

The Term “*Sam̐dhinirmocana*” in the Title of the *Sam̐dhinirmocana-sūtra*

John Powers
Wittenberg University

The Translations of the Title

The *Sam̐dhinirmocana-sūtra* is the primary scriptural source of the Yogācāra school of Indian Buddhism and one of the most widely influential texts of Indian Buddhist literature. This text contains seminal discussions of meditation theory, epistemology, soteriology, and hermeneutics. Its hermeneutical theories are particularly important in Buddhist philosophy and have influenced textual exegesis and doctrinal developments down to the present day, and the ramifications of the *sūtra*'s theories are still being actively debated in Tibetan monastic colleges. One of the initial difficulties confronting anyone wishing to translate the *Sam̐dhinirmocana-sūtra* is the array of differing interpretations of its title found in Tibetan and Chinese translations and in commentaries. The purpose of this article is to discuss the range of interpretations of the title, the various ways in which it can be construed, and to indicate some of the problems they raise for translators.

The full title of the *sūtra* in Sanskrit is *Ārya-sam̐dhi-nirmocana-sūtra*, which has been translated into Tibetan as 'Phags pa dgongs pa nges par 'grel pa'i mdo. The term *ārya* (Tibetan: 'phags pa) means “honourable, respectable, noble, excellent”,¹ and is often prefixed to the titles of texts in the Tibetan recensions of the Buddhist canon.²

The term *sam̐dhi* derives from the Sanskrit root √*dhā*, “to connect”, “to join”, “to fasten”, “to aim”, “to direct towards”, with the prefix (*upasarga*) *sam*. It was equated by Tibetan and Indian translators with the term *dgongs pa*, which means “to think, reflect, meditate, consider”, “the act of thinking, reflection, cogitation”, or “to purpose, intend”.³ *The Great Treasury of Tibetan Terms (Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*, a Tibetan-Tibetan-Chinese

¹ M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979), p. 152.

² For examples, see Ui Hakuju *et al.*, *A Complete Catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Canons* (Sendai, 1934), p. 58.

³ Sarat Chandra Das, *A Tibetan-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970), p. 275. See also D. Seyfort Ruegg, “Allusiveness and Obliqueness in Buddhist Texts”, in: *Dialectes dans les Littératures Indo-Aryennes*, ed. Colette Caillat (Paris: Institut de Civilisation Indienne. 1989), p. 323.

dictionary) states that *dgongs pa* is a term that is “an honorific for thinking or intention” (*bsam blog tong ba’am sems pa’i zhe sa*).⁴ M. Monier-Williams translates *saṃdhi* as “junction, connection, combination, union with, ... association, intercourse with ...”, and he states that *saṃ + √dha* means both (1) “to place or hold or put or draw or join or. fasten or fix or sew together, unite, ... to combine, connect with, ... to bring together, reconcile” and (2) “intimate union, compact, agreement; ... a promise, vow, ... intention, design.”⁵ Franklin Edgerton states that it means “union, concord, conciliation”, “intention”, “esoteric meaning”, and that *saṃ + √dha* means “the ‘real’ meaning of a Buddhist text or doctrine”.⁶

The term *nirmocana* is a combination of the Sanskrit verbal root *muc* or *muñc* and the prefix *nir*, and it was translated into Tibetan as *nges par ’grel pa*, a combination of the intensifying adverb *nges par*, “certainly, surely, really”,⁷ and the verb *’grel pa*, which means “to explain, comment upon”, “to put in, arrange”.⁸ According to Monier-Williams, *nir + √muc* means “to loosen, free from, ... liberate ... to be freed or free one’s self from, get rid of”,⁹ and Edgerton states that the compound *saṃdhi-nirmocana* means “setting forth, unfolding the real truth, fundamental explanation”.¹⁰

As the above citations indicate, the terms *saṃdhi* and *nirmocana* have a wide range of possible meanings, and one finds corresponding differences among scholars who have translated and commented on the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra*. The term *saṃdhi* is interpreted in a number of ways: (1) the Tibetan translators rendered it as *dgongs pa* in the New Translations,¹¹ which means “thought, intention, purport, or intended meaning”;¹² (2) the Chinese translators rendered it as both “hidden, profound, secret” and “knot, bond, connection”. Xuanzang translates the title of the *sūtra* as *The Sūtra that Explains the Profound Secret* (*Jieh shen mi jing*, T. XVI/676), while Bodhiruci translates it as *Sūtra Unravelling the Profound Secret* (*Shen mi jieh tuo jing*, T. XVI/675), and Paramārtha translates it as *Sūtra of the Knots of the Profound* (*Jieh jieh jing*, T. XVI/677). Étienne Lamotte follows Xuanzang’s rendering and translates the title as “L’Explication des Mystères” [Explana-

⁴ *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (Chendu, n.d.), p. 459.

⁵ M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, p. 1144.

⁶ Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979), p. 556.

⁷ *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, p. 354.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 300.

⁹ *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, p. 556.

¹⁰ *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*, Vol. 2, p. 557.

¹¹ I refer to the New Translations in the plural in accordance with the argument in my article, “The Tibetan Translations of the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* and Bka’ ’gyur Research” (forthcoming in *Central Asiatic Journal*), which demonstrates that there are two distinguishable translations of the *sūtra* in the New Translation (*gsar skad bcad*) format.

¹² See D. Seyfort Ruegg, “Purport, Implicature, and Presupposition: Sanskrit *Abhiprāya* and Tibetan *Dgoñs pa / Dgoñs gzi* as Hermeneutical Concepts”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, No. 13 (1985), p. 310.

tion of Mysteries]. He cites a variety of terms in which *saṃdhi* indicates something hidden, mysterious, or abstruse.¹³ He also states that the literal meaning of the title is “*sūtra* untying knots” (*sūtra* détachant les nœuds).¹⁴ This is also reflected in Wonch’uk’s (Tibetan: Wen tshegs; Chinese: Yuance) contention that,

“*Nirmocana*” is *rnam par ’grel pa*; this means “explain”. Therefore, in the master Paramārtha’s *Tshigs nges par ’grel pa’i mdo’i brjed byang byas ba* [his translation of the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra*], *nges par ’grel pa* [means] explain. *Tshigs* [means] hard and knot. With respect to that, hard [means] firm. Knot [means] bond. So just as there are hard and firm things and knots and bonds within the joints of wood and of humans, the profound thoughts of the teachings within this *sūtra* are also very difficult to realize and very difficult to untie; therefore, it cannot be realized and understood by ordinary beings and beginning Bodhisattvas, and thus it is “hard and knotty”. Because this *sūtra* unties, it is called “*Tshigs nges par ’grel pa*”. Furthermore—because, having included all the very subtle and difficult to understand meanings from among all the treatises of the Great Vehicle that are contained in this *sūtra*, they are explained clearly—this *sūtra* is called “*Untying the Knots*” (*tshigs nges par ’grel pa*).¹⁵

In a later discussion of Paramārtha’s translation of the title, Wonch’uk adds,

In another way, with regard to this *sūtra*, [the term *saṃdhi*] is nominally designated from an example; therefore it is [translated as] “word” or “connection”. So the connection between the meaningful words and things is like the interconnection of joints of bones.¹⁶

¹³ Étienne Lamotte, *Samdhininnocana-sūtra: L’Explication des Mystères* (Louvain and Paris: Université de Louvain and Adrien Maisonneuve, 1935), pp. 12–13.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁵ Sarat Chandra Das, *A Tibetan-English Dictionary*, p. 1252.

¹⁶ Wonch’uk, *Ārya-gambhīra-saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra-ṭīkā* (*’phags pa dgongs pa zab mo nges par ’grel pa’i mdo’i rgya cher ’grel pa*, Vol. *ti* [118], p. 72.6. This commentary is No. 5517 in the Peking edition and No. 4016 in the Sde dge. All citations in the present study are from the version published by the Karmapa Centre in Delhi (Delhi Karmapae Choedhey, Gyalwae Sungrab Partun Khang, 1985. *mdo ’grel*, Vol. *ti* [118], Vol. *thi* [119], and Vol. *di* [120].

The original Chinese text was in ten *juan*, but the only extant version, in the *Dainihon Zokyzōkyō*, (Hong Kong Reprint, 1922, pp. 134.d–535.a) is missing the first portion of the eighth *juan* and all of the tenth *juan* of the original text. These have been reconstructed from the Tibetan translation of Facheng (Tibetan: Chos grub) by Inaba Shoju: *Enjiki Gejin-mikkyōsho San’itsububan no kanbunyaku* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1949). See also Inaba’s *Restoration of Yüan-tses Chieh-shên-mi-ching-shu Through Its Tibetan Counterpart* (Kyoto: Heirakuji, 1972); reviewed by Nagao Gadjin, in: *Suzuki Gakujutsu Zaidan Kenkyū Nempō*, No. 9 (1972), p. 95.

Wonch'uk also states that according to Vasubandhu Indian scholars recognized three meanings of the term *saṃdhi*: (1) a connection between two things (*dnogs po gnyis mtshams sbyar ba*); (2) the connections of the joints of bones (*rus pa'i tshigs 'grel pa*); or (3) profound paths (*lam zab mo*).¹⁷ He then states that translators rendered it according to the individual meanings of the words of the title, and so they understood the term *saṃdhi* to mean “the correct profound thought” (*yang dag par na dgongs pa zab mo*). In an earlier section he indicated that in the case of the title of the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* “*saṃdhi*” refers to “statements in a secret manner” (*gsang ba'i tshul du gsungs*),¹⁸ which accords with the Chinese translations of Xuanzang and Bodhiruci, who used translation equivalents that mean “profound” or “secret”.

Among the commentaries on the *sūtra*, the most extensive explanation of the Sanskrit title is found in the introductory portion of the commentary attributed to Byang chub rdzu 'phrul, which indicates that *saṃdhi* has connotations of profundity and hiddenness and that the text helps one to cut the knots of the afflictive obstructions (*nyon mongs pa'i sgrib pa, kleśavarāṇa*) and the obstructions to omniscience (*shes bya'i sgrib pa, jñeyāvarāṇa*).

This [title] *Ārya-saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra* (*'phags pa dgongs pa nges par 'grel pa'i mdo*) is designated according to the level of meaning: This [sūtra] definitely delineates the meaning of the profound thought and indirect thought of the Tathāgata and cuts all the knots of the afflictive obstructions and the obstructions to omniscience. Here, “Ārya-saṃdhinirmocana” is designated as the name of the *sūtra*. ... With respect to that, “ārya” (*'phags pa*) means “one who is very distanced from all sinful, non-virtuous qualities. “*Samdhi*” (*dgongs pa*) [refers to] the profound thought and indirect thought of the Tathāgata. Also, in one aspect the meaning of the words [refers] to the knots of the afflictive obstructions and the obstructions to omniscience. “*Nirmocana*” (*nges par 'grel pa*) [refers to] definite delineation. It refers to “definite delineation of the profound thought and indirect thought of the Tathāgata”. Also, in one aspect the meaning of the words is “to cut completely”: this refers to “completely cutting all of the knots of the afflictive obstructions and the obstructions to omniscience”. With respect to that, if the meaning of the words

Inaba discusses his methodology in his article, “On Chos-grub’s Translation of the Chieh-shên-mi-ching-shu”, in: *Buddhist Thought and Asian Civilization*, ed. Leslie Kawamura and Keith Scott, Emeryville, CA: Dharma Press, 1977, pp. 105–13. For a more detailed discussion of the transmission of this text, see John Powers, “Accidental Immortality: How Wonch’uk Became the Author of the Great Chinese Commentary”, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, No. 15.1 (1992).

¹⁷ Wonch’uk, Vol. *ti* (118), p. 72.6.

¹⁸ Wonch’uk, Vol. *ti* (118), p. 4.6.

is brought together in a general way, it definitely unravels the profound thought of the Tathāgata and it cuts all of the knots of the afflictive obstructions and the obstructions to omniscience; hence, it both explains the [Buddha's] thought and completely cuts knots.¹⁹

This passage reflects two ways in which *saṃdhi* can be understood: as referring to the Buddha's hidden or intended thought or as a knot. In the former case, the title indicates that the *sūtra* explains the Buddha's hidden thought, and the second rendering indicates that it is a text that aids one in eliminating the knots of the obstructions.

In a recently completed translation of the *sūtra*, I have chosen to translate the term as “thought” in accordance with the Tibetan translations of the *sūtra*, primarily because this accords with the structure of the text itself, which consists of a series of questions by disciples of the Buddha, who ask him to explain the “thought” or “intention” (*dgongs pa, abhiprāya*) behind his earlier teachings.²⁰ Throughout this *sūtra* he explains his thought, the hidden intention that lay behind the literal reading of the words he uttered in previous teachings. For example, in chapter seven the Bodhisattva Paramārthasamudgata says to the Buddha,

I am wondering of what the Bhagavan [Buddha] was thinking (*ci las dgongs te*) when he said, “All phenomena are without entityness; all phenomena are unproduced, do not cease, are quiescent from the start, and are by nature in a state of *nirvāṇa*.” I ask the Bhagavan about the meaning of his saying, “All phenomena are without entityness; all phenomena are unproduced, do not cease, are quiescent from the start, and are by nature in a state of *nirvāṇa*.”

The Buddha replies,

Paramārthasamudgata, ... your intention (*sems pa*) in asking the Tathāgata about the meaning of this is good. Therefore, Paramārthasamudgata, listen to my explanation (*bshad pa*) of my thought (*ngas gang la dgongs te*) with respect to that in consideration of which I said, “All phenomena are without entityness, all phenomena are unproduced, do not cease, are quiescent from the start, and are by nature in a state of *nirvāṇa*.”²¹

¹⁹ Byang chub rdzu 'phrul, *Ārya-saṃdhinirmocana-sūtrasya-vyākhyāna* ('*phags pa dgongs pa nges par 'grel pa'i mdo'i rnam par bshad pa*; Delhi: Delhi Karmapae Choedhey, 1985), Vol. *cho* (205), p. 8.2. For a discussion of this text, see Ernst Steinkellner, “Who is Byañ chub rdzu 'phrul?” (Berliner Indologische Studien, 1989, pp. 229–52).

²⁰ This translation is being published by Dharma Publishing, Berkeley, California.

²¹ Stog, p. 46.2; Sde dge (D), p. 32.3. All references to the *sūtra* in this study first cite the

In this passage, the question and answer indicate that when the Buddha taught that “all phenomena are without entityness” and so forth he was thinking (*dgongs te*) of something else and that he will now explain (*bshad pa*) his thought. Similar statements can be found in other parts of the *sūtra*. For instance, (i) in Chapter Eight (Stog, p. 94.4; D, p. 65.7) the Buddha is asked to explain (*gsungs*) what he was thinking of (*dgongs te*) when he said, “A dirty pot, for example, an unclean mirror, for example, and an agitated pond, for example, are not suitable for viewing the signs of one’s own face, and the opposites of those are suitable”; Chapter Nine (Stog, p. 138.4; D, p. 95.7) the Buddha is asked about the thought (*dgongs pa*) behind his statement, “Both the Hearer Vehicle and the Great Vehicle are one vehicle”; (iii) in Chapter Ten (Stog, p. 157.4; D, p. 109.1) the Buddha is asked what he was thinking of (*ci las dgongs*) when he said, “Due to the power of the blessings of Tathāgatas [and Bodhisattvas] the marvellous bodies of humans in the Desire Realm ... [appear].”

As these passages indicate, in the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* the Buddha is presented with questions concerning certain teachings that he has given in the past that are either conceptually difficult or contradictory with teachings that were presented at other times, and he is asked to explain what he was thinking of when he gave them. For this reason, I have chosen to translate *samdhi* as “thought” in preference to its other possible meanings.

This meaning is reflected in the use of *dgongs pa* in the Tibetan translations, whose authors apparently chose this rendering in order to reflect a meaning that resonates with the structure of the text. The Chinese translations, however, rendered *samdhi* by terms like “profound” or “secret”, “hidden”, etc., which is another possible rendering of this term. In addition, as Hakamaya has noted,²² the possible meaning of *samdhi* as “connection”, “knot”, etc., is reflected in the Old Translation fragment of the *sūtra* found in the caves of Dunhuang and now stored in the India Office Library, in which the name of the Bodhisattva Gambhīrāthasamdhinirmocana (who appears in the first chapter of the *sūtra*) is rendered as “Zab mo’i dond bar mtsams ma las par ’grel pa”.²³ Ruegg also mentions that in a Dunhuang

Stog Palace version (*The Tog Palace Edition of the Tibetan Kanjur*, Leh: Smarntsis Shesrig Dpemzod, 1975–8, Vol. 63). References to the Sde dge version (D) are given after the page in Stog.

²² Hakamaya Noriaki, “The Old and New Translations of the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra*: Some Notes on the History of the Early Tibetan Translations”, *Komazawa Daigaku Bukkyō-gakubu Kenkyūkiyō*, No. 42 (1984), p. 188. See also (i) his discussions in *Komazawa Daigaku Bukkyō-gaku Ronshū*, No. 17 (1986), pp. 1–17, and *Komazawa Daigaku Bukkyō-gakubu Kenkyūkiyō*, No. 45 (1987), pp. 1–35, and (ii) Harada Satoru, “Analysis of the Tun-huang Manuscripts of the sGom rim dang po”, *Report of the Japanese Association for Tibetan Studies*, No. 28 (1982), pp. 4–8, which points out that the name of the Bodhisattva Zab mo’i dond bar mtshams ma las par ’grel pa in Stein Tib. No. 194, p. 46a.3–4, corresponds with Don zab dgongs pa nges par ’grel pa in the new translation (Sde dge, Vol. *ngu*, p. 3a.3; Lamotte, p. 34, 1.12).

²³ Stein No. 194, p. 46a. See my forthcoming critical edition of the *sūtra*, which contains

manuscript of Kamalaśīla's *Bhāvanākrama* the title of the *sūtra* is given as *Bar mtshams ma las par 'grel pa*, which indicates that the translator of this text understood the title as referring to untying knots, rather than explaining [the Buddha's] thought.²⁴ Also, as we have seen, Paramārtha's Chinese translation renders *saṃdhi* as "knot".²⁵

As Ruegg notes, however, even in cases where *saṃdhi* is rendered by terms that *can* connote "connection" or "knot" (such as the Tibetan terms *sbyor*, *bar mtshams*, *bar mtsams*, and *tshigs*), it is not absolutely certain that these do indicate these meanings, because "this meaning may nevertheless have a semantic reference, just as English 'in connexion with' can mean 'with reference to, having in mind, intending'".²⁶ The only conclusion that can reasonably be drawn from all these conflicting interpretations and translations is that the term *saṃdhi* has been viewed in a number of ways by Buddhist translators and commentators in India, China, and Tibet and that there is a number of plausible ways of understanding what it means in a given context. As I have indicated, my translation is guided by the context of the content of the *sūtra*, which is explicitly concerned with explaining the thought or intention of the Buddha.

The Term *Nirmocana*

As with the term *saṃdhi*, there are differing opinions among the translators and commentators concerning how *nirmocana* should be interpreted. All of the Chinese translations mentioned above use the term *jieh*, which Soothill and Hodous indicate means "to unloose, let go, release, untie, disentangle, explain, expound".²⁷ Bodhiruci's translation of the title as "*Sūtra* Unravelling the Profound Secret" and Lamotte's contention that the title literally means "*sūtra* untying knots" reflect the literal meaning of the term, which is derived from the root *muc* or *muñc*, meaning "to liberate", "to free", "to release", "to unravel", "to untie". These connotations are reflected in the passage from Byang chub rdzu 'phrul's commentary cited above, in which

an edited version of both this text and Stein No. 683 (which has been correctly identified by Hakamaya as belonging to the *Samdhinirmocana*), excerpt one. The page numbers are out of sequence in these texts, but de la Vallée Poussin has provided a table containing the correct order (*Catalogue of the Tibetan Manuscripts from Tun-huang in the India Office Library*; Oxford, 1962, pp. 69–70). In my edited version the pages of Stein No. 194 and No. 683 are arranged in accordance with the order of the New Translation texts, and references to the corresponding pages in my critical edition of these texts are noted.

²⁴ See Ruegg, "Allusiveness and Obliqueness", p. 308. The Dunhuang manuscript to which he refers is Stein No. 648, pp. 127a, 133a. The text of this can be found in my critical edition of the *Samdhinirmocana*, excerpt seven.

²⁵ See above, p. 53.

²⁶ Ruegg, "Allusiveness and Obliqueness", p. 309.

²⁷ William Edward Soothill and Lewis Hodous, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1937), p. 412b.

he states that this *sūtra* helps one to cut the bonds of the afflictive obstructions and the obstructions to omniscience. They are also reflected in Jñānagarbha's discussion of the title, which contains a similar statement:

Samdhinirmocana means “cutting the knots of the afflictive obstructions and the obstructions to omniscience” through definitely freeing (*nges par dkrol bas*) the profound thought [of the Buddha]. It is a “*sūtra*” because it is simply a complete statement of what is definite.²⁸

Bodhiruci's translation and the commentaries of Byang chub rdzu 'phrul and Jñānagarbha reflect the literal meaning of *nirmocana*, which means “to liberate”, “to free”, “to unbind”, “to untie”, and they also reflect the fact that in the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* the Buddha unties the conceptual knots created by his earlier contradictory or abstruse statements and, as Jñānagarbha and Byang chub rdzu 'phrul state, this helps his audience to free themselves from the knots of afflictions.

The Tibetan and Indian scholars who translated the *sūtra* into Tibetan, however, translated *nirmocana* as *nges par 'grel pa*, which means “to explain, comment upon”.²⁹ Equating *nirmocana* with *nges par 'grel pa* is a case of a “meaning translation”, and it apparently reflects the fact that throughout the *sūtra* the Buddha is asked to explain the thought behind his earlier teachings, as is indicated by the fact that he uses verbs that mean “to explain”, “to teach”, or “to expound” to describe what he is doing. For example, (i) when asked in Chapter Seven why he taught the idea of one vehicle (*theg pa gcig, ekayāna*) the Buddha states that the path of purification is the same in all three vehicles (i.e., the Hearer Vehicle, the Solitary Realizer Vehicle, and the Bodhisattva Vehicle), and he concludes (Stog, p. 54.6; D, p. 38.3), “Thinking of that, I explain that there is one vehicle” (*'di la dgongs nas ngas theg pa gcig tu bshad kyi*). (ii) Later in the same chapter (Stog, p. 56.1; D, p. 39.2) he says that his doctrine was “explained with an intention [behind it]” (*bsam pa rnam par dag pas bshad pa*), (iii) At the conclusion of the chapter (Stog, p. 72.1; D, p. 50.4), Paramārthasamudgata asks, “Bhagavan, what is the name of this teaching in this form [of explanation] of doctrine that explains [your] thought?” (*bcom ldan 'das dgongs pa nges par 'grel pa 'i chos kyi rnam grangs 'di la nges par bstan pa 'di 'i ming ci lags*); this formula also occurs at the conclusions of Chapters Eight, Nine, and Ten. (iv) In Chapter Ten (Stog, p. 152.3; D, p. 105.3), Mañjuśrī asks the Buddha to summarize his teachings: “Bhagavan, please teach the quintessential meanings (*gzung kyi don bstan du gsol*) by which Bodhisattvas enter into the indirect thought of the profound doctrines spoken by the Tathāgata” (*de bzhin gshes pas gsungs pa 'i*

²⁸ Jñānagarbha, *Ārya-maitreya-kevala-parivarta-bhāṣya* (*'phags pa dgongs pa nges par 'grel pa 'i mdo las 'phags pa byams pa 'i le'u nyi tshe 'i bshad pa*; Tohoku No. 4033, Ōtani University Press, *sems tsam*, Vol. 2 (*bi*)), p. 318b.5.

²⁹ See, for example, Sarat Chandra Das, *A Tibetan-English Dictionary*, p. 300.

chos zab mo rnams kyi ldem por dgongs pa la yang dag par 'jug par 'gyur zhing),³⁰ to which the Buddha replies, “Listen, Mañjuśrī, and I will explain to you all of the quintessential meanings (*gzungs kyi don ma lus par khyod la bshad do*), in order that Bodhisattvas may enter into that which I have said in indirect speech” (*byang chub sems dpa rnams ngas ldem po ngag du gsungs pa la 'jug par bya ba 'i phyir*).

As these examples indicate, throughout the *sūtra* the Buddha and his interlocuters describe what he is doing as “explaining” or “teaching”, and his interlocuters ask him to explain “what he was thinking of”.³¹ Both the Buddha and his interlocuters also imply that there is a deeper or hidden meaning behind many of his utterances, which they assume he can and will explicate. As with my choice of the word “thought” to translate *samdhi*, my decision to translate *nirmocana* as “explaining” in accordance with the

³⁰ For discussions of *ldem por dgongs pa* and related terms, see: Étienne Lamotte, tr., *La Somme du Grand Véhicule d'Asaṅga* (Louvain, 1973), p. 23, notes; Walpola Rahula, tr., *La Compendium de la Super-Doctrine d'Asaṅga* (Paris, 1971), section II.2; David S. Ruegg, “An Indian Source for the Tibetan Hermeneutical Term Dgoñs Gzi, ‘Intentional Ground’”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, No. 16 (1988), pp. 1–4; Ruegg, “Purport, Implicature, and Presupposition”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, No. 13 (1985), pp. 309–25; and Ruegg, “Allusiveness and Obliqueness”, especially pp. 299–317.

³¹ It should be noted also that the *sūtra* contains many more statements in which the Buddha states that he is “explaining” (*bshad pa*) his thought or “teaching” (*btsan pa*); for instance, (i) the Buddha’s statement in Chapter Two (Stog, p. 15.7; D, p. 10.4), “I am completely enlightened with respect to the ultimate, which has a character completely transcending all argumentation, and having completely realized it I also have explained and clarified it [for others], and I have opened it up, revealed it, and taught it” (*ngas ni don dam pa rtog ge thams cad las yang dag par 'das pai mtshan nyid mngon par rdzogs par sangs rgyas te | mngon par rdzogs par sangs rgyas nas kyang bshad cing gsal bar byas | rnam par phyed | gdags pa byas | rab tu bstan to*);

(ii) In Chapter Five, after being asked about the meaning of the secrets of mind, sentience, and consciousness, the Buddha answers (Stog, p. 34.7; D, p. 23.6), “Viśālamati, I will explain (*bshad*) to you the secrets of mind, sentience, and consciousness”; (iii) at the beginning of Chapter Six (Stog, p. 40.2; D, p. 27.4), the Buddha says, “Guṇākara, I will explain (*bshad*) to you the character of phenomena”; (iv) in Chapter Eight (Stog, p. 92.7; D, p. 65.2), the Buddha is asked, “What are exalted wisdoms that know doctrines and that know meanings of Bodhisattvas who cultivate calming and insight?,” to which he replies, “Maitreya, I teach (*bstan mod kyi*) enumerations of exalted wisdom and insight extensively, but I will explain it briefly” (*mdor bstan to*).

(v) Later in the chapter (Stog, p. 97.6; D, p. 68.3), the Buddha is asked to teach about emptiness, and he agrees to the request by answering, “Maitreya, ... I will fully explain to you the character of emptiness” (*byams pa ... khyod la stong pa 'i mtshan nyid rdzogs par bshad kyi*); (vi) in Chapter Nine (Stog, p. 128.4; D, p. 88.7), the Buddha states, “[I] will explain to you (*khyod la bshad*)—collectively and specifically—the purities of the perfections”; (vii) on Stog, p. 137.2 (D, p. 95.1), the Buddha states, “I thoroughly explain (*rab bshad*) that the state of having abandoned all assumptions of bad states that are like something existing in the marrow ... is the Buddha ground.” Of course, it is not surprising that the Buddha states that he is “explaining” or “teaching”, and one could undoubtedly find any number of examples in other *sūtras* that contain similar statements. The passages cited above do, however, serve to corroborate the idea that this is a text in which the Buddha explains his thought, and that it is also a text in which he unravels the conceptual knots that his earlier teachings had created for some of his followers.

Tibetan translation of *nges par 'grel pa* is based on the structure of the text itself, in which the Buddha “explains” his thought to his audience.

This meaning is also reflected in other Indian texts associated with the Yogācāra; for instance, (i) the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* (verse 20.1), which indicates that the ability to figure out “how to explain the meaning of [the Buddha’s] profound thought” (*gaṃbhīrārthasaṃdhinirmokṣa*, *dgongs pa zab mo nges par 'grel pa*) is a mark of Bodhisattvas;³² and (ii) the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, which discusses five “topics of explanation of the meaning of [the Buddha’s] profound thought by a Bodhisattva” (*bodhisattvasya gaṃbhīrārthasaṃdhi-nirmocanātāyā adhiṣṭhāni*). These are: (1) [explaining] the profound, brilliantly profound *sūtras* spoken by the Tathāgata, associated with [teachings about] emptiness and dependent arising due to particular conditions; (2) understanding the faults [taught] in the *vinaya* and understanding how to remove the faults; (3) non-mistaken presentation of the characteristics of phenomena; (4) the names and divisions of hidden intentional doctrines; and (5) the qualities, meanings, etymologies, and divisions of all phenomena.³³

This division accords with my contention that the term *saṃdhinirmocana* refers to explaining the hidden thought or intention behind the Buddha’s teachings, because in all of these cases Bodhisattvas explain the underlying thought of the Buddha’s teachings and terminology, and they explicate the purport, hidden assumptions, and underlying structures of these teachings. A similar idea is found in Ruegg’s discussions of this and related terms, as when he writes, “... the term *saṃdhi* in the sense of indirect allusion: is found also in the title of the *Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra*, meaning literally ‘Resolution of the intention [of the Buddha]’. ... In this *sūtra*, the Buddha is shown referring to persons who may not understand his deep intentional/allusive utterances (*dgons te bśad pa = saṃdhā(ya) uacana* or °*bhāṣya*?), and who are attached only to the wording.”³⁴

As indicated above, my translation of the title as *Sūtra Explaining the Thought* in accordance with the interpretive Tibetan translation of *Dgongs pa nges par 'grel pa'i mdo* is based on a consideration of the internal structure of the text, because throughout the *Saṃdhinirmocana* the Buddha is asked to explain of what he was thinking. My translation is also guided by several pertinent discussions in commentaries on the *sūtra*, for instance Wonch’uk’s gloss of *nges par 'gerl pa* with *rnam par bshad pa*,³⁵ “to explain, to declare, prove, enunciate”³⁶ and Byang chub rdzu ’phrul’s statement that the title implies both that it cuts the knots of the obstructions and explains the Buddha’s thought: “Because it definitely frees the profound thought of

³² See Sylvain Levi, *Mahāyāna-sūtrālamkāra* (Paris: Bibliothèque de l’École des Hautes Études, 1911, Tome II), p. 287.

³³ Wogihara Unrai, ed., *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (Tokyo: Seigo Kenkyūkai, 1936), p. 303.

³⁴ Ruegg, “Allusiveness and Obliqueness”, p. 308.

³⁵ Wonch’uk, Vol. *ti* (118), p. 73.2; see also p. 212.1.

³⁶ Sarat Chandra Das, *A Tibetan-English Dictionary*, p. 1252.

the Tathāgata and because it cuts all of the knots of the afflictive obstructions and the obstructions to omniscience, it both explains [the Buddha’s] thought and cuts all knots.³⁷ This meaning is also reflected in Wonch’uk’s statement that “because in this *sūtra* the meaning of the very profound and hidden thought of all of the three vehicles, which is difficult to unravel, is revealed and clearly indicated, it is called ‘[Sūtra] Explaining the Profound Thought’.”³⁸

That the term *nirmocana* in the title can mean “explain” or “teach” is also seen in (i) Byang chub rdzu ’phrul’s comment that the phrase, this form [of explanation] of doctrine that explains [the Buddha’s] thought” (*dgongs pa nges par ’grel pa’i chos kyi mam grangs ’di*; cited in example 5 above) “refers to the general presentation of the body of this *sūtra* that teaches the definitive meaning” (*nges pa’i don bstan pa’i mdo sde ’di’i lus mam par gzhas pa*);³⁹ (ii) Edgerton’s statement that the compound *saṃdhi-nirmocana* means “setting forth, unfolding the real truth, fundamental explanation”;⁴⁰ (iii) Lamotte’s translation of *nirmocana* as “explanation” (l’explication).

In choosing “explaining” over other possible equivalents I have followed the Tibetan translation, which appears to have been based on a consideration of the format of the *sūtra*. The choice of *rnam par ’grel pa*, “to explain, to comment upon” instead of *rnam par bkrol pa*, “to liberate, unravel, free” indicates that the Tibetan translators decided to use a term that reflected the *modus operandi* of the text itself, which consists of questions about the Buddha’s thought and his explanations. While it is true that many of these explanations could also be seen as attempts to “unravel” conceptual knots or “free” his listeners from the bonds of the afflictive obstructions and the obstructions to omniscience, the fact that when the Buddha is questioned about the thought behind his earlier teachings he responds by offering to “explain” himself indicates that the Tibetan translation reflects an important aspect of the architecture of the text. In the *Samdhinirmocana-sūtra* we find a number of explanations that attempt to show ways to reconcile apparent contradictions in the Buddha’s earlier teachings and to define his thought. The translation, “Sūtra Explaining the Thought”, was chosen in order to indicate something of the format of the text and what it attempts to do, given that no single translation into English (or Tibetan) can reflect the dual meaning perceived by the commentators.

³⁷ Byang chub rdzu ’phrul, Vol. *cho* (205), p. 8.2.

³⁸ Wonch’uk, Vol. *ti* (118), p. 4.7.

³⁹ Byang chub rdzu ’phrul, Vol. *cho* (205), p. 268.6. A similar passage is found on p. 462.4.

⁴⁰ *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*, Vol. 2, p. 557.