

THE GREAT DEBATE on EMPTINESS

THE ESSENCE OF OTHER-EMPTINESS

By Taranatha

Translated and annotated by Jeffrey Hopkins

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MOUNTAIN DOCTRINE: Tibet's Fundamental Treatise on Other-Emptiness and the Buddha Matrix

By Dolpopa Sherap Gyaltzen

Translated and introduced by Jeffrey Hopkins

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Reviewed by Roger Jackson

Over the past four decades, no scholar has done more than Jeffrey Hopkins to bring to life for Western audiences the philosophical literature of the Geluk tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Through his studies and translations of masterworks by Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), Jamyang Shepa (1648–1721), and others, he has helped demonstrate both the profundity and the precision of the Gelukpa tradition's comprehensive vision of reality and Buddhist practice. Although Hopkins's interests have never been solely confined to the Geluk, there is no small irony in the fact that his two most recent translations are of major texts from the Jonang school, whose philosophical views and political alliances were anathema to those of the Gelukpas. The Jonang's institutional identity was also suppressed in central Tibet when the Fifth Dalai Lama established Geluk control over the area in the mid-seventeenth century.

Until its marginalization, the Jonang was an important part of Buddhism in central Tibet for more than four centuries. Its most significant contributions to religious life were its preservation and

transmission of a vital lineage of Kalachakra tantra practice, the *Dro*, and its promulgation of an original and controversial interpretation of the doctrine of emptiness: the "other-emptiness" (*shentong*) view. Other-emptiness was declared to be the heart of a "Great Madhyamaka" philosophical system rooted in India and superior to the "self-emptiness" (*rangtong*) view of the Prasangika school regarded by Gelukpas (and others) as the acme of Buddhist thought. Although it originated with the Jonangpas, the other-emptiness view found adherents over the years within the other principal lineages of Tibet: the Nyingma, the Kagyu, and to a lesser extent, the Sakya. It is taught by certain masters of those traditions to this day.

As recently as fifteen years ago, the Jonang was believed to survive only in hard-to-find texts. Since then, however, important Jonang writings have been collected and published, thriving Jonang monasteries have been discovered in the northeastern Tibetan region of Amdo, and Jonangpa scholars have begun to work with their Western counterparts, including Hopkins. His translations of Dolpopa Sherap Gyaltzen's (1292–1361) compendious *Mountain Doctrine*, which is replete with scriptural citations, and

Taranatha's (1575–1634) concise text, *The Essence of Other-Emptiness*, make available for the first time in English two seminal Jonang treatises on the other-emptiness view. Added to earlier works by Cyrus Stearns, Matthew Kapstein, and others, these translations now give us a critical mass for the serious study of a Tibetan tradition whose influence has always been far greater than its size.

The conflict between Rangtongpas and Shentongpas (as I will denote them) is perhaps the most significant philosophical debate in Tibetan history. The ground on which it was contested includes arguments about the Buddha's intent in teaching emptiness in multiple ways, the significance of discourse about buddhanature (or the "matrix-of-one-gone-thus," as Hopkins translates it)¹ and dharmakaya, the parameters of the two truths, and the sort of negation that emptiness is. To its participants, though, the debate is not mere scholastic speculation about how many nothings can fit on the non-head of a non-pin. Rather, it impinges directly on the great question of spiritual freedom: for Mahayana Buddhists, enlightenment is contingent on a direct realization of emptiness, and emptiness cannot be directly realized if one's philosophical understanding of it is incorrect. Thus, the stakes in the debate could not be higher.

Rangtongpas and Shentongpas agree that emptiness is the most profound and liberating of the Buddha's teachings. They also agree that the Buddha turned the wheel of dharma three times in his career. In the first turning, at Sarnath, he taught the basic Buddhist sutras. These establish that the persons, places, and things that appear to us are not real. What is real is the irreducible components that they're composed of, known as dharmas (not to be confused with "the dharma," which generally refers to the teachings or to the truth).²

In the second turning, at Rajagriha, the Buddha taught the Mahayana perfection of wisdom (*prajnaparamita*) sutras. These establish that all dharmas—whether

1 This approximates the meaning of the most common Sanskrit term for buddhanature: *tathagata-garbha*. *Tathagata* is a synonym for the Buddha, while *garbha* means "womb," "embryo," or, by extension, "matrix," in the sense of "source," related to the Latin for "mother."

2 The first turning led to the development of the "realist" philosophical schools of the so-called Hinayana.

deluded or enlightened—are empty of self-existence. They depend on causes, conditions, and concepts extrinsic to them.³

In the third turning, at Vaishali and elsewhere, the Buddha taught various Mahayana sutras concerned with mind and buddhanature. This turning also established a distinction between dharmas that are not real (the imaginary concepts and dependent entities of samsara) and dharmas that are real (the perfected nature or enlightened mind).⁴

Rangtongpas and Shentongpas disagree over the meaning of the second and third turnings of the dharma wheel. Rangtong schools like the Geluk argue that the second turning—with its teaching that all dharmas, “from form through a buddha’s omniscience,” are equally empty of self-existence—is definitive and final. They believe the third turning—with its more positive characterization of the ultimate—is provisional and requires further interpretation. Thus, for example, “positive” descriptions of buddhanature in the third turning may be understood explicitly as palliatives for disciples with a dread of emptiness. Implicitly, these positive descriptions of buddhanature nevertheless refer to the mind’s emptiness of inherent existence, without which it could not change from a deluded to an enlightened state.

Conversely, Shentongpas like Dolpopa and Taranatha claim that the teaching of the third turning is definitive and final in discriminating between the two understandings of emptiness. In other words, buddha mind is empty of samsaric entities but is replete with enlightened qualities, which are permanent, ubiquitous, and self-existent. From this point of view, the second turning is too monolithic in its account of emptiness, and so requires further interpretation. Thus, second-turning negations of nirvana or buddha mind must be read on two levels: *explicitly*, as merely general assertions of their emptiness; and *implicitly*, as claims that nirvana or buddha mind are empty of their “other,” namely samsaric concepts and entities.

Each school believes that the views of its opponent lead to catastrophic philo-

sophical mistakes that threaten to undermine the possibility of enlightenment. For Gelukpas and other Rangtongpas, the Shentong claim that buddha mind is empty in a different way than samsaric entities, and is in fact self-existent, entails the extreme of eternalism—precisely the sort of belief in an enduring self, or atman, that the Buddha found in the Hindu schools of his time and rejected. Thus, if one accepts the self-existence of buddha mind, one is effectively admitting the existence of a self. Since grasping at self is acknowledged by all Buddhists to be the root of rebirth in samsara, meditating on the basis of the Shentong view will only perpetuate our suffering rather than end it. What’s more, if we assert that we already have within us the complete qualities of a buddha, why bother to practice?

For Jonangpas and other Shentongpas, however, the Rangtong view that all dharmas of samsara and nirvana are empty in exactly the same way—devoid of intrinsic reality or self-existence—inclines toward the extreme of nihilism, particularly where buddha mind is concerned. While it may be reasonable to deny that conditioned, samsaric dharmas exist self-sufficiently, to assert the same of unconditioned buddha mind reduces it to the same level as worldly conventions, thereby collapsing the crucial distinction the Buddha made between the unsatisfactoriness of samsara and the perfection of nirvana. If one denies that nirvana is fundamentally different from worldly persons, places, and things, and all of those are empty, then nirvana, which is utterly non-samsaric, will remain forever beyond reach. Indeed, if nirvana is reduced to the same nature as samsara, why bother to practice?

Over the course of their centuries-long dispute, both Rangtongpas and Shentongpas developed nuanced arguments to disarm their opponents’ critiques, appealing to scripture, rational argument, and basic Buddhist principles. Both *Mountain Doctrine* and *The Essence of Other-Emptiness* contain ingenious Shentong polemics. Yet given the complexity of the debate, and the sometimes differing premises of the antagonists, it is doubtful that either side

can ever finally defeat the other. Such philosophical inconclusiveness notwithstanding, it is crucial to understand that both the negative discourse favored by Rangtongpas and the positive discourse adopted by Shentongpas can be traced back to the beginnings of Buddhism, and that each is a voice in an ongoing dialogue—between negation and affirmation, absence and presence, critique and celebration—that runs through the entire history of the tradition.

Early Buddhist sutras (as in the Pali Canon) contain frequent denials that there is a self to be found anywhere, but they also proclaim the natural luminosity of the mind and the absolute difference between impermanent, unsatisfactory, samsaric things and an unborn, unchanging nirvana. Mahayana literature may seem at times only to entail negation after dizzying negation, but it also is replete with assertions of a glorious, real, enlightened reality, variously called mind, buddhanature (or the buddhamatrix), or dharmakaya. The authors of Buddhist tantric texts weave emptiness into their metaphysics, cosmology, and prescriptions for practice, but they also describe buddhahood in positive terms; for example, as an unchanging gnosis where great bliss and realization of emptiness are inseparable. Both negative and positive styles of Buddhist discourse made their way to Tibet, and they are inseparably interwoven there in the fabric of religious life: in scholastic debate, ritual practice, meditation procedure, and the popular imagination. Thus, whether or not one side can be vindicated, from the standpoint of cultural analysis, both seem indispensable.

The conflict between Rangtongpas and Shentongpas may not have a solution, and the arguments in *Mountain Dharma* and *The Essence of Other-Emptiness* may not change anyone’s mind about the philosophical issues dividing the two camps. Nevertheless, all those interested in Buddhist philosophy and its implications are indebted to Jeffrey Hopkins for making available these two classic Jonangpa texts, for they help bring balance to our understanding of a vital debate that still resonates through our puzzled attempts to comprehend, and live, what the Buddha *really* meant when he so famously declared everything everywhere empty. **BD**

3 The second turning led to the Madhyamaka (Middle Way) philosophical tradition of Nagarjuna, including the Prasangika subschool of Chandrakirti exalted by the Gelukpas.

4 The third turning led to the development of the philosophical tradition associated with Maitreya, Asanga, and Vasubandhu, regarded by Rangtongpas as Cittamatra (Mind-only), and by Shentongpas as Great Madhyamaka.