

# *A Brief History of the Winter Jang Debate Session*

*by Tenzin Zopa*

Generally speaking, the science of logic or science of valid cognition comes from the teachings included in the *Sutra Pitaka* (collection of discourses of the Buddha) and from the texts of the Two Great Pioneers (Nagarjuna and Asanga). In the sixth century, the great logician master Dignaga, endowed with love and compassion for all beings, possessing the wisdom eye granted by Manjushri's grace, composed the *Pramanasamuccaya* (*Compendium on Valid Cognition*).

In this text, he resolved many uncertainties regarding all the vital points of the path to liberation and omniscience and made them clear through reasoning. Because of his amazing and deep intelligence, his words are difficult to understand for people with lesser intellect. So later, the great master Dharmakirti (who was prophesied by the Buddha himself), the crown ornament of all scholars and emanation of the Venerable Samantabhadra, seeing that the *Pramanasamuccaya* could not benefit everybody, composed the *Seven Treatises* on valid cognition, in which he elucidated and elaborated on Dignaga's text. By providing his followers with discriminating wisdom through his work, the science of logic spread widely in India.

In Tibet, during the ninth century, Lotsawa Kawa Pältseg, Chogro Lüi Gyältsän and others translated the *Seven Treatises* and the *Compendium of Valid Cognition*, and in this way the tradition of studying the science of logic began and flourished. In the fourteenth century, the great Lama Tsongkhapa, after having studied all the texts on logic several times with Venerable Rendawa and other great masters, clearing away all kinds of exaggerations and underestimations, realized that this science was not merely a tool to master the external world, but is actually an organized system through which all beings can be liberated from samsara and attain enlightenment. In his work *Togjö Dünlegma* (the *Parable of the Excellent Future Destination*), he criticized the general popular understanding of this matter by saying, "In this north country, both people who have studied the science of logic's texts and those who have not are of one voice in saying that in the *Compendium of Valid Cognition* and the *Seven Treatises* there are no instructions on the stages of the practice to enlightenment." Thus, the great Lama Tsongkhapa and his spiritual sons, seeing the great importance of studying the logic texts, spread this tradition.

The purpose of studying the logic texts is not only that of increasing one's intelligence and defeating one's opponent in debate. In fact, approaching the study of the science of valid cognition with this motivation will result in failure and in creating obstacles for other people in their studies. Instead, the most important point is to draw one's own conclusions through perfect reasoning about the presentation of the basis, the path, and the result on the basis of the *Compendium of Valid Cognition*, the texts composed by the Two Great Pioneers, and others.

Moreover, since ordinary people cannot realize directly phenomena like the Four Noble Truths and so on at the beginning, they should train in reasoning in order to get inferential valid cognition on hidden phenomena. By clearing away the misconceptions of apprehending phenomena like the Four Noble Truths and so on in a mistaken way through perfect reasoning, one will be able to understand how to generate in one's mind the realization of impermanence, selflessness, and so on.

In this way, one will first see the lack of mistakes in Buddha's teachings that describe the Four Noble Truths. Subsequently, one will see the lack of mistakes in that Teacher. Finally, one will see the lack of mistakes in the Sangha members who practice those teachings properly. With this stable faith based on reasoning, one will gain certainty that the Buddhist teachings are the only entry-port for whoever desires liberation. Especially, one should gain certainty that contained within the logic texts are all the vital points of the two Vehicles (Mahayana and Hinayana), in the section wherein the validity of the teacher and his teaching are established through the previous mentioned sequence of reasons in the direct and reverse order. In this way, the teachings contained in the logic texts will be understood to be instructions for the path to enlightenment, and consequently, one should practice them accordingly.

Lama Tsongkhapa affirmed that just by reading Dharmakirti's root text on valid cognition, he developed such a strong faith that the hairs on his body stood up and he couldn't stop crying. Especially after studying the second chapter of the *Pramanavartika (Commentary on Valid Cognition)*, his faith in Dharmakirti's works and the science of logic became even deeper. To be able to establish the Madhyamaka (Middle Way) view through the science of logic is such an extraordinary feat that Lama Tsongkhapa praised it by saying that these two, the science of logic and the Middle Way view, are like two lions embracing each other.

Now, regarding the place where the winter debate session was first held, called *Sang-phu Rawa Töpa*, the story goes like this:

When the great Jowo Atisha resided at *Nye-thang*, he pointed his finger towards *Sang-phu* and made this prophecy to Ngog Legpay Sherab:

"In the upper part of that valley, the Victorious One is witnessing Manjushri and Maitreya discussing on the definitive and interpretative meanings of the Dharma. If you take up residence there, the Buddhist teachings will flourish."

Legpay Sherab asked Jowo Atisha to keep that secret for the time being, so the place came to be known as *Sang-Phu*, the secret upper part of the valley. Later Ngog Legpay Sherab established the *Neu* monastery there. After some time, it was divided into Upper and Lower *Neu* and there were eleven classes for both Sakya and Gelug students.

That place was blessed by means of Manjushri and Maitreya holding religious discussion; by Jowo Atisha's prophecy; by the followers of Legpay Sherab who taught and studied there; and by Lama

Tsongkhapa, who explained and debated there on the Perfection of Wisdom as well as the other four major subjects, captivating the mind of many scholars.

The great master logician Dignaga while pondering the composition of the *Compendium of Valid Cognition* wrote on the walls of his room this verse, "I bow down to the One who is the most perfect Teacher and who benefits all sentient beings". As soon as he did this, many wondrous signs appeared. Then, he went for alms and, in the meanwhile, the visionary Tirthika (Non-Buddhist) Black Conqueror erased his verse twice.

On the third day, Dignaga wrote, "If you are just joking, don't erase my verse again because it's very important. If you think I'm wrong, let's debate!" When he came back from his alms round, he found the tirthika there, and he defeated him in debate three times. Then, the Black Conqueror called for a competition of miracles and, with flames coming out of his mouth, he burned all of Dignaga's utensils.

Dignaga was sad and depressed and thought, "Let alone benefiting all sentient beings, I can't even benefit one!" In this way, he thought to give up his bodhichitta mind and threw his writing slate in the sky. Venerable Manjushri took it and said, "Son, that will become like an eye for all sentient beings," and exhorted him to compose the text.

There is a saying, among spiritual masters that the slate fell down at *Sang-Phu*. Because of this series of circumstances, it has become tradition for the most intelligent students from the three great monasteries to study the science of valid cognition at that place.

Before 1959, the best students from Sera-je would tolerate many hardships, such as poor food and living conditions, in order to be able to stay, teach, and study the logic texts there. For example, one of our former abbots, Losang Wangchug, was such a brilliant student that he was sent by the abbot Ngawang Phüntso to *Sang-Phu* to attend the winter debate session and to establish a similar tradition of debating on valid cognition at Sera-je upon his return. In his biography it is said that he went there three times and completed the study of the "Appendix texts," the Perfection of Wisdom study, and the advanced Madhyamaka study. The winter debate session was held during the cold 11th Tibetan month. The first two times he was there, he couldn't find any place to stay, and so he lived in the stone courtyard.

After 1959, in India, the tradition couldn't be restored immediately and so each monastery held their individual winter debate session through 1980. In 1981, the present and former abbots of the three main monasteries, who carry the responsibility to uphold the Buddhist doctrine, met to discuss the matter. They decided that each year the winter debate session should be held with all three monasteries together, with one of the three monasteries hosting each year, with two debate sessions held each day, and a minimum of seven hours of debate per day.

Previously, due to many difficulties, Sera-je Monastery could only afford to send about 200 monks to the winter debates. However, these days, Kyabje Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, who always cares with affection for the monastery and its students, seeing that the attendance to the Jang debate session

is an important condition for the development of the Buddhist teachings in general and of our monastery in particular, sponsors the travel and food expenses for 400 monks to be able to attend.

We want to thank Rinpoche from the bottom of our hearts for Rinpoche's kindness. During our assembly meeting, we pray and make dedication for Rinpoche's life to be long, stable, and without obstacles so that Rinpoche can continue to benefit the Buddhist doctrine and all sentient beings and for all His holy wishes to be fulfilled easily. Also, we pray and dedicate for all the other members of the organization to be free from any unwanted bad circumstances, and for all their wishes to be accomplished in accordance with the holy Dharma.

[However], if we are not able to send more monks to the debates, many of the more than two thousand monks enrolled in Sera-je will lose the opportunity to study and debate the science of valid cognition; and there is a danger that this kind of study will decline. Therefore, we request you to help find more people who are willing to sponsor monks to attend so that in the near future more will be able to participate in the Jang winter debate session.

Tenzin Zopa  
Sera-je Buddhist Study Center  
December 3, 2003

*Colophon:*

Translated from the Tibetan by Teresa Bianca and Sherab Dhargye, April 2004. Lightly edited by Kendall Magnussen, FPMT Education Department.