

Sa-pan's Hermeneutics: The Principles of Interpretation in His Three Major Works

Sonam Jamtsho

Abstract: This paper studies the hermeneutical principles developed by Sa-skya Paṇḍita (1182–1251) in his three major works: the Treasury of Reasoning, the Gateway to Learning, and the Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows. To solve the challenges of reading diverse Buddhist texts translated from Sanskrit and other languages into Tibetan, Sa-pan refined interpretive frameworks that reconcile apparent contradictions in these works. His approach organizes Buddhist teachings into a progressive hierarchy, from conventional realism to philosophical idealism culminating in the transcendent view of freedom from proliferation, aligned with Madhyamaka thought. By correlating these ontological levels with doxographical schools (Sautrāntika, Vijñaptimātra, and Madhyamaka), Sa-pan demonstrates their complementarity. Additionally, he introduces interpretive principles in the Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows, emphasizing content, medium, vehicle, and teaching manner, alongside distinctions between view, meditation, and conduct. This nuanced methodology not only shaped Tibetan scholastic traditions but can offer insights into cross-cultural dialogue. Sa-pan's work highlights the balance between preserving textual diversity and achieving interpretive coherence, providing a model for engaging with complex intellectual traditions.

Introductory Remarks

The huge task of translating Buddhist texts, chiefly, from Sanskrit into Tibetan between the 8th and 14th centuries presented Tibetan scholars with unprecedented intellectual and logistical challenges. As thousands of texts spanning diverse philosophical schools, tantric systems, and doctrinal positions made their way across the Himalayas, the need for sophisticated interpretive frameworks became increasingly apparent. These translated works not only introduced philosophical concepts and religious practices but also presented apparent contradictions and complexities that required sustained and thoughtful scholarly attention.

During this period and in the following centuries, Tibetan intellectuals and religious teachers grappled with fundamental questions of textual interpretation: How should seemingly conflicting doctrinal positions be reconciled? What principles should guide the arrangement and

categorization of diverse textual traditions and their contents? How might one determine the relative authority of different texts and their respective contents? These hermeneutical challenges were particularly acute given the sheer size and diversity of translated materials.

In this complex intellectual landscape, Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltzen (sa skya paṇḍita kun dga' rgyal mtshan, 1183–1251, henceforth Sa-paṇ), commonly known as Sa-paṇ, emerged as a pivotal figure who developed reflected hermeneutical principles. Through three of his major works—the masterful logico-epistemological treatise, *The Treasury of Reasoning* (*tshad ma rigs gter*) in eleven chapters with its auto-commentary; the scholarly manual, *The Gateway to Learning* (*mkhas pa 'jug pa'i sgo*) in three chapters with auto-commentary; and the infamous polemical work, *The Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows* (*sdom gsum rab dbye*) in three chapters—Sa-paṇ articulated systematic approaches to textual interpretation, analysis, and reconciliation. This article brings together the diverse hermeneutical theories found across these three texts, demonstrating how Sa-paṇ's interpretive framework helped shape Tibetan scholarly methodology and continues to influence Buddhist textual and interpretive studies today.¹

It will begin with discussing the perspectives found in the *Treasury of Reasoning* and the *Gateway to Learning* and then will present the views on hermeneutics gleaned in the *Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows*.

1. Hermeneutical Stratifications: From Conventional Realism to Ultimate Truth

In his three major works, Sa-paṇ presents a sophisticated hermeneutical framework that demonstrates the Buddha's pedagogical genius through a systematic arrangement of ontological theories. This framework represents a masterly synthesis of Buddhist philosophical thought, arranged in ascending levels of subtlety and profundity. What makes Sa-paṇ's contribution particularly noteworthy is his recognition that these varying ontological positions, rather than representing contradictions or inconsistencies in Buddhist thought, constitute a carefully calibrated teaching methodology responsive to different levels of understanding.

The theoretical structure Sa-paṇ presents is notable for its sophistication. He argues that the

1. This is an enlarged article based on a research paper originally presented at the 16th International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS), convened in 2022 at Charles University in Prague. For the sources and biographical details of Sa-paṇ's life, see Jackson 1987 and van der Kuip 1983. For a critical edition and annotated translation of the *Treasury of Reasoning* (i.e. the root text in eleven chapters) together with the notes and introduction, see Jamtsho 2023. This dissertation is being prepared by the current author for publication. For an introduction to the *Gateway to Learning*, see Jackson 1987 and Gold 2007. For a translation of the *Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows* and other short works connected to it see Rhoton 2002.

Buddha's teachings progress from more intuitive, easily accessible positions to increasingly subtle and counter-intuitive ones. This progression reflects a deep understanding of cognitive development and spiritual maturation that Buddhist practices are supposed to lead to, which Sa-paṅ shares. The earlier, more accessible teachings serve as provisional stepping stones, carefully designed to meet practitioners and thinkers in terms of their dispositions, intellectual capacity, philosophical sophistication, and spiritual readiness. These teachings, while not representing the Buddha's ultimate view, serve as essential pedagogical tools in the spiritual development of practitioners and honing the philosophical views of thinkers.

These three positions are, largely, contents of the Buddhist scriptures, and our author employs them to interpret these authoritative texts—working towards not only non-contradictory reading but a complementary one. At the foundation of this hierarchical structure lies what Sa-paṅ terms the “acceptance of atoms” (*rdul phran zhal gyis bzhes*). This initial level acknowledges the common-sense realism that most individuals bring to their initial encounter with Buddhist thought. In the *Treasury of Reasoning*, Sa-paṅ provides his most explicit elaboration of this position, utilizing the concept of *paramāṇu* (*rdul phran*), or atomic particles. This level of teaching accepts the validity of sensory experience and the reality of the external world as perceived through properly functioning sense faculties and consciousness. The epistemic insight through various modalities of perceptions, at this level, is accepted as providing one with an undistorting picture of the external world constituted by atoms in different configurations.

What is particularly surprising about Sa-paṅ's presentation of this first level is its careful delimitation. While acknowledging the reality of atomic particles, he notably refrains from addressing the ontological status of composite material objects encountered in daily experience.² This strategic omission suggests a sophisticated understanding of the philosophical problems inherent in bridging the gap between atomic constituents and macroscopic objects. This problem also occupied the minds of many Tibetan epistemologists, arguing for different positions, reflecting the difficulties of the issues involved.

This foundational level serves a crucial role in Sa-paṅ's larger pedagogical structure. By beginning with a position that largely accords with ordinary experience and intuition, it provides a comfortable entry point for newcomers to Buddhist philosophical thought while simultaneously laying the groundwork for more complex analyses to follow.

Our author's philosophical framework reaches a crucial turning point in its second level, where he presents an idealistic position that marks a significant departure from conventional realism. This level, which he designates as “mind-only” (*sems tsam*), represents a radical philosophical shift

2. For our author the temporal counterpart of the spatial dimension, which is continuity (*santāna, rgyun*) is a fiction imposed by conceptual thought on the momentary event, which ultimately exists within the context of the logico-epistemological tradition. See Sa-paṅ, *Rigs gter rang 'grel* 69–70. For a general discussion about the ontological status of continuity in the Sakya tradition, see Dreyfus 1997, 94–95.

that challenges our ordinary understanding of reality and introduces a more nuanced ontological perspective.

In this second tier of Buddhist philosophical understanding, Sa-paṅ presents a systematic refutation of external phenomena, replacing the atomic theory of the first level with a comprehensive idealistic framework. This position goes beyond mere phenomenological observation to assert the ontological primacy of the mind. What distinguishes Sa-paṅ's presentation is his sophisticated argumentation for the mind's reality, which operates on two distinct levels:

1. **Experiential Primacy:** The fundamental role of the mind in determining subjective experiences of pleasure and pain.
2. **Ontological Status:** The assertion of the mind's genuine or true existence.

This dual approach demonstrates Sa-paṅ's nuanced understanding of idealistic philosophy, bridging experience with metaphysical claims. The apparent reality of external phenomena is reinterpreted through the lens of habitual tendencies (*vasana*, *bag chags*) and fundamental ignorance, manifesting as dualistic conceptual frameworks that mistakenly posit subject-object distinctions. Sa-paṅ masterfully summarizes the arguments found in Indic sources and answers certain qualms about the soundness of these arguments.³

The culmination of Sa-paṅ's philosophical framework arrives with what he considers the Buddha's definitive position, the state free from all proliferations (*spros pa dang bral ba*). This highest level represents a radical transcendence of both realistic and idealistic positions, pointing toward an understanding that moves beyond conventional conceptual frameworks entirely.

While this ultimate position receives less explicit development in Sa-paṅ's works compared to the previous two levels, its significance cannot be overstated. The concept of freedom from proliferation (*prapañca*, *spros bral*) aligns with the Madhyamaka school's unique understanding of emptiness (*śūnyatā*, *stong pa nyid*), suggesting a view that transcends both materialist and idealist extremes. For Sa-paṅ, ultimately, the views that entertain the absolute status towards matter or cognitions, are limited and they have to be transcended. They can have instrumental value, serving as a stepping stone toward the ultimate view of freedom from extremes. This interpretation finds textual support in the *Gateway to Learning*, where Sa-paṅ explicitly connects this level with Madhyamaka reasoning.

These three positions or theories are also related to the three-levels of analyses, namely the examination of external phenomena (*phyi rol dpyod pa*), the examination of transactional reality (*tha snyad kyi de kho na nyid dpyod pa*), and the ultimate reality (*don dam pa'i de kho na nyid*).

3. For detailed arguments formulated by Sa-paṅ for the refutation of the external material objects and for the rebuttal of the refutation of momentary consciousness, see Sa-paṅ, *Rigs gter rang 'grel* 64, 67–70.

In the *Treasury of Reasoning*, Sa-paṅ states:

When the Victorious one examines the external phenomena, he accepts atoms.

When [he] analyzed the transactional reality, he accepts the [position of] mind-only [proponents], and while engaging with the ultimate reality, [he] engages in the freedom from all proliferations.⁴

This comment appears within the wider framework of a summary of the diverse philosophical positions adhered to by Buddhists and non-Buddhists, primarily in connection with their understanding of causality.⁵

In a similar vein, Sa-paṅ makes the following observations in the *Gateway to Learning*: “If one examines the external phenomena, the tenets of Sautrāntika are factual.” And in the same work, he continues;

When one refutes the external phenomena, the [tenets of] Vijñapti[mātra] is the factual.

When establishing reality, the reasoning of the Madhyamaka is factually based.⁶

4. See Sa-paṅ, *Rigs gter rang 'grel* 60: *bde bar gshegs pa'i lugs bsgrub pa la gnyis las | dang po dgongs pa ngos bzung ba ni | thub pas phyi rol dpyod pa na rdul phran zhal gyis bzhes la | tha snyad kyi de kho na dpyod pa na sems tsam zhal gyis bzhes shing | don dam pa'i de kho na nyid la 'jug pa na spros pa dang bral ba la 'jug par mdzad do* ||. All translations, both in the main texts and footnotes are mine alone, unless otherwise noted.
5. See Sa-paṅ, *Rigs gter rang 'grel* 5: *ngo bo nyid dang dbang phyug dang || gtso bo rdul dang rnam rig dang || rten 'brel yin zhes grub pa'i mtha' || tha dad rang gzhan sde pa 'dod* ||. (*The different tenets systems, one's own and the others assert [the following] as [the cause of the phenomena], namely, own's nature, Īvara, primal substance, atoms, minds, and dependent origination.*) A similar classification of Indian philosophical schools is made based on their account of the causality of phenomena in Buddhapālita's commentary on the *Mūlamadhyamaka*, *Buddhapālitaṃmūlamadhyamakavṛtti*, (D 3842, f. 58b5): *gang gis dbang phyug dang dus dang rdul phran dang rang bzhin dang ngo bo nyid la sogs par smra ba...*
6. See Sa-paṅ, *Mkhas 'jug* 433 and 434: *phyi rol dpyod na mdo sde pa'i || grub mtha' dngos po stobs zhugs yin ||* and *phyi rol don rnams 'gog pa na || rnam rig dngos po stobs zhugs yin || chos nyid gtan la 'bebs pa na || dbu ma'i gtan tshigs dngos stobs yin ||*. For a wider context of these passages and the translation of their commentary see Jackson 1987, 351–352. For a critical edition of this passage, see id.: 281–283. Gorampa Sonam Sengé (go rams pa bsod nams seng ge, 1429–1489), commenting on these lines, makes an illuminating observation. He says the Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika theorize within the first context, Vijñaptimātra follows the middle level of deliberations, which consists of two sub-schools, namely true and false aspectarian approaches. The last is the position of Madhyamaka. See Go rams pa, *Sde bdun rab gsal* 66–67: *bde bar gshegs pas tha snyad la 'jug pa'i tshe rdul phran zhal gyi bzhes la | 'di la bye brag smra ba dang mdo sde pa'i grub mtha' gnyis yod do | tha snyad kyi de kho na nyid la 'jug pa'i tshe sems tsam zhal gyi bzhes la 'di la rnam bden rdzun gnyis yod do | don dam pa'i de kho na nyid la 'jug pa'i tshe chos thams cad spros pa dang bral ba la 'jug par mdzad* |. (*When the Sugatas engage with conventional reality, they accept atomic particles. On this point, there are two tenets systems, that of the Vaibhāṣikas and that*

The same observation, on the three levels of ontological views, which Sa-pan attributes to the Buddha in the *Treasury of Reasoning* is presented in a slightly different manner, in his rather controversial work, the *Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows*. It says:

With regard to this, engaging with the common world,
[the Buddha] taught the [existence of] external phenomena.
Having the reasoning that examines the transactional [truth],
[he] taught all phenomena as mind.
And having the ultimate reality in mind,
[he] taught that all phenomena are free from proliferation.⁷

In summary, the philosophical sophistication of this framework lies in its progressive nature:

1. Beginning with conventional realism (*don rig*)
2. Moving through philosophical idealism (*rnam rig*)
3. Culminating in a transcendent view beyond conceptual elaboration (*spros bral*)

This progression demonstrates not only philosophical rigor but also pedagogical wisdom, showing how increasingly subtle understandings can be developed through systematic philosophical investigation and hermeneutical practices. The sophistication of Sa-pan's approach lies not just in its content but in its structure, which demonstrates how Buddhist thought can systematically lead practitioners and scholars from conventional understanding to deeper philosophical insights while maintaining internal coherence and pedagogical effectiveness.

2. Doxographical Hierarchies and Philosophical Deliberations: The Intersection of Buddhist Schools and Ontological Views

of the Sautrāntikas. When engaging with the true nature of conventional reality, they accept Mind-Only, within which there are two positions: true-aspect and false-aspect. When engaging with ultimate reality, they proceed into the freedom from all conceptual elaborations/proliferations.) Gorampa's commentary is also supported by Sa-pan's comments in the *mkhas 'jug*. Gorampa, following Sa-pan seems to be making the claims that the four doxographical schools are commenting on and interpreting the philosophical positions and discourses of the Buddha, as enshrined in the scriptures which they took to be authentically attributable to Buddha. Both of them are, it seems, not implying that the tenets of the four doxographical schools are actually present in the discourses themselves.

7. See Sa-pan, *Sdom gsum rab dbye* 73: *de la 'jig rten mthun 'jug la || dgongs nas phyi rol don du gsungs || tha snyad dpyod pa'i rigs pa la || dgongs nas chos rnams sems su gsungs || dam pa'i don la dgongs nas ni || chos kun spros pa bral zhes gsungs ||*. For a translation of the wider context of this passage, see Rhoton 2002, 150.

In both the *Treasury of Reasoning* and the *Gateway to Learning*, Sa-paṅ develops an intricate framework that correlates traditional Buddhist doxographical classifications with his threefold scheme of ontological views. This integration represents a masterful synthesis of Buddhist philosophical thoughts and their advocates.

In examining the first ontological level, Sa-paṅ engages with two major Buddhist philosophical schools, the Vaibhāṣika (*bye brag smra ba*) and the Sautrāntika (*mdo sde pa*). While both schools operate within the framework that accepts the reality of external phenomena, Sa-paṅ demonstrates a clear philosophical preference for the Sautrāntika position. This preference reveals his nuanced understanding of Buddhist philosophical development, suggesting that even within the same broad ontological framework, certain theoretical articulations may be more intellectually appealing or defensible than others.

At the second level, Sa-paṅ engages with the two primary sub-schools of Vijñaptimātra thought: the Satyākāravādin (*rnam bden pa*) and Alīkākaravādin (*rnam rdzun pa*). His apparent preference for the Alīkākaravādin position suggests an informed understanding of the problems inherent in idealistic philosophies. This preference likely stems from the Alīkākaravādin's more nuanced approach to the status of mental appearances (*gzung rnam*), which, in Sa-paṅ's considered view might better prepare thinkers for the ultimate view of emptiness.

The most intriguing aspect of Sa-paṅ's framework emerges in his treatment of the third level, characterized by freedom from proliferation (*spros pa dang bral ba*). The relative silence in all three works regarding the precise meaning and implications of this concept raises questions about Sa-paṅ's understanding of ultimate reality. This ambiguity might be intentional, reflecting the inherent difficulty—or perhaps impossibility—of articulating the highest philosophical view in conventional conceptual terms.⁸

In the *Treasury of Reasoning*, Sa-paṅ critically examines and refutes the epistemological and causal theories of sensory consciousness (*dbang shes*) proposed by the Vaibhāṣika school while maintaining the tenets of the Sautrāntika as viable positions. He explicitly states: “When one accepts the external reality, one should hold the positions of the Sautrāntika.”⁹ When establishing the idealistic position, Sa-paṅ primarily employs two arguments:

1. The reasoning of luminosity and cognizance (*gsal zhing rig pa'i rtags*)

8. Gorampa in his encyclopedic work on Madhyamaka, namely, the *dbu ma spyi ston*, lists a couple of meanings associated with this philosophically pregnant noun phrase. The first meaning of the phrase is that it refers to all positive and negative characteristics (*dgag sgrub kyi mtshan ma thams cad*), towards which the mind grasps. The second meaning is language, in the sense that it elaborates. The third connotation of this term is the cause. For details see Go rams pa, *Dbu ma spyi ston* 91–92.

9. See Sa-paṅ, *Rigs gter rang 'grel* 62: *phyi rol gyi don khas len pa na | mdo sde pa'i lugs bzung bar bya'o ||*.

2. The reasoning of ascertainment of simultaneous observation (*sahopalambhaniyama, lhan cig dmigs pa nges pa'i rtags*)¹⁰

From the broader context and detailed formulation of these two arguments, one can conclude that the author favors the position of the second sub-school of the Vijñaptimātra, specifically that of the Alikāravādin.¹¹

This conclusion finds support in Sa-pan's comment at the conclusion of the ninth chapter of the *Treasury of Reasoning*, the *Chapter on the Examination of Perception* (*mngon gsum brtag pa'i rab byed*), where he states:

10. See Sa-pan, *Rigs gter rang 'grel* 65: *shes pa'i mtsha nyid gsal zhing rig pa yin la | gsal zhing rig pa dang mi ldan pa'i shes bya mi srid pas | shes bya thams cad sems su grub ste | lkog shal gyis ba lang bsgrub pa bzhin no ||*, and *gang lhan cig dmigs pas nges pa de gzhan ma yin te zla ba gnyis snang bzhin | sngon po dang de 'dzin gyi shes pa'ang lhan cig dmigs pas nges so ||*. (*The defining characteristic of consciousness is luminosity and cognizance. Since it is impossible for objects of knowledge to lack luminosity and cognizance, all objects of knowledge are established as mind - just as a bull is established by a dewlap. And, whatever is the ascertainment of simultaneous observation cannot be different—like the appearance of two moons. Blue (color) and the consciousness apprehending it are also ascertainment of simultaneous observation.*) For details see Sa-pan, *Rigs gter rang 'grel* 65–66, and Go rams pa, *Sde bdun rab gsal* 426, where he explained how this particular reasoning functions within the diverse doxographical schools with bewildering ontologies. One of the critical consequences of the first arguments is that assuming Sa-pan accepts the *parikalpita* (*kun btags*) as knowable (*shes bya*), within the parameter of the Vijñaptimātra school, he must also accept it as cognition (*shes pa*), otherwise, his reasoning will turn out to be not established. For the author's clarification of another issue raised on this reasoning, see Sa-pan, *Rigs gter rang 'grel* 67. For the rebuttal of the refutation of the second argument, where this reasoning is seen as either unestablished (*ma grub pa*), contradictory (*gal ba*), or inconclusive (*ma nges pa*) see Sa-pan *Rigs gter rang 'grel*, 66–67.

11. Gorampa is explicit in that he says Dharmakīrti refutes Vaibhāṣika and tentatively accepts Sautrāntika position, and later refutes this position along with the Satyākāravādin position of Vijñaptimātra. See Go rams pa, *Sde bdun rab gsal* 67–68: *de ltar sangs rgyas pa'i grub mtha' bzhi las | slob dpon gyis gang gtan la dbab pa yin zhe na | 'di la don rig dang rnam rig gnyis las | dang po khas len pa'i tshe bye brag smra bas dbang shes kyis rang dang dus mnyam pa'i phyi don rnam med rjen char du 'dzin par 'dod pa de bkag nas skad cig snga ma rkyen gsum tshogs pa las | skad cig gnyis par dbang shes yul gyi rnam ldan du skeyes pa tsam las phyi don rtogs par 'dod pa mdo sde pa'i grub mtha' zhal gyis bzhes te | slob dpon nyid kyi zhal nas | gal te phyi rol dpyod la 'jug pa na || kho bos mdo sde'i skabs la rnam par brten | | zhes gsungs par grags so || gnyis pa rnam rig zhal gyis bzhes pa'i tshe rnam bden pas dbang shes la rags par snang ba bden grub tu 'dod pa de bkag nas rnam med zhal gyi bzhes te | de phyir don dang shes pa la || rags snang yod min || zhes sogs gsungs pa'i phyir ||*. (*Among the four Buddhist philosophical schools, which position did the master [i.e. Dharmakīrti] establish? Regarding this, between cognition of external objects and cognition of aspect, when accepting the first position, he rejected the Vaibhāṣika assertion that sense consciousness directly and nakedly apprehends external objects simultaneously with itself without representations. Instead, he accepted the Sautrāntika position which maintains that when the three conditions from the previous moment combine, in the second moment sense consciousness arises merely endowed with the object's aspect, and thereby cognizes external objects. As is well known, the master himself is supposed to have stated "When engaging in the analysis of external objects, I rely upon the Sautrāntika context." Secondly, when accepting the cognition of aspect position, he rejected the True Aspectarian [Satyākāravādin] assertion that the gross appearances to sense consciousness are truly established. Instead, he accepted the False Aspectarian [Alikāravādin] view, as evidenced by his statement, "Therefore, in both object and consciousness, there are no gross appearances..."*)

Therefore, the teacher [Dharmakīrti], posits like the Sautrāntika, while accepting the external reality, and when entering into the internal system [i.e. idealistic position], he accepts the [tenets of proponents of] aspectless.¹²

As evidenced in both the citation above and the *Gateway to Learning*, Sa-paṅ establishes an explicit connection between the three levels of views and the four doxographical schools. He maintains that the tenets of the Sautrāntika school—particularly its epistemological theory of the generation of sensory consciousnesses from three conditions—are based on proof (*sgrub byed yod pa*) and cannot be undermined (*gnod byed med pa*). These tenets are factually concordant within the limited framework of the first level of view, where the reality of external phenomena is asserted.¹³

Furthermore, in the same work, Sa-paṅ clarifies that the second position on the view—the idealistic one—corresponds to the tenets of the Vijñaptimātra, while the final view of freedom from all proliferations aligns with that established and proposed by the Madhyamaka school.¹⁴

In conclusion, a tabular presentation of the relationship between these three levels of views and three schools, as presented in the three works, will help to gain clarity around the ideas in an easy manner.

12. See Sa-paṅ, *Rigs gter rang 'grel* 302: *de ltar na grub mtha' bzhi las slob dpon ni phyi rol gyi don khas len pa na mdo sde pa ltar mdzad la | shes bya nang la 'jug pa na rnam med zhal gyis bzhes so ||*.
13. In the *Rigs gter rang 'grel*, the author counts only three conditions, while in the *Mkhas 'jug* he mentions four conditions. See Sa-paṅ, *Rigs gter rang 'grel* 62: *yul dang dbang po yid la byed || de las skyes pa'i rnam shes yin || yul dang dang po dang yid la byed pa tshogs pa'i skad cig dang po de nyid phyi rol gyi don bems po 'dra ba'i skyed byed yin la || de dag tshogs pa las skad cig gnyi spar rnam shes phyi rol yul gyi rnam pa 'dra bar skyes pa de nyid skyes la 'dra ba'i shes pa yin no ||* (*Consciousness arises from the object, sense faculty, and mental attention. The first moment, when the object, sense faculty, and mental attention combine, is like an external material object acting as a producer. From their combination, in the second moment, consciousness arises resembling the aspect of the external object—this is the cognition that arises and resembles [its object].*) And see *Mkhas 'jug* 433: *mdo sde pas yul dbang yid la byed pa la sogs pa rkyen bzhi las rnam shes skye bar 'dod pa la sgrub byed yod cing gnod byed med pas dngos po stobs zhugs kyi tshad ma yin no ||* (*The Sautrāntika position that consciousness arises from the four conditions—object, sense faculty, mental attention, and so forth—is established by valid proof and faces no valid refutation. Therefore, it constitutes a factually concordant standard.*) The four conditions according to Abhidharma materials are objective condition (*ālabhanapratyaya*, *dmigs rkyen*), dominant condition (*adhipatipratyaya*, *bdag rkyen*), immediately preceding condition (*samanantarapratyaya*, *de ma thag rkyen*), and causal condition (*hetupratyaya*, *rgyu rkyen*).
14. See Sa-paṅ, *Mkhas 'jug* 434: *des na phyi rol gyi don 'gog pa'i dus su sems tsam pa'i gcig dang du bral dang | lhan cig dmigs nges dang | rigs [read: rig] pa'i gtan tshigs dang |...gtan tshigs thams cad dngos po stobs zhugs yin la | dbu ma rang rgyud pa'i rdo rje gzegs ma dang | mu bzhi skye 'gog la sogs pa dang | thal 'gyur ba'i bsgrub bya dang mtshung pa dang | rgyu mtshan mtshungs pa la sogs pa dngos po'i stobs zhugs yin no ||* (*Therefore, when refuting external objects, all the Cittamātra reasoning such as neither one nor many arguments, the ascertainment of simultaneous observation, and the cognition argument... are factually gained. Similarly, the Svātantrika Madhyamaka arguments such as the vajra splinter, the refutation of production in terms of the four alternatives, as well as the Prāsaṅgika's similar probandum and similar reasons arguments are also based on the natural force of entities.*)

<i>The Treasury of Reasoning</i>	<i>The Gateway to Learning</i>	<i>The Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows</i>
Analysis of external phenomena (<i>phyi rol dpyod pa</i>)	Sautrāntika (<i>mdo sde pa dngos po stobs zhugs</i>)	Ordinary position (<i>'jig rten mthun 'jug</i>)
Analysis of transactional reality (<i>tha snyad kyi de kho nan yid dpyod pa</i>)	Vijñaptimātra (<i>rnam rig pa dngos po stobs zhugs</i>)	Reasoning that examines the convention (<i>tha snyad dpyod pa'i rigs pa</i>)
Ultimate reality (<i>don dam pa'i de kho na nyid</i>)	Madhyamaka (<i>dbu ma'i gtan tshigs dngos po stobs zhugs</i>)	Ultimate reality (<i>dam pa'i don</i>)

3. The Place of Dharmakīrti within the Three Levels of View and Four Doxographical Schools

Sa-pan develops and argues for a significant theme in the *Rikter rangdrel* (*rigs gter rang 'grel*), immediately following his presentation of the three ontological theories. This theme centers on his understanding and conception of Dharmakīrti's scholarship within the three ontological propositions and the four doxographical schools. Sa-pan contends that the epistemological theories (*tshad ma'i rnam gzbag*) presented in the works of Dharmakīrti, and by extension Dignāga, must be appreciated within the first two tiers of views and the second and third doxographical schools. These diverse positions and their implications are thematized as *don rig* and *rnam rig*.¹⁵ That is, according to Sa-pan, Dharmakīrti's ontological standpoints, which are structured around the two types of object of comprehension (*gzhal bya gnyis*), the elaborations of epistemological theories in terms of two types of valid knowledge (*tshad ma gnyis*), the theory of valid reasoning characterized by three modes (*tshul gsum pa can gyi gtan tshigs*), and the related topics like the relation and incompatibility (*'brel ba dang 'gal ba*), philosophy of language (*brjod bya rjod byed*),

15. See Sa-pan, *Rigs gter rang 'grel* 61: *gnyis pa de slob dpon gyis ji ltar gtan la phab pa'i tshul la don rig dang rnam rig gnyis so ||*. (Second, regarding how the master established this, [there are] two contexts, namely the cognition of external object and cognition of aspect.)

and so on, has to be understood within the ontological framework of accepting the reality of external phenomena and idealistic position, and therefore, within the philosophical parameters of the Suatrāntika and the Vijñaptimātra schools.

In his interpretation of Dharmakīrti's scholarship, within the framework of assuming the reality of the external phenomena, Sa-paṅ understands it by thematizing as follows. First is the refutation of the causal and epistemological theories of the Vaibhāṣika¹⁶ and some of his fellow Tibetan epistemologists,¹⁷ who argued for a contemporaneous object and subject (*gzung 'dzin dus mnyam*). The next is the presentation of the epistemological theory of generation of the sensory consciousness, which he termed as *skyes la 'dra ba'i shes pa* (*cognition that arises and resembles its object*), from the three preceding conditions, which he again termed as *bems bo 'dra ba'i skyed byed* (*like an external material object acting as a producer*).¹⁸

When interpreting the idealistic aspect of the Dharmakīrtian scholarship, Sa-paṅ, as we saw earlier, uses two arguments, namely the reasoning of cognizant and awareness and the reasoning of ascertainment of simultaneous observation, preceded by the refutation of the external reality through the arguments called neither one nor many (*ekānekaviyoga, gcig dang du ma dang bral ba*).¹⁹

Additionally, Sa-paṅ elucidates the idealistic aspect of Dharmakīrti's thoughts in his brief account of the *pramāṇa-phala* (*tshad 'bras*), where he indicates Dharmakīrti's acceptance of the Alīkāravadin position.²⁰

4. The Two Standpoints in Sa-paṅ's Epistemological Theories

16. See Sa-paṅ, *Rigs gter rang 'grel* 61 for details.

17. See Sa-paṅ *Rigs gter rang 'grel*, 61: *bod phal cher ni dus mi mnyam na yul du mi rung zhing dbang po lta byed ma yin pas | dus mnyam pa'i yul dang rnam shes gzung 'dzin yin zhes smra'o ||* (*Most Tibetans maintain that if [object and consciousness] are not simultaneous, [something] cannot serve as an object, and since the sense faculty is not the perceiver, the simultaneous object and consciousness [must] serve as the apprehended and apprehender.*) This position can be traced to the work of Chapa Chökyi Sengé (*phywa pa chos kyi seng ge*, 1109–1169). For Chapa, the integrity of the concept of object-subject must be of the same temporal dimension, that is they must exist synchronically. On the other hand, if they belong to different temporal slices, then the cognition will not be able to apprehend the object. See *Phywa pa chos kyi seng ge*, *Yid kyi mun sel* (fol. 3b2–3): *des na sems dang sems byung phyi rol gyi yul dang bdang po dang snod kyi jig rten la sogs pa thams cad dngos po ste tha dad dus mnyam tshogs pa gcig pas yul dang yul can du gnas pa yin la...||*. (*Therefore, mind and mental factors, external objects, sense faculties, the receptacle world, and so forth—all these entities exist simultaneously as distinct [things], and due to their gathering as one time, they exist as object and subject...*) See also *Yid kyi mun sel* (fol. 58b2): *kho bo cag yul dang yul can dus mnyam du 'dod pas...||*. (*Since we maintain that object and subject are simultaneous.*) Although the details of Chapa's position demand further study, it is at least clear that for him object-subject must necessarily exist at the same time.

18. See Sa-paṅ, *Rigs gter rang 'grel* 62: *don bems po 'dra ba'i skyed byed yin la || skyes la 'dra ba'i shes pa yin no ||*.

19. See Sa-paṅ, *Rigs gter rang 'grel* 64 for the details.

20. See footnote no. 12.

A fundamental principle underlying Sa-paṅ's interpretation of *pramāṇa* theories, as presented in the *Treasury of Reasoning*, is his distinctive articulation of two vantage points. These perspectives, designated as theoretical standpoint (*'chad tshé*) and practical standpoint (*'jug tshé*), are essential to comprehending various domains of philosophical inquiry, including:

1. Ontology (*yul gyi rnam gzhag*, in the 1st, 3rd, 6th, and 7th chapters of the *Treasury of Reasoning*)
2. Epistemology (*tshad ma'i rnam gzhag*, in the 8th, 9th, and 10th chapters of the *Treasury of Reasoning*)
3. Philosophy of language (*brjod bya rjod byed kyi rnam gzhag*, in the 4th, and 5th chapters of the *Treasury of Reasoning*)
4. Reasoning (*gtan tshigs kyi rnam gzhag* in the 10th chapters of the *Treasury of Reasoning*)

Many critiques presented by Sa-paṅ in the *Treasury of Reasoning* stem from what he perceived as insufficient attention to or misunderstanding of these dual standpoints. In other words, according to our author, these two standpoints are fundamental hermeneutical perspectives that any serious Buddhist epistemologist theorist has to take seriously.

The core distinction emphasizes that our practical engagement with reality through conceptual thought (*rtog pa*) and linguistic expression (*sgra*), while pragmatically efficacious, fails to accurately represent the world's true nature. This disparity emerges from understanding how conceptual mechanisms operate and their inherent distortion of reality—a distortion rooted in impressions (*vāsanā*, *bag chags*) from previous existences and associated habitual tendencies.

Sa-paṅ's tenets, and by extension those of his intellectual forefathers, result from their strict dichotomous division between the two halves of their epistemological theories and their ontological counterparts. Sa-paṅ makes a hard distinction between the conceptual world that only relates to the universals (*sāmānya*, *spyi*), which are unreal denominations and perceptual halves that only connect with the real particulars (*vyakti*, *gsal ba*). The first world of the conceptual half is rich in interpretation and description, determination and ascertainment, but it lacks contact with reality, composed of specifically characterized phenomena (*svalakṣaṇa*, *rang mtshan*) or particulars. The second world of perception has direct access to reality but it does not engage with the invariable generality, namely the generally characterized phenomena (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*, *spyi mtshan*) or universal, which are intimately connected with the process of naming and reasoning (*brda dang gtan tshigs*).

The theoretical standpoint is the perspective of critically reflecting on the elements and factors involved in, for example, the process of signification (*brda yul*), predication (*khyad gzhi dang khyad chos sbyor ba*), or structure of reasoning (*gtan tshigs kyi sbyor ba*). Here we find that what

is signified (*brjod bya*) and what signifies (*rjod byed*), the actual subject (*song tshong tshod kyī chos can*), predicates (*bsgrub bya'i chos*), and proof (*gtan tshigs*), are the conceptual entities, which furthermore lack any reality status. The real entities, namely the specifically characterized phenomena, which have a specific spatial and temporal location and specific nature, are ephemeral, transient, and innumerable and therefore do not signify nor are signified, neither entails nor general principle can be drawn.

The second perspective, namely the practical standpoint, is an account of how our conceptual thought and language that follows lead us to the successful fulfillment of the practical aims and purposes despite being inherently mistaken, and distorting the true picture of reality as accessed by perception. This innate mistake associated with the conceptual thought is expressed as the mistaking of appearances and superimposition as one (*snang btags gcig tu 'khrul ba*).²¹

5. Hermeneutical Principles in Sa-paṅ's *Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows*

Sa-paṅ's seminal work, the *Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows*, presents another comprehensive analysis of Buddhist hermeneutical principles. After conducting a critical examination of various philosophical deliberations, praxis, and pith instructional lineages expounded by his Tibetan contemporaries regarding the three vows (*sdom pa gsum*), Sa-paṅ articulates several interpretative perspectives.

These perspectives serve as evaluative frameworks through which one can assess, analyze, and appreciate the diverse content of Buddha's discourses preserved in both sūtras and tantras. Sa-paṅ's approach advocates for a balanced interpretation that avoids both absolutization (*sgro btags*) and denigration (*skur 'debs*) of specific commentaries or teachings.

Sa-paṅ emphasizes the critical importance of maintaining clear delineations between these hermeneutical principles and perspectives. He argues that their conflation, misunderstanding, or ignorance could lead to fundamental misinterpretations of the Buddha's teachings, potentially

21. If we take a conceptual thought thinking about a vase, the objective aspect (*gzung rnam*) of this cognitive episode is the appearance (*snang ba*), and the mistaking of this for a real vase is the superimposition (*btags pa*). See Go rams pa, *Sde bdun rab gsal* 129: 'o na bum 'dzin rtog pa'i bzung rnam de snang ba yin nam | sel ba yin zhe na | de la shes pa yin pa'i cha dang | phyi rol bum par sgro btags pa'i cha gnyis las | snga ma ni snang ba yin te | bum 'dzin rtog pa rang gi ngo bo la rang rig mngon sum du song ba'i yul yin pa'i phyir | phyi ma ni sel ba yin te | sgro btags yin pa'i phyir ||. (If one asks whether the apprehended aspect of the conceptual cognition apprehending a vase is a positive appearance or an elimination? Of its two aspects—the aspect of being consciousness and the aspect of being superimposed as an external vase—the first is a positive appearance, because it is an object of self-cognizing direct perception that perceives the conceptual cognition apprehending a pot in terms of its own nature. The second is an elimination, because it is superimposed).

resulting in the extremes of absolutizing certain teachings, while denigrating others, or both. These failures and errors are the origination of spurious positions he critiqued in the work. Thus, the following passages in the *Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows* appear to introduce a detailed arrangement of the numerous hermeneutical principles, suggesting a systematic categorization to follow.

5.1. The Four Factors of Buddhist Hermeneutics

The primary framework of hermeneutical principles is structured around four fundamental factors: content (*vācya*, *brjod bya*), medium (*vācaka*, *rjod byed*), vehicle (*yāna*, *theg pa*), and manner of teaching (*bshad pa*).

Regarding the content of Buddhist teachings, one must interpret the doctrine either as requiring further interpretation (*neyārtha*, *drang don*) or as definitive (*nītārtha*, *nges don*). As Sa-paṅ states:

The discourses of the Buddha encompass two forms of content:
That which requires interpretation and that which is definitive.²²

Sa-paṅ further posits that analysis of the terms, or the specific words employed by the Buddha in transmitting his teachings, can serve as an interpretative methodology. He categorizes these words into two distinct classifications: the literal (*ji bzhin pa*) and the non-literal (*ji bzhin min pa*). As he articulates:

The [Buddha's] words were articulated in two forms:
Either in literal or allegorical expression.²³

The third interpretative perspective, which facilitates accurate comprehension of the contextual meaning within Buddhist discourses, comprises the vehicles—diverse systems of ethical, meditative, and philosophical practices aimed at achieving either favorable rebirth within cyclic existence (*mngon mtho*) or complete liberation (*nges legs*). Sa-paṅ states:

The vehicles are of two forms, the mundane and the supramundane.²⁴

22. See Sa-paṅ, *Sdom gsum rab dbye 73: sangs rgyas gsung la drang don dang || nges don rnam pa gnyis su yod ||*. See also Rhoton 2002, 150.

23. See Sa-paṅ, *Sdom gsum rab dbye 73: sgra yang ji bzhin pa dang ni || ji bzhin min pa gnyis su gsungs ||*, and see also Rhoton 2002, 150.

24. See Sa-paṅ, *Sdom gsum rab dbye 73: theg pa yang ni 'jig rten dang || 'jig rten min pa gnyis su gnas ||*, and see also Rhoton 2002, 150.

The fourth hermeneutical factor, according to Sa-pan, which enhances understanding of the sūtras, is the manner of teaching. He delineates this as follows:

The manner of explanation manifests in three forms:
Through intention, allusion, and direct instruction.²⁵

5.2. The Context of View (*lta ba*) and Praxis (*sgom pa and spyod pa*) as an Interpretive Principle

Among the significant interpretative principles that Sa-pan developed in the conclusion of his *Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows* is the triadic framework of view, meditation, and conduct (*lta sgom spyod gsum*). Within scriptural texts, certain passages primarily address philosophical perspectives and must be understood accordingly, while others predominantly concern meditative contemplation and ethical conduct. Sa-pan articulates this distinction as follows:

In scriptural passages that proclaim statements such as “There is no need for prostrations, offerings, generosity, or ethical discipline,” “Neither the generation of mind nor empowerments are required,” “Here neither meditative absorption nor study is necessary,” and “Both virtue and non-virtue are non-existent, as are Buddha and sentient beings,” we find expressions of the view. These are not the scriptures of meditation and conduct.²⁶

Conversely, there exist both tantric and sūtric scriptures whose content primarily addresses the practical aspects of Buddhist soteriological objectives. Sa-pan illustrates this through the following examples:

Those scriptures that declare, “Without empowerments, there can be no accomplishments,” “Disordered rites will prove ineffective,” “Misconduct will result in infractions,” “One cannot receive blessings if the visualization of deities is incorrect,” “Doubts will give rise to faults,” and “Therefore, all rites must be performed

25. See Sa-pan, *Sdom gsum rab dbye* 73: *bshad pa yang ni dgongs pa dang || ldem por dgongs dang drang po ru || dgongs pa hzes bya rnam gsum yod*||. See also Rhoton 2002, 150. For a detailed discussion of these concepts and their sources, see Seyfort Ruegg 1989.

26. See Sa-pan, *Sdom gsum rab dbye* 83: *dper na phyag dang mchod pa dang || sbyin dang tshul kbrims sogs mi dgos || sems bskyed dbang bskur bya mi dgos || bsam gtan klog pa 'dir mi dgos || dge dang sdig pa gnyis ka med || sangs rgyas sems can yod min sogs || 'di 'dra gsungs pa'i lung rnam kun || lta ba yin gyi bsgom pa dang || spyod pa gnyis kyi lung ma yin ||*. See also Rhoton 2002, 164.

with impeccable precision,” are scriptures of conduct and meditation, not to that of view.²⁷

5.3. Interpretation of Scriptures and Doctrines in Relation to Neophyte and Advanced Practitioner²⁸

In the passages immediately following the aforementioned ones, Sa-paṅ presents an alternative hermeneutical framework for scriptural interpretation. This interpretive principle is predicated on the relationship between sacred texts, their contents, and sentient beings, specifically acknowledging that various scriptures are intended for practitioners at different stages of spiritual development. This framework necessitates careful consideration of the intended audience (*ched du bya ba'i gdul bya*)—both actual and potential—for whom a particular discourse was composed.

According to Sa-paṅ, certain discourses are specifically directed toward individuals who remain bound within saṃsāra, the cycle of existence conditioned by afflictions and karmic forces. He articulates this position as follows:

Furthermore, there exist two distinct contexts for the application of scriptural citations: the mundane and the supramundane. The exhortations regarding the diligent observance of empowerments, pledges, and vows are specifically addressed to ordinary beings who have not yet transcended the ocean of saṃsāra.²⁹

In contrast to these teachings, there exist apparently contradictory pronouncements by the Buddha in other scriptures, or within different sections of the same discourse, which are intended for spiritually advanced practitioners. Sa-paṅ elaborates on this point:

“There is no requirement for empowerment, pledges, or similar practices. One achieves liberation from all acts of obeisance and offerings. Having abandoned all meditative cultivation, one should relinquish all paths as one would discard a boat.” These instructions are specifically addressed to beings who have success-

27. See Sa-paṅ, *Sdom gsum rab dbye* 83: *dbang med pa la dngos grub med || cho ga 'kbrugs na las mi 'chags || log par spyad na ltung ba 'byung || lha bsgom 'kbrul na byin mi rlob || the tshom za na nyes pa skye || des na cho ga ci byed kyang || shin tu dag par bya dgos zhes || de 'dra'i lung kun spyod pa dang || bsgom pa yin gyi lta ba min ||*. See also Rhoton 2002, 164.

28. Although this particular point appears within the context of how to intelligently use the scriptural citations and it does not directly address the hermeneutical frameworks, one can deduce coherent theories of interpretation based on it.

29. See Sa-paṅ, *Sdom gsum rab dbye* 83: *gzhan yang lung sbyor byed pa la || 'jig rten pa dang 'jig rten las || 'das pa'i gnas skabs rnam gnyis yod || dbang dang dam tshig sdom pa sogs || 'bad nas bsgrub par gsungs pa ni || 'khor ba'i rgya mtsho ma brgal ba'i || 'jig rten pa la gsungs pa yin ||*. See also Rhoton 2002, 164.

fully traversed the ocean of cyclic existence.³⁰

This dichotomy in scriptural interpretation reflects an insightful understanding of the relationship between spiritual teachings and the developmental stages of practitioners, suggesting a nuanced approach to Buddhist hermeneutics.

6. Concluding Remarks

Sa-paṅ's three major works—*The Treasury of Reasoning* (*tshad ma rigs gter*), *The Gateway to Learning* (*mkhas pa 'jug pa'i sgo*), and *The Clear Differentiation of the Three Vows* (*sdom gsum rab dbye*)—exemplify the critical hermeneutical approaches developed by one of Tibet's most influential scholar-practitioners. His methodological innovations demonstrate a remarkable capacity to synthesize and systematize diverse Buddhist doctrines while maintaining their distinct contexts and purposes. Through these works, Sa-paṅ crafted a profound departure from earlier Tibetan attempts to reconcile seemingly contradictory Buddhist teachings. Rather than forcing disparate doctrinal elements into a rigid hierarchical schema, he developed nuanced interpretative strategies that preserved the unique contributions of different textual traditions and theoretical systems while revealing their underlying complementarity. This methodological sophistication helped establish foundations for subsequent Tibetan scholastic developments.

Sa-paṅ's hermeneutical principles reveal remarkable philosophical sophistication in their treatment of the relationship between language, meaning, and truth. For Sa-paṅ, following general Buddhist insight, and particularly the conclusions of the Dharmakīrtian tradition, the language, and other conventions, shape the thought, which in turn gets articulated in language. There is no natural relationship between these conventions and the world. Thus, this lack of inherent or natural relationship between the conventions and the world entails, at least for our author, that meaning—one's interpretation—of the world is liberatingly unlimited. His careful attention to context and resistance to absolutizing any single interpretative framework anticipates many concerns of later-day Tibetan hermeneutical theory while remaining firmly grounded in Buddhist epistemological, literary, and doctrinal traditions. Likewise, his systematic approach to reading and interpreting Indic sources established enduring standards of scholarly rigor in Tibetan intellectual culture. Through his insistence on careful attention to linguistics and various contexts, Sa-paṅ created methodological tools that remained influential for centuries of subsequent Tibetan Buddhist scholarship.

30. See Sa-paṅ, *Sdom gsum rab dbye* 83: *dbang dang dam tshig sogs mi dgos || phyag dang mchod pa kun las grol || bsam gtan bsgom pa kun spangs te || lam kung zings bzhin dor bya zhes || gsungs pa 'khor ba'i rgya mtsho las || brgal ba'i gang zag rnam la gsungs ||*. See also Rhoton 2002, 165.

The significance of Sa-paṅ's hermeneutical contributions extends far beyond their historical importance, offering valuable insights into contemporary challenges in cross-cultural philosophical dialogue and understanding, religious pluralism, and the interpretation of traditional wisdom in modern contexts. Although Sa-paṅ's hermeneutical project is limited within the parameters of a received "single" Buddhist tradition, the diversities of views and theories are rich. He, within his intellectual setting, succeeded in charting a path, where these diversities are neither rejected nor relativized. He found ways to see the values and insights of each tradition and view. We could also learn from his insights and apply them to our complexly interconnected world.

His contributions provide crucial guidance for negotiating apparently contradictory truth claims while preserving their distinct values. While substantial work has been done on Sa-paṅ's philosophical views and his role in Tibetan intellectual history, a comprehensive analysis of his hermeneutical theories remains a *desideratum*. Such investigation would necessitate a detailed philological analysis of his major works and their sources, historical contextualization within both Tibetan and broader Buddhist intellectual traditions, comparative study with other Buddhist hermeneutical systems, and careful assessment of his lasting influence on Tibetan scholastic methodology.

This research gap represents a crucial opportunity for scholars of Buddhist studies, comparative philosophy, and hermeneutical theory. Understanding his hermeneutical contributions provides insights into how traditional Buddhist thought can engage meaningfully with contemporary intellectual challenges while maintaining its distinctive character and insights. His example demonstrates how careful attention to context and methodology can allow for creative engagement across different boundaries without sacrificing philosophical rigor or religious authenticity. Through careful study of Sa-paṅ's hermeneutical approach, scholars and practitioners alike may find invaluable guidance for addressing the complex interpretative challenges of our increasingly interconnected intellectual world.

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