

47 Gendun Chopel: *Grains of Gold: Tales of a Cosmopolitan Traveler* (1940/1941)

Introduced by Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz

Introduction

The Tibetan intellectual Gendun Chopel (dGe 'dun chos 'phel) (1903–1951) is today regarded in Tibet and in Tibetan exile society as a kind of intellectual hero, having sharply criticised the government, the monastic system, and the conservative Tibetan society of his time. Originally destined for a monastic career, he spent his teenage years in various monasteries in his native region of Amdo, and later in Lhasa. In Lhasa, he met the Indian Sanskrit scholar Rahul Sankrityayan (1893–1963), with whom he travelled to northern India in 1934. Over the following twelve years, he travelled the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka. His many contacts in the Indian intellectual milieu allowed him to become acquainted with new scientific findings and political ideas. His writings reflect the great influence that the late colonial milieu of British India had on his thinking. Gendun Chopel's literary output includes an extensive oeuvre of historical works and philosophical treatises, as well as a travel guide for Buddhist pilgrims in India, and an erotic manual based on the Indian *Kāmasūtra*. The text passages translated here by Thupten Jinpa and Donald S. Lopez Junior are from the final chapter of his most extensive work, *Grains of Gold: Tales of a Cosmopolitan Traveler*, which he completed in Sri Lanka between 1940 and 1941. *Grains of Gold* comprises a total of seventeen chapters, in which he dwells on such diverse topics as the history of India, the Aśoka inscriptions, linguistic issues such as the development of the Indian and Tibetan scripts, the flora of the Indian subcontinent, and Hinduism. In his final chapter, he deals with the India of his time. After a scathing review of European colonialism, he addresses contemporary European scholars and theosophists' positive reception of Buddhism as a 'religion of reason.' In this context, he also comments at length on the European natural sciences, and their relationship to Buddhism. Gendun Chopel uses two terms to render the European natural sciences: *rigs pa gsar pa*, which Jinpa and Lopez translate as "new reasoning," and *sa yan si*, a phonetic transcription of the English term *science*. The "new reasoning" relies on direct perception and empirical observation. Gendun Chopel stresses the compatibility of Buddhist epistemology and European science in this regard. He follows the well-known tropes of the Buddhism and science discourse of the early twentieth century, but, at the same time, puts their compatibility into perspective, by pointing out discrepancies between Buddhism and science. In doing so, he proves to be an indepen-

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dent thinker who does not unconditionally follow Buddhist doctrines. On the whole, Gendun Chopel oscillates between claiming that the Buddha already foresaw all scientific developments, and recognising that new scientific developments challenge traditional Buddhist knowledge.

Bibliographical Information

Gendun Chopel. *mkhas dbang dge 'dun chos 'phel gyi gsung 'bum bzhugs so*, Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang 2009; 463–69.

Page numbers given in square brackets refer to this edition.

The translation adopted here can be found in:

Gendun Chopel. “rGyal khams rig pas bskor ba'i gnam rgyud gser gyi thang ma zhes bya ba bzhugs so, 1934–1941.” In *Grains of Gold. Tales of a Cosmopolitan Traveler*. Translated by Thupten Jinpa, and Donald S. Lopez Jr., 403–7. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Thupten Jinpa's and Donald S. Lopez Jr.'s translation is annotated by Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz.

Translation Adopted from Thupten Jinpa, and Donald S. Lopez Jr

Now I shall offer a sincere discussion for those honest and far-sighted dharma friends who are members of my religion. The system of the new reasoning “science”¹ is spreading and increasing in all directions. In the great countries, after baseless accusations by so many, both learned and foolish, who say, “It is not true,” they all have become exhausted and had to keep silent. In the end, even the Indian brahmins, who value the defense of their scriptures more than their lives, have had to powerlessly accept it.

These assertions of the new reasoning are not established just through one person arguing with another. For example, a telescope constructed by new machines sees something thousands of miles away as if it were in the palm of one's hand, and similarly, [p. 463/464] a glass instrument that perceives what is close by makes even the smallest particles appear the size of a mountain; it is like being able to analyze its many parts, actually seeing everything. Thus, apart from closing their eyes they [the opponents of science] have found no other way to persist. [. . .]

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I KKP: Gendun Chopel quotes the English word “science,” rendering it *sa yan si*.

Even so, when we Tibetans hear the mere mention of the new system, we look wide-eyed and say: “Oh! He is a heretic!” Acting in this way, some, like those Mongolians from the Uрга^{II} region [i.e., Communists], eventually come to impulsively believe in the new reasoning, and lose all faith in the Buddha, becoming non-Buddhists. Thus, whether one either stubbornly says, “no!” to the new reasoning or believes in it and utterly rejects the teaching of Buddhism, both are prejudice; because it is simply recalcitrance, this will not take you far.

No matter what aspect is set forth in this religion taught by our Teacher [the Buddha], whether it be the nature of reality, how to progress on the path, or the good qualities of the fruition, there is absolutely no need to feel embarrassed in the face of the system of science.^{III} Furthermore, for any essential point [in Buddhism], science can serve as foundation. Among the Westerners, many scholars of science have acquired a faith in the Buddha and become Buddhists; some have even become monks.

One of them said: “First, I followed the system of the ancient religion of Jesus. Later, I learned science well and a new understanding was born. [p. 464/465] Then I thought that all the religions in this world are just assertions rooted in a lie, requiring that one rely only on the letter. One day, I saw a stanza of the *Dhammapada*^{IV} translated into a European language and thought, ‘Oh! The only one who follows the path of reason is the Buddha. Not only did he climb the ladder of science, but having left that [ladder] behind, he travelled even further beyond,’ and conviction was born.”

[. . . p. 465/466] More than ten years have passed since they^V made a viewing apparatus that is not obstructed [in seeing] things behind a wall or inside of a body. All of this is certain. They have also made a machine by which what is said in India can be heard in China in the following moment. Because they are able to show in China a film of something that exists in India, all people can be convinced. The final proof that all things run on waves of electricity is seeing it with one’s own eyes.

Many great scholars of science made limitless praises of the Buddha, saying that two thousand years ago, when there were no such machines, the Buddha explained that all compounded things disintegrate in each moment and he taught that things do not remain even for a brief instant, and now we have actually seen this using machines. The statement by Dharmakīrti^{VI} that “continuity and collection do not exist ultimately” can be understood in various ways, but in the end one can put one’s finger on the main point. Similarly, because white exists, black can appear to the eye; there is no single truly white thing that can exist separately in the world. Some people say that this was

II KKP: The pre-revolutionary Russian name for Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia.

III KKP: Tib. *sa yan si'i rigs pa*.

IV KKP: An important Buddhist text, the second book of the Khuddaka Nikāya of the Pāli Canon.

V KKP: The followers of the new reasoning.

VI KKP: A Buddhist scholar living in the seventh century CE. He is famous for his writings on Buddhist logic.

first understood fifty years ago. However, our Nāgārjuna^{VII} and others understood precisely that in ancient times. They also say that all these external appearances are projections of the mind; they do not appear outside. Whatever we see, it is merely seeing those aspects or reflections that the senses can handle; it is impossible to see the thing nakedly. Because these things are not even mentioned in other [religions] like Christianity, scientific reasoning is considered to be something that did not exist previously. However, for us, [p. 466/467] these [ideas] are familiar from long ago. [. . .]

Yet, to be excessively proud and continually assert that even the smallest details of all the explanations in our scriptures are unmistaken seems attractive only temporarily; it is pointless stubbornness.

[. . . p. 467/468 . . .] Having become an open-minded person who sees what is central and what is marginal, you should strive to ensure the survival of the teaching [Buddhism] so that it remains together with the ways of the new reasoning. [. . .] Please pray that the two, this modern reasoning of science and the ancient teaching of the Buddha, [p. 468/469] may abide together for ten thousand years.”

VII KKP: A Buddhist scholar probably living in the second century CE. He is considered to be the founder of the *Madhyamaka* system of Buddhist philosophy.

