

# A Christian Catechism in Tibetan

An English translation and study of Ippolito Desideri's Tibetan manuscript

*The Essence of the Christian Faith*

Elaine M Robson

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for  
award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts

March 2014

Word count: 74,368.

## Abstract

This thesis is a translation and study of the Italian Jesuit, Ippolito Desideri's Tibetan manuscript *The Essence of the Christian Faith* which he wrote towards the end of his five year stay in Tibet (1716-1721). It is the first of his Tibetan works to be translated into English. Desideri's intention in writing was twofold: Firstly, to explain to Tibetan Buddhist readers why their denial of an intrinsically existent God (*rang grub dkon mchog*) leads to nihilism. Secondly, he wrote to express in the Tibetan language (in the form of a catechism) something of the nature and character of the triune God, and why belief in him does not destroy the Buddhist understanding of 'emptiness', but in fact enhances it.

In Desideri's introduction he explains why he considers the Tibetan Buddhist dGe lugs presentation of 'emptiness' to be flawed. He disagrees with their assertion that all things are beginningless and are mere mentally fabricated constructs which are dependent on their 'basis of designation'. Desideri considers that the existence of the Independent, who is external to the inter-dependent, explains the existence of the inter-dependent; whereas the denial of the Independent leads to the denial of everything.

Desideri describes God as the all pervading and compassionate One who sent his Son to liberate people from that which causes them to be shackled and which only perpetuates their 'ignorance'. Drawing on many highly contextualised illustrations, he presents the main doctrines of the Christian Faith in a way that a Tibetan reader who was hearing about Christianity for the first time could relate to.

Desideri sought to reassure his readers the acceptance of the biblical God who necessarily exists intrinsically would not destroy, but would in fact enhance, the dGe lugs understanding of 'emptiness' and thereby remove the 'fall into nihilism'.

## **Dedication**

To the people of Tibet:

For whom Desideri wrote his Tibetan manuscripts almost three hundred years ago.

(1716-1721)

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my supervisor Professor Paul Williams who has shown a great interest in my research. He has generously and unhesitatingly given me considerable time and support. I am particularly grateful for his guidance as I worked through the first part of Desideri's manuscript. I am indebted to him for his knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism and for his patience.

I also thank Dr Phillip Denwood of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London whose Tibetan language class I attended in 1982. I am grateful for the help he gave me during 1998-2002 when I embarked on my initial examination and research of Desideri's written documents.

Special thanks to my youngest son, Dr Stephen Robson who has always been willing to help me with computer hardware and software challenges, which I have faced during this project. His assistance has been invaluable.

Warm thanks to other friends and family members who have been longsuffering as I have so repeatedly spoken of Desideri that I am sometimes teased! This thesis would not have been realised without their openhearted, thoughtful and varied support over many years.

I am very grateful to the University of Bristol Disability Services for their generous support and guidance during the time I have been studying in Bristol.

Dr Michael Barnes, under whom I studied Interreligious Dialogue at Heythrop College, asked me in 2004 "So is Desideri your hero?" Ten years later I would still agree that he is!

## **Author's declaration**

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: *E M Robson*. DATE: 30th March 2014.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Author’s declaration .....	iiv
Abbreviations.....	viii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
BACKGROUND .....	1
(1) Early days.....	1
(2) Desideri’s five years in Tibet .....	5
(3) Desideri’s forced departure from Tibet.....	8
THE PURPOSE OF THE THESIS.....	10
LIMITATIONS.....	18
REVIEW OF THE CURRENT LITERATURE.....	19
THE ESSENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH .....	23
PART ONE.....	23
LAYING THE FOUNDATION .....	23
PART ONE A.....	23
Section Headings: .....	23
Desideri’s dedication or prologue.....	24
The need to differentiate between truth and falsehood.....	29
Everything is empty of intrinsic existence – true or false?.....	36
The moon and its reflection in a clear lake .....	39
Senseless Babble! .....	43
An infinite regress of causes that have no starting point .....	44
Dependent Origination.....	47
How a heavy object moves .....	50
The Birth of a Person.....	51
The illustration of an endless road and its implications.....	52
The necessity to be touched by a causal efficacy force .....	53
Emptiness cannot be established without ‘Dependency’ .....	54
An illustration of a ruler and his vassals .....	55
Disconformity with the Cause .....	57
Concepts of Upper & Lower, etc .....	58

An illustration of manufactured objects.....	60
LAYING THE FOUNDATION .....	62
PART ONE B .....	62
Section Headings: .....	62
Supreme excellence .....	63
Two types of cognition .....	66
Superior certain cognition.....	71
Two types of Cognitive Objects .....	74
Resistant to Analysis by Reasoning.....	77
There is no pervasion!.....	81
The pervasion’s unwelcome conclusion .....	86
Birth is more than a ‘mere’ birth.....	89
A time of primordial non-existence .....	92
A distinctive entity established with intrinsic nature .....	96
The reflection of the moon in a clear lake .....	101
LAYING THE FOUNDATION .....	105
PART ONE C .....	105
Section Headings: .....	105
Things and their opposite.....	105
Implications of things and their opposites .....	111
Parts and Wholes .....	112
More discussion on totalities .....	116
An illustration of a chariot .....	121
Without the cognisable there is no cognition.....	124
Illustration of a dot and its circumference .....	125
The Creation of entities which did not previously exist .....	128
The fallacy of rebirth .....	130
A system of Faith and Doctrine that is like ‘false gold’ .....	134



## Abbreviations

Desideri's other Tibetan writings (referred to in this thesis).

- (a) 'The Dawn'      *The Sunrise Dispelling Dawn's Darkness* also referred to as *The Allegory of the Dawn that Dispels Darkness*. (*Tho rangs mun sel nyi ma shar ba'i brda*).
- (b) 'Origins'      *The Origin of Living Beings and other phenomena*. (*Sems can dang chos la sogs pa rnams kyi 'byung khungs*).
- (c) 'Final Goal'      *The Highest Good and the Ultimate End* is a collection of Desideri's essays. (*nges legs*)
- (d) 'Previous Lives'      Questions presented by the European lama Ippolito to the learned of Tibet concerning [the theory of] former lives and the view of emptiness. (*mgo skar bla ma i po li do shes bya ba yis phul ba'i bod kyi mkhas pa rnams la skye ba snga ma dang stong pa nyid kyi lta ba'i sgo nes zhu ba*).

### Other abbreviations

- HNT.      Desideri's *Historical Notices of Tibet* or *Notizie Istoriche del Thibet*
- CCT.      *Catechism of the Council of Trent*.
- GT1, GT2, GT3.      An English translation of Tsong kha pa's *Byang chub lam gyi rim pa chen mo* (*The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*) in three volumes.
- OT1, OT3, OT4.      *Opere Tibetane di Ippolito Desideri, S.J.* (vol.1; vol.3; and vol.4.)
- IsMEO.      Istituto italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente

## INTRODUCTION

### BACKGROUND

#### (1) Early days:

Ippolito Desideri was born in Tuscany, Italy, on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1684.<sup>1</sup> He attended a Jesuit school in his hometown of Pistoia and entered the Society of Jesus in Rome in 1700. In 1702, having taken the three vows,<sup>2</sup> Desideri began his studies at the *Collegio Romano*, which had been established by the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius de Loyola, in 1551 (Sweet:15-16).

Fifteen years later, Desideri, now a young Italian priest in his early thirties, almost lost his life while struggling to cross the Himalayas in North-West India, enduring “snow drifts, storms, avalanches, freezing torrents, dangerous precipices, snow blindness [and terrifying] swaying rope bridges.” He finally reached the capital city of Tibet, Lhasa, on March 18<sup>th</sup> 1716 (Sweet: 30-31).

Whilst training for the priesthood in Rome, Desideri became aware of an inner impulse that was calling him to the Indies (Sweet: 17). The Catholic Indies Missions covered all of South, South-East and East Asia; Tibet was included under their extensive mantle. He left Rome on September 27<sup>th</sup> 1712 for Lisbon in Portugal and embarked on April 9<sup>th</sup> 1713 on the long sea journey to India, finally arriving in Goa six months later.

---

<sup>1</sup> The information and dates about Desideri have been taken from Michael Sweet’s introduction (pages 1-115) to his recently published English translation of Desideri’s Italian notes and draft chapters that document this young Jesuit’s missionary experiences in India and Tibet from 1713 to 1727. See *Mission to Tibet: the Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Account of Father Ippolito Desideri, S.J.* Sweet (trans.) 2010. Subsequent references to *Mission in Tibet* in my introduction will be shown as Sweet followed by the page number.

<sup>2</sup> These are the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Prior to Desideri's departure from Rome he was granted an audience with Pope Clement XI. When asked to what region of the Indies he intended to travel, he replied "Tibet"; the Pope praised his resolve and wished him well as he embarked on his journey (Sweet: 24).

At that time, Tibet fell under the jurisdiction of the Church of the Indian province of Goa and Desideri was in contact with Michelangelo Tamburini, the Father General of the Society of Jesus in Rome, concerning his future placement. Tamburini maintained that, despite the Propaganda<sup>3</sup> in Rome having awarded Tibet to the Capuchins in 1703, the area of Tibet where a previous Jesuit mission had existed was still under the jurisdiction of the Indian province and was therefore outside the Propaganda's control.<sup>4</sup>

The original Tibet mission was established by Antonio de Andrade S.J. in 1624 (Sweet: 18) but was abandoned in 1641 on account of serious political unrest. Tamburini wished to see the former Jesuit mission reopened, and so Desideri set out from Goa in South India in 1714 with the intention of achieving this. In Delhi, Desideri was joined by an older and more senior Jesuit priest, Manoel Freyre, and together they departed on September 24<sup>th</sup> 1714 to find the Himalayan town of Srinagar. They understood that the earlier Jesuit missionaries had always followed this route when going from India to Tibet. Although there were written records in the Jesuit archives in Rome concerning the actual location of the mission in the Tibetan village of Tsaparang (*rtsa pa rang*), it appears that Desideri left for Lisbon in such a hurry that he had not studied them. It was only many years later, after his return to Italy in 1728, that he discovered that the route they should have taken into Tibet was via a small settlement with the name of Srinagar in the Garhwal, (Sweet: 31) on the Indian side of the Tibetan border in the Himalayan foothills, east of Dehra Dun. Instead, Freyre and Desideri

---

<sup>3</sup> 'The Holy Congregation for the Propaganda of the Faith'.

<sup>4</sup> Sweet (2010: 20). He comments, "Even the Jesuits themselves seemed to have lost track of their former mission and were only awakened to that forgotten episode of their own history by the award [of Tibet] to the Capuchins." (Sweet 2010: 22).

went an exceedingly long way round and journeyed via Srinagar in Kashmir in North-West India. From there they proceeded to Leh, the capital of Ladakh, arriving in July 1715. Some months later, when crossing the high Tibetan plateau in Western Tibet, and on account of their following the northern route, they missed the area in which the Tsaparang mission had been located altogether. It seems that they were completely unaware that it was situated close to the Tibetan border with India. Freyre and Desideri also appeared to know very little about Tibet itself. While in Leh, to their great surprise, they discovered that Tibet was divided into three parts and not two as they had initially thought. They had been advised incorrectly by some Kashmiri informants that there were “two Tibets: Little Tibet, or Baltistan, and Great Tibet, or Ladakh.” A Kashmiri merchant who had recently arrived in Leh (having travelled westwards across the Tibetan plateau) informed them of a ‘third Tibet’ which it seems they were completely ignorant of.<sup>5</sup> Lhasa, the capital city, was the seat of religious learning for the whole of Tibet and was situated in the ‘third Tibet’. The trader mentioned that he had seen some Europeans in that city and when he described their unusual clothing, Desideri and Freyre immediately knew that they must have been Capuchins.

Desideri wished to remain in Ladakh, as the king had been most welcoming and appeared to be supportive of their desire to share the Christian faith with the people under his jurisdiction. But suddenly Freyre was adamant that they should leave immediately, as he had decided to return to India. He also claimed that Andrade’s Jesuit mission must have been established in the ‘third Tibet’ that they had just learnt about. Freyre argued that because of this (and because he had been advised that it was a less mountainous route) they should travel via Lhasa back to India. However, Desideri wished neither to return to India, nor to travel to Lhasa. As they now knew that Capuchin missionaries were already in that city, he believed that there was no need for other missionaries to go there too. But Desideri, being subordinate

---

<sup>5</sup> They expressed surprise that the area we know as Central Tibet was also called Tibet (Sweet: 33).

to Freyre, reluctantly capitulated, and the two men departed from Leh on August 17<sup>th</sup> 1715. Following the ‘northern route’ across the high Tibetan plateau, they travelled eastwards in the company of a caravan that belonged to a widowed Mongolian princess. She had taken charge as military governor of the Tibetan side of the border with Ladakh following her husband’s death and had been recalled to Lhasa. Her military caravan was large and well armed. The journey across the plateau normally took three months and it is certain that without her help Freyre and Desideri would both have perished in the extremely harsh conditions that they had to endure.<sup>6</sup>

Desideri assumed that Freyre’s desire to leave Tibet was because “the privations of the journey had proved too much for him”; according to Sweet he was unaware of his superior’s real intentions. There were more direct routes Freyre could have followed from Western Tibet back to India and there was no obvious reason for him to travel via Lhasa. Sweet suggests that a more ‘sinister’ reason for Freyre’s unnecessarily long journey could explain why he was so adamant about travelling via Lhasa. He wonders if the ‘orders’ given to Freyre prior to the two Jesuits’ departure from Delhi contained covert instructions that Desideri was not privy to. Had Freyre been sent to accompany Desideri with a secret agenda not only to find the places where the Capuchins had formed a presence in Tibet but also to report back to his superiors in India if they were in or close to previous Jesuit mission locations? If this was indeed the case, it could explain Freyre’s sudden decision to return to India via Lhasa.<sup>7</sup> The two men arrived in Lhasa on March 18<sup>th</sup> 1716 but discovered that the Capuchins were no longer there. Freyre only stayed for three weeks and, as soon as he was fit enough to resume his journey, departed for the Capuchin hospice in the capital city of Nepal, Kathmandu,

---

<sup>6</sup> Sweet 2010: 36.

<sup>7</sup> Sweet 2010: 31-32; 28.

situated on the main route back to India. Freyre left his young Jesuit companion alone in Lhasa and, unsurprisingly, Desideri felt he had been abandoned.<sup>8</sup>

## **(2) Desideri's five years in Tibet:**

Sweet comments that “had Desideri not gone to Lhasa he would not have had the experiences that resulted in his undying fame as the first Tibetanist and Buddhologist and pioneer of Buddhist-Christian communication.”<sup>9</sup>

On arrival in the capital city, Desideri found himself quickly accepted by the court officials and the reigning king (who was the administrator of Tibet). King Lhazang Khan (*lha bzang khan*) was a Mongolian and had ruled Tibet for twenty years. Desideri found the people he related to, who included the prime minister Targum Tashi (*darqan bkra shis*), were very interested in his religious ideas. Filippi quotes Desideri as saying:<sup>10</sup>

When the King and Minister heard that I was preparing this work [i.e. a written account of Desideri's Faith] they were impatient for it to be finished. Indeed constantly, until their tragic death, they seemed unable to talk of anything but different points of religion. Moved by Divine Grace, far more powerful than any words of mine, they inquired over and over again whether there was any great difference between our Holy Faith and their Sect or Religion. Partly not to diverge in any way from the Truth and partly not to

---

<sup>8</sup> Sweet 2010: 684n503. Desideri wrote Freyre “abandoned me as soon as we arrived.”

<sup>9</sup> Sweet 2010: 35.

<sup>10</sup> Filippi 1937: 99-100. Sweet translates the same passages in *Mission to Tibet* (Sweet 2010: 184-6). Sweet points out (*ibid.*, 62): “Desideri wrote and rewrote his account of his travels and missions to Tibet and India at least five times; four of these states are preserved in four manuscripts, and the work was left unfinished at his death.” According to Sweet (*ibid.*, 5) Filippi's translation of the *Historical Notices of Tibet* (HNT) in 1931, and his revised edition in 1937, was primarily based on the Florentine manuscript. Sweet comments that, Filippi's publication was only a partial translation as not only did he leave some sections out if he thought that they had little relevance for the reader, he also added some extra material from Desideri's other drafts and failed to note their source.

discourage them, I explained that in every religion there were two principal facts; [1] firstly, principles, maxims, or dogmas to be believed, and [2] secondly, precepts, counsels, or instructions as to what to do or not to do.

Desideri pointed out that: “As regards the first, our Religion and theirs were absolutely different but in the second the difference was very slight.” The first book that Desideri wrote in Tibetan, *Tho rangs mun sel nyi ma shar ba'i brda'*, was entitled *An Allegory of Sunrise Dispelling Dawn's Darkness*.<sup>11</sup> At the king's request Desideri was asked to present his book in a solemn and public audience, and he did so on the morning of the Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup> 1717.<sup>12</sup> A few weeks later the king, having read the book, summoned Desideri and requested that he prepare for a debate with the learned Buddhist doctors, the ‘rapjampa’ (*rab 'byams pa*), in order to point out the faults (if any) in Tibetan Buddhist logic (Sweet: 187). He had realised that Desideri was ignorant of basic Buddhist teachings and so asked him to relocate to a Buddhist monastery in order to learn the language and study various Buddhist texts in preparation for the encounter. It would appear that the king had shown him much favour and genuine friendship and protection.<sup>13</sup> Desideri writes: “[He] thanked me for my goodness towards himself and his subjects even before I had known them; secondly, that he was well pleased that I had come to the Kingdom and the Court and begged me to remain there permanently; and thirdly, he promised to listen to what I had to say, and if after mature discussion and examination of what I had to propose he should be convinced of having hitherto lived in error, he, his whole family, his Court and all his people would become followers of the word of Jesus Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Apparently, Desideri wrote the initial draft in Italian which he then rendered into Tibetan. Toscano's translation of the Tibetan was published in 1981. (Sweet 2010: 664n167).

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed account of this event see Sweet 2010: 186-187.

<sup>13</sup> Filippi 1937: 98.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

Desideri began his initial study of Buddhism as a day student “in the Shidé (*bzhi sde*) monastery that served as a preparatory school for the universities.”<sup>15</sup> In August 1717, he moved to the huge Buddhist monastery of Sera (*se ra*), where he lived alongside its eight thousand resident monks. He had a room to himself and was permitted to set up his own private chapel. Sera, located approximately three miles from Lhasa, still functions as a monastery today. Here, Desideri spent many hours reading and discussing the content of their philosophical texts as well as listening to interminably long debates. The king had ordered that Desideri be admitted into any monastery or university of his choice and that difficult passages in the texts should be explained to him by the doctors and masters. Desideri was grateful to be given the opportunity to study and to prepare for the forthcoming debate. He comments: "Finally, he [the king] asked me in a very pressing manner to take the trouble of writing down the reasons and the arguments that I had against the beliefs of that sect."<sup>16</sup>

Apparently, the monks and lamas took a lively interest in Desideri’s research and often crowded into his room to read his conclusions. But sadly, the proposed debate never took place as, due to a political uprising, the king and his chief minister were assassinated by Mongolian invaders (the Dzungars) on December 3rd 1717 (Sweet: 192). Due to the extremely unstable political situation which resulted from the king's death, Desideri, along with two Capuchin monks who had arrived six months after him and were living in Lhasa, decided to flee the besieged city. They travelled for eight days in a south-easterly direction to the county of Dakpo Khyer<sup>17</sup> where there was a Capuchin hospice.<sup>18</sup> Desideri stayed in the hospice for the next three years and continued his writing and research on Buddhism, with an

---

<sup>15</sup> This was from 25<sup>th</sup> March to 30<sup>th</sup> July 1717. (Sweet 2010: 685n520).

<sup>16</sup> Sweet 2010: 188.

<sup>17</sup> Desideri spelt this as ‘Takpo Khier’.

<sup>18</sup> As the climate was milder in this part of Tibet, the Capuchins were able to grow grapes in order to produce wine for use during their Eucharist services.

occasional visit to Lhasa and other places, where he always found an enthusiastic welcome from the lamas who were keen to discuss his findings.

### **(3) Desideri's forced departure from Tibet:**

Desideri was startled to receive a devastating expulsion order from Tamburini on January 10<sup>th</sup> 1721, which instructed him to leave Tibet immediately. With a heavy heart he departed Dakpo Khyer a few weeks later and headed for Lhasa, where he joined the bridle path which took him to the border of Nepal. Desideri desperately wanted to remain in Tibet, but it seems the Propaganda in Rome had pressurised Tamburini, who finally capitulated and sent the order to Desideri to withdraw and return to India. Sweet comments that the Capuchins must have handed Desideri's expulsion letter to him with much satisfaction (Sweet: 49). His expulsion indicated that the ongoing dispute between the Jesuits and the Capuchins in regard to Tibet had definitely swung in the Capuchins' favour. Consequently, their request that only their order be allowed to evangelise Tibet would no longer be contested. Desideri records that when he reached Lhasa, "[T]he Capuchin Fathers presented me [...] with the decree in which the Holy Congregation for the Propaganda of the Faith granted the mission to the kingdom's of Tibet to them exclusive of all others."<sup>19</sup>

Having crossed Tibet, Desideri lingered on the Nepalese border, reluctant to leave his newly adopted homeland. He remained there from May 30<sup>th</sup> to December 27<sup>th</sup> 1721 to wait for the cooler weather to set in before descending to the hot plains of India with his precious Tibetan manuscripts. He sojourned in the border town on Nyalam (*gnya' lam*) and continued to work on his writings (Sweet: 461). He also wrote an appeal to the Pope from Tibetan soil requesting that he be speedily recalled to Rome in order to state his case,<sup>20</sup> which was denied.

---

<sup>19</sup> Sweet 2010: 459.

<sup>20</sup> Sweet 2010: 733n1131.

It seems tragic that such a gifted foreign Tibetan scholar as Desideri should have had his field of study and ministry snatched away from him so unnecessarily. One might have expected the lamas to have been offended and to send him on his way because he was an outsider (*phyi ba*) who practiced and actively spread ideas that had the potential to threaten their religious beliefs, but this was not the case! It seems that his gracious manner and genuine interest in their philosophical ideas, country and people endeared Desideri to them. His attempts at ‘dialogue’ seem confrontational to the Western eye, but they were entirely appropriate and acceptable in the context of Tibetan religious debate. He was not a syncretist and did not dilute or compromise his convictions. He was mild-mannered and respectful of the Tibetan people and sought to express himself in ways that were culturally appropriate.<sup>21</sup> Because of this he earned enormous respect.

Sadly the same cannot be said of his fellow Catholics – the Capuchins, who, although they expressed warm hospitality to Desideri whenever he stayed in their hospices,<sup>22</sup> nevertheless felt that they had a genuine grievance against the renewed Jesuit presence in Tibet. The roots of this can be traced back to 1622 when the Vatican decreed that “No religious order was allowed to establish a new mission anywhere without the express approval of the Propaganda, which would then fund it, and no order would be allowed to establish a mission in a place where missionaries of another order had already done so.”<sup>23</sup> In 1703, when the Capuchins had been appointed to the Tibet mission by the authorities in Rome, they made an unsuccessful attempt (from 1707 to 1711) to settle permanently in Lhasa. Although their attempt failed and they returned to Nepal, this did not mean that they relinquished their sense of ownership; when the Capuchins appeared again in Lhasa, six months after Desideri’s arrival, the leader

---

<sup>21</sup> Desideri’s Tibet Missionary Manual is most informative. (Sweet 2010: 635-641. Appendix H.)

<sup>22</sup> Sweet 2010: 206-7; 462.

<sup>23</sup> Sweet 2010: 20.

of the trio<sup>24</sup> took great exception to the Jesuit's presence. Despite this, Desideri was respectful on a personal level and tried to cooperate with the three fathers. He welcomed them into his home, assisted them with language study and began a translation of Tsong kha pa's *Lam rim* Buddhist text into Italian so that they could begin to engage with Buddhist philosophy. He did this while continuing with his own research. When they all moved to Dakpo Khyer (following the king's assassination), Desideri lived with them in their hospice and continued to assist them in order to pay for his keep. Towards the end of his stay, he completed the Italian translation of the *Great Stages of the Path (Lam rim chen mo)*, but sadly the manuscript has been lost (Sweet: 50).

### **THE PURPOSE OF THE THESIS.**

My thesis will focus on just one of Desideri's manuscripts, which he wrote towards the end of his stay in Tibet. He titled the text *Ke ri se sti an gyi chos lugs kyi snying po - The Essence of the Christian Faith*.<sup>25</sup> I hope my English translation of this Tibetan manuscript will serve as a springboard for future ethnic Tibetan scholars to engage directly with Desideri's other Tibetan writings.

In order to fully grasp Desideri's aspiration in writing the manuscript it will be helpful to consider: (1) for whom did he write? (2) what did he say? (3) what was his intention? (4) how did he present his arguments? and (5) are his manuscripts still relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

This thesis is an attempt to answer these questions and thereby make this particular manuscript intelligible to a reader who is *not* a Buddhist. It will also examine the ways in which Desideri sought to relate his Catholic Christian beliefs to a Tibetan Buddhist reader, but will refrain from discussing the content of his catechism from a theological perspective.

---

<sup>24</sup> Domenico da Fano.

<sup>25</sup> The word *chos lugs* can mean 'religion', 'doctrine', 'religious system', etc. I have decided to use the term 'Christian Faith' as it seems appropriate for the twenty first century.

Particular attention will be given to Desideri's introduction, where he seeks to lay a foundation for the reasonableness of accepting the existence of God. Because this first part contains a substantial amount of material that requires some explanation for those unfamiliar with the dGe lugs Tibetan Buddhist school of thought, I have divided it into 37 sub-sections, each of which I will examine individually.<sup>26</sup> I will also look at some of the vocabulary Desideri used and comment on several important Buddhist doctrines which he refers to but does not elaborate on. Since he was writing for a Buddhist readership, his intended audience was already well versed in Tibetan Buddhist doctrine. Desideri's catechism forms the second part of his manuscript.

### (1) **For whom did Desideri write?**

Desideri's manuscripts were written for well-educated Tibetans who had spent time studying dGe lugs pa Buddhist texts but were open minded enough to consider Desideri's challenges to their claims. In an Italian manual written for the benefit of future missionaries, he describes the different grades of religious practitioners that they were likely to meet in Tibet. Desideri discovered that the rapjampa (*rab 'byams pa*), who are the doctors and professors of religion, were the most open-minded and willing to discuss ideas that differed from their own.<sup>27</sup> He observed that they were also in a good position to influence others. His description regarding the possibility of discussions with the lamas (*bla ma*) is less encouraging. Desideri explains that because the lamas are the highest authority, they are greatly esteemed and

---

<sup>26</sup> A Wylie transliteration of Laying the Foundation is in the Appendices. This will enable a reader familiar with the Tibetan language to refer to each of the 37 sections individually and also to view them in sequence. For an explanation of the transliterated system for Tibetan that was developed by Turrell Wylie, see his article entitled "A Standard System of Tibetan Transcription." (*Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 22, 1959: 261-67).

<sup>27</sup> Sweet 2010: 635-641. Desideri describes four categories of Tibetan religious practitioners and points out that (1) the Lamas (*bla ma*) are the highest in rank and similar to "abbots, bishops and patriarchs." (2) The simple Gelongs (*dge slong*) are those monks who are professed but have not graduated. (3) The teachers and doctors of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy are the Rapjampa (*rab 'byams pa*), and finally (4) there are the Traba (*gra pa*) or monks who are "novices, students, or religious who have not received any rank." Sweet 2010: 638.

venerated by the Tibetan people. He advises therefore that missionaries should be “neither too familiar nor too distant”. They should not be seen to disrespect the lamas since this would turn the population at large against the missionaries. However, simultaneously, they should not appear to venerate them (Sweet: 640).

Trent Pomplun (2010: 156) suggests that Desideri compiled his catechism (which constitutes the second part of the manuscript) in order to help future missionaries. He states that it was “probably meant to train future missionaries in the answers they would give to typical Tibetan questions, rather than represent a ‘dialogue’ between Christian and Buddhist philosophers.” However, I think it is more likely that when Desideri was compiling his catechism, his entire focus was on communicating Christian truth to the Tibetan people themselves, rather than writing it for future missionaries. This is because throughout much of the catechism he uses specific terminology that those with a Buddhist background would be familiar with. Unless the various terms and many of the examples he uses are glossed, the non-Buddhist would miss their significance altogether. Furthermore, when one reads the heartfelt prayers recorded in some of the pages of *The Final Goal*,<sup>28</sup> it is moving to see how completely focused Desideri was on the spiritual well-being of the Tibetan people.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> These are contained in *The Highest Good and the Ultimate End*. This publication is a collection of a few of Desideri’s manuscripts that Giuseppe M. Toscano translated and published in Rome in 1989. The Italian title is, *Opere Tibetane di Ippolito Desideri S.J.*, vol. IV: *Il “Nes Legs” (il Sommo Bene e Fine Ultimo)*. 1989. Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente.

<sup>29</sup> Desideri’s words at the end of the prayer shows the longing in his heart for Tibetan people to come to know the Triune God (*Origins*, OT4: 164):

*“[Oh] that your light may appear to me in this instant,  
And by its appearance, disperse the shadows.  
This is the true way which leads to Supreme Goodness:  
[Oh] That I might embark upon it and obtain it,  
that after death I might reach this end -  
the supreme stage of All Goodness.  
[Oh] That Tibetans, present and future  
may attain it.  
This is my prayer.”*

[Possa la tua luce apparirmi in questo momento  
e con la sua apparizione, disperdere le tenebre.

Therefore, I maintain that it is more likely he was writing for them as Buddhists.<sup>30</sup> The last few pages of his catechism are different in that he used no contextualised examples or illustrations. They are a straightforward summary of the Catholic Church's Sacraments, and it is probable that Desideri had in mind Tibetans who would one day decide to follow Christ and therefore need guidance in such matters.

## (2) What did Desideri say?

Was Desideri, as Michael Sweet (Sweet: 35) states, 'the first Tibetanist and Buddhologist and pioneer of Buddhist-Christian communication'? Although it is impossible to ascertain, almost 300 years later, how effective his dialogue with the Tibetans was, it would seem from some of the comments in his Italian travelogue (*Historical Notices of Tibet* (HNT) or *Notizie Istoriche del Thibet*) that a great deal of interest was engendered. He states that a constant stream of people visited him in order to see and read the books he had written (Sweet: 193). The Tibetan writings Desideri produced when he was in Tibet - in a recent, typed format -

---

Questa è la vera via che porta al Bene Supremo:  
possa io entrarvi e raggiungerlo,  
possa io, dopo la morte, pervenire a questo fine,  
stadio supremo di ogni bene.  
Lo possano ottenere i Tibetani  
presenti e futuri.  
È questa la mia preghiera]. (OT4: 164).

Desideri also prays (*Origins*, OT4: 249): "Through its boundless compassion, uniquely fortunate, I find myself in the midst of these people. [Oh] that all Tibetans may through your merciful blessing, attain this Absolute Goodness with heartfelt faith."

[Per la sua infinita compassione,  
unico fortunato, mi trovo in mezzo a questo popolo.  
Possano tutti i Tibetani  
per la sua misericordiosa benedizione  
raggiungere questo Sommo Bene  
con la fede profonda del cuore]. (OT4: 249).

<sup>30</sup> Sweet 2010: 573. Desideri explains the new catechism he wrote is "adapted to the understanding of those who are hearing about the Christian religion for the first time."

total just over 1,000 pages<sup>31</sup> but surprisingly, no English translation of any of these Tibetan treatises, which he wrote for the benefit of Tibetan Buddhist readers, has ever been published.<sup>32</sup> If his entire collection of these manuscripts could be translated into English, then a more thorough examination concerning their contribution to the mission of the Catholic Church could be undertaken.<sup>33</sup> The reasons why Desideri qualifies for Sweet's high accolade would then become even more evident. Desideri's English commentators frequently draw attention to the profoundness of his treatises but fail to examine the actual manuscripts themselves. Some readers have expressed frustration that this is the case. They wish to discover what Desideri actually wrote and the arguments he used when relating to Tibetan Buddhists. My thesis, which sets out to do this, contains the first English translation of one of Desideri's Tibetan documents.

### (3) What was Desideri's intention?

Desideri's original intention in writing in Tibetan was to enable dGe lugs Tibetan Buddhists to consider a series of logical arguments for the existence of God that would challenge the belief that everything is a result of dependent arising and there is no intrinsically existent entity. It is for this reason that in his lengthy introduction, which I refer to as Laying the Foundation, Desideri attempts to explain to the reader both why the dGe lugs foundational doctrine of emptiness fails to stand up to logical examination and why their denial of an

---

<sup>31</sup> This number represents 1,035 (A4 size) pages in the Tibetan script (Tibetan Machine Unicode) with a print size of 14.

<sup>32</sup> Guiseppe Toscano S.J. translated approximately 40 percent of Desideri's works into Italian during the 1980s and four separate volumes were published by IsMEO (ISTITUTO ITALIANO PER IL MEDIO ED ESTREMO ORIENTE) in Rome.

<sup>33</sup> This English translation of Desideri's catechism is a start. Sweet (2010: 686n534) comments: "Donald Lopez and Thubten Jinpa have made known their intention to translate the "largest and most complex of all of Desideri's works" *Questions presented by the European lama Ippolito to the learned of Tibet concerning [the theory of] former lives and the view of emptiness. (mgo skar bla ma i po li do shes bya snga ba yis phul ba'i bod kyi mkhas pa rnams la skye ba snga ma dang stong pa nyid kyi lta ba'i sgo nes zhu ba).*

intrinsically existent entity leaves them open to a charge of nihilism – a charge they steadfastly deny. Desideri's objection centres on the dGe lugs assertion that all entities *without exception* are empty of intrinsic existence. In an attempt to resolve their continued refusal to accept the necessity for an intrinsically existent entity, he draws the reader's attention to the contradictory position that a dGe lugs pa Buddhist will find himself in by trying to defend such a position against the questions Desideri raises as the 'challenger of their thesis'.

Desideri sought to put alien Christian concepts into a Tibetan Buddhist context, which explains why the Christian reader needs to have some knowledge of Tibetan Buddhist doctrines in order to understand *Laying the Foundation*. Although the second part of his manuscript (i.e. his catechism) is more straightforward, we observe Desideri struggling to describe concepts that have no reference point in Buddhism, such as God the three in one, original sin, creation, holiness and the resurrection of the body.

Later, in order to satisfy the curiosity of his mainly Christian European audiences who wanted to learn more about Tibet, Desideri was prevailed upon to write a book in Italian of his travels and the years he spent both in Tibet and the Indian sub-continent. Sadly, he died before it was completed. However, he left behind several different accounts in draft form<sup>34</sup> which are referred to as the *Historical Notices of Tibet* (HNT) or *Notizie Istoriche del Thibet*. An English publication in 2010 by Michael Sweet entitled *Mission to Tibet* is a translation of the entire HNT. This excellent translation is more comprehensive than the partial English one that was published by Filippo de Filippi in 1937.

---

<sup>34</sup> Sweet 2010: 62.

#### (4) How are Desideri's arguments presented?

Desideri wrote the *Essence of the Christian Faith* in the Uchen (*dbu can*) Tibetan script without any enumerations or headings. I have divided his work into two main parts. I refer to Part One as 'Laying the Foundation' or simply 'The Introduction', and have sub-divided it into three parts (A, B and C) which contain a total of 37 sections. These pages constitute Desideri's lengthy and highly significant preamble to Part Two and his arguments become clear as one methodically examines each section. Part Two consists of a series of questions and answers about the Christian Faith which constitute Desideri's unique new catechism. Although as far as the choice of topics is concerned it is presented traditionally, it is unique in that a number of his catechism replies show a high level of contextualisation, making the manuscript particularly relevant to a Tibetan Buddhist reader.<sup>35</sup> Desideri states that his new catechism is "adapted to those who are hearing about the Christian religion for the first time." (Sweet: 573) Although it is addressed to one person (who sometimes is presented as the defender of a thesis), the author obviously intended it for a broad Tibetan readership.<sup>36</sup> Desideri wrote for Tibetan scholars who were dGe lugs pa Buddhists, which explains why at times his style in Part One is similar to that of a Tibetan debate. It is the custom in a Tibetan debate for the defender, who maintains that a particular thesis is correct, to remain seated. The monk who takes the role of a challenger stands before his opponent and begins by asking a series of questions that have the potential to undermine the defendant's position. The challenger points out various consequences that arise as a result of the defendant holding a particular view. If the challenger is successful, the opponent's thesis will be shown to be contradictory and therefore false. The challenger is not normally expected to advance a thesis

---

<sup>35</sup> The final dozen pages of the manuscript are a straightforward presentation of the Sacraments of the Catholic Church and no explanation is necessary since it does not contain any contextualised comments. One assumes Desideri was writing this section for a future time when no doubt he hoped there would be Tibetan believers in Christ for whom this would be relevant.

<sup>36</sup> This is clear because he sometimes uses the pronoun 'you' in its plural form.

of his own, although in Desideri's case he does. Desideri's strength, as he sought to explain Christianity to his Tibetan contemporaries, was his understanding of *sūnyatā* or 'emptiness'. Although *Laying the Foundation* is not a transcript of an actual debate in a traditional Tibetan sense, it definitely has the flavour of one. Desideri imitates the dGe lugs style of presentation and also employs some of their characteristic phrases. Despite being an 'outsider', it appears Desideri's language skills were sufficient to enable him to engage in religious discussion at some depth. He describes the Tibetan people he interacted with as "truly humane and therefore of a nature that is drawn to mildness." He observes they are neither superficial nor credulous, listen with good will and want to discuss everything in great detail with logical reasoning. He explains they "*want to be convinced and not to be instructed.*"<sup>37</sup> I find it surprising it has taken almost three centuries for Desideri's Tibetan manuscripts to be seriously commented upon in the English language.

#### **(5) Are Desideri's Tibetan manuscripts still relevant in the 21st century?**

Before they can be properly assessed, Desideri's texts need to be translated in their entirety into English. In the 1980s, Giuseppe Toscano translated and published approximately forty percent of Desideri's manuscripts into Italian. Toscano continued to work on the final manuscript<sup>38</sup> and hoped to publish it in due course, but sadly due to age and physical frailty had to abandon the task. Most of Desideri's original documents, which he carried out of Tibet, were stored in different places in the Jesuit archives in Rome (A.R.S.I.). Toscano

---

<sup>37</sup> Sweet 2010: 638.

<sup>38</sup> The full name of this 600 page treatise is */mgo skar bla ma i po li do shes bya ba yis phul ba'i bod kyi mkhas pa rnams la skye ba snga ma dang stong pa nyid kyi lta ba'i sgo nes zhu ba /*. *Questions presented by the European lama Ippolito to the learned of Tibet concerning [the theory of] former lives and the view of emptiness.*

discovered a previously un-catalogued collection of Desideri's essays in draft form as recently as 1979.<sup>39</sup> He published these under the title *The Final Goal* in 1989.

### LIMITATIONS

(1) I have avoided any assessment of Desideri from the perspective of the history of the Jesuits and their missionary activities. Trent Pomplun has already addressed this in his recently published book *Jesuit on the Top of the World*. My thesis focuses on the Tibetan text itself. (2) I will refrain from discussing the Jesuit-Capuchin controversy any further but mentioned it briefly in my introduction since it must have been a severe trial for Desideri and overshadowed the five years he spent in Tibet. (3) My thesis is not a contribution to Buddhism as such but my hope is that it might help Christian readers to begin grappling with those aspects of Buddhism that Desideri encountered. (4) I do not assess Desideri's arguments concerning their effectiveness from either a philosophical or missiological standpoint. Until the manuscripts are translated in their entirety such an assessment would be premature. However I include some quotations from an unpublished English translation of Toscano's Italian translations.<sup>40</sup> Part One of *The Essence of the Christian Faith* is a summary of a number of Desideri's arguments that relate to dGe lugs Buddhist views which he wrote about in great detail in two of his earlier manuscripts, *Origins*,<sup>41</sup> and *The Final Goal*.

---

<sup>39</sup> See pages 40-41 of Toscano's introduction to his Italian translation of the *Final Goal* (*Opere Tibetane di Ippolito Desideri S.J.*, vol. IV) which was published by IsMEO in 1989.

<sup>40</sup> Toscano, Giuseppe M. (1984). *Opere Tibetane di Ippolito Desideri S.J.*, vol. III: *Il "Byuñ K'uñs"* (*L'Origine degli esseri viventi e di tutte le cose*). Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente.

Toscano, Giuseppe M. (1989). *Opere Tibetane di Ippolito Desideri S.J.*, vol. IV: *Il "Ñes Legs"* (*il Sommo Bene e Fine Ultimo*). Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente.

<sup>41</sup> The full name is the *Origin of Living Beings and other Phenomena* (*Sems can dang chos la sogs pa rnams kyi 'byung khungs*). An Italian translation of this manuscript which was written in Tibetan by Desideri was published under the subtitle *Opere Tibetane Volume 3* in 1984. Toscano, Giuseppe M. (1984). *Opere Tibetane di Ippolito Desideri S.J.*, vol. III: *Il "Byuñ K'uñs"* (*L'Origine degli esseri viventi e di tutte le cose*). Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente.

I consider *The Essence of the Christian Faith* to be an excellent introduction to these earlier manuscripts, and a completely fresh translation of the Tibetan<sup>42</sup> into English would be invaluable. It is informative to study some extracts from these earlier manuscripts from the Toscano edition in order to appreciate the depth and thoroughness with which Desideri tackled a topic. Unless a reader is aware of Desideri's earlier discussions he may assume, incorrectly, that the briefer comments in *The Essence of the Christian Faith* are somewhat superficial.<sup>43</sup> (5) I do not discuss the formation or contents of the *Notizie Istoriche del Thibet*<sup>44</sup> apart from the brief summary above, where I have described some events concerning Desideri's stay in Tibet. I also refrain from discussing the categorisation of Desideri's manuscripts, since Sweet and Pomplun have already addressed the challenges surrounding this in considerable detail. (6) I have already mentioned that the focus of my thesis is to make Desideri's manuscript accessible and also to look at the ways in which he sought to relate his Catholic Christian beliefs to a Tibetan Buddhist reader. I will not discuss the actual Church doctrines themselves which he promulgated beyond the purposes necessary for clarifying in the English translation what Desideri wants to say.

### **REVIEW OF THE CURRENT LITERATURE**

Although publications in the English language are very limited it is remarkable that Desideri's writings are available to read in the twenty first century and I think his Tibetan manuscripts should now be the focus of future study. When Desideri lived in the Capuchin hospice in South-East Tibet he found one Capuchin particularly interested to learn about

---

<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately both of these works were written in a running hand script which is difficult to read on account of it being exceedingly small. It seems Desideri was short of paper because of the political trouble in Tibet at that time.

<sup>43</sup> I am grateful to Mike Morphew for permitting me to quote selected passages from two of his unpublished English translations of Toscano's Italian translation of Desideri's manuscripts.

<sup>44</sup> The *Historical Notices of Tibet* (HNT). I refer to some of Desideri's statements on Buddhism which are included in Sweet's translation of the HNT (*Mission to Tibet*).

Tibetan philosophy. Giuseppe Felice da Morro arrived towards the end of Desideri's stay and begged Desideri to teach him everything he had learnt.<sup>45</sup> Despite their ministry jurisdiction concerns, the Capuchins were in the main appreciative of Desideri's research. Desideri writes "Just prior to my departure from Tibet, the Capuchin fathers [...] having seen what a great impression my books had made on these [Tibetan] people, begged me to leave them in their hands for the use and profit of their mission, but despite the fact that my zeal for the welfare and conversion of the Tibetans impelled me to yield to their request, there were other strong reasons that persuaded me to refuse them and convinced me it was not, all things considered, the best thing to do."<sup>46</sup> After Desideri's untimely death in Rome in 1733 from a chest infection (he was only 48) his extensive collection of Italian and Tibetan manuscripts were ignored. They remained 'hidden' until 1875 when Carlo Puini tracked down one of the Italian drafts in Desideri's home town of Pistoia and published fragments from these pages a few years later.<sup>47</sup>

There have only been five English publications on Desideri, none of which focuses on the content of his Tibetan writings. Toscano's monumental work seems to have been largely ignored by English writers, presumably as it was written in Italian.

Two significant English publications were printed in 2010. The first was *Jesuit on the Roof of the World: Ippolito Desideri's Mission to Eighteenth-Century Tibet* by Trent Pomplun, an

---

<sup>45</sup> Sweet 2010: 194. He arrived at the hospice in Dakpo Khyer in 1720. (Also see pages 50 and 205).

<sup>46</sup> Sweet 2010: 193-4. Desideri does not give his reasons, but, in seeking to assist the Capuchins in their work, he pressed on and completed his Italian translation of the *Lam rim chen mo* and gave it to them. Perhaps Fr. da Morro, who was recalled to the Kathmandu Capuchin hospice in 1721 and travelled with Desideri to the border, took the manuscript with him in order to publish it. But sadly he died of fever shortly after his arrival in Nepal and there is no trace of the manuscript which he had transcribed as Desideri dictated it to him when they lived together in Tibet.

<sup>47</sup> Pomplun 2010: 3-4. Also see Sweet 2010: 62-80; 100-109. A discussion relating to the complete collection of Desideri's manuscripts is beyond the remit of this thesis, but Pomplun (2010: 201-3) discusses them in his footnotes 1-3.

American scholar. He examines Desideri as “an explorer, a historian, and a theologian”.<sup>48</sup> Pomplun points out in his introduction that he will “make full use of the spectrum of Desideri’s writings [but] will generally favour Italian texts”. He explains that his focus is on “how Desideri viewed Tibetans and how he presented their culture to his European readers.” He adds “A truly comprehensive study of Ippolito Desideri would also include an exploration of his philosophical and theological writings in Tibetan, especially his magnum opus on reincarnation.” He makes the encouraging comment that he will “reserve a fuller discussion of Desideri’s Tibetan writings for a future study.”<sup>49</sup> The second publication is Michael Sweet’s book *Mission to Tibet: the Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Account of Father Ippolito Desideri, S.J.* It is a complete English translation of Desideri’s Italian manuscripts about his travels in the Indian sub-continent and Tibet.

The other three English language books were published in the first half of the twentieth century. Henri Hosten S.J. published his translation of the *Letters and other papers of Fr. Ippolito Desideri, S.J. (1713-21)* in 1938. It was reprinted in Delhi, India, in 1998 under the title *Missionary in Tibet: Letters and other papers of Fr. Ippolito Desideri, S.J. (1713-21)*. Filippo de Filippi’s 1937 revised translation of his book (originally published in 1931) is entitled *An Account of Tibet: the Travels of Ippolito Desideri 1712-1727*. Finally, the Jesuit C. Wessels published a study of *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia 1603-1721* in 1924, wherein a chapter focuses on Desideri’s life from 1714 to 1722.

As Desideri’s writings concern the various views held by the dGe lugs school of Tibetan Buddhism, my references are restricted to those authors who specifically comment on their writings. Jeffrey Hopkins is a well-known American academic in the field of dGe lugs scholarship. I also discuss selected statements from the Tibetan author Kelsang Gyatso,

---

<sup>48</sup> Pomplun 2010: 10.

<sup>49</sup> Pomplun 2010: 14-15.

whose writings are largely in accordance with the dGe lugs view. Although Desideri does not quote from any Buddhist texts in *The Essence of the Christian Faith*, he does so extensively in his earlier works. In my thesis, I briefly mention a number of Buddhist philosophers (Tsong kha pa, Candrakīrti and Nāgārjuna) who had a significant influence on the dGe lugs school of thought and whose writings Desideri engaged with during his all-too-brief sojourn in Tibet.

**THE ESSENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH.**

**PART ONE**

**LAYING THE FOUNDATION**

**PART ONE A**

**Section Headings:**

- [1] Desideri's Dedication or Prologue
- [2] The need to differentiate between truth and falsehood
- [3] Everything is empty of intrinsic existence – true or false?
- [4] The moon and its reflection in a clear lake
- [5] Senseless babble!
- [6] An infinite series of causes that have no starting point
- [7] Dependent origination
- [8] How a heavy object moves
- [9] The birth of a person is a significant event
- [10] The illustration of an endless road and its implication
- [11] The need to be touched by a causal force
- [12] Emptiness cannot be established without dependency
- [13] An illustration of vassals and a ruler
- [14] Disconformity with the cause

[15] Concepts of upper and lower, etc.

[16] An illustration of manufactured objects

### **Desideri's dedication or prologue:**

Desideri uses the phrase *rang grub dkon mchog* to refer to God. He begins his essay with a prologue which is in effect his personal dedication to the 'self-established' (*rang grub*) God (*dkon mchog*). The word *rang grub* (self-established) implies inherent or intrinsic existence.<sup>50</sup> Rigzin (1993: 255) points out that the phrase *rang (dngos nges)*<sup>51</sup> *grub ba* refers to "a true and independent existence established only in reference to the thing itself." In other words, it has an existence from its own side. The word *rang grub* may also be translated as 'existing naturally' (i.e. independently by its own nature).<sup>52</sup> I have highlighted in bold Desideri's term for God in his short prologue below.

*'/gran zla med do skyon yod ye mi mnga'/ skyon bral yon tan kun gyi ngo bo grub/ gzhan la  
ma bltos ma brten lhun gyis grub/ 'gyur med **rang grub dkon mchog** gcig pu rje/ de la dad pa  
bskyed cing bstod bsngags 'bul/ lus ngag yid kyis gus pas phyag 'tshal lo /.*

[1] English translation:

---

<sup>50</sup> The expression *rang grub* (*rang* means 'self' and *grub* 'established') is a shortened form of *rang bzhin gyis grub pa*. Desideri consistently chose to use the shortened form (presumably for convenience) throughout this manuscript and in all his subsequent writings. However he used the word *dkon mchog* (without adding *rang grub*) in his very first attempt to write about Christianity in the Tibetan language. He presented this account to the king of Tibet in Lhasa on January 6<sup>th</sup> 1717 (Pomplun 2010: 74). Subsequently the king instructed him to embark on a study of Buddhist philosophy at a nearby monastery since he was ignorant of its basic tenets. After that Desideri consistently referred to God as *rang grub dkon mchog*.

<sup>51</sup> The word *dngos nges* means 'in actuality'.

<sup>52</sup> Hopkins translates *rang bzhin* as nature (1996: 745). The term *rang bzhin gyis grub pa* can be translated as 'naturally established' and it implies intrinsic or inherent existence.

With my body, speech and mind I reverently prostrate and praise that One in whom [my] faith has been generated. I offer praises to the intrinsically existent *dkon mchog* - the unique Lord, the unchanging One who is naturally established, without dependence upon any other. He is the essence of all excellent qualities and is faultless. He is unique, is without rivals or competitors and is completely devoid of even a single fault (*skyon yod ye mi mnga'*).

Comments: In referring to God as the self-established or intrinsically existent God, Desideri makes it clear from the outset that he is discussing the concept of intrinsic existence. In the last line of his prologue (when expressing his devotion to God) he uses a common Tibetan Buddhist expression: ‘With my body, speech and mind I respectfully bow down’ (i.e. prostrate).<sup>53</sup> The Tibetan word (1) *lus* refers to ‘body’, (2) *ngag* is ‘speech’ and (3) *yid* is the ‘conceptual mind’. The use of these three words together implies total dedication. It appears that Desideri deliberately placed his offering of homage to God at the beginning of his text in conformity with a tradition followed by authors of many Tibetan Buddhist texts. Surprisingly, apart from this single reference to God, he refrains from using the term *rang grub dkon mchog* ‘God’ throughout the remainder of this lengthy introduction. However, he resumes using it when he begins his catechism, which forms the main bulk of this manuscript (i.e. Part Two). He then uses *rang grub dkon mchog* ‘God’ repeatedly throughout the remainder of the catechism, but always in conjunction with the word *rang grub*.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout his introduction (which I have entitled ‘Laying the Foundation’) Desideri’s discussion focuses on the word *dnegos po*. This is a general term meaning an ‘entity’ or ‘thing’.<sup>55</sup> As the Tibetan script does not have capital letters, he was unable to differentiate

---

<sup>53</sup> */lus ngag yid kyis gus pas phyag 'tshal lo /*.

<sup>54</sup> UTS page 13.

<sup>55</sup> In an English translation of Tsong kha pa’s *Byang chub lam gyi rim pa chen mo (The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment)* it states (Vol. 3. 2002: 145) “Therefore [the word] ‘thing’ (*dnegos po* in Tibetan) may refer either to ‘intrinsic existence’ (*rang bzhin*) or to the

when he was discussing ordinary things in contrast to ‘God’ as a necessary being, or supreme Entity. On some occasions, in order to show the distinction, he qualifies *dnegos po* by either: (1) putting the phrase ‘intrinsically existent’ before it (*rang bzhin gyis grub pa'i dnegos po*) or (2) some other adjective, such as: ‘superior’, ‘supreme’, and ‘most excellent’. Jeffrey Hopkins (1996: 438) describes the Prāsaṅgika view of *dnegos po*:<sup>56</sup>

Prāsaṅgikas [*thal 'gyur pa* in Tibetan] do not deny the *bhāva* (*dnegos po*) which is defined as ‘that which is able to perform a function’, particularly the function of creating an effect. They deny the *bhāva* which means inherent existence (*svabhāva*, *rang bzhin* in the sense of *rang bzhin gyis grub pa*), the non-dependence of things on their parts, their bases of designation, or the consciousness that designates them. Thus when an emptiness of inherent existence is rightly seen in an object, understanding of imputed existence is furthered. When imputed existence is rightly seen, understanding of the emptiness of inherent existence is furthered.<sup>57</sup>

---

‘capacity to perform a function’ (*don byed nus pa*).” Tsong kha pa’s *Byang chub lam gyi rim pa chen mo* is commonly referred to as the *Lam rim chen mo*. It seems Desideri was familiar with this text and translated it into Italian when he lived in Tibet but the work is lost. (Sweet 2010: 45; 50).

<sup>56</sup> Hopkins (1996: 452) defines a Prāsaṅgika follower as: “A Mādhyamika [*dbu ma pa*] who does not assert that phenomena exist by way of their own character even conventionally.”

The Mādhyamika system was studied in dGe lugs monasteries mainly through textbooks written as commentaries on Candrakīrti’s commentary on Nāgārjuna’s *Treatise on the Middle Way* (ibid: 399).

<sup>57</sup> In order to understand the word Prāsaṅgika more fully from a dGe lugs perspective, it is helpful to examine the four main Buddhist tenet systems (Newland 1999: 11). These are:

[I] The Great Vehicle tenet system (Mahāyāna) or *theg chen* in Tibetan, which is divided into two schools: (1) The Middle Way (Mādhyamika) school which is referred to as *dbu ma* in Tibetan. (2) The Mind Only (Cittamātra) school or *sems tsam*. [II] The Lesser Vehicle (Hīnayāna) or *theg dman* tenet system is also divided into two schools: (3) Sutra (Sautrāntika) school or *mdo sde spyod pa*. (4) The Great Exposition (Vaibhāṣika) school or *bye brag smra ba*. The Middle Way (*dbu ma*) system of philosophical thought is sub-divided into two separate schools: (i) the Autonomy system (*rang rgyud pa*) and (ii) the Consequence or Prāsaṅgika system (*thal 'gyur pa*). The dGe lugs view conforms to the Prāsaṅgika or Consequence system of thought.

We know Desideri would have been aware from his reading of the *Lam rim chen mo* and other Buddhist texts of some of the divergent views held by different schools within these various tenet systems. Both Sopa & Hopkins (1989: 302) and Napper (2003: 44-49) discuss these different views in more detail.

Things (*dn̄gos po*) are causally arisen phenomena which according to Hopkins “arise in dependence upon causes and conditions.”<sup>58</sup> He points out although the term *dn̄gos po* (i.e. a functioning thing or entity) is only be applicable to products,<sup>59</sup> in reality the word is used more loosely to refer to both products and non-products. Therefore I think Desideri’s use of the word *dn̄gos po* to refer to ordinary things, as well as to an intrinsically existent (independent) Entity, is entirely reasonable.<sup>60</sup>

Cozort considers a thing’s ability to perform a function as an indicator that it has a causal function.<sup>61</sup> This is in contrast to permanent phenomena (i.e. non-products), such as space or emptiness, which do not cause anything. Hopkins (1996: 219) defines space as “just a non-affirming negative of obstructive contact.”<sup>62</sup> Emptiness is an example of a permanent phenomenon because emptiness is an absence of something, which in this case is intrinsic existence. However, it is important to note that all permanent phenomena, including emptiness, have the quality of dependency. Williams (2012: 110) comments, “there is a very real sense in which emptiness is dependent on things.” He gives his reason stating that “[...] in a sense emptiness exists in dependence upon that which is empty.” Cozort points out that permanent phenomena are “merely imputedly existent and not truly [intrinsically] existent.”<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Hopkins 1996: 166.

<sup>59</sup> Hopkins (1996: 220): “Things [*dn̄gos po*] are also products, or caused phenomena, or compounded phenomena (*‘dus byas*) [...] because they are made (*byas*) [...] in dependence on the aggregation (*‘dus*) [...] of causes and conditions.” (Sanskrit terms have been excluded from this quotation).

<sup>60</sup> Napper (2003: 50) agrees that the word *dn̄gos po* is used in a number of different ways. For example, it describes a thing or entity; impermanent phenomena; and even, sometimes, permanent phenomena. Additionally, it may also be understood (in certain instances) to refer to inherent existence. Prāsaṅgika consider such an over-reified nature or entity as an object of negation.

<sup>61</sup> See Cozort 2003: 160fn1.

<sup>62</sup> To examine this further, see Hopkin’s chapter ‘The Selfless’ (1996: 213-274). A dGe lugs pa would assert that things are impermanent if they are a causally produced. In other words, things are an effect or a result of a causal process. All phenomena are said to have the nature of dependent arising. Permanent phenomena (e.g. emptiness; space; nirvana) are also considered to be dependently arisen in the sense that they exist in dependence upon the imputing mind.

<sup>63</sup> Cozort 2003: 24fn4.

Since Desideri does not define or discuss the meaning of *dn̄gos po* but simply uses it when discussing entities that may or may not be intrinsically existent, I will refrain from discussing it further.

So far, I have: (1) highlighted Desideri's word for 'God' (2) discussed the word (*dn̄gos po*) and (3) pointed out the difference between permanent things (which are classified as non-products) and impermanent things (or products). The next topic I want to introduce relates to Desideri's use of the term 'emptiness' (*stong pa nyid*). It seems that Desideri's aim in laying his introductory foundation - prior to his discussion of basic Church doctrines - was twofold. Not only did he want to convince his Tibetan dGe lugs reader: (1) it is logical to believe in God; he also wanted him to see how (2) a belief in God actually enhanced the dGe lugs belief in emptiness.<sup>64</sup>

According to the dGe lugs school of Buddhism an assertion that something is empty implies it does not exist intrinsically or independently of causes and conditions.<sup>65</sup> To describe something as having the property of emptiness means it lacks intrinsic existence.<sup>66</sup> Hopkins (1996: 9-10) states that intrinsic or inherent existence:

refers to our ordinary sense of the way that things exist – as if they concretely exist in and of themselves, covering their parts. Phenomena are the things which are empty of inherent existence, and inherent existence is that of which phenomena are empty.

---

<sup>64</sup> Desideri explains the reasons for his claim in an earlier manuscript (OT3: 189) entitled the *Origin of Living Beings and other phenomena* (*Sems can dang chos la sogs pa rnam kyī 'byung khungs*). An Italian translation of this manuscript was published under the subtitle *Opere Tibetane* Volume 3 in 1984. From now on all future references to this particular manuscript will be referred to as *Origins* (OT3).

<sup>65</sup> The Tibetan spelling for the word 'empty' (e.g. 'this box is empty') is *stongs pa* whereas the spelling for the term 'emptiness' is *stong pa nyid* (or *stong nyi* for short). In Section 4 Desideri introduces a phrase *rang bzhin gyis stongs pa'i stong pa nyid*, which may be translated as 'the emptiness which is empty of intrinsic nature or existence'.

<sup>66</sup> Williams (2012: 111): "Emptiness is not a way of looking at something. It is the quality of that thing which is its very absence of intrinsic existence – emptiness is in fact a property possessed by all things without exception as a result of their causally conditioned nature."

Emptiness or, more properly, *an* emptiness is a phenomenon's lack of inherent existence; an emptiness is a negative or utter absence of this concrete mode of being with which we are so familiar.<sup>67</sup>

### **The need to differentiate between truth and falsehood.**

[2] English translation:

For example, if one does not have a mind with the ability to differentiate between good [healthy] food and bad poison it is inevitable that such a person will not stay alive for very long and will die.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, if a person is unable to differentiate properly between Dharma and non-Dharma, then that person is no different from a dumb animal. Moreover, that one will inevitably fall into the most terrifying abyss from which there is no escape. For this reason, having generated a mind that has concern for others I desire to create in the minds of those seeking wisdom an unmistakable mental capacity to distinguish right from wrong and truth from falsehood - through essential reasoning<sup>69</sup> which distinguishes immaculate and pure doctrine from impure and unsound doctrine.

Comments: Desideri uses the Tibetan word *shes rab* (*prajñā* in Sanskrit), which means 'insight', 'understanding', 'knowledge', and 'wisdom'. However, *shes rab* refers to a specific type of wisdom that is a discriminative awareness or knowledge, whereby one is able to investigate and analyse something using a particular form of logic. Williams (2012: 99) elaborates on this concept: "Broadly speaking, *prajñā* is the state of mind that comes from

---

<sup>67</sup> Gyatso (2002: 289) explains it thus: "Inherent existence [is] an imagined mode of existence whereby phenomena are held to exist from their own side, independent of other phenomena. In reality, all phenomena lack or are empty of inherent existence because they depend on their parts."

<sup>68</sup> The word for 'body' is *lus* and *srog* is 'life'. When spoken together they mean 'life' and 'limb'.

<sup>69</sup> 'Essential reasoning' here refers to mentally evaluating and analysing teaching in order to ascertain if it is stainless and authentic spiritual teaching, as opposed to that which is untrustworthy.

properly understanding something. In Buddhism, as a technical term, it is used primarily for that understanding which sees how it really is in contrast to the way things appear to be.”<sup>70</sup>

Rigzin (1993: 275) points out that discriminative wisdom (*shes rab*) understands, “that which is to be cultivated and that which is to be abandoned.”

In this section, Desideri draws his reader’s attention to the need to discriminate properly or thoroughly between that which is Dharma, or authentic religious teaching, and that which is non-Dharma.<sup>71</sup> He likens a person who is unable to differentiate properly between Dharma and non-Dharma as being ‘no different from a dumb animal’, and states that that sort of person ‘will inevitably fall into the most terrifying abyss from which there is no escape.’<sup>72</sup>

References to hell are very common in Buddhist texts. The English translation of Tsong kha pa’s *Lam rim chen mo*, entitled *The Great Treatise*, contains a quotation from Nāgārjuna’s *Precious Garland*: “Fools who take pride in their supposed wisdom will destroy themselves by abandoning it and fall head-first to an Unrelenting Hell.”<sup>73</sup> Tsong kha pa states: “For instance, for even a single moment of anger towards a bodhisattva you must stay for an eon in the Unrelenting Hell.”<sup>74</sup>

Desideri states that he has ‘generated a mind that has a concern for others’.<sup>75</sup> There is a tendency in literary Tibetan for the author of a text not to include personal pronouns, which means that the reader may have to guess who the subject is. I suggest that in the above

---

<sup>70</sup> Williams (2012: 99-100).

<sup>71</sup> /...chos dang chos min pa gnyis legs par 'byed pa'i blo'i mthu med na.../

<sup>72</sup> Peacock (2003: 119) points out that in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition “beings consigned to hell because of bad *karma* are not destined to reside there forever. It is said that just one good action or thought can propel a being from this realm into one of the higher realms”.

<sup>73</sup> *The Great Treatise* Vol. 3, 2002: 149. All future references to the three volume English translation of Tsong kha pa’s *Lam rim chen mo* will be shortened to the initials GT. (For example: GT1 will refer to *The Great Treatise* Volume One).

<sup>74</sup> GT1: 124.

<sup>75</sup> /de'i phyir gzhan phan don du gnyer ba'i sems bskyed de /

sentence Desideri is referring to himself. He explains that his focus is on those who are seeking or requesting teachings in order to fathom the essential meaning, or ‘heart’, (*snying po*) of wisdom. The use of *zhu* ‘request’ plus *chos* (*chos zhu pa po*) shows that the person is requesting religious instruction. The word *zhu* shows it is a relationship between someone of a lesser status who is seeking to interact with someone perceived to be superior, such as a lama or a religious teacher. It is in the minds of such seekers that Desideri wants to create an unmistakable power of mental ability that can differentiate truth from falsehood. His claim that he has generated ‘a mind that has a concern for others’ would resonate with a ‘bodhicitta type of aspiration’ that characterises a bodhisattva and thus would be a concept his Buddhist reader would relate to in a positive manner.<sup>76</sup> Desideri elaborated on his particular commitment to help others in an earlier collection of essays which are referred to in their entirety as *nges legs* or *The Final Goal*.<sup>77</sup> Desideri writes:<sup>78</sup>

For them, [the Tibetan people] I shall point out the path that leads to perfect virtue. I would wish to lead them towards the city of the Absolute Good, which is the goal which one should seek. I want to purify all those who are ridden by impurities; I want to guide all those who are stuck in the mires of negativity; I want to disperse the poverty of those who are poor in virtue; I want to bear the burden of those who have been crushed beneath huge loads [lit.: large bundle of wood]; like a good doctor I

---

<sup>76</sup> Williams (2012: 102) comments: “The bodhisattva is accepted by all Buddhist traditions as the one who has seriously taken a vow, properly speaking in the presence of a previous Buddha, to follow the path to Buddhahood, and who is striving to live in accordance with that vow”.

<sup>77</sup> Desideri uses the Tibetan word *nges legs* for ‘Highest Good’ (see the Pandit’s reply to Question 61). In a Buddhist context the term *nges legs* refers to liberation from cyclic existence and/or omniscience. It is frequently translated as ‘certain or definitive goodness’.

<sup>78</sup> See *Opere Tibetane* Volume 4: 317. Bodhisattvas (*byang chup sems dpa*) or engaging Buddhists are practitioners who, motivated by great compassion, commit themselves to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings, furthermore their aspiration or wish to do so is spontaneous. *The Highest Good and the Ultimate End* (*nges legs*) represents a collection of Desideri’s notes and essays that relate to this subject. From now on all references to this collection will be *The Final Goal* (OT4: followed by a page number).

wish to cure the illnesses of all those who are sick, without exception; I want to fight for the well-being of mankind; I want to fulfil the hopes of those still not free, promising them the inexhaustible Supreme Good.

[Per costoro indicherò il sentiero che conduce alla perfetta virtù. Io li voglio condurre nella città del Sommo Bene, che è l'oggetto da raggiungersi; voglio ripulire tutti quelli che sono insozzati da impurità; voglio guidare tutti coloro che sono piombati nella palude della negatività; voglio disperdere la povertà di coloro che sono poveri di virtù; voglio portare I pesi di coloro che sono schiacciati sotto fardelli; come un bravo medico voglio curare le malattie di tutti i malati, senza eccezione; voglio combattere per il benessere di tutti gli uomini; voglio realizzare le speranze di coloro che non sono liberi, promettendo loro l'inesauribile Bene Supremo].

The Tibetan word for Buddhist enlightenment is *byang chub* and the expression *byang chub kyi sems* (bodhicitta) describes a mind motivated by an altruistic aspiration to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all living beings. A bodhisattva (*byang chub sems dpa'*) is a person who is motivated by bodhicitta. According to Gyatso (1995b: 561) a bodhisattva is a person who “has generated spontaneous bodhicitta but who has not yet become a Buddha.”<sup>79</sup> Desideri's reader would have been thoroughly familiar with Mahāyāna teaching concerning the aspiration to attain enlightenment for the sake of sentient beings. Williams (2012: 142) points out that the ‘arising of the Awakening Mind’ (i.e. bodhicitta) is characterised by a refocusing on the interests of others, as opposed to being engrossed in one's own interests. Gyatso (2001: 158) mentions two types of bodhicitta. One focuses on everyday altruistic activity and is called ‘conventional bodhicitta’. The other type is referred to as ‘ultimate bodhicitta’ which, according to Gyatso, is “a wisdom motivated by conventional bodhicitta that directly realises emptiness, the ultimate nature of phenomena”. He explains that the difference between an ordinary bodhisattva and a superior one is based on how they perceive

---

<sup>79</sup> Gyatso (2001: 158) explains there is a further division between those people who merely show a wish or aspiration to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings (this is called ‘aspiring bodhicitta’) and those who have taken practical steps (such as taking the bodhisattva vow) and who are actively involved in practices that lead to enlightenment. When this happens, aspiring bodhicitta is said to transform into ‘engaging bodhicitta’. The term ‘bodhisattva’ describes practitioners who have generated spontaneous bodhicitta. This means they live their lives in order to be of benefit to others and it seems that Desideri showed such a quality.

emptiness. The superior bodhisattva is said to have attained a direct realization of emptiness, whereas emptiness, for an ordinary bodhisattva, is still only a mental concept. Williams (2012: 101-102) states:

The Perfection of Wisdom literature itself does not claim to see all things without exception as empty is some special teaching for followers of the Mahāyāna.<sup>80</sup> Since any other perspective would involve grasping, it follows that it is necessary to see emptiness in order to attain cessation of grasping and therefore in order to attain *any* state that could be called one of enlightenment.” In other words, it is impossible for anyone, regardless of what school of Buddhist thought they may practice, to attain enlightenment (i.e. buddhahood) without the direct perception of emptiness.<sup>81</sup>

The Tibetan word *chos* (‘dharma’ in Sanskrit) has very wide usage and one has to determine its meaning from the context in which it occurs. The two main meanings of *chos* are (1) Dharma (with a capital ‘D’), which generally refers to the teachings of the Buddha. However, sometimes dharma with a small ‘d’ is also used to refer to religious teachings or doctrines in general.<sup>82</sup> (2) The word *chos* (‘dharma’) has other meanings too; for example, it is used for phenomenon/phenomena, and Desideri uses it extensively in this sense.<sup>83</sup> However in this section (Section 2) he is using the word *chos* in its religious sense, meaning doctrine or religious teaching, not phenomena.

In the next section (Section 3), Desideri openly confronts the central dGe lugs assertion that all things - without any exception - are considered to be empty of intrinsic or independent existence. The dGe lugs pa believe that even emptiness itself is empty of intrinsic existence,

---

<sup>80</sup> The phrase ‘all things without exception as empty’ is used repeatedly by Desideri in this Tibetan manuscript.

<sup>81</sup> See Williams 2009: 194-208 for a more detailed examination of this topic.

<sup>82</sup> When Desideri uses the word *chos* meaning ‘religious doctrine’ I translate it as Dharma.

<sup>83</sup> Desideri did not discuss other ramifications of the word *chos*. See Rigzin 1993: 79.

but they maintain that the term ‘emptiness’ does not mean that things do not exist and they emphatically reject any criticism that their assertions regarding emptiness could result in a charge that they have fallen into ‘the extreme of nihilism’ (*chad pa'i mtha'*) which means that nothing exists at all.<sup>84</sup>

As Sopa & Hopkins (1976: 68) point out:

The Mādhyamikas maintain that they are free from the extreme of annihilation because they assert the conventional existence of all phenomena. They consider that they are free from the extreme of permanence [*rtag pa'i mtha'*] because they assert that all phenomena whatsoever are without ultimate existence.<sup>85</sup>

The dGe lugs pa assert that their view, which holds that nothing has intrinsic existence, is true not only from a conventional point of view, but also ultimately. Hopkins (1996: 35)

comments:

Emptiness in all four Buddhist schools is a ‘self-emptiness’, but this does not mean that objects are empty of themselves. If objects were empty of themselves, then no object, not even an emptiness, would exist. Rather, ‘self-emptiness’ in the Prāsaṅgika system specifically refers to an object’s lack of its *own* inherent existence.

---

<sup>84</sup> For a detailed examination of nihilism in regard to Nāgārjuna’s philosophy see Burton (2001a: 87-121). Desideri believed the dGe lugs understanding of emptiness was basically flawed and resulted in a destruction of the whole process of dependent arising and emptiness. According to Desideri the dGe lugs denial of an intrinsically existent, supreme, independent and unique entity actually results in a total collapse of their theory of emptiness.

<sup>85</sup> The Tibetan expression for the ‘extreme of permanence’ is *rtag pa'i mtha'*. Cozort (1998: 32-33) makes the following statement concerning ‘The Middle Way’ (*dbu ma*):

“It is a spiritual path that falls neither to the extreme of ‘existence’ or ‘permanence’ [...] nor to the extreme of ‘non-existence’ or ‘annihilation’”. He points out that: “The latter extreme of ‘non-existence’ is the nihilistic rejection of the cause and effect of actions (*las, karma*) and consequently of transmigration in a cycle (*'khor ba/samsāra*) of rebirth and the possibility of liberation from it.”

The words '*without exception*' troubled Desideri. He considered the dGe lugs' negation of the existence of an 'absolute' to be illogical and contradictory and so he vehemently refuted their assertion that absolutely everything is dependent or relative. In an earlier manuscript, entitled *Origins*, he wrote:

[1] I must show that the belief that no Independent exists is an opinion that opposes the truth. This error arises through applying indiscriminately [the fact that everything around us is dependent] and this results in an error of the mind which opposes higher knowledge. [*rig pa'i dgag bya*]. [2] I must explain that this teaching of the one existing in his own right is not some heresy and attack upon your system of interdependence. [3] I must show that my teaching of the One who exists in his own right wholly supports your teaching of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and that my interpretation actually enhances it.<sup>86</sup>

[(I) Devo spiegare che l'opinione che non esiste alcun Indipendente è pensiero opposto al vero. Questo errore è avvenuto per aver interpretato in modo illimitato [il fatto che tutto intorno a noi è dipendente] e ne è derivato un oggetto errato della mente opposto alla sapienza superiore [*rig pa'i dgag bya*].

[(II) Devo spiegare che questa dottrina dell'Esistente da se stesso non è un'eresia contraria al vostro sistema dell'interdipendenza e neppure lo danneggia.

[(III) Devo spiegare che la mia dottrina dell'Esistente da se stesso è in pieno accordo con la vostra dottrina del vuoto (*śūnyatā*) e la mia spiegazione migliorerà questa vostra dottrina].

---

<sup>86</sup> See *Origins*, OT3: 189-90. Desideri also writes: "In fact it is contradictory to say that everything, without exception, is dependent and that an Independent thing having Substance (on which everything depends) does not exist. You have already conceded that all that exists, does so only in terms of ordinary existence, because the existence of the Independent is denied. But with this denial [of the Independent] comes also the denial of what you have admitted, i.e. the existence of dependent things, and [consequently] one becomes ensnared in the 'abyss of nothingness'. Your denial is not a denial of objects; it is a denial of the Independent..." (OT3: 201).

[É infatti contraddittorio dire che tutto senza eccezione é dipendente [fenomenismo universale] e che non esiste un Indipendente sostanziale [dal quale tutto dipende]. Voi avete già accettato che tutto ciò che esiste é secondo l'esistenza ordinaria però negate l'esistenza dell'Indipendente. Ma con questa negazione viene negato anche quello che avete ammesso e cioè l'esistenza delle cose dipendenti e si cade nel «precipizio del nulla». Voi quando negate non negate le cose ma negate che ci sia l'Indipendente].

From the above statement, it appears that Desideri is not setting out to oppose the dGe lugs theory of emptiness (i.e. insofar as it applies to dependently originated phenomena); but rather that he wants to challenge their absolute refusal to accept the existence of an intrinsically existent entity. Their refusal to accept such an entity was a major obstacle for him and is the reason why he asserted so strongly that the very heart of the dGe lugs doctrine on emptiness was fatally flawed.<sup>87</sup> It also explains why in the next section (Section 3) Desideri's statements concerning the dGe lugs understanding of intrinsic existence are so negative and why he declared their basic belief system to be incorrect or false (*yang dag ma yin pa*).

### **Everything is empty of intrinsic existence – true or false?**

[3] English translation:

Initially if [one] examines Tibetan [Buddhist] texts with reasoning which is honest, remaining unbiased, without partiality or attachment and animosity [then] they must be understood to hold that all existing entities [phenomena] are empty of intrinsic nature, coupled with an

---

<sup>87</sup> In his reading of Tsong kha pa's *Lam rim chen mo* Desideri would have become aware of other Buddhists who claimed to be Mādhyamika followers but who asserted that an absence of essence [i.e. intrinsic nature] in things would mean non-existence in the sense there would be nothing at all. (See Tsong kha pa's chapter on Dependent-Arising and Emptiness: GT3: 135-153). In *The Great Treatise* reference is made to the school of thought that Kamalaśīla represented which asserted that even though contingent entities do not have intrinsic existence ultimately, nevertheless, they maintain they do conventionally. The dGe lugs pa consider any claim of either conventional or ultimate intrinsic existence to be erroneous. A discussion concerning conventional intrinsic existence is examined in more detail in Sections 20-22. Tsong kha pa (GT3: 169-170) explains that Kamalaśīla's view that holds ultimate nature is superimposed upon contingent entities is in fact an imaginary construct, and as such is non-existent. However Kamalaśīla considers his view avoids the extreme of nihilism by maintaining that contingent entities have intrinsic character conventionally. As far as ultimate existence is concerned, Kamalaśīla's view and that of the dGe lugs pa agree, namely that, "The ultimate nature that is superimposed upon contingent realities is an imaginary construct and is thus non-existent."

assertion that there is not even one intrinsically existent entity [anywhere] incorrect and [thus] it is necessary to understand that such a view is unreliable [and untrustworthy]. If you ask me the reason for saying this, I would reply as follows [...].

Comments: Desideri seemed to grasp the dGe lugs position concerning emptiness and initially wrote about it in *Origins*:<sup>88</sup>

Speaking generally of the teaching of you Tibetan people, the end result is that absolutely nothing has existence with true [i.e. intrinsic] nature; the reason being that according to you everything arises out of inter-dependence: therefore regarding the case in question – for you there is no pure Supreme Being that exists outside the state of inter-dependence.

[In generale nel sistema di dottrina di voi Tibetani, risulta che non v'è assolutamente nulla che abbia esistenza nella natura propria per il motivo che tutto per voi sorge dall'interdipendenza: quindi nel caso particolare a voi non risulta che esista fuori dell'interdipendenza un puro Ente Supremo].<sup>89</sup>

Desideri's phrase 'unbiased and without partiality' is significant.<sup>90</sup> In Tsong kha pa's *Great Treatise* (GT2. 2004: 36-38) the necessity to achieve impartiality towards living beings is explained.<sup>91</sup> When Desideri appeals to his reader to examine his Tibetan (Buddhist) treatises (*bod kyi gzhung lugs*) without attachment and partiality, he wants him to consider the dGe lugs denial of an intrinsically existent entity with an open mind. He wants the reader at least

---

<sup>88</sup> *Origins* (OT3: 251).

<sup>89</sup> Toscano's Italian translation of Desideri's Tibetan manuscript is not always consistent in regard to use of capital letters when spelling 'supreme entity'. In the English translation capitals letters are always used (i.e. Supreme Entity).

<sup>90</sup> /*chags sdang med cing phyogs lhung med de* /

<sup>91</sup> The word *btang snyoms* may be translated as 'even-mindedness' or 'equanimity' and reflects a mental attitude that is neutral and free from the bias of attachment and hostility. The word Desideri used for 'attachment' and 'aversion' was *chags sdang* and he chose *phyogs lhung* to refer 'to partiality', 'prejudice' or 'bias'.

to be willing to consider reasons as to why, in the absence of an intrinsically existent entity, the dGe lugs doctrine of emptiness becomes incoherent. It is likely that what Desideri was saying at this early stage would have had little appeal to his reader who would be prone to immediately discount any positive remarks regarding the necessity for an intrinsically existent entity and would be likely to assume, mistakenly, that Desideri was defending the existence of an intrinsically existent ‘self’ (*bdag*) in dependently arisen entities. We have already seen in Section 2 that Kamalaśīla and his followers held that things have intrinsic existence from a conventional point of view, albeit not ultimately. The dGe lugs pa firmly resisted intrinsic existence *both* conventionally and ultimately.<sup>92</sup>

Williams (2012: 69) makes the following comment within the framework of a discussion on the Sarvāstivāda position<sup>93</sup> and although I quote it out of context I think it does help in shedding light on the way Desideri wants to criticize the dGe lugs Mādhyamika.

To state that *all* things lack intrinsic nature would be to state that all things are conceptual existents, reified conceptual constructs, without anything left for them to be constructed and reified out of. This would be an absurdity, for it would destroy the very category of secondary, conceptual existence and thus destroy the entire universe – everything – along with the destruction of primary existence. To state that *all* things are lacking intrinsic nature [...] must entail an absurd nihilism.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> Dependent existence relates to ‘dependent arising’, which according to Hopkins (1996: 167) “is the designation of all phenomena in dependence on the thought that designates them.” Hopkins points out that the arising of phenomena can only occur if there is thought which designates the existence of phenomena. It should be noted that in the Consequence System the term ‘dependent existence’ refers not only to the designation of phenomena dependent on their parts but also on the thought that designates them.

<sup>93</sup> See Sopa and Hopkins’ comment on Sautrāntika (1976: 67).

<sup>94</sup> Similarly, although the following quotation is taken out of context, I nevertheless think it is a helpful one when considering Desideri’s position. Williams is speaking of Abhidharma critics of Mādhyamika when he states: “It makes no sense to talk of all things being secondary existents. If all things were secondary existents then *all things would be constructs with nothing left for them to be*

Such an observation sums up Desideri's response, and in subsequent sections, we will see how he develops his arguments and systematically points out that the dGe lugs view (which holds that *all* things lack intrinsic nature) is an untrustworthy or unreliable viewpoint (*yd brtan du med pa*).

### **The moon and its reflection in a clear lake.**

[4] English translation:

If [you ask me the reason] for this, I would reply [as follows]. In the absence of an intrinsically existent entity, if all existing entities are empty of intrinsic existence, then it is necessary to accept all entities are like the reflection of the moon in a very clear lake.<sup>95</sup>

Comments: This particular section seems straightforward and the last sentence of Section 3 serves as an introduction to Desideri's reply in Section 4.<sup>96</sup> He begins to grapple with the dGe lugs assertion that because all phenomena are empty of intrinsic nature it must necessarily be accepted that all phenomena are *like* a reflection (*gzugs bsnyan*).<sup>97</sup> He gives an illustration of a reflection of the moon appearing in the water of a very clear lake. It was pointed out earlier (in Section 2) the dGe lugs view maintains that impermanent dependently originated things are existent, albeit at a conventional level. What they refute is any assertion that *dgnos po*

---

*constructed out of*. This must mean that nothing exists at all. It is not sufficient to reply with Nāgārjuna that this ignores the two truths, since if all is merely a conceptual construct then there could be no foundation for the two truths." (Williams 2012: 112).

<sup>95</sup> See Candrakīrti's (*Madhyamakāvatāra*) *Introduction to the Middle Way*, 4<sup>th</sup> stanza (2002: 59) which states that: "Beings are like the moon in rippling water".

<sup>96</sup> Gyatso (1992b: 255) comments: "Buddha also compared phenomena to reflections of the moon in a clear lake. When we see a reflection of the moon it looks like the actual moon, but in reality it is just a reflection that has no existence from its own side. Even so it functions, showing up in photographs for example. In the same way, phenomena appear to us to be real and substantial, but in reality they have no existence at all from their own side, [i.e. they are merely an imputed object dependent upon its collection of parts]. However, these reflections, like phenomena, do exist and perform functions."

<sup>97</sup> He is not saying they are a reflection, but they are *like* a reflection.

(things) are intrinsically existent. The crux of the problem from the Tibetan Buddhist perspective is that unenlightened people cognize all such conventionally existent phenomena in a way that is different from ‘the way things really are’. This means that their perception of things is false as they are unable to cognize how things actually exist. Newland (1999: 75) points out that: “Buddhism teaches that we innately and ignorantly imagine persons and things to be *more real* than they actually are” (my emphasis). The Tibetan Buddhist considers that the superimposing of an imaginary (i.e. a non-existent and therefore deceptive) status upon things comes about because of innate ignorance at a very subtle level. Such ignorance is considered to be the root of all misery. Newland (1999: 78) comments that our fundamental problem is not that we believe in “an uncaused permanent Being who causes all existence”. Rather, “The root of all suffering is the notion that things have their own ontological status – their own way of existing – without being posited through the force of consciousness.” He points out that belief in an independent creator is a rather coarse misconception that arises from the ‘actual root of suffering’. In other words belief in God is merely a symptom of a much deeper and underlying problem, namely, the root of ignorance which views things as having intrinsic existence, when in fact their nature is empty of such existence. Newland comments that, compared to other Tibetan Buddhist tenet systems, the Consequentialists (*thal gyur ba* in Tibetan and *Prāsangika* in Sanskrit) “argue for the ‘deepest cut’ to get at this very subtlest ignorance.”<sup>98</sup> Sopa and Hopkins (1989: 32) explain:

In order to cut out the root of cyclic existence, it is necessary to realize emptiness, first conceptually through inference and then in a totally non-dualistic direct cognition. Emptiness in the Consequence School, which is generally considered in Tibet to be the highest Buddhist philosophical system, is the lack of inherent existence, true existence, existence by way of the object’s own character, existence in

---

<sup>98</sup> Newland 1999: 75.

its own right, or existence as its own reality. This means that objects are only imputed in dependence upon bases of imputation.

Williams (2012: 110) comments that Buddhism “is a move of gnosis, an understanding of the conventional as merely conventional rather than bestowing it with a false sense of inherent or intrinsic, and therefore graspable, existence. The whole point is to see things the way they really are, to understand the ultimate way of things”.

In this section, Desideri is in effect clarifying the dGe lugs position (outlined above) that because all existing entities are empty of intrinsic existence they are like a reflection. He reminds the reader that the dGe lugs pa claim this to be the case even though they refute the existence of even one intrinsically existent entity. Although they hold that a reflection exists, conventionally speaking, they point out that its actual appearance is illusory. The reflection appears in one way but it actually exists in another way. If you look at a reflection you see an image of an actual thing (in our case the moon); however, the appearance of this image is misleading or deceptive. It appears real when in fact it is not. The dGe lugs pa claim that this reflective, illusory nature applies not only to actual reflections but, in fact, to all phenomena. Tsong kha pa makes the following observation:<sup>99</sup>

As Candrakīrti puts it [a phenomenon] ‘exists in one way but appears in another’.

This means that the five objects – forms, sounds and so forth – are not established by way of their intrinsic character, but appear to the sensory consciousness as though they were.

Desideri grasped that such an assertion underpins the dGe lugs understanding of the phenomenal world, which maintains that all unenlightened persons (naturally) see everything in a similar distorted manner – as though things existed in and of themselves – instead of

---

<sup>99</sup> GT3: 166.

seeing their true or ultimate nature, which is their emptiness of intrinsic existence. He also understood that the dGe lugs pa are not denying the existence of phenomena (conventionally speaking) when they say ‘all things are like an illusion’.<sup>100</sup> However, Desideri considered the logical conclusion of such reasoning to result in nothingness and so his particular emphasis (which becomes more evident in Section 5) is there can only be a reflection in the lake *because* there is an actual moon elsewhere. One consequence of the dGe lugs emphasis on the illusory or unreal nature of things is that they view everything as somehow being ‘less than real’.<sup>101</sup> A dGe lugs practitioner will equate what he considers to be the ‘unreal nature of things’ with an absence of intrinsic existence and will train his mind to view everything (not just reflections) as lacking ‘full reality’.<sup>102</sup> Desideri also maintained a lack of intrinsic existence in created things but struggled with the dGe lugs degree of illusory emphasis in claiming that everything was like a reflection. In *Origins* Desideri includes some excerpts from Mādhyamika texts which assert that all things in existence are ‘like a universal illusion’.<sup>103</sup>

In summary: Desideri is merely stating (in Section 4) what dGe lugs practitioners assert, namely, (1) if entities are empty of intrinsic nature, then they are like a reflection and (2) just as a reflection has no real nature or essence, so too, all phenomena lack ‘real’ or intrinsic existence. He reminds the reader that these assertions are made even though they have rejected the existence of an intrinsically existent entity.

---

<sup>100</sup> Gyatso (1992b: 253) points out that when one describes things as being illusory this does not mean they do not exist – it is just that their existence is not the same as their appearance. He gives the example of a conjurer who creates an illusion of a horse. The illusion of the appearance of a horse exists but the horse is in fact non-existent. Gyatso comments (ibid: 255) “in the same way conventional phenomena also exist and function even, though they are like illusions.” The dGe lugs pa view all phenomena as mere appearances which appear to our mind - just like objects in a dream. (Also see Gyatso 2002: 3).

<sup>101</sup> Newland 1999: 75.

<sup>102</sup> See Napper (2003: 203-4). The term ‘unreal’ here refers to an absence of intrinsic existence. It does not refer to the non-existence of things.

<sup>103</sup> (OT3: 217-220). Like a universal illusion. [*Come una universale illusione*]. Ibid., 220.

## **Senseless Babble!**

[5] English translation:

Having examined [the claim that all things are like a reflection] such a viewpoint can be shown to be faulty. [Let me illustrate this as follows] For example, having asserted that if there is no actual moon there can be no reflection of it in the lake's clear water – it would be contradictory to assert the reflection of the moon that appears in the lake is in fact the real moon. Similarly, to accept that there is not even one intrinsically existent entity - coupled with the belief that all persons and phenomena are undeniably existent - must be seen as simply a contradiction. [Such a claim] is similar to believing only senseless babble.

Comments: I do not think a Buddhist would assert that the reflection of the moon, which appears in the lake, is actually the real moon and it seems strange for Desideri to imply that they would. But I think here he is merely pointing out the obvious, namely, without an actual or real moon in the sky there can be no reflection of it. Furthermore when he uses the word 'real' he does not mean that the actual moon is 'truly real' in the sense that a dGe lugs would understand these words.<sup>104</sup> An assertion that something is 'truly real' would imply that the object under discussion exists independently - in and of itself.<sup>105</sup> In this particular illustration his point is that without an actual moon there can be no reflection of it in the lake's clear water. But he wants to take the discussion further in order to make it clear that, without the existence of an 'absolute', the 'relative' could not exist. In subsequent sections he shows his reader the consequences that arise from the dGe lugs denial of an intrinsically existent

---

<sup>104</sup> Hopkins (1996: 632), points out that the term 'truly existing' is a hypothetical synonym for inherent existence.

<sup>105</sup> Desideri would view God in these terms, but not the things that he had created. Additionally, he would have considered the moon to be a genuine creation of God and that God does not deceive us.

entity.<sup>106</sup> He concludes his current discussion with an assertion that not only is the aforementioned view contradictory; it is also mere senseless babble! (*bab col*).<sup>107</sup> In Section 27, Desideri resumes his discussion about the moon and its reflection/s and clearly states that just as there has to be a real moon in order to have an illusion of the moon so there has to be an intrinsically existent entity in order to have dependent origination.<sup>108</sup>

### **An infinite regress of causes that have no starting point.**

[6] English translation:

Moreover, you assert that there is not even a single intrinsically existent entity and yet [you] hold the belief that all persons and phenomena of the past, present and future are empty of intrinsic existence. Nevertheless, after an intelligent and logical examination you must accept that the particular person who is being born now comes into being because of dependent origination. That being the case, the person is [considered] empty of intrinsic existence.

Comments: In this section, Desideri refers to the technical term *rten cing'bre' par 'byung ba*.

The shortened form is *rten 'byung* and both expressions refer to Dependent Arising or Dependent Origination. He points out that the nature of those being born - because they are dependently originated - results in their being empty of intrinsic existence. Hopkins (1996: 168) states: “All phenomena do not inherently exist because of being dependent-arising.”<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>106</sup> /rang bzhin gyis grub pa'i dngos po gcig /. For Desideri, the intrinsic existent Entity is God and without him there would be nothing at all; however, he refrains from discussing the nature of God until the second part of this manuscript.

<sup>107</sup> Desideri's mention of 'babble' is interesting. Tsong kha pa, when responding to a questioner with whom he disagrees, describes his opponent's words as 'reckless chatter' (*ngag 'chal*) GT3: 156.

<sup>108</sup> See Laying the Foundation Part 1B Section 27.

<sup>109</sup> Hopkins also states (*ibid.*, 168) “All phenomena do not exist inherently because of being dependently imputed.”

Tsong kha pa's response to those who could not understand how it was possible for cyclic existence and nirvana to exist in a system that asserts emptiness was to explain that it is because things arise in dependence on causes and conditions. His following statement makes this clear: "the very meaning of emptiness is dependent arising".<sup>110</sup> Desideri paraphrases Candrakīrti's explanation of inter-dependence below:<sup>111</sup>

I'm not saying that things do not exist, I'm saying that all things are inter-dependent. And should somebody say to me – well then you are a realist I reply: Not at all. I'm not a realist because I speak of inter-dependence. And if you then say: Well what do you mean? I reply: I am saying that things are inter-dependent. If you ask me; what does inter-dependent mean? I reply: Inter-dependent means not existing by oneself, not being born independently. Not existing by oneself means that it is like magic, like a mirage, a reflection, an emanation, a dream: these things are not produced as independent effects but as inter-dependent ones. In this respect one can say that even the 'I' [*bdag*] does not exist and one can also say 'lacking existence in its own right'.<sup>112</sup>

[Io non dico che non esistono le cose; dico che tutte le cose sono interdipendenti. E se uno mi dice: Allora tu sei un realista. Rispondo: No io non sono realista perché parlo d'interdipendenza [*pratītyasamutpāda*]. E se mi si dice: Ma allora tu che cosa dici? Rispondo: Dico che le cose sono interdipendenti. Se mi si chiede: che significa interdipendente? Rispondo: Interdipendente significa non esistere da se stesso, non nato indipendentemente.

---

<sup>110</sup> GT3: 139.

<sup>111</sup> It appears that Desideri was familiar with Candrakīrti's *Commentary on the Four Hundred Stanzas (Bodhisattvayogacaryācatuḥśataka-śāstrakārikā)*, or at least extracts from it. The *Four Hundred Stanzas (bstan bcos bzhi brgya pa zhes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa)* was written by Āryaveda who was a disciple of Nāgārjuna. (In Sanskrit the *Four Hundred Stanzas* is called the *Catuḥśataka-śāstrakārikā*).

<sup>112</sup> *Origins* OT3: 210-11. Napper (2003: 53) points out that Tsong kha pa (*Dzong ka pa*) bases his refutation of his fellow Tibetans on the fact they have failed to understand correctly the views that Indian scholars (e.g. Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti) propounded. In particular they misunderstood Mādhyamika teaching concerning the compatibility of dependent-arising and an emptiness of inherent existence. Napper points out that Tsong kha pa takes dependent arising as the key to understanding Mādhyamika (ibid: 40).

Non esistente da se stesso vuol dire che è come magia, come miraggio, come riflesso, come emanazione, come sogno: queste cose non sono prodotti come effetti indipendentemente ma interdipendentemente. In questo senso si dice che non esiste l'io ed anche in questo senso si dice “vuoto di esistenza da se stesso”].

In giving the example of a particular person being born right now, Desideri affirms the dGe lugs belief that because such a person comes into being because of dependent origination (i.e. as a result of causes and conditions) they are therefore empty of intrinsic existence.<sup>113</sup> He reminds the reader that this assertion applies to all persons and phenomena of the past, present and future. In other words, it is all-encompassing. Desideri uses a phrase *rigs pa'i brtag pa byed pas* (by means of an intelligent examination). He does not seem to be referring here to the specific dGe lugs form of analytical analysis (*dpyod pa*) or conceptual investigation (*rtog pa*) that probes the ultimate nature of a thing's existence.<sup>114</sup> I think he is merely appealing to a person's own natural sense of reasoning whereby one can infer things from facts presented to the mind. In the second half of the next section, he expands his comments on 'a particular person who is being born right now'.<sup>115</sup> In appealing to his reader to consider such a person, Desideri wants him to acknowledge that birth occurs as an actual event that is significant in time and it is not some illusory or phantom event that *appears* to be a birth. As far as Desideri is concerned, birth is real in the sense that it actually occurs and it would make no sense to assert that somehow the event is merely fabricated and so is *like* an illusion or a reflection.

---

<sup>113</sup> It would be a contradiction to consider that something which has dependently arisen has the property of intrinsic existence.

<sup>114</sup> Hopkins 1996: 267-8.

<sup>115</sup> /da lta'i dus su skye bar 'gyur ba'i gang zag bye brag pa zhig /.

## **Dependent Origination.**

[7] English translation:

Because of this [i.e. dependent arising], it is necessary to assert that the particular person [who is born] cannot be established without causes and conditions. This being the case he/she is dependently originated. Accordingly, it has to be asserted that not only is this particular person dependent on causes and conditions but this particular person's causes and conditions are dependent on other causes and conditions. [Yet] without the existence of even a single entity that exists intrinsically, you maintain that all existent phenomena are empty of inherent existence. The causes and conditions of a particular person being born now are dependent on other causes and conditions that came about as a result of dependent origination. For this reason, it is necessary to assert that they [too] are empty of intrinsic existence. Therefore, if you logically analyse the series of causes and conditions – and then the causes of those causes and conditions, going backwards from the particular person who is born at the present time – it is necessary to maintain that there is an infinite regress of causes and conditions that have no end. The error in such a viewpoint may be demonstrated as follows ... [This discussion continues in Section 8].

Comments: The focus of Desideri's discussion now turns to 'causes and conditions' (*rgyu rkyen*).<sup>116</sup> He agrees with the dGe lugs pa observation that a person cannot be established without causes and conditions and that the causes and conditions that affect a person being born now have not arisen independently or causelessly but depend on a whole series of preceding causes and conditions. The dGe lugs pa hold that such a backward series is infinite.

---

<sup>116</sup> Hopkins (1996: 167-8) states: "When Candrakīrti says that dependent-arising is the arising of things dependent on causes and conditions, the words 'causes and conditions' do not just refer to usual causes and conditions such as seeds or ignorance. 'Causes and conditions' also refer to the parts of an object – an object's basis of designation – and to the thought that designates the existence of an object. The word 'arising' means not just 'production' but also 'existence' and 'establishment'; all phenomena are dependent existents or relative existents."

However, if this was the case it would mean there is no beginning to the series of causes and conditions that result in the birth of a person today. Nāgārjuna's *Sixty Verses of Arguments* states: "[To say] there was a beginning would clearly be holding onto a dogma. How can that which is dependently co-arisen have a first and a last?"<sup>117</sup> Desideri considered such a viewpoint was illogical and his comment below, taken from Section 9, shows this to be the case. 'If you assert that whatever 'causal efficiency force'<sup>118</sup> of the causes and conditions of birth do not even contact the person who is born - then it has to be a contradiction to say that the person is manifestly and undeniably born at the present time'.<sup>119</sup> In *Origins*, Desideri wrote about inter-dependent things and pointed out the necessity for the causal series to have an initial starting-off point.<sup>120</sup>

Feser (2009: 69-73) points out that Aquinas and other medieval thinkers considered that there are two kinds of series of efficient causes. (1) The first causal series occurs *accidentally* in the sense there is not necessarily a dependency on any prior member of the series. He explains that Abraham begat Isaac, Isaac begat Jacob and Jacob begat Joseph. If one takes the case of Joseph it is obvious that, once he has matured, he is capable of begetting a son by himself. Jacob's existence or non-existence has no bearing whatsoever on him doing this. Feser comments:<sup>121</sup> "Given that we are considering them as a series of begetters specifically, each member is independent of the others as far as its causal powers are concerned". (2) The second type of causal series refers to those that are ordered *essentially*. Feser draws attention

---

<sup>117</sup> /rtsom pa yod na nges par yang/ lta bar gyur pa yongs su 'dzin/ rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba gang /de la sngon dang tha ma ci/. Nāgārjuna's *Sixty Verses of Arguments* stanza 14, (trans. Lindtner 1997: 77). These sixty verses were compiled by Nāgārjuna and are named Yuktiṣaṣṭikā or *rigs pa drug cu*.

<sup>118</sup> An alternative translation for *nus stobs rnam pa* is 'capability power aspect'.

<sup>119</sup> Desideri returns to this topic in Section 8.

<sup>120</sup> In *Origins* (OT3: 140-163) Desideri gives detailed reasons why the Prime Cause is the origin of all things, including the origin of all living beings. He discusses the impossibility of an endless chain and offers arguments similar to those pointed out by Feser. See my comments in Section 7.

<sup>121</sup> Feser 2009: 70.

to Aquinas's first point of his Five Ways, where Aquinas discusses the existence of God and refers to motion or change as one of the proofs. He takes the example of a hand-held staff that moves a stone which then moves a leaf and points out "if any member higher up in the series ceases its causal activity, the activity of the lower members will necessarily cease as well".<sup>122</sup> Feser also points out that causal series ordered per se (i.e. essentially) are, "paradigmatically hierarchical with their members acting simultaneously"<sup>123</sup> He adds: "in efficient causes it is impossible to proceed to infinity per se – thus, there cannot be an infinite number of causes that are per se required for a certain effect". If we refer back to the case of a hand moving a staff, which then moves a leaf or a stone and so forth, it is clear that, in the absence of a principal moving cause - which in this example is the hand - all the lower members in the series, which are in effect acting as instruments, would be unable to do so. This is because they derive their power from a first cause. Feser states: "If a first member who is the source of the causal power of the others did not exist, the series as a whole simply would not exist".<sup>124</sup> It is clear that the lower members are dependent on the first member of the series, and to suggest that the series might regress infinitely in the absence of the first member (i.e. the principal moving cause), would make no sense whatsoever. Desideri is referring to this second type of causal series when he discusses movement in Section 8.<sup>125</sup> Once again he reminds his reader that the dGe lugs belief in the lack of intrinsic existence concerning all things is coupled with their denial of the existence of an intrinsically existent entity. This particular comment is like a refrain and occurs many times throughout Desideri's introduction. In the next two sections he emphasises that the causes and conditions that generate birth must in some aspect contact (*reg pa*) the person who is to be born. He then

---

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 71-2.

<sup>125</sup> That is to causal series that are ordered *essentially*.

illustrates this point by discussing the movement of a heavy, non-living, stationary object and emphasises that without contact there can be no movement.

### **How a heavy object moves.**

[8] English translation:

Take for example a [stationary] heavy object. In regard to a decision that it has been undeniably and manifestly moved: [1] if one maintains this [stationary object] cannot move without being pushed by some force from another [moving] object [2] [then] it is necessary to assert that the force of the moving object, in some way or another, contacted the object that was moved. [3] An assertion that the two objects, the one that was moved and the one that did the moving, had no contact whatsoever, [well if you say that] then the [first] heavy object moved [by itself!]. Such a statement must be accepted as contradictory and in this case, you have to conclude that the actual movement of the body [that you claimed to have seen move] makes no sense at all.

Comments: Desideri's purpose in this illustration is to show that movement is only possible if a force from outside itself pushes the stationary object. Take for example, the case of two croquet balls. We could refer to one of them as 'the ball that was moved' and to the other as 'the one that did the moving'. To claim the stationary ball moved by itself would indeed be a contradiction. In the next section, Desideri makes it clear that if the 'causal efficiency force' (*nus stobs rnam pa*) of causes and conditions do not contact the person being born then birth would indeed be impossible and in the absence of such contact there would be nothing at all.

## **The Birth of a Person.**

[9] English translation:

Likewise, if you assert that the particular person who is being born now cannot come into existence without contact by their own causes and conditions, then you have to assert that the causal efficiency force of the causes and conditions that generate birth must in some aspect contact the person who is born. If you assert that whatever causal efficiency force of the causes and conditions of birth do not even contact the person who is born then it must be decided it is a contradiction to say that the person is manifestly and undeniably born at the present time.<sup>126</sup>

Comments: Desideri states that it would be contradictory to claim a person is born in the absence of contact. A caused phenomenon cannot be produced if it is not touched or reached by the energy of the phenomenon that produces it. Therefore if the series of phenomena is unlimited in the past, then the energy-producer (i.e. causal efficiency force) which produces, for example, birth, could never reach the person who is being born in the present time and consequently that person can never arise. In *Origins*, Desideri declared the necessity for Tibetans to accept a Primary Cause which is common to all living beings and objects, and to understand that this Primary Cause is not dependent in any way upon any other cause. He tells the reader: “This is a truth of the most enormous magnitude but I shall explain it to you.”<sup>127</sup> [Questa é una verità profondissima, ma io ve la svelerò].

He then proceeds to write extensively on the subject of ‘movement’ and gives a number of additional illustrations, including the one mentioned in my comments in Section 7 about the

---

<sup>126</sup> If one asserts that the chain of dependency goes back into infinity, it would be impossible for the ‘causal efficiency force’ of earlier causes and conditions to generate birth in the present.

<sup>127</sup> *Origins* (OT3: 141).

hand that holds a stick that moved a stone etc.<sup>128</sup> It is evident that Desideri's discussion in Section 8 about a heavy object requiring some kind of causal contact [from another object] before it can move is just a brief summary of a number of logical arguments he had put forward earlier in his earlier works.<sup>129</sup>

### **The illustration of an endless road and its implications.**

[10] English translation:

Moreover, for example, if it is asserted that the road that leads from Lhasa to India is without limits, then it has to be accepted that the road that leads from India to Lhasa is also without limits. Because it is asserted that the road from Lhasa to India is endless, then a traveller from Lhasa will be unable to arrive in India and this becomes meaningless. [Moreover] because of the assertion that the road that leads from India to Lhasa is endless, the traveller from India will also be unable to arrive in Lhasa, and this [too] has to be meaningless.

Comments: In order to demonstrate the fallacy of an endless regress, Desideri bases his discussion on a road that goes from Lhasa to India. He points out that if the road which starts in Lhasa has no end, then a traveller from Lhasa would never be able to arrive in India (and vice versa); and so the whole journey becomes meaningless.

In this particular section, Desideri is engaging with the dGe lugs denial of a starting point. In his opinion, if there is no beginning point how can there be an endpoint? Therefore, if there is no beginning to a series there can be no 'now'. In *Origins*, he explained that if the series of

---

<sup>128</sup> *Origins* (OT3: 149-50).

<sup>129</sup> In Sections 23-25, Desideri returns to the subject of birth and emphasises its significance. Not only is it an event, it also has a function and is therefore meaningful. For example, we can use words such as 'before birth', 'during birth' and 'after birth'.

intermediate movers is without limit (i.e. infinite), the energy could never arrive at the final object.<sup>130</sup> In this case, if one started from the object that was first moved one could never arrive at the final object that was moved.<sup>131</sup> Desideri is re-emphasising the necessity for the power and energy from the first mover to reach the final moved object. He wants his dGe lugs reader to see the illogicality of accepting a view that claims intermediate movers are infinite. He wants him to accept they are limited and, this being the case, that there must necessarily be a Primary Mover that moves all the others - whilst not being moved itself.

### **The necessity to be touched by a causal efficacy force.**

[11] English translation:

[Therefore] at the time of critically examining the topic of the birth of a particular person [who is] born at the present time and starting with the sequence of those earlier and later causes and conditions [that pertain to the birth], you must necessarily assert the causes and conditions [which affect him/her] are infinite. This is because you have already asserted the preceding sequence of causes and conditions are infinite. [If this is the case], then it is not possible for the person who is manifestly born now to be touched by the causal efficiency force of those earlier and later causes and conditions. Consequently, it is an absurd and illogical conclusion to claim [as factual] the birth of a person who is manifestly and undeniably born at the present time.<sup>132</sup>

---

<sup>130</sup> *Origins* (OT3: 153).

<sup>131</sup> *Origins* (OT3: 154).

<sup>132</sup> Geisler summarises the philosophical need for a beginning (1999: 399) as follows: (1) "If an infinite number of moments occurred before today, then today would never have come, since it is impossible to transverse an infinite number of moments. (2) But today has come. (3) Hence there were a finite number of moments before today; (therefore) the universe had a beginning." A detailed study of the Cosmological Argument is not relevant to this dissertation and the above serves merely as

Comments: Again, Desideri is seeking to persuade his reader that it is illogical to deny an initial starting point in regard to a sequence of causes and conditions. The dGe lugs view maintains that a person's immediate sequence of causes and conditions and the causes and conditions of those causes and conditions go back infinitely; and so, in the last sentence, Desideri reiterates the illogicality of accepting a continuum that has no beginning-point while at the same time asserting the the birth of persons actually occurs. He wants his reader to grasp that not only is such a view contradictory but it also leads to the extreme of nihilism, since in fact nothing would, or could be born.<sup>133</sup>

**Emptiness cannot be established without 'Dependency'.**

[12] English translation:

Moreover, as for [your] maintaining all phenomena are empty of intrinsic existence coupled with the assertion there is not even one intrinsically existent entity [well consider this]: Because you have already maintained that no phenomena can be established apart from depending upon something else, you must necessarily assert that emptiness [too] cannot be established, apart from there being dependency of one thing upon another. Let us see if a fault can be shown in such a viewpoint?

Comments: Desideri is merely stating that since dGe lugs pa maintain: (1) that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic existence; and (2) that phenomena cannot be established apart from depending upon something then, necessarily, emptiness itself cannot be established apart from there being a dependency of one thing upon another. This is a view the dGe lugs pa

---

a brief summary and expresses the line of reasoning Desideri was pursuing as he sought to refute the dGe lugs concept of an endless chain.

<sup>133</sup> See Section 9.

would have been in full agreement with. However, by drawing attention to these basic dGe lugs assertions it seems that Desideri is preparing the ground for his next illustration. He understood their view that maintained: (1) that emptiness characterises all things (2) that all things have arisen dependently and (3) that, because of arising dependently, things are therefore empty of intrinsic existence. (4) As a consequence, things exist in dependence upon a thing or things that are empty. Desideri wants his reader to grasp that there could be no emptiness (or for that matter anything at all) in the absence of a non-dependently arisen entity that has the nature of emptiness (of intrinsic existence). In order for there to be dependently arisen entities there must be a primary (initial) independent entity that has the nature of intrinsic existence.

### **An illustration of a ruler and his vassals**

[13] English translation:

If one takes, for example, the case of a vassal or a subordinate it must necessarily be maintained that apart from dependency upon something there can be no subordinate or vassal. Similarly, if one takes the case of a lack of intrinsic existence being manifestly existent, it is necessary to assert that it cannot manifestly exist apart from there being dependency on something. In addition, for example, in regard to an assertion [that states] that without even one ruler all the people are vassals [well, you] have already asserted that there exists a support for dependent origination. Because of this, then an assertion that states there does not exist a ground [or] support for dependency anywhere at all must necessarily be accepted as being mere contradictory, senseless babble. Similarly, if you assert that without even one intrinsically existent entity all entities without exception are empty of intrinsic existence [this also makes no sense]. Because you have already accepted a support for dependent origination

exists, therefore to say there is no ground [or] basis for dependency anywhere at all [makes no sense] and you must accept that [your] assertions are [not] only unsustainable, [they are] contradictory and senseless babble. If you ask me to show the fundamental reason or root cause of both the example and its meaning, I will explain these in order that you may feel satisfied.

Comments: In giving the illustration of a ruler and his vassals, Desideri seeks to show that dependency requires a support of some kind. If there is no support, there can be no dependency. In order to be a ruler, it is necessary to have vassals to rule. The thrust of Desideri's argument is that it would be illogical to assert that without there being even one ruler all people are vassals. He reminds his reader, who in some sense is also his (debating) opponent, that he has already asserted that there exists a support or ground for dependent origination. Having maintained that there is indeed dependent origination, if the defendant should then assert that there does not exist a ground or support for dependent origination, such a view would be unsustainable and contradictory. It appears that Desideri is beginning to gather together the various strands of his argument. We have already seen that he does not reject the concept of emptiness. Desideri understands that the dGe lugs pa maintain that things are empty of intrinsic existence because they are dependently arisen, but he considers that this is because their existence depends on the creative power of God (which serves as a support for their existence) and not on an infinite regress of causes and conditions.

In Section 15, Desideri argues that, just as it makes no sense to claim that everything is 'low' and that nothing is 'upper', so it makes no sense to assert that everything is empty of intrinsic existence and there is nothing that has intrinsic existence. According to Napper (2003: 3) because things arise dependently on causes and conditions, they gain their identities in relation to other things: "Nothing stands alone, autonomous and isolated, but instead exists only in a web of interconnectedness. Like near and far, all things are relative, dependent on

their causes, their parts, or on their relationship to something else.” Desideri is referring to this kind of dependent relationship when he talks of a ruler and his vassals.

### **Disconformity with the Cause**

[14] English translation:

If it is accepted that an entity originates dependently [1] it is unreasonable to assert that there is no entity that is not certainly established [with intrinsic existence] anywhere. [2] [It is also unreasonable] to claim that something with the nature of originating dependently upon another is not established upon something. [So] if you assert that an entity, which is established in dependence upon another, is utterly not established anywhere, [then obviously] the entity with the nature of being established on another is [necessarily] non-existent. This being the case, it is necessary therefore to maintain that an entity with the nature of originating in dependence has to be established in dependence upon itself. Face this unwelcome conclusion! [1] There is no conformity between the reason [thesis] and the cause [i.e. the causal process that follows]. In addition, face [another] unwelcome conclusion, namely, [2] there is not one thing established anywhere, since it is not established even by that other [that other being itself].

Comments: The thrust of this argument follows from the previous section. It centres on the dGe lugs view that maintains that all phenomena are established in dependence upon another. Desideri now points out the consequences of maintaining that there is nothing that has the nature of intrinsic existence. First, an entity with the nature of arising in dependence on another is established without depending on another. It has to arise without depending upon another because ultimately there is no ‘other’ for it to depend upon. Secondly, if there is no

intrinsically existent entity anywhere (upon which the chain of dependency is initialised) then the dependent entity - which is said to arise with the nature of depending - if it exists, must exist in dependence upon itself. However it is not possible for a dependent entity to exist in dependence upon itself. Therefore, although an entity with the nature of dependent arising may 'appear to exist' - in actuality, if the dGe lugs pa position were correct, in spite of appearances, it would not exist at all. This is because it was not established as a result of depending on something else. Desideri considered that the dGe lugs line of reasoning necessarily resulted in the 'extreme of nihilism'. Nihilism (*chad lta*) is one of the two extreme views that dGe lugs pa claim to avoid.<sup>134</sup> While dGe lugs pa deny the possibility of the existence of even one intrinsically existent entity, Desideri argues that, in the absence of such an entity, existent phenomena would in fact be non-existent. He considered that the dGe lugs denial of the necessity for an Initial or Primary Cause results in the very thing that they resolutely reject, i.e. a fall into the extreme of nihilism.

### **Concepts of Upper & Lower, etc.**

[15] English translation:

If we apply [all this] to the [concepts of] upper and lower; in and out; early and late [and] if we take, for example, the case of upper, that thing [i.e. upper] is empty of intrinsic existence. This is because it is not established there independently of arising in dependence on another. Moreover, if it is asserted that there is not even one thing which is not the subject of upper [i.e. everything is upper and there is no lower] then, if we take our case of upper, it is

---

<sup>134</sup> A nihilistic view entails the denial of the existence; not only of objects established to conventional cognition, but it also results in the denial of the law of cause and effect, as well as the principle of dependent origination. The opposite extreme view is that of eternalism (*rtag lta*). The reader would have considered Desideri's view eternalistic because he spoke of the absolute necessity for an intrinsically existent entity.

necessary to assert it [i.e. upper] is established there even without depending on the other [i.e. upon lower]. If one asserts that there is no cause for establishing it [i.e. upper] there, and since there is no depending upon the other [i.e. upon lower] then necessarily it must be asserted that there is no cause for establishing it [i.e. upper] there as a dependent thing. Face this! It follows that to maintain as not established one thing [in our case upper] anywhere [means] there is not established the other [which in our case is lower]. To summarise: for example, if you assert in the case of vassals that they cannot be established apart from depending on another, then it is unreasonable to assert that there is not even one that is not a vassal. [In other words without a ruler it makes no sense to say there are vassals].

Comments: In this passage, Desideri appears to be reinforcing his argument (first mentioned in Section 13) about a ruler and his vassals. He now provides some additional examples, namely, the concepts of upper and lower; in and out; and early and late. He points out that if one takes the case of 'upper' there is no cause for establishing it without 'lower'.<sup>135</sup> Desideri is not talking about intrinsic existence in this illustration but relative or conventional existence. His point is ontological, namely, the existence of one requires the existence of the other. Without the existence of the other there would be no cause for the dependent thing and as a consequence both relationships (i.e. the ruler and the subordinate/s and upper and lower) would in fact be non-existent. In Section 13 Desideri stated: 'If emptiness of intrinsic existence is manifestly existent, one must necessarily accept that it cannot manifestly exist apart from there being dependency upon something'. He considered the weakness of the dGe lugs view (which asserts that all things, without exception, are empty of intrinsic existence) arose because they removed the necessary support for the emptiness of intrinsic existence.

---

<sup>135</sup> It is worth noting that the existence of a concept need not necessarily entail the existence of the thing of which it is a concept.

## An illustration of manufactured objects

[16] English translation:

Likewise, regarding those entities that are established by conventional cognizers - if one asserts they are not established there, apart from being dependent upon another, [then] it must necessarily be decided that it is unreasonable to assert there is not even one thing which is not dependently originated and which is [therefore] independent. Moreover, for example, take the case of an artefact: regarding that entity which has the quality of being manufactured, it is not established there apart from depending upon another. It would be unreasonable to assert that there is not even one entity that does not have the property of being manufactured. For example, if you take the case of that which has the property of low [it would be unreasonable to assert] it is not established there independently of having depended on another. It would be [just as] unreasonable to assert that there is not even one entity that does not have the property of low [i.e. everything is low]. Similarly, regarding emptiness that is empty of intrinsic existence - if you maintain [emptiness] as existing [you know] it cannot be established apart from being dependent upon something. It is unreasonable [therefore] to assert that there does not exist even one entity that is not empty [i.e. which lacks the property] of emptiness. If [you] ask me to explain the extremely subtle reason for both the example and its meaning, I will do so for the sake of generating pleasure [on account of] the diligence of the enquirer.

Comments: In the first sentence, Desideri uses the technical term *tha snyad pa'i tshad ma* which refers to a 'conventional' (*tha snyad pa*) 'valid cognizer' (*tshad ma*) or 'valid knowing'. He reiterates once more that because things are established in dependency, it is illogical to assert there is nothing at all that exists independently. He gives the example of an artefact and explains that since every manufactured thing is dependent, there is no such thing

as a manufactured thing independent of dependent origination. In this section Desideri is dealing with what he perceives to be a faulty assertion that literally everything is manufactured. From the beginning of his manuscript Desideri has made it quite clear that he considers the dGe lugs doctrine - which asserts that all things, without exception, are empty of intrinsic existence - is in fact an unsustainable assertion.

## LAYING THE FOUNDATION

### PART ONE B

#### Section Headings:

- [17] Supreme excellence
- [18] Two types of cognition
- [19] Superior certain cognition
- [20] Two types of cognitive objects
- [21] Resistant to analysis by reasoning
- [22] There is no pervasion
- [23] The pervasion's unwelcome conclusion
- [24] Birth is more than a 'mere' birth
- [25] A time of primordial non-existence
- [26] A distinctive entity established with intrinsic nature
- [27] The reflection of the moon in a clear lake

In Sections 17-26 Desideri continues to refrain from using the specific term he has chosen for God (i.e. *rang grub dkon mchog*) but he talks in more general terms about topics such as: the highest excellence and a supreme, distinctive entity established with intrinsic existence. His discussion in Section 17 about a search for supreme excellence (*gya nom pa rab mchog*) must have sounded strange to his reader, as this is not a Tibetan concept. In Sections 18-20 he

briefly touches on the mind insofar as it relates to the Tibetan understanding of cognition. Since mind is a subject of paramount importance to a Tibetan Buddhist it is helpful to have a basic understanding of how it functions (from a dGe lugs perspective) in order to understand the context in which Desideri was relating to his reader.<sup>136</sup> Lati Rinbochay comments (1980:11): “Understanding mind is essential to understanding Buddhism in both its theoretical and practical aspects, for the process of achieving enlightenment is one of systematically purifying and enhancing the mind.” Tibetan Buddhists consider the mind is pure in its essential nature; however, they also consider it to be stained by ‘adventitious defilements’.<sup>137</sup> Lati explains these ‘defilements’ are the “result of having misapprehended from beginningless time the actual nature of phenomena.” He continues: “These defilements can be removed; the mind can be totally purified, and the stages in this process of purification constitute the levels of progress towards enlightenment.”<sup>138</sup>

### **Supreme excellence**

[17] English translation:

As for something - which is not established as supremely excellent - it appears as a mental object in accordance with it being apprehended as clearly conceived. [However] the mind involuntarily apprehends [yet] another thing, which exceeds that which was originally

---

<sup>136</sup> Rapten (1992: 12) explains: “The mind has no beginning to its continuity and no end. The stream of consciousness manifest in us now has a history that reaches back into the past with no single point to be identified as its first moment. Likewise it will continue indefinitely in the future even when, through practice and effort, it has been transformed into the mind of a Buddha.”

<sup>137</sup> Gyatso (2007: 193). “The nature of our mind is like the pure, blue sky. However, at present our mind is obscured by myriad clouds of delusions and our wild disturbing thoughts.” Gyatso states that the Buddhist Dharma is effective in dispelling these clouds of obscuration. The aim of the Buddhist practitioner is to realise how phenomena exist as understood by the wisdom of one that has become a fully enlightened being i.e. a Buddha.

<sup>138</sup> Lati, 1980: 11.

apprehended. In accordance with this - in the absence of an example of something that is supremely excellent - there is apprehended involuntarily some excellence which is not established as supreme but which exceeds more and more [that which has previously been apprehended]. Therefore those who have keen intellects are automatically [involuntarily] not satisfied, despite having encountered objects that are excellent and even more excellent. Their search is for an entity that is established as supreme, and until they discover the goal of their search [i.e. the highest excellence], they will continue to seek for it. These wise ones who bring about knowledge and understanding do not [actually] need to have examples of things being more and more excellent in order to convince them that there is an excellence which is supreme and which is the highest excellence. [So I ask]: Do you assert that there is a finding, or not a finding, of some entity which is established as the supreme excellence? If it is the latter then this makes no sense. Those whose intellects have the power of cognition and a desire [to seek], having searched for that which they desire, would necessarily remain tormented by the unbearable suffering of never finding [the object of their search].

Comments: The thrust of this passage is that there has to be a supreme or highest excellence that serves as a standard against which all other excellences are graded, namely, excellent, more excellent, and most excellent.<sup>139</sup> Desideri refers to phenomena (*chos*) that exhibit varying levels of goodness or excellence but none of which are the supreme or highest excellence (*gya nom pa rab mchod*). He uses a number of technical terms, related to Tibetan cognition, in his attempt to point out the logicity of searching for this supreme excellence. He states that: (1) the mental object (*blo 'i yul*) which lacks the property of being the most excellent (2) is apprehended (*mtshan mar 'dzin pa*) (3) clearly (*mngon rtags su 'dzin pa*). From a Tibetan perspective it would be difficult to understand the move Desideri makes from

---

<sup>139</sup> Augustine of Hippo (trans. Clarke, 1984: 317) comments: “good whose goodness is derived from another good can be lessened or increased.” The intrinsically existent *dkon mchog* (God) does not derive goodness from any other and so his Goodness is intrinsic to his nature and remains constant.

something comparative (i.e., good, better, etc.) to something definitive. (i.e., the best) since this kind of reasoning is not found in Tibetan Buddhist texts. Therefore a reader unaware of Thomist philosophy is unlikely to have understood that Desideri’s discussion about supreme or highest excellence was his attempt to lay a foundation upon which he would later build as an introduction to God – the one and only intrinsically existent Entity. Desideri points out the search for highest excellence is a natural response of those who are wise<sup>140</sup> and who, despite having encountered objects that are excellent, and even more excellent, nevertheless remain (*rang dbang med pa*) automatically (i.e. involuntarily) unsatisfied. Theirs is an ongoing search for an entity that is established as supreme, and until they discover this highest excellence, they will continue to seek. Desideri’s point is that these wise ones, who bring about knowledge and understanding, do not need to have examples of more and more excellent things in order to be convinced that there is an excellence which is supreme and is consequently the highest excellence. Desideri’s comments seem to resonate with those of Thomas Aquinas. Davies (1992: 85) points out that Aquinas’s view is Aristotelian, in that “he maintains that ‘good is what all things desire’ and that the desired goal for a thing is its perfection”. This ongoing search is irrespective of whether that desire is felt consciously or unconsciously.<sup>141</sup> According to O’Toole (2005: 39) Aristotle equated the pursuit of excellence with the “highest good”.

Desideri asks his reader: ‘Do you assert that there is a finding, or not a finding, of some entity which is established as the supreme excellence?’ He seems to imply that if the contacted

---

<sup>140</sup> /*blo gros dang ldan pa rnam* /

<sup>141</sup> Davies (1992: 88-89) adds: “And, to round off his [Aquinas’s] account of God’s goodness, he basically only has two further things to say. The first is to say that God is not just good. He is *supremely* good. The second is that God alone is good by nature. He is supremely good because, not being in any class to which others belong, he is not so much a ‘good such and such’ as Goodness itself [...]. And he alone is good by nature since, unlike everything other than himself, (1) he has no risk of failing to exist (and hence of failing to be what he is by nature), (2) he has no potentiality for change (and hence improvement), and (3) he has no goal of perfection outside himself to which he is drawn”. (Ibid., 84).

object is dependently originated (and therefore empty of intrinsic existence), the production of a true and lasting happiness would be impossible.<sup>142</sup> He also points out that to deny the one who is seeking supreme excellence the possibility of ever finding his goal would mean that person would remain continually tormented by the unbearable suffering of never finding the excellence for which he searched. Desideri concludes by saying that never being able to find that excellence for which one searches would make a mockery of ever having searched for it in the first place, since the search would have had no meaning and therefore would have been pointless. However, from a Buddhist perspective, this probably would have sounded strange since, according to Rinchen, “seeking but not finding” is one of the characteristics of saṃsāra.<sup>143</sup>

### **Two types of cognition.**

[18] English translation:

Therefore - with the exception of all those entities that arise dependently upon another occurring as empty [and] which are merely established by cognizers which are those of conventional cognition - it is necessary to assert the finding of the existence of some entity that is established with intrinsic existence and which exceeds all those other things, [i.e. conventional dependent things]. Moreover, for example: you assert as existing happiness that is found by dumb animals [but] your assertion that happiness cannot be found by any human being, [well] that is just unreasonable.

---

<sup>142</sup> Desideri elaborates on this point in Section 18.

<sup>143</sup> Rinchen (2006: 13-14) comments: “The troubles of the world refer to birth, sickness, aging and death, not getting what we want, getting what we don’t want, and seeking but not finding.”

Similarly, generally [speaking], amongst cognition there exist two types: [1] conventional cognition which [is concerned with] the sphere of the ordinary ranges of activities and [2] supreme certain reasoning cognition.

[You] maintain a conventional cognition which, having made contact with those objects that have the property of suffering, is not suited [i.e. does not have the ability] to bring about the goal [of attaining happiness]. [Nevertheless] it is admissible [logical] there does exist an object, other than those [conventional objects] which, as a result of having contacted [or] encountered, there is the occurring of [lasting] joy and satisfaction.

Comments: Desideri continues his discussion about happiness and whether the attainment of true happiness is ever possible as far as contact with objects is concerned. He briefly touches on the two types of cognition: (1) ordinary or everyday conventional cognition (*tha snyad pa'i shes pa*) and (2) superior or supreme certain reasoning cognition (*rigs pa'i shes pa nges mchog*). This second type of cognition is analytical in nature and seeks to establish the actual mode of being of a phenomenon (i.e. how something truly exists), whereas analytical reasoning that is associated with ordinary conventional cognition (*shes pa*) relates to the senses. It includes the mental faculty of reasoning but does not seek to establish the true nature of phenomena. Supreme reasoning cognition (*rigs pa'i shes pa + nges mchog*) refers to a kind of cognition that depends on reasoning and is therefore largely inferential. However, one must determine from the context if Desideri is referring to this particular form of reasoning that employs logical principles and analysis in order to investigate the actual state of things concerning their 'emptiness', or if he is only talking about the conventional form of reasoning which is merely an intellectual pursuit of the mind (*yid kyi shes pa*) in an unrelated field that does not specifically relate to 'emptiness'.

Desideri clarifies that the search for supreme excellence must be for an intrinsically existent entity that is outside ordinary dependently arisen objects, which are perceived by conventional cognition. He points out the need to assert a finding of the existence of some entity that is established with intrinsic existence and which, by its very nature, exceeds all those other things. By ‘other things’ he means conventional dependent things. Gyatso (1995b: 361) explains because living beings are ignorant of the ultimate nature of phenomena they “grasp at phenomena as being inherently existent. This gives rise to delusions such as attachment and hatred, and these in turn give rise to contaminated actions that cause rebirth in *samsāra*.” As a consequence cyclic existence is said to continue unabated until the unenlightened mind, which is being gradually transformed by following the Buddhist path, is finally set free or liberated.

When discussing cognition, Desideri includes a number of technical words such as, ‘entities that are merely established by cognizers which are those of conventional cognition’ (*tha snyad pa'i shes pa'i tshad ma tsam gyis grub pa*). This phrase refers to the things one cognizes in everyday life. The first term, *tha snyad pa* (underlined) means ‘conventional’. All phenomena (according to the dGe lugs point of view) have two natures:<sup>144</sup> (1) a conventional nature that pertains to everyday aspects, and (2) an ultimate nature that relates to the phenomenon’s lack of inherent existence. The term ‘conventional cognition’ (*tha snyad pa'i shes pa*) consists of two words: (1) *shes pa* (‘to understand’, ‘know’, ‘cognize’ or ‘understand’. It can also refer to the consciousnesses). (2) *tha snyad pa* (‘conventional’). The second underlined word (*tshad ma*) means ‘valid’ (or ‘ideal’). Conventional cognition that is valid perceives correctly what is there. For example, seeing a coil of rope one cognizes it as it

---

<sup>144</sup> Taking the case of a table as an example, if one refers to its ‘conventional nature’ the discussion relates to the actual table itself i.e. its shape and colour, etc. However if one describes its ‘ultimate nature’ the discussion is about the table’s lack of inherent existence. For a more detailed explanation of cognition from a dGe lugs perspective, see two publications (1) by Lati Rinbochay (1980) and the other (2) by Geshe Raptan (1992). Both books are about mind and how it functions.

is (i.e. a coil of rope). However, if one mistakenly cognizes it as a snake then the cognition of that object would be considered invalid or mistaken.<sup>145</sup>

Desideri refers to making contact with objects that have the property of suffering. Such phenomena are viewed as contaminated or tainted. According to Gyatso any phenomenon that gives rise to delusions or that causes them to increase is a contaminated phenomenon.<sup>146</sup> The enjoyment of *samsāra* for example will give rise to delusions.<sup>147</sup> When contaminated phenomena (*zag bcas kyi chos*) are perceived by conventional cognition there is no possibility of lasting happiness, even though, in the short term, there may be fleeting satisfaction.<sup>148</sup> Gyatso (2002: 87) points out that: “In reality there is no such thing as a contaminated phenomenon that is a source of true happiness because all contaminated phenomena are true sufferings”.<sup>149</sup> This is precisely Desideri’s point. He agrees that conventionally cognized objects fail to satisfy in the long term. However, he also considers that this should not rule out the existence of another object (i.e. other than those conventional contaminated ones) through which contact provides (lasting) joy and satisfaction. Desideri

---

<sup>145</sup> Napper (2003: 108).

<sup>146</sup> Gyatso (1995b: 361) points out that because living beings are ignorant of the ultimate nature of phenomena they, “grasp at phenomena as being inherently existent. This gives rise to delusions such as attachment and hatred, and these in turn give rise to contaminated actions that cause rebirth in *samsara*”.

<sup>147</sup> Gyatso (1995a: 311) points out that delusions are countless and “act as the basis for all error and conflict and for the contaminated actions that throw us into states of *samsaric* rebirth”. The six root delusions, from which all other delusions arise, are: desirous attachment; anger; deluded pride; ignorance; deluded doubt and deluded view.

<sup>148</sup> I have translated Desideri’s words *sdug bsngal ba’i chos can* as ‘objects that have the property of suffering’. And his phrase *dang phrad de bde ba la reg par mi ‘gyur* as ‘not suitable to bring about the goal of attaining happiness’. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see Sopa & Hopkins (1989: 176). Sopa draws attention to the second of the four seals, which states: “All contaminated things are miserable”. On pages 187-192, he discusses both contaminated and uncontaminated phenomena.

<sup>149</sup> Napper (2003: 46) comments (when discussing the mode of subsistence of phenomena): “*Prāsaṅgika* assert that there are no non-defective sense consciousnesses, for the error of inherent existence extends to the level of the sense consciousnesses. Even our sense data are mistaken: phenomena appear to the sense consciousness to exist inherently whereas they do not in fact exist that way.”

does not elaborate on dGe lugs concepts of uncontaminated phenomena.<sup>150</sup> It seems he is just laying a foundation for a subsequent discussion concerning the attainment of ultimate true happiness which results from contact with the intrinsically existent Entity that exists outside the realm of cause and effect.<sup>151</sup>

Desideri wanted his reader to see that if animals can attain their happiness by doing what they do (as animals) would it not be strange if humans could not attain their happiness by doing what human beings distinctively do. But this sort of reasoning would have sounded strange to a Buddhist. They assert that even animals have the same potential to attain their own final happiness by becoming buddhas – just as humans do. However, although animals have the potential to attain buddhahood, they cannot do so when in an animal form. Since the dGe lugs view a buddha's mental continuum as supremely happy (even though it is empty of intrinsic existence) this particular discussion might not have had the relevance Desideri may have hoped for.

To summarise: We have seen that from a Buddhist perspective actions can be either contaminated or uncontaminated. The driving force that makes an action contaminated is when it is motivated by delusion or ignorance. In the dGe lugs context ignorance refers to an innate misapprehension that grasps at a non-existent 'I' or self (*bdag*). All unenlightened beings are said to be characterised by such grasping and even if they perform virtuous actions those actions are nevertheless considered to be contaminated. However, actions that are motivated by wisdom and compassion are said to be uncontaminated.

---

<sup>150</sup> The Tibetan word for 'uncontaminated' is *zag med* and dGe lugs pa use this word when discussing, for example, uncontaminated phenomena (*zag med chos*), uncontaminated actions (*zag med kyi las*), uncontaminated mental continuum (*zag med kyi shes rgyud*). The following are also referred to as 'uncontaminated': wisdom (*shes rab*), bliss (*bde ba*), virtue (*yon tan*), buddhahood (*sangs rgyas*).

<sup>151</sup> For a more detailed discussion on perfection and goodness from a Christian perspective, see Davies 1992: 84-89.

## Superior certain cognition

[19] English translation:

As for superior [or supreme] certain cognition,<sup>152</sup> it must necessarily be decided the assertion that [claims] - there utterly does not exist somewhere the finding of an object which when contacted [touched] brings about happiness and produces joy to someone - is unreasonable and must be uprooted. If this is so, why is it necessary to assert that entities that are established as empty, [as a result of] originating dependently, are simply not seen and not found by reasoning cognition? This is because, as far as supreme certain cognition of reasoning is concerned, it must be asserted that there is an impossibility of touching happiness by the power of delighting in any entity which is empty of intrinsic existence, irrespective of whatever it is [that one takes delights in]. Therefore the assertion that there does not exist even one entity that is established with intrinsic existence must be eliminated as unreasonable.

Comments: In the previous section, it was pointed out that conventional reasoning does not set out to investigate whether an object within the sphere of cognitively knowable objects exists intrinsically or not. Ordinary conventional reasoning would be, for example, an analysis concerning an understanding of impermanence. This is not the same as ‘superior certain reasoning cognition’ (*rigs pa'i shes pa nges mchog*) that refers to the type of reasoning that seeks to ‘realise’ the true nature of things i.e. the *actual mode of being* of a phenomenon or how it truly exists. Hopkins (2011: 1293) refers to such superior cognition as ‘*phags pa shepa*. This kind of analysis, which specifically seeks to ‘find’ (i.e. realise) concrete or inherent existence, is also referred to as ‘ultimate analysis’ (*don dam pa'i dpyod pa*). According to Napper (2003: 55-56):

---

<sup>152</sup> Supreme certain reasoning/analytical cognition (*rigs pa'i shes pa nges mchog*).

Because [superior] reasoned analysis does not find [realise] any such thing, [as intrinsic existence] it is said that ultimate, or inherent, or true existence is refuted by that consciousness and that it is found to be non-existent [...] what is found in its stead is emptiness, the mere absence of that inherent existence which was sought.<sup>153</sup>

Desideri's assertion that it is impossible for a person to attain happiness by delighting in an entity which has the property of being empty of intrinsic existence needs more clarification, within the context of the dGe lugs understandings of happiness. In Section 18, I argued that such a comment would be viewed as incorrect by the dGe lugs pa and I pointed out an uncontaminated phenomenon, such as a buddha's mental continuum, is considered supremely happy - even though it is empty of intrinsic existence. Thus Desideri's assumption that the supreme excellence must, necessarily, entail intrinsic existence would be unacceptable to them. However, for Desideri final, complete, and ultimate happiness cannot be found in something that has the nature of dependency and is empty of intrinsic existence. Such an entity is impermanent, causally conditioned and hence, in itself, not complete. For him, ultimate happiness can only arise from coming to know the intrinsically existent 'Highest Good' – not by the attainment of buddhahood.

The phrase 'unable to be found by reasoning cognition'<sup>154</sup> is not self-evident and one may ask why it must necessarily be asserted that entities which are established as empty of intrinsic existence, as a consequence of having originated dependently, are simply not 'seen' or 'found' (i.e. realised) by reasoning cognition. The dGe lugs pa consider that only something which is intrinsically existent could be realised under the sort of analytical investigation that analyses the final mode of existence of a phenomenon.<sup>155</sup> 'Empty' entities are called thus

---

<sup>153</sup> Napper (2003: 55-6).

<sup>154</sup> /*dnngos po rnams rigs pa'i shes pa nyid kyis mi rnyed pa* /

<sup>155</sup> According to the dGe lugs pa, since nothing exists intrinsically, there is nothing to be realised.

because they have not been ‘found’ in that way. The reason for this is because they are only *nominally existent* due to their being dependent on their basis of designation (i.e. on its constituent parts). (See Sections 30-32 for a more detailed treatment of this topic).

In this section Desideri is saying that one must uproot as false the assertion which maintains: because ‘superior certain reasoning cognition fails to realise an intrinsically existent object which when contacted brings about happiness – then such an object does not exist. The dGe lugs school of thought maintains there is no intrinsically existent object or entity anywhere – irrespective of whether it brings happiness or not. We know from Desideri’s statement in Section 18 the entity he is describing here is established with intrinsic existence. We also know he considers that in the absence of at least one intrinsically existent entity somewhere, all dependently arisen conventional objects would be non-existent.

If Desideri is referring to ordinary reasoning cognition (*rigs pa’i shes pa nyid*) towards the end of this section, perhaps his statement that ‘dependently arisen conventional entities’ are simply not seen and not realized by reasoning cognition is because in the absence of any dependent arisen conventional objects, ordinary conventional reasoning would not find anything since there would be nothing to observe and no one to observe! However I think it is more likely he either failed to add the word ‘superior’ or ‘supreme’ before cognition, or perhaps he just assumed the reader would know from the context he is still referring to ‘supreme and certain reasoning cognition’.<sup>156</sup> According to dGe lugs analysis, if anything exists with the nature of intrinsic existence it will be realised when subjected to ultimate analysis and if a thing does not have the nature of intrinsic existence it will not be ‘found’ – only its emptiness of intrinsic existence will be realised.

---

<sup>156</sup> The addition of *nyid* after *shes pa* (cognition) gives it emphasis. Perhaps Desideri’s use of *nyid* in this particular context indicates the cognition he is referring to is superior reasoning cognition.

## Two types of Cognitive Objects

[20] English translation:

Moreover, for example, there are two kinds of general cognition: [1] conventional cognition; [2] and reasoning cognition. Similarly, regarding cognitive objects or *shes bya* (i.e. that which is to be cognized): there are: [1] existent and non-existent conventional cognitive objects. [2] Existent and non-existent ultimate cognitive objects.

If one examines [*brtag*] with rational reasoning some or other object that is cognizable, then – initially - it must be decided whether that object exists conventionally or not. As regards maintaining it is conventionally non-existent there is absolutely no need for an examination with or by the wisdom of individual investigation as to its existence or its non-existence, ultimately. However, as for that object which is undeniably established as [being] necessarily existent, conventionally - the system of assertions established by reasoning which maintains there does not exist at all any entity that is resistant to analysis by reasoning [anywhere] - is necessarily established as a mere system of delusion in which one can have no reliance.

Comments: In the first part of Section 20, Desideri makes a number of brief statements without discussing them in any detail. He merely states that there are two different types of ordinary or general cognition: (1) conventional cognition (*tha snyad pa'i shes pa*) which relates to the five senses and (2) reasoning or analytical cognition (*rigs pa'i shes pa*) which is mind related. Desideri continues and states that there are two types of conventional cognitive objects (*shes bya*), existent and non-existent. He reiterates the dGe lugs view that it is necessary to decide whether an object (*yul*) exists conventionally or not. If the object exists conventionally, then superior/supreme reasoning analysis can be applied to determine its ultimate mode of existence (i.e. if it exists ultimately in the sense of its having intrinsic existence or not). However, if an object does not exist conventionally, there would be no

point in trying to examine it further.<sup>157</sup> Without elaborating on what he has just stated Desideri points out that there are two types of ultimate cognitive objects, namely, existent and non-existent ultimate objects. According to Gyatso (1995b: 200): “All phenomena, both permanent objects and impermanent things, have two natures: an ultimate nature and a conventional nature”. He adds: “The ultimate nature of any phenomena is its lack of inherent existence”<sup>158</sup> I pointed out (in Section 18) that reasoning cognition which seeks to discover a phenomenon’s true mode of being (and its resulting knowledge) is referred to as superior, infallible, or sublime/supreme reasoning cognition. In Section 19, I noted that this particular method - whereby an ultimate analysis of the profound nature of phenomena is pursued – is not for the purpose of discovering an object’s emptiness per se, but rather to find if that particular phenomenon exists ultimately (i.e. if it has intrinsic existence). Since dGe lugs pa maintain that emptiness is *always* the result of such an analysis one could say that the result of their analysis is a foregone conclusion. This is because the dGe lugs pa consider intrinsic existence a fiction and so anticipate it will never be realised (or found).<sup>159</sup>

Desideri continues and refers to an object which is ‘undeniably established as necessarily existent *conventionally*’. We know that the dGe lugs pa and Desideri both disagreed with the concept of an intrinsically existent entity that exists conventionally. Such a statement would be contradictory, since ‘existing intrinsically’ means precisely ‘existing ultimately’, and ‘to exist ultimately’ is not the same as ‘to exist conventionally’. Furthermore, if something were

---

<sup>157</sup> It would be pointless to employ the logic of analytical reasoning or investigation to try to discover the ultimate mode of existence of something which is non-existent e.g. the son of a barren woman or the horns of a rabbit. Fictional things are non-existent and therefore do not arise dependently nor are they able to perform a function. They are not classed as phenomena.

<sup>158</sup> Gyatso 1995b: 361.

<sup>159</sup> Cozort (1998: 51) states: “All things that exist, exist conventionally, for nothing exists ultimately. Even emptiness, despite being an ultimate truth, exists only conventionally, not ultimately. Furthermore, emptiness exists only conventionally despite the fact that it is realized as the result of an ultimate analysis, the point being that it was not what was sought in the analysis but is itself precisely the non-finding of an ultimately existing phenomenon by ultimate analysis.”

intrinsically existent then, according to the dGe lugs point of view, it would most certainly be ‘found’ or realised under analysis (See Sections 21-22 for a further discussion on this subject). Desideri would have been aware, from his reading of Tsong kha pa’s *Lam rim chen mo* and other Buddhist texts, of the divergent views held by the different schools within the four Buddhist tenet systems. It was pointed out earlier that the Middle Way (Mādhyamika) system is sub-divided into two separate schools, namely, (1) the Autonomy system and (2) the Consequence system. The dGe lugs pa adhere to the second system.<sup>160</sup>

Newland (1999:64) explains that a proponent of the Middle Way Autonomy system is someone: “who refutes true existence and ultimate existence (thus avoiding the extreme of permanence) but asserts that all phenomena inherently exist in a conventional sense (thus avoiding the extreme of annihilation).” It appears Desideri’s discussion relates to such a viewpoint and may explain therefore why he brings the concept of an ‘intrinsically existent entity existing conventionally’ into his discussion. Knowing that the dGe lugs pa firmly reject his assertion that there has to be an intrinsically existent entity somewhere (which served as the initial support for dependently arisen conventional entities), perhaps his intention was to draw attention to the fact there is another school of Tibetan philosophical thought that maintains the intrinsic existence of things – albeit conventionally.

Desideri’s final comment appears to be a reference to the dGe lugs system of analysis that maintains that there does not exist any entity (anywhere, i.e. neither ultimately nor conventionally) that is resistant to analysis when it is subjected their particular form of supreme certain reasoning cognition. He continues and declares in no uncertain terms that such a system is necessarily established as a mere system of delusion and is one on which one

---

<sup>160</sup> According to dGe lugs exegesis, the Autonomy system (Svāntarika Mādhyamika) considers conventional things to exist intrinsically, but they deny this is the case ultimately. From a Prāsangika point of view such an assertion is thought to be absurd. There are other Tibetan schools that describe emptiness as being ultimately existent; for example, the *Jo nang pa* teach a concept of extrinsic emptiness (see Williams 2009: 114-115).

cannot rely. In other words, it is a system that leads people astray. Desideri uses the word the word *bslu pa* which means ‘deceptive’. This word is commonly used to refer to the delusory nature of things. One consequence of the dGe lugs assertion that everything is like a reflection (see Section 4), a mirage, a dream, or an illusion is the clear implication that the objects our senses relate have an illusory ‘appearance’ and are therefore deceptive (Section 27). Thus we are deceived and led astray by our innately ignorant consciousnesses. We see things as existing intrinsically whereas their real nature, which is emptiness, is hidden or concealed. However, an enlightened being (i.e. a buddha) who has attained omniscience sees things ‘as they really are’.<sup>161</sup>

### **Resistant to Analysis by Reasoning**

[21] English translation:

Therefore, those who have understanding, who are not partial and are free from hate - not taking sides [but] remaining neutral - kindly listen carefully. If there does not exist some entity which is resistant to [i.e. able to withstand] analysis by reasoning existing conventionally, then it must necessarily be maintained that all entities without any exception which are undeniably established to conventional cognition do not exist. You maintain as existing, even though not existing ultimately, entities that are established undeniably to conventional cognition. Moreover, if one asserts as existing a real basis for positing

---

<sup>161</sup> Sopa & Hopkins (1989: 35) point out: “Emptinesses are ultimate truths or highest objective truths because they are objects of the highest wisdom and because they appear in direct cognition exactly the way they are. All other phenomena, permanent and impermanent, are truths-for-a-concealer because an ignorant consciousness, the concealer of the reality of emptiness through conceiving things to exist inherently, assumes they exist the way they appear”. The meaning of the term ultimate or sublime truth refers to that which is comprehended in the ultimate mode of being. See Section 27 for a more detailed explanation of ‘truths for a concealer’. Another name for ultimate truths is “highest object truths” (ibid., 35).

presentations of past, present and future, cause and effect and so forth, it is necessary to assert as existent, an entity that is resistant to analysis with reasoning – existing conventionally. If there does not exist any such entity that is resistant to analysis – existing conventionally – [then] because of the non-existence of that entity it will be necessary to maintain that all entities established to conventional cognition are utterly non-existent. If someone asks what is the system of proof that this is the case I will explain it.

Comments: It would seem that Desideri is continuing to focus his discussion on the Svāntarika Mādhyamika view that conventionally existent phenomena exist intrinsically.<sup>162</sup> I have already noted in Section 20 this is puzzling, since it is a contradiction to say that an entity with intrinsic existence exists conventionally and, moreover, it is a statement that neither Desideri nor the dGe lugs pa would ever agree to.<sup>163</sup> However, we have seen Desideri maintained that the existence of an intrinsically existent entity is necessary, somewhere, in order to avoid the extreme of nihilism and he was fully aware that this view would conflict with the dGe lugs assertion that there is not even one thing that has the nature of intrinsic existence.

The phrase ‘resistant to analysis by reasoning’ needs some explanation. Hopkins - when describing the position of those Tibetan Buddhists who rejected the dGe lugs view and asserted that conventional things exist intrinsically - makes the following comment:

---

<sup>162</sup> In Section 20 I pointed out that there were those who did hold such a view, even though they denied that such objects had ultimate intrinsic existence (Newland 1999: 64). Incidentally Newland (ibid., 65) also points out “being found” by an ultimate mind and “being able to bear analysis” by an ultimate mind are not the same but as Desideri did not address this point I will not comment further.

<sup>163</sup> For Desideri, the existence of a necessary being was essential in order to explain the existence of a ‘created world’. He considered that something must exist with its own intrinsic nature in order for there to be anything at all; however, that ‘something’ cannot be part of the conventional world of dependently arisen phenomena. In his prologue (Part One Section 1) he described God as intrinsically existent (*rang bzhin gyis grub pa*).

[A]n analytical consciousness is searching to find whether an object inherently exists or not, and if it ‘finds’ or cognizes an emptiness of inherent existence of that object, then it would seem that the emptiness must inherently exist, since according to [Ngok]<sup>164</sup> it would be able to bear ultimate analysis.<sup>165</sup>

Hopkins makes it clear (in the case of Svātantrika Mādhyamika) that the cognizing of an object’s emptiness means the object’s emptiness exists intrinsically. In contrast, the dGe lugs consider that the realisation, or ‘finding’, of emptiness does not mean that the object can bear ultimate analysis. They maintain that nothing can bear or be resistant to ultimate analysis, not even an emptiness.<sup>166</sup>

We have also seen the dGe lugs pa strongly reject any charge that their views result in nihilism. Although they describe things as being *like* a reflection, an illusion, a dream and so forth, for them the term, ‘existing conventionally’ does not mean that things are illusory. Desideri lists some of the things that they consider to be fundamental in a conventional sense. He reminds the reader they claim there is ‘a real basis for positing’, for example, presentations of past, present and future; cause and effect, etcetera.<sup>167</sup> The thrust of Desideri’s argument in the current discussion seems to be that in the absence of an intrinsically existent entity existing conventionally (or ultimately), then all the other things just listed – and which

---

<sup>164</sup> The famous *Ka dam* translator Ngok Loden Sherap (*ngog lbo ldan shes rab*) and his followers held such a view, which was considered faulty by the dGe lugs pas. Ngok was born in Tibet in 1059 and died in 1109. See Napper (2003: 711-12fn241).

<sup>165</sup> Hopkins (1996: 406).

<sup>166</sup> The meaning of *bzod pa* is to bear, forbear, withstand, or endure. The term *don dam pa'i dpyod pa* refers to ultimate analysis and the phrase *don dam dpyod byed kyi rigs pa* is used to describe ‘reasoning of ultimate analysis’.

<sup>167</sup> The dGe lugs pa posit as existing, past, present and future (*'das pa dang da lta ba dang ma 'ongs pa*), cause and effect (*rgyu 'bras*), karma and rebirth. (Karma and rebirth are discussed in Section 35). The word *'jog sa* (which is a place for putting or storing something) is included in a phrase which I have translated as ‘a real basis for positing’ (*sogs pa'i rnam gzhas (positing) la sogs 'jog sa (basis) yang dag pa (real) zhig yod pa*).

are established to conventional cognition - would be utterly non-existent.<sup>168</sup> He points out in *Origins*: “If the independent does not exist it is not possible to classify all that exists as ordinary existence, and if this – as you say – is the case then there is no birth, existence, or disappearance. And the law of the producer and the produced [cause and effect] does not hold, nor does the principle of affirmation and denial [the principle of non-contradiction].”<sup>169</sup>

[Se non esiste l'indipendente non vi é possibilità di sistemare tutto ciò che esiste di esistenza ordinaria: e se é così come voi dite, allora non c'è più nascere, esistere e sparire, ed anche non é più vera la legge del produttore e del prodotto [della causa e dell'effetto] e non é più vera l'esistenza dell'affermazione e della negazione [il principio di non contraddizione].

We have seen that one of the basic tenets of the dGe lugs pa school is the denial of an intrinsically existent entity. According to Williams (2012: 123), they consider that “All things are only secondary existents, conceptual concepts”. Williams (2012: 107) illustrates this saying:

We have seen that to be a conceptual existent is to be capable of being dissolved away under a particular sort of critical analytical investigation. That investigation is an investigation that searches to find if X is the sort of thing that has existence in its own right. In other words it searches to find if whether X can or cannot be dissolved into component parts that, as it were, bestow the existence of X upon it when conceptualised in a particular sort of way. Later Tibetan thinkers would refer to this sort of search as an ‘ultimate investigation’, a search to find if X has ultimate (i.e. primary) existence or not.

---

<sup>168</sup> Desideri understood that his reader held a strong belief in the process of cause and effect, and also in the presentations of past, present and future. This being the case, Desideri considered that in reality things have to be more than ‘illusion-like’. Indeed without things (*dgos po rnam*s) actually existent, albeit conventionally, there would be no emptiness.

<sup>169</sup> *Origins*; OT3: 201. The reference to the principle of non-contradiction is Toscano’s addition.

**There is no pervasion!**

[22] English translation:

If you assert that there does not exist a most excellent entity resistant to analysis existing conventionally it is necessary to maintain as utterly non-existent, all persons, without any exception, that are established by conventional cognition [awareness]. If there does not exist a most excellent entity that is resistant to analysis, existing conventionally, then the consequence [of such an assertion] is it necessary to maintain that there does not exist any birth of persons who are established to conventional cognition.

Face this! As for the birth of persons who are established to conventional cognition, being visibly established without causes and conditions, [well!] even conventionally such a thing does not happen.

If you say: 'It doesn't follow' [*khyab pa ma byung*. I say] 'Yes it does' [*khyab pa yod*].

If there is utterly non-existent a most excellent entity that is resistant to analysis existing conventionally [then according to that which was explained earlier] it must necessarily be maintained that the birth of persons who are established by or to conventional cognition is merely/simply established without causes and conditions. As for a birth like that, not only does it not occur ultimately, it is also without foundation because it cannot be maintained conventionally. If there is no most excellent entity which is resistant to analysis existing conventionally [and] should you ask the reason for the necessity of maintaining that the birth of person(s) established to conventional cognition is merely established without causes and conditions [i.e. the birth did not occur], I will also explain this.

Comments: It seems that Desideri is taking the concept of an ‘intrinsically existing entity existing conventionally’ a step further when he refers to it as a *most excellent entity* existing conventionally. When Desideri uses words such as ‘most excellent’ before ‘entity’ it usually implies he is referring to God. However, we know that Desideri did not consider God to be a product of cause and effect - therefore why would he imply that God exists conventionally? One possibility is that perhaps he was seeking to lay a foundation for introducing the idea that *evidence* for God’s existence is discoverable at a conventional level. In *Origins* (OT3: 318) Desideri explains although the Supreme Being is not an object of everyday consciousness nevertheless, his existence is the logical outcome of the indirect experience of relative consciousness. Ott (1963: 17) refers to this as ‘the supernatural knowability of the existence of God’. If this is the case, I doubt Desideri’s Tibetan reader would have grasped the meaning of what he was trying to say.<sup>170</sup> Ott explains (ibid., 18): “Our natural knowledge of God in this world is not an immediate, intuitive cognition, but a mediate, abstractive knowledge, because it is attained through the knowledge of creatures.” He draws attention to Romans chapter 1 verse 20 which backs up his claim that the natural knowledge of God is attained through created things.<sup>171</sup> In *Origins* Desideri writes:

The knowledge of absolute truth arises out of knowledge of relative truth. All learned people must recognize a Supreme Being who can be investigated by consciousness and is recognisable for his nature, which is that of his real condition. He is worthy of honour and respect. He is unique, absolute and without equal.<sup>172</sup>

---

<sup>170</sup> Why (according to Desideri) it is necessary for there to be ‘a most excellent entity that is resistant to analysis existing conventionally’.

<sup>171</sup> Ott 1963: 18-20.

<sup>172</sup> *Origins* (OT3: 299. In Section 26 I included a quote from Desideri’s manuscript *Origins*; OT3: 314: “There can be no doubt that relative logic, i.e., that of the senses, cannot lead us to the Absolute

[La conoscenza della verità assoluta sorge dalla conoscenza della verità relative. Con tutte le persone intelligenti si deve riconoscere un Supremo Ente esaminabile dalla conoscenza e riconoscibile nella sua natura che é propria della sua condizione reale. Egli é degno di onore, di rispetto; Egli é unico, senza paragone, Assoluto].

Desideri points out that relative logic related to the senses cannot carry out such an investigation nevertheless, it is possible by '*reasoning which is absolute*' to demonstrate his existence (Origins, OT3: 315). He continues:<sup>173</sup>

We have had many discussions. Someone might say: logic shows that the one Lord who is supreme, cannot not exist. But it does not demonstrate he does exist. The proof of his existence lies in the demonstration that he cannot not exist: if one demonstrates that it should be so, it is because it is so [...]. If I can logically show that he must exist, then one must accept that he does exist.

[Abbiamo fatto tante discussioni. Qualcuno potrebbe dire: La logica dimostra che non esiste un Signore unico, supremo, indipendente, ma non dimostra che esiste. Ma, la conferma che esiste, si ha dalla dimostrazione che non può non esistere: se si dimostra che ci deve essere, é perché c'è. Così ad esempio se posso dimostrare logicamente che esiste un vaso che non si può rompere, è perché quel vaso esiste; così è l'Ente Supremo: se si dimostra logicamente che deve esistere, si deve accettare che esiste.]

Perhaps this reference to '*reasoning which is absolute*' may have some relevance to his statement '*a most excellent entity that is resistant to analysis, existing conventionally*'.

However, if this is the case it is not at all obvious. There is a statement in Section 26, which may possibly indicate this was his intention. Desideri comments: '*If one should wonder in what way is there a system of establishing [i.e. a mode of proving] that there necessarily*

---

because the One Supreme Lord is above and beyond things which can be directly perceived [...] so he cannot be an object of ordinary knowledge and it is obvious then he cannot be proven by ordinary, relative knowledge."

<sup>173</sup> Origins, OT3: 314.

exists a supreme being that is resistant to analysis on a conventional level - I will tell you [but as] I am wary of going into great depth will do so succinctly'. However he fails to elaborate further.

As Sections 22 and 23 go together it is necessary to understand them in the context of a dGe lugs philosophical debate. It is clear that Desideri considered the existence of an intrinsically existent entity is necessary – somewhere - in order to avoid the extreme of nihilism. He contends that the denial of an intrinsically existent entity would result in the non-existence of all people, including their birth. In other words, there would be nothing at all. He was fully aware that such a nihilistic consequence would be completely unacceptable to the dGe lugs pa since they maintain the 'relative' existence of phenomena, including persons, and consider that such phenomena are undoubtedly established by or to conventional cognition.

Desideri uses several terms that specifically relate to the method dGe lugs monks follow when engaging in public debate. The expression *der thal* ('Face this!') means that what follows is going to contradict the opponent's position and will result in an unwelcome conclusion (for the opponent). We see him challenging the opponent when he states: 'If you say there is no pervasion' (*khyab pa ma byung zer na*) meaning 'if you say it doesn't follow'! Desideri responds with the words, 'I say it does follow'. The words *khyab pa yod* literally mean 'there is a pervasion'. The word for consequence in Tibetan is *thal 'gyur* (or *thal ba*). Hopkins (1996: 443-5) explains:

Consequences (*prāsaṅga*) are used to generate in an opponent a consciousness that infers a thesis. Unwanted consequences that contradict an opponent's position and arise from his position are frequently used. Employing a reason and a pervasion approved by the opponent, a consequence of his views which contradicts another of his views is presented to him [...] Through the statement of the consequence, a

consciousness that infers the implied opposite meaning is generated in the  
opponent.<sup>174</sup>

In Section 6, Desideri referred to the birth of a particular person who is born in the present time. Here (in Section 22) the discussion is about the birth of persons in general. Desideri's view on birth is that it necessitates (1) a primary or first cause and (2) a birth that is real, i.e. an actual birth that occurs as an event in time with a beginning and an end. This is the only kind of birth that for him has significance or meaning. The dGe lugs pa deny the first assertion but accept the second one in the sense that birth occurs conventionally, even though they consider it to be like a reflection. Desideri considers that their 'so-called birth' is in fact without significance or meaning because they deny an initial cause to the series of births. The dGe lugs pa consider the series is without beginning and regresses infinitely. For this reason Desideri maintains the birth they assert as occurring conventionally must be accepted as a *mere* fabrication (i.e. it is non-existent). Desideri is not asserting that birth exists intrinsically. He considered that God (*rang bzhin gyis grub pa'i dkon mchog*) alone exists intrinsically and that everything else has the nature of dependency. A fictional birth is a consequence of the dGe lugs denial of the necessity for an initial beginning to the whole process of dependent origination. In Section 7, Desideri made the assertion that the concept of an infinite regress of causes is erroneous. In Section 9, he stated that the 'causal efficiency force' of the causes and conditions that generate birth must in some aspect 'contact' the person who is being born. The thrust of Desideri's 'Face this' (*der thal*) relates to his challenge regarding the birth of persons that are established to conventional cognition being visibly established without causes and conditions. Desideri comments that even conventionally such a thing does not happen. The debating opponent had to respond to his challenge but Desideri knew he would

---

<sup>174</sup> For a detailed examination of debate in the Tibetan tradition see Hopkins (1996: 441-453) and Dreyfus (2003: 195-228).

never agree to such a statement and would try to ‘wriggle out’ of the unwelcome conclusion by asserting: ‘The pervasion does not stand’ (i.e. it does not follow). This is why Desideri insists that the pervasion does stand: If you say ‘It doesn't follow’ (*khyab pa ma byung*), ‘Yes it does’ (*khyab pa yod*)’. Desideri then repeats his previous discussion and adds the words: ‘As for a birth like that,<sup>175</sup> not only does it not occur ultimately (*don dam pa med par*), it is also without foundation because it cannot be maintained conventionally’.

### **The pervasion’s unwelcome conclusion.**

[23] English translation

Do you assert that the birth of persons who are established to conventional cognition [1] exists without beginning from beginningless time? [2] Or do you assert that birth has a beginning? If it is according to the first one – it is not reasonable, because in the treatise of those who are on the other side there does exist an end point to the birth of persons. If you say, ‘There is no pervasion’. [Well, I say] ‘There is’. [My] reason is this: if one maintains as existing, a terminating point, [then] there must necessarily also exist a starting off [or] beginning point. Face the [following consequences]. Taking the illustration of the road from India to Lhasa - since you have already asserted that the road exists with an end - [then] because of this, to assert the road from Lhasa to India is endless, makes no sense at all. Moreover, if you accept a person comes into existence [i.e.] that their birth exists conventionally - then you must necessarily accept that undeniably, there is birth in reality. For this reason, the birth of a person established to conventional cognition does not exist beginninglessly because [the person] is actually born. [If you say] ‘There is no pervasion’ [well I say]: ‘There is’. Because if one considers the meaning of birth [i.e. as an event with a

---

<sup>175</sup> A birth established without causes and conditions.

function] one cannot maintain that it necessarily exists beginninglessly. If you say ‘How can this be’? I will explain the reason.

Comments: Dreyfus (2003: 211), when discussing Tibetan debate points out that the main part of the debate consists of questions and answers. The aim of the challenger is to put forward clearly stated points in a logical progression, and to: “oblige the defender to contradict either previous statements or common sense.” It appears Desideri is trying to follow a similar protocol, and the context in which he frames his arguments relates to this particular debate structure. In taking the role of a challenger, his task is to point out if the opponent – i.e. the defender of the thesis – makes either (1) a contradictory statement or (2) takes a blatantly absurd position.

In the current discussion, we again see a denial of a beginning or starting point, in regards to the arising of casually dependent phenomena - would result in there being nothing at all.

Desideri now challenges the opponent to say whether he maintains (1) the birth of persons exists from eternity or (2) the birth of persons has a beginning. If he chooses the first option it would, according to Desideri, be unreasonable because ‘in the treatise of some others there does exist an end point to the birth of persons’.<sup>176</sup> Desideri declares that the pervasion still stands because ‘if one maintains as existing a terminating point there must necessarily also exist a starting off or beginning point’. It seems he is not speaking here about an end that is final but the actual coming into existence of an effect, and in the current discussion this is the actual birth of a person. Both Desideri’s debating opponent and Desideri himself would hold that people are indeed born. Desideri returns to his illustration (first mentioned in Section 10) about the road leading from Lhasa to India (and vice versa) and declares another ‘Face this’. His point is that it would be unreasonable for the opponent, who has already agreed that the

---

<sup>176</sup> The end or terminating point that Desideri is talking about here is that of actually coming into existence. He does not specify who the ‘others’ are.

road that leads from India to Lhasa exists with an end, to assert that the road from Lhasa to India is endless. However, the focus of this section is primarily about the birth of persons (*gang zag dag gi skye ba*), which are established to conventional cognition. Desideri has already argued that all such births have an actual beginning in that they are an event in time and are not fabricated births. He discusses birth in detail in *Origins* (OT3: 251-279) and points out that dependently originated things are impermanent because (1) they have a beginning and that (2) before their beginning they did not exist. Thus, it would be contradictory to assert that things had an inception at a certain point in the past, and then to declare they existed before that moment of inception.

In the next section Desideri talks of birth being more than ‘mere birth’. His reference to ‘beginningless birth’ may not only relate to a beginningless series it may also relate to the dGe lugs view that entities are mental fabrications or conceptual constructs and so are “merely appearances to the mind which have no further reality”<sup>177</sup> Nāgārjuna states:<sup>178</sup> “Whatever arises depending on this or that has not arisen substantially [i.e. intrinsically]. That which has not arisen substantially: How can it literally be called ‘arisen’? He then summarises the above in stanza 21, “So to conclude: There is no origination; there is no destruction. The path of origination and destruction has [however] been expounded [by the Buddhas] for a practical purpose.” In stanza 23 he comments: “Those who have come to understand that dependent co-origination is devoid of origination and destruction have crossed the ocean of existence, consisting of dogmas.” It seems that Desideri understood if things are considered to be merely mental fabrications then Nāgārjuna’s assertion ‘there is no origination; there is no destruction’ would mean birth could be viewed as beginningless. It is helpful to bear this in mind when considering Desideri’s comments in Section 24.

---

<sup>177</sup> Burton 2001b. See Section II of his article *Is Madhyamaka Buddhism Really the Middle Way?*

<sup>178</sup> Nāgārjuna 1997: 79. Stanza 19; trans. Lindtner. *Sixty Verses of Arguments (Rigs pa drug cu pa)*.

## **Birth is more than a ‘mere’ birth.**

[24] English translation:

It makes no sense to talk about a person who has already been born, to be born again. If one asserts the birth of persons in general, it must necessarily be asserted that there are people who have not yet been born. Therefore, if one asserts that the birth of persons exists beginninglessly [then] one must necessarily assert that the birth of person(s) not yet born exists beginninglessly [too]. Therefore the position [that maintains] the birth of a person exists beginninglessly – is unreasonable. Because it means one [also] has to assert there exists beginninglessly the birth of a person not yet having been achieved [i.e. occurred].<sup>179</sup>

Regarding the assertion that human birth exists beginninglessly – the birth never having been achieved nor occurred [there is a fault]. As far as the assertion that the birth of a person exists beginninglessly is concerned there is a fault of contradicting the thesis. [This is] because there is the fault of accepting birth as being a mere birth that is not a real or an actual birth.

Comments: Desideri continues his discussion on birth and there is a connection between the last sentence<sup>180</sup> of Section 23 and what follows here. He points out that:

(1) It makes no sense to talk about a person who has already been born - being born again i.e., the event of birth having occurred it is not repeated. This statement resonates with a quotation from Nāgārjuna: “That which has been born cannot be born [again]”.<sup>181</sup> In other words, causation cannot be said to produce an already existent thing. If birth was beginningless or eternal then something born would always be born. However, if that were

---

<sup>179</sup> Such people would, in fact, be eternal.

<sup>180</sup> [This is] because there is the fault of accepting birth as being a mere birth, i.e. it is not a real or an actual birth.

<sup>181</sup> /gang zhig skyes de bskyed bya min /. *Seventy Verses on Sunyata (sTong pa nyid bdun cu pa)*. (Nāgārjuna 1997: 95. Stanza 5; trans. Lindtner). See also Komito (1987: 79-95).

right then it would not be born, because it already exists! Thus, the thesis that birth occurs would be contradicted.

(2) As far as the birth of people in general is concerned – it is necessary to assert that there are people who have not yet been born. Desideri discusses the consequences of maintaining that birth exists beginninglessly. He was aware the dGe lugs pa consider that the arising of inter-dependent things have no initial beginning or starting-off point and so he draws attention to the necessity of an initial starting point for all individual births.<sup>182</sup> It has been pointed out he viewed the physical birth of persons as a specific event in time, and one which is characterised by both a beginning and a completion point. He also considered people who have been born (i.e. are currently alive) to be distinct from those who are yet to be born.<sup>183</sup> He goes on to assert (a) there was a moment when there were no dependent entities in existence and (b) that inter-dependent things arose from a cause outside of interdependence.<sup>184</sup> However birth from a dGe lugs perspective is considered to be beginningless and there has never been a time when there was no birth.<sup>185</sup> It is within such a context that Desideri's statements must be understood.

(3) Desideri points out that if birth is beginningless, then the birth of beings not born would also be beginningless. Hence those things would already be born and there would not actually be birth at all.

(4) If this were the case, then the thesis which asserts that 'birth occurs' would be contradicted. Desideri's point is that there would be the fault of accepting birth as being a

---

<sup>182</sup> We know that Desideri's own view was that all 'created' existences arise from inter-dependence but God who exists intrinsically is outside the process of cause and effect. See *Origins* (OT3: 261). But the dGe lugs pa assert that all existences without any exception arise from inter-dependence.

<sup>183</sup> *Origins* (OT3: 266).

<sup>184</sup> *Origins* (OT3: 267).

<sup>185</sup> Part One Section 23.

mere birth and not a real or an actual one. In other words, we are left with a mere assertion of birth, rather than an actual birth.<sup>186</sup>

Desideri was obviously familiar with the technical term ‘mere birth’ (*skye ba tsam*). The word *tsam* means ‘mere’, ‘only’ or ‘just’. From a dGe lugs perspective, to say that something is merely existent means it exists as a conceptual imputation, and, indeed, this is exactly how they view all things to genuinely exist.<sup>187</sup> In this section it seems Desideri is using the term ‘mere’ to describe a ‘mere’ appearance of birth. In other words, there would not actually be a birth at all and thus, the so claimed birth, would be a complete fiction. In *Origins* he makes the following comment:<sup>188</sup>

We should accept that birth has meaning for inter-dependent things: you cannot talk about birth as if birth has no meaning. Moreover, for birth to have any significance it can only be if the birth did not exist right from the very beginning, [that is] did not exist prior to the birth of objects born.

[Si deve accettare che la nascita abbia un significato per le cose dell’interdipendenza: non si può parlare di nascita se l’esser nato non ha significato. E nascere con significato v’è soltanto se la nascita non è esistita fin dal principio, prima della nascita di quello che è nato.]

---

<sup>186</sup> One is left with only words but no baby!

<sup>187</sup> According to Napper (2003: 63), Tsong kha pa’s understanding of the four extremes of production was that ‘inherently existent production’ is being refuted and not ‘mere’ production (i.e. at the conventional level). Napper explains the Prāsaṅkika use the term ‘mere I’ (*bdag tsam*) i.e. the ‘I itself’ when referring to a person in the context of analysis. (Ibid: 48-49). The ‘I’ or ‘self’ (*bdag*) which is said to exist conventionally is “merely imputed by thought but it cannot be found at all when sought analytically.” Even though we say words such as ‘I saw this’ and ‘I remember that’ and so forth, Napper points out that it is necessary to grasp that, “the ‘I’ does not in the least exist from its own side, in its own right, inherently, truly, and so forth.” According to her the Prāsaṅkika consider this to be true (1) in regard to the ‘self’ of persons and (2) for everything else as well. Desideri understood it was the mental and physical aggregates that serve as the basis of designation for the self (*bdag*). The subject of aggregates is examined in more detail in Sections 30-32.

<sup>188</sup> *Origins*. (OT3: 270).

In other words, we have to accept that the birth of things is real only when they are not already born.<sup>189</sup>

### **A time of primordial non-existence.**

[25] English translation:

Therefore, as far as the other person is concerned,<sup>190</sup> if he has not separated from the path of rejoicing in his learning, let both of us take up the case of birth. It is necessary to accept that birth exists with a beginning. Therefore, because of this, it is necessary to assert that - without birth - dependently originated entities do not arise. For this reason, it is necessary to assert that dependently originated entities [are born] as an event in time. If one asserts that, [then] it must necessarily be asserted that there was ‘an occasion’ of primordial non-existence as regards entities that are empty of intrinsic existence. However, in that situation of primordial non-existence of ‘all without exception entities that are empty of intrinsic existence’, was there anything ‘there’ or was there nothing at all? If [you say] there was nothing this makes no sense. [In this case] since there is asserted as not existing even one entity existing primordially [then as a consequence of that assertion] one also asserts that there does not exist any entity that has a beginning. Thus, one falls to the extreme end of annihilation since there is brought about the destruction of all the presentations of cause and effect.

You have already asserted that there was not even one entity existing primordially. If one should assert as empty of intrinsic existence and undeniably established to conventional cognition the commencement of some entity as existent, [then] it is necessary to assert that

---

<sup>189</sup> *Origins* (OT3: 271).

<sup>190</sup> This refers to the one who defends the dGe lugs thesis which maintains nothing exists intrinsically.

entities established to conventional cognition are born without causes and conditions and this would make no sense at all.

Comments: In Section 25 Desideri is trying to show how the dGe lugs reasoning actually destroys their theory of relativity. As far as he is concerned, to maintain that there is no ‘certainly established support’ primordially would be incomprehensible. Desideri would have viewed God as the creator of all and as the initiator, or prime mover, of the whole causal process.<sup>191</sup> Aquinas (1912: 252) states: “[T]ogether with time, heaven and earth were created.” Nothing except God can be eternal (ibid., 242) and, “The first mover was always in the same state: but the first moveable thing (*mobile*) was not always so, because it began to be whereas hitherto it was not. But this was not through change, but by creation, which is not change as said above.”<sup>192</sup> Aquinas adds that there was no place or space before the world was created: “God is prior to the world by priority of duration. But the word prior does not signify the priority of time but of eternity.”<sup>193</sup> As far as Desideri is concerned, only God is autonomous and thus has a completely different way of existence. Dependently originated products cannot exist in the way that God does, since they come about as a result of causes and conditions. Being born or produced is not in God’s nature. Desideri wants his reader to grasp that in the absence of an intrinsically existent entity primordially dependently originated things would have arisen without a support (i.e. causelessly), and so there would in fact be nothing at all. In Section 25 Desideri introduces the phrase ‘primordially established’.<sup>194</sup> He wants his reader (1) to accept the necessity for negating the concept of an infinite regress, and (2) to agree things have not existed ad infinitum or without an initial first

---

<sup>191</sup> See Aquinas’s Treatise on Creation: 1912: 244-252 in his *Summa Theologica* Part 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> number.

<sup>192</sup> Aquinas 1912: 244.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>194</sup> The term Desideri used for ‘primordial’ is *gdod ma nas med pa’i skabs*. The phrase *thog ma med pa nas dngos po gcig yod pa* may be translated as ‘a primordially existent entity’ and the words *thog ma med pa* mean ‘without beginning’.

beginning. (3) He also wants him to understand the term ‘primordial’ relates to that which is outside time and creation, when not even a single phenomenon with the nature of originating dependently on another existed. (4) Furthermore, he wants him to see that: (i) it makes logical sense to accept the existence of an intrinsically existent necessary entity – primordially - and that such an entity is not caused or produced as a result of originating in dependence upon another. (ii) This unique entity is in fact the support for the existence of everything that has the nature of dependency.

Returning to Desideri’s original question about whether there was anything at all present primordially, we know he is not referring to an entity which is empty of intrinsic existence.<sup>195</sup> He points out that it would be unreasonable to assert (1) there was nothing at all. (2) There does not exist even one entity from beginningless ‘time’. (3) There is absolutely no entity whatsoever which has a beginning. Desideri points out if this should be the case then one falls to the extreme end of annihilation because there is brought about the destruction of all the presentations of cause and effect, which would result in there being nothing at all. Thus dependent origination would be invalidated. By introducing and discussing the concept of a primordial past Desideri wants the reader to grasp that even though no dependently originated things existed primordially, nevertheless, there had to be at least one entity existent at the ‘time’ of non-existence of ‘all without exception entities that are empty of intrinsic existence’. In the following section (Section 26) Desideri explains this entity is established with intrinsic existence.

Here in Section 25 Desideri mentions a number of points – some of which he has already discussed earlier:

1. Birth exists with a beginning.

---

<sup>195</sup> He makes this clear when he says: “in the ‘time’ of primordial non-existence of all entities that are empty of intrinsic existence.”

2. Dependently originated entities do not exist without birth.
3. The birth of dependently originated entities is an event in time.
4. There must have been a time when dependently originated entities did not exist.

Desideri makes it clear that he is referring to the primordial non-existence of entities that are empty of intrinsic existence.

5. A denial of an entity existing primordially results in the destruction or annihilation of all presentations of cause and effect. One cannot assert that all dependently originated entities are the product of an infinite regress of causes. There must be something that is not dependently originated.
6. Therefore, an assertion of a ‘dependently arising’ entity existing primordially would mean that entities established to conventional cognition are born without causes and conditions and this makes no sense at all.
7. Desideri concludes that there is therefore a primordial creator. Such a comment arises out of his previous argument that birth must genuinely occur.

Desideri does not elaborate further, but we know from his earlier comments that he believed the absence of a causal initiator, (i.e. an intrinsically existent entity existing outside and independent of the cause and effect process which characterises all dependently arisen entities) would result in the total non-existence of all entities.

## **A distinctive entity established with intrinsic nature**

[26] English translation:

Therefore, if it is according to the earlier [assertion]<sup>196</sup> it is necessary to assert there was a distinctive singular entity in that primordial past - which was a state of non-existence for all, without exception, entities that are empty of intrinsic nature. If one makes this assertion, then it must necessarily be asserted, it [existed] ‘there’ with intrinsic nature. [Furthermore] it is necessary to assert in that state of primordial non-existence of ‘all without exception entities that are empty of intrinsic nature’ there was [indeed] existent a distinctive singular entity. By investigating that [distinctive] entity which exists at that ‘time’ [of primordial non-existence] it is necessary to delimit it. Either it is established with intrinsic nature or it is not established with intrinsic nature. If you state it is something that is neither - no matter what it is - this is unreasonable. [Moreover] an assertion that it is an entity that is empty of intrinsic nature makes no sense at all.

Face this [unwelcome conclusion]. As for the assertion that states, there exists an entity in that state of primordial non-existence of ‘all without exception entities that are empty of intrinsic existence’, [but] it is an entity which is empty of intrinsic existence; [well] this makes no sense at all. This is because [if one] asserts there is not even one entity that is established with intrinsic existence [then] you have to maintain that ‘all without exception, entities that are undeniably established to conventional cognition’ are non-existent. In that case: having already asserted as existing, even though not existing ultimately, entities that are undeniably established to conventional cognition and, having already asserted as existing a basis for the positing of presentations of past, present and future, [as well as] cause and effect and so forth - if one should [now] wonder in what way is there a system of establishing [i.e. a

---

<sup>196</sup> There was not even one entity existing primordially.

mode of proving] that there necessarily exists a most excellent supreme being that is resistant to analysis on a conventional level; I will tell you, [but as] I am wary of going into great depth, I will do so succinctly.

Comments: In order to understand Desideri's last point it is helpful to read what he wrote in *Origins*.<sup>197</sup> In it, he refers to a Buddhist text entitled *Commentary on the Four Centuries*:<sup>198</sup>

For this reason if we make a rigorous examination of an object via ordinary [sensory] consciousness, we shall discover nothing about 'substance' [intrinsic existence] because the method of enquiry is not the correct one. But, if there was such substance, then the superior consciousness should reveal it.<sup>199</sup> However one will not find it even with superior consciousness because the nature of things is that they are devoid of 'substance' i.e. *śūnyatā*.<sup>200</sup>

[A questo riguardo si legge ancora nel *Commentario de Le Quattro centurie* (B 23): « Per quel motivo, esaminando a fil di logica con la conoscenza comune l'oggetto, non essendo i sensi e la conoscenza in condizione adatta, non si trova qualcosa di sostanziale. Ma se ci fosse questa sostanza, in questo caso quando si esamina, si dovrebbe trovarla con la conoscenza superiore: ma non la si trova neppure con questa conoscenza perchè la natura delle cose è di essere vuote di sostanza, cioè *śūnyatā*»].

---

<sup>197</sup> *Origins* (OT3: 239). For Desideri, this Supreme Being (*dnchos po mchog dam pa zhig*) is God. There would be no point in applying supreme reasoning analysis (which seeks to delineate if conventional dependent phenomena exist intrinsically or not) to see if God exists intrinsically. Desideri considered that God is a necessary being and that he is permanent (unchanging). Moreover he is simple and cannot be divided into parts. I quoted previously (see Section 22) from *Origins* (OT3: 314) where Desideri states: "We have had many discussions. Some might say: logic shows that the one Lord, who is supreme, cannot not exist. But it does not demonstrate he does exist. *The proof of his existence lies in the demonstration that he cannot not exist*: if one demonstrates that it should be so, it is because it is so [...]. If I can logically show that [the Supreme Being] must exist, then one must accept that he does exist." [Emphasis mine].

<sup>198</sup> See Rinchen and Sonam 2008: 382 for a reference to Candrakīrti's *Commentary on the "Four Hundred Stanzas on the Yogic Deeds of the Bodhisattvas"* (*bodhisattvayogacaryācatuḥśatakaṭikā*) */byang chub sems dpa'i rnal 'byor spyod pa bzhi brgya pa'i rgya cher 'grel pa /*.

<sup>199</sup> Superior consciousness is associated with a reasoned analysis or logic that investigates the nature of how something exists. However, the dGe lugs pa assert that in all cases where there is such an investigation, only an emptiness of intrinsic existence will be realised.

<sup>200</sup> In this paragraph, the word 'substance' equates to 'intrinsic existence'. Desideri mentions the *Commentary on the Four Centuries* in *Origins* (OT3: 239).

In *Origins* Desideri comments:<sup>201</sup>

There are two types of logic: [1] that which relates to the senses and is relative and [2] that of reasoning which is absolute. Each of these may be direct, indirect, or founded upon the authority of texts held to be incontrovertible. There can be no doubt that relative logic, i.e., that of the senses, cannot lead us to the Absolute because the One Supreme Lord is above and beyond things which can be directly perceived. This means of knowing via the senses is limited to perceivable objects - material things. But the One Lord who is the essence of perfection, does not have a body, he has no [sense of] taste, no smell, nor the ability to be felt by touch. So he cannot be the object of ordinary knowledge and it is obvious then that he cannot be proven by ordinary, relative knowledge. Nor can the authority of sacred texts demonstrate his existence because that is not acceptable to you Tibetans and secondly because not everyone accepts the validity of this approach.

[Vi sono due tipi di logica: quella dei sensi, relativa, e quella della ragione, assoluta. Ciascuno poi di questi due tipi di logica può essere diretto, indiretto, o basato sull'autorità di testi ritenuti infallibili.

Sicuramente la logica dei sensi, relativa, non può trovare l'Assoluto, perchè quel Signore, unico, supremo, è al di là e al di fuori delle cose sensibili. Questo modo di conoscere attraverso i sensi è limitato alle cose sensibili, materiali e quell'unico Signore, essenza di tutte le perfezioni, non ha però corpo, e in lui non v'è sapore, né odore, né cosa raggiungibile dal tatto.

Quindi non può essere oggetto della conoscenza sensibile ed è logico quindi che la sua esistenza non possa essere dimostrata dalla conoscenza sensibile, relativa. E neppure può la sua esistenza essere dimostrata sulla base dell'autorità di testi ritenuti infallibili, anzitutto perché ciò non risulta a voi Tibetani, ed inoltre questo motivo di credibilità non è accettato da tutti.]

---

<sup>201</sup> *Origins* (OT3: 314).

In considering Desideri's comments in Section 26, it is helpful to know that even though he considered sense related consciousness unable to directly perceive the Supreme Being he did, nevertheless, believe that the logic of consciousness demonstrates his existence.<sup>202</sup> In *Origins* he makes this comment concerning indirect knowledge:

His [God's] existence is not revealed by direct logic in a way that we suddenly see when a lamp is lit. But just because it is not revealed by direct logic it does not mean it is not true [...] in this life we know this unique Lord - who is without compare, supreme and existing in his own right - by an act of faith [lit. words in which we trust] i.e., through indirect knowledge. After this life, if we obtain a positive end, the One Lord who is without compare, supreme and existing in his own right we shall know firsthand.<sup>203</sup>

[La sua esistenza non risulta dalla logica diretta, come sarebbe se si accendesse una lampada per vederci, però perchè non risulta dalla logica diretta, non si può dire che non esiste [...] in questa vita noi conosciamo questo unico Signore, supremo, incomparabile, esistente da se stesso, attraverso la parola di fiducia o logica indiretta; dopo questa vita, se otterremo risultato positivo, quell'unico Signore, supremo, incomparabile, esistente da se stesso, ci apparirà per conoscenza diretta.]

Desideri had pointed out earlier in *Origins*<sup>204</sup> that not only is the Supreme Being non-composite, in that he lacks parts and form, but he is one with his qualities.<sup>205</sup> Therefore, it is

---

<sup>202</sup> *Origins* (OT3: 315).

<sup>203</sup> *Origins* (OT3: 319).

<sup>204</sup> *Origins* (OT3: 300).

<sup>205</sup> He states (*Origins*, OT3: 301): “[...] all his perfections are implicitly defined in his nature and essence [...] God is infinite power, omniscient, gifted with sublime qualities [...] greatness [...] virtue.” Desideri goes on to explain that God's “qualities are as infinite as the number of drops in the ocean. Many rivers discharge into the ocean but the ocean remains one. So it is that all the greatness and perfection of the Supreme Being are simply one and the same with his nature.”

[ [...] tutte le sue perfezioni si identificano con la sua natura o essenza [...] Egli è infinito potere, onnisciente, dotato di sublimi qualità [...] grandezze [...] virtù. [...] Le qualità sono in Lui infinite come

not possible on the conventional level to distinguish component parts, qualities, and characteristics. It was explained earlier (in Section 21) to say something ‘cannot withstand or is resistant to analysis’ is to declare (that as a result of dividing that entity into its parts in an attempt to establish whether it exists intrinsically or not) all that is found is its emptiness, which is its lack of intrinsic existence.<sup>206</sup> Having seen it is impossible therefore for dGe lugs analysis to demonstrate God’s existence, nevertheless Desideri claims it is possible to know he exists because of natural logic. He states:<sup>207</sup> “Consciousness does not know him but the logic of consciousness demonstrates his existence.” [La conoscenza non lo conosce, ma la logica della conoscenza ne dimostra l’esistenza.]

In Section 22 I pointed out that Ott (1963: 13) speaks of the possibility of a ‘natural knowability of God’ by the natural light of reason from created things, and I suggested we could deduce that perhaps Desideri’s closing comment in Section 26 may relate to the indirect knowledge which Ott refers to as the natural light of reason from created things. Desideri also stated in Section 22 ‘If one should [now] wonder in what way is there a system of establishing [*i.e. a mode of proving*] that there necessarily exists a supreme being that is resistant to analysis on a conventional level [...] I will tell you.’ I pointed out that sadly he failed to follow up on this comment and one is left in the dark as to what this mode of proving might be. If he was referring to the natural light of reason from created things was he saying it cannot be refuted (*i.e.* it is resistant to analysis) by either mere conventional reasoning, or by the dGe lugs method of superior certain reasoning cognition?

---

le gocce nel mare. Nell’oceano si versano tanti fiumi, ma l’oceano rimane uno solo. Così è di tutte le grandezze e perfezioni l’Ente Supremo, che sono una cosa sola con la sua natura o essenza.]

<sup>206</sup> Cozort (1998: 49) points out that (according to the dGe lugs pa) inferential valid cognition (*rjes dpag tshad ma*) of the conventional sort includes all types of reasoning processes apart from: “(1) those that are fallacious [e.g. wherever there is smoke there is fire so wherever there is fire there is smoke] (2) those that seek to establish an ultimately existent object.”

<sup>207</sup> *Origins*, OT3: 315

## **The reflection of the moon in a clear lake**

[27] English translation:

According to what was said earlier regarding the example of the appearance of a reflection of the moon in a clear lake, even though it most certainly is the case that there is an appearance of the form of the moon [in the lake], however, [despite the reflection's] appearance it does not exist there as it appears [i.e. intrinsically] but exists in another way. Since it is the case that [the reflected appearance of the moon] possesses the property of being false and delusory, it is maintained it [the moon] is not established there. Similarly, regarding 'all without exception entities that are established to conventional cognition', even though [an object] appears to exist independently to the sensory consciousnesses which are polluted with outer and inner causes for affliction and error, [the object] does not actually exist in that place in accordance with the manner of its appearance.

Like the reflection that has the property of being mistaken, the [object] appears falsely [as if it is intrinsically existent] whereas it is necessarily established as being empty of intrinsic nature. [But], if you maintain, for example, the reflection of the moon undeniably exists there in accordance with its appearance in the lake, then necessarily [you must also] assert there is not a mere reflection of a moon [in the lake] but the actual form of the moon existing as a single entity. Likewise, if one accepts as existent, all entities that are established to conventional cognizers as being empty of intrinsic existence, [then] it must necessarily be asserted that there is a most excellent Supreme Entity that is established with intrinsic existence and which lacks emptiness. Therefore, regardless of how much one minutely examines, with the establishing of reasoning, the system of explanation which asserts as non-existent even a mere atom of being independently established [Well! It is necessary to decide

that] such a philosophical viewpoint must be simply established as one that generates astonishment and is delusory and untrustworthy.

Comments: Desideri is discussing objects that are established to conventional cognizers and their reflection(s). He returns to the illustration he first introduced in Section 4 concerning the reflected appearance of the moon in a clear lake.<sup>208</sup> Initially he focuses on the reflection's deceptive appearance. He reiterates the dGe lugs assertion that a reflection of the moon has the property of being false and delusory because the reflection does not actually exist as it appears. He then draws attention to conventionally cognitively cognized objects and points out that even though an object appears to be intrinsically existent - due to the observer's sense organs which are said to be faulty and polluted with outer and inner causes for affliction and error - the object does not actually exist in accordance with its manner of its appearance. This being the case, if the interlocutor maintains that the reflection of the moon exists there in accordance with its appearance, it is then necessary to assert that the moon's mere reflection is not there, but the actual moon itself. This of course would make no sense but perhaps Desideri's point is this: if one accepts as existent all entities that are established to conventional cognizers as empty of intrinsic existence, it must necessarily be asserted that there is a most excellent Supreme Entity that is established with intrinsic existence and which is not the same as conventionally cognized objects.

I pointed out in the introduction to my thesis that the first part of Desideri's *The Essence of the Christian Faith* is only a brief summary of various points he explored and wrote about extensively in his earlier manuscripts. I have included a number of extracts here in order to give the reader a glimpse of the depth and thoroughness of Desideri's approach in seeking to

---

<sup>208</sup> See Part One A Section 4.

make the Christian Faith relevant to the Tibetan people. Perhaps this is not always obvious when looking at ‘Laying the Foundation’.

In *Origins*, Desideri refers to the moon and comments:

For example, if one admits at the outset that the real moon exists, then the reflection of the moon comes from the light of the moon.<sup>209</sup> [...] But if you say that from the very beginning there was no real moon then right from the start there could never have been a reflection of the moon.<sup>210</sup>

[Per esempio, se si ammette fin dal principio che esiste la luna reale, il riflesso della luna viene dalla luce della luna [...] ma se si sostiene che fin dal principio non esiste alcuna luna reale, allora fin dal principio non ci può essere stato alcun riflesso della luna].

Desideri explains that although the reflections from the moon may be countless,<sup>211</sup> it is necessary to go back systematically, from one reflection to another, until one arrives at the end of the chain, “after which there are no more reflections – only the ‘real’ moon that was the cause of all the other reflections.”<sup>212</sup>

[Al di là del quale non vi è più riflesso, ma la vera luna che ha dato origine ai riflessi]

It is clear that Desideri’s understanding of the word ‘actual’ or ‘real’ (*dngos*) differs from that in dGe lugs conventional usage. Hopkins (1996: 421) highlights that in the Prāsaṅgika system there is no division of truths into ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ and that all objects are considered *unreal*

---

<sup>209</sup> *Origins*, OT3: 263.

<sup>210</sup> *Origins*, OT3: 263. When Desideri uses the word ‘real’ in this passage he is not implying intrinsic existence but simply referring to the actual moon.

<sup>211</sup> *Origins*, OT3: 226.

<sup>212</sup> *Origins*, OT3: 227.

from the point of view of a reasoning consciousness. This is because both conventionally existent objects, as well as magically fabricated or merely mistaken ones, do not exist as they appear. However being falsities one is deceived and thinks they are intrinsically existent.<sup>213</sup> Desideri did not consider that God created things to have a deceptive nature. Nor did he accept the dGe lugs assertion that all objects are mere mental fabrications that arise as a consequence of being dependent on their constituent parts and so forth.

---

<sup>213</sup> Hopkins (1996: 421). “In the Prāsaṅgika system there is no division of truths-for-a-concealer into the real and the unreal from the point of view of a reasoning consciousness because all are unreal in the sense of being falsities that do not exist in the way that they appear. However based on the world’s discrimination of what is true or untrue, real or unreal, through determining whether, with respect to impermanent objects, they can perform functions in accordance with their appearance, the Prāsaṅgika accept a division of truths-for-a-concealer into the real and the unreal. The unreal are objects such as a mirror image which appears to be a face but cannot perform the functions of a face.” He points out that an example of a real conventional truth would be a face.

## **LAYING THE FOUNDATION**

### **PART ONE C**

#### **Section Headings:**

- [28] A list of things and their opposites
- [29] Implication of a thing and its opposite
- [30] Parts and wholes
- [31] More discussion on the totality of entities
- [32] An illustration of a chariot
- [33] Without the cognizable there is no cognition
- [34] An illustration of a dot and its circumference
- [35] The fallacy of rebirth
- [36] The creation of entities that did not previously exist
- [37] A system of Faith and Doctrine that is like 'false gold'

#### **Things and their opposite.**

[28] English translation: It is also true that if one does a detailed, intelligent examination - reflecting on whether or not individual aspects of things exist or not [then] as far as each and every aspect is concerned it is maintained that there is a twofold classification, namely the thing itself and its opposite.

before and after [or former and later]

form and formless

wise and stupid

light and darkness

large and small

long and short

close and distant

external and internal

there and here

high and low

white and black

clear and dense

beautiful and ugly

happiness and pain

nice and unpleasant

subtle and gross

foolish and intelligent

talkative and mute

being Dharma and not being Dharma

worldly and supramundane

goodness and evil<sup>214</sup>

good and bad

above and below

high and low

being and not being

empty and full

hot and cold [frozen]

warm and cool

harmful and useful

past and present [gone and not gone]

difficult and easy

rare and common

smooth and rough

soft and coarse

mountain and plain

tasty and not tasty

tuneful and discordant

---

<sup>214</sup> /legs nyes dang bzang ngan /.

dry and wet

new and old

much and little

defective and perfect

heavy and light

obstructed and free

conjoined and disjoined [single and separated]

obstructed and free from obstructions

embodied and disembodied [alive and dead]

pure and impure

attainable and not attainable

sweet and bitter

There is maintained as being established such aspects as these, [namely] both the thing itself and its opposite.

Comments: In this section Desideri is addressing the twofold classification of things, namely the thing itself (i.e. whatever it may be) and its opposite. He points out that one is able to talk of things being heavy and light, with body and without body, pure and impure, and so forth. A scriptural reference to things being in pairs is found in the deuterocanonical book of Sirach chapter 42 v 24. It is a text Desideri would have been familiar with: “All things come in pairs, one opposite the other, and he [God] has made nothing incomplete.” Desideri’s intention is to root his discussion in the world of reality, i.e. in the conventional world in which we cognize

things directly by means of our five senses as well as our mental faculties which relate to the mind. However not all cognition is valid; in Part B: Section 18 reference was made to the well-known Buddhist illustration of a person who, on seeing a rope, mistakenly thinks it is a snake.<sup>215</sup> The snake is merely set up by conceptuality in dependence upon the mind, and has no basis in reality. Desideri's list does not include any contradictory or imaginary concepts such as; 'a rabbit with horns' or 'a son of a barren woman'.<sup>216</sup> However it is worth noting that neither the existence of a concept of a thing, nor the existence of a thing itself, necessarily imply the existence of its counterpart. Thus, an assertion regarding existence of 'emptiness of intrinsic existence' would not necessarily entail the existence of 'intrinsic existence'. Desideri strongly refuted the dGe lugs denial of intrinsic existence per se, on the grounds that in the absence of a necessary being who acted as the Initial or Primary Cause, there would in fact be nothing at all. The bedrock of Desideri's reasoning was based on God's revelation of himself to humanity in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, as recorded in the New Testament.<sup>217</sup> Being a Jesuit, Desideri would have been familiar with both the Old Testament and New Testament scriptures.<sup>218</sup> In *Origins*, he argues for the necessity for all inter-dependent things existing in a relative state to have had a beginning: "If absolutely all the objects of

---

<sup>215</sup> Desideri points out in the *Final Goal* (OT4: 153): "If with sensory consciousness I see a cord and I believe it to be a snake my sensory consciousness is not a valid consciousness because the cord is not a snake, and the characteristics of a snake are very different from those of a piece of string." (Also see GT3: 170).

[Se con la conoscenza sensibile vedo una corda e la credo un serpente, la mia conoscenza sensibile non è una conoscenza valida, perchè la corda non è un serpente e le caratteristiche di un serpente sono ben diverse da quella di una corda].

<sup>216</sup> Both of these examples are used in Tibetan Buddhism to represent something that is utterly non-existent (i.e. a figment of one's imagination). Wilson 1992: 143.

<sup>217</sup> John 14 v 9.

<sup>218</sup> In the *Final Goal* (OT4: 162). Desideri comments: "This noble Supreme Being, bestowed with true nature can be known by everybody via ordinary and supreme knowledge, but above all, it will be known if one draws upon the two testaments – Old and New – of the Christian traditions"

[Questo nobile Supremo Ente dotato di natura propria può essere conosciuto da tutti con la conoscenza ordinaria e suprema, ma lo sarà soprattutto se ci si appoggia ai due Testamenti vecchio e nuovo delle tradizioni scritturali cristiane].

interdependence exist, by definition, in a relative state, it is clear that there must be a Supreme Being that is not inter-dependent.”<sup>219</sup>

[Se assolutamente tutte le cose dell’interdipendenza esistono per definizione in condizione relative, è chiaro che ci deve essere un sacro supremo Ente che non è interdipendente].

Desideri points out that the ability ‘to exist’ and ‘not to exist’ is a characteristic of inter-dependence and is a relative condition; however, if a being exists that can never cease to exist, then it must necessarily exist and is therefore called a ‘necessary being’. The Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna wrote concerning inter-dependent things and their opposites: “When something is not related to anything, how then can that thing exist? For example, when it is not related to ‘long’, how can short exist?”<sup>220</sup> Other correlatives Nāgārjuna mentioned are: far shore and near [shore]; existence and non-existence; short and long; unity and multiplicity; past and the future; defilement and purification; true and false. He asks, “How can these exist by themselves?”<sup>221</sup> Desideri’s list of things and their opposites therefore seems very appropriate.

---

<sup>219</sup> *Origins* OT3: 284. Desideri pointed out (ibid., 286): “If something has existed from the very beginning – [i.e.] had no need to be born from one already born (and) has always existed – it can only be the ‘Existing One’, who must always have existed, who must always have ‘been born’, since the beginning [i.e., there was never a time when he did not exist]. And this ‘Existing One’ who from the beginning must always have existed, must always ‘have been born’, is the Supreme Being (Entity) who has to exist and can never fail to be present.”

[E allora, se esisteva una cosa fin dal principio che non ha avuto bisogno di nascere da uno già nato, e che è sempre esistita, essa non può essere che l’Esistente, il quale non può non esistere ed è non nato fin dal principio [cioè dall’eternità].

E tale Esistente, che non può non esistere ed è non nato fin dal principio, è il sacro Ente Supremo che deve esistere e non può non esistere].

<sup>220</sup> Nāgārjuna 1997: 17. Stanza 12, trans. Lindtner. /*gang tshe ci la’ang mi bltos pa / de tshe gang la gang zhig ‘byung / gang tshe ring la mi bltos pa / de tshe thung sogs ga la mchis / Hymn to the Inconceivable [Buddha]*, (*bsam gyis mi khyab par bstod pa*).

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., stanza 14 states: “Unity and multiplicity, past and future, and the like, defilement and purification, true and false – how [can they exist] by themselves?” (*ji ltar gcig du ma mchis pa / ‘das dang ma ‘ongs la sogs pa / nyon mong rnam byang de bzhin te / yang dag log pa’ang rang las ci*).

## **Implications of things and their opposites:**

[29] English translation:

[Now], concerning the [dGe lugs] way of understanding, which is a system that asserts as non-existent; even one supreme entity which is established with its own intrinsic existence - if one asserts that it is not appropriate to impute an error of falsehood to this system - how will one ever be able to refute the establishment of such a system which is untrustworthy? Therefore know [fully grasp] that there is the establishing of a thing and its opposite by means of [one] thing that exists, and something else.

[Those of you who are] intelligent - who possess understanding, are impartial, free from hatred and greed, and who can be neutral at the time of evaluating whether something exists intrinsically, or not [listen to me]. It is maintained for example, that things and their opposites exist and the existence of the other things that exist show this to be the case. Similarly, concerning something that exists: If there is no one [no intellect] able to delineate concerning the existence of both things [i.e. the thing itself and its opposite] as to whether it exists intrinsically or if it is empty of intrinsic existence, then [in the future] an intellect will arise that will decide, concerning all those things which exist that: [1] The assertion that there does not exist even one thing that is established with intrinsic existence results in the utter non-existence [of everything] and [2] such a viewpoint is without reliance.

Comments: Desideri continues and points out if it is considered inappropriate to test the view that maintains the non-existence of an intrinsically existent entity, how then will it be possible to decide whether the whole system of thinking is flawed or not? In other words, how can one prove if this particular system of thinking is right or wrong? Desideri appeals to those who are intelligent to consider his arguments and comments, if there is no-one who has the ability to discern the unreliable nature of the view which maintains there is absolutely no

intrinsically existent entity (anywhere), then in the future someone will arise who will have the ability to decide this is the case.

### **Parts and Wholes.**

[30] English translation:

Moreover, for example: [1] even if one decides that each and every part of a body [or] structure - each being a physical thing - is conjoined with another physical thing, nevertheless; [2] concerning the collection [or] totality<sup>222</sup> of those parts - there exists a ground for investigating whether the totality of those limbs is conjoined to another physical thing or not. [3] Even though it is true that in the case of reasoning cognition, all entities established to conventional sensory cognition are established as being empty of intrinsic existence, nevertheless, [4] concerning the totality of those entities there is a ground for investigation whether or not the totality is established there. [5] Some hold a view which accords with that which has [already] been asserted: [i.e.] all entities that are established to conventional sensory cognition are empty of intrinsic existence. [6] But [I ask you] is the totality of those entities also established [as being empty of intrinsic existence] or not?<sup>223</sup> [7] Having established, for example, that each and every physical part is conjoined with another physical thing, it is not possible therefore to say whether the totality is similarly conjoined to another [physical] body. [8] Even though each and every entity that is established to sensory conventional cognition is established as dependent upon another, [do you] assert the totality

---

<sup>222</sup> The Tibetan word *tshogs* may be translated as ‘totality’, ‘aggregation’, or ‘collection’. In my discussion, I use ‘totality’ (in preference to ‘aggregation’) when referring to the sum or a collection of parts. In the above passage (Section 30), Desideri is not discussing the mental and physical aggregates that make up an individual human being, but is merely referring to the sum or a collection of parts in general.

<sup>223</sup> Does the totality have the nature of dependency or does it not?

of all those entities is not established as dependent upon another. [9] If it is the latter,<sup>224</sup> then this is not in conformity with the assertion of others [but] if it is the former,<sup>225</sup> then it [the totality] cannot be established apart from depending on another. [10] Regarding the totality of all those entities that are established to conventional cognition - if it is asserted that [the totality] cannot be established, apart from depending on another, [then] it is dependent on something somewhere [and your] assertion that an intrinsically existent entity does not exist is just not reasonable. [11] If such an [intrinsically existent] entity does not exist [then] there would necessarily be an infinite regress backwards. [12] If one asserts that there has to be an endless regress [then] according to what was shown earlier, there would necessarily be an utter non-existence for the totality of all those entities.

Comments: In his first sentence, Desideri refers to the constituent parts that exist in relation to one another, the sum of which form a totality.<sup>226</sup> He wants his debating opponent to consider whether the totality is established in addition to all the parts that constitute an object.<sup>227</sup> Desideri's purpose was twofold: he wanted to press the defender of the dGe lugs thesis which maintains nothing exists intrinsically to acknowledge (1) the illogicality of the dGe lugs denial of an intrinsically existent Primary Cause. (2) To admit that in the absence of such a cause there would not be anything at all. This section and the subsequent one form part of the same argument. Desideri would have viewed the totality of totalities as having the nature of dependency on God as its Primary Cause. To assert that every individual thing and

---

<sup>224</sup> The totality of all those entities is not established as dependent on another.

<sup>225</sup> The totality has the nature of dependency.

<sup>226</sup> For example, we could ask if there is an army, in addition to all the individual entities (i.e. the soldiers), that make it up. Desideri would agree with the dGe lugs view that the soldiers are established to sensory cognition. They are characterised by having arisen dependently and consequently have the nature of emptiness. But one can legitimately ask: "What about the collective, namely the army itself? Does it have the nature of dependency or not?"

<sup>227</sup> It appears that Desideri wants to challenge the Buddhist viewpoint that asserts that totalities are nothing more than a mere collection of parts and that you cannot say anything more about the totality than what you can say about the collection of things.

its totality exhibit the nature of dependency but then maintain the totality of all those entities does not exhibit the nature of dependency would make no sense at all. A denial of God as the Primary Cause would result in an infinite regress backwards and a consequent non-existence of all parts and totalities.

From a dGe lugs perspective, the totality that one sees when looking at an object is not as such denied; however, their focus is on the actual parts rather than on the sum of those parts.<sup>228</sup> They hold that things and their totalities are established in dependence upon their bases of imputation (i.e. on the parts that make up individual things). Because each individual thing is established in dependence upon its parts it follows that any totality consisting of parts, is necessarily a mere mental imputation upon the bases of imputation. This means that any totality would have to be empty of intrinsic existence and is viewed as being merely a conceptual unity for practical purposes.<sup>229</sup> Having said that it is important to note that the sum of the parts does not exist with any less reality than the parts themselves, although for practical purposes we may refer to one as ‘part’ and the other as ‘whole’.

Desideri’s intention is to challenge the reader to see that the totality itself and not just the individual parts needs to be examined, as well as the nature of the cause upon which the totality of totalities depends. A dGe lugs pa whose focus is on the individual parts that make up an entity and not on the entity as a whole would consider such a discussion to have little

---

<sup>228</sup> Buddhists do not distinguish between a living organism and a non-living material object, such as a chair, when discussing the sum of parts. One can physically or conceptually dismantle a chair into its seat, individual legs, back and perhaps armrests. In looking at the pile of (seemingly meaningless) parts we can no longer give it the label of ‘chair’. When parts are arranged in such a way as to form a totality - which in the English language we have labelled as ‘chair’ - then we are able to ask various questions about it such as, ‘Is the totality itself established to sensory conventional cognition as being empty of intrinsic existence?’

<sup>229</sup> A comment in regard to the findability or not of a totality is made by Burton (2004:82). He refers to the Mādhyamika example of a ‘tree entity’ and points out that under analysis, when one searches for such an entity, they claim it is actually unfindable. He comments “the Mādhyamikas would say [...] that the entity which we call a ‘tree’ is simply a concept which the mind attributes to these various factors.” The factors referred to are the tree’s component parts and its external causal conditions. Burton comments that [for the Mādhyamika] “There is no mind-independent tree-entity.”

relevance. This means Desideri's position is a tricky one. He does not want his debating opponent to say that everything arises in dependence upon another from infinity and therefore there are no more questions that need to be asked. Desideri believed that his question was legitimate and required an answer. When dGe lugs pa look at things, they consider that each individual thing is caused by another thing, and that thing by another thing and so forth, back into infinity. Consequently any further discussion about origins would be pointless.

Nāgārjuna comments: "When one understands that 'This is a result of that,' the nets of all bad views all vanish. Undefined, one abandons desire, delusion, and hatred and gains nirvana."<sup>230</sup> A Tibetan Buddhist would consider once you have answered the question, 'Where does this come from?' with a response (pointing to the preceding cause/s) such as, 'It came from that'; there are no more questions to ask. But this does not satisfy Desideri. He wants to point out that not only does each and every thing rise in dependence upon another, but the totality of totalities must also rise in dependence upon another. In effect he is asking: (1) why is there a totality of things and (2) on what does this totality depend. He reminds the interlocutor that if he asserts the totality cannot be established apart from depending upon another, but denies the existence of an intrinsically existent entity, an endless backward regress or continuum would be the result. Once more he points out the unreasonableness of such a claim,<sup>231</sup> as it would result in the utter non-existence for the totality of all those entities that are said to be established to sensory cognition.

---

<sup>230</sup> /'di dag rkyen 'di las rig nas/ lta ngan dra ba kun ldog des/ chags rmongs khong khro spangs pa'i phyir/ ma gos mya ngan 'das pa thob/ Nāgārjuna 1997: 119. Stanza 73, trans. Lindtner. Rinchen (2006:24) points out that the statement 'Because this has been produced, that has been produced.' refers to the condition of impermanence and any belief that our world and living beings have been created by a permanent (i.e. an unchanging) force is wrong.

<sup>231</sup> Desideri's discusses this topic in Part One Section 7 'Dependent Arising', and Section 10 'The illustration of an endless road and its implication'.

### **More discussion on totalities**

[31] English translation:

[Now] to sum it all up: [1] having accepted these entities that are established to conventional cognition it is also necessary to accept the totality of those entities. For example, when one is examining each and every entity by reasoning consciousness; even though one is able to refute the four possibilities [or extremes] regarding production with the following expression:

It is not from itself.

It is not from another.

It is not it from both self and another.

It is not without cause.

[No one] is able to negate the individual birth of each and every entity. Similarly at the time of examining with '[logical] reasoning consciousness' the totality of those entities, even though one is able to negate the four extremes of birth - who is able to impugn the birth of things? [2] Furthermore, for example, each and every limb of the body<sup>232</sup> is asserted as possessing physicality and any assertion stating the body itself lacks form [physicality] would make no sense at all. It would be [like] asserting that each and every entity that is established to conventional cognition possesses a property of being established *without* causes and conditions and lacks the property of being established from self or from both self and another.

[3] It would be unreasonable to assert that the totality of all those entities [which are established to conventional cognition] is not established. For example, take the case of birth from another intrinsically; even though [such a thing] does not happen, [nevertheless] at the

---

<sup>232</sup> Limbs represent parts that make up a structure.

time of examining each and every entity one does not assert as non-existent the birth from another merely conventionally. Similarly at the time of examining the totality, even though one asserts that there does not exist intrinsically existent birth from another it [nevertheless] it would be unreasonable to assert there is no birth from another merely conventionally.

[4] [Well in that case] do you maintain that ‘this other thing’, which arises in dependence upon another thing merely conventionally, is [A] established as simply different [from the totality of all those entities that are empty of intrinsic existence]? Or [B] do you assert there is established - by itself - an independent ‘other’ [i.e. there is something that exists other than the totality]?

If it is according to the first it makes no sense [i.e.] if it is established as simply different from the totality of all those things that are empty of intrinsic existence [then] it must necessarily be established as empty of intrinsic existence because it is not reasonable to assert an ‘other’ exists, separate from the totality of all those [entities] that are empty of intrinsic existence, [i.e. something other than the totality] and that it [too] is empty of intrinsic existence.

For this reason it must necessarily be asserted that both the totality [which merely arises conventionally with the nature of emptiness of intrinsic existence] is established and [also] an independent ‘other’ [with the nature of intrinsic existence] is also established.

Therefore there is to be uprooted the side that asserts that there does not exist even one entity with intrinsic existence. [If this were the case] we necessarily would be annihilated.

Comments: Initially, Desideri’s discussion on birth, after a passing reference to the four possibilities (or extremes), focuses on whether or not there is an ‘other’ dependent (and therefore empty of intrinsic existence) entity which exists apart or separate from the totality of all entities. A consequence of asserting that a thing, from which there occurs birth of

another, is established separately from the totality would be a contradiction since it is not possible for a thing to be established separately or apart from its totality.<sup>233</sup> So if one says the totality is established as being ‘simply different’ from the parts that constitute it, then one would end up with an existent ‘other’ (i.e. other than the totality we are talking about) and it would follow – according to the opponent’s viewpoint – this ‘other’ would also be empty of intrinsic existence. This would make no sense at all.

The dGe lugs pa resolutely deny any charge of nihilism even though they refute the four possibilities or extremes of birth. The *mu bzhi* or four possibilities relate to production which Desideri states: ‘birth is not from itself; it is not from another; it is not from both self and another; it is not without cause’, but he does not elaborate further.<sup>234</sup> The original quotation can be traced back to Nāgārjuna’s *Madhyamakakārikā* where he states: “There is nothing anywhere at all that has ever been born [either] from itself; from another; from both self and another; or causelessly”.<sup>235</sup> As Desideri’s statements can only be fully grasped when they are read against the backdrop of the prevailing views expressed in the Buddhist texts he was studying, a brief comment about the term *mu bzhi* is appropriate here.

(A) Production from, self, and from both self and another.

According to Gyatso:<sup>236</sup> “Production from self is asserted by the Sāṃkhya school, the oldest of the Brāhmaic schools; production from other is asserted by some non-Buddhist schools and by all Buddhist schools below the Mādhyamika-Prāsaṅgikas; production from both self

---

<sup>233</sup> For example, it would make no sense to assert that each individual soldier is established to conventional cognizers and then claim that the army is not established to conventional cognition.

<sup>234</sup> See Desideri’s line 3 in Section 31, */bdag las min gzhan las min bdag gzhan gnyis las min rgyu med las min /* UTS page 9.

<sup>235</sup> My translation of Investigation of Conditions 1<sup>st</sup> stanza. (*dBu ma rtsa ba’i tshig le’ur byas pa shes rab ces bya ba*). See also Candrakīrti’s comments in *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way* (1979: 34, trans. Sprung). This commentary is sometimes referred to as ‘Clear Words’. It seems Desideri was familiar with this text as he includes extracts from it in his earlier writings.

<sup>236</sup> Gyatso 1995b: 177.

and other is asserted by some sections of the Sāṃkhya school and by the Jains; and production without a cause is asserted by the Chārāvaka school, a nihilist school.” Gyatso makes reference to a potter who, taking some clay, produces a clay pot.<sup>237</sup> He points out that the pot has the same nature of the clay from which it was made and according to non-dGe lugs lower schools this is an example of ‘production from self’. However, since the potter who made the pot is not made of clay, but of another substance, some claim this relates to ‘production from another’. The dGe lugs perspective is different. According to Gyatso,<sup>238</sup> Candrakīrti firmly refuted the concept of intrinsically existent production and firmly opposed the view held by those of the lower Buddhist tenet schools, which claim ‘production from self’ exists. The dGe lug pa consider that (1) nothing exists intrinsically, either conventionally or ultimately, and (2) nothing is produced intrinsically - from self, from another, or from both self and another. They maintain Nāgārjuna’s comment does not refer to production at the conventional level, where things *are* produced from causes that are different from themselves, but it refers to the concept of production from intrinsically existent ‘other’ causes. The dGe lugs pa deny the existence of any intrinsically existent cause and assert that production, even from another, cannot be ‘found’ or realised when examined through critical reasoning.<sup>239</sup> Desideri accepted the view that (1) nothing is produced at the conventional level from intrinsically existent ‘other’ causes.<sup>240</sup> (2) Birth does not occur intrinsically from itself (3) nor does it occur from an intrinsically existent product (should one exist) since this would be pointless.<sup>241</sup> But Desideri would not have viewed the intrinsically existent *dkon mchog*

---

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 175-6.

<sup>239</sup> In our everyday world, it is a matter of convention that production does occur from another, but there is no critical validation of that. It is not rationally coherent. It is simply the way our experiences are given in the world of conventions in which we live.

<sup>240</sup> Gyatso 1995b: 187. “In this context, ‘production from other’ means production from inherently existent other causes, not simply production from [conventional] other causes”.

<sup>241</sup> Hopkins 1996: 136-140, ‘Non-production from Self’.

‘God’ as a product, nor as a self-duplicating entity. God is uncaused, transcendent, and is not part of the conventional world, which is characterised by inter-dependence and production. All things, including time, came into existence when he created the world. He is the uncaused ‘First Cause’ or ‘Mover’ of all that exists, and although he initiated the causal process of dependent arising, he did not himself undergo a process of change as a consequence of having brought the world into existence.<sup>242</sup> Neither was creation formed out of his Substance.<sup>243</sup>

(B) Production is not without a cause.

According to Gyatso,<sup>244</sup> the nihilistic non-Buddhist Chārāvaka School held a view of causeless production. Gyatso points out the basis for their assertion is their belief that, “all things simply arise naturally without causes.” Flowers for example, have different shapes, scents, colours etc. but no one makes them like this, they just develop naturally. The dGe lugs pa refute such an assertion and maintain that it is not possible for things to arise causelessly. Tsong kha pa refers to Candrakīrti’s commentary *Guide to the Middle Way* and gives the following quotation:<sup>245</sup> “Because things are not produced causelessly; or from causes such as a divine creator; or from self, other, or both and other; they are produced dependently.”

Following Desideri’s brief reference to the four extremes of production he reminds his reader that it is not possible to negate the individual birth of each and every entity. He points out that one cannot say: ‘each and every limb of the body has physicality but that the body itself – the totality – is established as lacking physicality.’ He was also aware the dGe lugs pa held a view similar to his own, namely, that each and every entity established to conventional

---

<sup>242</sup> *Origins* OT3: 149; 175-84.

<sup>243</sup> The word ‘Substance’ here indicates intrinsic existence. Creation was *ex-nihilo*. See Williams (2012: 58) for his comment concerning the destruction of worlds in Indian thought.

<sup>244</sup> Gyatso 1995b: 277.

<sup>245</sup> GT3: 186.

cognition is not established apart from causes and conditions, but that if an entity is intrinsically established it must necessarily be established without causes and conditions. Desideri agrees that even though birth from another intrinsically does not exist, one does not assert as non-existent the birth from another merely conventionally. Desideri considers birth in our everyday world to be an actual event, whereas the dGe lugs pa maintain it is imputed upon its basis of designation and is therefore like a reflection. We have seen that when the dGe lugs pa subject conventional birth to their particular type of ultimate analysis (i.e. a search to find whether the birth has the nature of intrinsic existence or not) they declare that only the emptiness of intrinsic existence is realised. (Napper 2003: 55-56).

In this section Desideri seems to refer to three different things, namely, (i) the totality, (ii) a thing which is 'other' than the totality (both of which are said to be empty of intrinsic existence). (iii) The third option is a thing that is said to be characterised by intrinsic existence. This explains why Desideri concludes with the words: 'Therefore there is to be rejected the side that asserts that is not even one entity with intrinsic existence. [If this were the case] we necessarily would be annihilated.' He demonstrated in Part One A: Section 7 the illogicality of an endless regress since one would necessarily end up with utter non-existence of everything.

### **An illustration of a chariot**

[32] English translation:

Moreover, for example, if the parts of the chariot do not exist [then] it must necessarily be maintained that even the nature of the chariot is non-existent. Likewise, in the absence of any

of all those entities that are established to conventional cognition, it must necessarily be maintained that the collection [totality] of all those entities must also be non-existent.

Therefore, according to what was taught earlier regarding the assertion that each and every entity that is established to conventional cognition exists without a beginning, [well, it is just] unreasonable. And an assertion that the nature of the totality is also without an initial limit makes no sense at all. Because of this, primordial non-existence must necessarily be accepted. Moreover, according to what was explained earlier concerning: [1] each and every entity that is established to conventional cognition and [2] the totality of each of all those individual entities - there is a need to assert as non-existent primordially not even one entity from both of these [categories]. It must necessarily be maintained that all those entities [as well as] the totality of all those entities were utterly non-existent in all aspects, both earlier and later. Because of [1] the non-existence primordially of even one entity established to conventional cognition and [2] the primordial non-existence of the totality of those entities it is [nevertheless] necessary to assert as existent primordially some entity. For this reason, to maintain that there was some primordial entity [with the property of being] empty of intrinsic existence 'at that time'<sup>246</sup> of non-existence of the totality of all those entities which are empty of intrinsic existence - when there was not even one [dependent] entity [with the property of being] empty of intrinsic existence - must result in the conclusion that such an assertion is only contradictory babble [or] gossip. Therefore, because of this very thing, there must necessarily be an entity that exists primordially and it must necessarily be established as having the nature of intrinsic existence.

---

<sup>246</sup> If one translates *skabs* as 'time', as in a sequence of moments, one runs into theological problems. Prior to creation, there was absolutely nothing, including time. One could possibly translate *skabs* as 'occasion' or 'with reference to creation'. If the word *time* is preferred then the use of speech marks ('time') is recommended.

Comments: The discussion has moved on. The focus is now on the actual parts that make up a chariot or cart and Desideri makes the obvious point that if the parts of a chariot do not exist then there is no chariot. Tsong kha pa<sup>247</sup> describes a form of mental analysis whereby a chariot is reduced to a mere collection of constituent parts in order to demonstrate that objects and people do not possess a ‘self’ (*bdag*). His aim was to show their lack of intrinsic existence and to prove the object (in this case the chariot) merely exists as a mental imputation.<sup>248</sup> Desideri’s focus is different. He is not discussing the nature of ‘fabricated entities’ here but wants his reader to think about a ‘time’ before creation, when no dependent arising entities existed.<sup>249</sup> He points out that if all entities that are established to conventional cognition are non-existent, then the totality (or sum) of the various parts of each individual entity will not exist either. Neither would the totality of all those individual totalities exist. In other words there would be nothing. Having previously established the need for there to be an initial limit, Desideri re-introduces the topic of primordial non-existence and points out it would be a contradiction to assert there were entities established to conventional cognition existent primordially.<sup>250</sup> He adds, ‘not only is there an absence of any such entity, but there is also an absence of the totality of such entities’. He points out that despite the lack of dependently originated entities in the primordial past (i.e. there was no space, time, place, or pre-existent matter), it does not mean that there was nothing at all. He then declares ‘it is necessary to assert there was [indeed] some entity’.<sup>251</sup> He concludes Section 32 by declaring

---

<sup>247</sup> GT3: 277.

<sup>248</sup> Tsong kha pa (GT3: 279) quotes from Candrakīrti’s *Commentary on the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakāvātāra*). “A Chariot is neither asserted to be other than its parts, nor to be non-other. It does not possess them. It does not depend on the parts and the parts do not depend on it. It is neither the mere collection of the parts, nor is it their shape. It is like this”. Thus the chariot exists as a mere imputation.

<sup>249</sup> See *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, Part 1: Chapter XLVI (1912: 240-252; 486-7).

<sup>250</sup> Part One B: Section 25.

<sup>251</sup> /*gdod ma* (primordial) *nas med pa'i skabs* (time) *der dngos po 'ga' zhig yod par 'dod dgos so* / The word Desideri uses to refer to prior to the beginning is *gdod ma*, meaning ‘primordial’. However, in a

that this entity (1) must necessarily 'exist' primordially and (2) it is necessarily established as having the nature of intrinsic existence. He rejects as 'contradictory babble' (*'du'i bab col kho na yin pa*) any assertions that would claim (1) the entity under discussion must have been empty of intrinsic existence and (2) the totality of entities with the nature of emptiness would be existent primordially.

**Without the cognisable there is no cognition:**

[33] English translation:

Someone might say, for example, if there is not existing that which is to be seen [i.e. a cognitive object] there necessarily there does not exist the seeing [i.e. the cognition].

Similarly, without the arising dependently one upon another; in the absence of that; the support [or basis] for the arising dependently upon something necessarily does not exist [either]. Moreover for example, in the absence of the cognizable [i.e. that which is to be seen] because of the non-existence of that there would be no cognition and as a consequence of that [lack of cognition] the seeing which arises in dependence upon another is not established there by itself but is necessarily established as mere emptiness [i.e. the seeing is non-existent]. Similarly, without the arising in dependence upon another; as a result of the absence of that; the support for the arising in dependence upon something would necessarily be non-existent [too]. As for it [the support]; since the dependence which is the dependent arising conjoined to a support is not established by itself it would necessarily be established as mere emptiness [i.e. the support would be non-existent].

---

Buddhist context the word refers to something fundamental (e.g. the fundamental nature of mind is clarity). Because Buddhists hold that the past extends to infinity, if one were to speak of a primordial past it would simply relate to something a very, very long time ago and not to a state before there was anything.

Comments: Desideri makes the point that without a support for dependence, there can be no dependently originated entity. However, his ultimate intention is to show that if a support is itself dependently originated, then it cannot really serve as a support - unless there is finally or ultimately something that serves as a support and which is not itself dependently originated. He makes it clear in his first sentence that in the absence of cognisable object, cognition cannot occur. It is likely that he was familiar with the statement by Nāgārjuna: “[There is] no object of knowledge unless it is being known. But the knowing consciousness does not exist without [its object]! Thus [y]ou have said that knowledge and the object of knowledge do not exist by own being”.<sup>252</sup> A consequence of the non-existence of cognition would be the ‘dependence’ (i.e. the arising conjoined to a support by or of cognition) would not be established there either. Desideri was aware that Buddhists consider that dependently arisen cognizable objects arise as a result of depending upon dependently arisen supports. He points out that a support which is not established intrinsically would necessarily be established as mere emptiness (*stong nyid tsam du grub dgos so*). Desideri believed that dependently arisen supports can only exist because of the existence of an intrinsically existent primordial entity.

### **Illustration of a dot and its circumference**

[34] English translation:

In reply to that harmful speaker who refuses to refute [disprove what I say] I will present an example and apply its meaning. If one makes a minute dot [i.e. a very subtle speck] on a

---

<sup>252</sup> The term ‘own being’ is a reference to intrinsic existence. */shes pa med par shes bya min / de med rnam par shes pa’ang med / de phyir shes dang shes bya dag / rang dngos med ces khyod kyis gsungs / Hymn to [the Buddha] Transcending the World. (‘Jig rten las ‘das par bstod pa). Nāgārjuna 1997: 5. Stanza 10, trans. Lindtner.*

piece of paper, immediately [one can see] the dot which has just been drawn [has the potential to be] the very centre of a circle even though the hub or centre of a drawn circle is not [currently] established there. Since it has no circumference it is not like a circle itself but is the centre or hub and is manifestly existent – who can deny this? Now supposing at a later time one was to draw a fine line, having the shape of a circle, around that minute dot that has been made. Then that minute dot becomes the centre of the fine line which has been drawn having the shape of a circle. Regarding the fine line that has been drawn in the shape of a circle which is now encircling the minute dot that was made, it [the circle] has the property of arising in dependence [upon the dot]. If there was no dot [i.e. no absolute centre] then the circular line that has just been drawn would not exist [as a circumference. For a circumference to exist there needs to be a centre. For there to be dependent arising there must be a support. Without the existence of the very fine dot that has been established there as the centre of the circle, it follows that without it then necessarily the circumference does not exist either]. And because of that, dependent origination does not exist apart from the arising dependently upon its own centre. Even though that is the case, if you look at the dot which has been drawn it [the dot] is not established as having the property of arising in dependence upon the fine line which has been drawn in the shape of a circle which is the circumference. In the absence of that fine line drawn in the shape of a circle which is its own circumference; even though that (line) does not exist; the dot does exist. [You] should understand and grasp the meaning of this illustration according to the way it has been set out. It has been established in view of the numerous reasons and conclusions [which set out previously] it is necessary to accept a superior Entity which is established with intrinsic existence. [However] just because it is established as intrinsically existent it is not like those entities that are merely established as conventional entities and which have the property of arising dependently upon one another. It [the superior entity] necessarily exists.

Comments: Desideri has already shown in Section 32 the totalities must have had a beginning and that a totality exists in dependence upon something. He has also illustrated that dependent origination cannot occur without a support.<sup>253</sup> He uses an illustration in order to demonstrate more clearly the need for a support that is outside the dependently arisen totalities. For Desideri, this support is God who was the prime mover in the initial act of creation. However, he does not explain the manner in which God, as the ultimate support, created everything *ex nihilo*. Nor does he attempt to explain how God continues to uphold and sustain that which he brought into existence from nothing. Desideri's brief but relevant illustration is pertinent as Buddhists consider that a cause has to change by virtue of being a cause. Desideri wants to show that one can have a cause that does not change. But a concept of a 'changeless support' would be unacceptable to a dGe lugs pa, since this would imply that the support would have an independent existence, and thereby not be a product of dependent origination. Desideri wants his interlocutor to shift his focus away from the causally arisen series of secondary supports for dependency and to discuss whether the primary or initial cause for dependency is dependent or independent. By using an illustration of a dot and a line drawn in the shape of a circle around that dot, Desideri shows that something can act as a support for something that arises in dependence upon it - without the first thing changing, or in a sense, doing anything at all. His interest is in the dimensionless mathematical and geometrical centre point as indicated inadequately by a dot. Such a point is the very centre of the circle and as such has no circumference. Neither does it have a centre nor does it have a shape.<sup>254</sup> This geometrical centre point is dimensionless, yet indubitably existent, and 'extends to infinity'. However, it cannot be discovered, for example, simply by looking. Any point can be the very centre of a circle drawn around it, and as such it is necessary to the

---

<sup>253</sup> Part One A: Section 7.

<sup>254</sup> An actual dot does - for practical reasons - as a matter of fact have a dimension.

existence of the circle. The very centre of the circle is the support without having to change or do anything at all.

To summarise: Desideri's illustration of a dot to represent a geometrical centre point which does not change, illustrates his concept of a supreme Entity who is the changeless cause for the created world that he brought into being. It is a world characterised by dependency. In the illustration, God's dependent creation equates to the circumference and, even if it should no longer exist, the dot will still be there, as indeed it was even before the fine line was drawn that encircled it.

### **The Creation of entities which did not previously exist**

[35] English translation:

Supposing [i.e. picture] the various causally resultant entities - which did not exist at the 'time' [or] 'occasion' of the beginning - being created as arising in complete dependence upon that act of creation which was wrought by means of the power of compassion and incomparable strength and ability of the supreme intrinsically existent Entity.<sup>255</sup> Even though it is true that the supreme intrinsically existent Entity occurs as a support for conventional entities that arise sequentially and in dependence upon something nevertheless, [this supreme Entity] lacks the property of being a dependently arisen support for conventional entities that have the property of arising in dependence upon something. They came into being [i.e. were created] dependent upon [the act of creation which occurred at the 'time' of the beginning].

---

<sup>255</sup> The first article in the Catechism of the Council of Trent (CCT) under the sub-title 'Creator' states that God was not under any constraint or necessity to create the world but that he did so, spontaneously and of his own free will. "Nor was He impelled to create by any other cause than a desire to communicate His goodness to creatures. Being essentially happy in Himself He stands not in need of anything, as David expresses it: I have said to the Lord, thou art my God, for thou hast no need of my goods."

At that ‘time’ there did not exist even one conventional entity occurring primordially in dependence upon it [the supreme Entity] and even though they all did not exist in any aspect or time nevertheless, [the supreme Entity] exists with its own fundamental reality. By virtue of its own nature [i.e. its intrinsic identity] there necessarily does not exist an absence of it. [The Supreme Entity] is necessarily existent.

Comments: Desideri seems satisfied that he has established that there is an intrinsically existent Entity.<sup>256</sup> In the next section (Section 36) he points out that a decision to abide in the stainless faith (of Christianity) is now a matter of utmost importance. However before pursuing this subject, he makes a brief statement about why he considers the concept of rebirth to be fallacious.

Desideri’s main points from Sections 34 and 35 may be summarised as follows:

- (1) There is a supreme (superior) Entity.
- (2) This Entity is independent (i.e. it is established with intrinsic existence).
- (3) All ordinary things (conventional entities) have the property of arising dependently upon one another.
- (4) The supreme Entity is not a support in the way that ordinary things are since is not a dependently arisen entity upon which other entities arise. It is indeed a support but not in the above manner.
- (5) Before creation there was an absence of causes and conditions. But at the initial starting off point conventional things had a cause.

---

<sup>256</sup> The means whereby God created the world (meaning the whole of creation not just the physical earth) is clarified in CCT1 under ‘Creator’: “He spoke and they were made: He commanded and they were created.” Also, “For God formed the world not from materials of any sort, but created it from nothing and that not by constraint or necessity, but spontaneously, and of His own free will.”

- (6) Created conventional entities did not exist formerly but arose in complete dependence upon: (1) an act of creation wrought by the power of love (compassion)<sup>257</sup> and (2) the incomparable strength and ability of the supreme independent Entity.
- (7) The supreme Entity is not mutually dependent on [his] creation. He is established as being the support for the ‘arising in dependence upon something’ conventional entities. They arise in time (that is sequentially) but the supreme Entity is not part of that dependent process since (by nature) he is independent.
- (8) Even though primordially there was nothing, nevertheless there was the supreme independent Entity with its own fundamental existence. The supreme Entity necessarily exists.

### **The fallacy of rebirth:**

[36] English translation:

That being the case, there is to be achieved the first fundamental basis [for faith], namely an initial or first step of abiding in the ‘Stainless Faith’. Moreover in accordance with that, without going into detail, if one examines the system of the treatises of the Tibetans without bias and with intelligence, the point of view that asserts there exists, without any beginning, an endless continuum of the births of sentient beings [must be accepted] as incorrect. [This viewpoint] is necessarily established as merely having the property of being mired in delusion. Here in this treatise it has been shown that all things established to conventional cognition do not exist apart from their having a beginning. Because of this, the birth of sentient beings, from the point of view of asserting that the birth is visibly established

---

<sup>257</sup> Desideri makes this point in the next section (Section 35).

through the power of [the same] sentient beings actions, is established as incorrect. Thus, the assertion that there are many former and later births - in accordance with the cycling in saṃsāra of sentient beings – is also established as incorrect. Therefore, because of an unstable presentation of cause and effect, that [too] is established as incorrect.

For these reasons the ‘path’ [which the dGe lugs pa have presented for man to follow] and the true end of that ‘path’ are [both] established as being incorrect. This being the case, the attainment of the ultimate goal is incorrect [as well as] the point of view concerning the presentation of a suitable object of refuge [and so that too] is established as not correct.

Comments: Although Desideri’s comments above are very brief, according to Pomplun (2010: 199) Desideri discusses the subject of reincarnation or rebirth more fully in another manuscript entitled *Previous Lives (skye ba snga ma)*.<sup>258</sup> A discussion about rebirth is also found in Desideri’s manuscript entitled *Origins*.<sup>259</sup>

Section 36 of Laying the Foundation begins with a brief summary of Desideri’s objections to the dGe lugs assertion that the sequence of births of every sentient being lacks a beginning and forms an infinite endless continuum. His objections are several:

(1) In Desideri’s account of his travels (*Notizie Istoriche*<sup>260</sup>) he states that Tibetans:

[A]ssert that the world and everything in it, living beings and their origin, that is, the continual course of transmigration, have existed *ab eterno* [from beginningless ‘time’] so that beginning with the present birth of any particular being and following it back

---

<sup>258</sup> Pomplun 2010: 199. The full name of this 626 page treatise is */mgo skar bla ma i po li do shes bya ba yis phul ba’i bod kyi mkhas pa rnams la skye ba snga ma dang stong pa nyid kyi lta ba’i sgo nes zhu ba / Questions presented by the European lama Ippolito to the learned of Tibet concerning [the theory of] former lives and the view of emptiness.*

<sup>259</sup> *Origins* OT3: 154-161.

<sup>260</sup> HNT or *Historical Notices of Tibet (Notizie Istoriche del Thibet)*. Sweet published his English translation of these Italian writings by Desideri in 2010 under the title *Mission to Tibet*. I have commented on this publication in my Introduction to this thesis.

through an infinite series of prior births one can never arrive at a birth that could be proven to be the first one.<sup>261</sup>

Desideri considers the dGe lugs view of rebirth as delusory and dangerous and that the consequence of holding such a view would necessarily result in the ‘extreme of annihilation’.<sup>262</sup> He reminds the reader that conventional entities cannot exist, apart from there being an initial starting point or beginning.

(2) Desideri’s next objection relates to the dGe lugs assertion that birth is established visibly through the power of actions of sentient beings. Buddhists consider the concept of karma (*las*), action or deeds to be a fundamental or foundational truth but that the actual functioning of it can only be fully understood by a Buddha. In *Notizie Istoriche* (HNT), Desideri comments:

They [the Tibetans] assert that the world, considered universally in its totality as a whole, and everything contained in it is caused exclusively by the actions of living beings, and that every birth of every particular living thing, was, is, and will be caused by the virtuous or sinful [non-virtuous] actions committed by that particular living being in previous lives.

He points out that this would mean that the actions of a living being would exist prior the birth of a living being and that such a claim would be absurd.<sup>263</sup>

(3) Desideri’s third objection is similar to his first. It relates to the dGe lugs assertion that there are many former and later births, ‘in accordance with the cycling in *saṃsāra* of sentient

---

<sup>261</sup> *Mission to Tibet* 2010: 342. (Trans. Sweet).

<sup>262</sup> Part One C: Section 29.

<sup>263</sup> *Mission to Tibet* 2010: 342. (Trans. Sweet). “Thus it would follow that the actions of living beings existed prior to those beings themselves, which is an obvious absurdity”. For additional references relating to this topic from a Buddhist perspective see GT1: 209-214; 216-46.

beings'. Desideri considered the main and fundamental error that lay at the root of Tibetan Buddhist reasoning (and from which other false beliefs arise) was the "error of metempsychosis of the transmigration of souls".<sup>264</sup> He writes

[T]he Tibetans themselves declare [transmigration] to be a tangled and inextricable vortex and an endless bottomless sea owing to the infinity of notions and fantastical difficulties of which they pretend it is composed; but, in perfect truth, it would be much more fitting to describe it as a highly intricate and inextricable labyrinth and an endless and bottomless sea owing to the vast and extremely tangled combination of errors with which that fundamental error has been blindly compounded.<sup>265</sup>

(4) Desideri's fourth criticism of dGe lugs philosophy relates to their unstable presentation of cause and effect. In his travelogue, Desideri briefly discusses the functionality and causality of merit and demerit, as well as the functionality and combination of other contributory causes (*rgyu*) and conditions (*rkyen*).<sup>266</sup>

(5) Finally, Desideri states the attainment of the ultimate goal of beings (in the dGe lugs system) is incorrect and so too is their presentation of a suitable object of refuge.

---

<sup>264</sup> *Mission to Tibet* 2010: 342. (Trans. Sweet).

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>266</sup> *Mission to Tibet* 2010: 357. (Trans. Sweet) Sweet points out (*ibid.*, 716n918) the meaning of the Tibetan word *rgyu* equates to "a direct cause, like a seed in the case of a plant [...] *rkyen* refers to an auxiliary cause, like sunshine or water in the same example." Desideri's final observation (5) is dealt with in more detail in Section 37 under the title 'False Gold'.

### **A system of Faith and Doctrine that is like ‘false gold’**

[37] English translation:

[A speaker interjects] Oh! If the Dharma system of us Tibetans and its path is without a firm foundation [i.e. is untrustworthy] and not correct then those who enter a path like this will necessarily experience only suffering after they die. These words were spoken by a questioner [who is seeking] the essence [heart or core] of wisdom. A Pandit who is a learned person and is able to generate a non-erroneous strength of mind that can differentiate between that which is true and false and that which is good and evil – replies: ‘For example, if at the time of gathering to set out on a journey some poison is mixed with the provisions then, having embarked on their journey, they [the travellers] will never reach their desired destination. Stricken with a very serious illness and with no remedy available they will necessarily die. Likewise, you Tibetans hold a system of religion which is fundamentally incorrect. It is a faith-system which is extremely deluded [therefore] after death the experience of suffering is a certainty. [Allow me to present another illustration] If a merchant who is inexperienced and not wise goes to a precious treasure-filled island where he gathers much false gold, he will be extremely unhappy when he returns to his home with empty hands and no profit [to show for all his effort]. Similarly, your system of faith and doctrine is like false gold and when [you] arrive at death it will be of no benefit. There will only be the generation of suffering. Thus, I have replied.

Comments: In the previous section Desideri declared that (1) the Buddhist path of beings (2) the end of this particular path (3) the attainment of their ultimate goal (4) and their objects of refuge were all established as incorrect. In Section 37 the dynamic changes. A voice interjects saying ‘Oh! If the Dharma system of us Tibetans and the path is without a firm foundation and not correct then those who enter a path like that will after death necessarily experience

only suffering.’ Desideri points out that the person who speaks is one who is seeking to understand the essence or heart of wisdom. It is not possible to say with certainty if this seeker is Desideri’s reader/debating opponent who is now responding to what Desideri has been explaining. But it makes sense to assume this is the case as it appears the seeker is familiar with the earlier discussions. In this section and in Part Two (which follows) Desideri replies to the seeker’s comments and questions via the voice of a Pandit. He describes the Pandit as a learned man as one who is able to generate a non-erroneous strength of mind that can differentiate between that which is true and false and that which is good and evil. I will now focus on two of Desideri’s statements:

(1) Tibetans hold a system of religion which is fundamentally incorrect and is a faith system which is extremely deluded [therefore] after death the experience of suffering is a certainty.

(2) Your faith system and system of doctrine is like false gold and it will be of no benefit at the point of death. There will only be the generation of suffering.

Tibetans were familiar with the likelihood of suffering at the time of death, and what Desideri describes resonates with statements found in their own writings. It is helpful therefore to look at dGe lugs teaching concerning death and its outcome. The prognosis for an ordinary Buddhist is not good. According to Nāgārjuna:

Through desire one goes into hungry ghost transmigration,

Through hatred one is impelled into a hell,

Through obscuration one mostly goes into an animal transmigration,

Through stopping these one becomes a god or a human.<sup>267</sup>

---

<sup>267</sup> Nāgārjuna’s *Precious Garland* 1998: 124. Stanza 229, trans. Hopkins. Also see GT1: 89.

A quote from Śāntideva reminds the unenlightened Buddhist practitioner that fearful consequences await those who do not carry out meritorious deeds in their current life.<sup>268</sup>

In order to understand liberation from a Buddhist perspective one could envisage for example the state of un-enlightenment as being caught in a mesh representing endless rebirths in which countless numbers of sentient beings are also trapped. Liberation (*thar pa*) or escape may be likened to a tear in that mesh through which one escapes and is set free from the endless cycle of rebirth.<sup>269</sup> A fully enlightened person is no longer considered to be part of the ‘world’ of cyclic existence and dependency but is said to have attained ‘nirvana’ - the non-dualistic and omniscient state of buddhahood. Buddhists generally consider it takes many aeons to attain the state of enlightenment.<sup>270</sup> The reason Desideri likens the Tibetan system of practice and doctrine to ‘false gold’ is that after death suffering is unavoidable, whereas the path that Desideri offers - as a consequence of trusting in Jesus Christ - leads to indestructible eternal life.

---

“If you have taken someone as your teacher and then your method of reliance is wrong, not only will you be harmed by much madness and sickness in this lifetime, but in future lifetimes as well you will experience immeasurable sufferings in miserable realms for an immeasurable period of time.”

<sup>268</sup> Śāntideva 1997: 41. (Trans. Wallace and Wallace). “[I]f I do not practice virtue even when I am capable of it [...] the unendurable fire of hell will scorch my body for ages, and afterward the fire of remorse will torment my undisciplined mind for a long time.” (See lines 18 and 25).

<sup>269</sup> Williams 2002: 51.

<sup>270</sup> Burton (2004: 86) comments usually the attainment of Buddhahood “requires very many lifetimes of meditative practice on the Bodhisattva path.”