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# Tibetan Argumentation Technique – an Alternative Rhetoric

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## Abstract

Tibetan Buddhist monks have dedicated themselves to their knowledge and wisdom in seeking to free themselves from unwanted thoughts and actions for thousands of years. A practice developed during centuries in close contact with Indian Hindu logic is to engage in philosophical debates with each other according to a certain form. This debating form is also a part of teaching Tibetan children and youth in schools and can be seen as a way to preserve culture and language traditions. In our article we develop aspects of this argumentation technique that are relevant for the Swedish educational context and contrast them to classical rhetoric which has received new significance in western schools and society in recent decades. The purpose of this article is to clarify the Tibetan argumentation technique in relation to classical rhetoric and a Swedish educational context. We also discuss the degree to which Tibetan argumentation technique can inspire working towards deeper respect and mutual understanding—not polarization—in both the classroom and society in today's Sweden. The article is empirically based on observations and interviews with students and teachers in Dharamsala, observations in the classroom in Dharamsala, analysis of the curriculum and field notes. Furthermore, our results indicate that the debates seem to have engaged the pupils and some of the debates are not only full of life but also have emotional impact. The results also show that the aim of the debates is to sharpen thought and requires being knowledgeable, well read on the subject and good at making use of sources as arguments.

## Introduction

Tibetan Buddhist monks have dedicated themselves to their knowledge and wisdom in seeking to free themselves from unwanted thoughts and actions for thousands of years. A practice developed during centuries in close contact with Indian Hindu logic is to engage in philosophical debates with each other in a particular form (Perdue, 1992). The aim of the debates, writes Perdue, is "to establish a defensible view, and to clear away objections to that view" and continues:

The debaters are seeking to understand the nature of reality through careful analysis of the state of existence of ordinary phenomena, the basis of reality. This is the essential purpose for religious debate.

The argumentation is about practicing the art of persuasion through logical reasoning and reaching a consensus. The monks train and refine this argumentation technique during their studies and their daily life but debating is also a part of the teaching in secular schools for Tibetan children and youth. The monks' debate technique is perhaps not entirely easy to apply in a western and Swedish school context, not least because debating is so closely connected to religion and philosophical questions. The debates, as conducted in the Tibetan diaspora in India, can also be seen as a way to preserve culture and language traditions which is an important aim of the Tibetan addition to the Indian curriculum as is explained below.<sup>1</sup> We think that there are several aspects of the thought behind Tibetan argumentation technique which are relevant for the Swedish educational context. Not least is the contrast with classical rhetoric that has gained a new importance in western schools and society in recent decades.

Classical rhetoric is about the art of speaking well or the art of persuading. It was developed in ancient Greece around the fifth century before our era. The growing democracy put demands on citizens to be able, among other things, to speak for themselves and be able to state their case at political meetings, in the courts of the time or in other public gatherings. Aristoteles, the philosopher, summarized the basics of the growing art of speech when he wrote the first ever textbook of rhetoric. Rhetoric was supported and later further developed in the Roman Empire. From this context also come many of the rhetorical terms, concepts and Latin models which are used today. Rhetoric has met prosperity and decline through the centuries. During

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<sup>1</sup> Since 1959 there has been a Tibetan exile government in Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh in northern India and the highest Buddhist leader, Dalai Lama, also resides there. Tibetans have been living in exile here and in other places in India.

the Middle Ages when the Catholic church was strengthening its power in Europe rhetoric became a useful tool for the church's argumentation as well as for the priests' sermons. Even during the breakthrough of science and the Age of Enlightenment during the 17th and 18th centuries rhetoric still had a strong position, both as a school subject and a speech paradigm. However with the coming of Romanticism, with its thoughts and feelings of artistic freedom and originality, rhetoric lost ground and disappeared as a school subject.

Not until around the 1980s can a newly awakened interest in rhetoric be seen in Sweden. Hellspong (2011) suggests that modern mass media and new communication needs are behind the new need for rhetoric. In conjunction, a process oriented approach to writing is spreading, not least in the teaching of writing in schools which proceeds, in fact, from classical rhetoric models of composition. Rhetoric is growing in popularity, both among secondary level schools and higher education. In addition, the significance of knowing argumentation as well as knowing how to analyze the arguments of others is being emphasized in more contexts, not least in the school curriculum. (Skolverket 2011)

Current curriculums for primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school in Sweden advocate, for example, that students should be able to engage in critical and constructive dialogue with texts and that they should develop a critical approach which can be used in all subjects, as well as outside of the school walls (Skolverket, 2011; Andersson, Hydén & Obbel 2014; Winqvist & Nilsson, 2014; Westlund 2015, Olin-Scheller & Tenberg, 2016). This critical approach is being most often called *critical literacy* (see et. al. Janks, 2010). In critical literacy – or critical *literacies* – aspects related to language, learning and power (Janks, 2010) interact and form a basic part of schools' democratic commitment (Britt & Larson, 2004). At the same time studies show that pupils are bad at distinguishing the basic components in the structure of an argumentation, such as the thesis, argument and proof (Chambliss, 1994, 1995; Haria, MacArthur & Edwards Santoro 2010; Larson et al. 2004; Newell, Beach, Smith & VanDerHeide, 2011) and that the teaching of text argumentation is of low priority in upper secondary school (Norlund, 2009). This means that there is a need of developing argumentation models for subject-specific education (see Olin-Scheller & Tenberg, 2016; Lyngfelt & Olin-Scheller, 2016).

The aim of this article therefore is to clarify Tibetan argumentation technique in relation to classical rhetoric and the Swedish educational context. In this article we are not interested specifically in studying what is actually being said. Neither can we, due to the practical reason

that the debates are held in Tibetan, and none of us can speak it. The empirical material for this article consists in observations and interviews with the principal, teachers and students at Sarah College for Higher Tibetan Studies, classroom observations of Tibetan children in grades 4-8, educational materials and field notes. Before the material was collected we informed about our aim and principles of ethical research, the interviews were conducted in English and were recorded for later transcription.

### Background

Tibetan educational traditions rest on a long history that goes back over 1300 years. Needless to say, at that time no traditional schools existed; rather all education was held in Tibetan cloisters yet the education in the cloisters was already accessible to all very early on and not exclusively restricted to monks and nuns. In the preface of the 2004 Tibetan addition to the Indian curriculum, *Basic Education Policy for Tibetans in Exile*, (referred to as “the Tibetan addition” in this article) we can read the following about Tibetan educational tradition: “one of the greatest incomparable centers for the development and spread of the science of learning and in general *Inner Science* in particular” (p. 50).

The unrest in Tibet in 1959 forced hundreds of thousands of Tibetans to flee and many received asylum in northern India. Even today over 100,000 Tibetans live there while others have spread out in the world, foremost to nearby countries such as Nepal and Bhutan as well as North America. Under the leadership and direction of Dalai Lama Tibetan day schools and boarding schools (Tibetan Children’s Villages, TCV) were established in northern India with the aim of preserving and handing down Tibetan culture and its teachings. At the end of the 1900s it was observed that Tibetan students did not succeed particularly well in relation to the goals in the Indian curriculum and thus ideas began to take shape about needing an addition to the Indian curriculum for the Indian-Tibetan children. People also realized that many of the traditional values that are central to Tibetan traditions of education had been lost. To preserve the Tibetan language and traditional values is an important objective of the Tibetan government in exile, CTA (Central Tibetan Administration), and in order to reach that objective the need for a policy change was seen as necessary. The development of such a policy would take place through democratic processes, and after several years of discussions, negotiations and revisions, the Indian Parliament finally could adopt the Tibetan addition, *Basic Education Policy for Tibetans in Exile* year 2004. An important part of this language policy means that all teaching up to grade 6 is in Tibetan, gradually shifting to English or another language spoken

in the neighboring part of India. The Tibetan language is claimed to have undergone few changes and is well suitable for conveying Tibetan values which is a strong motive for choosing Tibetan as the language of teaching. Today there are seventy or so Tibetan schools in India (Sweden's ambassador in Delhi, 2014).

According to the preface of the Tibetan addition to the Indian curriculum, the aim for education is not only for working and making a living but also for developing a central part of education, the inner consciousness, *Inner Science*. Tibetan education leads to the development of “critical thinking”, the modern expression which we all are well acquainted with in the Swedish educational context. The student learns critical thinking by means of self-examination, deeper reflection and persevering contemplation and by relating to external phenomena and acting ethically according to the Tibetan world view and tradition. The aim of education in the Tibetan addition to the Indian curriculum is to waken and develop human qualities such as wisdom, altruism, and compassion, ethical values, as well as creative and innovative thinking. Words such as non-violence, peace, universal human values, social welfare and compassion occur frequently in the Tibetan addition. All the schools we visited had texts conveying these words on the walls. At one of the TCV schools we visited we were met by signs of the school slogan: “Others before self” (fig. 1).



Fig.1 Others before self – a school slogan at one of the TCV-schools

Besides the fact that the Tibetan language is the language of teaching until and including grade 5, the Tibetan addition also comprises a number of other subjects:

1. *Tibetan* (language, grammar and literature) is the basis of the teaching and is therefore the main subject during the entire education, from the first to the twelfth year.
2. *Science of Valid Cognition*: The ability to grasp phenomena by continually exploring and searching, without blindly following what others say, i.e. the faculty of critical thinking is one of the most important subjects through grade 12.
3. *Other languages* are studied on the basis of a three language policy where the goal for the pupils is to learn Tibetan as the mother tongue and to reach “full competence” in a second language as well as a working level (reading and writing) of a third language. This three language goal is to be reached in grade 10. Pupils can choose from these following languages for the second and third language options: Hindi, Chinese, English, Spanish or another language if the possibility exists. Until grade 3, according to the addition, no other language other than Tibetan is to be taught, not even, e.g., in the form of songs in other languages. Second and third language teaching can begin as of grade 4 (L2) and respectively grade 5 (L3).
4. *Art and crafts*. In these subjects non-violence and environmental aspects are emphasized.
5. *Natural science and humanities* (history and sciences of mind). Modern natural science subjects are taught through logical reasoning and experiments. As of grade 6 to grade 8 social science and history are studied.
6. *Mathematics*: both modern math and traditional Tibetan math are to be included in the subject.
7. *Principles of non-violence and democracy* are given in all grades.
8. *Moral behaviour*. The curriculum states that this subject cannot be taught as a separate one but rather as a general theme that permeates all teaching activities. Nonetheless, it does state that the teaching material should contain religious, traditional and modern moral narratives as well as biographies of important personalities in this area.

*9. Physical activity and sport:* Aspects of health, hygiene and physical training, as well as yoga and breathing techniques, baths, ointments, massage and regular sports and forms of exercise are listed here.

In the review of the Tibetan addition, it becomes clear that Tibetan values, philosophical reflection and a critical approach should permeate school activities which is also evident in the debates. The debates are held in Tibetan, the language that according to the Tibetan addition is basic for the values the school is built on. Because the people of Tibet live in exile the language serves the important function of being the bearer of culture and identity. At the same time the three language policy and “modern subjects” open up to new influences and to the surrounding society.

#### [\*\*How is the debate done?\*\*](#)

The debate we have observed is done in pairs and groups in front of classmates. The pair debate consists of a standing “challenger” who asks questions and a “respondent” who answers sitting down (see fig. 2). The challenger moves the argumentation forward through his or her questions, followed by a special hand movement and clapping of hands (fig. 3).



*Fig. 2. Challengers and respondents in paired debate (Sarah College, TCV)*



*Fig. 3. Hand movements (Sarah College)*

The debate can also be organized in groups in which the participants make their arguments with “one voice” (fig. 4).



*Fig. 4. Group debate (Sarah College & TCV)*

After a while the positions as challenger and respondent are switched. In the observed debates the topics have been philosophical and religious. To be able to move the argumentation forward the participants need to master both language and logic, as well as have a deeper understanding of the texts discussed. The goal of the argumentation is not to defeat the other, but through the dialectics together develop deeper understanding and knowledge.

John, one of the older students at Sarah College who also functions as a teacher/mentor, explains that:

the debate is used to understand the Buddhist teaching, so also includes Buddhist science which encompasses psychology and epistemology and logic and also the mind and consciousness and different types of psychological constructs.

But John explains that the debates can also include other, more secular issues and questions related to school subjects that have connections to logical thinking. He states:

So in that sense it's certainly applicable to secular approaches, to psychology and epistemology and philosophy and then beyond that it certainly could be applied, and I think is, in the current Tibetan school systems applied to mathematics.

The debate thereby involves not only learning a technique, but tests both the thinking and logical reasoning of all the participants. In addition, if knowledge and a deeper understanding is lacking, it is difficult to persuade the other respondent. The debate therefore also develops an understanding of when and if knowledge is limited.

### [Relevance for Swedish Education](#)

Even if critical literacies can be seen as a basic aspect of the democratic mission of the Swedish school system, the educational challenges to achieve student progress in this area are great. In connection with the newly developed interest in classical rhetoric in the Swedish classroom, we would suggest that Tibetan argumentation technique could add new dimensions to those educational situations in which argumentation based on logic and critical thinking is present.

Rhetoric and argumentation are to a great extent part of today's school and are deemed a central component in syllabuses and as knowledge requirements for the different school subjects in both primary and secondary curriculums. In the subject of Swedish these elements can often be found under the heading *Speak, listen and talk* in the Curriculum for Primary and Pre-school Education (Lgr 11). For example, it is prescribed in the core requirements for grades 1-3 in the syllabus for Swedish that "oral presentations and oral narrations about colloquial subjects for different recipients" should be included in the teaching (Skolverket, 2011). The levels of both factual content and knowledge requirements are obviously higher with increased student age, and we can find formulations such as that pupils should be able to *counteract arguments* or *conduct well-prepared argumentations*. These components are often labeled oral presentations rather than rhetoric or argumentation and often are aimed at oral presentation as a means of

training the pupils to dare express themselves rather than to sharpen their argumentative and logical skills. For the pupils' communicative and logical abilities to be developed, however, deliberate teaching is needed so that the pupils get recurrent and varied training that increases their communicative competence (see, e.g., Dysthe, 1996; Olsson-Jers, 2010). For example, Palmer (2008) shows how the subject of Swedish can develop secondary school students' skills in argumentation and logic, and also how the organization of classroom teaching, and the different subjects' ideologies of knowledge reflect all the subject's responsibility for the development of the pupils' language development.

According to the Swedish Education Act, "Education [shall] convey and establish respect for human rights and the basic democratic values upon which Swedish society is built" (SFS 2010: 800, ch. 1 § 4). This law is contextualized in Lgr 11, which prescribes that pupils in Swedish schools should have the opportunity to train their ability to express personal views. Lgr 11 also encourages divergent views to be expressed, and that pupils after completing primary/compulsory school will have developed their critical thinking and the ability to formulate knowledge- and ethics-based viewpoints. In the guidelines for the school's responsibility it is prescribed that the school teachers shall "openly account for and discuss differing values, views and problems" (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). The school's mission consequently includes developing the pupils' ability to express ethical positions based on their knowledge of democratic values, human rights, as well as their own experiences. Such an education assumes teachers who have a solid grounding in both the subjects they teach and in democratic values, in order to be able to conduct discussions based on established knowledge. Furthermore, it assumes teachers who are confident in leading discussions and are knowledgeable about different rhetorical models in order that, not only practically but also from a meta perspective, they are able to teach pupils about rhetoric and argumentation (Olsson-Jers, 2010). A model of the Tibetan argumentation technique adapted to Swedish teaching traditions would be able to add dimensions to the teaching by which the argumentation can go beyond the aim of persuading the other about what is right or wrong, to also developing the pupils' conscious logical and critical thought.

We are convinced that Tibetan argumentation technique can be a valuable complement to what in Swedish education today is termed rhetoric, presentations technique and oral presentations.

1. Because, first of all, it provides a clear and solid framework. The mode of debate is physical and engaging. The challenger, standing, shoulders the responsibility of moving the debate forward through his or her questions. The respondent, seated, has the role of, based on his or her own experience, finding the best and most truthful answers. The framework also includes the switching of roles, to ensure that each participant necessarily must acquaint themselves with the other's position.
  
2. Secondly, the Tibetan debate framework emphasizes different values and qualities from those of Western rhetoric. A Tibetan orator is skilled when he or she increasingly masters the religious texts and is able to use these sources as logical arguments in a debate. In the Western tradition, however, what is valued is normally the argumentative ability as such. For example, factors that are often assessed include presentational aids, outlines, language abilities and addressee awareness.
  
3. Thirdly, the Tibetan debating technique is more dialogical by nature. Western rhetoric, or the oral presentation often encountered in our classrooms, is often monologic in its characteristics. It demands preparations according to a prior fixed form that for the most part is designed for monologic utterances. Here Tibetan argumentation can offer a complement by using a form that in itself is dialogic and communicative, and which encourages the ability to listen as well as to talk and think.
  
4. Fourthly, the Tibetan debate framework offers a tool for practical engagements with texts in the different school subjects. A debate is always based on a particular content and an issue, which ensures that the debater is conversant and knowledgeable about his or her sources. Reading, processing, reflecting and debating are processes that deepen understanding and knowledge regardless of subject, level or situation. A common teaching session at Sarah College, which we visited, included a theoretical review (i.e., reading of texts) followed by practical application (i.e., debate).

By the introduction of the Tibetan debate framework in a Swedish context we gain more opportunities in our work with argumentation technique. In comparison with classical rhetoric and Swedish oral presentation, the Tibetan debates would move the focus from technique towards content, as well as towards a more stringent and logical argumentation. It also involves a move from person to issue, which strengthens the pupils' use of abstraction and perspective.

All of these are valuable competences in adult life, not least for possible future university studies.

This type of teaching argumentation would be a means of training both the pupils' communicative competence as well as their ability to examine the argumentation used in the different media they encounter, whether by politicians, journalists, bloggers or other opinion-formers. The aim of learning argumentation in school will then be to sharpen the logical arguments, which presupposes that the pupils have the required knowledge needed in the subject and that they are able to use relevant sources as the basis for their argumentation, abilities already supported by the Education Act and syllabuses. This could then lead to a teaching that aims for increased respect and understanding of other views, rather than polarization, in the classroom, and eventually in society at large. It is a form of education that demands professional teachers, well-prepared to discuss and argue, which of course makes the question how training in argumentation, rhetoric, or, if one prefers the term, oral presentation, is relevant for teacher training. The question is how the modules on rhetoric are organized in the different teacher programmes, and how well the students' own communicative competence is taught. It is also a question that can open up to research on how progression is implemented across the school years. There is variation in the models for argumentation used in different school subjects; for example, argumentation in mathematics is different from discussions about literature in the subject of Swedish/Swedish as a second language, or from questions about value systems in social science. The subjects' knowledge ideologies and values become a starting point for the content of the argumentation, at the same time as the forms for how the argumentation is conducted differ. In accordance with the Tibetan concept "inner science", critical literacy needs to be part of all the school subjects. Based on current syllabuses, the subjects of Swedish and Swedish as a second language can, however, be given a special responsibility to ensure that the students get equipped with the necessary tools to be able to argue, conduct logical arguments, and be able to assess these critically. In Tibetan argumentation technique there is a potential to contribute a set of practical tools that would deepen the students' knowledge in such a way that they can develop a communicative linguistic repertoire that is both broad and deep.

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