H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

rJe Tsong khapa. *Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika.* Garfield. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. xxiv + 603 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-514733-9.

Reviewed by Jonathan Gold (Department of Religious Studies, Drew University)
Published on H-Buddhism (September, 2007)

Tsong khapa Today, *mutatis mutandis*

Unless we count His Holiness the Dalai Lama XIV, Tsong khapa (1357-1419) is the best-known and most influential philosopher of Tibet. His writings and teachings were controversial but gained great popularity in his lifetime, and he initiated a tradition of thought and practice–eventually called the Gelukpa–that would dominate Tibetan intellectual and political life right down to the present. At the center of his innovative views was a masterful reinterpretation of Madhyamaka that served to unite it with the epistemological traditions deriving from Dignaaga and Dharmakiirti, and with meditative practice as elaborated in the literature on the path to enlightenment. For Tsong khapa, it was impossible to achieve nirvana without using reason to develop the correct view of emptiness.

The present work is an English translation of Tsong khapa's vast (indeed, "oceanic") yet carefully reasoned commentary on Naagaarjuna's foundational Madhyamaka text, incorporating numerous paraphrases and near-quotations from the Indian commentaries of Buddhapaalita, Candrakiirti, and (to a lesser degree) Bhaavaviveka. Tsong khapa passes judgment on previous Tibetan interpretations of these works as well, generally without mentioning his compatriots by name. For many Tibetans, and for many modern interpreters of Madhyamaka thought, Tsong khapa represents the final word in the presentation of the doctrine of emptiness, itself the philosophical core of Mahaayaana Buddhism. Therefore, the significance of this first English translation is hardly in question; it is a major contribution to the study of Buddhist thought.

The translation represents a tremendous amount of work of an extremely high caliber. The phrasing and terminological selections are deliberate, precise, and thoughtful. It is clear that the translators have worked to ensure that the English carries not just the wording, but also the philosophical import of each passage. The translation is admirably fluent, readable, and reliable. Its howlers and blunders are few, and its typos and printer's errors generally cluster around Sanskrit transliterations of names and book titles that are easily corrected by those likely to notice them. Tsong khapa's view of Madhyamaka philosophy is notoriously subtle, but I would not rule out the possibility of assigning a section to an undergraduate class. Even educated non-academic readers, practitioners or not, should find in much of the translation a lucid exposition (to invoke Candrakiirti) of Naagaarjuna's treatise.

The translation has few interruptions–no bracketed insertions, very few footnotes–and one result is that the master sings. There are moments where Tsong khapa's philosophical turns are no less than thrilling. I find myself in particular awe of his selection and application of scriptural sources as support for what he takes to be the essential point of each of Naagaarjuna's chapters. I am also grateful to the translators for their unflinching dedication to Tsong khapa's decisive, brilliant outline (*dkar chag*) of the text, which turns the *Ocean* into a river that meanders but always advances.

A number of important translation choices were guided by the translators' desire "to be presenting a philosophical text to philosophers" (p. xvi), by which they apparently mean philosophers with training in modern Western thought, but without any Asian specialization. Such a readership will be familiar with Naagaarjuna perhaps more than any other Indian thinker, and this translation should help to solidify Tsong khapa's place among world philosophers. At the very least, it will allow Western philosophers with interpretive questions to find exactly what the great Tsong khapa has to say about any and every verse in the *Muulamadhyamakakaarikaa* (*MMK*). The *Ocean of Reasoning* therefore makes a natural companion–almost a teacher's guide–to Jay Garfield's own excellent and widely used earlier translation of and commentary on that work. (The translators note that the translation of the *MMK* comprised herein represents an

improvement on that translation, published in 1995 as *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way.*)

The translators' understanding of the work as "a philosophical text," and their concomitant choice to shape the translation to the needs of Western philosophers, have effects that are worth noting. Above all, the text is presented as a relatively isolated, ahistorical object. Without footnotes or commentary to inform the reader of the work's place in Buddhist intellectual history (the introduction summarizes the *Ocean of Reasoning* and the *MMK* in two pages each, after which the reader is referred to other scholarly works), Tsong khapa's rehearsal of traditional arguments is bound to appear no less his own than what were in fact his most pioneering analyses. Genius that he was, he put his own twist on every argument; but unless we know the context, we are liable to read each argument as though he crafted it from whole cloth. This being the case, the fact that Tsong khapa "did not include footnotes" seems a rather misleading justification for the translators' choice to minimize their own notes (p. xvi). Tsong khapa could assume of his readers a degree of background knowledge that philosophers without special training today simply do not have. He wanted his readers to see that his text was a very specific kind of "event" in the intellectual history of Buddhism.

Or did he? Like other scholastics, Tsong khapa certainly sought to shield his treatise from accusations of newness. Indeed, what is the purpose of a commentary if not at least to show how one's own views coordinate with the authoritative texts taken as foundational for the tradition? Tsong khapa's distinctive, independent statements of his views were already contained in other works. Here, his goal was to reintegrate his views back into the mainstream of "perennial" Buddhist philosophy. To ask just how he does this is, in a sense, to read against the grain. Instead, this new translation serves Tsong khapa's interests by promoting an ahistorical reading experience that views philosophy as timeless in much the same way that traditional scholastic thinkers saw their traditions as timeless.

This global, universal view of philosophy helps to justify the *Ocean of Reasoning*'s numerous translations of Tibetan phrases into modern Western philosophical terms; such notions as *modus tollens*, external and internal negation, and recognition (in the specific sense of Immanual Kant's second synthesis in the *Critique of Pure Reason* [1781]) are, *mutatis mutandis*, here in play in Tsong khapa's reading of Naagaarjuna. These terms will help to draw philosophers with Western training into the dialogue even as they send more than a few Buddhologists to Google. They are thoughtful and reasonable translation choices, and I have no doubt that the overall result is a text that can be profitably used by the full range of its likely readership. But once we understand that the translators' work shapes the text to the needs of a particular interpretive community (as it always does), it makes sense to ponder just what "necessary changes have been changed" (a literal translation of *mutatis mutandis*)–and what is effectively lost in translation–when the text is adopted in its new interpretive context.

An ahistorical perspective tends to smooth over controversy, so we should not be surprised that this text somewhat occludes the controversy surrounding Tsong khapa's innovative way of defining the distinction between the two positions traditionally termed Svaatantrika and Praasan.gika. Recent Indological and Tibetological scholarship has made it clear that this distinction originated in Tibet, where it was retrospectively read into the Indian sources, and that Tsong khapa was among those who succeeded particularly well in this work of reification.[1] Without such knowledge readers of passages such as the following have no reason to suspect that Tsong khapa might be imposing his own interpretation on his predecessors:

"Candrakiirti's demonstration that the reverse of the reductio argument does not pertain to us shows that Bhaavaviveka says that Buddhapaalita must accept the reverse of the reductio, without being aware of the absurd consequences actually presented–that *additional* arising would be pointless and endless–and taking the reductio to show that arising *in general* would be pointless and endless" (p. 64).

The basic point of the section, approached from several angles, is that to deny the fabricated object of negation, as Naagaarjuna does, is not the same as to assert some real non-existence; the elimination of an essence does not establish essencelessness as a nature. Bhaavaviveka's famous criticisms of Buddhapaalita's exclusive use of reductio arguments are here described as a misunderstanding of this fact.

Whether or not we can understand the fullness of the traditional arguments here represented without being immersed in the textual history, we certainly do get a very full expression of Tsong khapa's *philosophical* point by reading his text as it stands, in a sense, alone. It does not really matter, then, from a certain philosophically engaged perspective, whether the tradition (Candrakiirti, Bhaavaviveka, Buddhapaalita) is accurately represented here; indeed, it does not even matter if the original texts exist or not. What matter are the philosophical subtleties

of the conclusion that Tsong khapa draws through the manipulation of these philosophical/literary characters–characters that (from a certain perspective) serve their roles equally well whether they rest in the original texts or not. The same argument might be made, *mutatis mutandis*, with regard to Socrates in the writings of Plato, or the characters in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), or perhaps even the figures represented in Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966).

To take this philosophical perspective, however, is to ignore Tsong khapa's crucial role in reinterpreting the tradition to serve his own interests, as suggested above. Also ignored is the intellectual-historical reality that arguments such as Tsong khapa's are never independent creations of a single mind and *really are* constructed out of their authors' attempts to make sense of a variety of previous texts and methods.

Of course, philosophers can and do deny, or at least ignore, these realities, and it may sometimes be that ignoring this kind of historical precision allows for genuine growth and dialogue to take place. Tsong khapa's extensive comments on *MMK* I.1, for example, center around identifying just what kind of negation these verses should be understood to involve: *med dgag* or *ma yin dgag*. As the translators explain in a rare footnote, they choose to translate *med dgag* as "external negation" and *ma yin dgag* as "internal negation," "in the sense familiar to Western philosophers of language, instead of using the misleading and neologistic terminology of non-affirming and affirming negation common in Buddhist studies" (p. 49, n. 6) My first thought in reading this was to think that although "external negation" and "internal negation" may work as translations of these terms as Tsong khapa uses them, their application in Western philosophical circles draws upon definitions whose methods (Fregean truth tables, for instance) are overly precise and foreign to the Tibetan milieu. Tibetan intellectuals, I thought, had definitions of these terms that were not only different from the Western definitions, but also different among themselves. So how could these Western terms possibly fit this range of meanings?

Yet as it turns out, there is something of a similar, if not equivalent, difference of opinion across Western philosophers about the most appropriate use of these terms. Some philosophers, for instance, have understood there to be significant reasons to include what John Searle calls "propositional" and "illocutionary" negations among forms of internal and external negations, respectively.[2] If Western philosophers are free to extend these terms in this way (controversial though such usage may be), why should we be so rigid as to prevent the terms from being applied in explicating Tibetan views of negation? The translators' choice does not need, therefore, to imply an identical, unified understanding of terms shared by Tsong khapa and all Western thinkers. Rather, in order to justify the choice, the translators need only say that just as Tsong khapa is a genuine contributor to the philosophical discussion of the nature of reality, Tsong khapa's work is now part of the dialogue about just how these terms–and, by extension, philosophy itself–ought to be understood.

Notes

[1]. See Georges Dreyfus and Sara McClintock, eds., *The Svaatantrika-Praasan.gika Distinction* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003).

[2]. See Richard T. Garner, "Some Doubts about Illocutionary Negation," *Analysis* 31, no. 3 (1971): 106-112.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Jonathan Gold. Review of khapa, rJe Tsong, *Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. September, 2007.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13585

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.