

# PHILOSOPHY, MEDITATION, AND EXPERIENCE IN THE GREAT DEBATE AT BSAM YAS<sup>1</sup>

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## I.

In his recent article, “Yogic Perception, Meditation, and Enlightenment: The Epistemological Issues in a Key Debate” (2013), Tom Tillemans spells out some of the implications of the issues that appear to have been at stake at the famous debate between Indian and Chinese Buddhists in Tibet in the late eighth century C.E. Tillemans characterizes the philosophical issues as fundamentally *epistemological* in nature. The main point of contention, he observes, remains highly relevant to scholars and practitioners today. It is “...in part about the efficacy of various types of meditation, but, more broadly... about the respective worth of analysis and meditation as approaches to knowledge and enlightenment...” (Tillemans 2013: 290). According to Tillemans the Indian side of the debate, led by the scholar Kamalaśīla, did not accept the possibility of meditation adding any new information or knowledge to the conclusions reached through philosophical analysis. In opposing this, the Chinese, represented by the Chan monk Mahāyāna (Heshang Mohoyen), held that meditation constitutes the very avenue through which genuine knowledge is to be obtained.

In this paper I will argue that this way of framing the debate – as one based upon an opposition between analysis and meditation – participates in a dichotomy that Kamalaśīla himself did not accept. In arguing for this I will base my understanding upon Kamalaśīla’s views as set out in his three famous treatises entitled *Bhāvanākrama*, which are generally

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thought to have been composed around the time of the debate itself. A close reading of these texts shows that while his opponent may have agreed with such an opposition, Kamalaśīla himself took considerable pains to outline a system in which a binary conception of analysis and meditation does not apply.<sup>2</sup> In providing an account of Kamalaśīla's understanding of the actual relationship between analysis and meditation, I will also argue that there are at least three senses in which he thought that meditation contributes to knowledge. Whether this contribution should be considered new information or knowledge in and of itself is a question I will take up only at the end of this paper.

The kind of knowledge at the heart of the historical debate was that of a non-dual, non-conceptual gnosis (*nirvikalṭpajñāna*), which, for the Indian gradualist position represented by Kamalaśīla, marks the beginning of the path of seeing and the first of the bodhisattva *bhūmis* (Williams 2009: 80–81; see BhK 1 224: 16–24). The Chinese position apparently equated this state of realized knowledge with awakening itself (or Buddhahood or omniscience).<sup>3</sup> In Indian epistemological thought this state is closely connected with the technical term *yogipratyakṣa*, a special type of cognition that occurs when a practitioner of meditation has entered a non-conceptual *samādhi* in which reality is known directly, without the intermediary of conceptual representation (Tillemans 2013: 291). Although this particular compound does not figure prominently in the *Bhāvanākramas*, Kamalaśīla does occasionally employ it when discussing the *yogin*'s meditative path. In the following passage, for example, *yogipratyakṣa* is described in terms of an illuminating light of knowledge (*jñānāloka*).

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that if this is so, then the debate might fairly be characterized as occurring on the basis of differing understandings of the nature of meditation itself. Modern scholarship has in fact often depicted the debate as having taken place, in significant part, on the basis of terminological and semantic confusions. Tillemans, on the other hand, takes the view that the basic issue at stake was well comprehended by both sides (Tillemans 2013: 292–93).

<sup>3</sup> This difference does not appear to have been a locus of the debate itself. Both sides accepted the general characterization of the sought after noetic state as non-dual, non-conceptual, liberating, and a goal prescribed by the Buddha. This appears to have provided sufficient basis for dialogue.

And when cognitive obscurations are removed, then on account of the absence of obstructions, the noetic light of yogic perception shines forth, unimpeded anywhere – like a sunbeam through a sky whose covering of clouds has retreated.<sup>4</sup>

Tillemans links the two theses in competition at the debate with two general positions that have been taken with regard to meditation in modern times; these he refers to as the “independence thesis” and the “continuity thesis.” The former, which he associates with Heshang Mohoyen, regards meditative states of mind as fundamentally different from those of philosophy – owing to their respective non-conceptual and conceptual natures. According to this view, meditation consists in non-conceptual awareness, a direct gazing at the mind, without any form of deliberate conceptual thought (Tillemans 2013: 291–293). Because of its conceptual nature, the activity of philosophy can only have the effect of interfering with the direct awareness that constitutes meditation and the non-conceptual gnosis that is awakening. It is only meditation that allows for the sudden and direct recognition of the mind’s true nature. Thus, for Heshang, meditative states of mind and awakening are understood to be independent from the activities of philosophical analysis. Indeed the latter are considered antithetical to the former.

On the other hand the “continuity thesis,” associated with Kamalaśīla, regards philosophy and meditation as continuous. Philosophical reasoning is not merely a possible avenue to liberating insight, but is actually a necessary precondition for its emergence. Meditative understanding is causally dependent upon philosophic reasoning. As Tillemans sums it up, “[M]editative understanding leads to knowledge of objects but is continuous with and dependent upon philosophical thinking” (Tillemans 2013: 298). This raises an important epistemological question regarding the continuity thesis.

[T]here is little doubt that meditative understanding as depicted in Kamalaśīla-style Indian accounts is indeed somehow interwoven with philosophy, but the key question is whether that version of meditative understanding could make any contribution to knowledge *distinct from or over and above* the

<sup>4</sup> BhK 1 216.10–12: *jñeyāvāraṇe ca prahīne pratibandhābhāvād ravikirāṇavad apagatameghādyāvaraṇe nabhasi sarvatrāvyāhato yogipratyakṣo jñānālokaḥ pravartate /*

contributions of philosophical thinking. If we look at the textual accounts on this, I do not think that it would. (Tillemans 2013: 298, Tillemans' emphasis).

Thus according to Tillemans, Kamalaśīla's view is that meditation cannot make a contribution to knowledge, but instead only serves to amplify or reinforce conclusions that have already been reached through philosophy. It is rational inquiry alone that plays the role of discovering new truths and determining the truth of any putative meditative insight. In this, Kamalaśīla's position is of a piece with those of Dharmakīrti and the Buddhist epistemological tradition more generally.

Indeed Kamalaśīla and Dharmakīrti themselves recognized that seeming 'direct perceptions' engendered by previous thought processes could well turn out to be merely auto-induced hallucinations, as is the case when a man, overpowered by his intense desires, has vivid obsessive fantasies. The test for Dharmakīrti, Devendrabuddhi, Dharmottara, and others as to whether a putative yogic perception is a mere hallucination or not is to see whether it can be vindicated by philosophical analysis. It is to be examined by reason (*yukti*) and determined to be in accordance with other reliable means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). In short, genuine yogic perception must apprehend matters that have already been confirmed rationally or will subsequently pass the tests of philosophical thinking. This may sound ingenious, but it is surprising how little autonomy it accords meditation... It is clear that all the epistemic weight is once again on philosophical thinking and that yogic perception adds no new discoveries of truths (Tillemans 2013: 299; cf. Eltschinger 2007).

I would suggest, however, that, regardless of Kamalaśīla's indebtedness to Dharmakīrtian epistemology, the account of meditation laid out in the *Bhāvanākramas* assumes that meditation plays an indispensable role in the quest for liberating knowledge, contributing insights that are unattainable by studying and thinking alone. To what extent such a position entails a significant departure from Dharmakīrtian epistemology is open to question, but the primacy he accords meditation in the traditional scheme of study, thought and meditation is not. In short, there is a relatively straightforward sense in which meditation can be understood as playing a key role in the discovery of truth. In order to demonstrate this we need to examine the textual account of meditation contained in the *Bhāvanākramas*.

These texts are said to have been written by Kamalaśīla as a kind of summary statement of the author's position at the request of the Tibetan emperor Khri Srong lde btsan shortly after the debate concluded. As their title suggests, they contain his views concerning the process or sequence of meditation (*bhāvanākrama*). Kamalaśīla appears to have taken a number of runs at this task by composing three identically entitled works. The repetition we find in the texts' titles and in much of their contents may well imply a recognition on the author's part that the nature of *bhāvanā* represented the crux of the matter, perhaps the most easily misunderstood and most critical of the topics discussed at the debate. The texts were not, after all, entitled *Yuktikrama* – or even, for that matter, *Dhyānakrama*. What needed to be clarified for the Tibetan king, apparently, was the nature of *bhāvanā* (meditation, cultivation, inculcation), a term broadly encompassing the practices that give rise to the Buddhist goal of awakening.

As noted, both parties to the debate appear to have agreed on one important point: the desirability of realizing a state in which reality is known *non-conceptually*. And each faced a similar problem: explaining how it is that the practices they endorsed could actually function to produce the sought after state. The problem facing the Chinese was how any such state of *knowledge* could possibly emerge on the basis of a meditative concentration that is wholly non-conceptual and hence without identifiable doctrinal content.<sup>5</sup> The third *Bhāvanākrama* contains well-known passages in which the practices of Kamalaśīla's opponent are ridiculed as leading to nothing more than a state of stupor and ignorance (see BhK 3 16: 10–14; Tillemans 2013: 295).

<sup>5</sup> BhK 3 16.20–17.2: *kiṃ ca samādhisamāpānasya yogino yadi manovijñānam asti, tadā 'vaśyam tena kiṃcid ālambayitavyam / na hi prthagjanānāṃ sahasā nirālambanaṃ jñānaṃ bhavet / atha nāsti, tadā kathaṃ niḥsvabhāvatā dharmānāṃ avagatā bhavet? kena ca pratipakṣeṇa kleśāvaranam prahīyate? na ca caturthadhyānālābhinaḥ prthagjanasya cittanirodhaḥ sambhavati /* “And if there is mental consciousness for a *yogin* who has attained *samādhi*, then, by necessity, must it not objectify something? Indeed objectless awareness would not just suddenly arise for ordinary persons. And if it does not, then how would *dharma*'s lack of independent existence be recognized? And by what antidote is the obscuration of the afflictions abandoned? And surely there can be no mental cessation for an ordinary person who has attained the fourth *dhyāna*.”

For the Indian side, the problem seems to have pertained to the other aspect of the desired noetic state, namely, its *non-conceptuality*. How can a non-conceptual state possibly emerge on the basis of conceptual thinking? The two seem like very different sorts of animals, and the idea of the one giving birth to the other may well have struck the Chinese as preposterous. In the third *Bhāvanākrama* we find Kamalaśīla rehearsing his opponents' arguments against him, basically asserting that conceptual activities generate karma, which obscures the mind and leads to a continuation in *saṃsāra*.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed much of the diverse content of the three *Bhāvanākramas* can be read as an elaborate attempt to demonstrate that certain kinds of conceptual activities do not in fact obscure the mind but instead lead it incrementally towards non-conceptual gnosis by helping to dispel conceptual reifications. Thus it is certainly correct to state that Kamalaśīla subscribed to some version of a continuity thesis. A close examination of the texts, however, reveals that their author was not principally addressing the question of how philosophical analysis and *meditation* are continuous, so much as the question of how philosophical analysis and *non-conceptual gnosis* can be so.

<sup>6</sup> BhK 3 13.16–14.4: *yas tu manyate / cittavikalpasamutthāpitaśubhāsubhakar-mavaśena sattvāḥ svargādi karmaphalam anubhavantaḥ saṃsāre saṃsaranti / ye punar na kiṃcic cintayanti nāpi kiṃcic karma kurvanti te parimucyante saṃsārāt / tasmān na kiṃcic cintayitavyam / nāpi dānādikuśalacaryā kartavyā / kevalam mūrkhajanam adhikṛtya dānādikuśalacaryā nirdiṣṭeti/* “However, there are some who think along the following lines: ‘Owing to the force of positive and negative actions generated by mental conceptualization sentient beings wander through *saṃsāra* experiencing the fruits of their actions, such as heaven. On the other hand those who neither think anything nor perform any action at all are fully liberated from *saṃsāra*. Therefore nothing should be thought about. Nor also should the wholesome conduct beginning with generosity be undertaken. The wholesome conduct beginning with generosity was only taught for foolish people.’”

A reviewer has generously pointed out that such arguments are very probably parodies, and as such would not accurately represent the actual arguments of Kamalaśīla's opponents. Indeed, one of the earliest Tibetan historical accounts of the debate agrees with most of the relevant passage of Kamalaśīla's third *Bhāvanākrama* – but also portrays Heshang as adding an important proviso: his instantaneous approach is for those *of sharp acumen* (i.e. those who have previously trained in virtue and who already possess acute senses). Conversely, gradualist teachings including generosity are said to be acceptable for ordinary, benighted people. This significantly alters our understanding of Heshang's views. See Wangdu and Diemberger 2000: 80–81.

Kamalaśīla makes use of two main conceptual schemas to frame his explanation of the transition between philosophy and gnosis. As befits the title of the texts, both schemas concern *bhāvanā*. In the first instance he employs the standard Buddhist division of meditation (*bhāvanā*) into tranquility and insight (*śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*).<sup>7</sup> Second, he uses the well-known Indian model of three kinds of wisdom: study or listening-based, thinking or reason-based and meditation or experience-based (*śrutamayī*-, *cintāmayī*- and *bhāvanāmayī-prajñā*).<sup>8</sup> The two schemas intersect on the point of *bhāvanā*, which classically encompasses all forms of meditation within the dyad of tranquility and insight, and which also constitutes the basis of the third of the three wisdoms. It is Kamalaśīla's blending of these two conceptual schemas that allows him to elaborate his account of a gradual process leading from philosophical analysis through meditative understanding to non-conceptual gnosis.<sup>9</sup>

Specifically, it is Kamalaśīla's explanation of *insight*, situated within the model of three kinds of wisdom, which does the heavy work in this area. For insight encompasses a series of practices that occur within an intermediate state of mind, a meditative state that shares features of both philosophy and non-conceptual gnosis – namely, conceptuality and immediacy respectively.<sup>10</sup> Whether the solution presented by Kamalaśīla is ultimately coherent or satisfactory is another matter, but I will at least

<sup>7</sup> See Adam 2006 and 2008 for detailed treatments of meditation terminology in the *Bhāvanākramas*.

<sup>8</sup> The importance of the model of three wisdoms as a framework for Buddhist philosophy is perhaps not as widely recognized as it should be. Two of the more detailed recent treatments with regard to the Buddhist epistemological tradition are Eltschinger 2007 and Kapstein 2013. Also see Adam 2006.

<sup>9</sup> The *dBa bzhed* describes Khri Srong lde btsan as having understood the result of the debate in the following terms: "Following the instantaneous entrance of the Ton mun, the Ten Spiritual Practices (*chos spyod bcu*, *dasadharmacaryā*) are considered incorrect. This shall not be done. If for oneself and the others, the door to learning is closed, the mind will become obtuse and the doctrine will decline. Hence, as far as theory is concerned, this shall follow the view of Nagarjuna. As far as cultivation (*sgom pa*) is concerned, mental quiescence meditation (*zhi gnas*, *śamatha*) and penetrative insight (*lhag mthong*, *vipaśyanā*) shall be practised on the basis of the three wisdoms" (Wangdu and Diemberger 2000: 88).

<sup>10</sup> See Adam 2006: 87, where I suggest that this intermediate state may be identifiable with the first *dhyāna*, in particular with the higher intermediate division of this state – in which gross thought (*vitarka*) is absent but subtle thought (*vicāra*) remains.

show that the account of insight he outlines is not limited to philosophical analysis alone; in fact it appears to have been aimed at addressing precisely this issue of effecting *a transition from philosophical analysis to gnosis*.

## II.

The intuitive implausibility of the continuity thesis is, I think, based on a fairly commonly observed human failing: even the most well-justified of beliefs will often have next to no effect on a person's conduct. Such a failure may perhaps be best exemplified by the kind of case I first took note of as an undergraduate student in Philosophy – that of an Ethics professor who, although an expert on various theories of the Good, turned out to be utterly mean-spirited and selfish as a person. Let us call this the Problem of the Self-centred Savant. The problem in general can be described as one of failing to integrate the real significance of rationally understood theory into one's outlook and practical behaviour. It is a failure to realize a connection between theoretical conclusions and actual points of reference within one's own lived experience – thereby providing a basis for appropriate modifications in one's conduct.

The particular variety of the problem facing Kamalaśīla represents a slight variation on the above ethical example. The purported difficulty wasn't simply that of the true meaning of the teachings remaining unintegrated, but also that philosophic theorizing, by its very nature, was said to prevent the direct experiential realization of this meaning and thereby the occurrence of gnosis and liberation. There are two senses in which this was taken to be the case. First, because philosophical analysis is *action* it was said to generate karmic results and prolong *saṃsāra*. Second, because this activity has a conceptual nature it was said to have the effect of coming between and obscuring the unmediated awareness that is non-conceptual realization.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Kamalaśīla's extended retort to such criticism also has two aspects. First of all, the elimination of thinking would result in a state of ignorance rather than wisdom. Second, because skilful practices such as generosity are impossible without thinking, moral conduct would also be ruled out. Thus both wisdom and method are negated by the position taken by Mohyen. See note 6 above. In this paper I am focused solely on the first of these.



It is through his account of *vipaśyanā* that Kamalaśīla addresses the latter dimension of the problem, for it is in this context that he aims to demonstrate the possibility of an intermediate stage of *meditative* understanding in which the conclusions concerning reality reached through philosophical reasoning are integrated and discerned directly. His definition of insight clearly indicates this:

Thus in the noble *Ratnamegha* and elsewhere the Blessed One concisely stated the definition of tranquility and insight, “Tranquility is one-pointedness of mind, insight is the discernment of reality (*bhūtapratyavekṣā*).”<sup>12</sup>

Most modern commentators, including (until recently) Tillemans, translate the term *bhūtapratyavekṣā* as “correct analysis” identifying this with the activity of correct philosophical reasoning itself. Kamalaśīla, however, suggests otherwise. In explaining the meaning of this expression he states:

And *bhūtapratyavekṣā* is said to be insight. But *bhūta* is the selflessness of persons and *dharmas*. Here, the selflessness of the person is the aggregates’ lack of self and belonging to a self. The selflessness of *dharmas* is precisely their being like an illusion.<sup>13</sup>

This passage clearly suggests a non-adjectival rendering of the first member of the compound. The entire expression is thus better translated as *discernment of reality* (Adam 2008).<sup>14</sup> Any reading that identifies this process with correct analytic reasoning alone not only ignores Kamalaśīla’s own definitions, but also runs the danger of implying some variety of the exclusive dichotomy noted at the outset of this paper, that between meditation ‘proper,’ conceived as non-conceptual (*dhyāna*, *śamatha*) and philosophy or intellectual analysis (*vipaśyanā*), conceived as conceptual.

<sup>12</sup> BhK 3 3.1–4: *tatra śamathas cittaikāgratā / vipaśyanā bhūtapratyavekṣeti samkṣepād āryaratnameghādau bhagavatā śamathavipaśyanayor lakṣaṇam uktam /*

<sup>13</sup> BhK 3 5.17–19: *bhūtapratyavekṣāṇā ca vipaśyanocyate / bhūtaṃ punaḥ pudgaladharmanairātmyaṃ / tatra pudgalanairātmyaṃ yā skandhānām ātmātmīyarahitatā / dharmanairātmyaṃ yā teṣāṃ eva māyopamatā / D 57b4–5: yang dag par so sor rtog pa ni lhag mthong zhes bya’o / yang dag pa ni gang zag dang / chos la bdag med pa’o / de la gang zag la bdag med pa gang phung po rnam s bdag dang bdag gi med pa nyid do / chos la bdag med pa ni gan de dag sgyu ma lta bu nyid do /*

<sup>14</sup> Tillemans has recently acknowledged that the expression should be understood as a genitive *tatpuruṣa* rather than a *karmadhāraya* compound (2016: 196).

The expression “correct analysis” is ambiguous, suggesting either a sensory process of progressively more accurate perceptions of an object or, more readily, an intellectual process in which ideas are analyzed correctly (see Adam 2008).

The latter interpretation is, of course, consistent with the picture of a debate in which the two sides squaring off were led, respectively, by a Chan monk championing non-conceptual *dhyāna* and an intellectual-scholar adversary who advocated philosophy. In my view, however, such a simplistic picture amounts to a caricature and leads to a number of interpretive problems. First of all it provides a very impoverished, and I would say inaccurate, account of Kamalaśīla’s conception of meditation. It suggests that Kamalaśīla held meditation to be necessarily or principally non-conceptual in nature – a picture that is clearly at odds with the basic two-fold division of *bhāvanā* (and *samādhi*, see Adam 2006) that he accepted. Second, if we identify *bhūtapratyavekṣā* only with an intellectual process of analytic reasoning we entirely miss the perceptual flavour of the language employed, principally that of vision (*pratyavekṣā*: *prati* + *ava* + √*iks*, *vipaśyanā*: *vi* + √*paś*; *māyopama*; also note, *yogipratyakṣa*; see Adam 2006, 2008), not to mention the visual nature of the examples he employs when providing descriptions of meditation (more on this below). Insight *sees* something about objects; it does not simply *infer* a conclusion through a series of logical steps. It discerns deep features of reality. Finally, such an identification of insight with logical reasoning alone leads directly to a very thorny and well-known Buddhological problem indeed, namely, how it is that tranquility and insight, with their opposite natures of one-pointed concentration and discursive thinking, could ever be combined (*śamathavipaśyanāyuganaddha*) to bring about awakening.

### III.

Thus it will hardly do to paint a picture in which Kamalaśīla bought into a division between philosophy and meditation in this way. As Tillemans himself is quick to indicate, Kamalaśīla clearly did advocate the practice of insight as a kind of “analytic meditation” – i.e. a form of meditation that involves concepts. According to Tillemans, the process of meditation

taught by Kamalaśīla involves a “serial alternation” between philosophical analysis and concentrated fixation on the conclusions of that analysis (Tillemans 2013: 291). There remains, however, a certain opacity and uncertainty as to the nature of this ‘so-called’ analytic meditation – a vacillation between considering *bhūtapratyavekṣā* simply as non-meditative philosophic argumentation or something more than that, a “subtle form” of reasoning in which meditative understanding is “somehow interwoven with philosophy” (Tillemans 2013: 298).

Indeed there may well have been a fair bit of confusion and uncertainty about this matter on the part of the actual participants of the debate. While the two sides clearly were divided on the question of the procedure to be followed in the lead-up to the moment of non-conceptual gnosis, it may also be true that the Chinese did not grasp the subtleties of the conceptual practices being described by their adversaries – imagining that these consisted only in ordinary discursive reasoning. Indeed that very confusion may perhaps be seen continuing today in the characterization of the debate as one between philosophy and meditation.

I would suggest that while Kamalaśīla considered philosophical analysis to be a necessary part of the path leading to awakening, he did not hold it to be sufficient to generate the depth of understanding necessary for the moment of gnosis to arise. The descriptions of conceptual meditation provided in the *Bhāvanākramas*, while presupposing that one has engaged in philosophic argumentation, actually bear more similarity to perception than they do to discursive thought.

The visual flavour of insight as described in Kamalaśīla’s account is clear:

By the power of tranquility the mind becomes steady on its proper meditation object (*svāmbana*), like a lamp [burning] in a place without wind. By insight, the light of genuine knowledge arises on the basis of recognizing the true nature of *dharma*s. And on that basis all obscuration is removed, just as the night by the dawning of the sun.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> BhK 3 1.10–14: *śamathabalena svāmbane cittam aprakampyaṃ bhavati nivāta-sthitapradīpavat / vipaśyanayā yathāvad dharmatattvāvagamāt samyagjñānālokaḥ samutpadyate / tataḥ sakalam āvaraṇaṃ prahīyate / andhakāravat ālokodayāt / Cf. Bhk 1 216.10–12 on yogipratyakṣa, above note 3.*

Aside from being a good example of the visual *quality* of insight, this passage also provides a succinct indication of the *function* of insight in relation to tranquility meditation according to Kamalaśīla. While the effect of tranquility is to stabilize the mind on an object of concentration, the effect of insight is to generate genuine knowledge (*samyagjñāna*).<sup>16</sup> This in turn leads to purification from obscurations.

Kamalaśīla goes on to explain that *śamatha* is non-conceptual (*nirvikalpa*) and that *vipaśyanā* is conceptual (*savikalpa*).<sup>17</sup> It is this characterization that raises the logical problem just mentioned. If an account cannot be given as to how conceptual insight can be combined with a one-pointed non-conceptual state of tranquility, the notion of non-conceptual knowledge emerging on the basis of their combination would seem to require the acceptance of a contradiction. This may well have been apparent to Kamalaśīla's opponents. In order to provide such an account, Kamalaśīla made extensive use of the model of three wisdoms, a schema that allows more subtle distinctions to be made among different levels of understanding.

Much of the first *Bhāvanākrama* is devoted to delineating these different kinds of wisdom. One passage in particular is worth quoting at length:

Now, to this extent, initially one should generate wisdom based on study. For it is by this means that one first understands the meaning of the scriptures. Thereafter one penetrates the provisional and definitive meanings by means of wisdom based on thinking. After that, having discriminated in that way, one should meditate upon a real meaning/object (*bhūtam artham*), not an unreal one. For otherwise, from meditating upon the false and the persistence of doubt, there could be no arising of genuine knowledge.

<sup>16</sup> Thus insight is linked with *samyagjñāna*, defined by the epistemological tradition as knowledge that is instrumental in bringing about human aims (Kapstein 2013: 276). In this case the aim is *mokṣa* itself.

<sup>17</sup> BhK 3 1.14–2.5: *ata eva bhagavatā catvāry ālambanavastūni yoginām nirḍiṣṭāni / nirvikalpapratibimbakam / savikalpapratibimbakam / vastuparyantatā / kāryaparinispattiś ca / tatra śamathena yat sarvadharmapratibimbakam buddhādirūpaṃ cādhimucyālambyate tan nirvikalpapratibimbakam ucyate / tatra bhūtārthanirūpaṇāvikalpābhāvān nirvikalpakam ucyate / yathāśrutodgrhītānāṃ ca dharmānām pratibimbakam adhimucyālambyata iti kṛtvā pratibimbakam ucyate / tad eva pratibimbakam yadā vipaśyanayā vicārayati yogī tattvādhiḡgamārthaṃ tadā savikalpapratibimbakam ucyate / tattvanirūpaṇā vikalpasya vipaśyanālakṣaṇasya tatra samudbhavāt /*

And then meditation would be truly pointless, just like that of the *īrthikas*. And in the *Samādhirāja*<sup>18</sup> the Blessed One stated:

If one discerns *dharma*s to be devoid of self,  
And if, upon discerning them, one would meditate  
This is the cause that leads to the fruit of *nirvāṇa*  
No other cause leads to peace.

Therefore, when the wisdom based on thinking has discerned through reasoning and scripture, that very reality which is the natural condition of things should be meditated upon. And the natural condition of things is ascertained on the basis of scripture and reasoning to be, ultimately, non-origination itself.<sup>19</sup>

Thus while Kamalaśīla clearly indicates the necessity of both study and thinking, he identifies the highest level of wisdom as *bhāvanāmayīprajñā*. The way the first *Bhāvanākrama* is structured suggests a progression of learning – from a stage of understanding based on scriptural study and listening (*āgama*, *śrutamayīprajñā*), to one based on reasoning and thinking (*yukti*, *cintāmayīprajñā*), and finally to one based in experience and meditation (*anubhāva*, *bhāvanā*).<sup>20</sup> Each level of wisdom builds upon and encompasses its predecessor, integrating and refining the material previously learned.<sup>21</sup> While *cintāmayīprajñā* has

<sup>18</sup> *Samādhirājasūtra*, *Gambhīradharmakṣāntiparivarta*, 37.

<sup>19</sup> BhK 1 198–199: *tatra prathamam tāvat śrutamayīprajñānotpādanīyā / tayā hi tāvad āgamārtham avadhārayati / tatas cintāmayī prajñayā nītaneyārtham nirvedhayati / tatas tayā niścītya bhūtam artham bhāvayen nābhūtam / anyathā hi viparītasypī bhāvanād vicikītsāyās cāvyapagamāt samyagjñānodayo na syāt / tatas ca vyārthaiva bhāvanā syāt / yathā īrthikānām / uktaṃ ca bhagavatā samādhirāje / nairātmyadharmān yadi pratyavekṣate / tāt pratyavekṣya yadi bhāvayeta / sa hetur nirvāṇaphalasya prāptaye / yo anyahetu na sa bhōti śāntaye / iti / tasmāc cintāmayī prajñayā yukyāgāmābhyām pratyavekṣya bhūtam eva vastusvarūpam bhāvanīyam / vastūnām svarūpam ca paramārthato 'nūtpāda evāgamato yuktītas ca niścītam /*

<sup>20</sup> In the first *Bhāvanākrama* (BhK 1 210–14) details concerning this highest level of wisdom are provided only after an explanation of the various stages of *samatha* and *dhyāna* (205–210), and this discussion of *samatha* and *dhyāna* occurs only after the philosophic arguments that constitute *cintāmayīprajñā* have been rehearsed (198–204). Thus the structure of the text suggests that *bhāvanāmayīprajñā* is the kind of understanding that presupposes the practices of both philosophical analysis and non-conceptual meditation.

<sup>21</sup> In providing his own personalized account of Tibetan scholastic education, Georges Dreyfus quotes the following summary of the process provided by Tsong-kha-pa, “At first, one should look for extensive listening. In between, one should take all the texts as though they appear as advice [for one’s practice]. Finally, one should practice day and night. All

the hermeneutical role of distinguishing the definitive from the provisional meanings in the scriptures learned through *śrutamayīprajñā* (Thurman 1978; Adam 2002), it is *bhāvanāmayīprajna* that provides the experiential corroboration of the conclusions reached through *cintāmayīprajñā*.

Therefore, having ascertained in this way the real meaning/object by means of the wisdom of thinking, one should generate the wisdom of meditation in order to make it perceptible (or direct, *pratyakṣī-kr*). In the noble *Ratnamegha* and elsewhere it is declared, “The meaning does not become perceptible merely by extensive study and so on.” Indeed, *experience belongs to those who practice*.<sup>22</sup> (Emphasis added).

When the meaning that refers to reality (*bhūtam artham, nītārtha*; *i.e. emptiness*), initially ascertained by philosophic reasoning, is perceived directly, it quite literally becomes “objective” knowledge. This is the sense in which meditation “leads to knowledge of objects,” as Tillemans put it (Tillemans 2013: 298). The *meaning*, previously understood, now is discovered to be an aspect of the *phenomenal object*. This is experienced or undergone, not merely thought about. Rather than knowing *that X*, one knows *X directly*. Without such experience, one’s cognition remains ungrounded in reality.<sup>23</sup> The same necessity is succinctly noted in the third *Bhāvanākrama*:

And whatever is known through the wisdom of study and thinking is itself to be realized through the wisdom of meditation, nothing else. It is like

of this should be dedicated to the growth of the [Buddha’s] teaching.” Dreyfus goes on to explain, “In the first stage, students acquire an understanding of the content of the tradition by extensively studying the great scholastic texts and learning how to inquire into their meaning. The second stage involves the appropriation of the soteriological relevance of these texts. Finally, in the third stage, intense practice brings about actual transformation effected by meditation on the internalized content” (Dreyfus 2003: 167).

<sup>22</sup> BhK I 204: *tad evaṃ cintāmayyā prajñayā niścītya bhūtam artham tasya pratyakṣī-karaṇāya bhāvanāmayiṃ prajñam utpādayet / bahuśrutādīmātrakeṇa nārthaḥ pratyakṣo bhavaṭīti niveditam āryaratnameghādiṣu / anubhāvaś ca pratipattṛṇām /*

<sup>23</sup> Thus, contra Sharf (1995, 1998) and others who would deny or diminish the importance of ‘experience’ in various Buddhist traditions, its critical role in Kamalāśīla’s thought is clear. While it is true that the concept of experience is not taken as the locus of discussion or thematized as a core Buddhist principle or idea, it nevertheless *is* used to clarify the nature of meditation and can be seen as playing a key role in Kamalāśīla’s arguments. On experience (*anubhāva*) in the Buddhist epistemological tradition more generally, see Coseru 2013.

a horse running along a previously indicated running track. Therefore the discernment of reality is to be undertaken.<sup>24</sup>

The implication is clear: the discernment of reality is to be identified with the third level of wisdom, the wisdom of meditation, rather than with the activities of study and discursive thinking. Nevertheless, this discernment of reality does presuppose and incorporate the results of philosophic activity.

The question remains, however, as to the precise nature of this type of discernment. In what does it consist? How is it to be distinguished from philosophic analysis? Is it simply a case of fixedly concentrating on the ideas that constitute one's philosophic conclusions, or repeatedly turning over their supporting arguments until convinced of their force? Or is there something qualitatively different going on?

It will be recalled from the description of tranquility and insight given above that the function of tranquility is to stabilize the mind upon a meditation object of some description. Kamalaśīla uses the example of an image of the Tathāgata (see BhK 3: 4.13–5.7). Once the mind is stabilized on this meditation object, it is to be used as a basis for insight. The intentional object of insight (*tattva*), what is known, is the true nature of *dharma*s. Insight recognizes the liberating dimension of *dharma*s, which compose the image used in meditation, i.e. it recognizes their lack of self and belonging to a self, which is to say their emptiness (*śūnyatā*).<sup>25</sup> This awareness is described in terms that sound very perceptual indeed:

And in determining the nature of that very image on the basis of understanding the nature of all *dharma*s as they are, it is as if the *yogin* were ascertaining the blemishes upon his own face by examining its reflection in a mirror.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> BhK 3 20.3–7: *kiṃ ca yad eva śrūtacintāmayyā prajñayā viditaṃ tad eva bhāvanāmayyā prajñayā bhāvanīyaṃ nānyat / saṃdiṣṭa [dhāvana]bhūmyaśvadhāvanavat / tasmāt bhūtapratyavekṣā kartavyā /* On the analogy of the running horse, see AK(Bh) 328: 10–13. Round and square brackets in Sanskrit passages, here and below, following Tucci.

<sup>25</sup> On the nature of perceptual cognition of the real aspects of objects according in the Buddhist epistemological tradition, see Eltschinger 2010 [2011], esp. 54–55 on Kamalaśīla's views.

<sup>26</sup> BhK 3 2.5–8: *tasyaiva ca pratibimbasya svabhāvaṃ nirūpayan yogī, darpañāntar-gatasvamukhapratibimbapratyavekṣaṇena svamukhagatavairūpyāṇāṃ viniścayavat, sarvadharmāṇāṃ yathāvat svabhāvāgamāt /* See Adam 2008 on *yoniso manasikāraḥ*. Typically four liberating aspects of *dharma*s are said to be perceived through wise attention,

The quality of vividness (*sphuṭatva*) associated with the cognition of *dharmas* in this passage occurs in a state of *samādhi*, seemingly combining features of both the conceptual and the non-conceptual (see Seyfort Ruegg 1989: 94–6, 182f. cf. Tillemans 2013: 291). A passage from the second BhK suggests both natures:

[H]aving abandoned mental distractions, one inwardly discerns those very same previously considered *dharmas* as images in the sphere of concentration. One does so intensively. In this manner, discriminating the meaning to be known in those images in the sphere of concentration, thoroughly discriminating, completely considering, completely investigating, forbearing, accepting, classifying, looking and knowing – that is called insight. So it is that the bodhisattva is skilled in insight.<sup>27</sup>

It is apparent that the discernment of reality was considered by Kamalaśīla to be an experiential process, one in which the true nature of *dharmas* is directly discovered or recognized while abiding in a meditative state – having been understood in a purely rational way at an earlier juncture. Rather than knowing *that dharmas* are empty, one directly **knows dharmas as empty**. Kamalaśīla identifies this meditative understanding with the first limb of awakening, the discrimination of *dharmas*, which he accuses his opponent of forsaking:

Thus by rejecting the discernment of reality one would thereby have rejected the very foremost limb of awakening – which is called “the discrimination of *dharmas* (*dharmapraṇicaya*).”<sup>28</sup>

Kamalaśīla does not deny that this meditative understanding includes a conceptual element; on the contrary his account points to a distinctive

namely, their being impermanent, unsatisfactory, empty and insubstantial. See Eltschinger 2007: 456 (note 16) for Sthiramati’s views, and 484 on these features as perceived in *yogipratyakṣa* according to Dharmakīrti and his commentators.

<sup>27</sup> BhK 2 D 47a7–b2: *sems kyi rnam par g.yeng ba spangs nas ji ltar bsams pa’i chos de dag nyid nang du ting nge dzin gyi spyod yul gzugs brnyan du so sor rtog par byed / mos par byed do // de ltar ting nge ’dzin gyi spyod yul gzugs brnyan de dag la shes bya’i don de rnam par ’byed pa dang / rab tu rnam par ’byed pa dang / yongs su rtog pa dang / yongs su dpyod pa dang / bzod pa dang / ’dod pa dang / bye brag ’byed pa dang / lta ba dang / rtog pa gang yin pa de ni lhag mthong zhes bya ste / de ltar na byang chub sems dpa’ lhag mthong la mkhas pa yin no zhes gsungs so //*

<sup>28</sup> BhK 3 15.5–7: *tathā hy anena bhūtapratyavekṣāṃ pratikṣipatā dharmapraṇicayāḥkhyāṃ pradhānam eva bodhyaṅgaṃ pratikṣiptaṃ syāt /*



kind of one-pointed experience in which conceptual and non-conceptual elements are combined. Whether such experience at this stage strictly qualifies as a special type of *pratyakṣa* may be debatable – certainly the presence of concepts makes the identification problematic. Nevertheless, the cognition is also, clearly, that of a *yogin* – and it is described in terms that leave no doubt that it is not simply an instance of ordinary rational inference.<sup>29</sup> In anticipation of his opponent’s possible objection, Kamalaśīla continues his argument:

And even if this discernment of reality has a conceptual nature, because it has a nature of well-founded attention (*yoniśomanasikāra*) a non-conceptual knowledge of reality arises from it. Thus one who aims for such knowledge should practice this (discernment of reality). And when the non-conceptual fire of knowing reality arises, then just as two sticks are incinerated by the fire born from their rubbing, it also gets burnt up in just that way.<sup>30</sup>

Thus it is in virtue of the fact that this form of meditative understanding is characterized by “well-founded attention” (*yoniśomanasikāra*), that non-conceptual gnosis proper can emerge and in the process “burn up” the very conceptual fuel that generated it (i.e. *bhūtapratyavekṣā*). Well-founded attention is wise attention, which has the nature of one-pointedly focussing on what is fundamental – namely, the selflessness of persons and *dharmas*. One’s mind has been ‘informed’ of this selflessness through the activities of philosophy. In this way, Kamalaśīla describes an experiential process in which the understanding that leads into non-conceptual gnosis possesses both conceptual and non-conceptual components.

<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, if *yogipratyakṣa* is identified with a state of non-dual non-conceptual knowledge *resulting from* meditative understanding a different problem arises – namely, that non-duality precludes the very possibility of an intentional object. As ineffable, the noetic state could only be described as one of emptiness *post-experientially*. The justification of that particular description (as opposed to, for example, *brahman*) becomes a problem of interpretation.

<sup>30</sup> BhK 3 20.7–9: *yadi nāmāsau vikalpasvabhāvā tathāpi yoniśomanasikārasvabhāvāt tato bhūtanirvikalpañāno (daya ī)ti kṛtvā tajjñānārthinā sā sevaniyā / nirvikalpe ca bhūtajñānāgnau samutpanne sati kāṣṭhadvayanigharṣasamijātavahninā tatkāṣṭhadvayadāhavat sāpi paścat tenaiva dahyata evety uktam āryaratnakīte /*

## IV.

Kamalaśīla's version of the continuity thesis is best understood by gaining a clearer sense of his reliance on the schema of the three wisdoms. While he does not appear to have regarded the continuity between philosophical analysis and conceptual meditation as particularly problematic, he did view them as phenomenologically distinct, and relied on this distinction in explaining the arising of non-conceptual gnosis. More problematic, likely because his opponents confronted him with it, was the gap between philosophy and non-conceptual gnosis – a gap that he filled by identifying the discernment of reality with a meditative understanding associated with the third of the three wisdoms, *bhāvanāmayīprajñā*.

The model of three wisdoms allows for an identification of *bhūtapratyavekṣā* with an *experiential* realization of the true nature of persons and *dharma*s, a realization that does not simply consist in discursive thinking, but which nevertheless retains a conceptual nature. Gazing at one's mind is indeed part of meditation, but in so doing one must also understand the liberating dimension of what it is that one is looking at. To interpret this understanding as "correct analysis," aside from not conforming to Kamalaśīla's own definitions, also has the unfortunate effect of lending itself to an imprecise picture of the actual process of acquiring knowledge described by Kamalaśīla. It leads to an account in which insight is principally identified with intellectual reasoning and philosophy, rather than with an understanding that is also necessarily grounded in the actual experience of a phenomenal object.

What then is the epistemological role of meditative insight? In Tilleman's view of Kamalaśīla's position nothing of any epistemic importance is really added to knowledge by meditation. While it is true that meditation may *psychologically enhance* the conclusions reached through philosophical reasoning – as in a movie recreation of a historical event – no new information, as such, is acquired. The *yogin*'s perception is, in the end, not really much like a perception at all, but is rather more akin to a dramatic recreation, a post-hoc visualization.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> “[Y]ogic perception of a real object might well be comparable to a fictional or cinematographic re-creation of a real historical event: such re-creations, when done well,

I would suggest, however, that this portrayal is at odds with Kamalaśīla's explanations in the *Bhāvanākramas*. These do not describe actively created *visualizations* or images of the conclusions reached through philosophy, so much as passive *recognitions* of aspects of reality corresponding to those conclusions within one's experience. As we have seen, in the *Bhāvanākramas* Kamalaśīla identifies these as the selflessness of persons and *dharmas*, which is to say, as emptiness. Emptiness characterizes the *images* present before the mind's eye in meditation. The latter may indeed be unreal or imaginatively created; the ontological status of the image is not an issue.<sup>32</sup>

Thus the problem with the comparison of meditative understanding to a dramatic recreation is that it suggests that the intentional object is the meditation object or support (*ālambana*); this is not the case. The intentional object is a real aspect (*ākāra*) of that meditation object, namely its emptiness. Rightly or wrongly, in the *Bhāvanākramas* Kamalaśīla understands emptiness to be directly seen, not projected. If the discernment of reality were not based in experience in this way, the beliefs (or information) gained through philosophy would remain merely theoretical.

Thus rather than a cinematographic re-creation, meditative understanding as described by Kamalaśīla might be better likened to the kind of knowledge held by a geologist examining a rock formation for the presence of gold, a great chef tasting ingredients in preparing a new dish, or

certainly do affect individuals' emotional lives and ways of understanding events. Nonetheless, it seems clear that it would not provide any *new information* from what had been given by philosophy (just as a modern cinematographic dramatization of a historical event adds nothing to the historian's knowledge of the details of the event). Kamalaśīla's yogic perception, in effect, appears to be neither a genuine direct perception nor a source of new knowledge, but rather a type of amplification or integration of the contents of philosophical thought" (Tillemans 2013: 299).

<sup>32</sup> See Bhk 1 15–19: *na cāpi sphuṭatarajñānālokodayam antareṇa samyag āvaraṇatamo 'pahīyate / bhāvanābahūlikāra[ta]ś cābhūte 'py arthe sphuṭatarajñānam utpadyate / yathā 'subhādiprthvikṛtsnādisamāpannānām / kiṃ punar bhūte / "Moreover, without the arising of the light of clearer knowledge, the darkness of obscurity is not properly abandoned. Extensive meditation practice, even upon an unreal object, gives rise to a clearer knowledge – as for those who have entered into the attainments based upon the inauspicious etc., the pervasive concentration on the earth element and so on. How much more so upon the real!"* Also see McClintock 2000: 236.

a musician learning a piece for later performance. In each case the expert directly perceives or experiences aspects of the object that would not be recognized without prior study and training. So too the expert in meditation. Prior study and philosophical thinking have allowed her to become thoroughly familiar with the idea of emptiness; but it is not until she has integrated this theoretical knowledge and can actually see objects to be empty that she can be said to have made the real breakthrough that one seeks through practice.<sup>33</sup>

Thus while Tillemans is certainly correct in stating that meditative understanding conforms to the conclusions reached through philosophy according to Kamalaśīla, this position is not inconsistent with one that holds meditative understanding to provide a kind of experiential verification of those conclusions. The proof is in the pudding.

The question, however, remains: *does such meditative experience actually add any new information to our knowledge?* Here I would suggest that there may be a problem with the formulation of this question, in particular with what it presupposes about the nature of knowledge. For it suggests that knowledge is to be principally identified with information rather than direct objective reference. I would argue that rationally justified information entertained without reference to objects is not conceptual knowledge in the strongest sense sought by Kamalaśīla – i.e. knowledge that is effective in bringing about the goal of non-conceptual gnosis. Aside from lacking an application in experience, and indeed because of that lack, the conclusions reached by reasoning often remain susceptible to doubt.<sup>34</sup> Such doubt can be progressively diminished through extended rational analysis, but it is ultimately put to rest through experience. Certainty, like knowledge, would appear to admit of degrees; conclusions reached through reasoning alone seem less secure than those that have

<sup>33</sup> The metaphor can be extended. Once non-conceptual gnosis has arisen, one puts one's knowledge into practice on the path of cultivation. As one's practice progresses and one's experience deepens, one's level of skilfulness eventually increases to the point of mastery – one's new outlook becomes completely natural and one's conduct entirely spontaneous; there is no longer a need for the rehearsing of arguments or for the deliberate cultivation of virtues (Buddhahood). One has become a spiritual virtuoso.

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, recalling that the function of *cintāmayīprajñā* is to distinguish the definitive and provisional meanings of the scriptures, doubt might rightly be considered an intellectual *virtue* during the earlier phases of learning.

also been corroborated in experience. In the context of the debate at Samyé, Kamalaśīla appears to have recognized this; he therefore employed the model of three wisdoms to prescribe a program of conceptual meditation supplemental to philosophy.<sup>35</sup> In the end if one's beliefs about reality are in doubt, spiritual progress becomes impossible.<sup>36</sup>

Kamalaśīla's account demonstrates at least three critical and connected senses in which meditation contributes elements necessary for knowledge. First, meditation stabilizes the mind upon phenomenal objects that provide the basis for insight – in other words, it provides an experiential foundation for knowledge. Second it dispels doubt. Finally, and perhaps most critically, it is a necessary condition for the arising of the sought-after result, namely non-conceptual gnosis. Importantly, from Kamalaśīla's gradualist perspective, meditation is also therefore instrumental in bringing about the highest human goal, namely awakening or Buddhahood itself.

Thus it would appear that Kamalaśīla regarded both philosophical analysis and meditation as necessary conditions of liberating knowledge or gnosis. The former he considered necessary to the arising of meditative insight. The latter was thought to provide a necessary experiential basis for one's entry into the state of gnosis. It would also appear that Kamalaśīla held that meditation allows for the experiential verification of conclusions reached through philosophy – just as he held that pronouncements made

<sup>35</sup> An anonymous reviewer has observed that Kamalaśīla elsewhere maintains that inference and perception yield knowledge and certainty in the same degree. This could be taken to imply that their combination in *vipaśyanābhāvanā* would not yield a degree of certainty greater than that provided by either perception or inference alone. This view seems to be at odds with the position taken in the *Bhāvanākramas*. Could it be that Kamalaśīla considered meditative understanding to constitute a special case, perhaps owing to the exceptional degree of concentration upon the objects known? A comprehensive account of Kamalaśīla's views on the nature of certainty must, at this point, remain the object of future research.

<sup>36</sup> BhK 1 213.2–7: *tathā samśaya[bhīṣā]pagamād rūpādīnimittamanasikārah śakyate varjayitum nānyathā / anyathā hy asati samādhyāloke prajñācakṣuṣāpy anavaloke yathā andhakūpāvasthitapurūṣasyāvacarakagataghaṭādiṣv iva yogino rūpādiṣv astitvasamśayo naiva nivarteta /* Thus attention to the signs of material forms and so on can be abandoned on the basis of the disappearance of the seed of doubt, not otherwise. For otherwise, if there were no light of *samādhi* and also no vision with the eye of wisdom, the *yogin's* doubt concerning the existence of material forms and so on could not cease – just like pots and other items in a house for a man stuck down a dark well.

on the basis of personal meditative experience must remain subject to philosophic critique and proof.<sup>37</sup> While he does not say as much, it may be that we can best understand Kamalaśīla's epistemological stance as one of mutually reinforcing private and public spheres of proof. It might even be suggested that his epistemological position is particularly resistant to doubt precisely because of its employment of both meditation and philosophy as tools of mutual verification.

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<sup>37</sup> Whether Kamalaśīla also held that philosophical views may be *refined* or rearticulated in light of personal meditative experience remains, at this stage, an open question. I see little reason to doubt that his perspective allows some room for this. Note, however, that the idea of refining a philosophical position may be understood as involving something more than simply sharpening or clarifying its expression. It may be taken to imply the idea of amending its content *with new information*, or even of *falsifying* it in certain ways. This, however, is *not* a position than I am presently prepared to attribute to Kamalaśīla.

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#### ABSTRACT

In this paper I attempt to explain the contribution of meditation (*bhāvanā*) to knowledge as it is presented in the *Bhāvanākramas*. Kamalaśīla's presentation in these texts makes use of the schema of three wisdoms or *prajñās* (*śrutamayī*-, *cintāmayī*, and *bhāvanāmayī-prajñā*) and a very specific understanding of the notion of *bhūtapratyavekṣā* as "the discernment of reality." My analysis is framed in the context of a recent controversy concerning the epistemological role of meditation in relation to the views of the opposing sides of the historical debate at Bsam yas. I argue that the *Bhāvanākramas* assign a necessary and very specific function to conceptual meditation in the process of acquiring a direct, non-conceptual knowledge of reality (*nirvikalpajñāna*).