

YAROSLAV KOMAROVSKI



TIBETAN  
BUDDHISM  
*and*  
MYSTICAL  
EXPERIENCE



TIBETAN BUDDHISM AND MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE



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Yaroslav Komarovski

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*I prostrate to the mother of victors of the three times,  
The unutterable, inconceivable, ineffable perfection of wisdom,  
The unborn and unceasing space[-like] nature,  
The object of functioning of individually  
self-cognizing primordial mind!  
From Rahulabhadra's  
Praise to the Perfection of Wisdom  
(Prajñāpāramitāstotra)*



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Although the idea of writing this book was born less than four years ago, my interest in the topics explored herein was initiated by people and events encountered much earlier. I've had a vague interest in things "mystical"/mysterious since about age seven. While going to bed I asked my father questions about whether the universe is finite or infinite, what lies beyond it, what lies beyond that which lies beyond it, etc., until I eventually fell asleep. Shortly afterwards, I was discussing with my family such "semi-Buddhist" questions about findability of phenomena as when a car stops being a car: does it happen after one or all of its wheels have been removed, after its doors have been taken away, after its steering wheel has been taken off, earlier, later, when exactly? Although my parents had neither answers to such questions nor interest in philosophical or religious matters, they were understanding, patient, and supportive during my preadolescent deconstructionist "quest." In my teens I remember lying

in bed sick while my mother read to me from the *Diamond Cutter* (Skt. *Vajracchedikā*) *Sūtra*:

The Blessed One said: “In this way, Subhūti, one who has set out on the way of a bodhisattva should know all things, should be intent on them. And he should be intent on them in such a way that even the conception of a thing would not be present. Why is that? ‘Conception of a thing, conception of a thing,’ Subhūti, that is said by the Tathāgata not to be a conception. In that sense ‘conception of a thing’ is used.”

My parents, Lev and Ludmila, continually encouraged my conceptions of such things without trying to foist their own conceptions upon me, and for this I am grateful.

By age seventeen, I was devouring whatever literature on “Asian religions” I could find, and eventually narrowed my search down to Buddhism. In my early twenties, I travelled to Siberia, where I met Darmadodi, a ninety-year-old Buryat lama with whom I took Buddhist Refuge. I started learning Tibetan voraciously, and a few years later I was studying Buddhist philosophy, epistemology, tantric rituals, contemplation, etc., in Tibetan monastic universities in exile. I am extremely thankful to all my teachers from that early period, without whom any further steps leading to my research for this book would not have been possible.

After six years of studying philosophy, epistemology, and other dimensions of the Geluk tradition at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, India, I moved on to study the Sakya and Nyingma systems at the Dzongsar Institute and Palyul Chokhor Ling monastery in Bir, India. One of the reasons for that change was my exposure to several texts of the Sakya and Nyingma traditions that I bought by sheer chance in the winter of 1997 when visiting

Bodhgaya, India. Those texts not only presented ultimate reality and its realization in a very different way from that of the Geluk tradition, but explicitly criticized the latter's interpretations. Since then, I've had a continuing interest in exploring conflicting Buddhist interpretations of reality; I've also started questioning how much those interpretive differences are reflected in contemplative practices and meditative experiences. Neither posing nor attempting to answer those questions would have been possible without my teachers of that period, to whom I want to express sincere gratitude: the late Gen Lopzang Gyamtso the late Khenchen Künga Wangchuk, Khenpo Tsewang Sönam, the late Khetsün Zangpo Rinpoché, the late Kirti Tsenzhap Rinpoché, and many others.

The general picture I formed of the Tibetan Buddhist world at that time was conflicted. When it came down to such questions as identification of reality and its realization, it tended to be rigid and sectarian. Yet all Tibetan traditions that I encountered produced outstanding scholars and contemplatives who apparently had boundless compassion, nuanced understanding of Buddhist philosophical ideas, and advanced contemplative achievements. How could it be—I kept asking—that despite holding views so diverse, followers of different Tibetan traditions appeared to achieve very similar results? Or perhaps this was just my imagination and wishful thinking? After all, how could I possibly gauge anyone's realizations and experiences? These and related questions kept floating around in my mind until 1998, when I came across the writings of the ingenious Tibetan thinker Shakya Chokden which suggested a new direction in approaching—and possibly even answering—these questions. Particularly helpful was Shakya Chokden's unusual interpretation of philosophical and contemplative systems subsumed under the categories of Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Yogācāra. His arguments that despite

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

conflicting philosophical outlooks, both of those systems equip their followers with effective means of achieving realization of ultimate reality and awakening inspired me to approach the rival Tibetan traditions I was familiar with in a similar way. It is also to Shakya Chokden, therefore, that I owe my gratitude.

While initially only a personal quest, my study of Buddhism eventually assumed a new and more formalized dimension when I began graduate research at the University of Virginia. I want to express my thanks to professors Jeffrey Hopkins, David Germano, Paul Groner, Karen Lang, and others under whose guidance I acquired research skills, knowledge of relevant languages, and some understanding of diverse Buddhist traditions. My work at UVA provided me with the opportunity to explore further the diversity and commonalities of different Buddhist traditions—a theme that eventually turned into a postgraduate research project.

Throughout all these times, I kept coming across people who believed that most, if not all, religions lead to the same goal (however identified and defined), or at least share some basic common core. This idea was—and still is—quite widespread in popular imagination. As a teenager, I took its truth for granted. Later, as a student of Buddhist studies, I took pleasure in deconstructing it. That said, it was also clear to me that on a more modest scale, certain religious traditions *do* share some common elements. Recently I became aware of the ongoing debate between scholars of religious studies—most notably Steven Katz and Robert Forman—regarding the question of whether something like unmediated mystical experience can be said to exist across different religious traditions. I am very thankful to Professor John Dunne, who introduced me to this debate when I was visiting Emory University in 2008. It seemed to me that what those scholars were debating regarding

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

religions and mystical traditions in general was in some important ways similar to what I was trying to understand with respect to Buddhism, and specifically Tibetan Buddhist traditions. It was around this time that I started the research that formed the basis of this book.

As I was working on the manuscript—first as a postdoctoral fellow and then as a full-time faculty member—I benefited from the support and advice of my colleagues and other people at Washington University in St. Louis and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I am especially grateful to Scott Leigh, who carefully read, edited, and made multiple insightful suggestions on all chapters of this manuscript.

If there is any virtue in this work, I want to dedicate it to all those—whether mentioned above or not—who directly or indirectly helped to bring it to completion.



TIBETAN BUDDHISM AND MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE





# The Mystical Panorama

## SETTING THE STAGE

Those who study Buddhist writings on philosophy and contemplation, have received Buddhist teachings, or put them into personal practice are most likely familiar with the close connection between Buddhist philosophical ideas, soteriological objectives, and processes leading to the realization of those objectives. Buddhist practitioners often insist that their philosophical views are not mere intellectual games without relation to personal experience, but are designed for incorporation into experience through practice whose main objective is *nirvāṇa* or awakening. Nevertheless, they also hold conflicting philosophical ideas, diverse approaches to how those ideas are related to practice, and different interpretations of the effects of practice. It is not uncommon for them to argue about which ideas are conducive to achieving their soteriological objectives and which are not. Contemplative processes leading to them are likewise understood differently. There is also a variety of opinions on the nature of the objectives themselves.

Such issues are no doubt familiar to scholars of religion and mysticism. Whether one engages in comparative study of religions or not, and whichever religious tradition one focuses on, the question

of diversity and similarities of religious ideas and practices, as well as the question of the relationship between those ideas and practices, sooner or later springs up. Followers of different religious traditions and mystics themselves have raised such questions for centuries. Answers to those questions, and the interpretive models used to understand them, are as diverse as the people and traditions that deal with them. Although not alone in this respect, during the course of posing and answering such questions, Buddhist thinkers have developed a particularly rich variety of interpretive models, such as those of paths and minds, to mention just two.

Analysis of those models is highly relevant to Buddhists, scholars of Buddhism, and researchers in the broader field of religious studies. It is relevant to Buddhists who live in the increasingly interconnected world, where in one and the same physical place, such as New York, or virtual space, such as the Internet, they are exposed to hundreds of ideas from diverse Buddhist traditions whose differences and commonalities cannot be ignored and require nuanced and context-sensitive understanding. It is likewise important to scholars of Buddhism who in their teaching and research address the question of diversity and commonalities of Buddhist ideas and practices. It also helps those religious studies scholars who seek to expand and refine their understanding of the nature of religious and mystical experiences and ideas.

With their complex and nuanced models of mind, path, contemplative states, and insights into reality, different forms of Buddhism hold a virtual treasure trove of ideas that can tremendously enhance contemporary studies of mysticism.<sup>1</sup> Although the connection

1. I have argued this earlier in an article "Buddhist Contributions to the Question of (Un)mediated Mystical Experience," *Sophia* 51, no. 1 (2012): 87–115, which is partly incorporated into the present book.

between Buddhism and mysticism is not obvious, and many issues dealt with by Buddhist scholars and contemplatives are of little relevance to scholars of mysticism, this book explores one particular area of connection where thinkers of Tibetan Buddhist traditions encounter problems in some ways similar to those encountered by researchers in mysticism: the process of realization or experience of ultimate reality. While Tibetan Buddhist traditions developed highly diverse and conflicting interpretations of reality and the process of its realization, they also developed interpretive tools or models for explaining how, despite those conflicting views, the actual processes of realizations of reality followed by those who hold them can be either the same or compatible, or can lead to the same results. Although these models are limited to only some traditions, and cannot be applied to Buddhism as a whole—not to mention mysticism or religion in general—those who debate the issue of unmediated mystical experience can definitely benefit from learning about them. The reason is that on the one hand, those models are used for targeting the issue of commonality and diversity of experiences that can be termed “mystical,” and also deal with the question of their mediation. On the other, they approach those experiences in unique ways, providing alternative perspectives for appraising them. Their study, therefore, promises to contribute to our understanding of both the question of unmediated mystical experience and interpretive approaches to it.

Even a brief survey of accounts of Buddhist “mystical experiences” will easily demonstrate the diversity of insights, visions, realizations, and awakenings experienced—or said to be experienced—by persons separated from one another temporarily, spatially, and culturally. Presupposing different models of the human mind, body, and external world, they are clearly embedded in the ritual, philosophical, social, and cultural contexts in

which they occur. Depending on context, they can also indicate that such terms as “awakening,” “experience,” and “realization” can assume very different meanings. In fact, these experiences and realizations—as well as the trainings and practices leading to them—are so diverse that their subjects might not even recognize each other as fellow Buddhists practicing Buddhism.

That diversity notwithstanding, it should also be noted that Buddhist thinkers and contemplatives often perceive and describe those experience and realizations as ineffable, transcendent, extraordinary, and spontaneous, referring thereby to the qualities that Euro-American theorists of religion usually ascribe to mystical experiences. Thus, despite the fact that the terms “mysticism” and “mystical experience” are not “native” Buddhist terms, they can justifiably be used when exploring diverse Buddhist experiences and realizations characterized by ineffability, nonconceptuality, etc., that are not foreign to Buddhism at all.

Buddhist traditions deal with multiple types of experiences that can be or already have been termed “mystical” by scholars of mysticism. Careful analysis of those experiences can greatly contribute to the broader field of studies of mysticism. Nevertheless, if we do not want to turn mysticism into mystification, those experiences have to be handled with care and appreciated in their own right in terms of specific contextual meanings, emphases, and objectives. Only if these conditions are fulfilled can “mysticism” and “mystical experience” be released from the confines of quotation marks and addressed as if they were active and actual categories in Buddhism itself. (It will soon become apparent that the terms “mysticism” and “mystical experience” do not apply straightforwardly within the Buddhist context. Starting in the next section, I have removed the quotation marks for ease of reading only.)

It goes without saying that in one book it is impossible to analyze and compare in any meaningful way all Buddhist realizations and experiences that can be termed “mystical,” much less to extend such analysis to other religions. Were one to undertake such a project, it would be further complicated by the need to take into account the diversity of interpretive tools used by diverse religious traditions themselves. The scope of this study is much more modest: to analyze some of the key Buddhist experiences and realizations in the context of Tibetan Buddhist views and practices, link that analysis with the issue of (un)mediated mystical experience debated by contemporary scholars of religion, and explore the issue with the help of the interpretive theories and polemical tools used by Tibetan thinkers in their discussion of the seminal “mystical experience”—realization of ultimate reality.

This study is limited to theories, ideas, and interpretive tools developed by Tibetans or adopted by them in the creative process of interpretation of the Indian Buddhist heritage. While I avoid using the term “Indo-Tibetan Buddhism,” and acknowledge the existence of indigenous Tibetan Buddhist practices and ideas, the continuity of Buddhist thought and practice as they developed in India and Tibet is impossible to ignore. To this day, the key Buddhist texts which are the focus of Tibetan Buddhist scholastic studies and commentarial works are Indian, and Tibetan writings on tantric and nontantric contemplative practices also rely heavily on the writings and ideas of their Indian predecessors. Consequently, although I will stay largely within the confines of what came to be known as “Tibetan Buddhism,” I will also be dealing with writings and ideas of epistemologists-logicians Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, Mādhyamikas Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, Yogācāras Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, and other Indian

thinkers whose ideas played a critical role in the development and formation of Tibetan Buddhist thought. The writings of these thinkers also comprise an indispensable part of the material explored in this book; the whole topic of the fifth chapter in which the book culminates deals with Tibetan polemics regarding ideas and practices derived from Indian Madhyamaka texts, while epistemological, contemplative, and other elements discussed in the preceding chapters are also based in large part on Indian Buddhist writings. Consequently, while limiting myself to ideas and practices that I call “Tibetan,” I am not implying that they are limited to the Tibetan form of Buddhism only. (Nor, of course, do I imply unanimity in the world of Tibetan Buddhism itself, as will soon become amply apparent.)

This study explores Tibetan approaches to Buddhist “mystical experiences” in connection with debates that occupy contemporary studies of mysticism, specifically the question of unmediated mystical experience. It examines how the processes believed to lead to those “mystical experiences,” and explanations of those processes and experiences, are related to distinctive worldviews, epistemology, ontology, path structures, and contemplative techniques. Tibetan Buddhists developed highly sophisticated theories for explaining “mystical experiences” across several traditions, and I apply one such theory to the issue of direct realization of ultimate reality. Similar to the question of unmediated mystical experience debated by contemporary scholars of religion, the process of direct realization of ultimate reality is one of the most challenging and important topics of Tibetan philosophical and contemplative theories and practices, and the issues of accessing that realization, maintaining it, and providing an adequate description of it remain a focus of heated inter- and intrasectarian polemics. I explore two conflicting Tibetan approaches to realization of ultimate reality,

the question of whether advocates of those approaches are in fact dealing with the same reality, and the hotly debated nature of the relationship between intellectual understanding of reality and its direct nonconceptual realization.

Overall, this book calls for a nuanced approach to what Buddhists *themselves* believe to be experiences and realizations that one can term “mystical” and how they understand the nature of those experiences. While it is self-explanatory that such an approach is important, it is often lacking in contemporary scholarship on mysticism that engages Buddhist topics. My work also is based on the premise that if one wants to clarify the question of mystical experiences in connection with different Buddhist traditions, it is indispensable to let followers of those traditions speak for themselves—without the overlay of “Western preconceptions,” so to speak. I thereby follow Wayne Proudfoot’s excellent advice:

An experience must be specified under a description that can be ascribed to the subject, and it is the task of the historian of religions to identify the particular concepts and descriptions available to people in particular contexts and to disentangle them from our anachronistic tendency to ascribe our concepts to those people. This is what much of the study of religion is about. Careful textual study of the Pali scriptures, Tibetan commentaries, and Buddhism in East Asia can help us sort out the particular concepts and assumptions that were available to Buddhists at different points in that complex tradition, as well as cases in which scriptural authority and local traditions came into conflict. Much of the same kind of work has been done for Christianity and Judaism. Often we discover that our anachronistic readings



have prevented our understanding the terms in which people identified their experience.<sup>2</sup>

The book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter addresses the topic of mystical experience in connection to Buddhism. (1.1) After this general introduction in the first section, (1.2) I then discuss the benefits of and problems involved in using such categories as “mystical experience” when addressing experiences and realizations dealt with by Tibetan Buddhist thinkers and contemplatives. (1.3) In the last section of the chapter, I critically appraise the contemporary debate over the issue of unmediated mystical experience. Overall, the first chapter is intended to provide a general background for a subsequent analysis of “mystical experiences” in Tibetan Buddhism.

In the next two chapters, I explore several critical elements of the Tibetan Buddhist worldview that are indispensable for understanding the “mystical experiences” addressed in the last two chapters. The second chapter focuses on the dimension of mind. (2.1) It starts with a general sketch of mind models used by Tibetan Buddhist thinkers, outlining diverse perspectives on the structure of mind and mental processes. (2.2) It then explores the twofold division of mind into conceptual and nonconceptual—a critical distinction for understanding such key “mystical experiences” as realization of ultimate reality. (2.3) The chapter closes with the criticism of the category of pure contentless consciousness that forms an important part of the contemporary polemics over the question of unmediated mystical experience.

2. Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 185–186.

In the third chapter, I focus on the dimension of the path. (3.1) I start with addressing several Buddhist path models, such as worldly and world-transcending paths. (3.2) I then proceed to explain the interdependent nature of different types of training and conditioning on the one hand and the experiences and realizations they aim at bringing about on the other. (3.3) In the last section of the chapter, I explore details of one seminal type of such conditioning dealt with by Tibetan thinkers and contemplatives—the negative process of deconstruction of conceptual thinking—which is designed for achieving realization of ultimate reality.

In the fourth chapter, I turn to the multidimensionality of “mystical experiences” in Tibetan Buddhism and address the issue of their commonalities. (4.1) I first address the category of ineffability—the critical point of convergence of studies of mystical experience and Tibetan Buddhist approaches to reality and its realization. (4.2) Next, I explore the often ignored relationship between “mystical experiences” and polemics, showing the critical role the latter play in the former. (4.3) In the last section of the chapter, I demonstrate certain areas where Tibetan thinkers argue for compatibility of realizations and experiences across different traditions while simultaneously acknowledging their overall diversity.

Taken together, these four chapters provide necessary background for the analysis of the highly important polemical issue of the nature and stages of the process of realization of ultimate reality addressed in the fifth chapter. Focusing on the Tibetan sectarian polemics on this issue, this chapter outlines two rival positions that seem to be advocating mutually contradictory forms of mediation preceding the direct realization of ultimate reality as well as different views on the nature of that realization. (5.1) In the first section, I explore the position of the major Geluk thinker,

Tsongkhapa. (5.2) In the second section, I explore the position of his major Sakya critic, Gorampa. (5.3) In the final section, I provide an alternative perspective on their discordant approaches, arguing that they refer primarily to conflicting descriptions of the similar conceptual conditioning/deconstructive processes leading to the nonconceptual realization of reality.

In the conclusion, I revisit the issue of (un)mediated mystical experience and discuss the ways in which the Tibetan Buddhist approaches to the process of realization of ultimate reality both enrich and problematize its understanding.

## WHAT DOES TIBETAN BUDDHISM HAVE TO DO WITH MYSTICISM AND EXPERIENCE?

As its title indicates, this book addresses those elements of Buddhism that are in one way or another related to the vague but vogue category of mystical experience. Far from being unanimously agreed upon, those elements are the focus of heated debates in both Tibetan traditional scholarship and contemporary Euro-American religious studies. Connecting Tibetan philosophical and contemplative perspectives with the questions debated in contemporary studies of mysticism, I argue that Tibetan Buddhism can make significant contributions to that field. Not only does it provide refined models of mind, contemplative processes, and other elements that help us understand certain mystical experiences, but it also encourages us to rethink the very meaning of “mediation,” “ineffability,” “experience,” and other categories used in discussions of mysticism. The application of the category of mystical experience to specific Buddhist traditions thereby problematizes that category itself, simultaneously

suggesting new meanings and perspectives. Far from being a passive object of contemporary scholarly Euro-American discourse on mysticism, those traditions can actively engage, challenge, and modify that discourse.

About a decade ago Steven Katz observed:

The logic, as well as the possibility, of framing cross-cultural phenomenological typologies of mystical experiences has to be re-thought. Though this has been a central aspect of the academic study of mystical experience since James's pioneering work, I remain unconvinced by the results so far achieved. It seems to me that the fact is that these typologies of supposedly common elements not only always *reduce* the actual variety of disparate experience to fit a specific theory but they also turn out to be of little help in understanding mystical experience because they are so broad as to be applicable to any one of several mutually exclusive experiences.<sup>3</sup>

And:

choosing descriptions of mystic experience *out of their total context* does not provide grounds for their comparability but rather severs all grounds of their intelligibility for it empties the chosen phrases, terms and descriptions of definitive meaning.<sup>4</sup>

The problems pointed out by Katz can be remedied by research into details of the experiences, insights, and realizations articulated

3. Steven Katz, "Diversity and the Study of Mysticism," in *The Future of the Study of Religion: Proceedings of Congress 2000*, ed. Slavica Jakelić and Lori Pearson (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 199–200.

4. *Ibid.*, 201.

by specific groups of Buddhists and interpreted from within the context of their particular worldviews and practices. Such an approach has much more to offer to the study of mysticism and mystical experiences than one that starts with generalizations about mysticism across diverse religions grouped under such categories as “theistic,” “nontheistic,” and so forth.

For example, most Tibetan thinkers would disagree that such key Buddhist experiences as realization of ultimate reality and awakening are accessible to those who have not undergone specific types of Buddhist training and conditioning. At the same time, they also admit the apparent similarities or sameness of certain experiences across Buddhist traditions. That consensus is often interwoven with fierce polemics against seeming flaws of rival traditions disagreeing with one’s own in such areas as contemplation, the identification of reality, and the results of meditative practice. Analyzing how followers of those traditions approach such differences, similarities, uniqueness, and diversity will greatly contribute to a more nuanced overall understanding of mysticism and mystical experiences.

If we do not want to turn discussions of Buddhist mystical experiences into merely additional blocks for building and supporting general theories of mysticism, we have to shift our focus and pay more attention to what followers of particular traditions themselves have to say about those experiences. The fact that traditionally Buddhists did not use the terms “mysticism” and “mystical experience” should not discourage us. On the contrary, it can make even more inspiring the project of exploring Buddhist ideas and experiences conveyed through uniquely Buddhist terminology and anchored in unique Buddhist frameworks. In the process, we will also learn that one term—such as “emptiness,” for example—can convey multiple meanings in different Buddhist

cultures and within one and the same culture, tradition, text, and even sentence. This is also true for “nirvāṇa,” “awakening,” “meditation,” and others. If we want to understand what those ideas mean to Buddhists themselves, we will have no other option but to appreciate and explore their particularities as they are anchored in specific contexts. As a result, not only will we enrich our understanding of Buddhist traditions per se, but we will enhance and possibly modify current theories of mysticism.

What I am advocating is not giving preference to emic interpretations of Buddhist mystical experiences over etic. Nor am I trying to advocate one particular theory over others. What I am arguing for is that, like mystical experiences in other traditions, Buddhist mystical experiences come as a part of a package which is bound together with unique worldviews, objectives, and problems. Any attempts to extract those experiences from that bundle will necessarily result in losing the very means of their adequate understanding.<sup>5</sup> This is why I consider it crucial to explore and utilize those Buddhist worldviews in which mystical experiences are embedded.

Based on examples derived from the world of Tibetan Buddhism, I argue that such seminal mystical experiences as the realizations of nirvāṇa, insights into the ultimate, Dzokchen (*rdzogs chen*, Great Perfection/Great Completeness)<sup>6</sup> visions,

5. See chapters 2 and 3 for details.

6. Unless otherwise indicated, all italicized foreign terms in parentheses are Tibetan, followed after a comma by Sanskrit equivalents when applicable. (This does not apply to direct citations from contemporary scholarly works.) Hereafter, I use the simplified phonetic transcription of Tibetan adopted by the Tibetan and Himalayan Library. For details, see David Germano and Nicolas Tournadre, THL Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan, available at <http://www.thlib.org/reference/transliteration/#!essay=/thl/phonetics/s/b1>. When appropriate, it includes not only Tibetan words but also Sanskrit words and names adopted by Tibetans, such as “Pendita” (*paṇḍita*) in “Sakya Pendita” (*sa skya paṇḍita*), in order to approximate the way Tibetans themselves pronounce them.

etc., can be adequately described only in specific Buddhist terms and explained only on the basis of respective Buddhist theories. For example, it is impossible to interpret Tögel (*thod rgal*, leap-over)<sup>7</sup> experiences without recourse to the unique Dzokchen “psychology” and “physiology.” Were we to apply non-Dzokchen interpretations to the visions of Tögel, we would most likely interpret them as some sort of exteriorized mental projections. According to Dzokchen practitioners, on the other hand, they are manifestations of the ultimate reality—described as the base (*gzhi*) or awareness (*rig pa*)—not of an ordinary consciousness. They can be counted as “exteriorized” only in the sense of being a display of the base that occurs within the internal expanse of awareness.<sup>8</sup> To explain Tögel visions, Dzokchen provides descriptions of energy channels, etc., that do not exist in other tantric systems.<sup>9</sup> Such visions cannot be understood even with the help of general tantric theories, not to mention nontantric Buddhist views. Likewise, experiences of the vital essences (*thig le*, *bindu*) or inner heat (*gtum mo*, *caṇḍālī*) accessed by tantric practitioners can be adequately understood only with the help

7. Tögel is the second of the two stages of the Quintessential Instructions Division (*man ngag sde*) of the Dzokchen system, the first being Trekchö (*khregs chod*, break-through). While the Trekchö practice consists of contemplating ultimate reality as it is explained in Dzokchen teachings, the Tögel practice consists of further honing and advancing that realization through contemplative practices associated with the four visions (see note 29). For details, see Tulku Thondup, *The Practice of Dzogchen* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2002), 67ff., and Dudjom Rinpoche (tr. and ed. Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstein), *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991), section 1, 335ff. (hereafter, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*).

8. The technical Tibetan term is the “lamp of the sphere (or expanse) of awareness” (*rig pa dbyings kyi sgron ma*). See Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 338.

9. See *Ibid.*, 340–342.

of theories related to those experiences.<sup>10</sup> The list could go on endlessly.

It is also important to note that Tibetan thinkers themselves developed theories for explaining mystical experiences across several Buddhist traditions. The fourth chapter of this book describes one such theory, and the last chapter applies its key elements to the issue of the direct realization of ultimate reality. To avoid the abovementioned problem of overgeneralization, though, I will not go beyond applying that theory to those traditions which share similar cultural, philosophical, and contemplative milieu, namely the Geluk (*dge lugs*) and Sakya (*sa skya*) traditions of Tibetan Buddhism.

There is little doubt that Buddhism is drawn into the discussion of mysticism and mystical experience in large part due to its emphasis on demolishing concepts and transcending mundane levels of consciousness. Tibetan Buddhist thinkers in particular view the direct realization of ultimate reality as the most potent agent of that deconstructing process, treating it as the very means of directly combating and destroying concepts. I therefore argue that when the category of “mystical experience” is applied to Tibetan Buddhism, the direct realization of ultimate reality (*don dam bden pa, paramārthasatya*) or emptiness (*stong pa nyid, śūnyatā*) should be treated as one of the highest expressions of that experience because of its supreme soteriological value as the only direct antidote for the impediments to awakening, as well as being an undeniable component of awakening itself. Likewise, because that realization both transcends and destroys conceptuality,

10. See, for example, Glenn H. Mullin (tr. and ed.), *The Six Yogas of Naropa: Tsongkhapa's Commentary Entitled A Book of Three Inspirations: A Treatise on the Stages of Training in the Profound Path of Naro's Six Dharmas, Commonly Referred to as The Three Inspirations* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2005), 139ff.



mundane mentality, and dualistic thinking, it best approximates the category of “unmediated mystical experience,” which will be addressed below.

The process of the direct realization of ultimate reality is one of the most challenging topics of Tibetan philosophical and contemplative theories and practices, and the issues of accessing that realization, maintaining it, and providing an adequate description remain a focus of heated inter- and intrasectarian polemics. This is why I will be exploring the issue of realization of ultimate reality in the context of Tibetan sectarian debates. Although many elements involved in this polemical issue are unique to the Tibetan Buddhist world, their analysis can help us to achieve a better and more nuanced understanding of mystical experiences in general and the issue of (un)mediated mystical experience in particular.

As an example, let’s look at the two characteristics that William James claims “entitle any state to be called mystical”:<sup>11</sup> ineffability and noetic quality. These two, together with transiency and passivity, which James says “are less sharply marked, but are usually found,”<sup>12</sup> are often found in discussions of mysticism and mystical experience. James describes ineffability as follows:

The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words.<sup>13</sup>

11. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 381.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 380.

He refers to the noetic quality like this:

Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

As we will see below, the direct realization of ultimate reality matches these two descriptions perfectly. However, Tibetan thinkers do not stop on that “matchmaking” level, but proceed to explore, contest, and produce different answers to such questions as whether this experience of the ultimate has any object, whether its object is a sheer negation or includes such positive features as luminosity, whether the direct realization of reality is necessarily accompanied by manifestations and visions of the innate qualities of buddhahood, whether different descriptions of that indescribable realization imply differences in the realization itself, and so forth. In other words, what the ineffable ultimate reality is, and how exactly it is known or realized, are highly contested polemical issues across Tibetan Buddhist traditions.<sup>15</sup> There is little doubt that analysis of those issues can make a significant contribution to the contemporary debates on the nature and types of mystical experiences.

That being said, it cannot be ignored that both the attribution of “mystical” to “experience” and the emphasis on experience itself are problematic in the Buddhist context in general and that of Tibetan Buddhism in particular. Firstly, Buddhism lacks an equivalent of the term “mysticism.” Similar to the study of “religion” as a separate field of inquiry, the topic of “mysticism” developed within the “Western” world.<sup>16</sup> Partly because of that, when

14 Ibid.

15. For details, see chapters 4 and 5.

16. For the history of the term “mysticism” in the context of Christianity, see Louis Bouyer, “Mysticism: An Essay on the History of the Word,” in *Understanding Mysticism*,

descriptions of mysticism are given, they are usually loaded with meanings, overtones, and agenda that are distinctly “Occidental” in character. The following statement by Robert Campany about religions is applicable to mysticism as well:

Discourse about religions is rooted in Western language communities and in the history of Western cultures ... To speak of “religions” is to demarcate things in ways that are not inevitable or immutable but, rather, are contingent on the shape of Western history, thought, and institutions. Other cultures may, and do, lack closely equivalent demarcations.<sup>17</sup>

Wayne Proudfoot also rightly observes:

Seldom do people actually describe or identify their experiences as religious. In fact, the possibility of doing so is very recent and is restricted for the most part to the modern West. People understand and identify their experiences in terms of the concepts and beliefs available to them. But *religion* is a term that is relatively recent in origin and belongs to the history of Western ideas. Smith (1964) has argued persuasively that this concept was not available to the adherents of most of the traditions we identify as religious. Attempts to translate similar terms from other cultures as “religion” often distort

ed. Richard Woods (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 42–55. Some scholars argue that the category of “mysticism” (as it is commonly understood) is alien even to Christianity. For references, see Randall Studstill, *The Unity of Mystical Traditions: The Transformations of Consciousness in Tibetan and German Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 11 n.18 (hereafter, *The Unity of Mystical Traditions*). Its applicability to Islamic, Jewish, and other traditions also remains questionable.

17. Robert Campany, “On the Very Idea of Religions (in the Modern West and in Early Medieval China),” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42, no. 4 (2003): 289.

the meaning of those terms. The same is true of our use of *mysticism* ... [W]e spoke of subjects identifying their experiences as mystical. In fact, however, even the possibility of identifying one's experience as mystical is only as recent as the availability of that term. Most individuals whom we might want to call mystics did not identify their experiences as mystical.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, "mysticism" and its derivative terms are extremely vague, and are used differently in different contexts. As Hans Penner puts it,

When we review the history of texts on mysticism we observe that at the beginning mysticism was defined in rather straightforward terms. With the passage of time and greater attention to the subject, things have changed; now mysticism eludes all attempts at definition. The various attempts at defining mysticism clearly suggest that there simply is no identifiable subject for study. The reaction to this state of affairs has been the development of studies in particular mysticisms.<sup>19</sup>

I side with Penner in not treating mysticism as an identifiable subject for study, and even question the usefulness of delineating particular mysticisms, doubting, as it were, that slicing clouds would make them less fluffy.

When applied to Buddhism in particular, the term "mysticism" and its derivatives appear to be even vaguer than such

18. Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 184. Wilfred Cantwell Smith's work Proudfoot refers to is *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Mentor, 1964).

19. Hans H. Penner, "The Mystical Illusion," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 94.

unenlightening terms as “enlightenment,” for example. It is true that similar to “mysticism,” “enlightenment” also derives from a context foreign to Buddhism and is loaded with questionable agendas and non-Buddhist meanings. It is also true that both terms share the similar fate of contributing to an impressive amount of confusion created by their careless application to a motley variety of phenomena in both scholarly and popular discourses on religion and Buddhism. But while “enlightenment” was initially used in order to translate a very specific term, *bodhi*,<sup>20</sup> “mysticism” has never been meaningfully used for translating or clarifying any Buddhist categories or concepts.

Because “mysticism” and “mystical experience” do not match the Buddhist views, I do not attempt to define them or even to sketch out their general characteristics. As for the research on mysticism and mystical experience in general, there is an impressive amount of literature,<sup>21</sup> and I simply have nothing to add. Some scholarly works are also very useful for tracing theories and

20. In passing, it is interesting to note that a great deal of confusion has been created by the term “enlightenment” and its careless application to diverse Buddhist and non-Buddhist systems. I am using “awakening” throughout this book, partly in order to avoid confusion and partly because “awakening” approximates *bodhi* much better than “enlightenment.” The term “enlightenment” was first applied to the Buddhist context by T. W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922), a Pali scholar and founder of the Pali Text Society. Rhys Davids translated *bodhi* as “Enlightenment,” apparently wishing to associate the knowledge acquired by the Buddha with the knowledge of the European Enlightenment. See Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Columbian Exposition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 106–107. In his *Nirvana: Concept, Imagery, Narrative* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 79, Steven Collins also argues that “awakening” is a more accurate translation of *bodhi*, although in his opinion “[t]he imagery of light is widespread enough to make the slight mistranslation of *bodhi* and *buddha* as ‘Enlightenment’ and ‘Enlightened’ admissible” (Ibid., 81). (I retain “enlightenment” when citing works in English which use this term.)
21. See, for example, Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., *Mysticism and Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), and Jordan Paper, *The Mystic Experience: A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

history of studies of mysticism and mystical experience.<sup>22</sup> Because my objective is not to address mystical experiences across different religious traditions, including Buddhist ones, but rather in the context of the Tibetan Buddhist world to explore some seminal experiences and realizations that can be called “mystical,” I will not be using theories and methods aimed at explaining mystical experience per se; they will be out of context and irrelevant to my task.

My approach to the topic of Buddhist mystical experiences, therefore, might sound paradoxical: on the one hand, this book is in large part about Tibetan Buddhist contributions to the issues surrounding the topic of mystical experience; on the other hand, the book does not deal with mysticism per se and does not offer any classifications, theories, or comparisons of mysticisms. In fact, there is nothing paradoxical in this approach at all, and it is designed to serve very specific ends. My position is that we can use the vagueness of the terms “mysticism” and “mystical experience” to our advantage if our objective is to clarify specific phenomena these terms address rather than selecting only a few phenomena as illustrations of limited definitions of the terms themselves. My approach, therefore, is not much different from exploring specific topics under such general rubrics as “religion” and “religious studies” without necessarily defining those categories and yet enriching their understanding.

My interest lies not in the topic of mysticism per se but in specific topics dealt with by Tibetan thinkers that I attempt to link

22. For a very helpful survey and analysis of several representative theories of mysticism, see Studstill, *The Unity of Mystical Traditions* (see note 41). See also Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and “The Mystic East”* (London: Routledge, 1999), 7–34, 161–186 (hereafter, *Orientalism and Religion*).

with certain sensitive issues in the studies of mysticism in order to enrich our understanding of mystical experience. My discussion of such categories as ineffability, mediation, spontaneity, and so forth is designed to fulfill this objective. Here I join Robert Gimello, who suggests caution in handling Buddhist themes related to mysticism and meditation, but also argues that scholars who apply such efforts will be rewarded:

Not only will they thereby increase their store of information, but they may also discover, embedded in the studied traditions themselves, new categories of interpretation, new criteria of judgment. These, in turn, may not only better suit their Asian subjects, but may also prove cross-culturally more useful than their counterparts of western origin. In the case of mysticism or the contemplative life this is particularly to be anticipated.<sup>23</sup>

Like mysticism, the topic of mystical experience in its application to various forms of Buddhism also has to be handled with caution and sensitivity; without specifying what “experience” refers to in each particular case, application of this term in combination with “mystical” to Buddhist views and practices might only obscure rather than clarify their nature.

In particular, the meaning of experience in Tibetan Buddhism is more complicated than theories of mystical experience derived

23. Robert Gimello, “Mysticism and Meditation,” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 179–180. Gimello himself prefers to take mystical experience in the Buddhist context narrowly, arguing that mystical experience as it is commonly understood is limited only to a particular type of Buddhist meditation, such as practices of calming, and that the terms “mystical” and “mysticism” should be restricted to the states of *śamatha* and *samādhi*, which Buddhists themselves distinguish from and subordinate to discernment or *vipaśyanā* (Ibid., 188ff.).

from other sources tend to suggest.<sup>24</sup> Tibetan thinkers and their Indian predecessors emphasize realizations of/insights into reality and the abandonment of obscurations achieved through contemplation, ethical behavior, and ritual practice. Experience per se is assigned only a secondary importance, usually as a by-product and indicator of the progress on the path. For example, the influential Indian Buddhist thinker Vasubandhu (ca. fifth century), whose writings also enjoy popularity in Tibet, states in his celebrated *Treasury of Abhidharma* (*Abhidharmakośa*):

The Teacher's [i.e., the Buddha's] holy Dharma is twofold:  
[It has] the nature of textual statements and realizations.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, the Buddha's teachings are of two types. The former type is what he directly or indirectly taught to his disciples. The latter is what his followers realize through incorporating the former type into personal practice. From this perspective, all instances of the Buddhist path will be seen as realizations (e.g., realization of selflessness) or auxiliaries and outcomes of those realizations (e.g., renunciation and nirvāṇa respectively).

24. For a critique of the overemphasis by some modern Buddhist apologists on the role of experience in Buddhism, see Robert H. Sharf's "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," *Numen* 42, no. 3 (1995): 228–283. But see also Janet Gyatso, "Healing Burns with Fire: The Facilitations of Experience in Tibetan Buddhism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 1 (1999): 113–147 (hereafter, "Healing Burns with Fire"). Gyatso rightly observes that Sharf himself goes too far in his claim that the idea of unmediated meditative experience in Buddhism came from the western mentors of modern Asian apologists (*Ibid.*, 114), and in particular argues that his "claim that writing from personal experience is rare in Buddhism is also contravened by the Tibetan case" (*Ibid.*, 116).
25. Skt. *saddharmo dvividhaḥ śāsturāgamādhigamātmakaḥ*. In Swāmi Dwārikādās Śāstri (ed.), *The Abhidharmakośa & Bhāṣya of Ācārya Vasubandhu with Sphuṭārthā Commentary of Ācārya Yaśomitra*, vol. 2 (Varanasi, India: Bauddha Bharati, 1998), 31 (hereafter, *The Abhidharmakośa & Bhāṣya*).



Tibetan Buddhists use several terms that can be translated as “experience” but have different meanings when discussed together or addressed in specific contexts. Only some of these terms have meanings that overlap with the meaning of “realization,” and it is realization that is emphasized even in such “experience-oriented” systems as Mahāmudrā (*phyag chen*, Great Seal) and Dzokchen. Take, for example, the Tibetan terms *nyam* (*nyams*) and *nyongwa* (*myong ba*), both of which—as well as their combination *nyamn-yong* (*nyams myong*)—can be translated as “experience.” Treating *nyam* as meditatively cultivated experience and *nyongwa* as a more general category of experience, Janet Gyatso writes about attitudes of Tibetan contemplatives to the former:

Meditative experiences are seen as tricky matters; they can be negative or positive, soteriologically speaking ... Even the positive ones are ambiguous, since on the one hand they are desired and expressly cultivated, but on the other hand they are dangerous: if they are not understood to be empty, it is warned, they can become the object of attachment, whereby the entire purpose of the practice would be destroyed. Hence the point is not simply to have more meditative experiences but to achieve “realization” (*rtogs-pa*) or understanding of the nature of such experiences.<sup>26</sup>

The category of “experience” in Tibetan Buddhism is narrower than the “experience” which is a part of the term “mystical experience,” because the latter also covers those mental states that are clearly distinguished from experience by Tibetan thinkers. The Mahāmudrā system, for example, addresses different types of

26. Janet Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 191 (hereafter, *Apparitions of the Self*).

direct insights or realizations (*rtogs pa*) into the nature of mind that can be preceded or accompanied by experiences of bliss, clarity, and nonconceptuality (*bde gsal mi rtog pa'i nyams*), but are considered to be separate from and superior to them.<sup>27</sup>

When one is encouraged to personally taste, experience, and realize different elements of Buddhist teachings, it is not the experience per se that is being emphasized but the fact that one has to “interiorize” those elements or discover them “within” oneself instead of treating them merely as external objects of intellectual study. Therefore, we should not confuse these referents of “experience” with any of the specific experiences of bliss, nonconceptuality, etc., that Buddhists often warn against forming attachment to and which they do not treat as unique objectives of their practice.<sup>28</sup>

This, of course, is not to deny the crucial role played by meditative experiences in Tibetan Buddhism, whose diverse traditions emphasize the importance of using meditation to personally test and experience the effectiveness of Buddhist teachings. The importance of experience in Buddhist practice is also indicated by the fact that the general Tibetan term for “practice” is “taking into experience” (*nyams len*). Such specific Dzokchen terms as the “increase of experiential visions” (*nyams snang gong 'phel*)<sup>29</sup> also indicate the importance of experience on advanced levels of the Buddhist practice. Furthermore, when such Tibetan thinkers as Serdok Penchen Shakya Chokden

27. For details, see Dakpo Tashi Namgyal (tr. Lobsang P. Lhalungpa), *Mahāmudrā: The Moonlight—Quintessence of Mind and Meditation* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 355ff. (hereafter *Mahāmudrā*). In this context we should distinguish between the experience of nonconceptuality and the actual state of nonconceptuality. As Gyatso points out, the threefold category of meditative experiences seems to be a Tibetan innovation evident in Tibet by at least the twelfth century. *Apparitions of the Self*, 299 n.27.

28. For the detailed analysis of this issue, see Gyatso, “Healing Burns with Fire,” 117ff.

29. This is the name of one of the four visions (*snang ba bzhi*) as they are described in the Lonchen Nyingtik (*klong chen snying thig*) system of Dzokchen. In progressive order, they are manifest reality (*chos nyid mngon sum*), increase of experiential visions (*nyams snang*

(*gser mdog paṅ chen shākya mchog ldan*, 1428–1507) use the term “definitive meaning experienced through meditation” (*sgom pas nyams su myong bya’i nges don*), they clearly treat the direct realization of ultimate reality as the *experience* of ultimate reality, thereby indicating the experiential quality of such realization.<sup>30</sup> Thus, I largely agree with Janet Gyatso, who suggests that “the realization named by *rtogs* and other terms should properly be considered special varieties of enlightened experiences themselves.”<sup>31</sup> Throughout this study I will be using the terms “realization of ultimate reality” and “experience of ultimate reality” interchangeably, because in that particular case Tibetan thinkers themselves can understand the term “experience” (*nyams su myong ba*) as “realization.”

## GLANCING AT THE ISSUE OF (UN)MEDIATED MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

The question regarding whether there can be (un)mediated mystical experience has for a long time been troubling scholars of religious studies.<sup>32</sup> This question is especially important

*gong ’phel*), culminated awareness (*rig pa tshad phebs*), and transcending mind exhaustion of phenomena (*chos zad blo ’das*). See also *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, 339.

30. See p. 151 for the full quotation. Nevertheless, in other contexts, such as the discussion of self-awareness or self-cognition (*rang rig, svasaṃvedana*), Shākya Chokden makes subtle but crucial distinctions between cognition, realization, and experience. See my *Visions of Unity: The Golden Paṅḍita Shākya Chokden’s New Interpretation of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), chap. 5 section 4 (hereafter, *Visions of Unity*).
31. “Healing Burns with Fire,” 120. I prefer to limit the term “enlightened experience”/“experience of awakening” only to what Buddhists understand as experiences/realizations of enlightenment/awakening. Not *all* realizations named by *rtogs* fall under this category.
32. For the debate over this issue, see articles published in Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, especially Katz’s “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism”

to those who contest the possibility that followers of different religious traditions who have diverse backgrounds, follow different practices, and hold contradictory worldviews might achieve similar mystical experience(s). Claiming the possibility of unmediated mystical experience is important to those who believe in the existence of “religion” and “mysticism” as generic phenomena with definable characteristics, whose essence lies in personal experience, and whose manifestations are found in Buddhism, Christianity, and so forth. Denying this possibility is crucial to those who question the applicability of such categories, as well as narratives and theories designed for their explanation.

Over the past thirty years, polemics about mediated and unmediated mystical experience have heated, boiled, welled up, and spilled into the area of Buddhist thought and practice. However, Buddhist thinkers and contemporary scholars of mysticism clearly pursue different objectives, have different interests, and operate within different conceptual frameworks. This is especially clear when we compare the approaches of Buddhist thinkers influential in Tibet with those of the two prominent adversaries

in the same volume, pp. 22–74, and Robert K. C. Forman (ed.), *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), especially Forman’s own “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting” in that volume, pp. 3–49. For further details of Forman’s arguments, see Robert K. C. Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999). For further details of Katz’s position, see Steven Katz, “The ‘Conservative’ Character of Mystical Experience,” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3–60, and Steven Katz, “Mysticism and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture,” in *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7–67. See also articles by contributors to the latter two volumes. For further references, see Forman’s *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 2, 173–174. Katz succinctly explains his position in his “Diversity and the Study of Mysticism,” cited above.

on the issue of (un)mediated mystical experience, Steven Katz and Robert Forman.

Katz's position is best described in his own words: "*There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences.* Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated."<sup>33</sup> Importantly, Katz adds that the process of mediation occurs *during* the experience itself, not only before or after.<sup>34</sup> Forman, on the other hand, using Roland Fischer's "cartography" of conscious states, splits them into ergotropic (i.e., states of hyperarousal) and trophotropic (i.e., hypoaroused states), and tends to reserve the term "mysticism" only for trophotropic states that are marked by low levels of cognitive and physiological activity.<sup>35</sup> He specifically focuses on the "pure consciousness event" (PCE), defining it as a "wakeful though contentless (nonintentional) consciousness," and further identifying it with what Walter Stace called "introvertive mysticism," distinguished from "extrovertive mysticism."<sup>36</sup>

The disagreement between the two sides is well summarized by Forman, who refers to his opponents as "constructivists" and to his own "school" as "Perennial Psychologists":<sup>37</sup>

33. "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 26. (Emphasis is the author's own.)

34. *Ibid.*, 26–27.

35. "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 5–7. For Roland Fischer's "cartography," see Roland Fischer, "A Cartography of the Ecstatic and Meditative States," in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. Richard Woods (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 286–305.

36. "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," 8. In *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, Forman has also included DMS (dualistic mystical state), contrasting it with PCE.

37. For the reasons why Forman gives this name to his "school," see his "Introduction: Mystical Consciousness, the Innate Capacity, and the Perennial Psychology," in *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K. C. Forman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 28.

In sum, the constructivists argued that mysticism results from a process akin to constructing. Out of their social, linguistic, and religious background, the mystics construct and shape their experiences. Because each culture constructs differently, members of different cultures shape and build different experiences. But the mystics we have discussed all suggest that mysticism results from relinquishing such constructive, linguistic process and coming to something that is innate within the human being.

By this these mystics apparently refer to something originating in or inherent in the constitution of the person rather than derived from culture or experience. The claim here is that key aspects of certain mystical experiences are not constructed from language, learning, personality, or culture acquisition but come from something inherent or prelinguistic in us.<sup>38</sup>

Both Katz and Forman tend to address mystical experience in general, although they do limit it to examples that suit their respective agendas. As Victor Hori observes, to support his claim that all cases of mystical experience are contextually constructed, Katz systematically chooses only those reported cases of mystical experience that have intellectual content, while Forman never discusses reported cases of mystical experience that have much content.<sup>39</sup> Larry Short also points out that in arguing for the existence of the pure consciousness event, Forman, and those scholars who have joined him, attempt to “demonstrate that mystical experience is epistemologically extraordinary (that is, an exception to

38. “Introduction: Mystical Consciousness, the Innate Capacity, and the Perennial Psychology,” 11.

39. Hori, “Kōan and Kenshō,” 282, 310 n.4. The exception is Forman’s DMS, mentioned in note 36.

the general rule that consciousness is mediated), as a way of establishing the possibility of a common core to mystical experience.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, contemporary scholarship demonstrates that this divide itself is questionable.<sup>41</sup>

Importantly, Katz's and Forman's positions—which following other scholars I will be referring to as “constructivist” and “essentialist” respectively—cannot be easily applied to the Buddhist context, as Tibetan Buddhist writings and writings of Indian thinkers prominent in Tibet will readily testify. To begin with, while Katz and Forman debate about the very *possibility* of unmediated

40. Larry Short, “Mysticism, Mediation, and the Non-Linguistic,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, no. 4 (1995): 670.

41. Richard King rightly notices that “the way in which this debate has been framed has tended to reflect the presuppositions and concerns of post-Enlightenment Western thought” (*Orientalism and Religion*, 173). For a nuanced analysis of this debate, also described as the “constructivist-essentialist debate,” see Martin T. Adam, “A Post-Kantian Perspective on Recent Debates about Mystical Experience,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70, no. 4 (2002): 801–817. Adam questions the appropriateness of the experience/interpretation distinction, which in his opinion presupposes the Kantian distinction between intuition and understanding, as well as noumenon and phenomenon. Victor Hori is also critical of this divide, approaching it from the Rinzai Zen perspective. He describes this divide as follows: “Katz and his opponents both agree in dividing the spectrum of consciousnesses into those with cognitive content and those without, into those that are mediated (not pure) and those that are unmediated (pure). They both assume that these categories are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive of all possibilities. They disagree only on whether there is or is not experience of pure consciousness” (“Kōan and Kenshō in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum,” 282–283). According to Larry Short, the argument about unmediated, pure consciousness is based on a false dilemma, because both Forman and Katz, despite their different approaches, restrict their discussion of mediation to the “sociolinguistic”; for example, all of Katz's samples consist of different sociolinguistic belief systems (“Mysticism, Mediation, and the Non-Linguistic,” 661, 663). Short himself argues against limiting mediation to just that, and suggests that overall mediation is “not an obstacle to experience, but its *sine qua non*, and not a barrier to understanding, but the process of understanding” (*Ibid.*, 664). A very helpful overview and critique of some of the key constructivist (including Katz's) and essentialist (including Forman's) theories of mysticism is provided by Studstill in *The Unity of Mystical Traditions*, 19–86, 240–270. Studstill himself disagrees with Short, and along with Forman argues that “even the more subtle, universal forms of mediation can be “forgotten” at advanced stages of mystical practice” (*Ibid.*, 66).

mystical experience, those thinkers take for granted that certain mystical states—the direct realization of ultimate reality being most representative—are not mediated by any conceptual images or verbal constructs *at the time of their occurrence*.<sup>42</sup> This is despite the fact that they *are* necessarily mediated through specific practices that precede them, and in cases other than buddhahood are also limited to realizing only some “parts” of reality. Those thinkers also disagree on the question whether the direct realization of ultimate reality has such “content” as images and involves mental processes. Therefore, they hold divergent views on the meaning and process of mediation involved in mystical experiences.

Overall, they will agree with Katz that most of our experiences are shaped or conditioned by social, linguistic, and religious background. Nevertheless, most of them will disagree that such key mystical experiences as the direct realization of reality fall under the same category of constructed experiences.<sup>43</sup> Many Tibetan thinkers may also agree with Forman that such key experiences are free of “content” in terms of having no objects, or that they “come from something inherent or prelinguistic in us.” But those experiences are precisely the ones that those thinkers see as accessible *only* to their fellow Buddhists; their availability to anyone who did not undergo specific training and conditioning approved by them is simply out of the question. For example, were one to claim the possibility of realizing the lack of self/selflessness (*bdag med*, *nairātmya*) or the universal emptiness through such non-Buddhist

42. It also should be noted that Tibetan Buddhist thinkers treat such categories as time, space, subject-object intentionality, etc., as conceptually constructed. Demonstrating that a certain experience is not mediated by concepts therefore automatically excludes it from being mediated by time, space, and other such constructs.

43. I discuss details of the direct realization of ultimate reality in many places in this book, especially in chapter 2 section 3, chapter 4 section 1, and chapter 5.



techniques as contemplation of an eternal self or devotion to a creator God, such a claim would be dismissed as nonsensical.

Here we are not dealing with some sort of “spiritual greed” or an attempt to create closure around one’s own tradition as a means of boosting its uniqueness and simultaneously keeping outsiders away. Rather, this stance is dictated by the very mechanism of such experiences as the direct realization of emptiness addressed below. On the following pages, we will encounter many thinkers who share the “paradoxical” position that those experiences are necessarily brought about by different types of conditioning while not being mediated by any concepts when they actually occur. This position is well exemplified by the approach of the influential Indian thinker Dignāga (ca. 480–540), whose epistemological ideas, together with those of his famous interpreter Dharmakīrti (ca. 600–670), became influential in Tibet and were creatively applied to Tibetan philosophical and contemplative systems. Summarizing this position, Richard King writes that according to Dignāga,

sense-perception (*pratyakṣa*), although immediate and non-conceptual in itself, is mediated in human experience by conceptual constructions (*kalpanā*). What we apprehend with our senses, in its unmediated givenness, is the particular instant (*svalakṣaṇa*) that characterizes what is really there. However, the picture of reality that we, as unenlightened beings, construct is the product of the association of our ‘pure sensations’ with linguistic forms—such as names (*nāma*), categories (*jāti*) and concepts in general—acquired from our linguistic and cultural context. These, Dignāga argued, result in a misapprehension of reality since they derive from the construction of

universals (*samānyalakṣaṇa*) in a world in which only unique particulars exist.<sup>44</sup>

While Tibetan Buddhist thinkers—especially their overwhelming majority who accept the Niḥsvabhāvavāda (*ngo bo nyid med par smra ba*, Proponents of Entitylessness)<sup>45</sup> philosophy as the highest worldview—would strongly disagree that we can apprehend with our ordinary senses “what is really there,” they are in consensus that the ordinary world constructed by unawakened beings is the result of their conceptual and linguistic activity. But the story does not stop there—they also share and believe in the possibility of achieving the goal of Dignāga’s system, which is

to liberate the Buddhist practitioner from attachment to these linguistic and cultural forms through meditative cultivation of the mind (*citta-bhāvanā*), ethical discipline (*śīla*) and the development of analytical insight (*prajñā*).<sup>46</sup>

No matter what particular terminology they use and what interpretive position on the nature of reality they hold, those thinkers will agree with the general perspective of what King describes as “Dignāga’s constructivism” that

postulated a way out of the web of cultural and linguistic conditioning through the cultivation of the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) and the development of a non-dual (*advaya*)

44. *Orientalism and Religion*, 178–179.

45. I focus on details of conflicting Tibetan interpretations of this system in chapter 5.

46. *Orientalism and Religion*, 179.

and unconstructed or non-conceptual awareness (*nirvikalpa jñāna*) of things as they really are (*yathābhūta, tathatā*).<sup>47</sup>

In other words, while those thinkers concur that our ordinary experience is constructed, they also concur—in contrast to Katz and other constructivists—that there is a way out of that conditioned state to the unconditioned and unconstructed state or experience. I therefore agree with King that in contrast to the “epistemologies of limitation” advocated by post-Enlightenment successors of the Kantian epistemology, Buddhist epistemology is better understood as an “epistemology of enlightenment.”<sup>48</sup> That applies to Tibetan Buddhism as well.

Although it is not my primary objective to either criticize or endorse essentialist and constructivist positions, a few critical remarks are in order as a means of highlighting Tibetan Buddhist approaches to mystical experiences. I will start with Forman.

Overall, Forman’s approach is very useful for directing our attention to *a* transcendent nonlinguistic reality that in one or another form is readily accepted by many Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. Nevertheless, his tendency to draw overarching conclusions based on insufficiently explored evidence makes his position open to criticisms from the Tibetan Buddhist side. For example, he argues: “The claim that mysticism is an encounter with consciousness itself is surprisingly common in a wide range of mystical traditions.”<sup>49</sup> Then, having referred to positions of two individuals from very different cultures and times—a famous Sufi thinker, Ibn al-’Arabī (1165–1240), and a popular contemporary

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49. “Introduction: Mystical Consciousness, the Innate Capacity, and the Perennial Psychology,” 12.

Hindu teacher, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (ca. 1917–2008)—he writes:

The two mystics just discussed are adding that that which is within us from the start and which is encountered in these quiet times is *consciousness*, or *awareness itself*. Indeed, that we are, in some unmixed way, “encountering” consciousness itself may be the marker of these events. In different ways and with different emphases, these mystics are suggesting that what is encountered in these mystical events is the subject’s sheerest awareness itself. Apparently this is the selfsame consciousness by means of which one has always been conscious, but here it seems to be unalloyed with the usual intentional content.<sup>50</sup>

This passage is a good example of the essentialist tactics used by Forman, viz., referring to statements of several religious authorities made “in different ways and with different emphases,” and then, without much examination of the contextual meaning of those statements, claiming similarity or identity of their referents. In this particular passage such referents are consciousness and awareness. One does not have to delve into cross-religious or linguistic analysis of what can be indicated—and translated—by the words “consciousness” and “awareness”; a quick glance at the Tibetan word for awareness, *rikpa* (*rig pa*, also translated as “cognition”), should suffice to demonstrate how problematic Forman’s position is.

Depending on context, *rikpa* can refer to minds’ inborn function of being aware of their objects and themselves<sup>51</sup>—the function

50. Ibid.,13.

51. See chapter 2 note 1 for more details.

“by means of which one has always been conscious.” Alternatively, in such systems as Dzokchen it can refer to the sublime ultimate reality that underlies, but is distinct from, other minds. Whether awareness (in the former sense) necessarily has an object, whether it can ever take oneself as an object, whether awareness on the level of realization of ultimate reality realizes something, whether that something naturally manifests or is initially constructed through an intentional conceptual process—these are just a few among many issues that are hotly disputed and understood very differently by Tibetan scholars and contemplatives.

Likewise, whether realization of ultimate reality involves realization of consciousness or not, and whether and which consciousness persists during such realization and in the states of *nirvāṇa*, absorption of cessation,<sup>52</sup> and so forth, are also very controversial issues whose understanding varies greatly from thinker to thinker. To ignore these and other distinctions is to ignore the very topic one attempts to clarify and to basically lock one’s interpretive theory in a self-interpreting and self-sustaining circle.

Forman’s position is further problematized by his basic assumption that the process of deconstruction of concepts and linguistic processes engaged in by different mystics is somehow the same and brings about the same results. This is problematic from the perspective of Tibetan thinkers, such as Tsongkhapa and Gorampa whose ideas we will explore in the last chapter, who will agree that the direct realization of ultimate reality, as well as the final state of buddhahood, are devoid of concepts. Nevertheless, as we will soon find out, whether and how one uses concepts for deconstructing concepts, how much one deconstructs, and the

52. See pp. 69-70 for details.

exact means of that deconstruction are the subjects of heated polemics that energize and enliven the Tibetan Buddhist world. At different times, these issues were dealt with by Tibetan interpreters of the gradualist versus sudden/simultaneist positions of the “Samyé debate,”<sup>53</sup> the Yogācāra (*rnal ’byor spyod pa*, Yogic Practice) versus Niḥsvabhāvavāda arguments,<sup>54</sup> contemplative techniques of special insight and calm abiding,<sup>55</sup> the worldly and world-transcending paths,<sup>56</sup> the Māhayāna versus “Hīnayāna” divide, and much more.<sup>57</sup> To ignore them is to ignore some of the most exciting, profound, and important issues that Buddhist thinkers have creatively struggled with for over a millennium. (Note that the polemical nature of these issues suggests that mystical experiences in Tibetan Buddhism can hardly be discussed in total separation from polemics on the nature of those experiences—a point on which I will elaborate later.)<sup>58</sup>

All Tibetan Buddhist traditions address such categories as realization of selflessness, insight into reality, awakening, path, and nirvāṇa, because those traditions deal with the topics of the four noble truths. Although the same categories and terms are used, their meaning varies greatly from tradition to tradition, from thinker to thinker, from context to context. Therefore, similarities in terminology and the fact that Tibetan Buddhists deal with common issues should not mislead us into ignoring differences, especially when differences—such as separating

53. See pp. 134ff. for details.

54. See chapter 4 section 3 for details.

55. See pp. 84–85.

56. See chapter 3 section 1 for details.

57. As will become clear, while some of those distinctions can be rather exaggerated and their impact on actual contemplative practices and experiences might be questionable, others do affect those practices and experiences in significant ways.

58. For details, see chapter 4 section 2, and chapter 5.

awareness from all other minds or distinguishing insight into reality from a mere experience of the storehouse consciousness (*kun gzhi'i rnam shes, ālayavijñāna*)<sup>59</sup>—are crucial to mystics themselves.

I should also point out important differences between Forman's and Tibetan thinkers' approaches to mind in general. Forman writes: "Yet despite the general currents of Western philosophy, I believe it makes sense to think of consciousness as distinguishable from content, even with reference to ordinary experiences."<sup>60</sup> This position runs against general currents of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy as well, as the discussion of mind models below should make clear. Here, suffice it to say that the idea of mind as a container that can be filled with or emptied of contents is not common in Tibetan Buddhism, whose understanding of mind in relation to thoughts, emotions, and experiences is closer to our understanding of the body in relation to organs, fluids, and bones: while in an ordinary conversation we might talk about "bones inside the body," for example, it does not take long to realize that the body does not contain bones, organs, connective tissue, skin, etc., but consists of them.<sup>61</sup> Forman clearly is trying to build a model of consciousness that would support his theory of mystical experience. While in itself this is not problematic, the fact that his model contradicts important Buddhist theories of mind used for explaining mystical experiences that Forman himself alludes to, along with the fact that he does not address that contradiction, is problematic because it obscures the very subject that he attempts to elucidate.

59. See chapter 2 section 1.

60. "Introduction: Mystical Consciousness, the Innate Capacity, and the Perennial Psychology," 17.

61. For more details, see chapter 2 section 1, especially pp. 52–53.

In contrast to Forman, Katz draws our attention to particularities of specific mystical experiences, emphasizing the linguistic and social contexts in which those experiences are anchored. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that despite their sensitivity to contextual details, Katz and those who share his approach tend to slide into the same trap of overgeneralizations about mystical experiences that essentialists are so prone to falling into. This is because both parties believe that one general basic schema can be applied to different mystical experiences across diverse religious cultures. To demonstrate my point, let me cite some of Katz's statements.

Katz writes that

what appear to be similar-sounding descriptions are not similar descriptions and do *not* indicate the same experience. They do not because language is itself contextual and words 'mean' only in contexts. The same words—beautiful, sublime, ultimate reality, ineffable, paradoxical, joyful, transcending all empirical content, etc.—can apply and have been applied to more than one object.<sup>62</sup>

Katz thereby rightly criticizes those essentialists who are misled by such similar sounding terms as “deconstruction” and “emptying” and believe that they refer to similar processes, as well as insisting that because mystics often make similar claims of “transcendancy,” “ineffability,” etc., of their experiences, their key mystical experiences must also be alike (if not identical). (In the Buddhist world too, it is well known that words follow concepts, and that there is no direct correspondence between words

62. “Diversity and the Study of Mysticism,” 200.



and the “objective realities” they express.) Despite these valuable observations, Katz makes a problematic jump when he writes:

Given the epistemic elements involved in arriving at a comprehensive phenomenology of mysticism it is wiser to stand on its head the traditional, though arbitrary, analysis of mystical experience, which contends for separable components of ‘experience’ and ‘description’, and argue that the ontological structures inherent in language and judgement pre-create the contours of experience and thus make ‘pure experience’ a chimera.<sup>63</sup>

In the context of Katz’s key position on mystical experience, outlined at the beginning of this section, the passage indicates that he rules out any possibility of a mystical experience that could transcend linguistic constructs and concepts. Because according to Tibetan Buddhist systems such an experience is not only possible but its cultivation is *the very means of destroying conceptuality* and achieving the ultimate goal of the path—nirvāṇa—Katz’s position runs contrary to one of their key tenets, with its related epistemology and soteriology. In further contrast to Katz’s approach, the distinction between experiences and realizations on the one hand and their descriptions on the other is a tool used by some Tibetan Buddhist thinkers for clarifying the nature of certain mystical experiences.<sup>64</sup> Like Forman, therefore, Katz also is building a general theory aimed at explaining *all* mystical experiences. Yet those experiences also include the ones dealt with by Buddhist thinkers who would not only discredit

63. “The ‘Conservative’ Character of Mystical Experience,” 41.

64. See chapter 4 section 3. In chapter 5, I myself adopt this approach.

such a theory but also see it as opposed to their fundamental worldviews.<sup>65</sup>

I should emphasize here that, in general, I see no problem in the essentialist and constructivist theories' seeming incompatibility with particular religious views and practices. Why not, after all? Nor is this book an attempt to endorse Tibetan Buddhist—or, for that matter, anyone's—truth claims. I also believe that, like other theories, essentialist and constructivist theories serve their specific purposes. They are especially useful when one tries to understand mystical experience in general, without focusing on a particular religious tradition. This is because, as Randall Studstill puts it, “the very attempt to understand mystical transformation across traditions indicates the need for an explanatory framework outside the traditions themselves.”<sup>66</sup> It is only natural, then, that such inherently etic theories will run into conflict with some emic worldviews, especially when the latter run into conflict among themselves.

The reason why I find both the essentialist and the constructivist positions wanting in this context is that while addressing Buddhist mystical experiences, they don't seriously take into account the

65. Gimello's position can serve as another example of the generalizing constructivist interpretation of mystical experiences. Gimello is even more outspoken than Katz when he writes: “acceptance of the dependency of mysticism upon its contexts, together with the entailed acceptance of the fundamental differences among varieties of mysticism, lends support to a view repugnant to many enthusiasts, viz. that mystical experience is simply the psychosomatic enhancement of religious beliefs and values or of beliefs and values of other kinds which are held ‘religiously’. But such a view of mystical experience should be disturbing only to those who set little store by religious beliefs and values.” “Mysticism in Its Contexts,” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 85.

66. *The Unity of Mystical Traditions*, 17. Whether there is such a thing as “mystical transformation across traditions” is a problematic issue that I prefer to leave on the level of doubt. Likewise, whether the construction of general theories of mystical experience is justified, who justifies them, what their relevance is, and who benefits from using them constitute a separate issue that I will not address here. I would only note that I doubt that such theories or “frameworks” can be equally distant from all religious traditions or remain entirely external and not influenced by any of them.

key theories and ideas that Buddhists use for both describing and producing them. Due to the intimate connection between those theories and ideas and the mystical experiences they are related to, any interpretation that ignores them will be insufficient for understanding how followers of Buddhist traditions interpret and create their mystical experiences. It goes without saying that if such insufficiency is not remedied, our understanding of mystical experiences will be one-sided, to say the least.

I therefore agree with Richard King, who in his analysis of the debate between Katz and Forman argues that

once this debate moves beyond Western intellectual horizons and one attempts to make universal claims about human experience one is obliged to reconsider the ethnocentric presuppositions of the neo-Kantian paradigm and consider the political and colonial implications of imposing one's own position on the debate. I suggest that there is a need to problematize the modernist and Eurocentric framework of this debate.<sup>67</sup>

And this is precisely what I am attempting to do here. Moving beyond “Western intellectual horizons” and narrowing down “non-Western” ones, I will explore several elements of one particular tradition—Tibetan Buddhism—in connection with the broader topic of mystical experience.

The following two chapters, which focus on the mind and path models, are intended to introduce unfamiliar readers to the complexity of those models and demonstrate their close relationship with specific experiences and realizations dealt with by Tibetan Buddhists. This in turn will put into question the

67. *Orientalism and Religion*, 174.

applicability to Tibetan Buddhism of such foreign ideas and categories as Forman's category of contentless consciousness and Katz's assumption that all our experiences are necessarily constructed and mediated. Discussion of those models will also provide a necessary background and context for the analysis of Tibetan polemics over realization of ultimate reality and other issues addressed in the final two chapters. My overall objective is not to defend one particular model over another but to demonstrate their multiplicity and the indispensability of utilizing specific models when analyzing specific mystical experiences, especially when those models are designed not only for explanation of those experiences but also for their very production.

## The Mind Dimension

As in other religious traditions, in the Tibetan Buddhist world mystical experiences comprise a part of interwoven combinations of different elements or dimensions, such as conceptual and nonconceptual states of mind, models of the path to awakening, diverse cosmological systems, bodily transformations, and so forth. To fully appreciate those experiences, therefore, it is crucial to consider all such related elements instead of just picking and choosing. Some dimensions play a more important role in particular mystical experiences than others. In this and the next chapters, I will respectively focus on two such dimensions: the dimension of mind and the dimension of the Buddhist paths. The former is indispensable for understanding how Tibetan thinkers view mental processes involved in mystical experiences, while the latter is crucial for understanding what those experiences are embedded in, shaped by, limited to, and what role they play within the broader framework of Tibetan Buddhist views and practices. Importantly, different ways of approaching mind and path in Tibetan traditions affect both the nature and descriptions of the mystical experiences of their followers.

The two dimensions are interrelated and overlap: Buddhist paths are understood primarily as a progressive series of mental states, and the majority of mental transformations related to mystical experiences, visions, and realizations in Tibetan Buddhism can be understood only in the context of these paths. Insights into ultimate reality and awakenings are the key points of convergence of the two dimensions; both of them are understood as states of mind (however defined) and located on some level of the Buddhist path (however defined).

In this study, I treat the terms “mind” and “mental states” broadly, referring to all types of mental processes, including those that are given names of wisdom, primordial mind, nondual wisdom, etc., as well as those that according to some thinkers transcend ordinary mentality.<sup>1</sup> I also take the term “Buddhist path” broadly—as encompassing not only paths *to* awakening, which are technically called “paths of learning” (*slob lam, śaikṣamārga*), but results of those paths as well. From this perspective, arhatship and buddhahood are

1. Terms for, definitions of, and interpretations of mind vary from one Buddhist tradition to another. In the Tibetan Buddhist world, mind (*blo*) is usually understood as “cognition”/“awareness” (*rig pa*). As the influential thinker Sakya Pendita Künga Gyeltsen (*sa skya paṇḍita kun dga’ rgyal mtshan*) wrote in his *Treasure of the Science of Valid Cognition: The Root Text and the [Auto-]Commentary* (*Tshad ma rigs pa’i gter gyi rtsa ba dang ’grel pa*, Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 1989; hereafter, *Treasure of the Science of Valid Cognition*), 5, “the definition of mind is cognition” (*blo yi mtshad nyid rig pa yin*). Furthermore, such terms as “consciousness” (*shes pa, jñāna*), “mind” (*blo, buddhi*), and “cognition” or “awareness” (*rig pa, samvedana*) are often treated by Tibetans as synonymous. See Lati Rinbochay (tr. and ed. Elizabeth Napper), *Mind in Tibetan Buddhism: Oral Commentary on Ge-shay Jam-bel-sam-pel’s Presentation of Awareness and Knowledge Composite of All the Important Points Opener of the Eye of New Intelligence* (London: Rider & Company, 1980), 15. I usually translate *sems, citta* also as “mind.” While it is often treated as synonymous with the previous three terms, it can also refer more specifically to—and can be translated as—cognitive states within the twofold division of mind into cognitive states and mental factors (see pp. 46-47).

paths too, as indicated by the term Buddhist thinkers reserve for them both: “path of no more learning” (*mi slob lam, aśaikṣamārga*).<sup>2</sup>

## MIND MODELS

Over centuries, Buddhists have developed highly sophisticated models of the mind’s structure and functioning, and they use them in discussions of realizations of reality, meditative states, progress on the path, exalted visions, and awakening. As will soon become apparent, not only are those models used in order to *describe* such experiences and realizations, but they play an important role in *shaping* them. This interdependent relationship between mind models and mental states is one of the reasons I insist on interpreting Buddhist mystical experiences with the help of specific Buddhist models of mind.

Tibetan Buddhists heavily rely on mind models developed by Indian thinkers, who treat mind not as a reservoir containing thoughts and feelings but rather as a framework of interrelated processes and mental states. The most common model, found in such sources as Vasubandhu’s *Thirty Stanzas (Triṃśikākārikā)*<sup>3</sup> and the second chapter of his aforementioned *Treasury of Abhidharma*, is the twofold division of mind into cognitive states (*sems, citta*) and mental factors (*sems byung, caitta*). Cognitive states are usually subdivided into six—five sensory (*dbang shes, indriyajñāna*) and one mental consciousness (*yiḍ shes,*

2. For more details, see chapter 3 section 1.

3. *Triṃśikākārikā, Sum cu pa'i tshig le'ur byas pa*, D4055, *sems tsam, shi*, 1a–3a. Sanskrit text and English translation in Thomas E. Wood, *Mind Only: A Philosophical and Doctrinal Analysis of the Vijñānavāda*, Monographs of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy 9 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991).

*manojñāna*)—or eight, adding the afflicted mentality (*nyon yid, kliṣṭamanas*) and storehouse consciousness, as is usually done by Yogācāra thinkers. Mental factors are divided into forty-nine, fifty-one, etc., and further grouped into clusters, such as the five omnipresent mental factors (*kun 'gro, sarvatraga*), eleven virtuous mental factors (*dge ba, kuśala*), and so forth. Similar to the other seven types of consciousness, storehouse consciousness is always accompanied by the five omnipresent mental factors: mental contact (*reg pa, sparśa*), attention (*yid byed, manaskāra*), feeling (*tshor ba, vedanā*), discrimination (*'du shes, saṃjñā*), and intention (*sems pa, cetanā*). Also, similar to other cognitive states and mental factors, even the storehouse consciousness has objects of perception (*dmigs pa, ālambana*), such as appearances of the external world.<sup>4</sup>

These models are used to describe all unawakened and awakened states of mind, or limited to unawakened states only. In the latter case, new elements can be added, such as the buddha-essence (*sangs rgyas snying po, buddhagarbha*), primordial mind (*ye shes, jñāna*), etc. Those elements then can be treated as becoming active/manifest during direct realizations of reality, buddhahood, and other circumstances when obscurations subside either temporarily or forever.<sup>5</sup>

4. See also Paul J. Griffiths, "Pure Consciousness and Indian Buddhism," in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K. C. Forman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 84. For a detailed analysis of the storehouse consciousness and related topics, see Gareth Sparham (tr.), *Ocean of Eloquence: Tsong kha pa's Commentary on the Yogācāra Doctrine of Mind* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).
5. Consider, for example, Shakya Chokden's position that the buddha-essence starts only on advanced stages of the Mahāyāna path. For further details, see my "Reburying the Treasure—Maintaining the Continuity: Two Texts by Shakya Chokden on the Buddha-Essence," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 34, no. 6 (2006): 524–538 (hereafter "Reburying the Treasure—Maintaining the Continuity").



A good example of limiting mind to ordinary unawakened consciousness and distinguishing it from more exalted mental states is the following passage authored by Tilopa, who figures prominently in Tibetan tantric lineages derived from India. Tilopa argues that one eventually has to destroy or “kill” mind:

Mind (Skt. *citta*) must be killed!  
 Destroy it with nirvāṇa,  
 and enter the undefiled emptiness  
 of the triple world.<sup>6</sup>

Far from indicating some sort of a blank state of mindlessness, this destruction of mind is accompanied by the manifestation or actualization of the self-cognizing reality:

Where mind  
 has died, breath  
 is completely dissolved;  
 the self-aware (Apabhraṃśa *saa[samveṇa]*)  
 fruit of the real:  
 to whom can it be told?<sup>7</sup>

In this particular context, Tilopa associates mind with thought and distinguishes it from the self-awareness associated with the direct realization of ultimate reality:

Self-awareness (Apabhraṃśa *saasamveṇa*),  
 fruit of the real—

6. Roger R. Jackson (tr.), *Tantric Treasures: Three Collections of Mystical Verse from Buddhist India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 129 (hereafter, *Tantric Treasures*).

7. *Ibid.*, 130.

Tilopāda's saying:  
 what falls within  
 the range of thought (Apabhraṃśa *maṇa*)  
 is not the ultimate.<sup>8</sup>

When no extra mental categories are added, or when they are subsumed under one of the sixfold or eightfold categories, it might be argued that realization of ultimate reality and awakening either are performed by those cognitive states and mental factors or are devoid of any mental states whatsoever and utterly inexpressible.<sup>9</sup>

Tibetan thinkers usually describe ultimate reality and mind realizing it as transcending subjective-objective duality, both in terms of the mode of realization (i.e., *how* the ultimate is realized) and in terms of the agent of realization (i.e., *what* realizes the ultimate). Realization of ultimate reality, therefore, is often treated as objectless.<sup>10</sup> Apart from this “special case,” they are in consensus that minds necessarily have objects. Because it is impossible to have objects and not to have “content” (to use Forman’s terminology), it is safe to argue that in Tibetan Buddhism at least, minds

8. Ibid., 131. In another passage Tilopa separates thought from mind and treats the latter as more fundamental than the former: “Quick! Kill the thought that is not rooted in mind” (Ibid., 140).

9. For more details, see pp. 71 ff.

10. A notable exception to this “rule” is the position of Geluk thinkers who treat ultimate reality as an object, and conceptual and nonconceptual minds realizing it as subjects cognizing that object. In that interpretation, although the subjective-objective duality is not *observed* during the direct realization of ultimate reality, the ultimate reality itself *is* an object, and the mind that realizes it *is* a subject. For details of the Geluk position see chapter 5 section 1. Shakya Chokden, on the other hand, treats the direct realization of reality as transcending the eight types of consciousness, thereby also transcending the subjective-objective duality that in his opinion necessarily qualifies those consciousnesses. He uses the term “object” in the context of the direct realization of reality only for convenience, otherwise explicitly rejecting both the division into and existence of subjects and objects in that context. For details of Shakya Chokden’s position, see chapter 4 section 3.

that do not directly cognize ultimate reality, and/or are not treated as ultimate reality itself, always have “content.”<sup>11</sup>

In their interpretations of Indian philosophical systems, Tibetan scholars disagree on the question of existence of external world or matter. Nevertheless, they concur that with the exception of such positions as that of Vaibhāṣika (*bye brag smra ba*, Particularists),<sup>12</sup> those systems view minds as cognizing objects not barely, but via their “aspects” (*rnam pa, ākāra*), i.e., representations of objects in mind—similar, we might say, to reflections of images in a mirror. They argue that whether one accepts the existence of material atoms that comprise a table, for example (as Sautrāntika does), or sees a table as an entirely mental projection (as Yogācāra does), both Sautrāntika (*mdo sde pa*, Sūtra Followers) and Yogācāra systems agree that what one immediately perceives in the act of perception is not a physical table but its representation or image arising in mind. In the former case, the appearance of that image is believed to be partially caused by external atoms, in the latter by mental conditions only. Both Sautrāntika and Yogācāra, as well as those Niḥsvabhāvavāda thinkers who adopt their epistemological models, agree that the perception of a table is none other than mind’s cognition of itself arisen in the “form” or image of the table.<sup>13</sup> This applies to all other sensory as well as purely mental acts of perception, with the possible exception of the direct realization of ultimate reality (for reasons just stated).

Certain mental states last throughout lifetimes, and can even continue into the state of buddhahood, while others are more short-lived and disappear at a certain point, either temporarily

11. For further details, see pp. 53ff., as well as the last section of this chapter.

12. For more on the tenet systems, see p. 111.

13. See my *Visions of Unity*, 73–74 and 331 n.17.

or forever. For example, according to Yogācāra as presented in Vasubandhu's *Thirty Stanzas*, the storehouse consciousness persists continuously and perishes or transforms in the state of nirvāṇa; the afflicted mentality temporarily ceases in a particular state called "absorption of cessation" (*'gog pa'i snyoms 'jug, nirodhasamāpatti*) and during the direct realization of ultimate reality prior to nirvāṇa, and is completely eradicated in the state of an arhat.

Tibetan traditions also provide dynamic models of mental states as unfolding processes. According to some Buddhist tantric systems, for example, worldly deluded states of consciousness develop on the basis of a primordially pure state of luminosity or clear light (*'od gsal, prabhāsvara*), and in the process of dying the order is reversed: all types of consciousness, including the storehouse consciousness, undergo successive stages of dissolution and vanish back into the basic luminosity at the moment of death just to reemerge again in the postmortem state. Tantric teachings provide elaborate descriptions of these processes with accompanying visions, and Tibetans creatively incorporate them into contemplative practices.<sup>14</sup> During the Generation Stage (*bskyed rim, utpattikrama*) of Highest Yoga Tantra (*bla med rgyud*), for example, one imagines undergoing gradual dissolution of consciousness similar to the process of dying. During the Completion Stage (*rdzogs rim, saṃpañnakrama*),<sup>15</sup> one actually

14. For details, see Lati Rinbochay and Jeffrey Hopkins, *Death, Intermediate State and Rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1985). On how that process is incorporated into tantric practice, see Daniel Cozort, *Highest Yoga Tantra: An Introduction to the Esoteric Buddhism of Tibet* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1986; hereafter, *Highest Yoga Tantra*), and Yangchen Gawai Lodoe (tr. Tenzin Dorjee and Jeremy Russel), *Paths and Grounds of Guhyasamaja [sic]* (Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1995; hereafter *Paths and Grounds of Guhyasamaja*).

15. Interpretations of these two stages vary. One widespread interpretation is that the Generation Stage consists of transforming in one's imagination the whole universe, including oneself, into the maṇḍala of awakened beings, while the Completion Stage

dissolves the energies or winds (*rlung, prāṇa*) into the central energy channel (*rtsa dbu ma, avadhūti*), thereby causing the dissolution of grosser levels of consciousness and triggering related visions and experiences.

Some Tibetan systems—such as the Quintessential Instructions Division (*man ngag sde*) of Dzokchen advocated by Longchen Rapjam (*klong chen rab 'byams*, 1308–1364) and later elaborated upon by Jikmé Lingpa (*'jigs med gling pa*, 1730–1798)—describe the basic reality as awareness (*rig pa*), emphasize its dynamism, and embrace the teaching of nature-manifestation (*gzhi snang*) due to the nature's functioning (*rtsal*). According to Dzokchen, awareness—also called “fundamental mind” (*gnyug sems*)—forms the basis for all the eight types of consciousness mentioned, and its realization cannot be performed by any other mind than that awareness itself. This fundamental awareness is also called “base” (*gzhi*), because all impure and pure awakened states of mind arise from it due to its dynamic functioning.<sup>16</sup>

I should note at this point that although the base, awareness, and luminosity provide for and serve as the basis of the arising of phenomenal appearances, they do not *contain* them. Otherwise,

consists of actually transforming oneself into an awakened being by removing “knots” blocking the central energy channel in the body, dissolving grosser levels of energy and consciousness, utilizing the most subtle levels of energy and mind, etc. Together these two stages comprise what is known as *sādhana* (*sgrub thabs*) or “means of accomplishment.” For further details, see pp. 99ff.

16. For details, see Sam Van Schaik, *Approaching the Great Perfection: Simultaneous and Gradual Methods of Dzogchen Practice in the Longchen Nyingtig* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003; hereafter, *Approaching the Great Perfection*), 51. For a detailed discussion of the dynamic development of different states of mind from the primordial base and their subsequent dissolution, as well as the nature and functioning of those mental states, see Longchen Rapjam, *Great Chariot: [Auto-]Commentary on the “Mind Nature Revitalization of the Great Perfection”* (*Rdzogs pa chen po sems nyid ngal gso*), vol. 1 (Cazadero, CA: Yeshe De Project, 1994; hereafter, *Great Chariot*), 145–174, 250–287. See also Tulku Thondup, *The Practice of Dzogchen*, 52–67, 205–213.

we would have to accept the absurd possibility of a nondualistic nonconceptual state of mind containing dualistic concepts, a non-afflicted state having afflictions (*nyon mongs, kleśa*), and so forth. This is just one among many reasons for the claim that I made and that will play an important role in our discussion of the PCE in the last section of this chapter: *because Tibetan thinkers do not treat mind as a thought container, the idea of emptying mind of its contents is hardly acceptable in the Tibetan Buddhist context.* It is more fruitful, therefore, to pay attention to what state ceases, what state persists, and at what level specific realizations and experiences occur. This adds an additional weight to distinctions between different types and levels of mind.

One should not be misled by such examples—scattered throughout Tibetan texts and contemplative instructions—as an empty house with thieves entering and exiting without finding anything inside (the example of a contemplative mind dissociated from occasional concepts that arise and subside by themselves), clear water with little fish which swim without disturbing the water (the example of maintaining one-pointed concentration while engaging in subtle analysis of reality), and so forth. These are just illustrations used for clarifying certain aspects of those contemplative states, not descriptions of their nature. Furthermore, the first example does not suggest that the house is a reservoir of thieves. Nor does the second example suggest that, similar to water containing fish, one-pointed concentration somehow contains subtle analysis. All it points at is their mutually unobstructive union.

Certain models of mind can add new significance to philosophical and contemplative systems when these models are combined with each other. For example, it is often argued that Highest Yoga Tantra is highly efficient and swift because it teaches utilization of subtle and powerful levels of consciousness that are unheard of

in nontantric systems.<sup>17</sup> Yogācāra terminology of the eight types of consciousness also can be carried into highly elaborate tantric systems and used as an aid in making subtle distinctions between different levels of consciousness utilized in tantric meditation.<sup>18</sup> Dzokchen meditation is built on making a sharp distinction between the fundamental mind of awareness and the eight types of consciousness, and utilizing the former in contemplative practice. As the influential Tibetan thinker Mipam Gyamtso (*mi pham rgya mtsho*, 1846–1912) points out,

[T]he consciousnesses of the eight collections, the substrata, are not the ultimate that is being ascertained by the path of the Great Completeness, whereas the noumenon of the minds of the eight collections—basic knowledge and emptiness, fundamental pristine wisdom, self-arisen and uncompounded—is the mind of clear light to be pointed out and recognized. The naturally clear maṇḍala of the mind, the suchness of Secret Mantra, is this. The path of release [from obstructions], the meaning of the fourth initiation introduced by way of the lama’s quintessential instructions, is this. The innate factuality [that is, the fundamental innate mind of clear light] dawning as an imprint of the winds and minds entering the central channel by way of the path of method [such as in the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*] is also this.<sup>19</sup>

17. See, for example, Daniel Cozort, *Highest Yoga Tantra*, 21ff.

18. See, for example, Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Tayé (*jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas*, 1813–1899), *Abridged Essentials of the Generation and Completion [Stages] Beneficial for the Beginners Who Have Entered the Path* (*Lam zhugs kyi gang zag las dang po pa la phan pa'i bskyed rdzogs kyi gnad bsdus*), translation and Tibetan text in Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thaye (tr. Sarah Harding), *Creation and Completion: Essential Points of Tantric Meditation* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1996; hereafter, *Creation and Completion*), 51–61.

19. Jeffrey Hopkins (tr. and ed.), *Fundamental Mind: The Nyingma View of the Great Completeness by Mi-pam-gya-tso, With Practical Commentary by Khetsun Sangpo*

Mipam thereby distinguishes between the fundamental pristine wisdom or awareness and the eight types of consciousness, argues that genuine Dzokchen practice focuses on the former, and points out that such mind is taught in other tantric systems as well.<sup>20</sup>

Note that this passage implicitly demonstrates important practical differences between Dzokchen and those traditions that do not focus on the fundamental wisdom utilized in Dzokchen practice. At the same time, it explicitly argues that such wisdom does not necessarily have to be accessed by uniquely Dzokchen means, but is accessible through alternative techniques as well. This highlights a complicated threefold issue that I will elaborate upon in chapters 3 and 4: the interrelationships between Tibetan Buddhists' claims about the diversity of their experiences and realizations, the search for a common ground for at least some of their realizations, and the polemics over the nature, causes, and results of those realizations.

It should have become clear by now that mind models used by Buddhists are much more than merely descriptive tools, because they often play an active role in Buddhist realizations and experiences. Not only are they used for distinguishing the practical scope of one's own and others' traditions, but they can also be incorporated into the very fabric of practice. Advanced systems of Buddhist meditation are often built on them.

*Rinbochay* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2006), 68–69. The fourth initiation/empowerment, also called “word empowerment” (*tshig dbang*), is the last in the popular set of the four empowerments of the Highest Yoga tantra. The first three (in order) are vase empowerment (*bum dbang, kalaśābhiṣeka*), secret empowerment (*gsang dbang, guhyābhiṣeka*), and wisdom-primordial mind empowerment (*shes rab ye shes kyi dbang, prajñājñānābhiṣeka*).

20. For further details see *Ibid.*, 52ff. See also Jamgön Kongtrul, *Creation and Completion*, 67ff. for discussion of those distinctions.



## CONCEPTUALITY AND DIRECT PERCEPTION

One distinction that is particularly helpful for understanding Tibetan Buddhist approaches to mystical experiences—and specifically to the direct realization of ultimate reality—is the distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual types of mind. Although conceptuality and the lack thereof are understood by Tibetan thinkers differently, interpretive approaches inspired by the ideas of the famous Indian Buddhist logician Dharmakīrti assumed a place of paramount importance in the Tibetan Buddhist world. Discussion of these ideas is indispensable for dealing with the topics of later chapters, in particular the question of mediation of mystical experiences and the issue of transition from conceptual to nonconceptual realization of reality.

According to Tibetan interpreters of Dharmakīrti's system, conceptuality (*rnam par rtog pa*, *kalpanā*) is understood as a state of mind that cognizes its objects via their generic images or "object universals" (*don spyi*, *arthasāmānya*),<sup>21</sup> while nonconceptual direct perception (*mngon sum*, *pratyakṣa*) perceives its objects directly, without the media of those generic images. The nonconceptual minds are subdivided into four types of direct perception (*mngon sum*, *pratyakṣa*): sensory direct perception (*dbang shes mngon sum*, *indriyapratyakṣa*), mental direct perception (*yid shes mngon sum*, *mānasapratyakṣa*), direct perception of self-awareness (*rang rig mngon sum*, *svasaṃvedanapratyakṣa*), and yogic direct perception (*rnal 'byor mngon sum*, *yogipratyakṣa*). All

21. See Anne Carolyn Klein and Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, *Unbounded Wholeness: Dzogchen, Bon, and the Logic of the Nonconceptual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10 n.17 for discussion and further references related to the problems involved in translation of this term.

other minds are necessarily conceptual. Direct perception can be either mistaken or nonmistaken. Depending on what system of Buddhist thought one follows, one will accept the existence of all four, three, or only two types of nonmistaken direct perception. The latter is the case of those Yogācāras who accept only the direct perception of self-awareness and yogic direct perception.<sup>22</sup> Some Niḥsvabhāvavāda thinkers, such as Candrakīrti (ca. 570–640), refute the existence of self-awareness and reject the validity of any worldly consciousness, accepting thereby one nonmistaken direct perception—yogic.<sup>23</sup>

Both conceptual and nonconceptual states of mind cognize their objects via the aforementioned representations or “aspects.”<sup>24</sup> The ontological status of those representations is understood differently even within the same Dharmakīrtean system,<sup>25</sup> not to mention their different interpretations by subsequent thinkers.<sup>26</sup> But it is important to note that despite the fact that nonconceptual perception—including yogic direct perception of ultimate reality—is not mediated by generic images, Dharmakīrti’s system and its interpretations do not allow for mind to lack any representations whatsoever.

Dharmakīrti describes the transition from conceptual to nonconceptual understanding as follows: “that to which one

22. For details, see Sakya Pendita, *Treasure of the Science of Valid Cognition*, 228ff.

23. See Candrakīrti, *Engaging in Madhyamaka (Madhyamakāvatāra, Dbu ma la 'jug pa)*, D3861, dbu ma, 'a, 205b, and his autocommentary *Explanation of the 'Engaging in Madhyamaka' (Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya, Dbu ma la 'jug pa'i bshad pa)*, D3862, dbu ma, 'a, 256a–b.

24. See p. 50.

25. Dharmakīrti uses different levels of analysis wherein the status of those representations and the process of perception in general are interpreted differently. See John Dunne, *Foundations of Dharmakīrti's Philosophy* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), 53–144, especially 53–79, 100–112.

26. See, for example, my *Visions of Unity*, 73–74, 157–168.

meditatively conditions oneself, whether it be real or unreal, will result in a clear, nonconceptual cognition when the meditation is perfected.”<sup>27</sup> This very model is applied by Tibetan thinkers to conceptual and nonconceptual realization of reality and the process of transition from the former to the latter. Recently, John Dunne argued that Dharmakīrti himself did not view the process of transition from conceptual to nonconceptual realization of reality as some sort of a break through the veil of concepts to a mystical gnosis that experiences reality lying beyond concepts, but rather as a transition from conceptual understanding to a nonconceptual experience of the four noble truths. As Dunne puts it,

Dharmakīrti does not choose to present yogic perception as a mystical gnosis that encounters or uncovers real things in the world; instead, he presents it as a process that is designed to inculcate transformative concepts into the mind through an intense, vivid and *nonconceptual* experience that arises from learning, contemplating and meditating on those concepts.<sup>28</sup>

In Dharmakīrti’s system, this process involves the sequence of cognitions or “wisdoms” induced initially by learning, then by contemplating, and finally by meditating.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast to that position, later Tibetan interpreters of Dharmakīrti’s thought and other systems to which that thought was adapted often viewed the transition from conceptual to nonconceptual realization of reality precisely as a break through

27. John Dunne, “Realizing the Unreal: Dharmakīrti’s Theory of Yogic Perception,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 34, no. 6 (2006): 514.

28. *Ibid.*, 500.

29. *Ibid.*, 507.

conceptuality to the inconceivable and ineffable ultimate reality underlying and hidden beyond concepts.<sup>30</sup>

Its usefulness notwithstanding, the above model cannot be universally applied to Tibetan Buddhist systems or those of their Indian predecessors who had alternative ways of understanding—and referring to—conceptuality.<sup>31</sup> That being said, hereafter I will be referring to conceptuality primarily in the sense outlined above, since this is how Tibetan thinkers approach conceptual versus nonconceptual realization of reality and related issues analyzed in chapter 5.

30. For further details, see chapter 4 section 1.

31. Consider, for example, the Sanskrit term *vikalpa*, which is often translated as “discrimination,” but like *kalpanā* can also be translated as “concepts” and “conceptuality.” Having different referents (see Griffiths, “Pure Consciousness and Indian Buddhism,” 85–87), this term conveys, among others, such ideas as the “concepts of the three spheres” (Skt. *trimaṇḍalavikalpa*, i.e., the apprehension of the subject of action, action, and the object of action). Maitreya’s *Sublime Continuum* treats these concepts as obscurations of knowables (Skt. *jñeyāvaraṇa*): “Concepts of the three spheres—those are regarded as obscurations of knowables” (Skt. *trimaṇḍala vikalpo yas taj jñeyāvaraṇa matam*); Edward H. Johnston (ed.), *The Ratnagotravibhāga Mahāyānottaratantraśāstra* (Patna, India: Bihar Research Society, 1950), 185. While there is an overlap between this approach to conceptuality and the one based on Dharmakīrti’s writings (as in the case of forming a concept of a tree, for example), upon a closer look they appear to be quite distinct. In terms of this model, even the sensory and storehouse consciousnesses are concepts. But in terms of the Dharmakīrtean model, only some of the eight types of consciousness are conceptual: the afflicted mentality and its accompanying mental factors are necessarily conceptual, the mental consciousness can be either conceptual or nonconceptual, while the five sensory consciousnesses and the storehouse consciousness are never conceptual. Likewise, in his *Thirty Stanzas* Vasubandhu writes: “This transformation of consciousness is conceptuality. What is conceptualized by that does not exist. Therefore, all of this is mere cognizance” (Skt. *vijñāna-pariṇāmo ’yam vikalpo yad-vikalpyate/tena tan-nāsti tenedaṃ sarvaṃ vijñaptimātrakam*; Sanskrit with alternative English translation in Wood, *Mind Only*, 53). In that text, Vasubandhu treats all the eight types of consciousness together with their accompanying mental factors as the “transformation of consciousness.” It is clear, therefore, that he understands all unawakened worldly minds as conceptuality/concepts. I should also add that in their oral meditation instructions Tibetan contemplatives often apply the word *namtok* (*rnam rtog*, the short form of *rnam par rtog pa*)—which is also used to translate *vikalpa*—to all worldly unawakened minds.

At this point, it is important to highlight the complex dynamic relationship between conceptuality and direct perception. Tibetan thinkers never prioritize a conceptual understanding of reality over its direct nonconceptual realization, and they often express mistrust of concepts, especially when dealing with realization of reality. For example, when addressing the cultivation of emptiness and compassion in their inseparability, Pakmo Drupa Dorjé Gyelpo (*phag mo gru pa rdo rje rgyal po*, 1110–1170) writes:

Since a theory derived from learning and reflection is [merely conceptual] understanding of the “object universal” (*don spyi*), in order directly to understand the cognitive object as an “own mark” [or “particular”] (*rangmtshan*) one needs to cultivate in meditation the orally transmitted practical instructions of the noble guru.<sup>32</sup>

In his mistrust of concepts and emphasis on relying on instructions orally transmitted from a qualified master, Pakmo Drupa joins such figures as Saraha, who taught:

Another can't tell you  
your inmost nature;  
apart from the guru's teaching  
it's never seen.<sup>33</sup>

When compared against each other, conceptual views of reality are treated as less powerful than its direct realizations, because these views cannot serve as direct antidotes to either afflictive obscurations (*nyon sgrib*, *kleśāvaraṇa*) that prevent one

32. Translated in David Jackson, “The *bsTan rim* (“Stages of the Doctrine”) and Similar Graded Expositions of the Bodhisattva’s Path,” in *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón and Roger R. Jackson (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1996), 234–235.

33. Roger Jackson, *Tantric Treasures*, 72.

from achieving freedom from cyclic existence or obscurations of knowables (*shes sgrub*, *jñeyāvaraṇa*) that prevent one from attaining buddhahood. They also have to be discarded, at least when the final nirvāṇa is achieved.

At the same time, conceptuality is virtually indispensable in Buddhist practice (and ordinary life!). Most obviously, one cannot embark on the quest to abandon conceptuality unless one has conceptualized “abandoning concepts.” Furthermore, even the aforementioned “orally transmitted practical instructions” that lead to the direct understanding of ultimate reality—described by Pakmo Drupa as a “particular” and contrasted with a conceptual idea of reality described as “object universal” (i.e., generic image)—can be given and received only with the help of concepts that, as we already know, always operate with generic images.

Thus, whether one actually engages in conceptual processes (such as Niḥsvabhāvavāda reasoning) leading to the direct realization of reality or receives and transmits instructions on how to engage in such processes, conceptuality is virtually unavoidable. Tibetan thinkers also acknowledge that unless someone is already a buddha or about to become one,<sup>34</sup> after having achieved the direct realization of ultimate reality he or she will have to return to a conceptual state of consciousness. Conceptuality then can be used for different purposes, such as describing that direct realization or guiding others toward it. Descriptions of reality can be judged either more or less successful in terms of maintaining steady progress on the path or relating its realizations to others.<sup>35</sup>

34. According to Tibetan thinkers, the last moment of the path preceding the attainment of buddhahood consists of the nonconceptual meditative equipoise on ultimate reality.

35. This is one of the reasons why such thinkers as Shakra Chokden prefer Yogācāra descriptions of realization of the ultimate over those given by most Niḥsvabhāvavāda thinkers: according to him, Yogācāras provide a fuller description of the direct realization of reality. See the last section of chapter 4 for details.

Conceptual understanding of reality can serve as a stepping stone towards its nonconceptual realization (although, as I will demonstrate in chapter 5, the correspondence between the two is understood by Tibetan thinkers differently). Concepts are likewise important for directly or indirectly identifying different “dimensions” of ultimate reality. Even Dzokchen’s tripartite division of the base into the empty essence (*ngo bo stong pa*), clear nature (*rang bzhin gsal ba*), and all-pervading compassion (*thugs rje kun khyab*), despite being conceptual, is treated as extremely important for identifying the nonconceptual base and incorporating it into the Dzokchen practice that defies concepts.

While not directly leading to realization of ultimate reality, such conceptual states of mind as renunciation, compassion, etc., are also understood as indispensable constituents of the path to awakening that brings about the destruction of concepts. As the seminal Buddhist thinker Śāntideva (685–763) argues in his celebrated *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* (*Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*), a philosophical and contemplative text that enjoys wide influence in Tibet, in order to achieve results of the path it is permissible to cultivate compassion towards other beings while also knowing that “sentient beings” is a conceptual imputation based on ignorance (*ma rig pa, avidyā*):

- If sentient beings do not exist,  
Whom will one generate compassion towards?
- [Towards] those who are imputed by delusion [and]  
Accepted for the sake of [achieving] the result.
- Without sentient beings, whose result is it?
- True, but [such is] asserted out of delusion.<sup>36</sup>

36. Skt.: *yadi sattvo na vidyeta kasyopari kṛpeti cet / kāryārtham abhyupetena yō mōhena prakalpitāḥ // kāryam kasya na cet satvaḥ satyam ihā tu mōhataḥ. Bodhicaryāvatāra. In* Parmananda Sharma, *Śāntideva’s Bodhicharyāvatāra [sic]: Original Sanskrit Text with*

We can further point out that according to the seminal Mahāyāna teachings of dependent origination (*rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba, pratītyasamutpāda*), things exist and make sense only in dependence on other things, such as their opposites, contexts in which they are embedded, minds that impute them, and so forth. This pertains to conceptual and nonconceptual understanding of reality too: ultimate reality and its direct realization by nondualistic consciousness are posited in dependence on their counterparts, conventional reality and dualistic thinking. Each side of the two pairs is furthermore linked with the other side in an intricate and dynamic relationship: conventional reality—including words and concepts—is not just the opposite of ultimate reality, but is the means of realizing ultimate reality and subsequently articulating that realization; conceptual understanding of ultimate reality by dualistic consciousness is the means of acquiring its nonconceptual realization by nondualistic consciousness, and so forth.

This dynamic relationship is well expressed by another Buddhist philosopher influential in Tibet, Bhāviveka (ca. 490–570), who wrote in his *Heart of Madhyamaka* (*Madhyamakahr̥daya*):

It is not appropriate for the learned ones to scale the building  
Of the true [meaning] without the ladder of the true  
conventionalities.<sup>37</sup>

And it is with this intricate relationship in mind that Buddhists compose voluminous works describing ultimate reality while

*English Translation and Exposition Based on Prajñākarmati's Panjikā* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1990; hereafter, *Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra*), vol. 2, 422–423.

37. Skt.: *tattvaprāsādaśikharārohaṇam na hi yujyate / tathyasamvṛtisopānam antareṇa yatas tataḥ*. In Christian Lindtner (ed.), *Madhyamakahr̥dayam of Bhavya*, Adyar Library Series 123 (Chennai, India: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 2001), 8.



claiming that it is ineffable, use different conceptual techniques for realizing it while claiming that it is beyond concepts, debate about right and wrong ways of expressing it while claiming that it is inexpressible, and strive to achieve transformation of consciousness and final awakening through its realization while arguing that it is beyond the reach of ordinary mentality.

The reasons why conceptual thinking is treated as the very means of generating nonconceptual realization of ultimate reality are succinctly explained by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyamtso (*bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho*), in *The Key to the Middle Way*:

With respect to a non-conceptual wisdom that apprehends a profound emptiness, one first cultivates a conceptual consciousness that apprehends an emptiness, and when a clear perception of the object of meditation arises, this becomes a non-conceptual wisdom. Moreover, the initial generation of that conceptual consciousness must depend solely on a correct reasoning. Fundamentally, therefore, this process traces back solely to a reasoning, which itself must fundamentally trace back to valid experiences common to ourselves and others.<sup>38</sup>

According to the Dalai Lama, it is virtually impossible to realize ultimate reality without initially relying on concepts, while to form a correct concept of ultimate reality one has to rely on proper reasoning. As we know already, conceptual thinking—including thinking about ultimate reality—always operates via generic images whose presence and absence respectively characterize minds as conceptual or nonconceptual. Therefore, the process of realization of

38. *The Key to the Middle Way: A Treatise on the Realization of Emptiness*, in Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (tr. and ed. Jeffrey Hopkins), *The Buddhism of Tibet* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1987; hereafter, *The Key to the Middle Way*), 55–56.

ultimate reality in this context can be described as follows: based on correct reasoning, one initially generates and subsequently cultivates a conceptual consciousness that apprehends its object—ultimate reality—via its generic image, and as a culmination of this process eventually achieves a clear and vivid perception of that reality that is accompanied by the simultaneous fading of the generic image.

The interwoven nature of the conceptuality/direct perception dichotomy extends to the area of Tibetan tantric practices as well. In Highest Yoga Tantra, for example, the conceptual visualization and cultivation of maṇḍalas, deities, etc., during the Generation Stage is usually seen as indispensable for progressing to the Completion Stage wherein one acquires direct experiences and realizations that eventually eradicate all concepts.<sup>39</sup> Conceptual visualizations are also used for suppressing wrong concepts on the level of the Generation Stage itself.<sup>40</sup> The influential Tibetan thinker Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Tayé (1813–1899) explains the importance of such conceptual imagination on the level of the Generation Stage prior to entering the nonconceptual state of mind at the level of the Completion Stage. Having quoted famous verses from the *Hevajra Tantra*:

In the same way as water gotten into the ear  
Is withdrawn by [addition of] more water,<sup>41</sup>

39. For more on the relationship between the two stages, see chapter 3 section 2.

40. I use the word “suppressing”—not “eliminating”—because only direct realizations of reality can actually eradicate concepts, including wrong ones.

41. Tib. *ji ltar rna bar chu zhugs pa // chu gzhan gyis ni dgug par bya*. Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Tayé, *Limitless Ocean of Knowables, Shes bya mtha' yas pa'i rgya mtsho* (Peking: Mi rigs pe skrun khang, 1982; hereafter, *Limitless Ocean of Knowables*), vol. 3, 164. Skt.: *karṇe toyam yathā viṣṭam prati toyena kṛṣyate*. In David Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*, London Oriental Series, 6, part 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 50. Snellgrove provides a slightly different Tibetan: *ji ltar rna bar chu zhugs pa // chu gzhan dag gis 'gugs par byed* (Ibid., 51).

and so forth, he writes:

Stopping ordinary conceptuality is perfectly accomplished by [cultivating] divine conceptuality. It is similar to just [being able to] stop immediately the conceptuality holding a person as an enemy by conceptualizing him as a friend, which is difficult [to accomplish] otherwise—by meditation on emptiness [of that person] and so forth.<sup>42</sup>

Jamgön Kongtrül thereby distinguishes between holding ordinary worldly conceptuality and cultivating “divine conceptuality,” which consists of the conceptual imagination of the world as a divine maṇḍala of awakened deities.<sup>43</sup> Based on that distinction, he explains that similarly to withdrawing water from the ear by adding more water, divine conceptuality cultivated on the level of the Generation Stage is used for blocking ordinary conceptuality and thereby provides an easy access to the contemplation of ultimate reality on the level of the Completion Stage, whose practice culminates in transcendence of all conceptuality, ordinary and divine alike.

The above are only a few among many examples demonstrating that although destined to destruction, conceptuality plays a crucial role in Tibetan Buddhist views and practices, and that Tibetan thinkers explicitly or implicitly acknowledge the need for conceptuality for the destruction of conceptuality to take place. This is illustrated by the well-known analogy of making fire with

42. *tha mal gyi rnam rtog 'gog pa la lha'i rnam rtog gis shin tu 'grub par 'gyur te / mi gang la dgrar 'dzin pa'i rnam rtog la gnyen du rnam rtog byas na de 'phral du 'gag pa tsam / gzhan stong par sgom pa sogs la dka' ba lta bu'o*. *Limitless Ocean of Knowables*, vol. 3, 165.

43. The Tibetan term for conceptuality that Jamgön Kongtrül uses here is *rnam rtog*. See also p. 100.

the help of two pieces of wood: if we want to make fire and all that we have at our disposal is two pieces of dry wood, we should rub them against each other, and that will eventually create fire. But if the fire keeps burning, it will consume the very wood that produced it. This analogy demonstrates the importance of using concepts (such as Niḥsvabhāvavāda reasoning) inquiring into the nature of reality (rubbing the wood) for producing the non-conceptual realization of the ultimate (fire). Like the fire consuming the wood that produced it, that direct realization of reality is not only itself free from concepts but eventually destroys all concepts, including those referring to ultimate reality. This analogy also points at the importance of reasoning (and reasoning is always conceptual), which is seen by many thinkers as virtually indispensable for the initial conceptual realization of ultimate reality to take place.

As we can see, Buddhist thinkers influential in Tibet acknowledge the close relationship between conceptual and nonconceptual mental states and the crucial role played by the former in producing the latter in the context of realization of ultimate reality. They also exhibit suspicion of conceptual thinking and acknowledge its limitations. It comes as no surprise, then, that Tibetan scholars engage in heated polemics over which concepts are correct and conducive to realization of reality, awakening, etc., and which are not. To go back to our analogy of wood and fire, we can say that if the pieces of wood are wet or one uses iron bars instead of wooden ones, rubbing them will not result in production of fire. Similarly, the nonconceptual wisdom realizing ultimate reality can be ignited only by concepts conducive to it, such as Niḥsvabhāvavāda reasoning, for example. The same is true for the ultimate Buddhist goal, nirvāṇa. While not a direct result of conceptuality—because it is not a *result* and

because it is not *directly* triggered by conceptual thinking<sup>44</sup>—its manifestation/attainment is nevertheless indirectly induced by conceptuality. Only concepts conducive to it—such as correctly formed ideas of emptiness, impermanence, etc.—can play such a role, while others—such as the idea of soul, creator God, permanence of phenomena, etc.—will either obstruct it or simply have nothing to do with it.<sup>45</sup>

## THE PROBLEM WITH PURE CONSCIOUSNESS

The above discussion leaves little room for doubt that the application of mind models developed or adopted by Tibetan Buddhist thinkers is crucial for understanding their approaches to mystical experiences. It also raises questions about the applicability of non-Buddhist models and categories to those experiences. In this section, I will focus on one such category—the contentless or pure consciousness advocated by Forman and used by him for demonstrating the allegedly cross-cultural type of mystical experience. Although the issue of pure consciousness—at least as Forman presents it—is not of significant importance to Tibetan thinkers, addressing it will help to further clarify their approaches to mystical experiences.

Our task in this section is relatively simple—to try to fish out the likely PCE candidates from the pool of the six/eight types of

44. Nirvāṇa is treated as unconditioned, and thus not a result brought about by specific causes.

45. Tibetan thinkers treat such ideas as that of a creator God as instances of the wrong views (*log lta, mithyādr̥ṣṭi*). In the context of the four noble truths, the wrong views are subsumed under the category of the truth of origins and have to be eliminated by the truth of the path in order to achieve the truth of cessation. We will return to this issue in chapter 4 section 2.

consciousness. A brief scan of the waters of this pool will suffice to realize that we are searching in vain—there are no PCE fish in it. As has already been demonstrated, all cognitive states and mental factors have objects and therefore cannot be free from “content.” Even such advanced contemplative states as the four formless absorptions (*gzugs med na spyod pa'i bsam gtan, ārūpyāvacaradhyāna*)<sup>46</sup> are accompanied by more than a dozen mental factors, including volition or intention, and have objects. This also applies to minds realizing ultimate reality when that reality is interpreted as an object and those minds are subsumed under the categories of the six or eight types of consciousness and accompanying mental factors.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, if we treat representations (“aspects”) as a “content” of mental states, we will have to agree that mind models based on the Dharmakīrtean system do not allow for contentless states of consciousness either, because according to those models, representations comprise an inseparable part of any of the eight types of consciousness. It is safe to claim, then, that contentless consciousness cannot be found among the six or eight types of consciousness.

It might be objected that the aforementioned absorption of cessation, described as the cessation of feeling and discrimination

46. They consist of “limitless space” (*nam mkha' mtha' yas, ākāśānantya*), “limitless consciousness” (*rnam shes mtha' yas, vijñānānantya*), “nothingness” (*ci yang med pa, ākiṃcanya*), and “peak of existence” (*srid pa'i rtse mo, bhavāgra*), and their cultivation is believed to result in rebirth in the four types of the formless realm with the same names. For further details, see Leah Zahler, *Study and Practice of Meditation: Tibetan Interpretations of the Concentrations and Formless Absorptions* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2009). See also Lati Rinbochay and Denma Lochö Rinbochay (tr. Leah Zahler and Jeffrey Hopkins), *Meditative States in Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1983), Geshe Gedün Lodrö (tr. Jeffrey Hopkins), *Calm Abiding and Special Insight* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1998), and Longchen Rapjam, *Great Chariot*, vol. 2, 190–200.

47. For details of this position shared by Geluk thinkers, see chapter 5 section 1. Other positions will be addressed later in this section and in chapters 4 and 5.

(*'du shes dang tshor ba 'gog pa, saṃjñāvedayitanirodha*), closely resembles the contentless consciousness argued for by Forman. But none of the Buddhist mind models we encountered would justify its interpretation as such. This is because it is understood either as a state of no mind at all—and therefore it can not fit into the category of *consciousness*—or as a state of mind that consists of cognitive states with accompanying mental factors and objects—in which case it is not empty of “content.”

The former position is held, among others, by Vaibhāṣika theorists, whose position is outlined in Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Abhidharma*, as well as some other thinkers.<sup>48</sup> The latter position is held by, among others, such Yogācāra thinkers as Vasubandhu, who in his *Thirty Stanzas* expounds the aforementioned view that the storehouse consciousness with its accompanying mental factors and objects does not cease until reaching arhatship, and therefore persists even in the absorption of cessation. Although the storehouse consciousness does not perceive its objects clearly, it is not devoid of them. Because those objects are not separate from the storehouse consciousness, to be devoid of them would be tantamount to being devoid of itself. Therefore, in terms of this approach too, the absorption of cessation cannot be treated as contentless and thus is not a good candidate for the PCE.

I should note in passing that I disagree with Paul Griffiths, who suggests that although proponents of the storehouse consciousness think that it has objects, nevertheless its “representations” are so subtle and indistinct that they do not come to awareness, and thus it might be a good candidate for the pure consciousness

48. For details, see Griffiths, *On Being Mindless*, 43–75.

thesis.<sup>49</sup> Unless we modify Forman's description of the PCE and include in this category those minds that have objects or "content" but are not aware of them, the storehouse consciousness cannot be treated as the PCE. Notice too that those very thinkers who accept the existence of the storehouse consciousness also argue strongly against focusing on it in meditation, because they treat it as a worldly mind whose meditative cultivation results only in propelling the cycle of worldly existence. Therefore, were we to treat the storehouse consciousness as a representative example of the PCE, we would end up claiming that they propose to avoid, rather than cultivate, the PCE—of this sort at least.

Such examples as the absorption of cessation lend support to my claim that no matter how subtle a state of mind is, it cannot be treated as objectless or "contentless" as long as it is subsumed under any of the eight types of consciousness with accompanying mental factors. Therefore, it is futile to pursue our hunt for the PCE among those types of mental states any further. But what if contentless consciousness is a mental state radically different from them? In particular, can the direct realization of ultimate reality—according to those interpretations that treat it as transcending all the eight cognitive states and accompanying mental factors—qualify as the PCE?

It is true that Tibetan thinkers often treat the direct realization of reality as transcending the eight types of consciousness and being devoid of everything but ultimate reality itself and mind. Such condition can be described as realization of the buddha-essence, primordial mind, luminosity, and so forth. It can also be treated as self-cognizing, in which case ultimate reality itself can be interpreted as self-awareness. There are many more interpretations of the

49. "Pure Consciousness and Indian Buddhism," 83–85.



nature of ultimate reality and its realization, and I will address some of them in more detail in chapters 4 and 5. Suffice it to say here that whether the mind realizing ultimate reality is treated as a part of that reality or not—and however that reality is described—its realization is not treated by Tibetan thinkers as “contentless” in Forman’s sense of the word. This is because it is usually claimed to have such “content” as the union of clarity and emptiness, buddha qualities, awareness, and so forth. In their polemics surrounding realization of ultimate reality, Tibetans often debate about what precisely is being realized in that context: is it, for example, just a sheer negation, a luminous state of mind qualified by negation of all proliferations, a union of clarity and emptiness, or a union of emptiness with unfolding qualities of buddhahood? <sup>50</sup> Polemics like these demonstrate that they rarely treat realization of reality as “contentless.”

That being said, there is a position on realization of ultimate reality that seems to be close to Forman’s PCE. This position is held by an important Tibetan thinker, Rendawa Zhönnu Lodrö (*red mda’ ba gzhon nu blo gros*, 1349–1412), and is outlined in his *Lamp Illuminating Thatness* (*De kho na nyid gsal ba’i sgron ma*). In that text, Rendawa explains that the direct realization of reality in Mahāyāna is the nature of the perfection of wisdom (*shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa, prajñāpāramitā*),<sup>51</sup> but it does not realize any object. Since it has no actual object, it is not a consciousness

50. For further details, see chapters 4 and 5.

51. Mahāyāna practice focuses on developing six perfections (*pha rol tu phyin pa, pāramitā*): generosity (*sbyin pa, dāna*), morality (*tshul khriims, śīla*), patience (*bzod pa, kṣānti*), effort (*brtson ’grus, vīrya*), concentration (*bsam gtan, dhyāna*), and wisdom (*shes rab, prajñā*). This list is often supplemented by four more perfections—skill in means (*thabs la mkhas pa, upāya kauśalya*), aspirational prayers (*smon lam, praṇidhāna*), strength (*stobs, bala*), and exalted wisdom/primordial mind (*ye shes, jñāna*)—and matched with the ten bodhisattva grounds (see pp. 86ff.), with each of these perfections (in the above order) becoming predominant on each successive ground. This approach is outlined in *Ten Grounds Sūtra* (*Daśabhūmikasūtra, Mdo sde*

(*shes pa*), because consciousnesses are characterized by the cognition of objects (*yul rig pa*). Nevertheless, it is a nonconceptual exalted wisdom/primordial mind (*rnam par mi rtoḡ pa'i ye shes, nirvikalpañāna*).<sup>52</sup> Rendawa thereby distinguishes between consciousness and exalted wisdom/primordial mind, attributing only to the former the characteristics of cognition of objects. In his view, characteristics of consciousness do not apply to the the direct realization of reality, which he treats as being free from any objects whatsoever. Although he clearly distinguishes this realization from consciousness, his description *does* partly resemble that of the contentless consciousness posited by Forman.

While Rendawa's approach might appeal to the PCE advocates, it can hardly support Forman's interpretation of the PCE as the common core of mystical experience across religious traditions. Tibetan thinkers, including Rendawa, believe that the direct realization of ultimate reality can be accessed exclusively by Buddhist means, which—depending on tradition—are understood to be Niḥsvabhāvavāda reasoning, tantric empowerments, direct introduction into the nature of mind in Mahāmudrā and Dzokchen systems, and so forth. In particular, the direct realization of ultimate reality addressed by Rendawa is possible only starting from the Mahāyāna path of seeing (*mthong lam, darśanamārga*), which in the nontantric context has to be preceded by a long-term conceptual

*sa bcu pa*, P761.31, vol. 25), and further articulated by such thinkers as Candrakīrti in his *Engaging in Madhyamaka* with its autocommentary (in fact, his whole text is embedded within this ten grounds—ten perfections framework). Importantly, what makes effort, concentration, etc., *perfections* and not simply virtues is their “animation” by the perfection of wisdom: in order for generosity, for example, to become the *perfection* of generosity, its cultivation has to be conjoined with realization of emptiness of the subject, object, and process of giving.

52. Rendawa Zhönnu Lodrö, *Lamp Illuminating Thatness: Explanation of [Candrakīrti's] 'Engaging in Madhyamaka'* (*Dbu ma la' jug pa'i rnam bshad de kho na nyid gsal ba'i sgron ma*, Sarnath, India: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1995), 91–93.

cultivation of the union of calm abiding and special insight into ultimate reality.<sup>53</sup> In that context, it is often emphasized that although the direct realization of the ultimate is nonconceptual, it cannot be achieved by simply trying to block all thoughts and requires a sustained analytical inquiry into the nature of reality outlined in Madhyamaka (*dbu ma*, the Middle) works.<sup>54</sup>

The cultivation of such distinctively Mahāyāna mental states as great compassion (*snying rje chen po*, *mahākaruṇā*) and mind of awakening (*byang chub kyi sems*, *bodhicitta*)<sup>55</sup> is also indispensable for accessing the direct realization of ultimate reality addressed by Rendawa. The very work of Candrakīrti on which he comments, while primarily dealing with the nature and realization of emptiness, starts with a eulogy to the great compassion as the cause of buddhahood:

Śrāvakas and the middling buddhas are born from the  
mighty sages.

Buddhas are born from bodhisattvas.

53. See pp. 86ff.

54. For more details, see chapter 4 section 2.

55. Tibetan Buddhists understand compassion as the mind that wishes *all* sentient beings to be free from *all* types of sufferings. Far from being limited to humans only, the “sentient beings” are of six types: besides humans (*mi*, *manuṣa*), they include gods (*lha*, *deva*), demigods (*lha ma yin*, *asura*), animals (*dud ’gro*, *tiryak*), hungry ghosts (*yi dwags*, *preta*), and hell beings (*dmyal ba*, *naraka*). Their sufferings are threefold: sufferings of pain (*sdug bsngal gyi sdug bsngal*, *duḥkhaduḥkha*), sufferings of change (*gyur ba’i sdug bsngal*, *vipariṇāmaduḥkha*, identified as any afflicted pleasure), and pervasive sufferings (*khyab pa ’du byed kyi sdug bsngal*, *saṃskāraduḥkha*, i.e., all physical and mental constituents that are produced due to karmas and afflictions). Great compassion is a type of compassion cultivated by Mahāyāna followers that is strong enough to serve as a cause of the mind of awakening (see note 58). This compassion is likewise of three types: compassion observing sentient beings (*sems can la dmigs pa’i snying rje*, *sattvāḷambanākaruṇā*), compassion observing phenomena (*chos la dmigs pa’i snying rje*, *dharmāḷambanākaruṇā*, i.e., compassion observing sentient beings as impermanent), and compassion observing unobservable (*dmigs med la dmigs pa’i snying rje*, *anāḷambanākaruṇā*, i.e., compassion observing sentient beings as empty).

Compassionate thought, nondual mind,  
And the mind of awakening are the causes of the victors' sons.<sup>56</sup>

In his autocommentary, Candrakīrti explains that from among the three types of nirvāṇa, those of śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas (“middling buddhas”)<sup>57</sup> are achieved by aspirants for personal nirvāṇa who receive teachings from buddhas (“mighty sages”) and put those teachings into practice. The state of buddhahood has to be preceded by the state of bodhisattvahood because all buddhas have been bodhisattvas (“victors’ sons”) prior to their attainment of buddhahood. Also, such bodhisattvas as Mañjuśrī cause other aspirants for buddhahood to develop the mind of awakening. One becomes a bodhisattva (i.e., an aspirant for buddhahood who has entered the world-transcending path leading to it) by developing the mind of awakening (i.e., the mind that strives to achieve buddhahood for the sake of all beings<sup>58</sup>), the mind realizing reality

56. *nyan thos sangs rgyas 'bring rnam thub dbang skyes // sangs rgyas byang chub sems dpa' las 'khrungs shing // snying rje'i sems dang gnyis su med blo dang // byang chub sems ni rgyal sras rnam kyi rgyu. Engaging in Madhyamaka, 201b.*

57. Tibetan thinkers refer to two types of non-Mahāyāna Buddhist practitioners who are striving for—or have already attained—the state of arhatship: śrāvakas (“hearers”) and pratyekabuddhas (“solitary buddhas,” not to be confused with buddhas). Both types of arhatship are attained through more or less the same practice, such as contemplation of the selflessness of persons, and therefore have more or less the same characteristics, such as freedom from afflictions and sufferings. But pratyekabuddhas also develop additional qualities, such as partial realization of the selflessness of phenomena, attain nirvāṇa without relying on teachers in their final life, teach with bodily signs rather than words, and so forth. For further details, see Eugene Obermiller, *Analysis of the Abhisamayālamkāra*, Calcutta Oriental Series 27 (London: Luzac, 1936), 201–222.

58. There are two types of the mind of awakening—ultimate (*don dam sems bskyed, paramāṛthabodhicitta*) and conventional (*kun rdzob sems bskyed, saṃvṛtibodhicitta*). The conventional mind of awakening is the mind that strives to achieve buddhahood for the sake of all beings. It is further subdivided into aspirational (*smon pa'i sems bskyed, praṇidhicitta*) and engaged (*'jug pa'i sems bskyed, prasthānacitta*). The latter type is accompanied by the practice of the six perfections, while the former is not. The

(“nondual mind”), and compassion. Compassion in its turn is the main cause of developing the mind of awakening and the nondual mind.<sup>59</sup> In other words, the development of compassion as it is understood in Mahāyāna is indispensable for producing such mental states as realization of emptiness, which in combination with other practices eventually bring about the state of buddhahood and its resultant activities, such as giving teachings to śrāvakas.

Furthermore, the direct realization of emptiness addressed by Candrakīrti and Rendawa is considered to be an extremely powerful state of mind that acts as a direct antidote of afflictions and nonafflictive obscurations. As soon as it has been produced, one dispels all intellectually acquired afflictions,<sup>60</sup> many of which—such as the belief in eternal soul or creator God, for example—are retained by mystics who in Forman’s view have experienced the PCE. Thus, the direct realization of emptiness is different from the PCE not only in terms of its nature and causes but its function as well.

In a word, if one accepts Rendawa’s position and treats the direct realization of ultimate reality as primordial mind free from any objects whatsoever, one will also have to accept that such realization is brought about by specific Buddhist techniques and results in accomplishing specific Buddhist objectives, and therefore cannot be counted as the PCE that serves to illustrate the common core of mystical experience—precisely the opposite of what Forman wants us to believe.

ultimate mind of awakening is synonymous with the mind realizing ultimate reality, and therefore is synonymous with the nondual mind. Thus, the type of mind of awakening referred to in the above passage is the conventional one. (One should not confuse “mind of awakening” with “awakened mind” or “awakening”—the terms that can indicate a mind that awoke to its ultimate nature or achieved final buddhahood.)

59. *Explanation of the “Engaging in Madhyamaka,”* 220aff.

60. For more details, see p. 138.

As I explain in the next section, the direct realization of reality, like other seminal mystical experiences, according to Tibetan thinkers falls into the category of world-transcending paths that are accessible only to those who undertake specific types of Buddhist training—not even to Buddhists in general. These thinkers do claim that some Buddhist contemplatives share with non-Buddhist contemplatives certain meditative states subsumed under the category of worldly paths. But precisely because those paths are viewed as worldly or mundane, they are not treated as uniquely Buddhist. Therefore, even if we managed to somehow squeeze Forman's PCE into the category of worldly paths, that PCE—like worldly paths—would not be treated by Tibetan thinkers as important or necessary for progress in Buddhist practice. On the contrary, this would only highlight radical differences between Forman's and their approaches: while Forman argues that the PCE is *the* key mystical experience across different religions, including Buddhism, for them it would be only one among many states of ordinary consciousness.

Although we could go further and continue our hunt for the PCE matches among other types of mind addressed in Tibetan Buddhism, it is time to make a full stop; by now, it should have become clear that the PCE category simply does not belong in here. On the one hand, certain experiences and mental states addressed by Tibetan thinkers are treated as the PCE due to an oversimplification of and confusion about the nature of those experiences. On the other, when some of them do appear to resemble the PCE at least partly, they might play very little role in the Buddhist world and not be treated as uniquely Buddhist, or they might be so embedded in uniquely Buddhist worldviews and practices that using them as examples of a common core of mystical experience would make little sense.

Before closing this section, I want to reiterate that my objective is not to criticize the idea and possibility of the PCE in general—I leave it to Forman and his critics to judge that. What I am critical about is the applicability of this idea in the Tibetan Buddhist context. In my opinion, applying the PCE category to storehouse consciousness, realization of ultimate reality, etc., only obscures the nature of those states. Careful analysis of those states, on the other hand, exposes the narrowness of the PCE category and calls into question its usefulness for supporting the claim of a common core to mystical experience. This compels me to stress once again that it is virtually impossible to adequately understand the categories of awakening, realization of emptiness, etc., without using the models of mind and path developed by Buddhist thinkers themselves.

The above discussion makes it clear that distinctions between different types and levels of mind are indispensable for understanding diverse approaches to meditation, progress in contemplative practices, and by extension mystical experiences, because these distinctions directly bear upon such questions as what state of consciousness is used in what type of practice, how different mental states condition each other, and what experiences they trigger. Furthermore, because mystical experiences in Tibetan Buddhism for the most part are treated as results and stages of specific Buddhist practices, their discussion will remain overly vague and general unless placed within the framework of those practices. Those practices in turn are often understood in terms of models of the path to awakening. It is to those models that I turn next.

## The Path Dimension

### PATH MODELS

In the previous chapters, I argued that experiences and realizations dealt with in Tibetan Buddhism are anchored in distinctive philosophical, contemplative, and ritual contexts. In this chapter, I will focus on one such context or dimension whose importance is repeatedly emphasized by Tibetan thinkers—the path (*lam, mārga*).

Tibetan writers often refer to contemplation of emptiness, tantric meditations, and other seminal elements of their respective traditions as “the path traveled by all buddhas,” thereby placing those elements within path frameworks and indicating that Buddhist paths lead to, contain, and express mystical experiences of primary importance. Over the centuries, Buddhists have developed a wide variety of path models, whose elaborate descriptions and analyses are given more attention in Buddhism than in any other religion. Not only do those models play a crucial role in Tibetan Buddhist thought and practice, but their analysis can make contributions to the studies of non-Buddhist religions as well. As Robert Buswell and Robert Gimello put it,

as a potentially cross-cultural category for the study of religions, the concept of “the path” has been given in Buddhism



an explication more sustained, comprehensive, critical, and sophisticated than that provided by any other single religious tradition.<sup>1</sup>

We already know that Tibetan thinkers do not limit the category of the path only to Buddhist practices leading to awakening or nirvāṇa, but distinguish between two types of paths: worldly paths (*'jig rten pa'i lam, laukikamārga*) and world-transcending paths (*'jig rten las 'das pa'i lam, lokottaramārga*).<sup>2</sup> Operating on the premise that Buddhist practices—as well as the realizations and experiences achieved as their result—are unique, those thinkers reserve the latter category only for distinctively Buddhist contemplative states. At the same time, they also accommodate many meditative states under the former category, claiming that those states are shared in common by Buddhist and non-Buddhist contemplatives and are *not* distinctively Buddhist. Therefore, learning about the nature and types of worldly and world-transcending paths, as well as their complex relationship, is virtually indispensable for understanding the mystical experiences dealt with by Tibetan Buddhists.

The worldly paths are so called primarily because they lead to rebirth in the form and formless realms (which—together with the realm of desires and its six states of rebirth<sup>3</sup>—comprise the universe of cyclic existence) instead of taking one out of the world

1. "Introduction," in *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought*, ed. Robert E. Buswell and Robert M. Gimello (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992), 2.

2. The world-transcending paths are addressed in the following pages. For the discussion of the worldly paths in the context of mystical experience, see Robert M. Gimello, "Mysticism and Meditation," in Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, 170–199, and Griffiths, "Pure Consciousness and Indian Buddhism," 71–97.

3. See chapter 2 note 55.

of cyclic existence as the transworldly paths do. Far from covering all rituals, beliefs, and practices that bind one to the world of cyclic existence, the category of the worldly paths is limited to very specific contemplative states. Included in this category are the four form absorptions—counted simply as the first, second, third, and fourth absorption—whose cultivation results in rebirth in the four types of the form realm (with the corresponding names). This category further includes the four formless absorptions mentioned in the previous section.

The category of the worldly paths covers those meditative states that the Buddha himself engaged in before discovering his own unique path to nirvāṇa. It likewise covers contemplative states achieved by some of the Buddha's followers before they became his disciples. More generally, this category helps accommodate the prior meditative practices of trainees who enter the Buddhist path after having achieved progress in certain non-Buddhist contemplations or who engage in those contemplations while on the Buddhist path. Arguing that one does not have to be a Buddhist contemplative to experience “limitless consciousness,” “nothingness,” and other states subsumed under that category,<sup>4</sup> Tibetan thinkers contend that those contemplative states, in and of themselves, are insufficient for attaining uniquely Buddhist objectives, and warn against confusing such states with distinctively Buddhist meditative states and world-transcending paths.<sup>5</sup>

Tibetan thinkers argue that although one does not have to attain *all* form and formless absorptions together with the absorption of cessation to become awakened as an arhat, the fourth form absorption is considered to be the level on which the Buddha

4. See chapter 2 note 46.

5. See for example, Longchen Rapjam, *Great Chariot*, vol. 1, 277–279, 404–406.

himself attained *nirvāṇa*, and is often viewed as a typical level at which arhats achieve their *nirvāṇa* too. This absorption also serves as a basis for developing clairvoyances and other magical powers. This explains why the Buddha—who is believed to have developed all such powers—is said to have attained this absorption. Also, it is often argued that at least the preparatory stage of the first form absorption is required as the basis for attaining the world-transcending path, and that without developing mental concentration to at least that extent, no further progress on the path to awakening is possible.<sup>6</sup>

When addressing the Mahāyāna path in particular, Tibetan thinkers argue that bodhisattvas master all the absorptions as a part of their training on the path to buddhahood. Thus, while the form and formless absorptions are counted as worldly paths, their analysis helps us to understand important details of the meditative attainments which are a part of the mystical experiences engendered and contained within uniquely Buddhist paths. In contrast to the worldly paths, the world-transcending paths are understood in terms of two interrelated elements: abandonments (*spangs pa, prahāṇa*) and realizations (*rtogs pa, adhigama*). No practice or contemplative state will be treated as a Buddhist path per se if it is not qualified by or does not lead to abandonments of at least some obscurations. Such abandonments are possible only through realizations of ultimate reality and other mental states and practices—such as the aforementioned great compassion and mind of awakening—that bring about, augment, or prepare for them. Buddhahood (synonymous with the Mahāyāna path of no more learning) is qualified by the fullest type of realization, omniscience,

6. Lati Rinbochay and Denma Lochö Rinbochay, *Meditative States in Tibetan Buddhism*, 143–144.

and the most complete type of abandonment, the elimination of *all* obscurations.

Tibetan Buddhist thinkers make sharp distinction between *suppression*, temporary removal of certain obscurations with the possibility of their reversal, and *abandonment*, complete and permanent eradication.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the main differences between worldly and world-transcending paths, as well as combinations of those paths, are understood primarily in terms of this distinction. For example, while it is possible to *suppress* the affliction of anger through the development of the first formless absorption,<sup>8</sup> its complete eradication is possible only when all other afflictions are *abandoned*. This happens when one attains arhatship or reaches the eighth bodhisattva ground of the Mahāyāna path.<sup>9</sup>

7. For a good survey of what is abandoned on which path, see Kanguy Rinpoche (tr. Padmakara Translation Group), *Treasury of Precious Qualities: A Commentary on the Root Text of Jigme Lingpa Entitled the Quintessence of the Three Paths* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001), 125–133. See also Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 174–201, on calm and insight meditations and the structure of the paths.
8. All form and formless absorptions are free from this affliction. Those who are born in form and formless realms as a result of practicing those absorptions also do not have it in manifest form.
9. The majority of Tibetan thinkers—including Tsongkhapa, the leading figure of the Geluk tradition—are in consensus that on the nontrinitarian Mahāyāna path afflictive obscurations are abandoned only on the eighth ground. See, Tsongkhapa's *Thorough Clarification of Intent: Explanation of [Candrakīrti's] Great Treatise 'Engaging in Madhyamaka'*/*Thorough Clarification of Intent: Extensive Explanation of [Candrakīrti's] 'Engaging in Madhyamaka'* (*Bstan bcos chen po dbu ma la 'jug pa'i rnam bshad dgongs pa rab gsal/Dbu ma la 'jug pa'i rgya cher bshad pa dgongs pa rab gsal*; Dharamsala, India: Tibetan Cultural Printing Press; hereafter, *Thorough Clarification of Intent*), 69, 119, 209, 491–492, 521. Nevertheless, such influential Sakya thinkers as Gorampa argue that this happens already on the first ground. The beginning of this ground coincides with the first moment of the direct realization of ultimate reality on the Mahāyāna path. See Gorampa's *Elimination of Bad Views: Outline of Textual Contents and Analysis of Difficult Points of Individual Passages of [Candrakīrti's] 'Engaging in Madhyamaka'* (*Dbu ma la 'jug pa'i dkyus kyi sa bcad pa dang gzhung so so'i dka' ba'i gnas la dpyad pa lta ba ngan sel*), *Collected Works of Kun-mkhyen Go-rams-pa Bsod-nams-seng-ge*, vol. 5 (Bir, India: Yashodhara Publications, 1995; hereafter, *Elimination of Bad Views*), 571–573, 717–718.

Realizations and corresponding abandonments can also be more or less inclusive and extensive (as in the state of arhatship versus buddhahood, higher and lower bodhisattva grounds, and so forth). This brings further complexity into the discussion of the paths, resulting in sophisticated structures, maps, and hierarchies of worldly and world-transcending paths, distinctions between different types of practitioners of the world-transcending paths, polemics on the status of an arhat, the three final vehicles versus one, and so forth.<sup>10</sup>

In the context of the two basic types of meditation—calm abiding (*zhi gnas*, *śamatha*) and special insight (*lhag mthong*, *vipaśyanā*)—worldly paths are subsumed under the former type, while world-transcending paths are related primarily to the latter. Described very generally, calm abiding is a very concentrated state of mind, while special insight is a mind focused on analysis and discernment of such seminal Buddhist themes as impermanence, emptiness, and so forth. The two categories overlap, but the former is often understood as a type of concentration/meditative stabilization (*ting nge' dzin*, *samādhi*), the latter as a type of wisdom (*shes rab*, *prajñā*). Tibetan thinkers often argue that special insight necessarily includes calm abiding as its fundamental constituent, i.e., that special insight is synonymous with the union of calm abiding and special insight, and that such union is achieved by alternating

10. According to the model of one final vehicle or path outlined in such texts as the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharmapuṇḍarikasūtra*), even those who attained arhatship of śrāvakas or pratyekabuddhas continue to exist and like all other beings will eventually enter the Mahāyāna path and attain buddhahood. Thus, the paths of śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas are not final; there is only one final vehicle, not three. English translation: Tsugunari Kubo and Akira Yuyama (ed.), *The Lotus Sutra* (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2007). The main cause of arhats' continuing existence as not fully awakened beings is nonafflictive (*nyon mongs can ma yin pa*, *akliṣṭa*) obscurations. See Śāntideva's *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*, translated in Crosby and Skilton, *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 119–120.

between stabilizing meditation (*'jog sgom*) and analytical meditation (*dpyad sgom*).<sup>11</sup> Distinguishing between calm abiding and special insight helps locate mystical experiences—including realization of ultimate reality—strived for and developed by Buddhist practitioners.

Similar to path models in general, what exactly is understood as calm abiding and special insight differs from tradition to tradition and from context to context, influencing approaches to contemplative practice and its relationship to other aspects of Tibetan Buddhist life, such as intellectual study. For example, because special insight into ultimate reality is indispensable as the main means of destroying obscurations and achieving nirvāṇa, and because followers of such traditions as Geluk believe that realization of reality is almost never possible without reliance on reasoning<sup>12</sup> (whose mastery in turn requires intensive intellectual study of Madhyamaka philosophy), contemporary Geluk monks often feel compelled to put more efforts into study than contemplation, at least at the beginning of their training. On the other hand, followers of such traditions as Nyingma (*rnying ma*), who emphasize the presence of innate calm abiding or concentration

11. In other words, they distinguish between stabilizing meditation and calm abiding, treating the latter as the culmination of the former but not equal to it. They likewise distinguish between analytical meditation and special insight, treating the latter as the culmination of the former (practiced in alternation with stabilizing meditation) but not equal to it. For further details, see Tsongkhapa's *Stages of the Path to Awakening Teaching in Their Entirety All Stages Incorporated into Experience by the Three Beings/ Great Stages of the Path to Awakening* (*Skyes bu gsum gyi nyams su blang ba'i rim pa thams cad tshang bar ston pa'i byang chub lam gyi rim pa/Byang chub lam rim che ba*, Dharamsala, India: Tibetan Cultural Printing Press: 1991; hereafter, *Great Stages of the Path*), 468ff. Translated by The Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee as *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, vols. 1–3 (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2002; hereafter, *Great Treatise*), vol. 3, pp. 13ff. See also Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1983), 67ff.

12. See the Dalai Lama's statement cited (p. 64).

and special insight or wisdom inherent in the ultimate nature of mind, might focus more on ritual and contemplative means of discovering them in personal experience and maintaining their realization afterwards, assigning less weight to intellectual study. At least, such is often the rhetoric of those traditions.<sup>13</sup>

One model of the path to awakening widely used in Tibet is that of the “five paths” (*lam lnga, pañcamārga*), which is usually combined with the “ten grounds” (*sa bcu, daśabhūmi*), issuing the so-called “ten grounds–five paths,” which are all presented as progressive stages of the path to buddhahood. Because this model is particularly important in the context of this study, I will discuss it in some detail.

According to the ten grounds–five paths model, the journey begins with the path of accumulation (*tshogs lam, saṃbhāramārga*). In this stage one starts accumulating the “two collections” of wisdom (*shes rab, prajñā*) and method (*thabs, upāya*) by respectively developing an initial conceptual understanding of ultimate reality and nourishing other positive qualities, such as compassion. (The accumulation of the two collections is completed only in the state of buddhahood.) The practitioners then move on to the next stage, the path of preparation/application (*sbyor lam,*

13. My information on the Tibetan traditions is based primarily on personal discussions with Tibetan monks of different traditions. It became customary in the Tibetan Buddhist world to treat Nyingma and Kagyü traditions as contemplative and Geluk and Sakya as study-oriented. Needless to say, this picture is simplistic: all four traditions produced outstanding scholars and remarkable contemplatives as well. The emphasis on *four* as the number of traditions is also misleading: the four main traditions became more or less solidified only in the fifteenth century. Prior to that time, the situation had been much more fluid, although the process of branching into rival traditions had already begun a few centuries earlier. Readers interested in learning more about monastic practices and education in Tibetan monasteries can refer to Georges Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003; hereafter, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*).

*prayogamārga*), where they achieve the union of calm abiding and special insight conceptually discerning ultimate reality, thereby preparing themselves for the direct vision of reality. When for the first time they *directly* realize or “see” the ultimate reality of all phenomena, they enter the path of seeing (*nthong lam, darśanamārga*) and the first bodhisattva ground, thus becoming Mahāyāna *āryas* (*’phags pa*, “noble,” “exalted”). As the practitioners deepen and further develop their realization of reality and other elements of the Mahāyāna path, they enter on the path of meditation (*sgom lam, bhāvanamārga*), which covers bodhisattva grounds 2–10. When these grounds have been traversed they achieve the Mahāyāna path of no more learning (*mi slob lam, aśaikṣamārga*): buddhahood.

Each of the ten grounds consists of a state of absorption or meditative equipoise (*mnyam bzhag, samāhita*), when one directly realizes ultimate reality, and a state not in absorption, known as subsequent attainment (*rjes thob, prṣṭhalabdha*), when one engages in other bodhisattva practices.<sup>14</sup> Every transition from one ground to the next is necessarily conditioned by specific practices of the preceding ground. According to the nontantric Mahāyāna teachings, it takes at least three countless eons (!) to cover all the five paths, requiring one countless eon to cover paths 1–2, another to cover grounds 1–7, and a final one to cover grounds 8–10. On the other hand, when dealing with tantric systems, Tibetan thinkers often try to reconcile this model with the claim of the possibility of attaining buddhahood by tantric means in one lifetime. Some argue, for example, that although one does have to accumulate the

14. For details, see Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 2d ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), 200ff., whose discussion is primarily based on *Ten Grounds Sūtra*. See also Longchen Rapjam, *Great Chariot*, vol. 1, 521–538, and vol. 2, 202–241.



two collections of the three countless eons, one does not have to accumulate them *during* the three countless eons.

On each of the ten grounds, one acquires increasingly extensive realizations of reality, a process illustrated by the example of the waxing moon.<sup>15</sup> Thus, even the *direct* realization of ultimate reality never stays the same and constantly evolves until the path of no more learning is achieved. Likewise, when the category of the buddha-essence is plugged in, it is argued that the buddha-essence becomes only partly manifest on the first ground, continuing to manifest more fully until its complete manifestation in the state of buddhahood.<sup>16</sup> This increase of realizations or manifestations of ultimate reality is inseparably linked with the process of abandoning obscurations—the greater the realization, the more obscurations are abandoned.<sup>17</sup>

The ten grounds–five paths model helps explain when and why certain mystical experiences are believed to happen. For example, the direct realization of ultimate reality can happen only during meditative equipoise on the paths of seeing, meditation, and no more learning, and has to be preceded by a long process of conceptual contemplation of emptiness and other practices. At the very beginning of the subsequent attainment that immediately follows most meditative equipoises,<sup>18</sup> one experiences the

15. See Nāgārjuna, *Praise of the Dharma-Sphere (Dharmadhātustotra, Chos kyi dbyings su bstod pa)*, D1118, bstod tshogs, ka, 63b–67b. Translated in Karl Brunnhölzl (tr.), In *Praise of Dharmadhātu by Nāgārjuna, Commentary by the Third Karmapa* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2007), 126–128.

16. See my “Reburying the Treasure—Maintaining the Continuity” for details.

17. For more on the deconstructive or negative processes involved in contemplation of reality, see the last section of this chapter.

18. The transition from the Mahāyāna path of learning to the path of no more learning is marked by the transition from one state of meditative equipoise to another. The last moment of the tenth ground is the state of meditative equipoise that dispels all remaining obscurations. It is followed by buddhahood, the state of everlasting meditative equipoise.

illusion-like meditative stabilization (*sgyu ma lta bu'i ting nge' dzin*, *māyopamāsamadhi*) in which conventional phenomena appear merely as illusions due to the immediately preceding realization of their emptiness. Besides this experience, subsequent attainments also contain visions and experiences that can be termed “mystical” (in the “ecstatic” sense): on each ground one can see an increasing number of buddhas, experience visionary journeys to an increasing number of universes they dwell in, enter an increasing number of meditative absorptions, and so forth.

Importantly (for the topic of this study), the ten grounds–five paths model is utilized by those thinkers who claim commonalities between certain mystical experiences brought about by different contemplative processes. Shakya Chokden, for example, argues that because meditative equipoise is primordial mind free from ignorance, it engages its “object” in agreement with the object’s way of being (*yul gyi gnas tshul*). In other words, it realizes ultimate reality just as it is. On the other hand, conceptual conventions of subsequent attainment (*rjes thob kyi tha snyad*)<sup>19</sup>—that are used for describing the experience of meditative equipoise—cannot take that ultimate reality as their actual object, because conventions do not transcend sounds and concepts (*sgra rtog*). In other words, because those conventions are based on language and conceptual thinking, they do not have direct connection with realization of ultimate reality, which transcends words and concepts.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, differences in descriptions of realization of reality do not necessarily imply differences in that realization itself.

19. That is, conventions applied in subsequent attainment after meditative equipoise.

20. Shakya Chokden, *Rain of Ambrosia: Extensive [Auto-]Commentary on the 'Profound Thunder amidst the Clouds of the Ocean of Definitive Meaning'* (Nges don rgya mtsho sprin gyi 'brug sgra zab mo'i rgyas 'grel bdud rtsi'i char 'bebs), in *Two Controversial Mādhyamika Treatises* (Bir, India: Yashodhara Publications, 1996), 334–335.

Shakya Chokden uses this distinction in support of his claim that followers of Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Yogācāra—the two major non-tantric Mahāyāna systems—can achieve the same realizations of ultimate reality during meditative equipoise despite the different terminology used for describing those realizations during subsequent attainment.<sup>21</sup> Claiming that both systems provide efficient tools for realizing ultimate reality, he asserts the sameness of key mystical experiences achieved by their followers, while acknowledging discrepancies in their descriptions of those experiences. (We will explore this important position in more detail in the last section of chapter 4.)

Despite its usefulness, the ten grounds–five paths model cannot be universally applied to all kinds of Buddhist mystical experiences dealt with in Tibetan Buddhism. On the contrary, that model—especially in combination with the aforementioned model of conceptual and nonconceptual states of mind—itself requires tuning and reconsideration when applied to specific contexts. For example, when it is asserted that one can directly realize ultimate reality only starting from the level of ārya bodhisattvas that begins from the path of seeing, this means that virtually no living Mahāyāna practitioners can claim to have realized ultimate reality directly (unless they have engaged in tantric practice allowing completion of the whole Mahāyāna path in one lifetime or less). Otherwise, they would also have to claim that they have been practicing the Mahāyāna path in previous lives for at least one countless eon, acquired the ability to see at least a hundred buddhas and visit a hundred world realms, and so forth.<sup>22</sup>

21. For details, see the last section of chapter 4.

22. For the list of these and other qualities that are acquired by bodhisattvas on the ten grounds, see Candrakīrti's *Engaging in Madhyamaka* with its autocommentary. See also Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness*, 100ff.

On the other hand, followers of Dzokchen and Mahāmudrā repeatedly emphasize that from the very beginning of practice one has to be introduced and exposed to the ultimate nature of mind *directly*, and that even this initial realization is nonconceptual.<sup>23</sup> But in the context of the ten grounds–five paths model, this position raises the problems just mentioned. In attempts to resolve such problems while retaining this model, some Dzokchen and Mahāmudrā thinkers resorted to ideas of acquiring the not-yet-manifest potential to meet a hundred buddhas, visit a hundred realms, etc., that can be achieved in this very life but manifest after death, when the “shell” of the body is finally broken, similar to the mighty mythical Garuda bird, whose powers are complete within the egg even before it hatches.<sup>24</sup> But such interpretations are far from being universally accepted even within the Tibetan Buddhist world. Understanding which path models are implied for particular mystical experiences helps clear away a great deal of confusion created by drawing overly generalized parallels not only between Buddhist and non-Buddhist mystical experiences, but also between mystical experiences addressed within different Buddhist traditions.<sup>25</sup>

It is tempting to make a clear-cut distinction between those path models (such as the Trekchö and Tögel stages of Dzokchen) that focus more on personal experience and those (such as the

23. See, for example, Longchen Rapjam, *Good Chariot: [Auto-]Commentary on the ‘Illusion Revitalization of the Great Perfection’ (Rdzogs pa chen po sgyu ma ngal gso’i ’grel ba shing rta bzang po*, Cazadero, CA: Yeshe De Project, 1994), 221–236.

24. See Sam Van Schaik, *Approaching the Great Perfection*, 124–127.

25. See, for example, the analysis of the tantric path model of the Guhyasamāja system in Christian K. Wedemeyer, *Āryadeva’s Lamp that Integrates the Practices (Caryāmelāpakapradīpa): The Gradual Path of Vajrayāna Buddhism According to the Esoteric Community Noble Tradition* (New York: The American Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2007), especially 63–120. On how it is matched with the ten grounds–five paths model, see Yangchen Gawai Lodoe, *Paths and Grounds of Guhyasamaja*, 106ff.

ten grounds–five paths model) that tend to be more general and operate with the grand categories of countless eons of yogic practice, journeys to numerous pure lands, inconceivable magical powers, and so forth. Nevertheless, these two types of models are usually interdependent, their boundaries are blurred, and they are rarely understood by their adherents as separate or separable. Although their ratio will vary on a case-by-case basis, Tibetan traditions use hybrids of the two. When “experiential” models are applied, they are seen in one way or another as being embedded in the “grand” models, while the latter in turn are built on appeals to such key experiences as realization of reality and awakening. As an example, we can look at the influential eighth-century Indian thinker Haribhadra’s commentary on Maitreya’s *Ornament of Clear Realizations* (*Abhisamayālaṃkāra*)<sup>26</sup> called *Clear Meaning* (*Sphuṭārthā*), both texts being the focus of numerous Tibetan commentaries and forming a part of curricula in Tibetan monastic universities. While this commentary (as well as its root text) presents, among other things, “grand” modes of the path, when commenting on the Clear Realization of the Peak (*rste mo’i mngon rtogs*, *mūrdhābhisamaya*) chapter, Haribhadra turns to an “experiential” model. Here, he outlines the fourfold progression of practice in which one first contemplates the selflessness of persons, then negates the external world while retaining the apprehension of mind appearing as that external world, then negates that subjective mind as well but retains the reality of primordial mind devoid of subjective-objective duality, and finally

26. *Abhisamayālaṃkāranāmaprajñāpāramitopadeśaśāstrakārikā*, *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa’i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa’i rgyan zhes bya ba’i tshig le’ur byas pa*, D3786, shes phyin, ka, 1a–13a.

contemplates even that nondual primordial mind as “entityless,” like an illusion.<sup>27</sup>

It is true that path models used by Tibetans are saturated with many elements that appear fantastic and too removed from the world of everyday experience to the “contemporary Western mind.” But to dismiss those seemingly fantastic models in favor of more “realistic” ones, or to dismiss them all as imaginary embellishments, doctrinal byproducts, or “fossilizations” of genuine mystical experiences, will do little justice to the cultures we explore in order to understand the mystical experiences they produce.

## MEDIATIONS: WHITHER AND WHEN

In order to better understand the issue of mediation involved in such mystical experiences as realization of ultimate reality, this section takes a closer look at the paths in terms of the conditioning processes that help bring about those experiences.

27. *Sphuṭārthā, Don gsal*; full title: *Abhisamayālaṃkāranāmaprajñāpāramitopadeśa-śāstravṛtti, Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan ces bya ba'i 'grel pa*, D3793, shes phyin, ja, 124b–125a. In *Great Path Compressing the Two Chariot Ways into One: Explanation of [Maitreya's] 'Ornament of Clear Realizations' together with [Haribhadra's] 'Clear Meaning' Commentary (Mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan 'grel pa don gsal ba dang bcas pa'i rnam par bshad pa shing rta'i srol gnyis gcig tu bsdu pa'i lam po che)*, Collected Writings of Gser-mdog paṅ-chen Śākya-mchog-ldan, vol. 12 (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunzang Tobgey, 1975), 257, Shakya Chokden identifies this progression of contemplative states as “four stages of yoga” (*rnal 'byor gyi sa bzhi*), which, in the corresponding order, are the stage of yoga realizing the selflessness of persons (*gang zag gi bdag med rtogs pa'i rnal 'byor gyi sa*), the stage of yoga realizing the selflessness of the apprehended-phenomena (*gzung ba chos kyi bdag med rtogs pa'i rnal 'byor gyi sa*), the stage of yoga realizing the selflessness of the apprehender-phenomena (*'dzin pa chos kyi bdag med rtogs pa'i rnal 'byor gyi sa*) and the stage of yoga not realizing any extremes of proliferations (*spros pa'i mtha' gang yang ma rtogs pa'i rnal 'byor gyi sa*).

The category of the path plays a critical role in the basis-path-result, the four noble truths, and other popular models designed to provide the matrix, foundation, and context for the Buddhist worldview and practice as a whole. According to the basis-path-result model, the basis consists of the ultimate and conventional realities (including their subdivisions), the path consists of utilizing in practice different elements of the basis (e.g., wisdom, compassion), while the result is the state of an arhat or a buddha achieved through practice of the path. According to the four truths model, the suffering nature of cyclic existence (the first truth) has to be realized in order to inspire sufficient motivation to eradicate the causes of suffering (the second truth), resulting in the attainment of *nirvāṇa* (the third truth) via comprehensive practice of the path (the fourth truth).

It is hard not to notice the close connection between—and virtual inseparability of—constituent elements of these models. It is likewise clear that the paths are depicted as conditioning devices or processes, being presented as the means of affecting, changing, and transforming consciousness in pursuit of awakening. These conditioning processes culminate in achievement of one of the three types of *nirvāṇa*—those of *śrāvakas*, *pratyekabuddhas*, and *buddhas*—that are believed to be unconditioned. While no Buddhist thinker would claim that *nirvāṇa*—subsumed under the path of no more learning—can be constructed or created, it is also admitted that it cannot be manifested or achieved without using such means as the four preceding paths of learning that lead to and trigger its attainment.

Besides functioning as conditioning processes leading to the final state of *nirvāṇa*, the paths consist of progressive mental states, with preceding ones affecting, conditioning, and triggering succeeding ones. According to the ten grounds–five paths model, the

direct realization of ultimate reality within meditative equipoise on the ārya path of learning is prepared for by preceding practices on the paths of accumulation and preparation. Each succeeding meditative equipoise in the ten grounds builds on the meditative equipoises and subsequent attainments of the preceding grounds. The illusion-like meditative stabilizations at the beginning of subsequent attainments are likewise affected by the immediately preceding meditative equipoises.

According to a tantric model of the three types of appearances (*snang ba gsum*)—impure appearances (*ma dag pa'i snang ba*, i.e., ordinary appearances of cyclic existence), yogic experiential appearances (*rnal 'byor nyams kyi snang ba*, i.e., appearances cultivated in meditative concentration), and pure appearances (*dag pa'i snang ba*, i.e., appearances manifested in the state of buddhahood)—contained in the Path and Result (*lam 'bras*) system of the Sakya tradition, the latter two are rooted in understanding the first and are conditioned by specific tantric and nontantric practices.<sup>28</sup>

We know already that according to Tibetan thinkers, no realizations on the Mahāyāna path are possible unless one has first developed the mind of awakening. Likewise, no substantial progress on the path is possible unless one first generates renunciation of worldly existence.<sup>29</sup> Nor is it possible to directly realize the emptiness of all phenomena unless one uses specific techniques to do so. Likewise, it is believed to be impossible to acquire genuine realizations on tantric paths without receiving tantric

28. For details, see Cyrus Stearns (tr. and ed.), *Taking the Result as the Path: Core Teachings of the Sakya Lamdré Tradition* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006), 319–394.

29. See, for example, Jeffrey Hopkins, “A Tibetan Perspective on the Nature of Spiritual Experience,” in *Paths To Liberation: The Marga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought*, ed. Robert Buswell and Robert Gimello (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992), 225–267.



empowerments and instructions. In a word, no matter what Buddhist system or tradition dealt with by Tibetan thinkers we look at, it is virtually impossible to find mystical experiences that are not seen as being mediated by specific causes, conditions, and practices.

I should note here that tantric empowerments, renunciation, logical reasoning, etc., are treated as much more than disposable tickets one has to buy in order to board Buddhist vehicles to awakening. On the contrary, they comprise important parts of those vehicles. Cultivation of the mind of awakening, for example, does not just precede but necessarily accompanies Mahāyāna practices. Tantric empowerments do not only initiate but are incorporated into tantric practice through visualizing oneself as a tantric deity accompanied on more advanced levels by self-empowerments (*bdag 'jug*). Furthermore, certain meditative states and experiences make sense only when conjoined with other practices. For example, the direct realization of emptiness within the Mahāyāna context is believed to be brought about not solely by contemplation of reality, but by that contemplation in tandem with the great compassion and other Mahāyāna practices and states of mind.

These examples demonstrate one more important feature of the Buddhist paths according to Tibetan thinkers: while mystical experiences are believed to be mediated by specific types of training and conditioning, mediation does not necessarily have to immediately precede mystical experiences, but can occur at some earlier time. In fact, it usually consists of a long—often a *lifelong*—process that eventually results in a certain mystical experience. Therefore, while causes and conditions that *directly* trigger such mystical experiences as realization of ultimate reality are crucial for understanding the nature of those experiences, one should not ignore other practices that lead to those realizations

and condition them indirectly. All such mental states as direct realizations of emptiness, Dzokchen visions, Mahāmudrā experiences, etc., are usually understood as advanced stages of paths that start with preliminary practices, continue to the development of compassion, etc., and proceed to developing insights based on Niḥsvabhāvavāda reasoning or tantric techniques.

The above examples demonstrate another feature as well: although the doors to some mystical experiences are at least partially open, not everybody can easily cross the threshold, and the means of entering those doors consist of specific training and conditioning. In fact, Tibetan thinkers often argue that certain experiences can be achieved *only* if specific ritual or contemplative conditions are fulfilled. Consider, for example, the following passage from the *Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows* (*Sdom pa gsum gyi rab tu dbye ba*) by Sakya Pendita Künga Gyeltsen (*sa skya paṇḍita kun dga' rgyal mtshan*, 1182–1251), the figure of highest authority in the Sakya tradition of Tibetan Buddhism:

My mahāmudrā<sup>30</sup> is  
 The primordial mind arisen from the empowerments  
 And the self-arisen primordial mind  
 Arising from the meditative concentrations of the Two Stages.  
 Its realization is accomplished in this life  
 If one is skilled in the method of the Secret Mantra.<sup>31</sup>  
 No realization of mahāmudrā in [any way]  
 Other than that was taught by the Buddha.<sup>32</sup>

30. The same Sanskrit word *mahāmudrā* can indicate a particular contemplative system (in which case I capitalize it), reality realized through the practice of that system, or that realization itself.

31. I.e., Tantra.

32. *nged kyi phyag rgya chen po ni // dbang las byung ba'i ye shes dang // rim pa gnyis kyi ting 'dzin las // 'byung ba'i rang byung ye shes yin // 'di yi rtogs pa gsang sngags*

Criticizing those who taught Mahāmudrā without necessarily relying on tantric empowerments and the Generation and Completion Stages of the Highest Yoga Tantra, Sakya Pendita argues that no genuine realization of mahāmudrā is possible unless those conditions are fulfilled. Even though other thinkers disagree with the need for tantric empowerments in realizing mahāmudrā, or distinguish between tantric and nontantric Mahāmudrā systems,<sup>33</sup> they would nevertheless concur that realization of mahāmudrā is impossible without first receiving instructions from a qualified teacher, devotion, preliminary observations of the workings of mind, and so forth. Thus, whichever side they take, and whether they hold that realizations achieved by followers of different Mahāmudrā systems are the same or not, one position that those thinkers share in common is that no such realizations are possible without specific training and conditioning.

This emphasis on specific conditioning also applies to those mystical experiences and realizations that are described with the help of such terms as genuineness (*rnal ma*), spontaneity (*lhun grub*), and nonartificiality (*bcos ma ma yin pa*), normally contrasted with states characterized as artificiality (*bcos ma*), mental fabrications (*blos byas*), and so forth. The description of some experiences as spontaneous is not meant to imply that those experiences happen randomly and do not require conditioning (whether termed “artificial” or not). On the contrary, it is these conditioning practices

*kyi // thabs la mkhas na tshe 'dir 'grub // de las gzhan du phyag rgya che // rtogs pa sangs rgyas kyis ma gsungs.* See Jared Douglas Rhoton (tr.), *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes: Essential Distinctions among the Individual Liberation, Mahāyāna, and Tantric Systems* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002; hereafter, *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes*), for the Tibetan text (p. 303) and alternative translation (p. 117).

33. See Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and Alexander Berzin, *The Gelug/Kagyü Tradition of Mahamudra* [sic] (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1997), 133ff.

that are believed to prepare for and bring about “spontaneous” experiences. The distinction between spontaneous and artificial experiences, visions, and realizations is prominent in different tantric systems practiced by Tibetans, especially the Highest Yoga Tantra and Dzokchen. Within the two stages of the Highest Yoga Tantra, for example, the Generation Stage is treated as artificial and the Completion Stage as nonartificial. Nevertheless, while interpretations of their nature and relationship may vary,<sup>34</sup> the widespread position is that the Generation Stage is indispensable for accessing the Completion Stage.<sup>35</sup> As Nāgārjuna<sup>36</sup> wrote in the *Five Stages (Pañcakrama)*:

For those who wish [to practice] the Completion Stage  
 Well abiding in the Generation Stage  
 The perfect Buddha taught this method  
 As the rungs of the ladder.<sup>37</sup>

34. Alternatively, the two stages can be viewed as having the same nature and practiced simultaneously. They can also be practiced gradually during one and the same meditative session, and so forth. For details, see Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Tayé, *Limitless Ocean of Knowables*, vol. 3, 162–164.
35. This traditional point of view does not necessarily express the historical reality of the development of the Completion Stage. Notice also that some Buddhist tantric thinkers disagree that the Generation Stage is indispensable for accessing the Completion Stage. For more on the issue of relationship of the two stages, see Elizabeth English, *Vajrayoginī: Her Visualizations, Rituals, and Forms* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002), 171ff.
36. There are several Buddhist writers who use the name Nāgārjuna. While Tibetans usually concur that Nāgārjuna the Madhyamaka thinker and Nāgārjuna the tantric writer are the same figure, scholars now argue otherwise. See, for example, Jan Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Investigation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4–5.
37. Skt. *utpattikrama-saṁsthānām niṣpannakrama-kāñkṣi ṇām / upāyaś caiṣa sambuddhaiḥ sopānam iva nirmitaḥ. Pañcakrama*. Katsumi Mimaki and Tōru Tomabechi (ed.), *Pañcakrama: Sanskrit and Tibetan Texts Critically Edited with Verse Index and Facsimile Edition of the Sanskrit Manuscripts* (Tokyo: The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies for Unesco, 1994), 1.

The hierarchical arrangement of the two stages resembles that of the two realities, as well as the distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual ways of understanding reality addressed in chapter 2 section 2. In the same way as conventional reality is used as a ladder to access ultimate reality, and in the same way as conceptual understanding of ultimate reality leads to its direct nonconceptual realization, the Generation Stage serves as a ladder for accessing the Completion Stage. Although visualizations of divine maṇḍalas, deities, and other elements of the Generation Stage are artificial in terms of being conceptually constructed, they are seen as indispensable for accessing the direct nonconceptual realization of ultimate reality and other experiences on the level of the Completion Stage. As Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Tayé puts it,

In general, the Generation Stage is artificial, [but]  
The artificial path leads to the genuine meaning.<sup>38</sup>

Like “conceptuality” and “nonconceptuality,” the terms “artificiality” and “nonartificiality” have different referents and are understood differently depending on context. For example, all tantric systems other than Dzokchen are treated as artificial by those who claim that non-Dzokchen systems do not utilize the spontaneously present ultimate reality or awareness as it is understood in Dzokchen.<sup>39</sup> Saraha and some other tantric adepts whose teachings

38. *spyir na bskyed pa'i rim pa bcos ma yin // bcos ma'i lam gyis rnal ma'i don la khrid.* Jamgön Kongtrül, *Creation and Completion*, 50. My translation is slightly different from Harding's in *Ibid.*, 49.

39. Interestingly, the Tögel stage of Dzokchen practice might appear less spontaneous than Trekchö, because it requires assuming specific postures, using special gazes, and relying on other deliberate meditative techniques. Nevertheless, according to Dzokchen thinkers, those practices have to be done from within the realization of ultimate reality achieved on the Trekchö level, and those techniques only help the four visions of Tögel to spontaneously manifest from within that state. In other words,

spread to Tibet, while themselves practitioners of such tantras as Cakrasaṃvara and Hevajra, also expressed dissatisfaction with many elements of the Generation and Completion Stages, treating them as yet another type of convention that do not necessarily complement ultimate realization. Saraha criticized both Buddhist and non-Buddhist practitioners, as well as tantric and nontantric teachings and practices, as follows:

Some sit writing comments on the sūtras, others seek to dry up intellect. Others run around in the Great Way, where scripture turns to sophistry and word play. Some contemplate the maṇḍala circle, others describe the Fourth as the real. Some think it's in the realm of space, others connect it with emptiness: mostly, they dwell in contradiction. You may give up the innate and fancy nirvāṇa, but not an ounce of the ultimate will you gain.<sup>40</sup>

This demonstrates that the same contemplative practice of the Completion Stage can be seen as either artificial or nonartificial, depending on the meaning read into the term “artificiality.”

Even in the case of the Trekchö and Tögel stages (both of which are considered by Dzokchen practitioners as nonartificial), the four visions of Tögel (which are understood as a spontaneous display of ultimate reality) have to be based on—and therefore conditioned by—insights into the nature of mind on the level

although Tögel practitioners might be using ordinary consciousness when assuming postures, gazes, etc., those techniques are seen as allowing the spontaneous display of the fundamental nature of reality in the form of the four visions that are not produced by ordinary consciousnesses.

40. Jackson, *Tantric Treasures*, 57–59. Jackson rightly argues that such statements are contextual and that Saraha, Tilopa, and other mahāsiddhas themselves used and promoted certain yogic and tantric techniques (*Ibid.*, 28ff.).

of Trekchö. This demonstrates well the basic position shared by Tibetan Buddhist traditions: there are different mental states that can function spontaneously when activated, but precisely because they need activation they require specific conditions that “unlock” or trigger them. The best example of this approach is, perhaps, a buddha’s awakened mind itself: it is considered to be nonconceptual, nonartificial, and spontaneous. But would anyone claim that this mind could just randomly pop into existence? And could such a claim even be considered meaningful?

In sum, in the Tibetan Buddhist world, mystical experiences believed to be achieved by Buddhist practitioners are virtually always linked with the elements of conditioning or mediation which are inseparable components of the Buddhist paths. But although those experiences are linked with, and conditioned by, the paths, they are not necessarily mediated at the time when they actually occur. I will elaborate upon this later.

## NEGATIONS AND DECONSTRUCTIONS

In this section we will continue the discussion of mediation and conditioning, now with the focus on the process of realizing ultimate reality—a process that can be described as deconstructive or negative. Realization of reality is similar to other mystical experiences insofar as it is brought about by specific causes and conditions. What makes realization of reality process unique is that it consists of *deconstruction*, not construction; negations, not affirmations. No matter how Tibetan thinkers understand the nature of reality, they are in consensus that the process leading to its realization lies in negations, whether partial or complete. They claim that this process—usually conceptual in its initial stages—leads to

undermining, weakening, and eventually destroying conceptual dualistic thinking, including the ideas of self, inherent existence, intrinsic reality, and so forth.

Not only is the process leading to realization of reality negative or deconstructive, but the ultimate reality reached through this process is usually described in negative terms and/or interpreted as a negation as well (although it can also be understood as involving such positive qualities as luminosity, dynamism, etc.). The realization of reality is also often described in negative terms: as transcending all conceptual proliferations, as a state free from subjective-objective duality, and so forth (although it can also be described in positive terms, e.g., as a subjective mind cognizing its object, emptiness).

In the context of realization of ultimate reality, therefore, negations (*dgag pa, pratiṣedha*) can be understood in at least three ways. First, they can refer to different types of deconstructive processes leading to and involved in realization of reality, such as the contemplation of selflessness that consists of searching for and not finding a self. Second, negations can refer to the nature of ultimate reality itself, such as when it is understood as the absence of true existence. Third, negations can refer to the ways of expressing or describing realization of reality, such as its description as “not realizing anything.”

Although these three types of negations are intimately related—e.g., the interpretation of reality as inexpressible can result in using negative language in articulation of its realization—they should be clearly distinguished. For example, while the contemplation of emptiness is understood as a negative, deconstructive process consisting of negating or not finding phenomena through reasoning, and subsequently remaining in that state of nonfindability, emptiness realized as a result of that



process is not necessarily understood as a negation. Nor does the description of reality in a negative way necessarily lead to a negative articulation of its realization.

Of course, this threefold typology is far from being exhaustive and does not address all of the elements involved in the deconstructive process of realization of reality. A closer analysis shows further distinctions between the deconstructive process leading to realization of reality and what one perceives in that process (which might consist of exclusive negations or might include affirmations [*sgrub pa, vidhi*] as well). In other words, while the process of realization of reality is necessarily negative or deconstructive, this does not automatically rule out the possibility of positive elements being involved in, or comprising a part of, that process. After all, similar to demolishing a wall, for the deconstruction/negation to happen, it does have to be performed by someone (or something!). These positive elements can be perceived and described as luminosity, realization, experience of reality, and so forth. One can say, therefore, that while in terms of its function the process of deconstruction is negative, in terms of its agent or means it usually involves positive elements that might also be perceived in that process and described in positive terms.

Additional distinctions have to be made between understanding reality itself as a negation and its mere articulation in negative terms, without any implication that this is what the nature of reality consists of. Further distinctions should be made between negative (or positive) processes of contemplation of reality subsequent to its direct realization and negative (or positive) descriptions of those processes. We will have to distinguish between negation understood as a conceptual process and negation understood as a nonconceptual direct realization. We will also have to take into account differences between an affirming negation (*ma*

*yin dgag, paryudāsa*)—a negation that implies something is “left over” after the negation—and a nonaffirming negation (*med dgag, prasajyapraṭiṣedha*) that does not imply there is anything remaining. We will likewise have to differentiate between broader and narrower negations, negations that include or mutually exclude each other, and so forth. The list could go on, and I will address and utilize some of these concepts below. But for the purposes of this study it is essential that we distinguish between the aforementioned three types of negations—which can be termed “negation as a process leading to realization of reality,” “negation in terms of reality realized,” and “negation as an articulation of realization of reality”—and especially to clearly understand the nature and function of the first one.

To achieve this objective, I will utilize a distinction between two contexts or levels, the “practical” and the “descriptive.” The former pertains to realization of reality and the contemplative processes leading to it, the latter to the articulation of that realization, its “objects,” and its triggering processes. While the two levels are clearly interrelated, my basic argument is that different ways of describing ultimate reality and its realization in Buddhist writings do not necessarily indicate differences in that reality or in the realizations themselves. Nor do different descriptions of the deconstructive processes leading to realization of reality necessarily imply differences in those processes and their results. For example, descriptions of the ultimate as emptiness by one group of thinkers and luminosity by another may or may not imply differences in what those terms refer to. Likewise, descriptions of conceptual meditation on emptiness as maintaining a particular object—such as negation of true existence—versus not maintaining anything at all may or may not imply differences in the actual process of meditation on emptiness. I will return to this distinction in the last two chapters.

No matter how they describe reality and its realization, Tibetan thinkers are in consensus that the direct realization of reality itself transcends words and concepts (in fact, it is this very freedom from concepts that is indicated by the word “direct” here). Because realizing something as “this or that” necessarily involves concepts, at the moment of direct realization the ultimate itself is never “realized as”—no matter what “as” refers to, be it negation, affirmation, luminosity, reality, freedom from elaborations, or something else.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, no Tibetan thinker can claim an immediate correspondence between realization of reality and articulation of that realization. Consequently, different descriptions of realization of reality do not automatically imply differences in that realization.

Like its direct realization, ultimate reality is treated by most Tibetan thinkers as being beyond concepts, ineffable, and inconceivable. This further undermines the direct correspondence between any attempted articulation of ultimate reality and its realization—between how it is expressed and how it is realized. But this does not make those thinkers shy away from identifying reality in very diverse ways. Some treat it as a sheer negation, others as transcending negations and affirmations, and still others as including affirmations or positive elements as a “part” of reality that may or may not be described as negation. In the mainstream Sakya tradition, for example, the mental element of clarity or luminosity is treated as an inseparable “part” of ultimate reality which is described as the inseparability of clarity and emptiness (*gsal stong dbyer med*).<sup>42</sup> According to this view, ultimate reality is

41. This is accepted even by those thinkers who, like Geluk followers, treat mind realizing reality as a subject and reality—emptiness—as an object.

42. So important are such mental elements that the influential twentieth-century Sakya master Dezhung Rinpoché (*sde gzhung rin po che*, 1906–1987) stated: “You must understand that your mind has the nature of nondual clarity and voidness [i.e., emptiness].”

neither negation nor affirmation. Nevertheless, such reality has a “part” (clarity) that by itself is an affirmative or positive phenomenon. A similar approach is followed by thinkers from other traditions, such as the sixteenth-century Kagyü (*bka’ brgyud*) master Dakpo Trashi Namgyel (*dwags po bkra shis rnam rgyal*) and a contemporary Kagyü master, Tsültrim Gyamtso (*tshul khrims rgya mtsho*). The latter describes the ultimate nature of mind as the inseparability of emptiness and luminosity.<sup>43</sup> Shakya Chokden treats ultimate reality as an affirming negation, which he explains as a combination of a positive phenomenon of primordial mind and a nonaffirming negation.<sup>44</sup> As we will see later, in contrast to these approaches, Tsongkhapa Lopzang Drakpa (*tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*, 1357–1419) and Geluk thinkers who follow him treat ultimate reality exclusively as a nonaffirming negation. Although they concur that ultimate reality is realized by minds that take it as their object, in their opinion mental elements do not comprise a part of ultimate reality itself.<sup>45</sup> As for the approaches of Rendawa, who takes ultimate reality as being beyond any

If you recognize this, there is hope for you, and you will be a Sakyapa. If you do not recognize this nondual clarity and voidness of your own mind, you are not a Sakyapa.” Deshung Rinpoche (tr. Jared Rhoton), *The Three Levels of Spiritual Perception* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 471. This emphasis on the nonduality of clarity and emptiness is carried into meditative instructions as well, as evident in the writings of Rongtön Sheja Künrik (*rong ston shes bya kun rig*, 1367–1449). See, for example, his *Moonrays of Essential Points: Abridged Essence of Incorporation into Experience* (*Nyams su len pa’i rim pa snying po mdor bsdus pa gnad kyi zla zer*), The Collected Works of Rong-ston Shak-kya Rgyal-mtshen, vol. *Bkha* (Dehra Dun, India: Sakya College, 1999), 562–565 (hereafter, *Moonrays of Essential Points*), and other meditative instructions in the same volume.

43. See Karl Brunnhölzl, *The Center of the Sunlit Sky: Madhyamaka in the Kagyü Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2004), 303–310. Dakpo Trashi Namgyel is the author of *Mahāmudrā: The Moonlight—Quintessence of Mind and Meditation* who is referred in this book under the name “Dakpo Tashi Namgyal.”

44. For Shakya Chokden’s interpretation of reality see my *Visions of Unity*, especially chap. 5.

45. See chapter 5 for further details.

descriptions whatsoever, and Dzokchen thinkers, who include positive elements of clear nature and all-pervading compassion as “parts” of reality, they have already been addressed above.

An important question begging an answer in face of this diversity is whether differences in descriptions of reality necessarily indicate differences in its realization and the processes leading to it. The answer to this question depends on the perspective chosen by a particular thinker and on the specific traditions one is discussing. Shakya Chokden, for example, argues that those Niḥsvabhāvavāda writings which provide exclusively negative articulations of ultimate reality do not express it as efficiently as Yogācāra writings which describe ultimate reality positively as primordial mind. Nevertheless, in his opinion, it does not follow that those who adopt the Niḥsvabhāvavāda approach do not have sufficient tools for realization of the same ultimate reality. In other words, Yogācāras and Niḥsvabhāvavādins can realize the same ultimate reality despite differences in their descriptions of it. In the context of the different positions on Niḥsvabhāvavāda developed by Geluk and Sakya thinkers, I will also argue that their descriptive differences do not directly affect realization of reality, and that the actual tools used by them for achieving that realization are equally effective. I will demonstrate that their different articulations of reality pertain to descriptions subsequent to its realization and/or pedagogical tools used for drawing attention to it, while the actual processes of its realization advocated by them consist of similar techniques of alternating deconstructive reasoning with dwelling in the state of nonfindability achieved through its application.

This is not to say that *in general*, different identifications of the nature of ultimate reality cannot affect contemplative processes leading to or following its realization. For example, one

can identify ultimate reality as mind devoid of duality (thereby presenting it as an affirming negation) or, alternatively, exclusively as the negation of true existence (thereby presenting it as a non-affirming negation). Due to these differences in the identification of ultimate reality, during the contemplative process leading to its realization one *might* focus on the mind devoid of duality—in which case one will be contemplating an affirming negation—or, alternatively, bypass the positive element of mental presence and focus exclusively on the nonaffirming negation. While in either case one will be using mind for contemplating emptiness, in the former case the mind will also be used as an “object” of such contemplation, while in the latter it will not.

In Tibetan tantric traditions, too, different articulations of reality can be interwoven with and become a significant part of the process of its realization. This is obvious in the case of the “guiding mind instructions” (*sems 'khrīd*) in the Mahāmudrā system, the “empowerment of awareness-display” (*rig pa'i rtsal dbang*) in the Dzokchen system, or the “word empowerment” (*tshig dbang*) in the Highest Yoga Tantra. Identifications of reality given in those contexts are intended to ground practitioners in specific ways of cultivating reality by providing for and confirming their experience through words, symbols, and so forth.<sup>46</sup> Based on those introductions, disciples attempt to realize the nature of their mind and its different dimensions in various ways. For example, as we already know, ultimate reality is introduced in Dzokchen as having three “constituents” or “dimensions,” and one is expected

46. Alikākāravāda's description of the direct meditative experience of the ultimate as it is presented in Shākya Chokden's system appears to be similar. It seems that in his opinion it helps Alikākāravādins more effectively than Niḥsvabhāvavādins to keep progressing in the right direction *after* the realization of freedom from proliferations has been achieved.

to realize it accordingly. Of course, it is always mentioned that such reality is inexpressible and beyond concepts, and that the threefold distinction is made only as a way of conceptually/verbally pointing at it or expressing its realization. Nevertheless, it is believed that such description *does* affect its realization, and that realization of ultimate reality based on Dzokchen instructions is distinct from—and in fact more profound than—the one in, say, Niḥsvabhāvavāda.

The above examples notwithstanding, I would argue that different descriptions of ultimate reality do not *necessarily* affect contemplative processes leading to its realization. Nor do different contemplative processes based on discordant identifications of the nature of ultimate reality *necessarily* result in different realizations of ultimate reality. For example, whether one focuses on mind devoid of dualistic thinking or on nonduality itself, as long as one can equally destroy concepts blocking access to the direct realization of reality, that realization can be achieved in both cases. It is also possible that certain practitioners can follow identical deconstructive processes leading to realization of reality without being affected by different descriptions of ultimate reality, descriptions of its realization, and descriptions of processes leading to that realization—descriptions influenced by their specific philosophical outlooks.

And this is not just my own position. As we will see in the last two chapters, several Tibetan Buddhist thinkers and traditions claim that despite holding different philosophical views and applying different meditative techniques, some contemplatives can reach the same direct realization of ultimate reality. Their argument hinges on the premise that different deconstructive contemplative processes can lead to the same direct realization of reality: as long as deconstructive techniques can equally destroy the same

impediments to the direct realization of reality, the direct realization they trigger and the reality accessed through that realization are the same. As an example, we can again think of demolishing a wall: whether one uses bare hands, feet, hammers, sledges, explosives, etc., as long as one can completely demolish it, one will achieve the same end result—disappearance of the wall and manifestation of the open space it has been blocking.

Let us explore this approach a bit further. Not all walls can be destroyed with bare hands; likewise, not all mental impediments to realization of reality can be destroyed with just *any* deconstructive technique. This being the case, *what* exactly—and *how much*—does one have to negate or deconstruct in order to access the direct realization of reality? Do followers of different Buddhist systems possess sufficient tools for breaking through the veil of dualistic thinking to the same vision of ultimate reality? In other words, can the mystical experience of ultimate reality be shared by followers of different Buddhist traditions? There can be no one general answer to this inquiry, and the only way to address it is to anchor it in a particular context or position. In the following pages I provide a brief sketch of the standpoint of Tibetan thinkers. I will focus specifically on the position of Shakya Chokden, because of its relevance to the topics discussed later.

The majority of Tibetan thinkers adhere to a powerful hierarchy of Buddhist systems that can be described as progressive levels of increasingly refined negations. They usually divide those systems into four, which—starting from the “lowest” to the “highest”—are Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Cittamātra, and Madhyamaka.<sup>47</sup> Cittamātra (*sems tsam*, Mind-Only) is often equated with

47. For more on the four tenet systems, see Jeffrey Hopkins, *Maps of the Profound: Jam-yang-shay-ba's Great Exposition of Buddhist and Non-Buddhist Views on the Nature of Reality* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2003; hereafter, *Maps of the Profound*).



Yogācāra, and Madhyamaka with Niḥsvabhāvavāda. Shakya Chokden denies these equations, arguing that while one of the two types of Yogācāra, Satyākāravāda (*rnam bden pa*, Proponents of True Representations), is in fact synonymous with Cittamātra, the other type, Alikākāravāda (*rnam rdzun pa*, Proponents of False Representations), is a subdivision of Madhyamaka alongside Niḥsvabhāvavāda. Regardless how they subdivide the four tenets, most Tibetan thinkers share the same basic opinion that the more reality one attributes to phenomena the less advanced one's view of the ultimate nature of phenomena is. In other words, the more reality one negates or deconstructs, the more subtle one's view will be. This explains why in the nontantric context the view of Niḥsvabhāvavāda, which denies the real existence of any phenomena whatsoever, is considered by most Tibetan thinkers to be the pinnacle of Buddhist views.<sup>48</sup>

The four systems are not treated as unrelated philosophical schools. Rather, they are presented as sets of ideas and related contemplative practices whose elements are often found in dynamic tension and conflict with each other. Because negations made by followers of higher systems are broader than the corresponding negations made by followers of lower systems, higher systems not only absorb negations made by lower ones, but unavoidably negate specific affirmations made by lower tenets as well. The following passage from Śāntideva's *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* is often cited by Tibetan commentators in support of this approach:

There, the ordinary world  
Is invalidated by the yogis' world.

48. I am not claiming that the extensiveness of negations is the *only* criterion of the hierarchical superiority of the doctrinal views held by Tibetan thinkers. Nevertheless, in my opinion, it is one of the main tools for gauging this hierarchy.

Due to the distinctive features of their minds,  
Higher yogis also invalidate the lower ones.<sup>49</sup>

According to Shakya Chokden in particular, the elements of lower systems refuted by higher ones are primarily those phenomena which the lower systems assert to be true or real. In other words, the advocates of higher systems are in harmony with the negations made by the lower systems (as long as those negations do not target their own views), but disagree with their affirmative positions about reality.<sup>50</sup> For example, the negation of phenomena extended in space and time by Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika followers or the negation of all external phenomena by Cittamātra are accepted and assimilated by followers of the higher systems. In contrast, those higher systems refute the positive assertions by Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika of partless atoms and by Cittamātra of the true existence of some types of consciousness.

Shakya Chokden argues that advocates of all four systems can abandon afflictive obscurations, because they all possess effective tools for realization of the selflessness of persons (*gang zag gi bdeg med, pudgalanairātmya*). Nevertheless, only followers of Madhyamaka (including Alīkākarāvāda) are able to abandon obscurations of knowables, because only they possess efficient tools for realization of both selflessness of persons and selflessness of phenomena (*chos kyi bdag med, dharmanairātmya*) in their

49. *de la 'jig rten phal pa ni // rnal 'byor 'jig rten gyis gnod cing // rnal 'byor pa yang blo khyad k'yis // gong ma gong ma rnam k'yis gnod. Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds, D3871, dbu ma, la, 31a. Skt.: tatra prākṛtako loko yogilokena bādhyate // bādhyante dhivīśeṣeṇa yogino 'py uttarottaraiḥ. In Sharma, Śāntideva' Bodhicaryāvatāra, 368–369. For an example of a commentary on this passage see Kunzang Pelden (tr. Padmakara Translation Group), *The Nectar of Manjushri's [sic] Speech: A Detailed Commentary on Shantideva's [sic] Way of the Bodhisattva* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2007), 317–321.*

50. For further details, see chapter 3 section 1 of *Visions of Unity*.

entirety. In other words, he claims that despite holding different or even contradictory views on the nature of mind, external world, etc., followers of *all* the four systems can abandon *all* afflictions by producing the same realizations leading to that abandonment. Put differently, although their other philosophical positions may vary and exhibit different levels of subtlety, they can achieve the same mystical experience through the cultivation of the view of selflessness of persons, whose main features they all share.

That being said, Shakya Chokden argues that those systems whose negations are not extensive enough to abandon obscurations of knowables should not be counted as Madhyamaka. At the same time, to be a Mādhyamika (i.e., a Madhyamaka follower), one does not have to make the broadest negation possible either. Here lies an important difference between his approach to Cittamātra and Madhyamaka on the one hand, and Alikākāravāda and Niḥsvabhāvavāda subdivisions of Madhyamaka on the other. Madhyamaka is placed above Cittamātra because it negates more than Cittamātra (in particular, the dualistic consciousness), and such negation *is* necessary to achieve buddhahood. On the other hand, although Niḥsvabhāvavāda negates more than Alikākāravāda (i.e., it negates even the nondual consciousness that Alikākāravāda retains), such negation *is not* necessary even for the achievement of buddhahood. This is why, despite the differences in extensiveness—as well as styles—of their negations, Shakya Chokden places both Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Alikākāravāda on the same level as equal subdivisions of Madhyamaka.<sup>51</sup> In other words, he argues that whichever of the two systems one follows in contemplative practice, one can access the same experience of ultimate reality, because the processes leading to that experience,

51. For more details of Shakya Chokden's position, see chapter 4 section 3.

despite their differences, lead to deconstruction of the same amount of concepts, etc., that prevented it from occurring. What allows for that is, once again, the nature of negative conditioning involved in realization of reality, which is different from conditioning in a positive or constructive sense.

Whether we agree with Shakya Chokden's interpretation of Buddhist systems or not, and whether we treat the four-tenet division advocated by Tibetans as artificial or not, what interests me here is the fact that by appealing to the deconstructive or negative nature of the processes involved in realization of ultimate reality, Tibetan thinkers are able to claim that certain contemplatives who adhere to conflicting philosophical views can nonetheless achieve the same realization of reality. This once again suggests that to better understand whether, when, and how followers of different Buddhist systems can achieve similar mystical experiences, we have to undertake a deeper analysis of the negations they make and utilize in contemplative practice.

In the Niḥsvabhāvavāda context in particular, from among the three types of negations, the analysis of the nature of negative processes leading to realization of reality ("negation as a process leading to realization of reality") is of prime importance, being more important than analyzing whether the ultimate is understood as negation ("negation in terms of reality realized") and whether its realization is described in a negative way ("negation as an articulation of realization of reality"). After all, descriptions of the ultimate and its realization are influenced by the basic philosophical views held by different Tibetan thinkers who themselves usually admit that the ultimate transcends words and concepts. Adhering to those descriptions in itself is not the actual tool for realization of reality, whether conceptual or nonconceptual. The actual tool is the deconstructive process based on Niḥsvabhāvavāda reasoning.

It is in this context that one can claim commonalities of some Buddhist mystical experiences, as I will do in the last chapter of this book.

In sum, I argue that in order to acquire a nuanced understanding of Tibetan Buddhist approaches to realization of ultimate reality, we have to distinguish between different types of negations in the practical and descriptive contexts, paying prime attention to the deconstructive processes leading to realization of reality. My basic position is that *as long as it can be demonstrated that deconstructive contemplative processes—whether actually different or only described differently—result in the same deconstruction of impediments to realization of ultimate reality, and as long as it is accepted—as it is by Tibetan thinkers—that there is only one ultimate reality, realizations of that reality triggered by such processes should be the same.* In particular, I argue that different identifications of the ultimate by adherents of Niḥsvabhāvavāda—including followers of the rival Geluk and Sakya traditions—do not prevent them from attaining the same realizations of the ultimate. The main reason for this is that these traditions equip their followers with equally effective deconstructive techniques, thereby enabling them to come to the same realization of ultimate reality.

## Mystical Complexities

### A FEW WORDS ABOUT INEFFABILITY

As some scholars have rightly observed, interpreters of mysticism are often misled by similar-sounding descriptions of mystical experiences as ineffable, inexpressible, transcendent, sublime, and so on.<sup>1</sup> Much confusion surrounding this matter boils down to the simplistic assumption that the same or similar words and expressions should have the same or similar referents because they sound similar. Tibetan thinkers in particular often describe the categories of ultimate reality and its realization as ineffable, inexpressible, and transcendent. But even within the world of Tibetan Buddhism, in the context of addressing one and the same system, such as Niḥsvabhāvavāda, they offer multiple and *contradictory* interpretations of these categories.<sup>2</sup> The basic assumption they share is that although ultimate reality is ineffable and inexpressible, it can still be articulated in different ways, and there are right and wrong ways of doing so.

1. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 46–47.

2. I will explore this issue in detail in the last chapter. See also my "Encountering Ineffability—Counting Ineffability: On Divergent Verbalizations of the Ineffable in 15th Century Tibet," *Acta Tibetica et Buddhica* 1 (2008): 1–15.

To understand this “paradox,” we should recall the complex status of conceptuality in Tibetan Buddhism. On the one hand, Tibetan thinkers hold that genuine realization of ultimate reality has to be direct and nonconceptual, that such realization is the very means of eventually destroying all conceptuality, and that concepts and words cannot fully express ultimate reality. On the other hand, they treat conceptuality as a means of accessing and describing ultimate reality and contend that “correct” conceptualizations of the ultimate can usefully impact mental processes and eventually result in its direct realization. They see conceptuality as helpful—if not necessary—to prepare for that realization, come closer to it, and eventually articulate it to oneself and others. This partly explains why so much has been written on Niḥsvabhāvavāda reasoning leading to the realization of emptiness, on an ultimate reality that lies beyond words and concepts, and so forth. This also explains why such intense polemical storms surround these issues.

Every attempt to describe or explain something as “ineffable”—indeed the very act of calling it so—appears to be self-contradictory, raising a legitimate question: if something is ineffable, how meaningful can any description of it be, including its description as ineffable? Neither Tibetan Buddhist thinkers nor writers on mysticism are immune to this and other challenges posed by the category of “ineffability,” which has so often been involved in discussions of mystical experiences. This category has also received a significant amount of attention from contemporary scholarship. Some scholars, for example, have argued that if “ineffability” is taken at face value and something is called “ineffable,” all attempts at describing it should be dropped. As Katz puts it, “[i]f the terms ‘paradoxical’ and ‘ineffable’ mean anything, do they not cancel out all other descriptive claims, thus undermining any and all attempts at a phenomenological typology of mystical

experience based on post-experiential reports?”<sup>3</sup> Proudfoot in his turn insists that the terms “ineffable” and “paradoxical” often serve to “constitute an experience rather than to describe, express, or analyze it. They are conditions for the identification of an experience as mystical.”<sup>4</sup> He further argues that “[t]he component of the experience which insures ineffability is a grammatical rule; it is prescriptive rather than descriptive. It is a criterion for the identification of an experience as mystical.”<sup>5</sup>

Tibetan thinkers would disagree with the position that the term or concept of ineffability can somehow be built into the direct experience of ultimate reality, since they argue that on the nonconceptual level, reality is not realized as anything (or nothing), including as being ineffable. They will likewise disagree with the claim that accepting something as ineffable should necessarily cancel descriptive claims; after all, they concur that those descriptions are not supposed to reach the ineffable reality in the first place—only point at it. The shared claim of the ineffability of ultimate reality does not prevent them from providing highly divergent conceptual descriptions of that concept-transcending indescribable reality, conceiving different ways of accessing the direct nonconceptual insight into it, and holding dissimilar opinions on the process of transition from its conceptual understanding to its direct realization.<sup>6</sup>

Although concepts cannot reach or fully express ultimate reality and its nonconceptual realization, they can be used as a means of approaching and at least partly describing them. Descriptions of ultimate reality are often provided in the same texts or even

3. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 55–56.

4. Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 125.

5. *Ibid.*, 127.

6. See the last section of this chapter and the final chapter for details.



the same passages where that reality is claimed to be ineffable and transcending words and concepts. This tendency is seen, for example, in the songs of tantric adepts such as Saraha, Kāṇha, and Tilopa whose ideas influenced Tibetan tantric traditions: while maintaining that the ultimate is inexpressible and ineffable, they also describe it by such terms as “great bliss,” “stainless mind,” “inmost nature,” “the real,” “great delight,” “tasting the same,” “that,” “knowledge,” and “self-awareness.”<sup>7</sup> A similar tendency can be seen in the writings of such thinkers as Nāgārjuna (ca. second century CE) and Asaṅga (fourth century CE), which play a vital role in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy; such core Mahāyāna sūtras as the *Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā)*, which many Tibetans know by heart; and such often-quoted writings as the *Praise to the Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitāstotra)*, usually attributed to Rahulabhadra. The latter states:

I prostrate to the mother of victors of the three times,  
 The unutterable, inconceivable, ineffable perfection of wisdom,  
 The unborn and unceasing space[-like] nature,  
 The object of functioning of the individually self-cognizing  
 primordial mind!<sup>8</sup>

As this passage demonstrates, the ineffability and inconceivability of ultimate reality do not prevent Buddhists from describing it in negative ways (similar to space, which is identified as a mere absence of obstructions) and positive ways (as an object

7. Jackson, *Tantric Treasures*, 21–24.

8. *smra bsam brjod med shes rab pha rol phyin // ma skyes mi 'gag nam mkha' i ngo bo nyid // so so rang rig ye shes spyod yul pa // dus gsum rgyal ba' i yum la phyag 'tshal lo*. In “We Are All Gzhan stong pas,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 7 (2000): 111 by Matthew Kapstein, who cites this passage and provides a slightly different translation.

of primordial mind). This passage is also open to multiple interpretations. For example, the perfection of wisdom it praises can be taken either as ultimate reality itself or as a mind—classified as a conventional reality—that perceives ultimate reality, which is described as a sheer negation. Alternatively, the individually self-cognizing primordial mind that realizes the perfection of wisdom can be treated either as a type of mind or as a state which transcends mind in spite of having qualities of clarity and awareness. Furthermore, the overall meaning of the quote can be explained differently depending on context. I remember how one Tibetan lama cited this very passage in order to illustrate that the Dzokchen system was taught in India, and he interpreted it in the Dzokchen style.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that very different meanings can be read into “ineffability” and such related terms as “unutterability,” “inconceivability,” and “freedom from proliferations” helps explain the diversity of their interpretations and the proliferation of polemics surrounding them in Tibetan writings. Consider, for example, the term “freedom from proliferations” (*spros bral, aprapañca*, “proliferations” referring to conceptual elaborations) that Tibetan thinkers apply to ultimate reality. While this term indicates that ultimate reality cannot be grasped by conceptual thinking, the status and meaning of that reality, the amount of concepts it transcends, and its realization by followers of different systems are understood in highly diverse ways. Sakya Pendita, for example, makes a statement in his *Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows* that can be read as indicating that the tantric and nontantric—or “sūtric”—Buddhist views on freedom from proliferations are identical, and

9. Khamtrül Rinpoché (*kham sprul rin po che*), personal communication.

that holders of those views can achieve the same realization of reality:

If there were a view higher than the Perfection [Vehicle's  
View of] freedom from proliferations,  
That view would have proliferations.  
If it is free from proliferations, there is no difference [between  
the two].  
Therefore, the view [arisen from] listening  
Understood through explanation is only one [for both systems].  
Nevertheless, Secret Mantra is superior in terms of  
Means of realizing the freedom from proliferations.<sup>10</sup>

Despite its apparent clarity, this passage provides ample space for a creative interpretation. An obvious way to comment on the first four lines is to say that they indicate a lack of difference in the “object” realized by followers of sūtras and tantras, because both systems teach it as a total freedom from the proliferations of being/nonbeing, existence/nonexistence, and so forth. Thus, shifting the focus of the sūtric/tantric distinction away from the “object,” one can claim that their difference lies in different ways of realizing that “object.”<sup>11</sup> Because the Highest Yoga Tantra teaches an uncommon “subject,” such as the great bliss (*bde ba chen po*, *mahāsukha*) arisen from empowerments (*dbang*, *abhiṣeka*)<sup>12</sup> that

10. *pha rol phyin pa'i spros bral las // lhag pa'i lta ba yod na ni // lta de spros pa can du 'gyur // spros bral yin na khyad par med // des na bshad pas go ba yi // thos pa'i lta ba gcig nyid yin // 'on kyang spros bral rtogs pa yi // thabs la gsang sgnags khyad par 'phags*. See Rhoton, *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes*, for the Tibetan text (p. 308) and an alternative translation (p. 129).

11. See, for example, Kelden Tsering (*skal ldan tse ring*), *Presentation of Tenets of Glorious Sakyapas (Dpal sa skya pa'i grub mtha'i rnam bzhag*, Hong Kong: Zhang kang then mā dpe skrun khang, 2001), 98.

12. See chapter 2 note 19.

realizes a common “object,” it is superior to nontantric Mahāyāna systems.

This is a standard explanation followed by later commentators, including Shakya Chokden, who in his *Rain of Ambrosia* (*Bdud rtsi'i char 'bebs*) explains that there are two bearers of the name “view”: the object, freedom from proliferations, and the subject, primordial mind. In terms of the first, the tantric view is *not* superior, but it *is* superior in terms of the second. This is because the tantric system presents an uncommon subject—supremely unchangeable bliss (*mchog tu mi 'gyur ba'i bde ba*)—that experiences the object, primordial mind free of proliferations.<sup>13</sup> That subject and the means of its utilization are taught only in Tantra.

Nevertheless, there are other possible interpretations. In the *Wish Fulfilling Meru* (*Yid bzhin lhun po*), for example, the same author draws the reader's attention to the next two lines in the *Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows* cited above, arguing that what Sakya Pendita asserts as one is determined by listening and thinking (*thos bsam gyis gtan la dbab bya*), and is not actually the object of experience (*nyams su myong bya*). In other words, that passage shows that it is only the views conceptually formulated on the basis of intellectual study of the Buddhist teachings that are “just one” in sūtras and tantras. The tantric view realized in meditation is different from the sūtric one, precisely because this view—and not just the means of realizing it—has to be produced by empowerments and other uncommon tantric means. It is this view that makes tantric practice more efficient,

13. *Rain of Ambrosia: Extensive [Auto-]Commentary on the 'Profound Thunder amidst the Clouds of the Ocean of Definitive Meaning'* (*Nges don rgya mtsho sprin gyi 'brug sgra zab mo'i rgyas 'grel bdud rtsi'i char 'bebs*), in *Two Controversial Mādhyamika Treatises* (Bir, India: Yashodhara Publications, 1996; hereafter, *Rain of Ambrosia*), 376. See also *Ibid.*, 361.

potentially resulting in achievement of buddhahood in a single lifetime.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Shakya Chokden approaches the issue of superiority of the tantric view of freedom from proliferations over the sūtric from two different angles. Despite different ways of addressing the views of sūtras and tantras, he treats the tantric view as superior to the sūtric *both* when the ultimate view is artificially split into subjective and objective parts, *and* when it is treated as a “single unit.” Either way, he achieves the same point of showing the superiority of the tantric view over the sūtric, and he argues that this is the approach of Sakya Pendita as well. What this shows is that in Shakya Chokden’s opinion, the inexpressible and inconceivable nature of the tantric and sūtric views of reality that is free from proliferations does not prevent the former view from being “higher” than the latter.

This is just one among multiple examples demonstrating that the nature of referents of “ineffability,” “nonconceptuality,” and related terms is far from being uniform even within the same tradition or the writings of a single thinker, and can indicate multiple things depending on context. Thus, the word “ineffability” by itself does not indicate any one thing, and even when it is attached to such categories as ultimate reality, they can have different referents themselves. The fact that the realization of reality and other mystical experiences are often described as ineffable and inexpressible does not necessarily show their similarity, nor does it

14. *Wish Fulfilling Meru: Discourse on the History of Madhyamaka* (*Dbu ma'i byung tshul rnam par bshad pa'i gdam yid bzhin lhun po*), Collected Writings of Gser-mdog paṅ-chen Śākya-mchog-ldan, vol. 4 (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunzang Tobgey, 1975), 227–232, translated in Yaroslav Komarovski (tr.), *Three Texts on Madhyamaka by Shakya Chokden* (Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2000; hereafter, *Wish Fulfilling Meru*), 17–20 (I provide a slightly different translation of the *Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows* passage there).

indicate significant parallels between them. Once again we can see the crucial importance of understanding the contexts in which such terms are used.

However, while interpreting the ineffable ultimate reality differently, Tibetan thinkers concur that its direct realization does indeed transcend words and concepts, because it does not utilize them. (This also allows some of them to claim that diverse descriptions of ineffable reality by different individuals do not necessarily preclude them from acquiring the same realization of it.) As we already know,<sup>15</sup> the absence of generic images—which are exclusively conceptual constructs—involved in the act of perception is precisely what distinguishes direct realization from conceptuality. Thus, although the ineffable is described (or “pointed at”) differently, it is still ineffable.

But if this is the case, then how is the ineffability of ultimate reality and its realization different from the ineffability that can be ascribed to sense perception with its objects? After all, both the direct realization of the ultimate and the direct perception of, say, an apple by an eye consciousness are similar in terms of being free from conceptuality and the generic images which conceptuality utilizes. They both transcend words and concepts. Is this transcendence of words and concepts not what is understood as ineffability? I would agree that *just from this point of view* both types of perception are ineffable. But what makes direct perception of reality distinct is that in contrast to sensory perception, it challenges and undermines the very means of its articulation and expression—words and concepts.

Words and concepts operate on the subjective-objective plane, while the direct realization of the ultimate not only transcends

15. Chapter 2 section 2.

that plane but acts as the means of destroying the dualistic apprehension of subjects and objects. This is why no matter how one tries, one will never be able to adequately describe emptiness and its realization in positive terms—as *what it is*. This is also why Buddhist thinkers often resort to negative articulations of emptiness—as *what it is not*.

I am not arguing here that one can fully express in words or concepts the direct perception of an apple's color, shape, or taste. Of course not! My point is that the direct perception of, say, a delicious red apple only confirms—rather than undermines—the concept of a delicious red apple. The direct perception of the ultimate, on the other hand, challenges the adequacy of all conceptions of the ultimate, even negative ones. Acutely aware of this “paradox,” Tibetan thinkers characterize ultimate reality and its realization as ineffable and inexpressible, while continuing to believe in the utility of descriptions which “point to” these states of being.

There is another interesting difference between sensory perception and the direct realization of the ultimate in their relation to conceptuality. In the former case, the concept of “apple” is a product—not a cause—of the direct perception of one or more apples. In other words, the concept does not serve as the necessary cause of their perception. Rather, it is the other way round—to form a correct concept of an apple, we have to see or taste it first. But in the case of the direct realization of ultimate reality, the process is reversed: conceptual understanding of emptiness—or, better, a conceptual understanding that leads to realization of emptiness—is the necessary cause of its direct realization (although conceptualization of emptiness will continue after its direct realization as well). It suggests, therefore, that in order to understand the direct realization of ultimate reality, it is indispensable to pay

close attention to details of the process of forming its conceptual understanding. I will explore those details in the last chapter.

## MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES AND POLEMICS

In the previous section, I demonstrated that the ineffable status ascribed to ultimate reality and its realization does not make them immune to varieties of interpretations. This plethora of conflicting interpretations is built on virtually unavoidable tension: on the one hand, the ineffable nature of reality challenges any attempts to approach it through words and concepts; on the other, words and concepts are unavoidable when trying to express it. When different ideas about ultimate reality are articulated—especially when they are articulated in explicit or implicit juxtaposition to each other—sooner or later they come into conflict, stirring debates, polemics, and sectarian controversies. As a result, new ideas can be formed and put to different uses, such as reconciling conflicting theories of reality, supporting one side and negating the other, or proposing an entirely new perspective. Because polemics surrounds those very issues that Tibetan Buddhists consider vital to their traditions, it is not surprising that such issues as the nature of reality and the process of its realization are immersed in the ocean of polemics. In many instances, we observe that polemics are both an outcome of and a factor contributing to the growth and development of Tibetan traditions, including their philosophical and contemplative dimensions. Consequently, it is virtually impossible to discuss mystical experiences in Tibetan Buddhism in total separation from polemics. Understanding the nature of those polemics is especially crucial for dealing with the issues explored in the last chapter of this book.



Far from being related only to mystical experiences, Tibetan polemics are intricately linked with the broader issues of sectarian rivalry, political conflicts, philosophical concepts, ritual practices, and so forth. Nevertheless, this does not weaken the intricate connection between polemics and mystical experiences. Consider, for example, the issues surrounding Sakya Pendita's writing one of the earliest Tibetan polemical treatises, the *Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows* that I quoted from in the previous section. Allegedly, he was dissuaded from completing the text, but eventually decided to finish it because one night he had a dream about the Buddha image sunk in filth. He took it up and cleaned it off, but that made many people upset. He then put the image down and it was smeared with filth again, which made bodhisattva Mañjuśrī (the embodiment of wisdom) turn his back on him and made Nāgārjuna ill.<sup>16</sup> Most likely, to Sakya Pendita this dream symbolized that the Buddhist teachings were sunk in the filth of wrong interpretations by his contemporaries and it was his responsibility to purify them through polemical refutations. He realized that if he did so, it would make many people unhappy; but if he did not, it would displease those who support their right understanding. So, after he woke up, he proceeded to complete the text.<sup>17</sup>

Looking at the religious and political milieu of Sakya Pendita's time, we learn, among other factors, about the sectarian and political rivalry between his Sakya tradition and certain branches of the Kagyü tradition. But the text itself deals primarily with philosophical, ritual, and contemplative issues, including those related to realization of ultimate reality, as in the case of the Mahāmudrā

16. Rhoton, *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes*, 9.

17. *Ibid.*

system.<sup>18</sup> It also describes what Sakya Pendita sees as the proper means of bringing about such realization. While it is impossible to know the details of Sakya Pendita's motivation, there is no reason to doubt that he genuinely wished to benefit Buddhism and its followers. It is also clear that those who took that text seriously—and they comprise generations of followers of the Sakya tradition—heeded his advice on what to appropriate and what to avoid as the means of practicing Mahāmudrā, etc.

While this text has been taken as authoritative by Sakya followers, it also has provoked responses from followers of other traditions who have defended the correctness of their own ways of practicing Mahāmudrā and other systems.<sup>19</sup> And I do mean *practicing*, and not just theorizing about practice. Tibetan Buddhists believe that Mahāmudrā is one of the most advanced and powerful systems that leads to, articulates, and helps maintain the direct realization of ultimate reality, and in one or another form it is practiced by many advanced Tibetan contemplatives. Consequently, if one wants to learn about the similarities, differences, and nuances of different approaches to the experience of reality in the context of Mahāmudrā, it is virtually indispensable to study Sakya Pendita's polemical treatise, as well as polemical responses to it. This is only one among numerous examples—some of which will be dealt with later—demonstrating that far from being just an apologetic or sectarian process that pertains exclusively to “scholastic” or “intellectual” domains, polemics can actually affect and modify mystical experiences. In fact, they are often intended to do exactly that.

18. For details, see the introduction in Rhoton, *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes*, as well as David Jackson, *Enlightenment by a Single Means: Tibetan Controversies on the “Self-Sufficient White Remedy”* (dkar po chig thub) (Vienna: Der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1994), 67ff.

19. See introduction in *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes* for details. See also Dakpo Tashi Namgyal, *Mahāmudrā*, 123–125.

Mystical experiences and polemics interact with each other: polemics can spring up as a result of some mystical experiences, and mystical experiences can be affected by polemics. Some mystical experiences pose a challenge to certain thought patterns and interpretive ideas, while some polemical ideas—or ideas placed in polemical juxtaposition to each other, such as those about sudden versus gradual awakening<sup>20</sup>—can affect mystical experiences. Mystical experiences can also be put to polemical use, while polemics can directly target mystical experiences. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that in discussions of mystical experiences, the polemical, mystical, and other levels of discourse are often merged. References to personal experiences and visions, for example, can be mixed with allusions to diverse philosophical ideas and systems of thought as well as to particular scriptural and religious authorities; they may also include polemics against rival or alternative interpretations of mystical experiences, replies to polemical challenges from rival interpreters, and so forth.

Interestingly, appeals to the importance of personal meditative experience of ultimate reality can be used polemically, as a means of deemphasizing the importance of what can be termed “ritualized polemics”—scholastic debates as they are practiced in Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Ritualized polemics, in turn, can be seen as a road to mystical experiences. I recount a conversation with some Nyingma monks who criticized Geluk monks for spending too much time on debates. “Those guys,” they would say, “are like people who put *tsampa*<sup>21</sup> on the palm of their hand, and then blow it off instead of eating!” In other words, instead of putting Dharma into personal practice, they only learn how to spit out

20. See pp. 134ff.

21. *Tsampa* (*rtsam pa*) is the staple Tibetan food, made of roasted barley flour.

smart words that miss the true meaning of Dharma—a meaning that, similar to the taste of tsampa, can be savored only through personal experience. In their defense, Geluk monks would argue that first, debates themselves can be a form of analytical meditation and the debate yard a place to generate insights, and second, without firm philosophical foundation built primarily through the practice of debates, it is very difficult to achieve a genuine realization of reality, no matter what one meditates on or experiences in meditation. Overall, there is no consensus on this issue (and on the broader issue of the relationship between intellectual study and meditative experience) and the polemics over these issues go on.<sup>22</sup>

It is true that “schools,” “lineages,” and “traditions” arise as a result of retrospective labeling by those who imagine or consciously create rigid distinctions where the actual historical and social circumstances are much more fluid. Yet, whatever the initial circumstances of their arising, schools and traditions do develop, grow, and solidify, and their followers do acquire and consciously emphasize their specific affiliation and sectarian identity, often by juxtaposing it with those of others. That in turn leads to acceptance of specific philosophical stances, ritual and contemplative styles, and different approaches to mystical experiences. The ways different traditions arise, branch off, and develop are often directly related to polemics, sectarian and otherwise. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that polemically charged sectarian distinctions are often built into actual contemplative practices and related mystical experiences.

22. For more on the relationship between intellectual and contemplative practices in Tibetan monastic traditions, see Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*, 164ff., and Jeffrey Hopkins, *Reflections on Reality: The Three Natures and Non-Natures in Cittamātra School, Dynamic Responses to Dzong-ka-ba's The Essence of Eloquence*, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 3–28.

Depending on the tradition in which one is trained and educated, one's attitude to polemical issues surrounding mystical experiences will be different, and one's style of practice and the results of that practice can also be different. I remember talking to one Geluk scholar who had just returned from visiting a Sön monastery in South Korea. I asked him about his impression of Korean Sön monks, who are known for spending remarkably long periods of time in vigorous meditation.<sup>23</sup> Knowing the general Geluk attitude to study and meditation, I was not surprised to hear that in his opinion, those contemplatives were just wasting their lives. "This is because," he said, "they do not have the correct view of emptiness"—meaning that they do not put into contemplative practice the view of emptiness as explained in texts studied by followers of his Geluk tradition. Such position is shared by those Geluk scholars who believe that only the Geluk view of emptiness—or a view matching it—is conducive to liberation, and that to develop that view one has to engage in intellectual study of Geluk works on Madhyamaka.

Regardless of what school or tradition they belong to, when dealing with contemplative practices, overall Tibetan Buddhists stress the importance of using right contemplative techniques and avoiding wrong ones. Since Buddhist paths consist of contemplative states, if one's contemplative practice is mistaken in terms of its objects or ways of engaging those objects, that practice will not bring the desired results. Geluk writers, for example, criticize contemplatives of some Tibetan traditions for not distinguishing between the two types of laxity (*bying ba*) that occur in meditation,

23. On meditative training in Korean monasteries, see Robert E. Buswell, *The Zen Monastic Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), chaps. 6–9, especially 8.

subtle and coarse. They argue that in both cases the mind is too much withdrawn inside, but in contrast to the coarse laxity, which has a problem with stability of concentration, the subtle one is more difficult to identify and distinguish from the genuine meditative stabilization: in that case the mind is still focused on its object and apprehends it clearly, but it lacks sufficient intensity (*ngar*).<sup>24</sup> Consequently, they argue, because of the inability to distinguish between these two types of laxity, followers of other traditions might get rid of only the coarse one, but then mistakenly engage in cultivating the state of mind that is not free from subtle laxity, mistaking such a state for a genuine meditative stabilization. That in turn will prevent them from developing the direct realization of reality, because such realization is possible only on the basis of calm abiding, which by definition is free from all types of laxity.

We can also recall Sakya Pendita's polemics regarding Mahāmudrā in his *Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows*, where he criticizes those “fools” who do not know the right way of contemplating mahāmudrā:

Meditation on mahāmudrā by fools

Is taught most likely to be the cause of animal [rebirth].

If not, [those fools] will be reborn in the formless realm.

Otherwise, [they] will fall into the cessation of śrāvakas.<sup>25</sup>

Notice that in this passage Sakya Pendita is not saying that foolish meditation on mahāmudrā is necessarily fruitless. After all, as its

24. Geshe Gedün Lodrö, *Calm Abiding and Special Insight*, 35, 79–80.

25. *blun po phyag rgya che bsgom pa // phal cher dud 'gro' i rgyu ru gsungs // min na gzugs med khams su skye // yang na nyan thos 'gog par ltung*). See Rhoton, *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes*, for the Tibetan text (p. 303) and alternative translation (p. 117). Dakpo Tashi Namgyal responds to this passage in his *Mahāmudrā*, pp. 245–246.

result, those unidentified fools, if lucky, can be reborn in higher realms or even escape cyclic existence altogether, śrāvaka style. Nevertheless, from the Mahāyāna perspective, even the nirvāṇa of śrāvakas—not to mention rebirth in the formless realm—is something to avoid, not strive for.

The same polemical issue can be—and often is—reinterpreted repeatedly and fed with different meanings in order to serve specific purposes, some of which might also be polemical. A good example is the so-called “Samyé debate” or “council of Lhasa,” which reportedly occurred ca. 792 at Samyé (*bsam yas*)—the first Tibetan monastery built near the Tibetan capital Lhasa (*lha sa*)—and was presided over by King Trisong Detsen (*khri srong lde brtsan*, 742–ca.798). The two rival sides in this debate were “gradualists” (*rim gyis pa*), represented by the Indian thinker Kamalaśīla, and “instantanialists”/ “simultaneists” (*cig car ba*), represented by the Chinese Chan master Heshang Moheyan. The debate concerned the relative (im)mediacy of awakening and the purported necessity of cultivating such conceptual states of mind as compassion in order to achieve it. Gradualists insisted on the indispensability of such practices as cultivation of the six perfections, most of which involve discursive thinking, while simultaneists argued that it is sufficient to achieve the cessation of conceptualization without any need for gradual practices of the six perfections. The famous example used by Heshang Moheyan was that of white and black clouds—representing good and bad concepts respectively—which despite color differences equally obscure the sun.

In Tibet, it is widely believed that gradualists won the debate. Whatever the historical truth is, gradualism became the dominant approach in Tibetan Buddhism, and later Tibetans often associated instantanialism with a mere cessation of concepts, which became the standard object of rebuttal. Some thinkers of the Sakya

and Geluk traditions, for example, put Heshang Moheyan's alleged defeat to polemical use against certain Mahāmudrā and Dzokchen systems practiced respectively in the Kagyü and Nyingma traditions, claiming that those systems too were advocating Heshang Moheyan's simultaneous method. Noticeably, warnings against Heshang Moheyan-style meditation can be found in texts that deal with practical instructions on meditation on emptiness, such as Tsongkhapa's *Great Stages of the Path*.<sup>26</sup>

A very different approach was taken by the early Tibetan thinker Nupchen Sanggyé Yeshé (*gnubs chen sangs rgyas ye shes*, born 772), who was situated much closer in time to the debate. In his *Lamp for the Eye of Meditation (Bsam gtan mig sgron)*,<sup>27</sup> he outlined four Buddhist approaches to awakening, with each succeeding one being superior to the preceding ones: the gradual approach taught by Kamalaśīla, the instantaneous Chan approach of Heshang Moheyan, the approach of Mahāyoga, and the approach of Dzokchen.<sup>28</sup> Importantly, he treated all of them as valid, placed the instantaneous approach above the gradualist, but considered Dzokchen as the highest method distinct from the instantanialist method.

Later Nyingma thinkers also issued different responses to the criticisms of their practices and presented various perspectives on

26. See, for example, *Great Stages of the Path*, 643, 704–705, 775–776, 787, 791 (English translation: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 194, 260, 332–333, 343, 346).

27. Smarntsis shesrig spendzod, vol. 74 (Leh, India: S. W. Tashigangpa, 1974).

28. The discussion is based primarily on Jacob Dalton and Sam van Schaik, "Lighting the Lamp: An Examination of the Structure of the *Bsam gtan mig sgron*," *Acta Orientalia* 64 (2003): 153–175, and "The Great Perfection and the Chinese Monk: Rnying-ma-pa Defences of Hwa-shang Mahayana in the Eighteenth Century," *Buddhist Studies Review* 20 (2003): 189–204. See also Kenneth K. Tanaka and Raymond E. Robertson, "A Ch'an Text from Tun-huang: Implications for Ch'an Influence on Tibetan Buddhism," in *Tibetan Buddhism: Reason and Revelation*, ed. Steven D. Goodman and Ronald M. Davidson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 57–78, especially 74ff.



the issue of simultaneism and gradualism. Nyangrel Nyima Özer (*nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer*, 1124–1192), for example, argued that Trisong Detsen himself stated that there is no ultimate difference between the simultaneist and gradualist paths, but that Heshang Moheyan's simultaneist method is for those of the best faculties. Longchenpa argued that Heshang Moheyan's statement that black and white clouds obscure the sun was made in accordance with the ultimate reality. Katok Tsewang Norbu (*ka thog tshe dbang nor bu*, 1698–1755) followed the *Lamp for the Eye of Meditation* in his classification of the Buddhist systems into (from highest to lowest) Vajrayāna/Tantra and Sūtrayāna, with the latter further subdivided into the simultaneous approach and the gradual approach. Although he placed simultaneism above gradualism, he nonetheless argued that simultaneism, while valid, is a Chinese phenomenon not applicable to Indian and Tibetan Buddhism. Jikmé Lingpa (*'jigs med gling pa*, 1729–1798) also defended Heshang Moheyan, but stressed the distinction between worldly mind (*sems*) and awareness (*rig pa*). He argued that if concepts are simply blocked without making that distinction, the result will be only a neutral state of mind, while recognition of that awareness brings about clarity, vividness, and other factors conducive to awakening.

The “Samyé debate” with its subsequent polemics provides a good illustration of the fact that depending on tradition, thinker, and other factors, the same polemical issue or side in the issue can be interpreted differently. As a result, if such interpretation becomes an accepted view—e.g., distinguishing Dzokchen from the simultaneous approach—it can also affect meditative techniques, mystical experiences they may bring about, and subsequent descriptions of those experiences. In the case of the “Samyé debate,” something that happened in the eighth century still reverberates on debate grounds, in polemical writings, and in meditative instructions.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that polemical issues are often built into the very fabric of processes leading to mystical experiences. I call this feature “internalized polemics,” and here is why. As I have mentioned above,<sup>29</sup> the Tibetan Buddhist approach to contemplation of emptiness or ultimate reality is deconstructive in nature. In Tibetan nontantric systems in particular, this deconstructive process usually consists of using specific types of polemical reasoning or arguments articulated in the works of Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and other Madhyamaka thinkers. The best known are the so-called “five great reasons” (*gtan tshigs chen po lnga*): “lack of being one or many” (*gcig du bral*), which analyzes entities (*ngo bo*, i.e., nature of phenomena), refuting existence of phenomena as singular or plural; “diamond slivers” (*rdo rje’i gzegs ma*), which analyzes causes, refuting production from self, other, both, and neither; “negation of the production as existent or nonexistent” (*yod med skye ’gog*), which analyzes results, refuting production of results existing at the time of their causes, not existing, both, or neither; “negation of the production via the four alternatives” (*mu bzhi skye ’gog*), which analyzes both causes and results, refuting production of singular or plural results by singular or plural causes; and “reason of dependent origination” (*rten ’brel gyi gtan tshigs*), which analyzes phenomena in general, establishing the lack of true existence of phenomena by reason of their interdependence.<sup>30</sup> Such arguments—whose claimed function is

29. Chapter 3 section 3.

30. For detailed discussion of different types of Niḥsvabhāvavāda reasoning, see Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness*, 125–196. See also Gorampa (*go rams pa*), *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning: General Presentation of the Thatness of Madhyamaka—the Profound Intent of the Hearts of All Victors* (Rgyal ba thams cad kyi thugs kyi dgongs pa zab mo dbu ma’i de kho na nyid spyi’i ngag gis ston pa nges don rab gsal), Collected Works of Kun-mkhyen Go-rams-pa Bsod-nams-seng-ge, vol. 5 (Bir, India: Yashodhara Publications, 1995; hereafter, *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*), 182ff. For further references to the sources providing details of

to destroy our habitual perception of the world as real—are put into contemplative practice or “internalized” through analytical meditation for the purpose of realizing ultimate reality, demolishing all grasping at reality, and eventually attaining awakening. At least, this is how they are approached by Tibetan thinkers. In fact, in the Tibetan Buddhist world, it is difficult to find a Niḥsvabhāvavāda contemplative practice that, in its initial stages at least, does not involve internalized polemics operating with those arguments.

While the ultimate purpose of using Niḥsvabhāvavāda reasoning is to eliminate two types of obscurations—afflictive obscurations and obscurations of knowables—one faces and battles against afflictive obscurations first. Afflictive obscurations—and in particular afflicted ignorance, which serves as the cause of other afflictions—are of two types, coemergent and intellectually acquired. Coemergent ignorance (*lhan cig skyes pa'i ma rig pa, saḥajāvidyā*), such as grasping at I or self, is characteristic of all unawakened beings, including small babies and animals, while intellectually acquired ignorance (*kun btags pa'i ma rig pa, parikalpitāvidyā*) is acquired through learning what is considered to be wrong tenets, such as different non-Buddhist systems with their ideas of a permanent, substantially existent self, and so forth. Most Tibetan scholars concur that on the non-tantric path, the latter type of afflicted ignorance is eradicated as soon as one directly realizes ultimate reality, while the former is eliminated only in the state of arhatship or the eighth bodhisattva ground (which is equal to arhatship in terms of freedom from afflictive obscurations).<sup>31</sup>

those reasonings, see José Ignacio Cabezón and Geshe Lobsang Dargyay, *Freedom from Extremes: Gorampa's "Distinguishing the Views" and the Polemics of Emptiness* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2007; hereafter, *Freedom from Extremes*), 331 n.380.

31. On Gorampa's position, see chapter 3 note 9.

Because coemergent ignorance is more fundamental than—and serves as the foundation of—intellectually acquired ignorance and other afflictions, one might think that targeting it from the start would make more sense than refuting intellectually acquired concepts of eternal soul, permanent self, God, and so forth. After all, don't we not have to eliminate causes in order to secure freedom from their results? In fact, such writings influential in Tibet as Śāntideva's *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* do provide reasoning that targets coemergent ignorance. But these writings, and other texts such as Candrakīrti's *Engaging in Madhyamaka*, also provide numerous arguments that target intellectually acquired ignorance. Why is it so?

According to the seminal Tibetan thinker Gorampa (*go rams pa*, also known as Gowo Rapjampa Sönam Senggé, *go bo rab 'byams pa bsod nams seng ge*, 1429–1489), the former type of reasoning is designed for those lucky ones whose minds are not affected by wrong philosophical systems, while the latter assists those who are already affected by them. In the former case, one negates “mere I” (*nga tsam*)—which is the coemergent self (*lhan skyes kyi bdag*) and the object of apprehension of coemergent ignorance—by not finding it under analysis that inquires whether it is identical with or different from one's mental and physical aggregates. In the latter case, through reasoning one negates the intellectually acquired self (*kun btags kyi bdag*)—conceived as being one with aggregates, separate from them, etc.—that was posited as a proof of substantial or real existence of that “mere I.” Gorampa argues that according to his teacher Rongtön, it is a common approach of the followers of reason to accept that when damage to a proof has been realized, one abandons thoughts grasping at what that proof attempted to establish.<sup>32</sup>

32. Gorampa, *Elimination of Bad Views*, 677–678 and 689–690. See also *Ibid.*, 689–690, as well as his *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 287.

Tsongkhapa writes that from within the two types of the view of the transitory collection ('*jig tshogs la lta ba*, i.e., the view of mental and physical aggregates as self), intellectually acquired and coemergent, it is the latter that one should chiefly focus on negating, because it serves as the main cause of cyclic existence.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, Buddhist treatises provide extensive refutations of the intellectually acquired grasping at self. One of the reasons for this, Tsongkhapa argues, is that those systems which accept the existence of self use their versions of the intellectually acquired self in order to prove the object of coemergent grasping at self. Consequently, by refuting them the coemergent self too is indirectly (*brgyud nas*) negated.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, in the Niḥsvabhāvavāda context one can argue that although coemergent ignorance is in fact the foundation of intellectually acquired ignorance, it is possible—and in fact advisable, since our minds cannot help but be affected by learned misconceptions—to undermine and destroy it by initially

33. See also *Great Stages of the Path*, 644–645 (English translation: *Great Treatise*, 196–197), where Tsongkhapa argues that when determining the view of emptiness, one should focus on determining the nonexistence of objects as they are conceived by coemergent ignorance, and refute objects apprehended by intellectually acquired ignorance only as ancillary to that. For further details see Tsongkhapa, *Stages of the Path to Awakening [wherein] the Key Essentials of the Excellent Words of the Conqueror [Buddha are] Abridged and Determined* (*Rgyal ba'i gsung rab thams cad kyi snying po'i gnad bsdu te gtan la phab pa byang chub lam gyi rim pa*), The Collected Works (gsung 'bum) of the Incomparable Lord Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa, vol. 14 *pha* (Sku 'bum: Sku 'bum Byams pa gling Par khang, 2000?), 342–344 (hereafter, I will be referring to this text by its popular title *Medium-Length Stages of the Path, Lam rim 'bring*). The passage is translated in Jeffrey Hopkins, *Tsong-kha-pa's Final Exposition of Wisdom* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2008; hereafter, *Final Exposition*), 46–48. See also Tsongkhapa's *Thorough Clarification of Intent*, 143–144 and 160 (translated in *Final Exposition*, 186 and 213).
34. *Abridged Instructions on the Madhyamaka View Given by the Precious Lord [Tsongkhapa]* (*Rje rin po ches gnang ba'i dbu ma'i lta khrid bsdu pa*), The Collected Works (gsung 'bum) of the Incomparable Lord Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa, vol. 18 *tsha* (Sku 'bum: Sku 'bum Byams pa gling Par khang: 2000?), 800.

targeting the intellectually acquired ignorance. To put it slightly differently, in order to eliminate both types of ignorance, it is important to expose wrong ideas they project and “stretch” them to all possible limits. Although coemergent ignorance is very strong, it is somewhat vague and hard to pinpoint. Even babies and cats have it, but if you ask them to articulate it they cannot do so. Adult humans too will have a hard time identifying and articulating the precise nature of their coemergent attachment to self, and so forth. And when they do try to explain it, they usually turn for help to intellectually learned ideas and theories.

Intellectually acquired ignorance stems from coemergent ignorance, as in the case of taking the concept of self and building a theory to support its reality. Due to the close relationship between the two types of ignorance, when such a theory is destroyed through *Niḥsvabhāvavāda* reasoning—reasoning that initially encourages its self-justification but then systematically deconstructs it—the coemergent grasping at self becomes exposed, threatened, left without support, and eventually abandoned. Cornering such creations of the intellectually acquired ignorance, therefore, helps one eliminate any crutches used to support the coemergent ignorance, and eventually to destroy it. Here, we might think for example of someone who cannot protect himself with bare hands and therefore uses a gun or a knife for protection. While the gun is artificially constructed—in contrast to naturally grown hands—it can be an effective means of protection. Consequently, when that person is disarmed, he is no longer able to protect himself and will eventually lose the fight.

That being said, it would be absurd to claim that one has to exhaust all wrong theories one by one. Obviously, that would not be possible. How can one even be aware of all possible wrong theories, and where would one get enough time to combat them?

The way to approach the issue is as follows. Whatever theory is inspected through Niḥsvabhāvavāda reasoning, it is destroyed in more or less the same fashion. When one starts getting a “feel” for the method of that deconstruction—that is, when one returns repeatedly to the same state of mind in which one experiences the nonfindability or negation of any referents of such theories—it is time to start accustoming one’s mind to that negative state through focused concentration. The expected result of this internalized polemical process, in which the arguments are aimed at what one grasps or could otherwise grasp at, is to arrive at the negation of all concepts.

This is one of the reasons why, when we look at the works of Śāntideva, Candrakīrti, Bhāviveka, and many other Niḥsvabhāvavāda writers, we find so many pages dedicated to refuting wrong tenets, both non-Buddhist and Buddhist, that are seen as products of intellectually acquired ignorance. Polemics often emerge at the very heart of those treatises whose claimed aim is soteriological and contemplative. Reading *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*, for example, one quickly discovers that the multiple reasons used in its ninth chapter (on the cultivation of wisdom realizing emptiness) deal with refutations of other systems, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. The same is true of the sixth chapter (also on wisdom realizing emptiness) of *Engaging in Madhyamaka*. Polemical ideas contained in those writings are not treated as mere arguments for destroying opposing views, but are expected to be absorbed, internalized, and put to contemplative use as a means of battling one’s most immediate opponent—the coemergent grasping at reality.

The fact that polemics inform, condition, and are often built into the very fabric of contemplative processes leading to mystical experiences adds to the challenge posed to the claims of

the common ground of mystical experiences, including the commonalities of different types of Buddhist experiences and realizations. That does not mean that polemics related to mystical experiences necessarily rule out any possibility of some of them sharing common ground. Remember, my basic claim is that certain mystical experiences arrived at through deconstructive processes can be the same. Even more, as will be demonstrated in the last chapter, because the internalized polemics are a part of the process of searching for, analyzing, and deconstructing referents of our grasping at reality, they can actually point at and lead to mystical experiences of ultimate reality that are shared by several traditions. Because polemics can be internalized and used as tools for triggering mystical experiences, we will analyze how exactly these polemics function in that triggering process.

Despite the multifaceted and powerful roles played by polemics in Tibetan Buddhism, especially the role of internalized polemics in triggering mystical experiences of reality, polemics also have limits. No Tibetan thinkers would disagree that polemics do not transcend dualistic, conceptual thinking, and that even the internalization of polemics is just one step in a long contemplative process that involves more advanced stages. In the next section, we will also see that internalized polemics can be bypassed altogether in favor of oral instructions on contemplation, etc. Not knowing the limits of polemics can in fact be an obstruction to understanding mystical experiences.

## MYSTICAL COMMONALITIES

Despite the diversity of mystical experiences they address, Tibetan scholars often see some of them—such as realization of the selflessness of persons—as being accessible to followers of



most if not all Buddhist systems, because in their opinion those systems provide efficient tools for such realization.<sup>35</sup> In other words, despite differences in the views and practices of followers of different systems, they are believed to share certain realizations and experiences. It is also believed that certain experiences and realizations can be accessed by *different* means. Thus, although Tibetan scholars often provide minute distinctions between views, practices, and realizations, they also highlight commonalities of at least some of them.

They might argue, for example, that there are several ways of accessing the subliminal level of consciousness, including the direct realization of ultimate reality. Some thinkers argue that in tantric systems there are two distinct ways of accessing the fundamental innate luminous mind mentioned above: through initially dissolving subtle bodily energies into the central energy channel (as generally practiced in the Highest Yoga Tantra systems) and through direct exposure to that luminous mind itself (as practiced in Dzokchen).<sup>36</sup> In other words, one can access the most fundamental subtle state of mind either after having stopped coarser states of mind due to the dissolution of subtle energies or while still having them. In the nontantric context, too, some argue that one can fruitfully meditate on emptiness after either having determined it through logical reasoning (of the kind outlined in Niḥsvabhāva-vāda treatises) or through quintessential instructions on meditation.<sup>37</sup> It is also argued that the direct realization of reality does not necessarily have to

35. This is the position of Shakya Chokden, which has been addressed pp. 113–114.

36. See, for example, Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (tr. and ed. Jeffrey Hopkins), *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2006), 246ff.

37. See, for example, Rongtön Sheja Künrik, *Lamp Clarifying the Five Paths: Quintessential Instructions on Incorporating into Experience the Essence of All Excellent Words—the*

be preceded by conceptual understanding based on reasoning; tantric practitioners can access that realization by using alternative techniques, such as the wisdom-primordial mind empowerment (*shes rab ye shes kyi dbang, prajñāñānābhiṣeka*) and the stage of self-blessings (*rang byin gyis brlabs pa'i rim pa*).<sup>38</sup> Scholars of the Sakya, Nyingma, and Kagyü traditions argue that followers of both Svātantrika\* (*rang rgyud pa, Autonomist*) and Prāsaṅgika\* (*thal 'gyur ba, Consequentialist*) systems of Madhyamaka can access the same realization of ultimate reality despite differences in provisional means of accessing that realization. Scholars of the Geluk tradition believe that the Prāsaṅgika view of emptiness is shared and utilized by practitioners of the Highest Yoga Tantra. Such thinkers as Shakya Chokden also demonstrate the equal validity of Niḥsvabhāvavāda Madhyamaka and Alikākāravāda Yogācāra approaches to reality (see below). The list could go on.

Tibetan scholars also acknowledge that different articulations of certain mystical experiences do not rule out the possibility that the experiences themselves are the same. Although it is often true that discordant descriptions indicate differences in what they describe, it is not *always* true. Even in our daily life we encounter multiple situations where the *same* experience can be expressed in multiple ways: through the language of poetry, philosophy, or

*Perfection of Wisdom (Gsung rab thams cad kyi snying po shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa nyams su len pa'i man ngag / lam lnga gsal sgron, Gangtok, India: Sherab Gyaltzen, 1979), 11ff. For more details on these instructions discussed by the same author, see, for example, Rongtön's Moonrays of Essential Points, 562–565.*

38. See Shakya Chokden's *Rain of Ambrosia*, 362 and 376, and *Appearance of the Sun Pleasing All Thinkers: Discussion of the History of the Chariot Ways of [Dignāga's] Sūtra on Valid Cognition' and [its] Treatises (Tshad ma'i bstan bcos kyi shin rta'i srol rnams ji ltar 'byung ba'i tshul gtam du bya ba nyin mor byed pa'i snang bas dpyod ldan mtha' dag dga' bar byed pa)*, *Collected Writings of Gser-mdog pañ-chen Śākya-mchog-ltan*, vol. 19 (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunzang Tobgey, 1975; hereafter, *Appearance of the Sun*), 102.

music, or simply in different languages. This also applies to such mystical experiences as realization of ultimate reality that are not expressed exclusively through technical philosophical language. Even when these experiences are expressed in such a way, the chosen terms, expressions, and ideas are often informed and affected by specific sectarian affiliations, philosophical and religious backgrounds, and so forth.

As I have mentioned, the dominant Tibetan Buddhist position is that the direct realization of ultimate reality is not mediated by words and concepts when it occurs, although it is necessarily prepared for by certain conditioning processes. These processes are usually considered to be conceptual, and in the context of *Niḥsvabhāvavāda* they consist of specific sequences of logical reasoning aimed at deconstructing and eventually destroying dualistic thinking. According to Tibetan thinkers, words and concepts cannot fully articulate the direct realization of ultimate reality, or even ordinary sensory experiences. Because there is no direct correspondence between words and their referents, depending on context, one and the same word can indicate different things, and different words can indicate the same thing. Nevertheless, those thinkers also emphasize a very close connection between words/concepts and their referents, because it is primarily through words and concepts that we articulate our experiences and communicate them to others. This also applies to words and concepts intended to articulate the direct realization of ultimate reality that transcends them.

The natural questions to ask here are how conceptual processes can lead to *nonconceptual* realization, what the relationship is between conceptuality and the direct perception of reality, whether different descriptions of that realization necessarily indicate differences *in* that realization, and whether different

descriptions of the means of achieving that realization indicate differences in those means. To answer these questions, we must use the distinction between practical and descriptive levels that I introduced above. Most importantly, with the help of this distinction we will have to look at the means or techniques used for accessing the direct realization of ultimate reality and analyze whether differences in those means indicate differences in that realization. As we shall see shortly, it is this very distinction that helps such thinkers as Shakya Chokden demonstrate the sameness of certain mystical experiences despite different articulations of those experiences by those who attain them.

It is clear that when one uses positive or constructive tools for building and developing such experiences or states of mind as compassion, aversion to the physical body, visions of tantric divinities, devotion to a guru, etc., their results will necessarily be different. Similar to erecting different types of houses when using different blueprints, construction materials, and building techniques, one will acquire very different experiences depending on whether the meditation is on tantric deities coupled in sexual union or on the foulness of the decomposing human body, for example. Nevertheless, techniques leading to the direct realization of ultimate reality in the context of Niḥsvabhāvavāda reasoning are the inverse of this process, because, as we already know, they are necessarily negative or deconstructive. Therefore, they require special treatment.

I have mentioned before (pp. 82–83) one important feature of the Buddhist path, the close relationship between realizations of reality and the corresponding abandonments of certain concepts, ideas, and negative qualities. Closer analysis of this feature, together with a deconstructive means of accessing realization of reality, uncovers several possibilities, at least three of which

allow for different individuals reaching the same realization or experience. Let's look at them one by one while focusing on three elements: *processes* leading to the realization of reality, *descriptions* of those processes, and *abandonments* achieved as a result of those processes. The first and third elements pertain to the practical level, while the second element pertains to the descriptive level.

- 1) When certain *processes* leading to the realization are stated to be the same, their functioning is *described* in the same way, and their application leads to the same *abandonments*, it is obvious that the realization or experience accompanying those abandonments will also be the same. A good example is the realization of the selflessness of persons by those who use the same techniques leading to such realization, provide the same descriptions of those techniques, and achieve the same abandonments as a result of applying those techniques.
- 2) When the *processes* are quite similar, *abandonments* are identical, but the *descriptions* are different, it is still possible to claim that the resulting experience will be the same. I will discuss this option in detail in the next chapter, because this is exactly how I interpret the differences between Geluk thinkers and their critics' approaches to the realization of ultimate reality.
- 3) Another option to consider is the case of both the *processes* and *descriptions* being significantly different, but the *abandonments* being the same. In that case, it is still possible that experiences/realizations accompanying abandonments are the same as long as the different tools that trigger those abandonments are equally efficient. As we will see, this is true of Alikākāravāda and Niḥsvabhāvavāda approaches to the realization of reality according to Shakya Chokden.

Shakya Chokden argues that in certain contexts the same direct realization of reality can be accessed through different conceptual means. In a nutshell, he argues that despite contradictory worldviews, different types of contemplative conditioning leading to the direct realization of ultimate reality, and conflicting descriptions of that realization, followers of the two major rival systems of Mahāyāna Buddhism—Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Yogācāra—can access the same direct meditative experience of emptiness that is not mediated by any words and concepts at the time when it actually occurs. In other words, in his opinion it is possible to have the same mystical experience of ultimate reality despite using different types of mediation to trigger it. Because I am using elements of Shakya Chokden's position both as an example and as an interpretive tool for addressing the issue of (un)mediated mystical experience in Buddhism, I provide further details of this position here.<sup>39</sup>

In Tibet, the two rival systems of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka are nearly universally viewed as the most important of all Buddhist philosophical traditions, although by the fifteenth century Madhyamaka clearly had been elevated to the top position. Shakya Chokden too fully acknowledges differences between the two systems and provides a detailed analysis of their mutual polemical refutations of each other. But in his works written from 1477 onwards,<sup>40</sup> he argues for their fundamental compatibility and shared vision. As I have already mentioned (pp. 111–112), the majority of Tibetan thinkers treat Madhyamaka as synonymous with Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Yogācāra as synonymous with Cittamātra, and further subdivide the latter into the two systems of Alikākāravāda and Satyākāravāda. In contrast, Shakya

39. The following summary is based on chapters 4 and 5 of my *Visions of Unity*.

40. On the details of development of Shakya Chokden's views, see my *Visions of Unity*, 38–41, 102–108.

Chokden accepts neither that Yogācāra and Cittamātra are the same system nor that Madhyamaka is limited to the system of Niḥsvabhāvavāda only.

As he understands it, the Satyākāravāda/Alikākāravāda distinction ultimately boils down to the question of the reality of mental appearances. Although Yogācāras in general do not accept the existence of an external material world, according to Satyākāravāda, its appearances or “representations” reflected in consciousness have a real or true existence, because they are of one nature with the really existent consciousness, their creator. According to Alikākāravāda, neither external phenomena nor their appearances and minds that reflect them really exist and they are therefore false. What exists in reality is only primordial mind described as self-awareness (*rang rig, svasaṃvedana*) or individually self-cognizing primordial mind (*so so(r) rang gis rig pa'i ye shes*).<sup>41</sup> Shakyā Chokden understands this difference between the two systems as highly important and treats the Alikākāravāda view of reality as much more advanced than that of Satyākāravāda. As a result, although he accepts the twofold division of Yogācāra into Alikākāravāda and Satyākāravāda, he identifies Satyākāravāda as synonymous exclusively with Cittamātra, and Alikākāravāda as a subdivision of Madhyamaka on an equal footing with Niḥsvabhāvavāda and surpassing Cittamātra. His unique position is that Alikākāravāda is *both* Yogācāra and Madhyamaka. Consequently, his essential task is to prove that Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Alikākāravāda are equally valid Madhyamaka systems that provide different but efficient means of achieving the same realization of ultimate reality.

41. For details, see *Visions of Unity*, chapter 4 section 1 and chapter 5 section 1.

In his interpretation of the Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Alikākāravāda systems, Shakya Chokden relies heavily on the mind and path models addressed above, such as conceptual and nonconceptual minds, meditative equipoise and subsequent attainment, and so forth. Clarifying the differences between Alikākāravāda and Niḥsvabhāvavāda, and at the same time showing their compatibility, he makes a sharp distinction between the views realized in the meditative equipoise of Mahāyāna āryas and the views conceptually determined by reasoning prior to meditative equipoise or described during its subsequent attainment. Firstly, he shows that interpretive differences between Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Alikākāravāda pertain to the view of ultimate reality determined through reasoning on the conceptual level, but despite those differences they provide means for accessing the same ultimate reality directly realized through meditative experience. As he puts it at the beginning of his *Rain of Ambrosia*, the text that most extensively treats this issue:

I wish to explain the way in which there is a difference between the two systems in the modes of temporarily positing [their views] through reasoning, but no difference in their modes of upholding [the ultimate view] in the context of identification of a definitive meaning experienced through meditation.<sup>42</sup>

Consequently, he argues, despite using different conceptual approaches to ultimate reality, followers of both systems can access the same direct realization of it. In other words, he argues

42. *srol gnyis po gnas skabs su rigs pas gtan la 'bebs tshul gyi khyad par yod pa dang / sgom pas nyams su myong bya'i nges don zhig ngos 'dzin pa'i tshe 'dzin tshul la khyad par med pa'i tshul bshad par 'dod pas. Rain of Ambrosia, 390.*



for their sameness on the practical level of realization of reality and their equal efficiency or compatibility on the practical level of reasoning leading to that realization.

Secondly, he explains that descriptions of the realization of ultimate reality on the level of its subsequent attainment are also distinct in the two systems. Nevertheless, both are equally valid divisions of Madhyamaka, because both have the capacity to dispel the most subtle obscurations and thereby enable the achievement of buddhahood:

Both [systems] are also similar in asserting that on the level of severing proliferations by the view within meditative equipoise, one does not take to mind any characteristics, and even the wisdom of individual analysis itself only has to be consumed by the fire of primordial mind. Nevertheless, on [the level of] subsequent attainment, when they present tenets in their own systems, [they differ in] accepting non-dual primordial mind or not accepting it. Therefore, due to that lack of difference in their modes of severing proliferations within meditative equipoise, it is not possible to distinguish between ability or non-ability to abandon habitual tendencies of obscurations of knowables by the views of the two systems.<sup>43</sup>

43. *gnyis kas kyang mnyam gzhas tu lta bas spros pa gcod pa'i tshe mtshan ma gang yang yid la mi byed cing / so sor rtog pa'i shes rab nyid kyang ye shes kyi mes bsreg dgos pa nyid du bzhed par mtshungs kyang / rjes thob tu rang lugs su grub pa'i mtha' smra ba na / gnyis med kyi ye shes yod par khas len pa dang / de mi len pa'o // de bas na mnyam gzhas tu spros pa gcod tshul la khyad par med pa de'i phyir lugs gnyis ka'i lta ba la shes sgrib kyi bag chags spong nus mi nus kyi khyad par dbye nus pa ma yin no. Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning of the Five Dharmas of Maitreya (Byams chos lnga'i nges don rab tu gsal ba zhes bya ba'i bstan bcos), Collected Writings of Gser-mdog pañ-chen Śākya-mchog-ldan, vol.11 (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunzang Tobgey, 1975), 19–20.*

In this line of argument, we can clearly see that making the distinction between practical and descriptive levels allows him to bring the two systems together on the level of the direct realization of ultimate reality while keeping them distinct on the level of its conceptual articulations.

Shakya Chokden's claims are grounded in his basic position on primordial mind. He understands it as a nonconceptual, non-dualistic mind transcending subjective-objective division. It both cognizes and is itself the ultimate reality. In other words, he understands ultimate reality and primordial mind as self-awareness. Nothing else can be ultimate reality, and therefore nothing else can be cognized during the direct realization of ultimate reality. According to him, this primordial mind is the quintessence of contemplative practices in all Madhyamaka systems: it is what their practices are related to, aimed at, come down to, and utilize. It exists from beginningless time as the underlying reality of all phenomena. It is the basis of cyclic existence, *nirvāṇa*, and the path out of cyclic existence into *nirvāṇa*. In the case of cyclic existence, it simply provides space for mistaken appearances to occur, but in the case of the path, it becomes its very essence. Shakya Chokden argues that this primordial mind is the only reality, while everything else does not really exist, and appears to exist only due to ignorance. It is only primordial mind, therefore, that can serve as the foundation of the path, can become the path, and finally will transform into the result of the path, buddhahood.

Concepts—whether affirming or negating that primordial mind—cannot reach it, because by its very nature it transcends them all. But although it is beyond concepts and words, its realization can be subsequently conceptualized and described either in negative terms, as not realizing anything by anything, or in positive terms, as realizing the primordial mind, self-awareness, and so forth.

Both Niḥsvabhāvavādins, who choose the former approach, and Alikākāravādins, who choose the latter, are right in their own way. We can say that according to Shakya Chokden, Niḥsvabhāvavādins are more faithful to *how* reality is realized within meditative equipoise. This is why they do not posit any actual view of reality on the level of subsequent attainment. Alikākāravādins, on the other hand, are more faithful to *what* experiences that reality and what that reality is. This is why on the level of subsequent attainment they posit primordial mind as the actual view. Approached in this way, the differences between the two systems only contribute to their compatibility. On the one hand, adherents of both systems agree that ultimate reality is beyond sounds and concepts. On the other hand, both of them directly realize the same primordial mind.

Comparing the two systems in the context of the self-emptiness (*rang stong*)/other-emptiness (*gzhan stong*) distinction, Shakya Chokden explains that Niḥsvabhāvavāda determines reality in terms of self-emptiness of all phenomena, while Alikākāravāda does it in terms of other-emptiness.<sup>44</sup> When determining the view of reality on the conceptual level, Niḥsvabhāvavāda treats it as a total negation of the entities of all phenomena, including emptiness itself. In contrast to that, Alikākāravāda selectively negates some phenomena (imaginary natures, *kun btags*, *parikalpita*) on the basis of other phenomena (dependent natures, *gzhan dbang*, *paratantra*), and preserves the entity of nondual primordial mind (thoroughly established nature, *yongs grub*, *pariniṣpanna*), left as the remainder of that negation.<sup>45</sup> The Niḥsvabhāvavāda position of self-emptiness entails the view of nonaffirming negation, because it entails the negation of all phenomena without positing

44. *Rain of Ambrosia*, 379.

45. *Ibid.*, 333–334.

anything in its stead. The Alikākāravāda position of other-emptiness entails the view of affirming negation, because it casts the nondual primordial mind as the remainder of negation of the object of negation. Shakyā Chokden further argues that a nonaffirming negation is an object of conceptual minds only and therefore cannot be directly experienced in the meditative equipoise of Mahāyāna āryas. The affirming negation can be experienced directly in meditative equipoise, because the self-cognizing primordial mind is both an affirming negation and a functional thing (*dn̄gos po*).<sup>46</sup>

Thus, in Shakyā Chokden's opinion, Alikākāravādins conceptually determine through reasoning and meditate directly in meditative equipoise on the same primordial mind. Afterwards, they describe that process also as meditation on primordial mind. Niḥsvabhāvavādins through reasoning arrive at the nonaffirming negation, and afterwards claim that not realizing anything by anything is simply given the name of the direct realization of emptiness. Despite these differences, both sides directly realize the same primordial mind. Highlighting this sharp distinction between Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Alikākāravāda views of emptiness on the conceptual level, he nonetheless argues that this difference itself does not go beyond conceptually determined views. Even though on the conceptual level the two types of Mādhyamikas determine emptiness differently, both of them sever the same proliferations

46. *Ocean of Scriptural Statements and Reasoning: Treasury of Ascertainment of Mahāyāna Madhyamaka* (*Theg pa chen po dbu ma rnam par nges pa'i bang mdzod lung dang rigs pa'i rgya mtsho*), Collected Writings of Gser-mdog paṅ-chen Śākya-mchog-ldan, vol. 14 (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunzang Tobgey, 1975), 393; *Ibid.*, vol. 15, 461; *Great Path of Ambrosia of Emptiness: Explanation of Profound Pacification Free from Proliferations* (*Zab zhi spros bral gyi bshad pa stong nyid bdud rtsi'i lam po che*), Collected Writings of Gser-mdog paṅ-chen Śākya-mchog-ldan, vol. 4 (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunzang Tobgey, 1975), 114; *Appearance of the Sun*, 85.

and attain the same direct realization of ultimate reality within the meditative equipoise of Mahāyāna āryas.<sup>47</sup>

Shakya Chokden argues that followers of both Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Alikākāravāda are “destined” to directly realize the same ultimate reality. No matter which of the two systems one follows, one eventually will break through the thicket of conceptuality and directly experience the nondual primordial mind. But we also know that according to him, Niḥsvabhāvavāda negates the reality of all phenomena, including primordial mind, while Alikākāravāda does not negate its reality. How then can the two systems be compatible on the practical level? Shakya Chokden’s position is that whether Mādhyamikas negate primordial mind prior to meditative equipoise or not, all of them can gain access to this primordial mind within meditative equipoise. The truly established primordial mind, the thoroughly established nature, is not an object of abandonment, while the other natures are. True existence itself is not an object of abandonment, but the grasping at true existence is.

The main question to raise in this context is the following: how is it possible to negate grasping at the true existence of primordial mind without negating its true existence? Shakya Chokden handles it by arguing that there are two different ways of negating grasping:

There are two types of reasoning negating  
 Adhering minds together with habitual tendencies:  
 The reasoning that negates grasping at objects  
 By having negated those objects in the face of conceptuality, or

47. *Rain of Ambrosia*, 334.

[The reasoning negating] only the apprehender-imaginary nature<sup>48</sup>

By the reason of the lack of being one or many.<sup>49</sup>

The first approach is used by Niḥsvabhāvavādins, the second by Alikākāravādins. Describing the tools that negate all proliferations, Niḥsvabhāvavādins argue that without negating the object, its subject cannot be negated. This is because the Niḥsvabhāvavāda system treats subjects and objects as dependently established. Because they are *established* in mutual dependence, they have to be *negated* in mutual dependence too. According to the Alikākāravāda system, on the other hand, it is possible to negate grasping at objects by negating just subjects that grasp. Arguably, by negating grasping subjects, their grasping function will be cancelled automatically. (We might think of cutting off a hand as an analogy: the moment it is cut off, its grasping or “grabbing” function stops on its own accord, without unnecessary removal of objects of grabbing.)

In particular, it is possible to negate grasping at the true existence of primordial mind by negating consciousness that takes primordial mind as its object and grasps at it as truly existent. To put it in Yogācāra terms, by negating the apprehender-imaginary nature it is possible to simultaneously abandon grasping at true existence and all other projections it creates. This is true also when

48. According to Shakya Chokden, “apprehender-imaginary nature” (*'dzin pa kun btags*) is minds that project dualistic appearances of the external world, etc.

49. *zhen blo bag chags dang bcas pa // 'gog byed rigs pa'i rnam grangs gnyis // rtog ngor de yul bkag pa yis // de 'dzin 'gog pa'i rigs pa dang // yang na 'dzin pa kun btags nyid // gcig dang du bral rigs pas so. Precious Treasury of the Condensed Essence of the Profound and Extensive in Eight Dharma Sections (Zab rgya'i snying po bsdus pa rin chen gter mdzod chos tshan brgyad pa)*, in *'Hundred and Eight Dharma Sections' Treatise (Chos tshan brgya dang brgyad pa zhes bya ba'i bstan bcos)*, Collected Writings of Gser-mdog paṅ-chen Śākya-mchog-ldan, vol. 13 (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunzang Tobgey, 1975), 174.

the apprehender-imaginary nature apprehends primordial mind, i.e., the thoroughly established nature.

Thus, Shakya Chokden treats both Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Alikākāravāda approaches as valid, and argues that it is possible to abandon all obscurations by following either one. This is how he presents them in the *Rain of Ambrosia*:

Honorable Candrakīrti and other [Niḥsvabhāvavādins] assert that without determining the object, the dharma-sphere, as self-empty, it is impossible to reverse thoughts that grasp at it as signs. On the other hand, honorable Asaṅga, commenting on Maitreya's scriptures, [asserts that] having determined the apprehender-imaginary nature as self-empty, and accustomed [one's mind to it], due to that very [process] the grasping [at the dharma-sphere] can subside by itself within meditative equipoise.<sup>50</sup>

In more general terms, by using this interpretive approach Shakya Chokden demonstrates that different conceptual approaches to reality can bring their followers to the same direct realization despite their polemical stances against each other. In terms of mystical experience, his position is that at least within the limits of the Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Alikākāravāda systems,

50. *yul chos dbyings rang stong du gtan la ma phab na / de la mtshan mar 'dzin pa'i blo ldog mi nus zhes pa ni zla ba'i zhabs sogs kyi bzhed pa yin mod / thogs med zhabs kyis byams pa'i gzhung 'grel ba na ni / 'dzin pa kun btags rang stong du gtan la phab nas goms par byas pa nyid kyis mnyam gzhas tu 'dzin pa rang gi ngang gis zhi bar nus. Rain of Ambrosia, 415. See also *Appearance of the Sun*, vol. 19, 118–119 for more details. In that text (Ibid., 119), Shakya Chokden uses the famous example of the mind seeing magical appearances of horses, etc. By realizing that this mind is mistaken, one abandons grasping at the reality of its appearances. To realize that the mind is mistaken, one does not have to first realize the nonexistence of the hallucinatory horses, and so forth.*

Mahāyāna āryas acquire the same mystical experience of ultimate reality, which is not mediated by any concepts or words at the time of its occurrence. This is despite the fact that it is necessarily mediated prior to its occurrence, being prepared and led to by different conceptual tools, and its subsequent description is also affected by the divergent philosophical categories of the two systems.

Shakya Chokden's approach shows that different types of reasoning used by followers of some rival Buddhist systems can serve as efficient means of accessing the same direct realization of ultimate reality. Although rival Mahāyāna systems give divergent descriptions of that realization, this does not undermine the fact that those descriptions refer to the same realization of the same ultimate reality. This position demonstrates that within the narrow limits of some Mahāyāna systems, it is possible to claim a certain common mystical experience that is mediated by conditioning processes that bring it about, but is not mediated by words and concepts at the time of its occurrence.

By now we have outlined different contemporary approaches to the topic of mystical experience. We have likewise discussed different models Tibetan Buddhists provide for exploring the topic of direct experience of ultimate reality and specific techniques used by some thinkers for approaching the issue of realization of ultimate reality. In particular, we have focused on Shakya Chokden's interpretation of the positions of Alikākāravāda and Niḥsvabhāvavāda. By applying elements of his interpretive approach to the issue of realization of ultimate reality contested by rival Tibetan thinkers, throughout the rest of this study I will be targeting the following questions: Are the Geluk and Sakya



positions completely irreconcilable, and do they lead to different results? If not, do they refer to different conceptual contemplative processes that can result in the same nonconceptual realization of reality, or do they refer only to conflicting descriptions of the same conditioning process? Let us proceed.

# Contesting the Ultimate Experience

During the course of my studies in monastic universities of several traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, I was impressed and challenged by the rich diversity of seemingly irreconcilable interpretations of ultimate reality and its realization. The passion and emotional fervor with which these interpretations were addressed, discussed, and debated were truly contagious and inspired my own exploration and comparison of Buddhist approaches to reality. Personal feelings aside, even a brief excursus into Tibetan Buddhist history shows the crucial role that rival views of reality play in it. Sectarian thinkers emphasize irreconcilable differences between the views of ultimate reality held by their own and rival traditions. Alternatively, even ecumenically minded thinkers often read the views and terminology of their own traditions into other traditions with the seemingly innocent intention of finding common ground between them.<sup>1</sup> As a result

1. For example, some thinkers, based on the views of the Geluk system, interpret the Dzokchen view of reality as an affirming negation and the Dzokchen's "awareness" as being impermanent and falling under the category of consciousness. Alternatively, according to some Nyingma thinkers, the actual view of reality held by Tsongkhapa in the context of Madhyamaka transcends the nonaffirming negation. These positions are not accepted as valid by followers of the respective systems to which they are attributed.

of this camouflaged sectarianism, those thinkers end up projecting their own sectarian identities onto rival systems, comfortably locking themselves within the narrow confines of their sectarian outlook. This sectarian divide continues, and nuanced and persistent attempts to understand opposing traditions *in their own terms* are rare.

As we already know, Tibetan interpretations of ultimate reality and its realization are very diverse, and even within a particular tradition one can find thinkers who hold conflicting positions on this topic. The most heated polemics on this matter started after the emergence of the Geluk tradition in the religious and political arena in the fourteenth century. Greatly simplifying, we can say that since then, when addressing this topic in the context of Niḥsvabhāvavāda, Tibetan thinkers have followed two distinct approaches. One approach has been advocated by Geluk scholars, while the other has been put forth by scholars of the other three major traditions, Sakya, Nyingma, and Kagyü. This divide was further reinforced by the fact that starting from the time of activity of its forefather, Tsongkhapa, the Geluk tradition asserted its identity through criticisms of the systems of “early Tibetans” (*bod snga rabs pa*), eliciting critical responses from thinkers who sided with those systems.<sup>2</sup> Tsongkhapa’s opponents—in particular, followers of one of his major critics, Gorampa—at least in part asserted *their* sectarian identity through criticisms of Tsongkhapa’s position. Since that time, Tsongkhapa’s and Gorampa’s interpretations of realization of ultimate reality have been accepted as the

2. Thinkers whose writings comprise the foundation of the Geluk views are Tsongkhapa and his two major disciples, Gyeltsap Darma Rinchen (*rgyal tshab dar ma rin chen*, 1364–1432) and Khedrup Gelek Pelzang (*mkhas grub dge legs dpal bzang*, 1385–1438). Some of the major critics of Geluk, and of Tsongkhapa in particular, are Taktsang Lotsawa Sherap Rinchen (*stag tshang lo tsā ba shes rab rin chen*, born 1405), the Eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorjé (*mi bskyod rdo rje*, 1507–1554), Gorampa, Shakya Chokden, Mipam Gyamtso, and Gendün Chöpel (*dge ’dun chos ’phel*, 1903?–1951).

mainstream positions held by the Geluk and Sakya traditions. In effect, when discussing “Tsongkhapa’s system” and “Gorampa’s system,” we are dealing not only with the views of these two individual thinkers, but with the “intellectual identities” of numerous followers of Geluk and Sakya.

From now on, our primary concern will be with the two sides’ polemics regarding proper means of achieving and articulating realization of ultimate reality on the Mahāyāna path according to the final position of Niḥsvabhāvavāda Madhyamaka. For Geluk thinkers, this position is represented only by Prāsaṅgika—one of the two major subdivisions of Madhyamaka (the other being Svātantrika). For Sakya thinkers, it is represented by both Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika which, in their opinion, agree on most key points, especially those pertaining to the process of contemplation of ultimate reality.<sup>3</sup> Not only do both sides treat the Prāsaṅgika view of ultimate reality as valid and efficient for attaining freedom from cyclic existence and buddhahood, but they also rely on the same sources—most notably, the works of Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva—in their interpretation of that view and the process of its realization. Yet it is in this context that their positions clash in the most significant way, leading to heated sectarian polemics. These polemics are further reinforced by the fact that followers of the two traditions share technical vocabulary and focus on similar philosophical issues. Due

3. The Prāsaṅgika/Svātantrika distinction is rooted in the debate about what kind of reasoning should be used in order to reach conceptual realization of ultimate reality—consequences (Skt. *prasaṅga*) or only autonomous syllogisms (Skt. *svatantraprayoga*). For the discussion of the Svātantrika/Prāsaṅgika distinction, see Georges Dreyfus and Sara L. McClintock (ed.), *The Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika Distinction: What Difference Does a Difference Make?* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003). In contrast to Sakya thinkers, Geluk thinkers do not accept the Svātantrika view of reality as valid, although they do subsume it under the category of Madhyamaka.

to the aforementioned<sup>4</sup> intimate connection between sectarian identity and approaches to contemplative practice, the relevance of these polemics for the subject of this study can hardly be overestimated. Although the Geluk and Sakya interpretations of realization of ultimate reality are far from being limited to those of Tsongkhapa and Gorampa,<sup>5</sup> for the present purposes I will limit myself to the views of these leading thinkers of the two traditions.

Before going into details of the two positions, here is a short summary. Briefly put, although both sides agree that the process of contemplation of emptiness is deconstructive (i.e., consists of negations), they interpret very differently what is negated, in which way it is negated, and how one should proceed in that negation process. According to Tsongkhapa and his followers, in order to directly realize ultimate reality, one first has to form its conceptual image on the basis of correct identification and subsequent negation of the object of negation. By maintaining apprehension of that negation, one has to cultivate a conceptual understanding of reality that will eventually culminate in nonconceptual direct realization of that very reality, that same negation. According to Gorampa and his followers, one has to gradually negate all conceptual referents without exception, obviating the need for selection of a specific object of negation prior to that deconstructive process. Nor does one have to focus on maintaining apprehension of negation of the initial object of negation. Rather, one has to negate

4. See chapter 4 section 2.

5. For example, Thupten Jinpa observes: "I would go so far as to say that there is the danger of committing the methodological error of assuming that Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka equals Geluk Madhyamaka." *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002; hereafter, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy*), 5. On the Sakya side, Gorampa and Shakya Chokden, for example, disagree with each other on multiple points regarding the nature of reality and its contemplation.

that negation as well, and by systematically deconstructing all referents of conceptual thinking finally arrive at direct realization of ultimate reality—a state which is free from apprehension of any objects whatsoever.

Polemics on this issue began early in the fifteenth century, and they remain alive and well as I am writing this book. These polemics continue to fuel the rigid sectarian divide that appears to resist any attempts at reconciliation. Nevertheless, I argue that a careful look at the positions held by the two sides reveals that major differences between their approaches to the process of contemplation of reality pertain not to the actual process itself, but to the ways of articulating that process dictated by their broader philosophical outlooks. Here, I am primarily inspired by the works of Shakya Chokden who admitted minute differences between the Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Alikākāravāda systems, but ultimately presented them as equally valid and efficient methods of realizing reality and achieving awakening. In my opinion, a similar approach can be chosen when dealing with the conflicting interpretations of realization of ultimate reality by the Geluk and Sakya systems.<sup>6</sup>

6. This is not to imply that Shakya Chokden was sympathetic to Geluk views. In particular, he treated Tsongkhapa's approach to ultimate reality as thoroughly flawed, and dedicated multiple works to its refutation. See, for example, his *Clear Identification of the Presence of the String of One Hundred and Eight Beads of Mistakes Conceived by [Wrong] Logic in Madhyamaka of the System of Others* (Gzhan lugs kyi ni dbu ma la // rtog ges brtags pa'i nor ba'i phreng // brgya dang rtsa brgyad yod pa yi // ngos 'dzin gsal po), Collected Writings of Gser-mdog paṅ-chen Śākya-mchog-ldan, vol. 4 (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunzang Tobgey, 1975); *Ocean of Scriptural Statements and Reasoning: Treasury of Ascertainment of Mahāyāna Madhyamaka* (Theg pa chen po dbu ma rnam par nges pa'i bang mdzod lung dang rigs pa'i rgya mtsho), Collected Writings of Gser-mdog paṅ-chen Śākya-mchog-ldan, vol. 14–15 (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunzang Tobgey, 1975); and *Smaller Summarized Exposition [of Madhyamaka] Called 'Vajra of the Lord [of Gods]' Pleasing Clear-Minded Ones* (Stong thun chung ba dbang po'i rdo rje zhes bya ba blo gsal mgu byed), Collected Writings of Gser-mdog paṅ-chen Śākya-mchog-ldan, vol. 4 (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunzang Tobgey, 1975).

Let us now look closer at the two positions. In what follows, I will be discussing only those elements of Tsongkhapa's and Gorampa's thought that are related to the process of realization of reality. I will refrain from analyzing the ways they interpreted multiple Indian sources to support their views. What interests me here is not their interpretive methods or the relative correctness of their positions, but differences and similarities between their approaches to the process of realization of ultimate reality.<sup>7</sup>

## THE GELUK POSITION

Geluk thinkers follow Tsongkhapa's approach which hinges on three interrelated elements: identifying the object of negation, maintaining apprehension of negation, and not negating conventional phenomena.

1. *Identifying the object of negation.* Prior to embarking on the process of contemplation of emptiness, one has to correctly identify the object of negation—a nonexistent object conceived by coemergent ignorance which serves as the cause of cyclic existence. That “object” is variously described by Tsongkhapa as “true establishment” (*bden par grub pa*), “establishment by way of one's own character” (*rang gi mtshan nyid kyis grub pa*), “establishment by way of one's own entity” (*rang gi ngo bos grub pa*), etc.—all of which pertain to the same referent of coemergent ignorance.<sup>8</sup> This

7. For the comparison and analysis of Tsongkhapa's and Gorampa's positions on reality, see Sonam Thakchoe, *The Two Truths Debate: Tsongkhapa and Gorampa on the Middle Way* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2007).

8. Tsongkhapa argues that according to the Prāsaṅgika system, the following six categories are synonymous, referring to the same object of adherence (*zhen yul*) of coemergent

correctly chosen object of negation should be subsequently negated by mind analyzing the ultimate nature of phenomena through Madhyamaka reasoning.<sup>9</sup>

2. *Maintaining apprehension of negation.* In the process of conceptual contemplation of emptiness, rather than negating everything indiscriminately one must negate or refute only the carefully identified object of negation. Subsequently, one has to maintain the mode of apprehension (*'dzin stangs*) and cultivate ascertainment (*nges pa*) of that negation which is described as emptiness, selflessness, thatness, etc.—all of

ignorance: true establishment, ultimate establishment (*don dam par grub pa*), real establishment (*yang dag tu grub pa*), existence by way of one's own entity (*rang gi ngo bos yod pa*), existence by way of one's own character (*rang gi mtshan nyid kyis yod pa*), and existence by nature/inherent existence/intrinsic existence (*rang bzhin gyis yod pa*). See *Thorough Clarification of Intent*, 156 (tr.: *Final Exposition*, 207). Note that depending on context, the Tibetan term *bden par grub pa* can be translated as “truly established,” “true establishment,” or “established as truth,” and the word *bden pa* (which I also translate as “reality”) itself can be translated either as the noun “truth,” as the adjective “true,” or, with the addition of the particle *ra* (*-r*), as the adverb “truly.” Likewise, the term *don dam par grub pa* can be translated both as “ultimately established,” “ultimate establishment,” or “established as ultimate,” and the word *don dam*, “ultimate,” can be understood in the nominal or the adjectival sense, or, with the addition of the particle *ra*, as the adverb “ultimately.” Because Tsongkhapa accepts that both the truth and the ultimate exist, but does not accept that anything—including the truth and the ultimate—can exist truly or ultimately, the translation of the terms as “truly established,” “true establishment,” “ultimately established,” and “ultimate establishment” helps an English reader to realize that they refer to the object of negation in his system. Were one to translate them as “established as truth” or “established as ultimate,” that could confuse the reader regarding whether they refer to what Tsongkhapa accepts or to what he proposes to negate. Note too that such words as *bden pa* or *rang bzhin* (but never *don dam*) also can by themselves indicate the object of negation for Tsongkhapa. Usually, it is clear from context or from other words these terms are combined with whether Tsongkhapa refers to “truth” or “nature” as the object of negation, as in “proliferations of truth” or “mind that superimposes nature,” or as something that he accepts, as in “conventional truth” or “ultimate truth” (rendered throughout the book “conventional reality” and “ultimate reality,” respectively).

9. Because in contrast to Shakyā Chokden, both Tsongkhapa and Gorampa (as well as the majority of Tibetan thinkers) treat Madhyamaka as synonymous with Niḥsvabhāvavāda, from now on I will be using the more often used “Madhyamaka reasoning” rather than “Niḥsvabhāvavāda reasoning.”



which amount to the same ultimate reality. That negation itself is not to be negated, but whenever apprehension of its true existence occurs, true existence should be negated. The process will eventually culminate in the fading away of a generic image of emptiness and seeing emptiness directly.

3. *Not negating conventional phenomena.* Because conventional phenomena—including compassion, aspiration to awakening, paths, etc.—are established by conventional valid cognition and exist on a conventional level, they are not *negated* by the reasoning analyzing the ultimate (*don dam dpyod byed kyi rigs pa*). Rather, they are merely *not found* under that analysis. Nor are they *negated* by the direct realization of emptiness—merely *unobserved* by it. If one interprets the nonfinding of conventionalities by reasoning as their actual negation by it, this indicates an overly broad identification of the object of negation. Such identification leads to a nihilistic view of emptiness which hinders correct understanding of the Buddhist teachings.

In Tsongkhapa's system, these three elements are virtually inseparable. No matter which of the three is addressed, the other two necessarily come into play. For example, he argues that if the object of negation is identified too narrowly, its subsequent negation through reasoning will be insufficient for realizing emptiness and eradicating the root of cyclic existence—coemergent ignorance. On the other hand, if it is identified too broadly—spilling beyond the boundaries of “true existence” into the conventional realm—its subsequent negation will amount to refutation of phenomena established by conventional valid cognition. Because those phenomena include such key Buddhist ideas as compassion,

practice of the path, and so forth, this will effectively prevent further progress on the path to awakening.

Since it is difficult—and unnecessary—to treat these three components in total separation, I will be discussing them together, but focus primarily on the issue of identification of the object of negation (*dgag bya dngos 'dzin*). Arguably, this issue is the most controversial element in Tsongkhapa's interpretation of the process of realization of reality, and it also is a target of severe criticisms by his opponents. I will be particularly concerned with Tsongkhapa's rejection of what he sees as an overextended identification of the object of negation (*dgag bya ngos 'dzin ha cang khyab ches pa*). It is here that the uniqueness of his view shines forth, polemics against earlier Tibetan interpreters of Madhyamaka are leveled, and clashes with his numerous critics erupt. His take on the narrow identification of the object of negation (*dgag bya ngos 'dzin khyab chung ba*) is not important for our purposes, and Tsongkhapa himself dedicates significantly less attention to it.<sup>10</sup>

Like Gorampa (but providing a different interpretation),<sup>11</sup> Tsongkhapa distinguishes between two types of objects of negation: objects of negation by path (*lam gyi dgag bya*) and objects of negation by reasoning (*rigs pa'i dgag bya*).<sup>12</sup> Like Gorampa, he also accepts the division of the former into afflictive obscurations and obscurations of knowables (although the two thinkers identify them differently). What interests us here is Tsongkhapa's unique interpretation of the nature of the object of negation by reasoning.

10. In *Great Stages of the Path*, for example, Tsongkhapa dedicates approximately eight times more space to the former than to the latter.

11. See pp. 196–197.

12. *Great Stages of the Path*, 610, 651 (English tr.: The Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee, *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 158–159, 203).

In his opinion, such an “object” necessarily has to be nonexistent, because if it existed, it could not be negated by reasoning.<sup>13</sup> In Tsongkhapa’s words,

[The actual process of] negation, unlike destroying a pot with a hammer [both of which are existent, consists of] generating an ascertaining consciousness (*nges shes*) that recognizes the nonexistent as nonexistent. If ascertainment (*nges pa*) [of the object of negation] as nonexistent has been generated, the mistaken consciousness apprehending [it] as existent becomes overturned.<sup>14</sup>

Further elaborating on the process of negation, he writes:

- If the negation by reasoning is for the sake of generating the nonerroneous ascertainment via refutation of the incorrect mode of apprehension, then the mode of apprehension of what kind of mind is refuted by reasoning?
- In general, there are numerous [types of] conceptuality (*rtog pa*) apprehending objects of negation. However, one should correctly identify and refute the object of adherence (*zhen yul*) of that erroneous conceptuality which is the root of all faults and defects. This is because if it is overturned, then all faults and defects will [also] be overturned.<sup>15</sup>

13. Ibid., 652 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 204).

14. 'gog pa'ang tho bas bum pa bshig pa lta bu min gyi / med pa la med par ngo shes pa'i nges shes skyed pa ste med par nges pa skyes na yod par 'dzin pa'i 'khrul shes ldog pa yin no. Ibid.

15. rigs pa rnam kyis 'gog pa ni phyin ci log gi 'dzin stangs sun phyung ba'i sgo nas phyin ci ma log pa'i nges pa bskyed pa'i phyir yin na blo ji 'dra zhig gi 'dzin stangs kyi yul rigs pas sun 'byin pa yin zhe na / spyir dgag bya 'dzin pa'i rtog pa la mtha' yas pa zhig yod kyang nyes skyon thams cad kyi rtsa bar gyur pa'i phyin ci log gi rtog pa gang yin pa de legs par ngos bzung nas de'i zhen yul sun dbyung bar bya ste / de log na nyes skyon thams cad ldog par gyur ba'i phyir ro. Ibid., 654.

In other words, to destroy afflictions and other negativities, one has to destroy their basis, ignorance, and that should be done by identifying and refuting through reasoning the unreal objects that ignorance imagines and adheres to.

In Tsongkhapa's opinion, minds whose mode of apprehension is refuted through reasoning are not just any type of consciousness, but only mental conceptual consciousnesses (*yiid shes rtog pa*). More specifically, they are the two types of grasping at self, as well as other types of conceptual minds that superimpose different features onto the objects imputed by the two types of grasping at self.<sup>16</sup> Grasping at self is none other than ignorance, which is characterized as "mind that superimposes nature, apprehending internal and external phenomena as established by way of their own character" (*phyi nang gi chos rnams rang gi mtshan nyid kyis grub par 'dzin pa'i rang bzhin sgro 'dogs pa'i blo*).<sup>17</sup>

Tsongkhapa's insistence on correct identification of the object of negation and his warnings against making the negation too broad were formed in large part in response to views that in his opinion were held by the majority of his contemporaries. As he puts it:

Nowadays, most of those who claim to propound the meaning of Madhyamaka say:

All phenomena ranging from forms through omniscience are negated by reasoning analyzing whether production, etc., are established in thatness. This is because whatever is asserted, when it is analyzed through reasoning, there

16. Ibid., 660.

17. Ibid. For more on the nature of ignorance and its relation to the object of negation according to Tsongkhapa, see *Great Stages of the Path*, 651–665 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 201–217).

is not even a particle that withstands analysis. This is also because all the four possibilities—existence, nonexistence, etc.<sup>18</sup>—are negated, and there are no phenomena that are not included into those [four]. Moreover, the exalted wisdom<sup>19</sup> of āryas observing thatness observes production and cessation, bondage and freedom, etc., as utterly nonexistent. Therefore, since [they] have to be as comprehended by that [exalted wisdom], production, etc., do not exist.<sup>20</sup>

The position that phenomena are negated by reasoning apparently was—and definitely still is—widespread. It also closely resembles the position of Gorampa discussed in the next section. The position that the mind directly realizing reality sees phenomena as nonexistent—instead of merely not seeing them as existent—by itself is too coarse to be held by a serious Madhyamaka thinker. It might have been held by certain of Tsongkhapa's contemporaries, but it is not representative of the mainstream views held by Tibetan thinkers, including Gorampa.

18. The latter two possibilities are the extreme of both existence and nonexistence and the extreme of neither existence nor nonexistence. I will address Tsongkhapa's and Gorampa's positions on the four extremes in this and the next sections respectively.
19. In this section, I am translating *ye shes, jñāna* as "exalted wisdom," because in contrast to such thinkers as Shākya Chokden or Mipam, whose views were addressed in previous chapters, both Tsongkhapa and Gorampa in their Madhyamaka works treat *ye shes* not as the primordially existent subtle level of consciousness, but as consciousness produced anew in the meditative equipoise of āryas.
20. *da lta dbu ma'i don smra bar 'dod pa phal mo che na re / skye ba la sogs pa de kho na nyid du grub ma grub dpyod pa'i rigs pas ni gzugs nas rnam mkhyen gyi bar gyi chos thams cad khegs pa yin te / ji' dra zhig khas blangs pa la'ang rigs pas dpyad pa byas na brtag bzod pa rdul tsam yang med pa'i phyir dang / yod med la sogs pa'i mu bzhi po thams cad bkag pas na der ma 'dus pa'i chos med pa'i phyir ro // gzhan yang de kho na nyid gzigs pa'i 'phags pa'i ye shes kyis skye 'gag dang bcings grol sogs ci yang med par gzigs pas na des gzhal ba ltar yin dgos pas skye ba sogs med do. Great Stages of the Path, 580.*

One of the main issues Tsongkhapa has with identifying the object of negation too broadly is that in his opinion negation of such an object undermines acceptance, understanding, and ability to practice positive actions, compassion, and other elements of the Buddhist teachings that pertain to conventional reality.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, as if admonishing his readers not to throw the baby (conventional phenomena) out with the bathwater (object of negation), he emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between the following pairs: not being able to withstand analysis by reasoning versus being invalidated by reasoning; production and cessation not being seen by the exalted wisdom of the meditative equipoise of āryas versus being seen by it as nonexistent; production and cessation not being found by rational consciousness analyzing whether nature exists or not versus being found as nonexistent by that consciousness. Not only do his contemporaries mistakenly confuse them, he says, but some early scholars also committed the same mistake.<sup>22</sup>

In Tsongkhapa's opinion, one of the reasons for his contemporaries' tendency to overnegation is their failure to distinguish between not finding something under analysis and actually negating it. He, in contrast, insists on differentiating the two, explaining that because such conventional phenomena as karmas with their results are posited by conventional valid cognition, they should not be perceived as being negated or harmed by the analysis of their ultimate nature. If the object of negation is identified too broadly—that is, if it includes existent phenomena—then the application of the ultimate analysis will lead one to seeing persons

21. See, for example, his warnings in *Ibid.*, 633 and 744–745 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 183 and 302–303).

22. *Ibid.*, 609 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 158).

and other conventional phenomena as being invalidated by that analysis. This will make one commit the grave mistake of treating phenomena as nonexistent.<sup>23</sup>

To illustrate his point that conventionalities are not negated by mind realizing their ultimate nature (emptiness), Tsongkhapa uses an example of a visual consciousness that does not observe or find sounds. It does not see or hear sounds not because it negates them, but because sounds are not its objects (being objects of an auditory consciousness). Similarly, the rational consciousness (*rigs shes*) realizing emptiness does not observe production, cessation, and other conventional phenomena. Nor are those phenomena established by that rational consciousness. Nevertheless, they *are* established by a conventional consciousness. Thus, although they are not found by the rational consciousness, this does not mean that they are negated by it.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, not only does Tsongkhapa argue that conventional phenomena *are not* negated by Madhyamaka reasoning, but he also states that they *cannot be* negated by that reasoning.<sup>25</sup>

Clarifying his position on the meaning of phenomena's non-findability by reasoning (*rigs pas ma rnyed pa*), Tsongkhapa equates it with their not withstanding analysis by reasoning (*rigs pas dpyad mi bzod pa*). But he objects to those who think that this necessarily amounts to *negation* by reasoning (*rigs pas khegs pa*). In his opinion, they confuse not withstanding analysis by reasoning with being invalidated by reasoning (*rigs pas gnod pa*). Rebuking those who thereby commit the mistake of accepting the existence of production and other conventional phenomena

23. Ibid., 743 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 301).

24. Ibid., 607, 617, 623 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 156, 167, 173).

25. Ibid., 633 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 183). See also p. 233.

on the one hand and their negation by reasoning on the other, he dismisses such claims as senseless babble.<sup>26</sup> His own position is that Madhyamaka reasoning searches for or analyzes whether phenomena have production, cessation, etc., *that are established by way of their own entity*—not production and cessation per se. In other words, it analyzes whether those phenomena are established in reality, thatness. This reasoning inquiring into thatness (*de kho na nyid la dpyod pa'i rigs pa*, also characterized as reasoning analyzing the finality, *mthar thug dpyod pa'i rigs pa*) is a correct analytical inquiry into whether such phenomena as forms, etc., exist or not, are produced or not *in their mode of being* (*don yin lugs*)—not in general. It is true that this reasoning does not find production and other conventional phenomena. But this nonfindability of phenomena should be counted only as their not withstanding analysis by reasoning—not as their negation by it.<sup>27</sup>

Tsongkhapa's position that Madhyamaka reasoning inquires into the ultimate nature of phenomena should not be taken as implying that in his opinion it does not analyze conventional phenomena at all. It does, but it analyzes them *in terms of their ultimate status*—not in general. Thus, the analogy of visual consciousness not seeing or hearing sounds is limited only to the mind that

26. Ibid., 606–607 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 156). See also his *Ocean of Reasoning: Explanation of [Nāgārjuna's 'Wisdom:] Root Stanzas on Madhyamaka'* (*Dbu ma rtsa ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa shes rab ces bya ba'i rnam bshad rigs pa'i rgya mtsho*), Collected Works of Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa, vol.15 *ba* (Sku 'bum: Sku 'bum byams pa gling par khang, 2000; hereafter, *Ocean of Reasoning*), 41–42, where he likewise insists on distinguishing between not withstanding analysis by reasoning and being invalidated by reasoning, as well as between not being found by rational consciousness and being negated by it (*rigs shes kyis mi rnyed pa dang des bkag pa*). English translation in Geshe Ngawang Samten and Jay L. Garfield (tr.), *Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; hereafter, *A Great Commentary*), 39.

27. *Great Stages of the Path*, 607 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 156).



realizes emptiness and does not observe conventional phenomena. It does not apply to the mind that uses Madhyamaka reasoning prior to that, because while analyzing the ultimate nature of phenomena, that mind observes those phenomena as well. Analysis of the ultimate nature of phenomena does lead to the realization of emptiness which does not observe or find phenomena. But during the initial stages of that analysis, one still observes conventional phenomena, such as when one applies the reason of dependent origination, thinking, “The subject, sprout, is empty because of being dependently arisen.”

Tsongkhapa does admit the existence of many passages in Madhyamaka works that, upon literal reading, appear to suggest negation of conventional phenomena by reasoning. In order to solve this apparent intrusion of the ultimate analysis into the conventional sphere, he insists that one has to add to the object of negation such qualifications as “ultimate” (*don dam gyi khad par*), etc., arguing that those qualifications are implied even in contexts where they are not explicitly used. For example, when a text literally says that production or existence is negated by the ultimate analysis, he claims that it is not existence and production per se that are negated, but “true existence,” “production established by the way of its own entity,” etc. He justifies this approach by arguing that because in multiple sūtras of definitive meaning, Nāgārjuna’s texts, etc., such qualifications are indeed added, those texts imply them even in those cases where they do not explicitly state them.<sup>28</sup>

According to Tsongkhapa, if such qualifications were not added, negations based on Madhyamaka reasoning would be misinterpreted as undermining the validity of conventional phenomena,

28. *Great Stages of the Path*, 664ff. (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 215ff.). See also *Ocean of Reasoning*, 38–39 (tr.: *A Great Commentary*, 37–38).

and the two realities would be misunderstood as contradicting each other. Leveling criticisms at his opponents, he writes:

[Y]ou say:

As things have no nature established by its own entity, what other [nature] do [they] have? Therefore, bondage and freedom, production and cessation, etc., are negated by the reasoning negating nature, with no need of adding [to the object of negation such] qualifications [as] “ultimate,” etc.

Think then about how you have not negated that which allows positing bondage and freedom, arising and disintegration, etc., in the absence of nature.<sup>29</sup>

And he further adds:

In brief, if you claim that the absence of nature [on the one hand] and bondage and freedom, production and cessation, etc. [on the other] are contradictory, then for [things that are] empty—being empty of nature—all presentations of nirvāṇa and cyclic existence will be unsuitable in terms of either of the two realities [—conventional or ultimate]. Thus, you have [effectively] negated the unique feature of Madhyamaka. If you claim that they are not contradictory, then you have no good reason for claiming that the reasoning negating nature also negates production and cessation, bondage and freedom,

29. *khyed cag dngos po rnam la rang gi ngo bos grub pa'i rang bzhin med na gzhan ci zhig yod/ des na bcings grol dang skye 'gag sogs 'gog pa la don dam pa sogs kyi khyad par sbyor mi dgos par rang bzhin 'gog pa'i rigs pas 'gog pa yin no zhes smra ba na / rang bzhin med pa la bcings grol dang 'byung 'jig sogs bzhag pas chog pa ji ltar ma bkag pa soms shig. Great Stages of the Path, 591–592.*

etc., with no need of adding any qualification to the object of negation.<sup>30</sup>

This position is also reflected in Tsongkhapa's approach to extremes (*mtha'*)—such as the extreme of existence (*yod mtha'*) and the extreme of nonexistence (*med mtha'*)—that are negated by Madhyamaka reasoning. He objects to the treatment of conventional existence of phenomena and apprehension of that existence as the extreme of existence and grasping at the extreme of existence, respectively. Rather, he treats *ultimate* existence and its grasping as, respectively, the extreme of existence and grasping at that extreme. He likewise treats the nonexistence of phenomena *on the conventional level* and grasping at such nonexistence as, respectively, the extreme of nonexistence and grasping at that extreme. Tsongkhapa is also against treating the apprehension of ultimate nonexistence as the grasping at the extreme of nonexistence, arguing that one falls into such extreme if one holds *as true* the nonexistence qualified by negation of the object of negation. Tsongkhapa thereby specifies two types of the extreme of nonexistence—the extreme of nonexistence in terms of deprecation (*skur 'debs kyi med mtha'*) and the extreme of nonexistence in terms of superimposition (*sgro 'dogs kyi med mtha'*). The former is the nonexistence of phenomena on the conventional level, while the latter is the true existence of negation of true existence. But he also notes that in some textual passages, all types of ultimate

30. *mdor na rang bzhin med pa dang bcings grol dang skye 'gag sogs 'gal bar 'dod na / rang bzhin gyis stong pa'i stong pa la 'khor 'das kyi rnam gzhaq thams cad 'thad pa bden pa gnyis gang du'ang mi rung bas dbu ma ba'i khyad chos gcig pu de khyed kyiis bkag pa yin no // de dag 'gal bar mi 'dod na ni rang bzhin 'gog pa'i rigs pas dgag bya la khyad par ci yang sbyar mi dgos par skye 'gag dang bcings grol sogs 'gog par 'dod pa la rgyu mtshan yang dag pa ci yang med do. Ibid., 592.*

existence are treated as the extreme of existence.<sup>31</sup> Either way, what this amounts to is that according to Tsongkhapa, as with the object of negation by reasoning, for something to be an extreme negated by Madhyamaka reasoning it has to be nonexistent, and if something exists it cannot be an extreme liable to negation by that reasoning.

When addressing the four extremes (*mtha' bzhi*) or four possibilities (*mu bzhi*) of existence, nonexistence, both, and neither, Tsongkhapa specifically objects to the claim that because all four are refuted in Madhyamaka texts, and because there are no phenomena that are not included within the four, Madhyamaka reasoning negates all phenomena. He argues instead that Madhyamaka reasoning negates things established by way of their own entity (*rang gi ngo bos grub pa'i dngos po*), nonthings established by way of their own entity (*rang gi ngo bos grub pa'i dngos med*), both things and nonthings established by way of their own entity, and neither things nor nonthings established by way of their own entity.<sup>32</sup> Here too we see that extremes for him necessarily have to be nonexistent, and such qualifications as “established by way of one’s own entity” have to be added in order to avoid an overly literal reading of Madhyamaka texts.

Tsongkhapa follows the same approach when he addresses different types of Madhyamaka reasoning, such as the five great reasons referred to (p. 137). In his opinion, all those reasonings negate only the nonexistent (but imagined) object of negation (e.g., true existence) superimposed by ignorance onto phenomena—not

31. See *Thorough Clarification of Intent*, 390–391. See likewise *Ocean of Reasoning*, 21–22 (tr.: *A Great Commentary*, 23) for virtually identical reasoning. See also *Ocean of Reasoning*, 334–338, 376 (tr.: *A Great Commentary*, 322–327, 365) and *Great Stages of the Path*, 595 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 142–143).

32. *Great Stages of the Path*, 637 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 189).

phenomena themselves. When a literal reading of descriptions of those reasonings suggests the negation of phenomena themselves, he adds qualifications.<sup>33</sup>

It might sound as if Tsongkhapa were trying to disconnect the conventional and ultimate spheres, leaving the realm of conventional phenomena intact, and letting Madhyamaka reasoning deal with questions pertaining to the ultimate level only. But this simplistic interpretation does not do justice to his view. In fact, one finds multiple passages in his works where he insists on the intricate connection between conventional and ultimate phenomena together with the minds perceiving them. As we will see, he also thinks that correct application of Madhyamaka reasoning should lead to deep, fundamental changes in the way one perceives *both* conventional and ultimate phenomena. Let me therefore draw the reader's attention to a very important feature of his position which has at times been overlooked by his critics and even his own followers.

Although Tsongkhapa says that the object of negation, which is initially identified and subsequently refuted through Madhyamaka reasoning, must necessarily be different from

33. For example, in *Great Stages of the Path*, 720ff. (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 278ff.), Tsongkhapa discusses the sevenfold reasoning establishing the selflessness of persons by analyzing whether self is one with mental and physical aggregates, different from them, is their support, supported by them, possesses them, is their collection, or is their shape. Because according to him, self and aggregates *are* different, he describes the second reasoning as analyzing whether self is *essentially* different from aggregates (*bdag phung po las ngo bos grub pa'i tha dad pa*) or not (Ibid. 737, tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 296). He later discusses the fourfold reasoning that establishes the selflessness of phenomena by analyzing whether results are produced from themselves, other, both, or neither (*Great Stages of the Path*, 753ff., tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 311ff.). As might be expected, he describes the second reasoning as negating the production of results from causes that are different *by nature* (*rang bzhin tha dad pa'i rgyu las 'bras bu skye*, Ibid. 755, tr. *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 313). See also *Ocean of Reasoning*, 71ff. (tr.: *A Great Commentary*, 67ff.).

conventional phenomena, he also insists that this object should not be searched for elsewhere, separately from the way phenomena appear to ordinary consciousness. Rather, it has to be identified *in the very mode of appearance of phenomena* to a consciousness that has not yet discerned the Madhyamaka view of reality. As we will see below, Tsongkhapa argues that until ultimate reality or emptiness is *directly* realized, any phenomenon appearing to consciousness will necessarily appear as truly existent, established by way of its own character, etc., because its appearance is mixed with the appearance of the object of negation. And it is this mode of appearance that should be targeted by Madhyamaka reasoning—not just an artificial concept of “true existence” constructed through learning bad philosophical systems.

Tsongkhapa does admit three ways of *apprehending* (*'dzin tshul*) phenomena: apprehension as truly existent (*bden par yod par 'dzin pa*, i.e., apprehending phenomena as being established by way of their own entity), apprehension as falsely existent (*brdzun par yod par 'dzin pa*, i.e., apprehending phenomena not as being established by way of their own entity, but as existing like an illusion), and apprehension as merely existent (*yod pa tsam zhig tu 'dzin pa*, i.e., apprehending phenomena as existent in general, without being qualified by either truth or falsity). He also argues that although one can have all three modes only after the Madhyamaka view has been realized, at least conceptually, it is possible to have the first and third modes prior to that. Differentiating between these modes, he criticizes a claim that until the view of illusion-like nature of phenomena has been generated, the way of apprehending existence by conceptual minds necessarily amounts to the apprehension of true existence.<sup>34</sup>

34. Ibid., 703–705 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 259–261). See also *Thorough Clarification of Intent*, 64 and 160 (the latter passage is translated in *Final Exposition*, 212–213).

This important distinction notwithstanding, Tsongkhapa also admits that prior to the direct realization of emptiness, phenomena necessarily *appear* by way of their own character (i.e., as truly established) even to sensory consciousnesses, not to mention conceptual consciousnesses.<sup>35</sup> This mistaken appearance—wherein things appear as having nature while having no nature (*rang bzhin med bzhin du rang bzhing du snang ba*)—is overturned only when one directly realizes ultimate reality in the meditative equipoise of āryas.<sup>36</sup> And even that “overturning” is only temporal: dualistic appearances will continue returning during subsequent attainments on the paths of seeing and meditation.<sup>37</sup>

This mode of appearance as truly existent applies not only to the way conventional phenomena appear to ordinary consciousness, but also to the way emptiness itself appears to the conceptual consciousness realizing it. Arguing (in contrast to many of his critics) that not only the directly realized emptiness, but the conceptually understood emptiness as well, *is* ultimate reality, Tsongkhapa distinguishes between two types of mind or rational consciousness realizing emptiness: nonconceptual, which is the nonconceptual exalted wisdom of the meditative equipoise of āryas (*'phags pa'i mnyam gzhang mi rtog ye shes rtog med*), and conceptual, which is the rational consciousness comprehending thatness by relying on reasons (*rtags la brten nas de kho na nyid 'jal ba'i rigs shes rtog bcas*). The former consciousness is able to sever both proliferations of truth

35. *Great Stages of the Path*, 616 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 166). See also *Ocean of Reasoning*, 492–494 (tr.: *A Great Commentary*, 485–486).

36. *Great Stages of the Path*, 649 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 200).

37. According to Tsongkhapa, dualistic appearances, together with the habitual tendencies of desire, etc., that give rise to them, fall under the category of the obscurations of knowables that are completely removed only in the state of buddhahood. See *Thorough Clarification of Intent*, 216–217 (tr.: *Final Exposition*, 251–252), where he addresses these two types of obscurations of knowables.

(*bden pa'i spros pa*) and proliferations of dualistic appearances (*gnyis snang gyi spros pa*),<sup>38</sup> while the latter is able to negate proliferations of truth with respect to its object (i.e., emptiness), but is unable to sever proliferations of dualistic appearances.<sup>39</sup>

Now the appearance of truth or true existence is the most fundamental type of dualistic appearances for Tsongkhapa. He also argues that ordinary beings' view of thatness is polluted by ignorance and its habitual tendencies.<sup>40</sup> In particular, he refers to the primary cause of cyclic existence—the afflicted ignorance which, as we have already seen (p. 171), he identifies as mind apprehending phenomena as established by way of their own character or truly established/existent. What it amounts to is that for Tsongkhapa the conceptual realization of emptiness both negates true existence and has its appearance. It cannot simultaneously *apprehend* or *have proliferations of* true existence and the lack of true existence, because these two modes of apprehension and proliferations are in

38. While Tsongkhapa does not here go into details of different types of dualistic appearances that the nonconceptual realization of emptiness is free from, one can distinguish at least five different types of dualistic appearances: conceptual appearance, sense of subject and object, appearance of inherent existence, appearance of conventional phenomena, and appearance of difference. Thus, the direct realization of emptiness within meditative equipoise on the path of seeing, etc., is nondualistic in five ways: 1. there is no conceptual appearance; 2. there is no sense of subject and object—subject and object are like fresh water poured into fresh water, indistinguishable; 3. there is no appearance of inherent existence; 4. there is no appearance of conventional phenomena—only emptiness appears; and 5. there is no appearance of difference—although the emptinesses of all phenomena in all world systems appear, they do not appear to be different. See Jeffrey Hopkins, *Tantric Techniques* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2009), 161. As Hopkins explains, the contents of the list are common knowledge among Geluk scholars (Ibid.).

39. *Medium-Length Stages of the Path*, 409–410 (tr.: *Final Exposition*, 142–143). Arguing that the only two possible ways to realize emptiness are conceptual and nonconceptual/direct, Tsongkhapa stresses that only the former option is available to ordinary beings who have not yet reached the path of seeing. *Great Stages of the Path*, 780 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, vol. 3, 336).

40. *Thorough Clarification of Intent*, 208 (tr.: *Final Exposition of Wisdom*, 240).



direct contradiction to each other. Nevertheless, the *appearance* of true existence to that consciousness persists.<sup>41</sup>

To support his claim that although ordinary beings do realize ultimate reality, they—in contrast to āryas—do not realize it in a way free from dualistic appearances, Tsongkhapa uses the example of a person with an eye disease who seems to see falling hairs but realizes that in fact there are no actual hairs in his visual field.<sup>42</sup> What the conceptual realization of emptiness realizes is the emptiness of true existence. But although it does not *apprehend* or grasp at emptiness as truly existent, that very emptiness *appears* to it as truly existent. In contrast to that, on the level of nonconceptual realization of emptiness by āryas, not only the *apprehension* of emptiness of true existence ceases, but even the *appearance* of true existence ceases too. Tsongkhapa likens that realization to a person who cured the eye disease that made him see falling hairs. Not only does that person now know that there are no hairs in his visual field, but he also does not see them anymore.<sup>43</sup>

To provide another illustration, we can say that a person who, prior to achieving the path of seeing, has mixed appearances of existence and true existence is like someone drinking salty water who can conceptually differentiate between salt and water, but cannot taste them as different. In contrast to that, starting from the time when he realizes emptiness directly, he becomes like

41. Clarifying this issue, Jamyang Zhepa Ngakwang Tsöndrü (*'jam dbyangs bzhad pa ngag dbang brtson grus*, 1648–1721) writes: “Although the absence of ultimately existent production, which is the mode of subsistence, does not have proliferations from its own side, an inference of determinative realization [of the absence of ultimately existent production] comprehends [the absence of ultimately existent production] together with proliferations of dualistic appearance in the perspective of its appearance factor despite the fact that proliferations have disappeared in the perspective of its ascertainment factor.” Hopkins, *Maps of the Profound*, 908.

42. *Ocean of Reasoning*, 398 (tr.: *A Great Commentary*, 386).

43. *Ibid.*

a goose that, according to a widely used Indian metaphor, in its mouth can separate milk from water mixed with it.<sup>44</sup> This is because from that moment on, the person will be able to distinguish in his own experience the appearance of existence and the appearance of true existence.

Tsongkhapa's position can be interpreted as follows. The way conventional and ultimate phenomena appear to coemergent ignorance and other types of consciousness (eye consciousness, etc.) in the mental continua of those who have not yet directly realized emptiness is the same in terms of them appearing as truly existent. The difference lies in the fact that the coemergent ignorance apprehends or grasps at that appearance as such (i.e., as truly existent), while eye consciousness, etc., do not do that. The process of apprehending true existence does not consist of explicitly thinking: "I believe phenomena truly exist" (such conceptualization would pertain to the intellectually acquired type of ignorance). Rather, it consists of holding onto or affirming the notion of true existence via its generic image (because ignorance is necessarily a conceptual type of mind). Nonconceptual minds, such as the eye consciousness, have only the appearance of true existence but not its generic image. Conceptual minds other than ignorance also have the appearance of true existence and might have its generic image as well, but they do not hold onto true existence the way coemergent ignorance does.

Thus, despite Tsongkhapa's insistence that in the process of negation one should negate not phenomena but true existence superimposed onto phenomena, and that with respect to emptiness, too, one should negate true existence of emptiness and

44. Lanman, C.R., "The Milk-Drinking Haṅsas of Sanskrit Poetry," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 19 (1898): 151–158.

not emptiness itself, we can argue the following: According to Tsongkhapa, until the direct realization of emptiness has been achieved, a. true existence appears not only to coemergent ignorance but to all other types of consciousness; b. the appearances of true existence and mere existence cannot be separated on the experiential level prior to that moment; and c. true existence is the very “object” that has to be negated in order to destroy its subject—coemergent ignorance—with Madhyamaka reasoning.<sup>45</sup> It follows, therefore, that the application of reasoning should target the very way phenomena appear to ordinary consciousness. As we are going to see in the last section, this is exactly how it has been interpreted by some leading thinkers of the Geluk tradition. In that section, we will revisit this important feature of Tsongkhapa’s position, because, in my opinion, it brings his interpretation of the process of realization of emptiness much closer to

45. It should be noted that, as Thupten Jinpa points out, Tsongkhapa himself is ambiguous or unclear on how exactly one is supposed to proceed with the identification of the object of negation. Thupten Jinpa writes: “What does it mean to say that someone must have a prior understanding of what is to be negated? Tsongkhapa gives the analogy of someone who is trying to ascertain the absence or presence of a certain person. For this, he argues, it is necessary to have some idea of who that person is in the first place. Judging by this analogy, Tsongkhapa is asserting that a Mādhyamika must develop a clear sense of what is to be negated by the Madhyamaka dialectic before the actual process of deconstruction has even begun. If this is true, this raises, in my view, some epistemological problems for Tsongkhapa. First, this implies that the Mādhyamika aspirant is able to coherently distinguish between ‘existence only’ (*yod tsam*) on the one hand, and ‘intrinsic existence’ (*rang bzhin gyis yod pa*) on the other. Not only that, he or she must be able to distinguish this within his or her personal experience, i.e., how things and events appear to the naive worldview. The problem with this, however, is that such distinctions can be made, if at all, only in the aftermath of having cognized the absence of intrinsic existence (*niḥsvabhāva*) by true knowledge. Until then, existence and intrinsic existence remain completely indistinguishable so far as the perception of the average individual is concerned. They are, to use Tsongkhapa’s own imagery, like a face and its reflection in a mirror. As far as visual perception is concerned, the face that you see in the mirror and its reflection are one and the same image. There is no separate image of the face apart from the reflection that appears in the mirror.” *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy*, 52–53.

that of his opponents than those opponents—or even Tsongkhapa himself—would be willing to admit.

Let us now go into further details of Tsongkhapa's interpretation of the process of meditation on emptiness. In his opinion, this process has to consist of alternating between analytical and stabilizing meditation. In order to destroy the root of cyclic existence—coemergent ignorance, identified as coemergent grasping at self or true existence—one has to ascertain the two types of selflessness. The two types of selflessness are the lack of true existence of persons and the lack of true existence of phenomena. The mode of their apprehension by the ascertaining consciousness stands in direct opposition to that of grasping at the two types of self. In order to turn realization of selflessness or emptiness into a powerful antidote capable of destroying ignorance, one has to maintain it and make it firm through further analysis. Resorting to further analysis also allows strengthening of the ascertainment of emptiness whenever it weakens.<sup>46</sup>

Stressing the importance of both analytical and stabilizing meditation, Tsongkhapa criticizes cultivation of consciousness that does not apprehend any objects whatsoever, likening it to the (in)famous meditative technique advocated by Heshang Moheyan.<sup>47</sup> Because in Tsongkhapa's opinion this type of meditation cannot serve as an antidote of ignorance, he strongly objects to treating meditation on emptiness as a mere placement of mind in a nonconceptual, thoughtless state, regardless of whether such a state has been preceded by Madhyamaka analysis or not.<sup>48</sup> To this, he juxtaposes what in his opinion is the correct approach, wherein

46. See *Great Stages of the Path*, 783ff. (*Great Treatise*, 339ff.) for detail.

47. See pp. 134ff.

48. *Great Stages of the Path*, 773ff. (*Great Treatise*, 331ff.).

one first refutes by reasoning the two types of self and thereby induces ascertainment of selflessness. Then one realizes that if the two types of self do not exist, their negation cannot be truly established either. This will lead to abandoning all conceptual minds apprehending true existence. Alternation of analytical and stabilizing meditation on emptiness in this manner will eventually result in the direct realization of emptiness by the nonconceptual exalted wisdom.<sup>49</sup>

Tsongkhapa stresses the importance of the correct identification of the object of negation even after the initial conceptual realization of emptiness has taken place. Here too, he warns against an overnegation, now with respect to emptiness itself:

When the nature or self established by way of its own entity has been negated with respect to the aggregates, there arises wisdom thinking: “nature or self does not exist.” Were one also to negate that naturelessness—the object of that wisdom—one would [effectively] refute the Madhyamaka view because of refuting the object of wisdom realizing naturelessness of phenomena.<sup>50</sup>

Instead, he proposes to proceed as follows:

Upon the negation of a sprout’s nature established by way of its own entity, we ascertain: “there is no nature.” Then, even if some other mind apprehends: “that very lack of nature

49. Ibid., 787–788 (*Great Treatise*, 343–344).

50. *phung po la rang gi ngo bos grub pa’i rang bzhin nam bdag bkag pa na rang bzhin nam bdag med do snyam pa’i shes rab skye la / shes rab de’i yul rang bzhin med pa de yang ’gog na ni dbu ma ba’i lta ba sun ’byin pa yin te / chos rnams rang bzhin med par rtogs pa’i shes rab kyi yul sun ’byin pa’i phyir ro.* Ibid., 638.

exists,” its object is not negated by reasoning. However, if that emptiness is claimed to be established by way of its own entity, [then the object of that claim should] be negated.<sup>51</sup>

In other words, if—subsequent to the conceptual realization of emptiness of conventional phenomena—that emptiness itself is apprehended as truly existent, then the object of that apprehension of true existence has to be negated—not a mere assertion of emptiness or existence of emptiness. Because emptiness exists, it is not liable to negation—only the nonexistent true existence of emptiness is.

One of the reasons why Tsongkhapa insists on *maintaining* the mode of apprehension of mind realizing the lack of true existence, rather than subsequently destroying it, is because he thinks that doing otherwise will amount to effectively destroying the very antidote of the root of cyclic existence:

Thus, the root of all decline is ignorance that superimposes nature. What uproots it through [having a] mode of apprehension explicitly contradicting it is solely the wisdom realizing naturelessness or selflessness. This being so, if you refute the mode of apprehension of that [wisdom], you will have to accept, albeit unwillingly, that you have [effectively] negated the view of thatness.<sup>52</sup>

51. *kho bo cag ni myu gu la rang gi ngo bos grub pa'i rang bzhin bkag pa na rang bzhin med do snyam du nges par 'gyur la / de nas blo gzhan zhig gis rang bzhin med pa de nyid yod do snyam du 'dzin pa na'ang de'i yul rigs pas 'gog pa min gyi / stong nyid de rang gi ngo bos grub par 'dod na 'gog pa yin no.* Ibid., 639.
52. *des na rgud pa thams cad kyi rtsa ba ni rang bzhin sgro 'dogs pa'i ma rig pa yin la / de dang 'dzin stangs dngos su 'gal ba'i sgo nas de drungs 'byin pa ni rang bzhin med pa'am bdag med pa rtogs pa'i shes rab nyag gcig yin na de'i 'dzin stangs sun 'byin na de kho na nyid kyi lta ba bkag pa ni mi 'dod bzhin du'ang khas blang dgos.* Ibid., 642.

The above passages clearly show that no matter in which context Tsongkhapa addresses the negation of the object of negation, he insists on differentiating that object from what it is negated with respect to. Nevertheless, this should not lead one into thinking that according to him, the mind conceptually realizing emptiness apprehends anything other than negation of the object of negation. Interpreting that negation as a nonaffirming negation,<sup>53</sup> Tsongkhapa says that such mind apprehends only it, and nothing else—not even its existence (although it does not negate it either). Appealing to his reader’s personal experience, Tsongkhapa writes:

The ascertainment apprehending, “There is no nature established by way of its own entity” with respect to something like a sprout, apprehends, “The sprout does not have nature.” It does not apprehend, “That naturelessness exists” or “[It] does not exist.” Close your eyes, turn inward, and realize [this]; it is very easy to understand.”<sup>54</sup>

To put it differently, because such ideas as “this is emptiness,” “this is realization of emptiness,” “this is a nonaffirming negation,” and so

53. For further details of Tsongkhapa’s interpretation of emptiness as a nonaffirming negation, see his *Essence of Good Explanations: Treatise Differentiating the Interpretive and the Definitive Meaning* (*Drang ba dang nges pa’i don rnam par ’byed pa’i bstan bcos legs bshad snying po*, Mundgod, India: Drepung Loseling Library, 1991), 220–227. Translated in Robert Thurman, *Central Philosophy of Tibet: A Study and Translation of Jey Tsongkhapa’s Essence of True Eloquence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 376–381. See also his *Thorough Clarification of Intent*, 163–165, as well as *Ocean of Reasoning*, 50–56 and 507–508 (tr.: *A Great Commentary*, 50–54, 496). At the end of the latter passage, Tsongkhapa explains that the actual meaning of nonaffirming negation is a mere elimination of the object of negation (*dgag bya rnam par bcaad pa tsam*), and criticizes those who think that all nonaffirming negations are entirely nonexistent, like rabbit horns.
54. *myu gu lta bu la rang gi ngo bos grub pa’i rang bzhin med do snyam du ’dzin pa’i nges pa des ni myu gu la rang bzhin mi ’dug go snyam du ’dzin gyi / rang bzhin med pa de ’dug go zhe’am mi ’dug go snyam pa gnyis gang du’ang mi ’dzin pa ni mig tshums la kha nang du phyogs par gyis la rtogs shig dang ches rig par sla’o*. *Great Stages of the Path*, 638. Tsongkhapa follows the same approach in his *Ocean of Reasoning*, 56 (tr.: *A Great Commentary*, 55).

forth, belong to the category of conventional reality, they cannot be comprehended by mind realizing emptiness whose object is exclusively the ultimate reality.

Although only the nonaffirming negation of true existence is apprehended by mind realizing ultimate reality, Tsongkhapa thinks that the process of understanding emptiness does not stop with realizing emptiness per se, but has to affect and be harmonized with the understanding of dependent origination and appreciation of the validity of such phenomena as karmas with their results on the conventional level. For example, when elaborating on the conceptual meditation on the selflessness of persons, Tsongkhapa writes that first one has to make the object of negation by reasoning appear well to one's mind, thinking and identifying how ignorance in one's own mental continuum superimposes nature. Then one has to apply reasoning, thinking that if such nature existed it would be either one or many, and understand that both of these claims can be invalidated by reasoning. One has to induce a strong ascertainment of this invalidation and make firm the ascertainment that ultimately persons do not have nature at all. But the process should not stop there. Next, one has to make the convention of person (*gang zag gi tha snyad*) appear to the mind, thinking about person as the accumulator of karmas and experiencer of karmic results. One thereby has to ascertain that dependent origination fits or accords with (*'thad*) emptiness. Whenever the two appear contradictory, one has to induce understanding that they are in fact not contradictory with the help of such examples as reflections.<sup>55</sup>

55. *Great Stages of the Path*, 746 (tr.: *Great Treatise*, 303–304). See also *Medium-Length Stages of the Path*, 370–372 (tr.: *Final Exposition*, 83–85) for a virtually identical approach.



In this process, too, the correct identification of the object of negation is of crucial importance to Tsongkhapa:

When the measure of the object of negation explained above is not grasped well and an object is analyzed with reasoning, breaking it down, initially the thought arises, “That object does not exist.” Then, seeing the same also with respect to the analyzer, [one thinks that] there is even no ascertainment of non-existence. Thereby it comes that there is nothing to ascertain as “It is this, not that.” The dawning, thereupon, of shimmering ephemeral appearances arises in dependence on not differentiating existence and nonexistence of nature from mere existence and nonexistence. Hence, such an emptiness is an emptiness destroying dependent origination.<sup>56</sup>

Tsongkhapa juxtaposes this position to the one where the two realities are seen as mutually complementary and noncontradictory, pointing at the rarity of achieving such an understanding:

The difficult point is that you must, from the depths, be able to induce ascertainment with respect to the negation, without

56. *sngar bshad pa'i dgag bya'i tshad legs par ma zin par yul la rigs pas dpyad de gsil ba na yul de mi 'dug pa snyam pa dang por 'byung zhing / de nas dpyad mkhan la yang de dang 'dra bar mthong nas / med par nges mkhan yang yod pa ma yin pas gang la yang 'di yin 'di min gyi nges pa bya sa med par song nas / snang ba ban bun du song ba'i snang ba 'char ba yang rang bzhin yod med dang / yod med tsam ma phyed pa la brten nas byung ba yin pas / de 'dra' i stong pa yang rten 'brel bshig pa'i stong pa yin. Medium-Length Stages of the Path, 367 (I mostly retain Hopkins's translation in *Final Exposition*, 79–80 with some minor changes in terminology). See also *Great Stages of the Path*, 744–745 (*Great Treatise*, 302) for a virtually identical passage, which adds an additional specification: “... arises in dependence on the negation of everything by reasoning, without differentiating existence and nonexistence of nature from mere existence and nonexistence” (*rang bzhin yod med dang yod med tsam ma phyed par rigs pas thams cad bkag pa la brten nas byung ba yin*).*

residue, of nature established by way of [the object's] own entity—and be able to posit those very persons and so forth, lacking nature, as the accumulators of actions, experiencers of effects, and so forth. A composite of these two hardly occurs; hence the Madhyamaka view is very difficult to find.<sup>57</sup>

According to Tsongkhapa, the process of correct identification and negation of the object of negation by conceptual consciousness eventually results in its nonconceptual realization by direct perception within the meditative equipoise of āryas. The difference between the two ways of realizing emptiness lies in the presence or absence of a generic image through which emptiness is realized. It does not lie in the nature of emptiness itself, which is always the same—a nonaffirming negation. Because Tsongkhapa treats both the conceptually realized ultimate and the directly realized ultimate as the same real ultimate, he does not accept literal reading of those passages in Madhyamaka texts that explicitly describe the negation of true existence of things as merely a concordant ultimate (*mthun pa'i don dam*) and treat the actual ultimate (*don dam pa dngos*) as transcending all conceptual proliferations. Criticizing those thinkers who interpreted the two in terms of metaphorical and nonmetaphorical ultimate reality (*rnam grangs pa yin min gyi don dam bden pa*), he argues that they misinterpreted those textual passages as presenting the former as an imputed ultimate reality (*don dam bden pa btags pa ba*),

57. *dka' sa ni rang gi ngo bos grub pa'i rang bzhin ma lus par khegs pa dang / rang bzhin med pa'i gang zag la sogs pa de nyid las gsog pa po dang 'bras bu myong ba po la sogs par 'jog pa la nges pa gting nas 'drongs te / de rnams su 'jog thub pa'i gnyis tshogs de srid mtha' tsam du song bas dbu ma' i lta ba shin tu rnyed dka' ba yin no. Medium-Length Stages of the Path, 367–368 (I retain Hopkins's translation in *Final Exposition*, 80, with only minor changes in terminology).*

which in fact is only a conventional reality, and the latter as the nonmetaphorical ultimate that cannot be taken as an object by any mind whatsoever, and thus is not a knowable (*shes bya*). Disagreeing with this approach, he argues instead that it is the nonerroneous conceptual rational consciousness comprehending reality and the nonconceptual wisdom of meditative equipoise directly realizing it that are respectively termed “concordant ultimate” and “actual ultimate” in such context, while their object is necessarily the actual ultimate.<sup>58</sup> In another context, where he discusses the nature of emptiness in terms of affirming and non-affirming negations, he writes that emptiness which is the non-affirming negation of the object of negation is the real ultimate, and the affirming negation which is the combined appearance of conventional phenomena and that emptiness—such as the one which is perceived during the subsequent attainment following the meditative equipoise of āryas—is the metaphorical ultimate.<sup>59</sup> Regardless of which interpretation Tsongkhapa provides, he always treats the nonaffirming negation of true existence as the real ultimate.

## THE SAKYA POSITION

The Sakya interpretation of the process of contemplation of emptiness articulated by Gorampa can be seen in part as the continuation, reiteration, and further advancement of several trends in the views of the “early Tibetans” criticized by Tsongkhapa. According to this position, Madhyamaka reasoning negates everything,

58. *Medium-Length Stages of the Path*, 408–409 (tr.: *Final Exposition*, 138–143.) See also *Medium-Length Stages of the Path*, 364 (tr.: *Final Exposition*, 77).

59. See *Ocean of Reasoning*, 506–507 (tr.: *A Great Commentary*, 495–496).

negation of true existence too has to be negated, and negation of phenomena by reasoning does not invalidate them.

1. *Madhyamaka reasoning negates everything.* In the process of contemplation of emptiness, one has to negate all referents of conceptual thinking, including the four extremes of existence, nonexistence, both, and neither (also described as truth, truthlessness, both, and neither). One should not selectively choose an object of negation, such as “true existence,” at the beginning of the process of contemplation of emptiness. During that process, when applying Madhyamaka reasoning one will negate not only a nonexistent object of negation but all objects of thinking, regardless of whether they exist on the conventional level or not. Everything is negated by Madhyamaka reasoning because nothing can be found by it.
2. *Negation of true existence too has to be negated.* After the first extreme has been negated, one has to continue the deconstructive process by negating that negation itself, as well as the remaining two extremes, in order to eventually arrive at not finding and not apprehending anything at all. Although prior to the Mahāyāna path of seeing one engages in the conceptual process of meditation on emptiness, this process is not understood as retaining or maintaining the negation of true existence. Rather, it consists of dwelling in the state of nonfindability after all extremes have been negated. Mind dwelling in such state is conceptual and operates via a generic image, but its cultivation leads to the direct realization of ultimate reality characterized as freedom from proliferations.
3. *Negation of phenomena by reasoning does not invalidate them.* Although phenomena are negated by mind

utilizing Madhyamaka reasoning, their negation does not undermine their validity on the conventional level. This is because the context in which conventional phenomena are posited is different from the context in which they are negated. The former is the context of presenting conventional reality, the latter—ultimate reality. Although the contexts of negating and positing phenomena are different, they are not unrelated, and negation of phenomena by Madhyamaka reasoning only helps realize their interdependent, conventional existence.

As in the case of the three components of Tsongkhapa's thought discussed in the previous section, these elements of Gorampa's position are closely related. In his view, *all* phenomena have to be negated by reasoning in order to eliminate *all* minds grasping at them. Therefore, there is no need to pick and choose a specific object of negation. Rather, one has to negate as much as one can, not stopping even after the initial negation has been completed, continuing the process until there is nothing else left to negate. Afterwards, when the context changes and appearances of conventional phenomena start coming back, instead of being damaged by that deconstructive process they will emerge purified of imputations made by grasping at extremes.

One of the most striking differences between the systems of Gorampa and Tsongkhapa is Gorampa's insistence on negation by Madhyamaka reasoning of all referents of thinking in general, and of the mind realizing truthlessness in particular. To better understand Gorampa's position, let us explore further what he understands as the objects of negation. Differentiating between two types of objects of negation—by path and by reasoning—Gorampa identifies the former as all errors of grasping at existence or

nonexistence that bind one to cyclic existence. The latter is further subdivided into two types: conceptual wrong consciousness mistaken about its object of adherence (*zhen yul la 'khrul ba'i rtog pa log shes*) and nonconceptual wrong consciousness mistaken about its appearing object (*snang yul la 'khrul ba'i rtog med log shes*).<sup>60</sup> What interests us (and Gorampa) here is the conceptual wrong consciousness, because it is the one that is eliminated by the reasoning used for realizing the Madhyamaka view. This consciousness is eliminated by negating through reasoning the very objects it projects. As Gorampa puts it, “through the negation of the two extremes [of existence and nonexistence]—the objects as [they are] conceived by that conceptuality—the wrong conceptuality apprehending those [extremes] is eliminated.”<sup>61</sup>

The category of conceptual wrong consciousness mistaken about its object of adherence is not limited to grasping at truth or true existence only, but extends to all types of grasping or apprehension, including apprehension of emptiness. True existence in Gorampa’s opinion is not the most subtle object of negation; therefore, its negation is not sufficient for eliminating all types of grasping. Consequently, when applying Madhyamaka reasoning, one has to negate concepts of both true existence and emptiness of true existence (the latter issuing from the negation of the former).<sup>62</sup>

Gorampa does think that the mind that manifestly adheres to truthlessness after truth has been negated by reasoning is the

60. Note two features of this approach: it allows for the overlap between the objects of negation by path and by reasoning, and it also shows that the objects of negation by reasoning do not necessarily have to be nonexistent. A good example of both features is grasping at true existence.

61. *de lta bu'i rtog pa des ci ltar brtags pa'i yul mtha' gnyis bkag pa'i sgo nas der 'dzin gyi log rtog sel ba yin. Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 273.

62. *Distinguishing the Views: Moonrays of Essential Points of the Supreme Vehicle (Lta ba'i shan 'byed theg mchog gnad kyi zla zer)*, edited Tibetan text and English translation in Cabezón and Lobsang Dargyay, *Freedom from Extremes*, 120ff., 210–215.

mind realizing the object's mode of being *in terms of negation of truth*.<sup>63</sup> But in terms of its manifest adherence (*mngon par zhen pa*) to truthlessness, this mind is erroneous, and therefore it has to subsequently be negated by another mind. He explains that truth—the object of adherence of grasping at truth—does not exist in the context of analysis by reasoning. Similarly, truthlessness—the object of adherence of grasping at truthlessness—does not exist in that context either.<sup>64</sup> This applies to all proliferations of the four extremes. Therefore, all of them have to be negated. This negative process is not endless and will continue only until the point when proliferations of all the four extremes have been negated. Because at that point, one has reached the state of consciousness that does not grasp at any extremes whatsoever, that consciousness does not have to subsequently be negated by another consciousness.<sup>65</sup>

The successive negations of the four extremes by conceptual consciousness should eventually result in the nonconceptual realization of emptiness within the meditative equipoise of Mahāyāna āryas. Gorampa describes the process as follows:

On the level of an ordinary being, one meditates by gradually negating each of the proliferations of the four extremes. Due to this, the Mahāyāna path of seeing is produced, at which point the proliferations of the four extremes are negated

63. As will become clear in the following pages, this mode of being is not the *final* mode of being of phenomena according to Gorampa. See also note 69.

64. *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 173.

65. *Ibid.*, 175. In *Elimination of Bad Views*, 587, Gorampa also objects to Tsongkhapa's statement in *Thorough Clarification of Intent*, 160, that if one identifies grasping at truth well, one will realize that there are many concepts which are neither of the two types of grasping at self, and will thereby abandon wrong claims that all objects apprehended by concepts are negated by reasoning analyzing thatness.

simultaneously. The convention “ultimate reality” is applied to the object [wherein] without the realized reality and realizing mind appearing separately, that very mind is manifested inseparably from the freedom from proliferations.<sup>66</sup>

Further detailing the deconstructive process of realization of emptiness that leads to its direct realization, Gorampa elaborates on the steps of gradual negation of the four extremes. He explains that when ordinary beings analyze the mode of being, they negate the first extreme—truth—by using such reasons as the lack of being one or many. In that context, the function of that mind—manifest adherence to truthlessness—is not considered to be a fault, because when conceptual consciousness has negated truth, it has no other option but to manifestly adhere to truthlessness. Nevertheless, because in terms of the state of mind produced afterwards it *is* a fault, this adherence to truthlessness also has to be negated via not finding its object of adherence—truthlessness. In that new context, the function of this mind—the manifest adherence to nontruthlessness (*bden med ma yin pa*)—is not a fault. But it too becomes a fault in terms of the next (third) type of mind, and thus the manifest adherence to nontruthlessness too has to be negated. In terms of the fourth mind that arises afterwards, this third mind likewise is understood as faulty and has to be negated. At this point, the process of negation ends, because no mode of apprehension is possible beyond this fourth type of mind.

66. *so so skye bo'i gnas skabs su / mtha' bzhi'i spros pa res 'jog tu bkag nas bsgoms pas / theg chen gyi mthong lam skyes pa'i tshé / mtha' bzhi'i spros pa cig char du 'gags nas rtogs bya'i chos nyid dang rtogs byed kyi blo gnyis so sor mi snang bar / blo de nyid spros bral dang dbyer med par mngon du gyur pa'i yul de nyid la don dam bden pa zhes pa'i tha snyad btags pa yin. Freedom from Extremes*, 216. My translation differs slightly from Cabezón and Lobsang Dargyay's translation on p. 217. On Gorampa's usage of the word “object,” see pp. 215–216.



Familiarization with the continuity of that rational consciousness eventually results in the direct realization of the mode of being, when no proliferations of any of the four extremes manifest. In that context of direct realization of reality within the meditative equipoise of āryas (starting from the Mahāyāna path of seeing), one does not have to negate extremes by focusing on them one by one. Nevertheless, whenever adherence manifests during subsequent attainments through to the seventh bodhisattva ground, it has to be negated gradually as before.<sup>67</sup>

In contrast to Tsongkhapa, who treats negation of true existence as the most subtle type of negation, Gorampa relegates it to the level of negation of the first extreme only. He treats it as relatively coarse, in contrast to the negation of all extremes, which he treats as subtle. Thus, when discussing different types of the “middle” (*dbu ma*, *madhyama*[*ka*], from which the Madhyamaka system got its name), he distinguishes between the middle qualified by negation of the coarse object of negation (*dgag bya rags pa bkag pa'i dbu ma*) and the middle qualified by negation of the subtle object of negation (*dgag bya phra ba bkag pa'i dbu ma*). The former type of the middle is free from the extreme of permanence (*rtaḡ pa'i mtha'*) due to the negation of the true establishment of appearances by the reason of diamond slivers and other types of Madhyamaka reasoning. It is free from the extreme of nihilism (*chad pa'i mtha'*) due to the establishment of karmas with their results and other phenomena as mere appearances (*snang ba tsam*) on the conventional level, within the scope of mind that does not engage in Madhyamaka analysis. The latter type of the middle

67. *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 180–181. Not all types of adherence will reappear after the initial direct realization of reality on the first ground. Because according to Gorampa, at that stage all afflictions are eliminated, grasping at the true existence of persons, for example, cannot reappear.

is free from all extremes due to the negation of the latter three extremes together with the manifest adherence even to the mere imputed existence of things that are subjects empty of truth (*bden pas stong pa'i chos can gyi dngos po btags yod tsam*).<sup>68</sup>

Consequently, Gorampa opines that the apprehension of emptiness of truth alone is not the ultimate view of Madhyamaka.<sup>69</sup> This leads him to criticizing Tsongkhapa's insistence on maintaining apprehension of negation of true existence, which he interprets as the refusal to negate manifest adherence to emptiness.<sup>70</sup> When addressing different types of extremes, he even reserves a special category for it, calling it the "extreme of manifest adherence to emptiness wherein the object of negation has been negated" (*dgag bya bkag pa'i stong nyid la mngon par zhen pa'i mtha'*).<sup>71</sup> According

68. *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 40–41.

69. Cabezón and Lobsang Dargyay, *Freedom from Extremes*, 124–125. See also *Elimination of Bad Views*, 521, where commenting on the passage from Candrakīrti's *Engaging in Madhyamaka* cited (pp. 74–75), Gorampa interprets the nondual mind mentioned in that passage as the wisdom free from the extremes of things, nonthings (*dngos po dang dngos med*), etc., and argues that the passage refutes the interpretation of the nonaffirming negation which is a mere negation of truth as the mode of being, and that it also refutes the claim that the manifest adherence to that negation should not be negated.

70. *Freedom from Extremes*, 114–115.

71. Gorampa addresses various presentations of the one, two, three, and four types of extremes found in Madhyamaka texts. 1. One extreme refers to all objects adhered to by concepts. There are also occasions when it refers to the grasping at truth only, in which case what is intended is only the root of cyclic existence. 2. The two extremes can refer to the extremes of existence and nonexistence, in which case they are treated as the extreme of deprecation, the conventional nonexistence, and the extreme of superimposition, the ultimate existence, when the common objects of negation by the three vehicles are addressed. They can also refer to the selves of phenomena and persons grasped by consciousness which, as in the case 1, is the root of cyclic existence. 3. The three extremes can refer to the objects of the view of nihilism, the two types of self, and mere proliferations (the former two being the common objects of abandonment by the three vehicles, the latter by Mahāyāna only). They can also refer to the extreme of superimposition made by Buddhist and non-Buddhist proponents of phenomenal existence (*dngos por smra ba*): different types of self imputed by non-Buddhists; aggregates, spheres, and sources (*phung khams skye mched*) imputed by Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika; and the nondual consciousness imputed by Cittamātra.

to Gorampa, Tsongkhapa proposes that after having negated truth, one should not negate manifest adherence to emptiness—the negation of truth—because it is sustained by the mind realizing the object’s mode of being (*yul gyi gnas lugs*).<sup>72</sup> Except for using stronger wording (such as “manifest adherence to emptiness”), Gorampa accurately presents Tsongkhapa’s position, which is already familiar to us from the previous section.<sup>73</sup> In contrast to that position, as we have just seen, Gorampa argues that in order to progress in the process of contemplation of emptiness, one has to negate not only true existence but its negation and the negation of that negation too, proposing that after the first extreme has been

4. The four extremes are those of existence, nonexistence, etc., that encompass all proliferations that have to be negated in order to achieve buddhahood. According to Gorampa, all these types of extremes can be condensed into three: the extreme of deprecation as nonexistent (*med pa skur ’debs kyi mtha*), the extreme of superimposition as existent (*yod pa sgro ’dogs kyi mtha*), and the extreme of manifest adherence to emptiness wherein the object of negation has been negated. *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 273–278. Note that some of these categories (such as “all objects adhered to by concepts” or “aggregates, spheres, and sources”) become extremes only in particular contexts (such as when applying Madhyamaka reasoning for determining emptiness), not in general.

72. *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 171.

73. As Cabezón and Lobsang Dargyay point out in *Freedom from Extremes*, 304–305 n.157, Gorampa appears to exaggerate Tsongkhapa’s statement that conceptual consciousness apprehending emptiness and its mode of apprehension should not be negated. While Tsongkhapa uses such terms as “conceptuality (*rtog pa*), “mode of apprehension” (*’dzin stangs*), etc., Gorampa uses stronger terms, such as “manifest adherence” (*mngon par zhen pa*), “adhering mind” (*zhen blo*), etc., when discussing the same process of conceptual realization of truthlessness. As can be seen from the above line of reasoning and the citations below, Gorampa treats adherence as a general property of such conceptual states as apprehension of truth and truthlessness. When criticizing Tsongkhapa, he applies the same approach to Tsongkhapa’s position. It is also worth noticing that *An Encyclopedic Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary*—whose definitions of minds, their objects, epistemological processes, etc., are often based on Geluk interpretations—provides the “object of inferential valid cognition” (*rjes dpag tshad ma’i yul*) as an example of the “object of adherence” (*zhen yul*). See Zhang Yisun (*krang dbyi sun*), ed., *An Encyclopedic Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary (Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*; Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1985), vol. 2, 2402. Conceptual realization of emptiness is an inferential valid cognition.

negated, one has to negate whatever object conceptuality adheres to next.<sup>74</sup> Simply put in his own words, “if something is not established within the scope of the rational consciousness analyzing the mode of being, it should not be apprehended.”<sup>75</sup>

This approach to contemplation of reality is also reflected in Gorampa’s interpretation of the difference between coarse and subtle realizations of the two types of selflessness. He writes that when phenomena and persons which are subsumed under the conventional reality have been analyzed by Madhyamaka reasoning, no true thing is found at all, and this nonfinding is termed “coarse realization of selflessness of phenomena” (*chos kyi bdag med rags par rtogs*). It is coarse because the reasoning that had been used for reaching this realization initially negated only truth from within the four extremes of proliferations. After that, when one uses reasonings negating the latter three extremes of proliferations of truthlessness, both, and neither, and does not find any extremes of proliferations at all, that nonfinding is termed “subtle realization of selflessness of phenomena” (*chos kyi bdag med phra bar rtogs*).<sup>76</sup> This approach once again demonstrates that according to Gorampa, stopping on the level of negation of true existence is insufficient for making progress in the contemplation of emptiness on the Mahāyāna path.<sup>77</sup> By using

74. *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 170. See *Freedom from Extremes*, 212–213, where Gorampa also argues that the conceptual construction of truthlessness has to be negated, and this is why emptiness of truth cannot be considered reality.

75. *gnas lugs dpyod pa’i rig [sic] ngor ma grub na der bzung du mi rung ba. Freedom from Extremes*, 214–215.

76. *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 341.

77. See also *Elimination of Bad Views*, 545, where he writes that while the Śrāvakāyāna (here referring to “Hīnayāna” in general) teaches the negation of only the first extreme—truth—with respect to the physical and mental aggregates that serve as the causes for imputing self, Mahāyāna teaches the negation of all proliferations of

Madhyamaka reasonings, one has to negate truthlessness, etc., as well.<sup>78</sup>

Regarding which reasoning negates which of the four extremes, Gorampa writes that the “lack of being one or many” and other great Madhyamaka reasons negate the first of the four extremes.<sup>79</sup> The second extreme is negated by such reasons as “If a thing does

the four extremes. Note that although according to Gorampa, the negation of true existence alone is not enough for progressing *on the Mahāyāna path*, he does not treat that negation as unimportant or unnecessary. As we saw above, he treats it as the first step in the gradual process of negation of the four extremes. As can be seen here, he treats it as the means of eliminating the afflicted ignorance that serves as the cause of cyclic existence. One can argue, therefore, that on the “Hīnayāna” paths of accumulation and preparation, maintaining apprehension of truthlessness is not only permissible but necessary. See also *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 341.

78. Regarding different types of Madhyamaka reasoning and contexts in which they are used, Gorampa writes that the five great Madhyamaka reasons are the main reasonings negating the self of phenomena (for details, see *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 307–322). Reasonings aimed at negation of persons established in seven ways (*gang zag rnam pa bdun du grub pa*, i.e., as being different from the mental and physical aggregates, being one with them, being their support, being supported by them, possessing them, being their collection, and being their shape; see *Ibid.*, 324–332) and negation of the inexpressible person (*brjod du med pa'i gang zag*; *Ibid.*, 332–333) are the main reasonings negating the self of persons. According to Gorampa, the order of negating the two selves can vary; furthermore, reasonings used to negate the self of persons can also be used to negate the self of phenomena, and vice versa (*Ibid.*, 337–340, 385). Providing further details, Gorampa explains that a representative reasoning negating the selves of persons and phenomena apprehended by the coemergent grasping at self, and thereby establishing the two selves as nonexistent, is also found in *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* where self is searched for and not found in bodily parts, the body is likewise searched for and not found in bodily parts, those parts are not found in their parts, etc. (*Ibid.*, 286–287). When one primarily focuses on negating the intellectually acquired types of self, the imputations of the lower tenets are negated through reasonings of the higher tenets (such as when the permanent singular self imputed by non-Buddhists is negated by Vaibhāṣika reasoning, for example), or all imputations are negated through Madhyamaka reasoning (*Ibid.*, 298–299). When negations are made without distinguishing between intellectually acquired and coemergent selves, one uses such reasonings as the ones negating conditions, movement, etc., in Nāgārjuna's *Wisdom: Root Stanzas on Madhyamaka* and his other works (*Ibid.*, 299; for details of those reasonings, see *Ibid.*, 299ff.).

79. *Ibid.*, 161.

not exist, of what will a nonthing be?”<sup>80</sup> or “Since there is no object of negation, I do not negate anything.”<sup>81</sup> The reasoning negating the third extreme is the combination of the reasonings negating the first and second extremes. The reasoning negating the fourth extreme is: if one apprehends something which is not both truly existent and nontruly existent, it means that one dwells via observation in the middle wherein the two extremes have been abandoned. Thus, one should not dwell via observation in that state either, because it is not established, and if it were established, it too would be an extreme.<sup>82</sup>

The above discussion leaves no doubt that—like Tsongkhapa—Gorampa emphasizes the crucial role played by reasoning in the process of contemplation of emptiness. Although he differs from Tsongkhapa in his position that the outcome of the contemplation of emptiness is reaching the state of consciousness free from observing anything at all, he does believe that such state has to be achieved by relying on reasoning, at least in the context of the gradual negation of the four extremes that concerned us here. By emphasizing the use of such reasoning in the process of realization of emptiness, Gorampa also distances his approach from that of Heshang Moheyan, which both he and Tsongkhapa find problematic. According to Gorampa, what Heshang Moheyan

80. *dnegos po yod pa ma yin na // dnegos med gang gi yin par 'gyur*. *Wisdom: Root Stanzas on Madhyamaka (Prajñānāmamūlamadhyamakakārikā, Dbu ma rtsa ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa shes rab ces bya ba)*, D3824, dbu ma, tsa, 4a. Skt.: *avidyamāne bhāve ca kasyābhāvo bhaviṣyati*. J. W. de Jong (ed.), *Nāgārjuna Mūlamadhyamakakārikāḥ* (Madras, India: The Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1977), 7.

81. *dgag bya ci yang med pas na // nga ni ci yang mi 'gog go*. *Refutation of Objections (Virgrahavyāvartanikārikā, Rtsod pa bzlog pa'i tshig le'ur byas pa)*, D3828, dbu ma, tsa, 29a. Skt.: *pratiśedhayāmi nāhaṃ kiṃcīti pratiśedhyamasti na ca kiṃcīti*. Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, Elgin H. Johnston, and Arnold Kunst, *The Dialectical Method of Nāgārjuna: Virgrahavyāvartanī*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), 25, 79.

82. *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 168–169.

interpreted as realization of the final view is nothing more than not taking anything to mind after concepts have been simply blocked without any preceding analysis of the mode of being. The approach to the realization of freedom from proliferations defended by Gorampa is different: having determined the objective mode of being (*yul gyi gnas lugs*) by reasonings taught in Madhyamaka texts, one refutes objects of adherence of grasping at extremes (*mthar 'dzin gyi zhen yul*) one by one, and finally arrives at not finding any proliferations of existence, nonexistence, etc. This mere nonfinding is termed “realization of the Madhyamaka view” (*dbu ma'i lta ba rtogs*).<sup>83</sup>

To better understand Gorampa's insistence on negating—not merely not finding—phenomena by Madhyamaka reasoning, let us have a look at his criticism of Tsongkhapa's claim that there are different types of conceptuality that do not belong to either of the two types of grasping at self. Criticizing this position, Gorampa argues that there can be only two types of such conceptuality: a mind conceptualizing the three spheres (the subject of action, action, and the object of action) that manifestly adheres to the mere imputed existence after the superimpositions of grasping at truth have been severed (*bden 'dzin gyi sgro 'dogs chod nas btags yod tsam du mngon par zhen pa'i 'khor gsum du rnam par rtog pa'i blo*) and a mind manifestly adhering to negation wherein the object of negation has been negated (*dgag bya bkag pa'i bkag pa la mngon par zhen pa'i blo*). If Tsongkhapa were referring to the former, he writes, it would follow either that such mind is not an object of abandonment or that it is possible to abandon adhering minds without refuting their objects of adherence.<sup>84</sup> What Gorampa implies here is that were Tsongkhapa to advocate this option, he

83. *Ibid.*, 177–178.

84. *Ibid.*, 179–180.

would have to concur that such mind has to be abandoned via refutation of its object of adherence—imputed existence. But since imputed existence exists conventionally, Tsongkhapa would be contradicting himself because he believes that no conventional phenomena should be negated by Madhyamaka reasoning.

Regarding the latter option, in contrast to Tsongkhapa, who proposes to maintain the mode of apprehension of negation of true existence, Gorampa argues that all objects adhered to by conceptuality are the objects of negation within the scope of reasoning analyzing the finality (*mthar thug dpyod pa'i rigs ngo*)<sup>85</sup>—i.e., the mode of being of phenomena. This is how he advances and defends his position against a Tsongkhapa-like opponent:

It is not fitting to assert that all objects to which conceptuality adheres are not the objects of negation within the scope of reasoning analyzing the finality. This is because all objects to which conceptuality adheres have to be analyzed by reasoning analyzing the finality and determined as truthless.

- [Objection:] Then the conventional reality too will become an object of negation within the scope of reasoning analyzing the finality.
- And I very much accept [that]! This is because when searched for by the reasoning analyzing the finality, [it is] not found.<sup>86</sup>

85. Ibid., 178.

86. *rnam rtog gis gang du zhen pa'i yul thams cad mthar thug dpyod pa'i rigs ngor dgag bya ma yin par 'dod pa'ang mi 'thad de / rnam rtog gis gang du zhen pa'i yul thams cad mthar thug dpyod pa'i rigs pas dpyad nas bden med du gtan la dbab dgos pa'i phyir 'o na kun rdzob bden pa'ang mthar thug dpyod pa'i rigs ngor dgag byar 'gyur ro zhe na shin tu'ang 'dod de / mthar thug dpyod pa'i rigs pas btsal ba'i tshé mi rnyed pa'i phyir ro.* Ibid., 178–179.



This passage well demonstrates Gorampa's position on the issue of negation of phenomena by reasoning: all objects of conceptual thinking are negated by Madhyamaka reasoning because all of them are not found by that reasoning and determined by it as empty. Because conventional phenomena too are objects of conceptual thinking, they too are not found—and thus negated—by that reasoning.

Gorampa applies the same logic to the negation itself, writing that when one takes production, cessation, etc., as the main objects of negation, there is no problem with establishing just their negation. This is because that is the occasion of inducing ascertainment of their lack of production, etc., via their negation. Nevertheless, when one explores thatness or the mode of being of that negation, it cannot be established either. This is because on that occasion the negation itself is taken as the object of negation and is not found under analysis.<sup>87</sup>

What further contributes to Gorampa's insistence on negating phenomena by Madhyamaka reasoning is his understanding of the nature of ignorance and its objects. Distinguishing between objects of coemergent and intellectually acquired grasping at self of phenomena and persons, he explains that the former are those objects which are apprehended as true by the coemergent grasping due to habitual tendencies, without analysis of phenomena and persons. The latter, in contrast, are the two intellectually acquired types of self that are objects apprehended as true through proofs based on wrong reasoning analyzing the selves of phenomena and persons.<sup>88</sup> He further distinguishes between phenomena and

87. *Rays of Light of the Perfect View: Explanation of [Nāgārjuna's] Wisdom: Root Stanzas on Madhyamaka* (Dbu ma rtsa ba'i shes rab kyi rnam par bshad pa yang dag lta ba'i 'od zer), Collected Works of Kun-mkhyen Go-rams-pa Bsod-nams-seng-ge, vol. 4 (Bir, India: Yashodhara Publications, 1995; hereafter, *Rays of Light of the Perfect View*), 497.

88. *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 282–283.

persons apprehended by the coemergent ignorance and the *selves of* phenomena and persons—that is, truly established phenomena and persons—apprehended by it. The former pair is mere mental and physical aggregates and mere self observed by our minds every moment since beginningless times. These phenomena and persons existing conventionally (i.e., in the context of positing conventional phenomena) are not objects of negation. But in the context of analysis by reasoning they are negated.<sup>89</sup> In Gorampa's opinion (in contrast to Tsongkhapa), until the Madhyamaka view has been generated, no matter what object is apprehended by minds apprehending persons and phenomena, it is necessarily apprehended as true.<sup>90</sup> In other words, he argues that the habitual apprehension of phenomena as truly existent can be altered only after one has reached the coarse realization of selflessness of phenomena by negating the first of the four extremes of proliferations—truth. Gorampa argues that in contrast to mere phenomena and persons, truly established phenomena and persons—the apprehended objects of the mode of apprehension (*'dzin stangs kyi gzung bya*) of that grasping at truth—are the objects of negation by Madhyamaka reasoning even on the conventional level. But they are negated through analysis of parts on which persons and phenomena depend. Thus, when those selves of persons and phenomena are negated, persons and phenomena are negated too. They are negated by the same reasoning that establishes the two types of selflessness.<sup>91</sup>

89. See also *Elimination of Bad Views*, 677, where Gorampa also writes that “mere I”—the object of adherence of the coemergent grasping at self—is negated through analysis by reasoning, but not on the conventional level.

90. *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 282. See also *Rays of Light of the Perfect View*, 693.

91. *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 281–282.

In other words, Gorampa argues that although there is a difference between the conventional existence of phenomena and persons on the one hand and the nonexistence of selves of phenomena and persons on the other, both pairs appear indistinguishably to the same coemergent ignorance until the truthlessness has been realized; both are thus negated by the same Madhyamaka reasoning. When engaged in the actual process of contemplation of emptiness, one cannot distinguish between what should and what should not be negated. Madhyamaka reasoning negating the selves of persons and phenomena also negates the persons and phenomena serving as the bases of superimposition of the two types of self. Because they appear together, they are also negated together. In this respect, Gorampa differs from Tsongkhapa, who would agree that both pairs are *not found* by Madhyamaka reasoning but would accept that only the former pair is *negated* by it.

It is clear that in contrast to Tsongkhapa, Gorampa does not see the negation of phenomena by reasoning as problematic or undermining understanding of conventional reality. Both thinkers are similar in their position that in the context of positing conventional, relative phenomena, conventions such as existence and non-existence, coming and going, etc., have to be accepted as they are posited in the world. But where Gorampa differs from Tsongkhapa is in his insistence that in the context of analysis by reasoning, those phenomena are actually negated. In contrast to Tsongkhapa, he does not see this position as involving any internal contradiction. This is because, he argues, the contexts in which phenomena are posited and negated are different. He explicitly emphasizes that the two contexts must not be mixed, and one should not apply analysis by reasoning when positing conventional phenomena.<sup>92</sup>

92. *Ibid.*, 285–286.

What then is the relationship between the negation/nonfinding of persons and phenomena by Madhyamaka reasoning and their establishment on the conventional level? By plugging in the categories of true conventionalities in terms of the world itself (*'jig rten nyid ltos yang dag kun rdzob*) and wrong conventionalities in terms of the world itself (*'jig rten nyid ltos log pa'i kun rdzob*, i.e., things perceived as unreal by ordinary minds), Gorampa points out three steps in the process of perception of reality and conventional phenomena. He writes that prior to analyzing the mode of being of any phenomena, one accepts true conventionalities in terms of the world (i.e., accepts things perceived as real by ordinary minds). When one undertakes their analysis and does not find them, one does not accept them in terms of either of the two realities (i.e., as existing either conventionally or ultimately). Afterwards, when mere appearances of phenomena again dawn in one's mind, one accepts them as not being different from wrong conventionalities in terms of the world as far as their truth or falsity goes. Gorampa praises this approach as the way of accepting the two realities on the basis of one and the same phenomenon.<sup>93</sup>

He thereby shows how the application of Madhyamaka reasoning helps one change perception of phenomena from seeing them as real to seeing them as being like an illusion. But in no way does this realization of their unreal, illusory nature imply their invalidation or rejection according to Gorampa. Rather, he believes that Madhyamaka reasoning leads to realizing their dependent existence. This is how he describes understanding of phenomena after they have not been found by reasoning:

[With respect to] the meaning of [the statement] by the world conventionally that "It is true that sprouts are produced from

93. *Rays of Light of the Perfect View*, 553–554.

seeds,” when the mode of production [of sprouts from seeds] is analyzed with respect to the four extremes, it is not found. On that occasion, that production of sprouts from seeds too [is understood as being] a combination of merely appearing as true within the scope of nonanalyzing, yet not truly existing if analyzed. Thus, it is established as merely dependently imputed, similar to an illusion.<sup>94</sup>

Regarding persons, he writes:

With respect to the meaning of the application of the convention of a true person, [such as when] in worldly conventions it is said “I” or “self,” when [it is] analyzed by the seven types of reasoning,<sup>95</sup> it is not found. Thereby self, I, person, etc., [being] merely dependently imputed, are established as conventional.<sup>96</sup>

This approach demonstrates that like Tsongkhapa and many other Mādhyamikas (including such seminal Indian thinkers as Nāgārjuna), Gorampa sees the work done by Madhyamaka reasoning as actually contributing and leading to the understanding of the imputed, relative existence of phenomena on the conventional level. The difference between him and Tsongkhapa lies primarily

94. *'jig rten gyis tha snyad du sa bon las myu gu skye ba bden zhes pa'i don skye tshul mtha bzhir rnam par dpyad pa na ma rnyed pa'i tshe sa bon las myu gu skye ba de'ang ma dpyad pa'i ngor bden par snang ba tsam yin gyi dpyad na bden par med pa'i tshogs pa yin pas sgyu ma la sogs pa bzhin du brten nas btags pa tsam du grub. Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning, 334.*

95. See note 78.

96. *'jig rten gyi tha snyad du nga'o bdag go // zhes gang zag bden pa'i tha snyad byed pa'i don la rigs pa rnam pa bdun gyis btsal ba'i tshe ma rnyed pas nga dang / bdag dang skyes bu sogs brten nas btags pa tsam gyis kun rdzob tu grub. Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning, 336.*

in how they interpret functioning of that reasoning—as only not finding phenomena or as also negating them.

Despite the crucial role played by reasoning in the process of contemplation of reality, that process is not limited to analytical meditation alone. To advance on this path, reasoning must be combined with stabilizing meditation, which leads to the union of calm abiding and special insight conceptually realizing emptiness. And with maturation, this approach eventually culminates in the direct realization of reality. Gorampa addresses several ways of progressing in this process that do not necessarily include the gradual negation of the four extremes. In particular, when discussing meditation on special insight after calm abiding has been accomplished, he outlines three approaches: simultaneous, gradual, and the one that is based on quintessential instructions.

In the simultaneous approach (*cig car 'jug pa*), one uses reasoning establishing the selflessness of phenomena for also establishing the selflessness of persons, and vice versa. One starts by analyzing any person or phenomenon with one type of Madhyamaka reasoning, and in conclusion does not find it. Then, by using the same reasoning, one turns to analyzing all other apparent phenomena, and having not found them either, places one's mind one-pointedly in the state of nonfindability. This leads to eventually achieving the union of calm abiding and special insight qualified by the ability to stay in such a state for as long as one wishes.<sup>97</sup>

In the gradual approach (*rim gyis 'jug pa*), by first using reasoning establishing the selflessness of persons, one does not find the self of persons, and subsequently places mind in that state of nonfindability. Next, by using reasoning negating partless atoms, one does not find external phenomena and places mind in that

97. *Ibid.*, 385.

state. Then, by thinking that since the apprehended (i.e., external phenomena) does not exist, its apprehender (i.e., subjective minds) does not exist either, one does not find the apprehender, and places mind in that state. Finally, one realizes that the non-dual consciousness devoid of the apprehended and apprehender is free from proliferations of the four extremes, and places mind in that state.<sup>98</sup>

In the approach where one meditates by putting together essentials of quintessential instructions (*man ngag gi gnad bsdus te bsgom pa*), with the examples of dreams and illusion one understands all appearances as mind and illusion, respectively. Next, with the examples of a butter lamp, a mirror, etc., one establishes that illusion as dependent origination. Having understood that dependent origination too as inexpressible, one places mind in that state. This leads to eventually reaching the path of seeing where one generates the stainless exalted wisdom (*zag pa med pa'i ye shes*).<sup>99</sup>

Whichever approach is chosen, it starts with conceptual analysis—which in the last case does not even involve Madhyamaka reasoning—followed by dwelling in the state of nonfindability and culminating in the nonconceptual realization of reality or freedom from proliferations.

Unpacking the meaning of the term “freedom from proliferations,” Gorampa writes that “proliferations” refers not only to truly existent things (*bden pa'i dngos po*) but to all signs of negative and positive phenomena that mind engages in and diffuses toward (*blo 'jug cing 'phro ba dgag sgrub kyi chos kyi mtshan ma thams cad*). “Freedom” refers to the utter nonfindability in terms of being free [even] from mere negative and positive phenomena (*dgag sgrub kyi*

98. Ibid., 386.

99 Ibid.

*chos tsam dang bral ba'i ci yang ma rnyed pa nyid*), transcendence beyond the objects of functioning of examples, sounds, and minds (*dpe dang sgra dang blo'i spyod yul las 'das pa*).<sup>100</sup>

When addressing realization of freedom from proliferations in general, without making divisions into metaphorical and real ultimates, Gorampa writes that on the Mahāyāna paths of accumulation and preparation, freedom from proliferations where all four extremes are negated is understood through a generic image (*don spyi'i tshul gyis*), while on the Mahāyāna path of seeing it is understood directly (*mngon sum du*).<sup>101</sup> He further describes it as

the object of the profound mind, the final consciousness—the perfection of wisdom. This is because [it is] realized through a generic [image] by a worldly conceptual mind, an inferential cognition searching for the finality, and realized through individual self-cognition by the nonconceptual mind of the meditative equipoise of āryas.<sup>102</sup>

Although in this passage Gorampa uses the word “object,” he does so only metaphorically, because he also explains that if the actual

100. *Ibid.*, 93–94.

101. *Freedom from Extremes*, 226–227. Cf. also the following statement by a leading contemporary Sakya scholar, Khenpo Apé Yönten Zangpo (*mkhan po a pad yon tan bzang po*, 1927–2010): “The second path is the path of application, which refers to the mind that meditates on emptiness or selflessness. At this stage, we do not yet have the actual realization of emptiness or selflessness; however, we have a thought or a concept of selflessness. Actually, when we consider this thought or idea, we work with it, meditate on it. This is known as the path of application.” Khenpo Appé, “The Five Paths to Enlightenment,” in Migmar Tseten, *Treasures of the Sakya Lineage* (Boston: Shambhala, 2008), 141.

102. *blo zab mo shes pa rnams kyi mthar thug pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i yul te 'jig rten pa'i rtog bcas kyi blo mthar thug tshol ba'i rjes dpag gis spyi'i tshul du rtogs pa dang 'phags pa'i mnyam bzhag rnam par mi rtog pa'i blos so so rang gis rig pa'i tshul gyis rtogs pa'i phyir*. *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 96.



freedom from proliferations could be taken as an object by either conceptual thinking or experience (*rtog pa dang myong bas yul du byas*), it would not go beyond being a generic image or a thing (*don spyi dang dngos po*).<sup>103</sup>

Differentiating between conceptually realized reality and directly realized reality, he calls the former “ultimate in terms of teachings” (*bstan pa don dam*) and the latter “ultimate in terms of realization” (*rtogs pa don dam*). While the former is realized by the mind of rational consciousness of ordinary beings by way of having expressions (*so so skye bo'i rigs shes kyi blos brjod pa dang bcas pa'i tshul gyis rtogs pa*), the latter is realized by the meditative equipoise of āryas in an inexpressible way (*'phags pa'i mnyam gzhaq gis brjod du med pa'i tshul gyis rtogs pa*).<sup>104</sup>

Gorampa mentions that although according to Svātantrika texts the former is metaphorical (*rnam grans pa*) and the latter is nonmetaphorical (*rnam grans ma yin pa*), according to Prāsaṅgika both are the genuine ultimate reality (*don dam bden pa mtshan nyid pa*) within the twofold division into conventional and ultimate realities.<sup>105</sup> Explaining why Prāsaṅgikas do not make that twofold division of the ultimate, Gorampa writes that when ordinary beings determine the ultimate by rational consciousness analyzing

103. Ibid., 103. He likewise explains that according to Candrakīrti, the ultimate reality is defined as the “found object which is found by the correct seeing that finds the entity of things” (*mthong ba yang dag pas dngos po'i ngo bo rnyed pa'i rnyed yul*). But regarding the way of finding this “entity of things,” he explains that it consists *not* of actually finding an established entity of things, but of not seeing or observing the entity of things as any extremes of proliferations of existence, nonexistence, etc. (Ibid., 137). In other words, it refers to not finding any entity of/or anything at all. This is similar to his argument in *Rays of Light of the Perfect View*, 628, that at the time of searching by reasoning, one does not find any extremes of existence, nonexistence, being empty, not being empty, etc., and that nonfindability is called on the conventional level “Madhyamaka view,” while in fact, no view at all has been established.

104. *Thorough Clarification of Definitive Meaning*, 46.

105 Ibid.

the mode of being, they presume (*rlom*) that they are determining the ultimate reality that exists within the scope of seeing of āryas, and thus they apply the convention “realization of ultimate reality” to their realization of it. Because, according to Prāsaṅgikas, in such context definitions, divisions, etc., of the ultimate have to be posited as if one were positing the actual ultimate reality within the scope of seeing of āryas, they do not make the twofold division.<sup>106</sup> In other words, Prāsaṅgikas here assume the position of ordinary beings (who might be Prāsaṅgikas as well) who, as nonāryas, are not able to distinguish the ultimate they determine conceptually and the ultimate āryas realize directly.

This interpretation of the conceptually realized ultimate reality does not bring it any closer to the ultimate reality realized directly. This explains why overall, Gorampa prefers to distinguish between the actual and the concordant ultimate reality or freedom from proliferations, arguing that the actual freedom from proliferations of the four extremes is realized by the meditative equipoise of āryas, while the concordant is realized by the rational consciousness analyzing the finality.<sup>107</sup> In terms of the two realities, freedom from proliferations experienced by the meditative equipoise of āryas by way of vanishing dualistic appearances (*'phags pa'i mnyam gzhas gis gnyis snang nub pa'i tshul gyis nyams su myong bya'i spros bral*) is the ultimate reality, while *all* objects and subjects of dualistic appearances are the conventional reality.<sup>108</sup> Thus, although a provisional distinction is made into two types of the ultimate—the metaphorical ultimate (*rnam grangs pa'i don dam*) or concordant ultimate (*don dam rjes mthun pa*) and the nonmetaphorical ultimate (*rnam grangs ma yin pa'i don dam*) or

106. *Ibid.*, 136.

107. *Ibid.*, 176.

108. *Ibid.*, 58.

real ultimate (*don dam mtshan nyid pa*)—only this latter type of emptiness is the ultimate reality.<sup>109</sup> Because emptiness realized by minds engaged in Madhyamaka analysis is an object of conceptual, dualistic thinking, this concordant ultimate is subsumed under the category of conventional—not ultimate—reality. Only directly realized emptiness is the actual ultimate reality.

### CONTEMPLATING DIFFERENCES DIFFERENTLY

How substantial are the differences between the two rival systems outlined above? Do their distinct interpretive approaches deal with different ways of contemplating reality? And if so, should the results of that contemplation necessarily be different? To address these and other related questions, I've put the key components of Tsongkhapa's and Gorampa's positions side by side (p. 219).

These points of contention are no doubt substantial and reflect the profoundly different philosophical outlooks of the two thinkers. It is clear, for example, that the distinction between negation of true existence of phenomena versus negation of phenomena themselves is crucial for Tsongkhapa, who thinks that the intrusion of ultimate reasoning into the realm of conventional phenomena undermines their validity. This renders it impossible for him to claim that one has to refute referents of *all* conceptual minds. Furthermore, his acceptance of the conceptually realized emptiness of true existence as the real ultimate makes it impossible to claim that such emptiness should be negated. Because Gorampa, in contrast, thinks that objects of all conceptual minds have to

109. *Freedom from Extremes*, 210–217. See also *Elimination of Bad Views*, 613.

Table 1 INTERPRETIVE POSITIONS OF  
TSONGKHAPA AND GORAMPA

| <i>Points of contention</i>                | <i>Tsongkhapa</i>                       | <i>Gorampa</i>                      |
|--|---|-------------------------------------|
| choosing a specific object of negation     | indispensable                           | unnecessary                         |
| object of negation by reasoning            | true existence                          | all phenomena                       |
| true existence                             | most subtle object of negation          | only the first of the four extremes |
| negation of true existence                 | ultimate mode of being                  | coarse selflessness                 |
| subsequent to negation of true existence   | retain its mode of apprehension         | eventually negate it                |
| conceptually understood ultimate           | real/actual                             | metaphorical/<br>concordant         |
| real ultimate                              | object                                  | total nonfindability                |
| realization of the ultimate                | subjective mind realizing its object    | mind not apprehending any objects   |
| negation of conventionalities by reasoning | undermines their correct understanding  | helps understand them correctly     |
| function of Madhyamaka reasoning           | not finding, yet not negating phenomena | not finding = negating phenomena    |

be negated in order to eliminate concepts, he favors negating all phenomena by reasoning, and sees cultivation of the realization of emptiness of true existence as insufficient for achieving the intended result of the Mahāyāna path—buddhahood. Because of his emphasis on the contexts in which negations and affirmations are made, Gorampa does not see this approach as undermining the understanding of either conventional phenomena or the emptiness of true existence.

Although I could go deeper into exploring connections between Tsongkhapa's and Gorampa's interpretations of the process of contemplation of reality and their broader philosophical positions, this is not my objective. Instead, I want to revisit the distinction I made earlier between the practical and descriptive levels, arguing that many of the above differences pertain to the descriptive level of articulating the process of realization of reality and are not reflected in the actual practice of its contemplation. I will also argue that although some of those differences—such as Tsongkhapa's insistence on maintaining apprehension of negation of true existence versus Gorampa's insistence on negating it—do bear on the practical level as well, they are not significant enough to prevent followers of the two systems from reaching the same direct realization of ultimate reality.

It bears repeating that despite multiple differences in the ways that Tsongkhapa and Gorampa fit descriptions of the process of contemplation of emptiness into the broader contexts of their systems, the general outlines of that process provided by them are very similar:

- both accept the basic ten grounds–five paths model of the path
- both treat contemplation of emptiness prior to the path of seeing as a conceptual process operating via generic images

- both emphasize the importance of using Madhyamaka reasoning in that process
- both accept the same basic types of reasoning, such as the five great Madhyamaka reasons outlined in the works of Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and other Indian Mādhyamikas
- both argue that those reasons should target the most subtle object of negation grasped by the coemergent ignorance
- both understand the process of contemplating reality as alternations between analytical and stabilizing meditations
- and both believe that conceptual contemplation of reality will eventually result in its direct realization

Within these basic outlines of the path, we also find certain ideas that are very different philosophically, but have no immediate relevance to the actual process of contemplating reality. Consider, for example, the different descriptions of ultimate reality offered by the two thinkers—as an object realized by a subjective mind versus a state that transcends subjects and objects. While philosophically significant, these differences do not affect the actual process of contemplating reality, which, according to both thinkers, involves dualistic subjective-objective appearances in its initial stages, but eventually becomes free from perceiving them. Or consider their different interpretations of the conceptually realized ultimate—as actual versus metaphorical. This difference is not reflected in the actual process of contemplation, which at its conceptual stage perceives the ultimate via a generic image but does not involve any claims about what the ultimate is or isn't.

Even if that is true, how, for example, should we treat Tsongkhapa's insistence on selectively identifying the object of negation and not negating phenomena by reasoning versus Gorampa's proposal to negate everything? Is *this* difference not

reflected on the practical level of contemplating reality? And what about interpreting the lack of true existence as the ultimate mode of being and proposing to retain its apprehension versus relegating it to the status of coarse selflessness and proposing to eventually negate it? We should also think about a possible effect of those different approaches on other dimensions of Buddhist practice: is the cultivation of compassion, for example, not affected by how one understands the function of Madhyamaka reasoning, as the negation of all phenomena—including compassion—versus merely not finding them? To answer these complicated questions, let us look closer at how the two thinkers approach the process of contemplation of emptiness. In particular, let us compare its interpretation by Tsongkhapa as meditation on the negation of true existence with its interpretation by Gorampa as the gradual negation of the four extremes (which, it should be remembered, is just one among several possible approaches he addresses).

Arguing against negation of all modes of apprehension, Tsongkhapa proposes to negate only the apprehension of phenomena as truly existent. He also considers true existence to be the most subtle object of negation, no matter what it is imputed onto (or negated with respect to)—pots, persons, existence, or emptiness of true existence itself. He consequently thinks that mind apprehending the lack of that object of negation apprehends the most subtle mode of being, and therefore neither it nor its object should be negated. So far, he appears to be very different from Gorampa, who does not treat true existence as the most subtle object of negation, does not treat the lack of true existence as the most fundamental mode of being, and proposes to eventually negate the negation of true existence itself. But let us recollect now that Tsongkhapa also argues that true existence is the very mode in which all phenomena always appear to mind

prior to direct realization of emptiness, and it is *this very mode of appearance* of phenomena that should be targeted by Madhyamaka reasoning.

One might agree or disagree with Tsongkhapa that an overly broad identification of the object of negation can affect the way conventional phenomena are approached *after* the deconstructive process has taken place, but how can it affect the deconstructive process *when* it is taking place? That process consists of identifying the mode of appearance of phenomena to ordinary consciousness, and then utilizing Madhyamaka reasoning, which uses such concepts as “The sprout is empty of true existence because of being dependently originated” and not such concepts as “I am going to negate true existence of the sprout and not the sprout itself.” If one has to identify in one’s experience and target with reasoning the very way phenomena appear to consciousness—including sensory consciousnesses that do not operate with words and concepts at all—then *on that very occasion* what difference does it make whether the object of negation is called “phenomena” or “true existence,” and whether the deconstructive process is identified as “negation of phenomena” or “negation of true existence of phenomena”?

Gorampa does disagree with Tsongkhapa’s claim that the apprehension of true existence is the most fundamental type of grasping. But he also believes that Madhyamaka reasoning targets the very way phenomena appear to mind. In addition to that, he does not see the negation of true existence as problematic in itself, and treats it as the first step in the process of gradually negating the four extremes. Taken together, these elements of the positions of the two thinkers demonstrate that despite different descriptive strategies, on the practical level they agree with regard to what is targeted by Madhyamaka reasoning in the initial stages of



contemplation of reality—the mode of appearance of phenomena as truly existent.

Where Tsongkhapa and Gorampa appear to be moving in opposite directions is with regard to what should be done next with consciousness perceiving truthlessness. Tsongkhapa proposes to maintain its mode of apprehension. He also argues that when grasping at the true existence of truthlessness arises, one should negate it by once again applying Madhyamaka reasoning. After that, as before, one has to maintain apprehension of truthlessness, and when the need arises, again resort to Madhyamaka reasoning, etc. According to him, whether one conceptually realizes emptiness anew or does so for the second, third, or hundredth time, the object itself—lack of true existence—does not change. In contrast, Gorampa proposes that after truth has been negated, one has to use Madhyamaka reasoning again in order to negate truthlessness itself. What one will be perceiving as a result of that negation is the lack of truthlessness. The object itself, therefore, should change. Thus, on the surface, Tsongkhapa and Gorampa propose to do two contradictory things: maintaining versus destroying the apprehension of the lack of true existence.

However, we should recollect that according to Tsongkhapa, even when true existence has been conceptually negated, that lack of true existence will still appear as true (although it will not necessarily be apprehended as such). Thus, as before, what Madhyamaka reasoning will be targeting at this stage is the very mode of appearing of that lack of true existence. As a result, similar to not finding conventional phenomena when negating their true existence by Madhyamaka reasoning, when the true existence of truthlessness is negated, truthlessness itself will not be

found either.<sup>110</sup> For Gorampa too, what Madhyamaka reasoning will be targeting subsequent to the negation of the first extreme is truthlessness as it appears to ordinary consciousness. There is no practical difference between their positions in this respect.

The same applies to the last two steps in Gorampa's gradual model of negating the four extremes when compared to Tsongkhapa's model of negating only true existence. While Gorampa proposes to negate both existence and nonexistence, and neither existence nor nonexistence, Tsongkhapa is against negating them at face value. But the actual process of negation advocated by the two thinkers remains the same: applying Madhyamaka reasoning, which targets the very mode of appearance of both existence and nonexistence, etc., and reaching the state of their nonfindability/negation. In fact, the very reason both thinkers propose to use Madhyamaka reasoning again after the respective negations have been achieved is identical—to target and destroy the very *way* those negations appear to mind. Whether their nonfindability is interpreted as their negation per se or not is not reflected in the actual deconstructive process.

Tsongkhapa does argue that when *subsequent to* the realization of truthlessness, a mind arises thinking “truthlessness” or “truthlessness exists,” that mind should not be negated. But such a mind is not involved in the actual process of contemplation of emptiness. Rather, it arises when one has already shifted away from that process. The process itself, as we know, is deconstructive,

110. In *The Key to the Middle Way*, 76, Tenzin Gyamtso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, clarifies this point, explaining that in the case of conceptual realization of emptiness, the emptiness found as a result of ultimate analysis is not the phenomenon that has just been analyzed by ultimate analysis. When emptiness itself becomes an object of ultimate analysis, it is not found either, although the emptiness of that emptiness is found.

consisting of applying Madhyamaka reasoning and reaching negation/nonfindability. Thus, Gorampa would only agree with Tsongkhapa, because *that* context is not the actual process of contemplating reality, but is subsequent to it. According to Gorampa, it is only *during* the actual contemplation of reality that the ideas of “truthlessness,” “truthlessness exists,” and any other ideas have to be negated.

That said, we should not overlook the important fact that Tsongkhapa proposes to maintain the apprehension of the negation of true existence, while Gorampa proposes to negate the negation of true existence itself, then proceed to negating the remaining two extremes. It can be objected, therefore, that the application of Madhyamaka reasoning targeting the mode of appearance of truthlessness subsequent to maintaining the apprehension—possibly for a prolonged period of time—of truthlessness might produce a different practical effect from the application of that reasoning to the mode of appearance of truthlessness which is not preceded by maintaining that apprehension. If we look only at this stage, the difference between the two positions does appear to be substantial. But let’s look again at what happens later in this negative process.

Tsongkhapa’s project of maintaining the apprehension of truthlessness consists of negating true existence and sustaining the vision of truthlessness, interspersed with the negation through Madhyamaka reasoning of the most subtle mode of appearance of the object of negation (true existence) whenever grasping at it occurs. Gorampa’s project of negating extremes consists of reaching the state of nonfindability through negating the very mode of appearance of the lack of true existence, etc., and then familiarizing oneself with that state. Since Gorampa argues that even after one has reached the path of seeing one has to use Madhyamaka reasoning whenever grasping

at extremes arises, it goes without saying that this applies to what happens before the path of seeing as well. Consequently, the contemplative process advocated by Gorampa consists of negating all four extremes and subsequently dwelling in that state, interspersed with the negation of extremes through Madhyamaka reasoning whenever apprehension of any of them arises again.

The basic outlines of the two models can be presented as follows:

Table 2 CONTEMPLATIVE MODELS OF TSONGKHAPA  
AND GORAMPA

| <i>Contemplative process</i>  | <i>Tsongkhapa's model</i>   | <i>Gorampa's model</i>   |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| <i>Initiating the process</i> | using Madhyamaka reasoning resulting in the negation of true existence—the most subtle object of negation | using Madhyamaka reasoning resulting in the negation of the four extremes—the most subtle object of negation |
| <i>Continuing the process</i> | conceptual meditation on emptiness understood as maintaining the mode of apprehension of truthlessness    | conceptual meditation on emptiness understood as familiarization with the state free from the four extremes  |
| <i>Sustaining the process</i> | using Madhyamaka reasoning whenever grasping at extremes occurs again                                     | using Madhyamaka reasoning whenever grasping at extremes occurs again  |

Put side by side, Tsongkhapa's proposal to maintain the apprehension of truthlessness and Gorampa's proposal to knock it down and move to familiarization with the freedom from the four extremes do not appear dramatically different. After all, according to either model, one starts by using Madhyamaka reasoning, using it until one reaches the state of nonfindability/negation of the most subtle object of negation identified directly in the way phenomena appear to mind, then maintains/familiarizes oneself with that state, then again resorting to reasoning when grasping at extremes occurs. Although Gorampa does not emphasize sustaining the mode of apprehension of truthlessness, he does emphasize familiarization with what he treats as the most advanced conceptual negative state reached through application of Madhyamaka reasoning. Tsongkhapa likewise emphasizes familiarization with the most advanced conceptual negative state reached through application of Madhyamaka reasoning, although he identifies that state as the negation of true existence and interprets familiarization with it as maintaining its mode of apprehension. Note too that although he interprets the four extremes differently from Gorampa and does not propose to negate truthlessness, etc., at face value, he will only agree that neither truth, nor truthlessness, nor both, nor neither can be found under Madhyamaka reasoning.

I should also reiterate that my primary concern here is not with the two approaches' differences or similarities per se, but with whether both of them can result in the eventual destruction of concepts obstructing the direct realization of ultimate reality. In my opinion, the foregoing analysis leaves no ground for reasonably claiming that this is not possible. There is no reason to think that if someone follows Gorampa's lead in contemplating reality, that person will accomplish less or more than someone following Tsongkhapa's lead. Consequently, it is safe to argue that the doors

to reaching the same level of realization—possibly in the same period of time—are open to followers of both thinkers.

It is also worth noting that although in the context of the gradual negation of the four extremes Gorampa does not advocate maintaining continuity of the states of negations of the first through third extremes, he does not deny that possibility either. And generally speaking, it is not unlikely that prior to negating truthlessness one might place one's mind on it for a while, even if just in order to better familiarize oneself with what is to be negated next. (As an analogy, we might think of focusing on a target for a while in order to make shooting at it more precise.) The same applies to the next two negations. Were one to follow such an approach to negating the four extremes, it would bring one even closer to Tsongkhapa's position. The possibility of doing so looks even more plausible if we recollect the other aforementioned contemplative models outlined by Gorampa. As we remember, in the context of the gradual approach, for example, he argues that when searching for and not finding through reasoning the self of persons, external phenomena, or subjective mind, one dwells in the state of nonfindability after each successive negation. There is no reason why one cannot do the same in the process of the gradual negation of the four extremes as well.

We should not be misled by the fact that Gorampa points out specific Madhyamaka reasoning negating the second through fourth extremes, while Tsongkhapa proposes to negate with all Madhyamaka reasonings only what Gorampa counts as the first extreme. This is because for both thinkers, Madhyamaka reasonings target the very way phenomena appear to the consciousness of ordinary beings. Most of those reasonings come from the same Madhyamaka texts (such as Nāgārjuna's *Wisdom: Root Stanzas on Madhyamaka*), and the primary difference between the two

thinkers here lies not in *which* reasonings they propose to apply, but *how they describe* functions of those reasonings. Now we know that according to Tsongkhapa, ordinary beings are unable to experientially distinguish between true existence and mere existence. Consequently, as long as those reasonings target the very mode of appearance of, say, production to ordinary consciousness, at the moment of the actual application of reasoning it does not matter whether one proceeds to negate the production of phenomena different from their causes or the production of phenomena *truly* different from their causes. Such differences, once again, pertain only to the descriptive level, and not to the practical level of the application of Madhyamaka reasoning in contemplative practice.

Let me emphasize again that this study is not concerned with whether Gorampa was right in his approach to the negation of the second through fourth extremes or whether Tsongkhapa was right in his proposal to negate true existence only. What I am concerned with here is that despite these differences in the two approaches, they both allow one to reach the same direct realization of ultimate reality when put into contemplative practice. And when that stage has been achieved, the person will be able to decide for him or herself what is right and how to proceed further. This is because, according to both thinkers, at that stage all intellectually acquired ignorance (and, according to Gorampa, all afflictions too) have been abandoned.

Going back to the analogy of demolishing a wall, Gorampa and Tsongkhapa can be likened to those who are proposing to demolish the same type of wall by using similar tools, yet applying them with a slightly different “rhythm,” then describing the process differently. To further extend this analogy, we can think of them as proposing to demolish a multilayered wall. Both thinkers propose to move gradually, starting from the first layer, then moving to

the second, etc., but describe the process differently. Tsongkhapa assigns number 1 to the whole wall and calls the process “destroying wall 1.” Gorampa outlines four layers, assigns number 1 only to the first layer, and calling the first step “destroying wall 1,” proposes to move next to “destroying walls 2–4.” Both eventually destroy the whole walls.

Remember, the gradual negation of the four extremes is not the only possible approach to the contemplation of reality according to Gorampa. He treats as equally valid the simultaneous approach that consists of analyzing any chosen phenomenon with Madhyamaka reasoning, not finding it, and then turning the same reasoning at all other phenomena. Having not found them either, one places mind one-pointedly in that state of nonfindability. This approach comes very close to that of Tsongkhapa, who also argues that when analyzed with Madhyamaka reasoning, no phenomena are found, and that subsequent to that, one has to maintain apprehension of their emptiness. If we agree that the difference in terminology—maintaining apprehension of emptiness versus placing mind in the state of nonfindability—pertains to different ways of describing the same process, and if we also agree that Tsongkhapa, like Gorampa, proposes to target the very way phenomena appear to ordinary consciousness, then we can safely argue that in this context, the two thinkers advocate virtually the same process.

Now even if one agrees with the claim that followers of both thinkers can reach the same *conceptual* realization of ultimate reality, one can still object to my claim that they can reach the same *nonconceptual* realization of it. After all, has Tsongkhapa not repeatedly insisted that if the object of negation is not correctly identified and everything is negated by Madhyamaka reasoning, that will result in the rejection of the validity of conventional



phenomena, resulting in a fall into nihilism? Has he not argued, for example, that if a person believes he has negated compassion by using ultimate analysis, that person will end up deemphasizing the cultivation of compassion on the conventional level? Consequently, even if it is granted that followers of both thinkers follow similar processes of contemplating reality, when they emerge from that state, Gorampa's followers should fall into deprecating compassion, and their further progress in contemplating emptiness too will be blocked. This is because according to Tibetan thinkers, it is only by practicing *both* method and wisdom that one can progress on the Buddhist path in general, and reach the direct realization of reality in particular.

My answer to this challenge is that Tsongkhapa's rhetoric against negating phenomena by reasoning is best approached not as descriptive but as proscriptive. In other words, it should be seen as a warning against what *might* happen to those who do not understand the relationship between not finding phenomena through Madhyamaka reasoning and positing them on the conventional level. Perhaps Tsongkhapa was speaking from experience and knew some cases when that actually happened. But his warnings against an overly broad identification of the object of negation should not be seen as reflecting either what usually happens or what necessarily has to happen. Rather, they should be seen as the proposal to correctly articulate on the descriptive level what one is going to negate or has negated.<sup>111</sup> Consequently, those warnings amount not to the practical level of identifying

111. This also explains why Tsongkhapa's usual way of objecting to the negation of phenomena by reasoning is that one should not *understand* or *interpret* their nonfindability as their negation.

the object of negation in one's experience, but to the way that identification is interpreted.<sup>112</sup>

Here, it is also worth recalling Tsongkhapa's contention that conventional phenomena and their emptiness are posited by two different types of consciousness, and that similar to the eye consciousness not finding or observing sounds because they are not its appropriate objects, a mind observing emptiness does not negate, but rather does not find or observe conventional phenomena, because they are not its objects.<sup>113</sup> This position on the process of negation simply does not allow for conventional phenomena to be negated by Madhyamaka reasoning, allowing only for the *interpretation* of that process as the negation of phenomena.<sup>114</sup> This is similar to one being able to mistakenly claim that he negated sounds by the eye consciousness, but not being capable of actually doing that.

112. If we treat Tsongkhapa's objection to negating phenomena by reasoning as a proposal to correctly articulate the process of negation on the descriptive level rather than as an instruction to separate true existence from existence on the practical level at the beginning of contemplation of emptiness, this can also help clarify the apparent ambiguity of Tsongkhapa's position regarding identification of the object of negation pointed out by Thupten Jinpa (see note 45).

113. See p. 174.

114. From this perspective, even those passages which seem to imply the possibility of the negation of phenomena by reasoning—where, for example, Tsongkhapa outlines misunderstandings of emptiness which occur due to “the negation of everything by reasoning, without differentiating existence and nonexistence of nature from mere existence and nonexistence” (p. 192 and note 56)—can be read only as hypothetical statements (what Tibetans would call “apprehension of analytical extremes,” *brtag pa mtha' bzung*). If taken literally, such passages would contradict Tsongkhapa's own words: “Thus, among objects of coemergent minds there are two [types]: those which can and cannot be negated by reasoning. The objects of the coemergent valid cognitions which posit these forms, sounds, etc., exist conventionally, and therefore are not negated by reasoning (*de'i phyir lhan skyes kyi blo'i yul la rigs pas dgag nus mi nus gnyis yod de / gzugs sgra la sogs pa 'di dag rnam par 'jog pa'i tha snyad pa'i tshad ma lhan skyes 'di dag gi yul ni tha snyad du yod pas rigs pas 'gog pa min no*). *Great Stages of the Path*, 633.

As for Gorampa's position, as we have seen, all he says is that conventionalities have to be negated by reasoning in the context of positing emptiness, and that the contexts of negating and positing phenomena should not be mixed. How does this imply deprecation of phenomena? Thus, I see no good reason to think that what is supposed to happen to practitioners of the two traditions subsequent to the conceptual realization of ultimate reality is different.

Both the Geluk and Sakya traditions have produced excellent scholars and contemplatives who utilized Tsongkhapa's and Gorampa's versions of contemplation of reality in actual practice. I had the great fortune of meeting and studying with some of them. Although measuring the quality and depth of the meditative experiences and realizations of others is a tricky and questionable enterprise, on a personal and impressionistic note I should say that if one observes the lives of adherents of the Geluk and Sakya traditions—as I did by studying and interacting with them on a virtually daily basis for many years—one will have to search hard to find among them a serious scholar or practitioner who would deprecate practices related to conventional reality. On the contrary, followers of both traditions emphasize the importance of cultivating compassion, mind of awakening, etc., in their writings and teachings, and neither group seems to display more or less compassion, generosity, or any of the other major virtues, than the other.<sup>115</sup> Were we to accept Tsongkhapa's rhetoric wholesale, we would also have to either accept that Sakya contemplatives

115. In particular, I met outstanding scholars and practitioners—such as the late Kirti Tsenzhab Rinpoché (*kirti mtshan zhabs rin po che*, 1926–2006) and the late Khenchen Künga Wangchuk (*mkhan chen kun dga' dbang phyug*, 1921–2008)—who, besides other subjects, taught me Tsongkhapa's and Gorampa's approaches to contemplation of reality and embodied those virtues in their own words and deeds.

denigrate conventional phenomena or that they do not put into practice the very approach to contemplating reality they advocate.

One of the main factors that allows me to claim the compatibility of Tsongkhapa's and Gorampa's approaches to contemplation of reality on the practical level is that both of them propose to target by reasoning the very mode of appearance of phenomena to ordinary mind. Gorampa is unequivocal on this point when he argues that Madhyamaka reasoning negates everything that is apprehended by conceptuality. Tsongkhapa's position, on the other hand, *might* appear as a proposal to leave mere appearances aside and focus only on an object of negation separate from them. Nevertheless, I have argued that this interpretation is incorrect, and that in fact, far from proposing to somehow separate the object of negation from what is given to ordinary beings in everyday experience, Tsongkhapa insists on identifying the object of negation in that very experience itself. In my opinion, it is this very feature that brings his position so close to that of Gorampa. Were this not the case, my whole argument about the two systems providing efficient means of reaching the same realization of reality despite their different conceptual frameworks would collapse. Because this point is so crucial to my interpretation, I am including some writings on the topic from a few prominent thinkers of the Geluk tradition.

Nothing could serve this purpose better than the *Liberation Held in Hand* (*Rnam grol lag bcang*), a text based on the record of the teaching on the Stages of the Path (*lam rim*) system by a sectarian Geluk thinker, Pabongkha Jampa Tendzin Trinlé Gyamtso (*pha bong kha byams pa bstan 'dzin 'phrin las rgya mtsho*, 1878–1941).<sup>116</sup>

116. The text was compiled by Trijang Lopzang Yeshe Tendzin Gyamtso (*khri byang blo bzang ye shes bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho*, 1901–1981), who was Pabongkha's disciple and also served as the junior tutor of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama.

While using such standard reasons for the importance of identifying the object of negation as not being able to hit a target without first identifying it, Pabongkha proceeds to argue that the object of negation is in fact not separate from what is given to us in ordinary experience. He supports this claim by citing a seminal Geluk thinker the First Penchen Lama, Lopzang Chökyi Gyeltsen (*paṅ chen blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan*, 1570–1662):

There is no mode of appearance of the object of negation different from this current mode of emergence of appearances to us, ordinary beings; because all consciousnesses in the mental continua of ordinary beings are polluted by ignorance, whatever object appears, it appears as true.<sup>117</sup>

Commenting on this passage, Pabongkha says:

Whatever phenomena now appear to us, ordinary beings—self, the aggregates, mountains, fences, houses, etc.—[they] manifest exclusively [as] the mixed appearances of conventional appearance and appearance as true. Without [us being able to make] distinction into “just this part appears as true and just this does not appear as true,” [they] appear as true from all parts.

117. *des na rang cag so skye la da lta'i snang ba 'char tshul 'di las gzhan pa'i rtags kyi dgag bya'i snang tshul gzhan med de / so skye'i rgyud kyi shes pa thams cad ma rig pas bslad pa'i dbang gis yul ci snang yang bden par snang ba'i phyir. Lamp for Further Illumination: Extensive Explanation of the Root [Text] of Mahāmudrā of the Oral Tradition of the Precious Geden Kagyü (Dge ldan bka' brgyud rin po che'i bka' srol phyag rgya chen po'i rtsa ba rgyas par bshad pa yang gsal sgron me)*, Collected Works (Gsung 'bum) of Blo-bzan-chos-kyi-rgyal-mtshan; reproduced from prints from the bkra shis lhun po blocks), vol. 3 (New Delhi, India, 1932), 134. (Where Lopzang Chökyi Gyeltsen's text reads *yul ci snang yang*, Pabongkha's text reads *yul snang ci snang yang*; the meaning is not altered). Note that Lopzang Chökyi Gyeltsen mentions that *all* appearances in the mental streams of ordinary beings (i.e., those who have not yet achieved the path of seeing where emptiness is realized directly) appear as true.

Thus, whatever appearances manifest to our, ordinary beings', minds, there is not a single mode of appearance of any of them that is not mixed with the object of negation. Consequently, this very way of appearance to us is the mode of appearance of the object of negation, or [in other words] the mode of appearance of true establishment.<sup>118</sup>

Pabongkha proceeds to warn against leaving these appearances as they are, and instead toiling to find the object of negation elsewhere. He supports this warning by citing another seminal Geluk thinker, Changkya Rölpe Dorjé (*lcang kya rol pa'i rdo rje*, 1717–1786), who in the following passage likens emptiness to an old mother:

Apparently, nowadays some of our clear minded [scholars]  
 Through their adherence to terms “self-sufficiency,” “true  
 establishment,” etc.,  
 Leave these quivering appearances as they are  
 And search for something with horns to negate.

118. *de lta rang cag tha mal pa rnams la bdag dang chung po ri ra ba khang khyim sogs chos gang dang gang snang yang kun rdzob kyi snang ba dang bden snang dres pa'i snang ba 'ba' zhig 'char te cha 'di tsam zhig bden par snang la / 'di tsam zhig bden par mi snang zer rgyu'i dbye ba med par cha thams cad nas bden par snang bas na rang re so skye'i blo la snang ba gang shar thams cad dgag bya dang ma 'dres pa'i snang tshul gcig kyang med pas / rang rer snang lugs 'di ga rang dgag bya' i snang tshul lam bden grub kyi snang tshul yin. Essence of Ambrosia Instructions Condensing the Pith of All Excellent Pronouncements: Record of the Experiential Instructions on the Stages of the Path to Awakening, the Pith of the Heart of the Unequaled King of Dharma, the Complete and Unmistaken Profound Practical Instructions Entrusting Liberation [as if] to Be Held in One's Hand (Rnam grol lag bcangs su gtoḍ pa'i man ngag zab mo tshang la ma nor ba mtshungs med chos kyi rgyal po'i thugs bcud byang chub lam gyi rim pa'i nyams khrid kyi zin bris gsung rab kun gyi bcud bsdu gdams ngag bdud rtsi'i snying po; Lhasa: Ser gtsug nang bstan dpe rnying 'tshol bsdu phyogs sgrig khang, 2009), 688–689. Translation: Pabongka Rinpoche (tr. Michael Richards), *Liberation on the Palm of Your Hand* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1997), 684.*

There is no talk of this palpitation and quivering existing  
 In that unobscured mother's face.  
 There are many explanations that do not penetrate the  
 essential point,  
 Yet I am afraid that the old mother will run away.<sup>119</sup>

What these passages collectively demonstrate is that according to the leading figures of the Geluk world, the identification of the object of negation consists of nothing other than identifying or paying close attention to how phenomena appear to us in ordinary experience. It should be noted that in the Geluk world, Pabongkha was a very popular teacher with multiple followers,<sup>120</sup> which suggests that many Geluk contemplatives adopted and are still using this very type of meditation. The same applies to the thinkers he cites, Lopzang Chökyi Gyeltsen and Changkya. Note too that far from criticizing or abandoning Tsongkhapa's view, those thinkers held it in high esteem, as is clearly demonstrated in their writings. Thus, it is possible to be an ardent follower of Tsongkhapa and yet also hold the view that one should not identify the object of negation elsewhere, but within this very

119. *da lta rang re yi blo gsal 'ga' zhig / tshugs thub bden grub sogs brda' la zhen nas // snang ba ling ling 'di rang sor bzhag nas // dgag rgyu rwa can zhig 'tshol bar snang ste // sgrib bral a ma yi bzhin ras de na // lang lang ling ling 'di yod skad mi 'dug / gnad 'gag ma phig pa'i bshad bshad mang kyang // a ma rgad mo de bros dogs 'duggo. Song of the View (Lta ba'i mgur ma)*, in *The Expanded Redaction of the Complete Works of 'Ju Mi-pham series, The Sde-dge Dgon-chen Prints of the Writings of 'Jam-mgon 'Ju Mi-pham-rgya-mtsho*, vol. 4 (Paro, Bhutan: Lama Ngodrup and Sherab Drimey, 1985), 824. (This version differs only slightly from the one cited by Pabongkha, which reads *brda for brda', ling ling de for ling ling 'di*, and *bshad bshad mang na for bshad bshad mang kyang*.) For translation of the whole *Song of the View*, see Karl Brunnhölzl, *Straight from the Heart: Buddhist Pith Instructions* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2007), 393–397.

120. For a short memoir on Pabongkha's life and teachings, see *Liberation on the Palm of Your Hand*, 10–15.

mode of appearance of things to ordinary consciousness. The fact that writers from different times noticed this points to the long-standing tradition of approaching meditation on emptiness in that way. As we already saw, this is what Tsongkhapa himself was getting at.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that even Gorampa did not criticize Tsongkhapa for treating true existence as something unrelated to ordinary experience. Rather, he criticized him for proposing to stop on the level of its negation without going further to negate the negation itself, etc. This suggests that Gorampa did not have issues with Tsongkhapa's approach to identifying and negating true existence, thereby implicitly endorsing it as a first step in the four-step process of contemplation of emptiness.

My interpretation of the positions of the two thinkers should not be understood as an attempt to reconcile their systems. In fact, I am convinced that their views pertaining to the descriptions of ultimate reality, its realization, and related topics are virtually irreconcilable. It is also clear to me that when interpreted in terms of Gorampa's philosophical outlook, Tsongkhapa's system necessarily must appear as thoroughly flawed and insufficient for realization of the final view of ultimate reality. The same is true for Gorampa's system when interpreted through the lenses of Tsongkhapa's views. Nevertheless, I also think that the foregoing discussion has sufficiently demonstrated that if we take a step back from those interpretive frameworks and focus on the actual processes of contemplating reality proposed by the two thinkers, their systems appear in a very different light. If put into practice, rather than preventing their followers from coming to the same point on the practical level, they allow them to achieve the same realization of reality. From this perspective, the interpretive differences



between the two systems make their practical closeness all the more dramatic.

As I mentioned above, my interpretation of Gorampa's and Tsongkhapa's positions as contradicting each other on the descriptive level but coming to the same point on the practical level resembles Shakya Chokden's interpretation of Alikākāravāda and Niḥsvabhāvavāda. But there is one important difference: while Shakya Chokden admits that Alikākāravāda and Niḥsvabhāvavāda use substantially different approaches to the process of contemplation of reality *and* provide very different descriptions of that process, I argue that Tsongkhapa and Gorampa only provide different descriptions, but advocate very similar and compatible approaches to that process.

Let me now connect my claim that the Geluk and Sakya systems provide equally effective means of realizing ultimate reality with the main topic of this book—the question of achieving the same unmediated mystical experience by using different conditioning processes. My interpretive position can be presented as an argument that the differences between mediating conceptual processes proposed by the two rival systems pertain mostly to the conflicting *descriptions* of those conditioning processes, as well as minor variations in those processes, while on the practical level those processes are equally effective in terms of leading to the same mystical experience of ultimate reality, which is not mediated by any words or concepts when it actually occurs.

## Conclusion and Final Remarks

The overall objective of this study was to connect the Tibetan Buddhist polemics over realization of ultimate reality with contemporary debates regarding mystical experience. I chose to explore realization of ultimate reality because on the one hand in significant ways it resembles the category of unmediated mystical experience, while on the other it challenges and suggests rethinking the very meaning of that category. Correspondingly, I proposed to move beyond the interpretive models used by “constructivists” and “perennialists” in their debates regarding unmediated mystical experience to a different model used by Tibetan thinkers. I demonstrated that according to that model, the direct realization of ultimate reality is not mediated by any concepts or mental constructs at the time of its actual occurrence, but it *is* necessarily mediated by conditioning contemplative processes leading to it. Consequently, I suggested that in order to understand this type of mystical experience we have to shift attention from the resultant experience per se to the deconstructive processes that condition it. It is here, I argued, that we should search for elements responsible for the differences and similarities of experiences of ultimate reality addressed by different traditions. I also proposed to shift focus from the

descriptive to the practical dimensions of rival approaches to those experiences.

In the face of the overwhelming diversity of Buddhist mystical experiences in general, and multiple approaches to realization of ultimate reality in particular, I limited myself to only two rival Tibetan approaches to the process of contemplation of reality, those developed by thinkers of the Geluk and Sakya traditions in the context of Niḥsvabhāvavāda Madhyamaka. I used them in order to demonstrate that despite the apparently irreconcilable philosophical differences between different traditions, if one takes a closer look at the actual processes some of them refer to it is possible to claim the compatibility and similarity of those processes and the sameness of the mystical experiences they propose to achieve as their result. Such an outcome is possible in those cases where it can be demonstrated that the processes leading to mystical experiences are equally effective in terms of deconstructing and destroying hindrances obstructing their achievement.

My approach was influenced by Shakya Chokden's position that despite conflicting interpretations of the nature of ultimate reality and the processes of its realization, certain Buddhist traditions—namely Alikākāravāda and Niḥsvabhāvavāda—equip their followers with effective tools for achieving the *same* experience of ultimate reality. The key feature of Shakya Chokden's position was the disconnection of the descriptive and practical dimensions of contemplation of reality and the argument that because both systems provide effective means of deconstructing concepts preventing one from achieving direct realization of reality, the result of putting those systems into practice should be the same. Partially adapting this approach to my analysis of the Geluk and Sakya systems, I argued that their differences with respect to the processes of realization of ultimate reality pertain primarily to the descriptions

of those processes, while the contemplative processes themselves do not differ significantly enough to prevent their followers from achieving the same realization of reality. In my opinion, both systems refer to similar conditioning processes that can lead to the same mystical experience of reality, but due to divergent philosophical contexts their descriptions of those processes—as well as descriptions of the resultant experience—are different. Thus, basing myself on Shakya Chokden's approach to the positions of Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Alikākāravāda, I argued that *in theory* this is also possible in the case of the Sakya and Geluk traditions.

I recognize there is a conspicuous absence of any attempts to compare examples of living practitioners from the two traditions describing their experiences of ultimate reality. There are several reasons why I did not make such an attempt. First, my objective was not to collect and analyze data from interviews with Buddhist practitioners but to explore *theories* developed by Buddhists for describing, producing, and comparing their mystical experiences. In particular, I wanted to demonstrate a key feature of one such theory—the complex relationship between the descriptive and practical dimensions of the deconstructive process of realization of ultimate reality—showing that different descriptions of that process need not drastically affect the process itself.

Further, it is important to recognize that Buddhist contemplatives are usually very reluctant to report their personal experiences. In the Tibetan Buddhist world in particular, it would be uncommon for someone to claim that he or she achieved the direct realization of ultimate reality by following Niḥsvabhāvavāda Madhyamaka, because this claim would imply the attainment of many other highly advanced qualities, such as freedom from any intellectually acquired ignorance. Regarding the contemplative processes leading to that realization, the way Tibetans I studied

with describe them is by addressing what is said in the texts of such masters as Tsongkhapa and Gorampa—not by describing how *they themselves* put those instructions into practice. This seems to be caused in part by modesty and in part by not wishing to inadvertently show that their own practices disagree with those authoritative texts. It should further be noted that the application of Madhyamaka reasoning in contemplation is a rather elite enterprise open only to those who both know Madhyamaka philosophy and are willing to put it into practice. Thus, to find enough samples on the Sakya and Geluk sides who *both* use such reasoning in contemplative practice *and* are willing to talk about their experiences during that practice would be extremely difficult.

It is worth repeating that this study was not concerned with evaluating the truth claims of any particular tradition or thinker—only with analyzing some contemplative theories advocated by those who uphold those claims. Consequently, raising such questions as, for example, whether it is actually possible to achieve the direct realization of reality by relying on Madhyamaka reasoning would be irrelevant to my task. Equally irrelevant would be the question of whether the ultimate reality as articulated by Niḥsvabhāvavāda is the *actual* reality or not. My objective was different: to show that despite vastly divergent interpretations of the process of realization of reality by the Sakya and Geluk traditions, the contemplative tools provided to attain that realization can result in the *same* mystical experience. Correspondingly, my point was to suggest that if we shift focus from descriptions of mystical experiences by followers of other religious traditions to the meditating, conditioning processes they use in order to produce those experiences, we might discover similar elements at play there as well.

Shifting focus from the analysis of mystical experiences *per se* to the analysis of the processes leading to those mystical experiences can help us understand those experiences *regardless* of our basic assumptions about their nature, and whether we are asserting or denying the possibility of unmediated mystical experience. This refocusing can help clarify the nature of deconstruction, inefability, internalized polemics, and other elements related to the mystical experiences of specific religious traditions. Refocusing is also likely to make generalizing about mysticism and mystical experiences more problematic and less appealing—which is a *good* thing! At the same time, it may result in the discovery of unexpected similarities and parallels, as the analysis of the Sakya and Geluk approaches to the realization of ultimate reality has demonstrated (and which would not be possible were we to focus only on their respective descriptions of the experience of ultimate reality). In particular, it might enrich and problematize our understanding of the nature of (un)mediated mystical experience, paving the way to transcending the Eurocentric framework of the debate on this issue between scholars siding with Katz or Forman.

This is not to say that analyzing mystical experiences themselves is unimportant. Of course it is important! It is especially fruitful if we pay close attention to the descriptive models and presuppositions used by those who have—or aim at having—specific mystical experiences. In particular (as I hope this book has amply demonstrated), learning about unfamiliar models can result in challenging our beliefs in the applicability of certain “Western” models to mystical experiences arising within “non-Western” religious cultures, whether they are based on the assumption of the possibility of the “pure consciousness event” or on the claim that all our experiences are necessarily constructed. Consequently, we

might feel the need to either modify and “tune up” such models or stop using them altogether as general interpretive frameworks aiming at cross-cultural and cross-religious comparisons.

Although this study has emphasized the importance of specific Buddhist theories for analysis of Tibetan Buddhist approaches to mystical experiences, this should not be taken as a suggestion that no non-Buddhist theories can be applied to the study of Buddhism and Buddhist mystical experiences. Nor should it be taken as implying that no etic theories can be adequately used when dealing with emic views. Rather, my point is that learning, paying attention to, and utilizing those emic theories can enrich the field of the study of religion and mysticism. In particular, I believe that Buddhist theories of mind and paths can enrich the understanding of non-Buddhist traditions as well. Learning about the role of conceptuality in reaching nonconceptual states of consciousness or the importance of polemics—especially internalized polemics—in contemplative processes can help better understand the relationship between the philosophical and contemplative dimensions of other religious traditions. Learning about such arguments as Shakya Chokden’s proposal to disconnect the practical and descriptive levels and to pay close attention to the practical level of conditioning processes leading to mystical experiences can also help us to better understand the differences and similarities between diverse perspectives and traditions within the same religion.

This book is not concerned with possible commonalities between Buddhist and non-Buddhist mystical experiences in general or unmediated mystical experience across religious traditions in particular. There was brief mention of worldly paths that Tibetan thinkers take as common to some groups of Buddhist and non-Buddhist contemplatives, but the mental states developed on those paths are clearly conditioned by very specific contemplative

techniques used only in some contemplative systems. Overall, I could not find *unmediated* mystical experiences that, from the Tibetan Buddhist perspective at least, are common to both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. This leads me to conclude that unmediated mystical experiences cannot be used to support an argument for a common core to mystical experiences in general.

Analysis of the direct realization of ultimate reality in terms of the mind and path models used by Tibetan thinkers has demonstrated that it is necessarily conditioned by uniquely Buddhist contemplative techniques. The reason it is difficult to claim the sameness of this particular mystical experience in Buddhism and other religions—unlike its sameness in Alikākāravāda and Niḥsvabhāvavāda, or in the Geluk and Sakya approaches addressed above—is that the latter systems rely on conditioning processes based on reasoning aimed at the *deconstruction* of concepts. As long as it can be demonstrated, at least in theory, that the deconstructive tools they use are equally effective, it is also possible to claim that they can eventually bring about the same mystical experience based on that deconstruction. Such is not the case in those religious systems that provide neither such reasoning nor conditioning processes based on that reasoning. Even in the Tibetan Buddhist context, such an option is open only within the narrow confines of certain traditions.

This is not to say that our research cannot be extended further, and—similar to analyzing common elements in Tibetan approaches to Buddhist mystical experiences—that we should not continue asking whether according to *specific* thinkers, *certain* Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions might not also share *some* mystical experiences in common. As some authors have done already, we might want to focus particularly on the mystical experiences of those Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions that



advocate *deconstructive* contemplative processes as a means of their achievement.<sup>1</sup> We can also explore whether the differences and similarities between different mystical experiences and processes leading to them pertain to the descriptive or practical levels. It is difficult to predict what conclusive results might issue from such a search and what impact it might have on our understanding of the category of mystical experience. But even if it results in demonstrating more diversity than similarities, more plurality than commonality between mystical experiences of different traditions, that in itself might be significant and serve its purpose. Perhaps we will end by concluding that the diversity and plurality of mystical experiences are their primary shared features. Or—and this is not an unlikely outcome either—we might decide to finally part ways with the very notion of mystical experience, questioning its applicability as a useful interpretive and comparative category. These and other possibilities will have to await further research.

1. See, for example, Leesa S. Davis, *Advaita Vedānta and Zen Buddhism: Deconstructive Modes of Spiritual Inquiry* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011).

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