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# *Lta sgom spyod gsum: A Tibetan Approach to Moral Phenomenological Praxis*

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# *Lta sgom spyod gsum*: A Tibetan Approach to Moral Phenomenological Praxis

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## **Abstract**

This article unpacks the Tibetan framework of *lta sgom spyod gsum*, or view, meditation, action, and relates it to the Buddhist ethical project of moral phenomenology. It first investigates how the framework has been defined and used both descriptively and practically in Tibetan primary texts. It then nuances this usage by identifying key aspects of its deployment in Tibetan contexts, including how view is prioritized among the three limbs, how the unity of view and action is the intended fruition of practice, and how there is a specific order of operations in its implementation. This article then relates *lta sgom spyod gsum* directly to the ethical project of moral phenomenology and demonstrates how it can be mobilized as the practical arm of this uniquely Buddhist ethical theory. Thus, this article presents a robust reading of *lta sgom spyod gsum* in Tibetan Buddhist contexts, contributes to the ongoing development of the ethical theory of moral phenomenology, and provides further

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avenues for engaging the Tibetan Buddhist ethical tradition with the moral issues facing us today.

## Introduction

As the field of Buddhist ethics has developed, scholars have proposed a variety of interpretations of the religion's moral tradition. The most common of these has been a virtue ethic wherein the *brahmavihārās*, *pāramitās*, and so forth are seen as the primary focus of Buddhist moral development and ethical literature (Keown; Whitehill; Fink). Others have argued for a consequentialist interpretation of Theravada and Mahayana ethics (Goodman), while others still have explored the Kantian dimensions of Buddhist moral theory (Whitaker; Berman). Each of these three interpretations involves the project of viewing the Buddhist ethical tradition through the lens of western ethics and searching for congruities between the two. However, this is not the only way to come to a systematic evaluation of Buddhist ethics. Instead, we can begin from the Buddhist tradition itself and present a Buddhist approach to ethics on its own terms.

This approach has been taken up by a handful of scholars who have begun to articulate a novel kind of ethical theory from Buddhist sources which they call moral phenomenology. In brief, moral phenomenology is an experiential and perceptual approach to ethics which is built from the notion that conative states, affective responses, and actions emerge from an individual's direct perceptual experience of the world. Ethical development in this theory therefore involves a reorientation of one's immediate experience of the world rather than a reformation of one's actions. It entails a radical change of an individual's moral behavior by going directly to the root of experience rather than refining one's ability to conduct a moral calculus or developing secondary qualities that themselves emerge from the ground of experience. As such, moral phenomenology primes an

actor to respond spontaneously to situations as they present themselves in a manner which accords with their broader realization of their situatedness in myriad relationships, communities, ecosystems, and so forth. Key to this kind of ethical theory is what we might call a *default perceptual mode*. This is the lens through which we see the world and involves both our bare sense experience and, more importantly, the way we label and process that sense data through our acquired conceptual frameworks. It is the way in which we experience the world as it happens, in the present, without reflection. And while it certainly involves concepts, these concepts and their associated affective states are instantly applied as indivisible from the sensory experience itself.

This ethical theory was first posited and has been most fully engaged by Jay L. Garfield in the article “What is it like to be a bodhisattva?”, a chapter in *Engaging Buddhism: Why it Matters to Philosophy*, and his recent book *Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Investigation*. These pieces all make the claim that Buddhist ethics is a kind of moral phenomenology concerned “not primarily with actions, their consequences, obligations, sentiments or human happiness, but rather with the nature of our experience” (*Engaging Buddhism* 279). This emphasis on experience is novel amongst ethical theories despite being ubiquitous in the Buddhist tradition. Thus, across these texts, Garfield both fleshes out the various facets and implications of a moral phenomenology using Buddhist sources to both provide a hermeneutically nuanced presentation of Buddhist moral thought and to offer a novel way of approaching ethics in general.

Since Garfield introduced the term, moral phenomenology has been further developed by Daniel Aitken who has investigated the mechanisms of such an ethical theory and investigated the ethical implications of the Buddhist understanding of perception. Jessica Locke has written about *lojong*'s relevance to moral phenomenology and the possibility of using moral phenomenological ethics to address anti-black racism.

Finally, I have drawn from these thinkers to present a robust defense and development of moral phenomenological theory and to forward its possibility as a viable ethical theory alongside aretaic ethics, consequentialism, and so forth. This article will supplement these prior works by moving from the realm of theory to the realm of praxis and by proposing a succinct method for putting moral phenomenology into practice.

This supplementation is necessary because, despite all this work, little has been written about how to actually *implement* this uniquely Buddhist moral phenomenological ethic. Locke made the first step to addressing this question in her article “Training the Mind and Transforming Your World” where she argued that “the moral-phenomenological pedagogy targets the affective polarities of our life-world” and that “this targeting takes the form not of intellectual argumentation, but rather proceeds through an experiential, experimental engagement with the structures of our perception” (252). Thus, Locke promotes the contemplation and meditation of these Tibetan aphorisms as the practical arm of a moral phenomenological ethic. Garfield has similarly offered a way to practice moral phenomenology in *Buddhist Ethics* where he argues that “vivid narrative” and projecting “ourselves imaginatively into morally charged situations” are the primary ways of developing ourselves morally (54).

While both approaches have merit and both authors provide salient defenses of their positions, I would like to offer a different, perhaps more robust approach to enacting a moral phenomenological ethic through the framework of *lta sgom spyod gsum*, or *view, meditation, action*. This framework is found in many different geographic, philosophical, and literary contexts in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and provides a clear means for changing one’s experience of the world in a precise, directed way. Further, not only is it a ubiquitous framework in the Buddhist tradition, but it is broad enough that it can be used outside of its original

context and can be used to bring this Buddhist theory to broader ethical conversations.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in the interest of both the hermeneutical goal of articulating what constitutes the Tibetan Buddhist ethic on its own terms and the cosmopolitan ethical goal of understanding and engaging the unique moral philosophies of global traditions for addressing contemporary problems, this article will explore the Tibetan framework of *view, meditation, action* and relate it to the project of moral phenomenology. It will first investigate how the framework was defined, understood, and used both descriptively and practically in Tibetan primary texts. It will then nuance this usage by identifying some aspects of its deployment in Tibetan contexts including how view is prioritized among the three limbs, how the unity of view and action is the intended fruition of its practice, and how there is a specific order of operations in the implementation of *view, meditation, action*. With this established, this article will then relate this framework directly to the project of moral phenomenology and demonstrate how it can be used in this particular presentation of ethics. Ultimately, this article will contribute to the ongoing development of the ethical theory of moral phenomenology and will provide more avenues for engaging the Tibetan Buddhist ethical tradition with the moral issues facing us today.

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<sup>2</sup> As I have shown elsewhere, the theory of moral development articulated in Buddhist sources has many similarities with the notion of ethical comportment in the work of Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus. They argue that this kind of experiential approach to ethics can be gradually developed similar to how one would develop acumen for playing chess or driving a car, but they too neglect an articulation of how one goes about actually engaging in this development.

### Original Context and Definition of *lta sgom spyod gsum*

To begin, the framework of *view, meditation, action* can be found across literary genres in Tibet. We can find Tibetan authors using the framework in *rnam thar* or hagiographies,<sup>3</sup> *dohas* or songs of experience,<sup>4</sup> aspiration prayers,<sup>5</sup> pith meditation instructions,<sup>6</sup> *sadhanas* or ritual practice texts,<sup>7</sup> and doxographies.<sup>8</sup> These texts and the framework's usage therein span

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<sup>3</sup> As in Yeshe Tsogyal's hagiography of Padmasambhava which states: "As the road to freedom, practice the view, meditation, and [action]" (Yeshe Tsogyal 186).

<sup>4</sup> As in Saraha's *Spontaneous Song of View, Meditation, Action, and Fruition* which states: "In brief, by acting in whatever way benefits the practice of view, meditation, and action, one acts according to the natural state." Tib. *mdor na lta sgom spyod pa nyams len la / ji ltar phan pa'i spyod pas rnal byor spyod*. Sourced from: sa ra ha 13.

<sup>5</sup> As in Rangjung Dorje's *Prayer of Mahāmudrā* which states: "To cut through misconceptions of the ground is to have confidence in the view. To maintain that view without distraction is the crucial point of meditation. To train in all objects of meditation is the supreme form of action. May I possess the confidence of view, meditation, and action." Tib. *gzhi la sgro 'dogs chod pa lta ba'i gdengs / de la ma yengs skyong ba sgom pa'i gnad / sgom don kun la rtsal sbyong spyod pa'i mchog / lta sgom spyod pa'i gdeng dang ldan par shog*. Sourced from: rang byung rdo rje 4.

<sup>6</sup> As in Jigmé Lingpa's "Prayer of the Ground, Path, and Fruition" which states: "Since it is primordially pure, even the word view does not exist. Through the awareness of one's true nature, it emerges from the sheath of causal meditation. Since it is without grasping at concepts, it is free from the fetters of [restrained] action. This is the spontaneously entered nature, the state of naked simplicity. May there be no wrong directions on the way to this crucial point of the path!" Tib. *ye nas dag pas lta ba'i ming yang med / rang ngo rig pas sgom rgyu'i shubs nas 'don / gza' gtad med pas spyod pa'i sgrog dang dral / rang bzhin lhums zhugs spros bral rjen pa'i ngang / lam gyi gnad la gol phyogs med par shog*. Sourced from: 'jigs med gling pa 433.

<sup>7</sup> As in Dudjom Rinpoche's *Light of Primordial Wisdom* which organizes its text around the framework, stating: "1) Deciding through the view; 2) Adopting it as one's experience through meditation; 3) To experience continuously through action, and; 4) Bringing the fruition to realization." Tib. *lta bas thag bcod pa / sgom pas nyams su blang ba / spyod pas rgyun skyong ba / 'bras bu mngon du byed pa'o*. Sourced from: bdud 'joms rin po che 427.

<sup>8</sup> As in Padmasambhava's *A Garland of Views* which uses the framework as an organizational tool.



across the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism making *view, meditation, action* a ubiquitous term in the tradition. Further, we can find *lta sgom spyod gsum* in some of the seminal Indian texts that Tibetan Buddhism developed from. For example, the Indian *mahāsiddha* Saraha,<sup>9</sup> who played an important role in establishing the Mahāmudrā tradition of Vajrayāna Buddhism, has a song titled *the Spontaneous Song of View Meditation, Action, and Result* that addresses various aspects of the path of Mahāmudrā. Most of this song speaks to Mahāmudrā in general and gives general instructions on the practice. There are, however, also specific references to *view, meditation, action* as a closed framework such as when he sings: “In brief, by acting in whatever way benefits the practice of view, meditation, action, one acts according to the natural state, yoga.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, in Saraha’s song we have *view, meditation, action* used as both a general signifier for the various facets of Mahāmudrā practice as well as a specific framework therein.

Perhaps more important than its inclusion in a variety of genres is how *view, meditation, action* is defined and understood in the Tibetan tradition. While examples are few, there are some instances of *lta sgom spyod gsum* being packaged together in Tibetan dictionaries and given its own entry. For instance, Nobrang Orgyen’s<sup>11</sup> *Compendium of Buddhist Terminology*<sup>12</sup> gives the definition of *lta sgom spyod gsum* as:

1. [View is] the *Sūtra-pitika* which explained the main points of the view of the Buddhist Dharma traditions.

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<sup>9</sup> Tib. *sa ra ha*, fl. 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E.

<sup>10</sup> Tib. *mdor na lta sgom spyod pa nyams len la / ji ltar phan pa'i spyod pas rnal byor spyod*. Sourced from: *sa ra ha* 13.

<sup>11</sup> Tib. *nor brang o rgyan gyis bsgrigs*, b. 1933.

<sup>12</sup> Tib. *chos mam kun btus*.

2. [Meditation is] the *Abhidharma-pitika* which explained the main points of the method of training in meditative stabilization.
3. [Action] is said to be the three *pitikas* and the three texts, together with the *Vinaya-pitika* which explained the main points of right action.<sup>13</sup>

Here, Nobrang Orgyen uses *view, meditation, action* as an organizational tool for understanding the various facets of the *sūtras*. This entry recognizes the intimacy of these terms while at the same time acknowledging that each addresses a key aspect of the Buddhist path. While his definition is somewhat curious in that it does not gesture to the practical nature of the framework, it nonetheless gives us an example of how this framework was given credence as a formal structure for organizing Buddhist teachings and practice.

That said, whenever this framework has been parsed in English translations it *does* give us a way to put this framework into practice. One of the earliest examples of this can be found in Garma C. C. Chang’s translation of Milarepa’s<sup>14</sup> *Hundred Thousand Songs* where he gives his own definition of *view, meditation, action* to help the anglophone reader understand what the framework means. In the notes on the former passage, he writes:

“View” is the knowledge or principle upon which all meditations are based and religious activities conducted. “Practice” refers to the yogic exercise of the View; “Action” to a

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<sup>13</sup> Tib. 1. *nang pa'i chos lugs kyi lta ba gtso bor bshad pa'i mdo sde'i sde snod* / 2. *ting nge 'dzin sgom tshul gtso bor bshad pa'i mngon pa'i sde snod* / 3. *kun spyod gtso bor bshad pa'i 'dul ba'i sde snod bcos gzhung gsum la sde snod gsum zer*. Sourced from: nor brang o rgyan gyis bsgrigs 265.

<sup>14</sup> Tib. *mi la ras pa*, c. 1040-1123.

state in which the yogi is absorbed in the View while carrying out his [sic] daily activities. (72)

Thus, we find a presentation of *view, meditation, action* wherein practice (read: meditation) involves yogic (or meditative) cultivation of the view, and action refers to behavior that accords with and stems from the view. Chang also gives an example of how this operates in the Mahāmudrā tradition of Milarepa, stating:

In the case of the Mahāmudrā teaching, the View is the understanding of the void nature of Mind; the Practice is the contemplation on this understanding; and the Action is the mindfulness of this View in daily activities, meaning that the yogi is able to remember his meditation experience even during all the vicissitudes of his daily existence. (72)

While his example is nearly a restatement of his definition with a couple of generalities made more specific, this quote sheds light on how a prolific translator like Garma C.C. Chang understood the framework's employment in the Tibetan language.

Another important translator who provides a definition of *view, meditation, action* in his work is Erik Pema Kunsang. In his translation of both Yeshe Tsogyal's<sup>15</sup> *The Lotus Born* and Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche's<sup>16</sup> *The Union of Mahāmudrā & Dzogchen* he provides the following definition of *view, meditation, action*:

The philosophical orientation, the act of growing accustomed to that - usually in sitting practice, and the implementation of that insight during the activities of daily life.

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<sup>15</sup> Tib. *ye shes mthso rgyal*.

<sup>16</sup> Tib. *chos kyi nyi ma rin po che*, b. 1951.

Each of the ‘nine vehicles’ has its particular definition of view, meditation and action. (286; 239)

Thus, we have two important aspects of *lta sgom spyod gsum* in Kunsang’s definition. First is the clear practical relationship between view, meditation, and action in this definition. Meditation is growing phenomenologically accustomed to a particular philosophical position and action is acting from that position. Second, he states that each of the nine vehicles have a distinct view, meditation, and action unto themselves. That said, taken together, Kunsang seems to be suggesting that, despite these disparate views, meditations, and actions, each vehicle implements the framework in the same way. In other words, regardless of the specific views, meditative practices, and actions that are inserted into the framework, the relationship between the three components is uniform.

Furthermore, each of the components of *lta sgom spyod gsum* have a broad semantic range that is worth understanding should we wish to operationalize the framework in a moral phenomenological setting. First, we may look at the Tibetan term for view: *lta ba*. In Gegen Dorje Tharchin’s 1950 dictionary, commissioned by the University of Washington, *lta ba* is given the following entry: “its honorific form is *gzigs pa*, and it is the meaning of that which perceives the object of realization.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, there is a sense of *perceiving* and a sense of an *object of perception*. These two connotations can be clearly seen in the entry for *lta ba* in Tibetan-English dictionaries. First is its nominalized sense which is clearly posited in *lta ba*’s Rangjung Yeshe dictionary entry:

[philosophical] view, orientation, point of view, philosophical position [wrong] view / opinion, belief, heresy, speculative theory, ideology], theory, position, stand point, outlook, attitude, perspective, doctrine, opinionatedness,

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<sup>17</sup> Tib. *zhe sar gzigs pa dang / rtogs bya’i lta ba*. Sourced from: Gegen Dorje Tharchin 1007.

dogma, principles, ideology, teaching, insight, understanding. (Kunsang et al. “lta ba”)

Its other primary meaning comes from its verbal sense of *viewing* which Jeffrey Hopkins parses as “viewing consciousness; viewer; look; see; read” (733) and Rangjung Yeshe gives as “to pay attention to, look at, see, watch, gaze at, observe, contemplate, view/ regard/ attend to” (Kunsang et al. “lta ba”). Both meanings have relevance to a practical ethical framework, but it is the former nominal sense that often takes precedent over the latter verbal sense. While the practical framework of *lta sgom spyod gsum* certainly involves a certain kind of seeing, this occurs in the *sgom pa* rather than the *lta ba*. In this framework, establishing *lta ba* involves intellectually affirming a particular philosophical position, point of view, ideology, or theory. It is this sense of *lta ba* that is involved in the framework of *view, meditation, action*.

Next, *sgom pa* is typically translated as “meditation” but has a wider semantic range than the English term typically provides. Gegen Dorje Tharchin’s Tibetan definition of *sgom pa* reads: “the mind resting single-pointedly . . . It refers to the cultivation of *citta* (heart/mind) and so forth.”<sup>18</sup> These can be seen as two of the main uses of the English term “meditation.” In Tibetan Buddhism, meditation is of two kinds: *zhi gnas* and *lhag mthong* which are the equivalents of the Sanskrit *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* respectively. In English, the former term often gets translated as “calm-abiding” and the latter as “special insight” which, as in Tharchin’s definition of *sgom pa*, involve single-pointed concentration and the meditative cultivation of particular ideas or states respectively. Alongside the word “meditation,” Hopkins states that *sgom pa* can also refer to cultivation, progress, and development (317), but Rangjung Yeshe gives even more English equivalents including training, familiarization, contemplation, creative imagination, and to become accustomed to (Kunsang et al.

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<sup>18</sup> Tib. *sems rtse gcig tu gnas pa . . . thugs sgom zer ba sogs la’ngo*. Sourced from: Tharchin 568.

“sgom pa”). Jim Valby offers further connotations of *sgom pa* such as: making a living experience of, concentrated attention to the nature of things, close attention, call up, foster, and so forth.<sup>19</sup> From all of these related meanings, we can thus conclude that meditation refers to the act of single-pointedly focusing on a particular object in order to cultivate a perceptual familiarity with, contemplate the meaning of, or *make a living experience of* said object. Far from simply sitting in a quiescent state, *sgom pa* involves concentrating on a particular concept or *lta ba* in order to bring that view into one’s default perceptual state.

Thirdly, *spyod pa* has both a verbal and nominal sense like *lta ba* and *sgom pa* before it.<sup>20</sup> Hopkins translates *spyod pa* as deeds, behavior, enjoy, make use of, practice, act out, and perform. To this, Rangjung Yeshe adds to engage in, behave, carry out, participate in, be involved with, and commit. Tharchin gives several contexts we find the term in his Tibetan entry, including: “theory and practice being separated from each other, clumsy action, precise action, elaborate action, confused action, and so forth.”<sup>21</sup> So, we have two clear connotations to the term. In the first, *spyod pa* is used to denote action on a specific object as is the case with enjoy, make us of, participate in, and so on. Second, we have a general sense of a continued *kind of acting* in the terms conduct, behavior, action, and activity in the dictionary entry by Tharchin. Depending on the text, *spyod pa* can be used in either of these ways when it is used in the framework of *view, meditation, action*. However, in the contexts where *view, meditation, action* constitute a particular curriculum of practice it is typically this

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<sup>19</sup> Jim Valby’s dictionary is a desktop application, but his entries can also be found on the Tibetan & Himalayan Library translation tool. The above connotations can be seen under “JV” when one searches for *sgom pa*. See: “THL Tibetan to English Translation Tool.”

<sup>20</sup> Note that all of these are given in a nominalized form but can be conjugated to become verbs.

<sup>21</sup> Tib. *lta spyod ya bral te / spyod pa rtsing ba / spyod pa zhib pa / spyod pa rgya chen po / spyod pa mi gsal ba sqgs*. Sourced from. Tharchin 656.

general and continued sense that *spyod pa* is referring to. Further, this use of *spyod pa* to denote action and behavior is especially important to the framework's utility in a moral phenomenological setting, so it is worthwhile emphasizing this long-term, behavioral sense of *spyod pa* (especially in its nominalized form) over the more specific sense of acting on an immediate object.

### **Descriptive Uses of *lta sgom spyod gsum* in Tibetan Buddhist Literature**

With these definitions parsed, we can now turn to how this framework is employed in Tibetan contexts. Regardless of the literary genre or the sectarian affiliations of the author, *lta sgom spyod gsum* is typically used as either a descriptive framework or a practical framework. Descriptive uses of *view*, *meditation*, *action* abound in Tibetan Buddhist literature and are how we find *lta sgom spyod gsum* being used in the majority of cases. These descriptive uses are found primarily in the Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen tradition which color these descriptive accounts in particular ways. For instance, in Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol's<sup>22</sup> autobiography, he recounts an instance where he requests a yogi by the name of Nyungnepa Tendzin Nyima Rinpoche<sup>23</sup> to sing an instructional song and is given a description of *lta sgom spyod gsum* in reply. He relates:

If there's bias, that's not the view.

If there's clinging to things as real, that's not the meditation.

If there's accepting and rejecting, that's not the action.

If there's hope and fear, that's not fruition.

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<sup>22</sup> Tib. *zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol*, c. 1781-1851.

<sup>23</sup> Tib. *smyung gnas pa bstan 'dzin nyi ma rin po che*, fl. 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E.

"Then what is it?" you may ask.

The view is empty awareness, without any source.

The meditation is empty clarity without any concepts,

The action, like the path of a bird through the sky, is without any traces.

Whatever arises is freed, just as it arises.

The fruition is *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*,

Complete within mind itself. (*The Life of Shabkar* 115)

Thus, through this passage we come to understand the proper view, meditation, and action in this lineage of Mahāmudrā. Here, these three are not explicitly related to one another as a specific practical framework; instead, Nyungnepa Tendzin Nyima Rinpoche gives a general description of how view, meditation, and action are to be understood in other Buddhist practices.

Shabkar is often seen as the second Milarepa by virtue of their similar approaches to Buddhist practice and their similar realization. It therefore is unsurprising that we find a similar statement in the writings of Milarepa. He states:

Manifestation, the Void, and Non-differentiation,

These three are the quintessence of the View.

Illumination, Non-thought, and Non-distraction

Are the quintessence of the Meditation.

Non-clinging, Non-attachment, and complete Indifference

Are the quintessence of the Action. (*Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* 69)

Again, we find view, meditation, and action being defined not in explicit relation to one another in the context of a singular practical framework



but as isolated terms. As in Shabkar's passage, Milarepa uses the framework of *lta sgom spyod gsum* to organize his thoughts about Mahāmudrā practice in general and give his students insight into the fruition of Mahāmudrā practice. Here, view, meditation, and action are presented from the perspective of an individual who has reached the pinnacle of yogic practice rather than from the perspective of a student seeking to understand these principles from a beginner's perspective. This enlightened perspective can also be found in a text by the great *tertön*<sup>24</sup> Jigmé Lingpa<sup>25</sup> titled *Prayer of the Ground, Path & Fruition* which states:

Since it is primordially pure, even the word view does not exist.

Through the awareness of one's true nature, it emerges from the sheath of causal meditation.

Since it is without grasping at concepts, it is free from the fetters of action.

This is the spontaneously entered nature, the state of naked simplicity.

May there be no wrong directions on the way to this crucial point of the path!<sup>26</sup>

There is a slight difference between these two passages. Milarepa tells us what ideal view, meditation, and action *are* in his tradition while Jigmé Lingpa tells us how view, meditation, and action *look* from the perspective of one who has attained liberation. Also worth noting is how Milarepa is speaking from the perspective of the Mahāmudrā tradition while Jigmé

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<sup>24</sup> Tib. *gter ston*. Lit. treasure revealer.

<sup>25</sup> Tib. *'jigs med gling pa*, c. 1730-1798.

<sup>26</sup> Tib. *ye nas dag pas lta ba'i ming yang med / rang ngo rig pas sgom rgyu'i shubs nas 'don / gza' gtad med pas spyod pa'i sgrog dang dral / rang bzhin lhums zhugs spros bral rjen pa'i ngang / lam gyi gnad la gol phyogs med par shog*. Sourced from: *'jigs med gling pa* 433. For an alternate translation, see: Jigmé Lingpa.

Lingpa approaches practice from a Dzogchen perspective. Nonetheless, both use *lta sgom spyod gsum* to describe key points of practice in their respective traditions.

One final instance of *view, meditation, action* being used in a descriptive sense can be found in Rendawa's<sup>27</sup> *Vajra Song of View, Meditation, Action, and Result*. He writes:

Blissful is the view that dispels eternalism and nihilism.

Blissful is the action that is without cessation or production.

Blissful is the meditation that is effortless and without striving.

Blissful is the fruition that is without hope and fear.

That view that dispels eternalism and nihilism  
Is an awareness<sup>28</sup> of the true essentials of dependent origination.

That action that is without cessation or production  
Is an awareness of the true essentials of what is to be adopted and what is to be discarded.

That meditation that is effortless and without striving  
Is an awareness of the true essentials of the remedies to eliminate the undesirable.

That fruition that is without hope and fear

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<sup>27</sup> Tib. *red mda' ba*, c. 1349-1412.

<sup>28</sup> The word used is *rig pa*. Which can be translated as knowing, seeing, understanding, and being aware of. However, it is a deeper knowing than mere *shes pa* which is an intellectual or discursive knowing; rather, it is a direct cognition of a thing that translates to knowledge.

Is an awareness of the true essentials of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.<sup>29</sup>

While Rendawa's definition of meditation and action are familiar, his use of *lta ba* strays from what we have thus far seen in Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā contexts. Rendawa was a Sakya contemporary of Je Tsongkhapa, the founder of the heavily scholastic Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, and while yogic practices certainly played an important role in the Sakya school, it also placed a good deal of importance on scholarship, philosophy, and debate. Some of the aforementioned authors such as Milarepa and Shabkar were primarily yogis and largely eschewed scholastic study in favor of meditative practice in the Mahāmudrā or Dzogchen traditions. Thus, their definitions of view deal primarily with the nature of mind. Rendawa, on the other hand, gives the definition of view as “an awareness of the true essentials of dependent origination” reflecting his study of Madhyamaka and his positioning of that philosophical school as the pinnacle of philosophical views.<sup>30</sup> A thorough treatment of the various ultimate views in Tibetan Buddhism is beyond the scope of this present article, but we can nonetheless note how the “view” is fluid between different traditions' employment of the *lta sgom spyod gsum* framework and how this

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<sup>29</sup> Tib. *rtaḡ chad spangs pa'i lta ba bde / dgag sgrub med pa'i spyod pa bde / 'bad rtsol med pa'i bsgom pa bde / re dogs med pa'i 'bras bu bde / lta bar tag chad spangs pa de / rten 'bral rang mtshang rig pa yin / dgag sgrub med pa'i spyod pa de / blang dor rang mthang rig pa yin / 'bad rtsol med pa'i bsgom pa de / spang gnyen rang mtshan rig pa yin / 'bras bu re dogs med pa de / rten 'brel rang mtshan rig pa yin*. Sourced from: red mda' ba gzhon nu blo gros 92.

<sup>30</sup> We can safely infer this from the number of Madhyamaka treatises Rendawa composed including *Main Points of the Madhyamakakarikas* (Tib. *rsta she'i spyi don*), *Commentary on the Madhyamakakarika* (Tib. *dbu ma shes rab kyi tik ka*), *Commentary on the Madhyamakavatara* (Tib. *dbu ma 'jug pa'i tik ka*), *Commentary on Āryadeva's Four Hundred Stanzas* (Tib. *bzhi brgya pa'i tik ka*), and a *Commentary on Nāgārjuna's Letter to a Friend* (Tib. *bshes spring gi tik ka*). For more information on Rendawa's life and thought, see Samten Chhospel's biography of him in the Treasury of Lives.

framework is present in both the yoga-focused Nyingma and Kagyu schools as well as the more scholastic Sakya and Gelug schools.<sup>31</sup>

### **Practical Uses of *lta sgom spyod gsum* in Tibetan Buddhist Literature**

In terms of a moral phenomenological praxis, these descriptive uses of *view, meditation, action* do not give us a great deal to work with. They are useful insofar as they provide us with some background as to how the framework was understood and deployed by particular thinkers throughout Tibetan Buddhism's history, but they do not give us much material for relating *lta sgom spyod gsum* to ethics. There are, however, many scholars and practitioners who use the framework in a practical sense wherein *view, meditation, and action* are intimately connected to one another as sequentially related parts of Buddhist practice. Since these practical, sequential uses of *view, meditation, action* are what can be mobilized towards moral phenomenological ends, they should be parsed in detail.

We can find a strong example of *lta sgom spyod gsum* being used in a practical sense in the 9<sup>th</sup> Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje's<sup>32</sup> text *Mahāmudrā: Dispelling the Darkness of Ignorance*<sup>33</sup> where he writes:

To be free from all notions of 'apprehended' and 'apprehender' and see one's true abiding mode is the view.

To meditate without distraction on the meaning of that is the meditation.

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<sup>31</sup> To see a thorough treatment of this subject in relation to moral phenomenology, see chapter five in: Simonds(2022).

<sup>32</sup> Tib. *dbang phyug rdo rje*, c.1556-1603.

<sup>33</sup> Tib. *phyag chen ma rig mun sel*.

To be free from all actions and activities and maintain that view during any of the four actions is the action.

To be free from hopes and fears, such as the fear of falling to the lowest depths of saṃsāra or the desire for attaining the highest Buddhahood, and to be free from notions of action and agent in meditation is the fruition.

You should understand the meaning of view, meditation, action, and fruition in that way and generate diligence.<sup>34</sup>

Here we find meditation being defined directly in relation to the view such that, in this presentation, meditation's function is to bring the view into the fore of one's perceptual mode. This relationship between view and meditation can also be seen quite clearly in the *Prayer of Mahāmudrā* by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Karmapa Rangjung Dorje.<sup>35</sup> He writes:

To cut through misconceptions of the ground is to have confidence in the view.

To maintain that view without distraction is the crucial point of meditation.

To train in all objects of meditation is the supreme form of action.

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<sup>34</sup> Tib. *bya bas gzung 'dzin kun dang bral zhing yang dag pa'i gnas lugs la blta b ani lta ba / de don yengs med du bsgom pa ni sgom pa / bya byed thams cad dang bral zhing / spyod pa bzhi gang rung skyong ba spyod pa dang / mar 'khor bar lhung dogs dang yar sangs rgyas thob 'dod sogs re dogs / bsgom bya sgom byed thams cad bral b ani 'bras bu ste / lta sgom spyod 'bras kyi don yang / de zhin du shes par byas la brtson pa bskyed cing*. Sourced from: kar ma pa dbang phyug rdo rje 2021. For an alternate translation, see: Wang-ch'ug Dor-je 150.

<sup>35</sup> Tib. *rang byung rdo rje*, c. 1284-1339.

May I possess the confidence of view, meditation, and action!<sup>36</sup>

As in the case of Wangchuk Dorje, meditation is being defined as a specific practice of maintaining the view without distraction. Where Wangchuk Dorje's presentation differs from Rangjung Dorje's is in his presentation of action. Rangjung Dorje's action is training in all the facets of meditation whereas Wangchuk Dorje's action is defined in relation to view such that all action should be done while simultaneously sustaining the view. Thus, alongside the view being integrated as a perceptual mode, it seems to also serve a *conative* function in this particular Mahāmudrā context.

A more straightforward use of *lta sgom spyod gsum* as a practical framework occurs in Dudjom Rinpoche's<sup>37</sup> *Light of Primordial Wisdom*. This text gives instructions on how to practice the completion stage<sup>38</sup> of a particular Nyingma *sadhana* which it breaks down into the two foundational types of meditation: *śamatha* and *vipāśyanā*. In the section describing the

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<sup>36</sup> Tib. *gzhi la sgro 'dogs chod pa lta ba'i gdengs / de la ma yengs skyong ba sgom pa'i gnad / sgom don kun la rtsal sbyong spyod pa'i mchog / lta sgom spyod pa'i gdeng dang ldan par shog*. Sourced from: rang byung rdo rje 4.

<sup>37</sup> Tib. *bdud 'joms 'jigs bral ye shes rdo rje*, c. 1904-1987.

<sup>38</sup> In general, tantric practice in Vajrayāna Buddhism consists of two parts: the generation stage (Tib. *bskyed rim*) and the completion stage (Tib. *rdzogs rim*). In the generation stage, one visualizes a particular meditative deity (Tib. *yi dam*) either in front of, on top of, or as oneself. In the completion stage, one collapses this visualization and rests in a non-clinging meditative equipoise, the description of which changes from practice to practice but can be said to be akin to the view of Dzogchen or Mahāmudra. For example, this particular text defines the view of the natural state as: "The ultimate Dorje Drolö which is empty clarity, is not to be looked for anywhere but here, this naked, self-arisen awareness. In the great lord which is the whole of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, this great primordial nature, be resolved." Tib. *stong gsal don gyi gr obo lod / gzhan nas mi 'tshol rang byung gi / rig pa rjen pa 'di ka ste / 'khor 'das yongs kyi khyab bdag che / ye babs chen por la bzla'o*. Sourced from: bdud 'joms rin po che 427.

*vipaśyanā* stage of the practice, he describes what is to be done through the framework of *view, meditation, action*. He states:

Second, the main part: four points on generating the wisdom of special insight:

1. Deciding through the view;
2. Adopting it as one's experience through meditation;
3. To experience continuously through action, and;
4. Bringing the fruition to realization.<sup>39</sup>

Here, Dudjom Rinpoche gives a very precise instruction as to how to practice *vipaśyanā*. One first conceptually establishes the view, adopts it as one's default perceptual mode by meditating on it, and finally brings that experience into their daily life until it is fully realized. More so than any use of *view, meditation, action* we have seen thus far, this is how the framework can operate to enact a moral phenomenology. If moral phenomenology is aimed at reworking an individual's natural mode of acting by reworking their default perceptual, affective, and conative experience of the world, then Dudjom Rinpoche's framework presents us a clear means for doing so. We first decide what the proper view is for a desired ethical outcome, adopt it into our experience through meditation, and act from that basis in our daily lives.

Similar explanations of the practical use of *lta sgom spyod gsum* can be found in the contemporary Tibetan tradition as well. In his commentary on Patrul Rinpoche's<sup>40</sup> *Heart Treasure of Sacred Practice* (subtitled *A Discourse Virtuous in the Beginning, Middle and End on View, Meditation, and*

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<sup>39</sup> Tib. *gnyis pa dngos gzhi lhag mthong gi ye shes bskyed pa la bzhi / lta bas thag gcod pa / sgom pas nyams sub lang ba / spyod pas rgyun skyong ba / bras bu mngon du byed pa'o*. Sourced from: bdud 'joms rin po che 427.

<sup>40</sup> Tib. *dpal sprul rin po che*, c. 1808-1887.

*Action*),<sup>41</sup> contemporary Dzogchen master Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche<sup>42</sup> gives a succinct presentation of the practice of *view, meditation, action*. He writes:

The first step in establishing the view is to acquire a proper understanding of the teachings about it. Then, to incorporate the view into our inner experience, we put it into practice over and over again; this is the *meditation*. Maintaining our experience of the view at all times and under all circumstances is the *action*. Through the constant combination of these three—*view, meditation, action*—the *fruit* of the practice of Dharma will fully ripen. (9)

More interestingly, he also makes a clear statement regarding the relationship between view, meditation, and action as well as their relationship to ethics in general. He writes:

Once you have recognized the view, as you practice it through meditation, all your actions, words, and thoughts will become naturally more and more wholesome. Eventually, whether resting, working, eating, or sleeping, whether happy or sad, you will constantly have the thought of Chenrezi present in your mind; this is called action. (167)

This is not a practical presentation of *view, meditation, action* per se, but is instead an explanation of what happens *during* the practice. Essentially, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche is claiming that as one familiarizes oneself with the view, one will naturally act more ethically. In this sense, view has a *direct* consequence on one's action and that this consequence has a somewhat proportional relationship to how fully one familiarizes oneself with that view in meditation. He also states that the culmination of this

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<sup>41</sup> Tib. *thog mtha' bar gsum du dge ba'i gtam lta sgom spyod gsum nyams len dam pa'i snying nor zhes bya ba*.

<sup>42</sup> Tib. *dil mgo mkhyen brtse rin po che*, c. 1910-1991.



meditative familiarization is to constantly have “the thought of Chenrezi present in your mind.” Since Chenrezi is the *bodhisattva* of compassion, this statement can therefore be read as stating that one will install a compassionate conative mode through a perceptual familiarization with a particular view, in this case that of emptiness.<sup>43</sup> Thus, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche gives us great reason to believe that this framework can indeed be employed towards moral phenomenological ends quite effectively.

### Nuancing View, Meditation, Action

With the definition of, descriptive use, and practical application of this framework now understood, we can consider the ways the relationship between view, meditation, and action has been nuanced by some of its proponents. To begin, we might look at how and why view is prioritized in this framework. In his analysis of Madhyamaka philosophy and practice, Sonam Thakchoe states that “the Buddha himself considers the right view as the forerunner of all spiritual practices” (79), thus it is unsurprising that view is universally privileged in *lta sgom spyod gsum* in Tibetan contexts. Indeed, many teachers who use *view, meditation, action* as a practical tool for moral and perceptual transformation have stressed that view is to be privileged over meditation and action. For example, in a text titled *A Brief Presentation of View, Meditation and Action*, Yangthang Rinpoche<sup>44</sup> states:

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<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere in the text, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche states: “To establish the view means to acquire complete certainty about the absolute truth, which is that the phenomenal world, though obviously appearing and functioning, is utterly devoid of any ultimate reality. This view of all phenomena as appearing yet void is the seed from which the perfect fruit of enlightenment will grow.” See: Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche 9.

<sup>44</sup> Tib. *yang thang rin po che*, c. 1930-2016.

Among the view, meditation, and action, view is most important.

It is extremely important that one realizes the view without any mistakes.

If the view is not realized, then meditation will be without any basis whatsoever.

So, after one directly realizes the view without any mistakes,

Then, when one brings it into one's personal experience through meditation,

Residing in that state of the view which one has recognized and

Extending the amount of time in that state through effort is the meditation.

Therefore, apart from this, there is not a single other object of meditation.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, Ringu Tulku Rinpoche<sup>46</sup> focuses in on view as the means for changing our perspective and our behavior. He writes: "Human ignorance sees others as a threat to our survival. In fact, we benefit from seeing everyone as a potential partner. 'View' is the most important factor in bringing about this shift" (130). In both passages, view is prioritized over meditation and action, and there is a good reason for this. When thinking through *view* in the practical use of *lta sgom spyod gsum*, both meditation and action relate back to the specific view you have established.

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<sup>45</sup> Tib. *lta sgom spyod gsum nang nas lta ba gtso / 'khul med lta bar togs pa shin tu gal / lta ba ma rtogs sgom gzhi gang yang med / 'khrul med lta ba dngos sur togs pa'i rjes / de nas bsgom pas nyams su len pa'i skabs / rang ngo 'phrod pa'i lta ba'l ngang de la / bzhugs yun bsting nas 'bad pas bsgom pa yin / de bas sgom rgyu gzhan zhig logs na med*. Sourced from: yang thang rin po che. For an alternate translation, see: Yangthang Rinpoche.

<sup>46</sup> Tib. *rim gul sprul sku rin po che*, b. 1952.

Meditation is the cultivation of a particular philosophical position, and action stems directly from this newly established perceptual mode. We might say meditation is a *tool* for establishing a view *experientially* and for bridging the gap between how one thinks of and acts in the world. Thus, when Yangthang Rinpoche says that the view must be established flawlessly, he is really saying that an error in the view will become an error in the resultant default perceptual mode which will in turn cause one to act in inappropriate ways. In other words, if meditating on a “correct” view has the capacity to bring about positive action and ultimately liberate oneself from *duḥkha*, then meditating on an “incorrect” view will equally have the capacity to do the opposite. Khensur Jampa Tegchok warns against this in his commentary on Nāgārjuna’s<sup>47</sup> *Ratnāvalī*. He writes:

When those who lack proper study and a correct understanding meditate on emptiness, there is danger that they meditate incorrectly and come to the wrong conclusion. Falling to the extreme of nihilism and thinking that karma and its effects do not exist, their behavior becomes reckless, and their destructive actions lead them to ruin. This is similar to a person who grasps a poisonous snake improperly—instead of being able to extract the medicine from the snake, he will be bitten by it. (47)

This is why such importance is placed on correctly establishing the view—it is the direct referent for action once it is perceptually and experientially established through meditation.

Despite this emphasis on view, we should be careful not to regard view *alone* as sufficient for either liberation from *duḥkha* in Buddhist soteriological settings or a moral phenomenological approach to ethics. Action is necessary in both contexts for bringing about the desired result of

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<sup>47</sup> Tib. *klu sgrub*, fl. 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century, C.E.

liberation and ethical behavior. The proper fruition of *lta sgom spyod gsum* is a unity of view and action such that both aspects are always informed by one another. Shabkar writes about this idea in his *Emanated Scripture of Mañjuśrī*, stating:

Both an authentic view of selflessness and a completely pure conduct are necessary. To give an analogy, to be able to fly in the sky a bird needs two wings—it cannot go anywhere with one, even if it's an excellent wing. Likewise, having relied on the practice which unites view and action one will attain the level of omniscience. Even if the view or conduct is excellent, if either is missing, one will not be able to continue beyond some point of the ground or path. Now, if one were to wonder what the practice is that unites view and action, it is the practice of the holy ones, the saints of the Kadampa tradition who previously condensed the complete collection of sutras into what one should actually engage in and who saw that the root which produces all the suffering of *samsāra* is the ignorance which grasps selflessness as a self. This ignorance is brought down by the awareness which liberates the single and the many and reaches decisive insight into the selflessness of persons and things. Through the emptiness of meditative equipoise like the sky and the emptiness of dream-like post-meditation, one perfects the path by means of the union of view and action.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Tib. *de ltar bdag med kyi lta ba rnam par dag pa la / spyod pa rnam par dag pa dgos / dper na bya gshog pa gnyis 'dzom gyi nam kha' la 'phur nus / gshog pa ya gcig bzang kyang gar yang mi phyin ba ltar / lta spyod zung du 'brel ba'i nyams len la bsten nas / rnam pa thams cad mkhyen ba'i go 'phang thob nas / lta spyod dang rung gcig bzang kyang sa lam gar yang phyin mi nus / o na lta spyod zung du 'brel ba'i nyams len ji ltar bya snyam na / mdor hril gyis dril bas lag len la*

Thus, in order to actualize liberation from *duḥkha*, both view and action are necessary components. Liberation cannot be accomplished with only one. The same might be said of a moral phenomenological approach to ethics. Action without the view would be uninformed and hence potentially inappropriate for the given setting while view without action would be entirely ineffectual. Shabkar also gives us an example of what this unity of view and action looks like: a meditative equipoise like the sky and a post-meditation like a dream. Thus, meditation is positioned as the link between view and action, and their unity can be understood as maintaining the view (established in meditative absorption) in one's day-to-day life (post-meditation).

Finally, we might consider the order by which *view, meditation, action* is practiced. In many of the prior examples, the *view, meditation, action* was presented according to the sequence of terms. First, one establishes the view philosophically, then one meditates on that view to install it as one's default perceptual mode, and finally one goes about one's life acting in accordance with that acquired perceptual and conative set. This is the fairly standard order of operations we find in the vast majority of practical uses of *lta sgom spyod gsum*. However, there are apparent exceptions to this rule. In a recent work by Chöden Rinpoche<sup>49</sup> titled *Mastering Meditation: Instructions on Calm Abiding and Mahāmudrā*, there is an insightful account of a student asking whether it is better “first to settle on the view of emptiness and then to actualize calm abiding, or first to actualize calm abiding and then to settle on the view” (98). Chöden Rinpoche responds: “That

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*sngon gyis bka' gdams pa'i skyes chen dam pa rnams kyis 'khor ba'i sdug bsngal thams cad bskyed pa'i rtsab bdag med la bdag tu 'dzin pa'i ma rig pa 'di yin par ma khyen nas / gcig dang du bral gyis rig pas gang zag dang chos kyi bdag med gtan la phab nas / mnyam bzhaq nam kha' lta bu'i stong nyid dang / rjes thob sgyu ma lta bu'i stong pa nyid la bslab pas lta spyod zung 'brel gyis lam rnam par dag.* Sourced from: zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol 395-396. For an alternate translation, see: Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol 2020, 98-99.

<sup>49</sup> Tib. *chos ldan rin po che*, c. 1930-2015.

depends on your degree of familiarity with these two topics. If you have greater familiarity with emptiness, it is better first to meditate on emptiness and then to actualize calm abiding. If you have greater familiarity with calm abiding, then you should actualize that first” (98). He repeats this twofold approach later in the text, stating: “There are two kinds of people: (1) those who first gain certainty about the view, realize the view, and from within the view, actualize calm abiding, and (2) those who first actualize calm abiding, and having actualized calm abiding, gain certainty about the view” (186). At face value, this seems to somewhat contradict the standard process by which one enacts the framework of *view, meditation, action*, but if we recall how meditation is understood in the Tibetan Buddhist system, we can easily reconcile these two approaches.

In brief, meditation is typically divided into two categories: *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*. *Śamatha* meditation involves developing calm and concentration while *vipaśyanā* is involved with developing direct insight into particular philosophical points. In the *lta sgom spyod gsum* framework, *sgom* is typically used to refer to an analytical *vipaśyanā* meditation rather than a calming concentration meditation. For view to be installed as one’s default perceptual and conative mode, one cannot simply meditate on the breath or a visual object but must instead conduct a process of familiarization with a given conceptual view. However, for one to be able to do this well, one must have a basis in *śamatha* meditation to be able to remain single-pointedly on this view. Chöden Rinpoche states this quite clearly when he writes: “With such strong concentration, one can much more easily develop deep insight into these topics and can eventually develop direct perception of them, thereby gaining an antidote that cuts ignorance at the root” (13).

This is why Chöden Rinpoche’s twofold approach does not contradict the standard order of *view, meditation, action*. *Vipaśyanā* meditation must always come after one establishes the view intellectually, but

*śamatha* meditation which increases the efficacy of *vipaśyanā* can occur either before or after establishing the view. Thus, we can conclude that *śamatha* meditation can be practiced either before or after establishing the view in order to strengthen one's *vipaśyanā* meditation and that the standard order of operations for *lta sgom spyod gsum* is: (1) establish the view philosophically/intellectually; (2) practice analytical meditation on that view in order to familiarize oneself with it and install it as one's default perceptual mode; and (3) act in a way that is informed by and naturally emergent from that view. This is the case in the general Tibetan Buddhist religious context and is the case in a moral phenomenological approach to ethics.

### **View, Meditation, Action as Moral Phenomenological Praxis**

We have thus analyzed the various ways *lta sgom spyod gsum* is used in Tibetan contexts and have unpacked some of the nuances of its practical applications. In doing so, a picture of how *view, meditation, action* could be posited as a viable candidate for a moral phenomenological praxis should be becoming apparent. It will be the job of this section to clarify this application further and delineate exactly how the relationship between these two frameworks functions and how exactly *view, meditation, action* can be directed towards moral phenomenological ends.

To summarize the core points of Buddhist moral phenomenology, it is an ethical theory primarily concerned with the perceptual and affective experience of an individual and is built from the claim that one's action stems from one's experience of the world and that to change one's experience of the world is to change one's behavior. Moral development in this theory therefore entails priming an individual to respond naturally and effortlessly to situations in accordance with the way they recognize their situatedness in myriad relationships, communities, ecosystems, and

so forth. It entails adjusting one's *default perceptual mode*, being the lens through which we see the world and involves both our bare sense experience and, more importantly, the way we label and process that sense data through our acquired conceptual frameworks. Moral phenomenology goes directly to the root of *experience* as it happens, in the present, and without reflection, rather than refining one's ability to conduct a moral calculus or developing secondary qualities that themselves emerge from the grounds of experience.

Whether we are talking Buddhist moral phenomenology specifically or some non-Buddhist form of ethical comportment, the Tibetan Buddhist tradition as a whole is a useful practical interlocutor by virtue of how it understands the role of "practice." The Tibetan term for practice is *nyams su len pa* and consists of two parts: *nyams su* and *len pa*. The latter term *len pa* connotes grasping, accepting, bringing, obtaining, and so forth. The former term *nyams su* means "into experience" or "into vision." Thus, practice in the Tibetan Buddhist system means to bring into one's experience. To use familiar language, *nyams su len pa* refers specifically to the process by which a particular philosophical view is integrated into one's default perceptual mode. It thus accords incredibly well with a moral phenomenological approach to ethics. Obviously, different kinds of practice will bring different objects or ideas into one's personal experience and thus have different consequences ethically speaking. Nonetheless, the way in which practice is understood Tibetan Buddhism makes it a rich tradition for practically engaging moral phenomenology.

Again, the key to enacting moral phenomenology is the installment of a particular ontological view as one's default perceptual mode through meditation and contemplative practice resulting in compassionate action or conduct that accords with said view. It is for this reason that the practical use of *view, meditation, action* presents such a potent method for putting moral phenomenology into practice. As Garfield writes,



“Buddhist ethics is a moral phenomenology concerned with the transformation of our experience of the world, and hence our overall comportment to it” (*Engaging Buddhism* 279). *View, meditation, action* provides a distinct path for bridging the link between one’s conceptual understanding of the world and one’s direct perceptual experience of it and, more than any other framework in Tibetan Buddhism, has the ability to precisely direct this perceptual and conative transformation.

The first step in this process is therefore to determine which view will bring about the desired result. In terms of its original Tibetan Buddhist context, Garfield lays out quite clearly what the desired result is in terms of one’s conative state, comportment, and behavior. He writes: “Care, grounded in the awareness of our joint participation in global life, hence, from the Mahāyāna perspective, is the wellspring of the motivation for the development of all perfections, and the most reliable motivation for morally decent actions” (*Engaging Buddhism* 296-297). He also tells us the view that brings about this result, stating:

Care is also, on this view, the direct result of a genuine appreciation of the emptiness and interdependence of all sentient beings. Once one sees oneself as nonsubstantial and existing only in interdependence, and once one sees that the happiness and suffering of all sentient beings is entirely causally conditioned, the only rational attitude one can adopt to others is a caring and careful one. (*Engaging Buddhism* 296-297)

Of course, there are exemplary figures across the Buddhist and non-Buddhist world which have perfected compassionate activity not through a realization of interdependence but through the development of virtue of compassion itself. Nonetheless, in this moral phenomenological context, we might follow Garfield and assert that determining what it means to be

nonsubstantial, existing only in interdependence, and empty of intrinsic existence is the first step in practicing a Buddhist moral phenomenology.

We have seen this step phrased in a number of ways earlier in this chapter. Dudjom Rinpoche’s first step for practicing according to *lta sgom spyod gsum* is “to decide through the view.”<sup>50</sup> More than just deciding which view is appropriate, we also need have confidence in the particular view we intend to assume. This can be seen when Rangjung Dorje states: “To cut through misconceptions of the ground is to have confidence in the view.”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche writes: “The first step in establishing the view is to acquire a proper understanding of the teachings about it” (9). Thus, the first step to practicing moral phenomenology involves both identifying the view and understanding its philosophical nuances in order to be confident that it is correctly understood. It therefore involves intellectual study, reflection, and debate in order to learn and develop confidence in a particular ontological position. Of course, this position may change from tradition to tradition and various views may be used to effect varying ethical outcomes. Nonetheless, we may claim that intellectually understanding a particular philosophical view of the world is the necessary first step for practicing moral phenomenology.

Once the view that leads to ethical behavior has been properly established, the following step is to meditate on said view. Meditation in this context has the connotation of familiarization, contemplation, and to make a living experience of a concept as we saw in the earlier definitions of *sgom pa*. The kind of meditation to be applied here is an analytical *vipaśyanā* meditation wherein one sits with and familiarizes oneself with a particular view until that view is thoroughly integrated into one’s experience. While concentration or *śamatha* meditation is useful as a preliminary practice prior to engaging in *vipaśyanā* meditation, it is this latter

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<sup>50</sup> Tib. *lta bas thag bcod pa*. Sourced from: bdud ‘joms rin po che 427.

<sup>51</sup> Tib. *gzhi la sgro ‘dogs chod pa lta ba’i gdengs*. Sourced from: rang byung rdo rje 4.

type that is highlighted in this framework. This is for obvious reasons: while *śamatha* meditation is an integral part of mindfulness stress-relief programs (which may inadvertently lead more ethical action as a consequence of the calming states they can produce), *śamatha* is unable to uproot the fundamental perceptual misapprehension of the world that, on the Buddhist account, leads to unethical behavior. It is only by familiarizing oneself with concepts in a meditative setting that one can reorient oneself to different perceptual, affective, and conative modes. Therefore, the second step to practicing moral phenomenology is to engage in analytical meditation on that previously established view.

Again, we have seen this step articulated quite clearly earlier in this article. Erik Pema Kunsang defined meditation as “the act of growing accustomed to that [view]—usually in sitting practice,” gesturing to how this familiarization does not exclusively occur in meditation but that it is the predominant method for doing so. Further, Wangchuk Dorje states: “to meditate without distraction on the meaning of that [view] is the meditation.”<sup>52</sup> This kind of experiential exploration of the *meaning* of a view is precisely what is referred to by *vipaśyanā* meditation. Similarly, Dudjom Rinpoche describes the second step of *lta sgom spyod gsum* as “adopting [the view] as one’s experience through meditation.”<sup>53</sup> This adoption is again done via an analytical meditation wherein one familiarizes oneself with the view until it becomes their default perceptual mode. A further quote by Dagpo Rinpoche shares this sentiment in its claim that “experience is produced in dependence on the meditation.”<sup>54</sup> This tells us that it is not meditation *alone* that produces the desired experience but that it is certainly a necessary factor for an experiential understanding of the view.

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<sup>52</sup> Tib. *de don yengs med du bsgom pa ni sgom pa*. Sourced from: kar ma pa dbang phyug rdo rje.

<sup>53</sup> Tib. *sgom pas nyams sub lang ba*. Sourced from: bdud ‘joms rin po che 427.

<sup>54</sup> Tib. *sgom pa la brten nyams myong skye*. Source from: dbang phyug rdo rje 434.

However, these two examples should not lead us to claim that *śā-matha* is not a component in this step whatsoever. Rather, as Rangjung Dorje writes: “To maintain that view without distraction is the crucial point of meditation.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, there is an element of *concentration* required in this step as well. To efficiently practice this meditative step, a degree of concentrative ability is useful insofar as it allows one to sustain one’s analytical meditation for longer periods of time and increases the efficacy of the analytical meditation’s ability to bring the view into one’s experience. That said, even if one practices meditation effectively, truly bringing the view fully into one’s experience may take a long time even for meditative adepts. As Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche says, “to incorporate the view into our inner experience, we put it into practice over and over again; this is the *meditation*” (9). Thus, this practice is to be done continuously until the view is fully brought into one’s perceptual experience. Taken together, we might describe step two in the practice of moral phenomenology to be the concentrated focus on analyzing, thinking through, and becoming familiar with the earlier view such that it becomes adopted as one’s default perceptual mode and reorients one’s conative and affective modes as a result.

This brings us to the final point of *lta sgom spyod gsum*: action. The way that action is understood in this moral phenomenological context differs slightly from the ways that we have seen it thus far. In our definition of moral phenomenology, action is considered a *result* of experience. It is the *end* of moral phenomenological practice and emerges from an individual’s direct experience of the world. Moral phenomenological practice is directed at the experience of the individual rather than the action which may be considered a by-product of this shift, even if it is the reason for conducting the experiential transformation in the first place. In Buddhist contexts, the goal is liberation from *duḥkha*. To this end, *action* is

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<sup>55</sup> Tib. *de la ma yengs skyong ba sgom pa'i gnad*. Sourced from: rang byung rdo rje 4.

performed. Despite this incongruency, there is still a similarity in how action functions in this framework in particular. While a distinct kind of *fruition* is often included beside *lta sgom spyod gsum* in Tibetan texts, the way that action is still understood as emerging from one's experience of the view allows us to derive an idea of how *action* in this framework has a moral phenomenological sense.

This can be seen in the various ways Tibetan authors describe action in their explanations of *lta sgom spyod gsum*. Dudjom Rinpoche relates the third step as “to experience [the view] continuously through action,”<sup>56</sup> implying that one's day-to-day actions are themselves aspects of the view. Similarly, Wangchuk Dorje instructs one's actions to accord with one's view when he states that to “maintain that view during any of the four actions is the conduct.”<sup>57</sup> Finally, Dagpo Rinpoche<sup>58</sup> states that “to continually abide in that [experience of the view] is the action.”<sup>59</sup> In each of these statements, we can see how not only *action* is intimately tied to view, but also how action is framed as the continuous experience of view. Another way to put this, as Milarepa does, is that “action is the mindfulness of this view in daily activities, meaning that the yogi is able to remember his meditation experience even during all the vicissitudes of his [*sic*] daily experience” (*Hundred Thousand*, 72). Thus, once one has meditatively familiarized oneself with the view, one must bring that experience with them into their daily happenings. In doing so, one's actions become informed by that particular view, and, in turn, one practices moral phenomenology.

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<sup>56</sup> Tib. *spyod pas rgyun skyong*. Sourced from: bdud 'joms rin po che 427.

<sup>57</sup> Tib. *spyod pa bzhi gang rung skyong ba spyod pa dang*. Sourced from: kar ma pa dbang phyug rdo rje.

<sup>58</sup> Tib. *dwags po rin po che*, also known as *sgam po pa bsod nams rin chen*, c. 1079-1159.

<sup>59</sup> Tib. *de la rgyun du gnas pa spyod pa yin*. Sourced from: dbang phyug rdo rje 434.

More poignantly, some of the aforementioned sources refer to action as a specific *mode* of acting. Not only must one maintain the experience of the view during daily life, but one must also act in a way that accords with said experience. For example, Erik Pema Kunsang writes that action is “the implementation of that insight during the activities of daily life” (Yeshe Tsogyal 286; Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche 239), Barawa<sup>60</sup> states that “always acting in that way is the action,”<sup>61</sup> and Jigten Sumgon writes that “by acting in that state itself, it is the action.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, once an individual has meditatively installed a particular view as their *default perceptual mode*, their actions will emerge naturally from that view such that they will spontaneously respond to the situations presented to them from that phenomenological position. This is precisely the ethical approach of moral phenomenology.

The spontaneity of ethical action that results from establishing and becoming familiar with a specific view (in this case the view of Mahāmudrā, Dzogchen, and the Madhyamaka) accords well with how we have seen moral phenomenology and ethical comportment described in previous scholarly works on the subject.<sup>63</sup> This natural and thus spontaneous mode of action is directly articulated when Thubten Jinpa states: “once you have formed a good habit through internalization and integration, you can move to the third stage: action. The kind of action we are talking about would arise naturally out of transformed states of mind” (202-204). Phagmodrupa<sup>64</sup> explains this way of acting through metaphor when he states, “their action needs to arise by itself like an old ox drinking

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<sup>60</sup> Tib. *‘ba’ r aba*, c. 1310-1391.

<sup>61</sup> Tib. *rgyun du spyod pas spyod pa yin*. Sourced from: dbang phyug rdo rje 436.

<sup>62</sup> Tib. *de nyid la spyod pas spyod pa*. Sourced from: dbang phyug rdo rje 436.

<sup>63</sup> Particularly in the recent presentation by Simonds (2021).

<sup>64</sup> Tib. *phag mo gru pa*, c. 1110-1170.

water,”<sup>65</sup> and Tilopa states bluntly that “when one is without deliberate action, that is majestic action.”<sup>66</sup> We may therefore conclude that when one puts moral phenomenology into practice by establishing a specific view conceptually and subsequently meditating on that view to bring it into one’s nonconceptual experience, one’s actions will be informed by this experience such that one can spontaneously and ethically respond to events as they happen.

### Conclusion

This article has surveyed the use of *lta sgom spyod gsum* across literary genres, has related the framework to the classical goals of Tibetan Buddhism, and has briefly unpacked the meaning of the term. More importantly, this article looked at the way that *view, meditation, action* has been used across Tibetan Buddhist lineages as both a descriptive device and as a practical framework. *View, meditation, action* is thus a multifaceted framework that can function in varying ways depending on the text or tradition, but these uses are unified in how they present these three aspects as an intimately related whole. In other words, view, meditation, and action are each dependent on one another and are integral aspects to the project of transforming an ordinary, deluded experience of the world into a liberated experience of self and phenomena.

When we look at *lta sgom spyod gsum*’s use as a practical framework in the work of Wangchuk Dorje, Rangjung Dorje, Patrul Rinpoche, and others, we begin to see how it can relate to moral phenomenology and can be mobilized as a practical addendum to this ethical theory. If we return to

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<sup>65</sup> Tib. *spyod pa shugs las byung bag lang rgan chu btung ba lta bu zhig dgos*. Sourced from: dbang phyug rdo rje 436.

<sup>66</sup> Tib. *bya rtsol med na spyod pa’i rgyal po yin*. Sourced from: dbang phyug rdo rje 436.

Dudjom Rinpoche's *Light of Primordial Wisdom*, we can see clearly how this framework operates in Tibetan Buddhist contemplative settings. He instructs practitioners to develop the wisdom of *vipāśyanā* by deciding through the view, adopting the view as one's experience through meditation, and experiencing the view continuously through one's action.<sup>67</sup> The way *view*, *meditation*, and *action* relate to one another in his text is precisely the way that I have argued it can effect moral phenomenological change. One first comes to an intellectual or conceptual understanding of the view, then one meditates on that view in order to bring it into one's default perceptual mode, and then one acts naturally and spontaneously from that integrated perceptual experience of the view in one's day-to-day life. The Tibetan tradition does not maintain that this framework must *always* work this way. We can also find instances of yogis beginning with the practice of compassion (or action) and later coming to the wisdom of emptiness (the view) as a result. Nonetheless, the way *lta sgom spyod gsum* is articulated by Dudjom Rinpoche affords us a succinct framework for implementing a moral phenomenological ethic. It is through this framework that one can affect the conative and affective shift called for in a moral phenomenology and can confidently rely on one's experience of the world as the basis for action rather than rules, virtues, or a moral calculus.

Thus, I argue that *lta sgom spyod gsum* can offer a practical method for implementing a Buddhist moral phenomenology. That said, while scholars have articulated the theory of moral phenomenology using Buddhist sources, it is not necessarily restricted to the Buddhist tradition. Elsewhere I have shown how the theory of ethical comportment forwarded by Hubert and Stewart Dreyfus approximates the moral phenomenology found in the Buddhist tradition, and it is not unreasonable to

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<sup>67</sup> Tib. *gnyis pa dngos gzhi lhag mthong gi ye shes bskyed pa la bzhi / lta bas thag gcod pa / sgom pas nyams sub lang ba / spyod pas rgyun skyong ba*. Sourced from: bdud 'joms rin po che 427.



think that moral phenomenology could have a viable life outside of Buddhist contexts. Nonetheless, this conversation has remained mostly in the realm of Tibetan Buddhist moral philosophy where there is a wealth of material suggesting that the meditative realization of its ultimate view leads to ethical action. For example, in his commentary on Patrul Rinpoche's *Special Teaching on the Wise and Glorious King*, Pema Kunzang Rangdrol<sup>68</sup> writes that, "when one sees one's own face, awareness which is originally pure, wisdom which emerges from meditation and compassion which cares for all beings in *saṃsāra* spontaneously arises,"<sup>69</sup> and His Holiness the Dalai Lama shared a similar statement at the 1993 Western Buddhist Teachers Conference when he told the audience, "[for] someone who properly meditates on *śūnyatā*, the result must be more compassion and discipline. If there is not a positive result, then something must be wrong."<sup>70</sup> These ethical outcomes have been evidenced by the many practitioners who have experienced and written about this relationship between the meditative realization of view and a naturally ethical conduct in the fourteen-hundred-year history of Tibetan Buddhism. Thus, *lta sgom spyod gsum* presents itself as an exemplary practical framework for enacting a Buddhist moral phenomenological ethic.

If we are to consider a moral phenomenology outside of Buddhist contexts, we would have to locate and articulate views that lead to specific ethical outcomes. *Śūnyatā* and primordial awareness<sup>71</sup> are core views of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition that are intrinsically linked therein to compassionate conative states. However, western philosophers are still largely allergic to non-western philosophy, which often gets cast aside as

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<sup>68</sup> Tib. *pad+ma kun bzang rang grol*, c. 1916-1984.

<sup>69</sup> Tib. *ka dag gi rig pa rang zhal mjal na sgom byung gi shes rab dang 'gro la brtse ba'i snying rje ngang gis 'byung bas*. Sourced from: *pad+ma kun bzang rang grol* 173. For an alternate translation, see: Pema Kunzang Rangdrol 2019.

<sup>70</sup> "The Western Buddhist Teachers Conference with H.H. the Dalai Lama (5 of 8)."

<sup>71</sup> Tib. *ye shes*.

“religious,” even if positions like *śūnyatā* can be established independent of Buddhist religious contexts. Regardless, the malleability of *view, meditation, action* is what I consider its strength over *lojong* or Buddhist narratives as a moral phenomenological praxis. If an individual outside of the Buddhist tradition wants to engage in moral phenomenology, they can do so without recourse to Buddhist philosophical positions by identifying and experientially familiarizing themselves with other views that lead to desired ethical outcomes. In “Making Consciousness an Ethical Project,” Jessica Locke gestures to this kind of applicability in the context of a moral phenomenological approach to white anti-racism, although she does not engage *lta sgom spyod gsum* specifically. Should moral phenomenology become an engaging ethical theory that can confront such contemporary issues as anti-black racism, it needs an accessible, direct method for its implementation, and I contend that *view, meditation, action* is such a method. Both the theory of moral phenomenology and the framework of *view, meditation, action* can engage with contemporary issues facing the human and more-than-human world in novel and productive ways, and I hope scholars will begin to creatively mobilize this theory and praxis towards these issues in the future.

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