different observers the activity of Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa (1357–1419) has been characterized as that of either a reformer or a conservative, of either a radical (if not maverick) innovator or of a faithful expositor and continuator. As a thinker in the line of dBu ma / Madhyamaka thought, Tsong kha pa has himself eloquently and movingly recorded the intellectual and spiritual struggles he went through, and how he came to feel dissatisfied with certain interpretations current in Tibet. Yet he is known also as the disciple of the great Sa skya scholar Red mda’ ba; and in his biography / hagiography he is represented as a faithful disciple of several other *bla mas*. What are we to make of these apparently conflicting characterizations of him? And does being a ‘conservative’ necessarily exclude being a radical thinker, an innovator?

Much more generally, there arises the question as to whether ‘Tibetan Buddhism’ and ‘Buddhism in Tibet’ are really two entirely distinct, and possibly opposed, things? Or do they turn out to be complementary rather than antithetical in many a chapter in the history of Tibetan thought?

Such questions are of basic importance for Tibetan civilization, and the answers to be given them are crucial to Tibetology. For Tibetan civilization comprises a component – the Indian one – which is recognizably, and avowedly, of historically Indian origin on the one side, and on the other side a further component – the Indic one – where Tibetans have creatively developed their thinking with originality, following a style which is typologically inspired and infused by Indian thought without being actually attested from available Indian sources.

The co-existence of a quite ‘conservative’ – and historically Indian – strand which came to be thoroughly integrated, and enculturated, in Tibet and an ‘innovative’ Indic component – typologically continuing Indian thought in a creative and quite Tibetan fashion – seems also to inform some of the writing of Tsong kha pa, just as it does so much else in Tibetan culture.