ENCOUNTERING INEFFABILITY
—COUNTING INEFFABILITY:
ON DIVERGENT VERBALIZATIONS OF THE INEFFABLE IN 15TH CENTURY TIBET

YAROSLAV KOMAROVSKI

In what follows below, I am addressing several Tibetan Buddhist views on ultimate reality, which is described by such interchangeable terms as "ineffability" (*brjod med*), "inconceivability" (*bsam med*), and "freedom from conceptual proliferations" (*spros bral*). My special interest lies in how Tibetan thinkers handle the "paradox" of treating the ultimate as transcending verbalizations and conceptualization on the one hand and facing the necessity of its articulation on the other.

While briefly describing some representative approaches to the issue, I will use them primarily as a background for highlighting the system developed by the 15th century Sakya (*sa skya*) thinker Serdok Penchen Shakya Chokden[1] (*gser mdog paṇ chen shākya mchog ldan*, 1428-1507) which is the main topic of this article. More specifically, I will be focusing on the works written by Shakya Chokden from 1489 on, during the period of crystallization of his distinct views on the Mahāyāna doctrinal systems. This was the period when he started clearly articulating his unique interpretation of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka.[2]

---

[1] In this paper I am using simplified phonetic transcription of Tibetan based on the usage adopted by the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library. When appropriate, it includes not only Tibetan words, but also Sanskrit words and names adopted by Tibetans, such as "pendita" (*paṇḍita*), in order to approximate the way Tibetans themselves pronounce them. For details, see:
http://www.thdl.org/xml/showEssay.php?xml=/collections/langling/THDL_phonetics.xml

[2] As I explain in my "Reburying the Treasure—Maintaining the Continuity: Two Texts by Shakya Chokden on the Buddha-Essence," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 34, no. 6 (2006), 523, this process began in 1475, when in his *Good Questions about the 'Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows'* (*Sdom gsum rab dbye la dri ba legs pa*), Collected Works, vol.17, 448-462 (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunzang Tobgyey, 1975), Shakya Chokden started *explicitly* questioning—though not necessarily in the sense of disagreeing with—the views expressed in the authoritative text by Sakya Pendita Künga Gyeltsen (*sa skya paṇḍita kun dga' rgyal mtshan*, 1182-1251), *Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows* (*Sdom pa gsum gyi rab tu dbye ba*, Sa skya bka' 'bum, vol. 12 (na), 1a-48b). In 1481, he answered his own questions in the *Golden Lancet: a Resolved Abundant Discourse on the 'Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows' Treatise* (*Sdom gsum gyi rab tu dbye ba'i bstan bcos kyi 'bel gtam rnam par nges pa legs bshad gser gyi thur ma*), Collected Works, vols. 6-7 (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunzang Tobgyey, 1975). It is impossible to point out the end of this "crystallization period" because, until his death in 1507, Shakya Chokden kept polishing and updating his views. But Shakya Chokden had already well organized his unique views on the nature of the Mahāyāna systems at least by 1489, when he

My task is to introduce readers to Shakya Chokden's articulation of the ineffable ultimate reality, to demonstrate unavoidable tensions involved in his position, and to show how he attempted to solve them. All Tibetan thinkers mentioned in this article struggled to come to terms with the problematic issue of expressing the inexpressible. Shakya Chokden was not an exception, and he eagerly joined their struggle. The uniqueness of his system lies in *how* he aligned his "unorthodox" position with what he saw as the orthodox position on the issue without at the same time sacrificing his own unusual take on the controversial issue of verbalizing the ineffable.

Positive and negative sides of discourses on ineffability

It is remarkable that virtually all Mahāyāna thinkers from different ages and cultures are in consensus that the highest ultimate reality is ineffable and transcends words and concepts. This is clear from the writings of Mādhyamikas and Yogācāras, such as Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga, from such core Mahāyāna sūtras as the *Perfection of Wisdom* (*Prajñāpāramitā*, *Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa*), and such often quoted writings as Rahulabhadra's *Praise to the Perfection of Wisdom* (*Prajñāpāramitāstotra*, *Sher phyin bstod pa*). 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] entity,
> The object of functioning of individually self-cognizing primordial mind![3]

At the same time, Buddhist thinkers provide highly divergent conceptual descriptions of that concept-transcending indescribable reality, conceive different ways of getting access to a direct non-conceptual insight into it, and hold dissimilar opinions on the process of transition from its conceptual understanding to its direct realization. The above passage itself is open to

---

wrote the *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). For a more detailed treatment of the issue of change in his views, see my "Echoes of Empty Luminosity: Reevaluation and Unique Interpretation of Yogācāra and Niḥsvabhāvavāda Madhyamaka by the Fifteenth Century Tibetan Thinker Sākya Mchog Ldan," Ph.D. Thesis (University of Virginia, 2007), 291-301 (hereafter, *Echoes of Empty Luminosity*). That study explores in detail his approach to the systems o Madhyamaka and Yogācāra.

[3] 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. See "We Are All Gzhan stong pas," in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics,* vol. 7 (2000): 105-125 by Matthew Kapstein who cites this passage and provides a slightly different translation.

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 non-affirming negation (*med dgag*, *prasajyapratiṣedha*). Alternatively, the individually self-cognizing primordial mind (*so sor rang gis rig pa'i ye shes*) that realizes the perfection of wisdom can be treated as a type of mind (*sems*, *citta*) or as a state which transcends mind in spite of having qualities of luminosity and awareness (*gsal rig*). Furthermore, the overall meaning of the quote can be explained differently depending on context. I remember how one Tibetan thinker cited this very passage in order to illustrate that the Buddhist tantric system of Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) was taught in India, and he interpreted it in the Great Perfection style.[4]

In a word, there are various ways of articulating the ineffable in Buddhism, especially when forming a correct conceptual idea of the ultimate is deemed a necessary step for getting access to its non-conceptual realization. Even those thinkers who do not see that conceptual step as absolutely indispensable can hardly avoid accepting the term and the idea of ultimate reality and using them as instructional and descriptive tools. Therefore, the question of divergent articulations of the ineffable is crucial, and the answer to this question largely depends on how one understands the relationship between ultimate reality described in negative terms and affirmative statements about its qualities, its realization, and its very presence and being.

As long as one accepts ultimate reality—even when such reality itself is described in negative terms—he or she automatically formulates an affirmative idea of its presence. This creates tension between positive statements of existence of the ultimate and its descriptions in negative terms. Adding to this complexity is the fact that the ultimate itself is rarely described *only* in negative terms. In the same way as negations (*dgag pa*, *pratiṣedha*) are virtually omnipresent in Tibetan Buddhist presentations of ultimate reality or attributed to the ultimate itself, positive elements or affirmations (*sgrub pa*, *vidhi*) are equally ubiquitous either as a part of ultimate reality or at least as factors of its realization. These positive elements can be described as realization, perception, or experience of the ultimate, as a mere clarity-cognition, and so forth. Because all of them have a distinct mental flavor, I call them "mental elements."[5] As an example, we can again refer to the *Praise to the Perfection of Wisdom* passage where the negative description of the perfection of wisdom as ineffable is followed by its positive description as an object of primordial mind. Noticeably, because such mental elements are always at least partially addressed as positive phenomena or affirmations, whenever they are

---

[4] Khamtrül Rinpoche (*khams sprul rin po che*), personal communication.
[5] The word "mental" as I am using it here does not indicate only "intellectual." Rather, it refers to all types of mental processes, including those that are given names of wisdom, primordial mind, etc., as well as those that are deemed to transcend mind.

taken as parts of the ultimate, it suggests—although does not necessarily lead to the conclusion—that the ultimate itself should be treated at least partially as an affirmation.

It is difficult if not impossible to describe ultimate reality independently from its realization and without raising questions about "subjective" minds that take that reality as their "object"[6] and/or can themselves *be* that very reality. No matter what names are given to such mental elements, they are always either explicitly stated or implicitly assumed in discourses on the ineffable. In the Sakya tradition in particular, the mental element of clarity and cognition is treated as an inseparable part of ultimate reality which is described as an inseparability of clarity and emptiness (*gsal stong dbyer med*). In other words, while Sakya thinkers tend to take clarity, cognition, and mental appearances in general as conventional truths, they take the non-dual union of clarity and emptiness, appearance and emptiness, and cognition and emptiness as ultimate truths. Such an approach is carried into meditative instructions as well, as evident in the writings of Shakya Chokden's teacher Rongtön Sheja Künrik (*rong ston shes bya kun rig*, 1367-1449).[7] So important are such mental elements that the influential 20th century Sakya master Deshung Rinpoche (*sde gzhung rin po che*, 1906-1987) stated:

> You must understand that your mind has the nature of nondual clarity and voidness. 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.[8]

Such statements indicate that acceptance of *both* positive and negative sides of ultimate reality—inseparable as they are—is important not only for a full realization of the ultimate, but also for identifying oneself as a member of that sectarian tradition which maintains teachings on such "double-sided" reality and its realization.

On the other hand, the majority of Tibetan Buddhist thinkers adhere to a powerful albeit artificial hierarchy of doctrinal systems that can be described as progressive levels of increasingly refined negations. From the standpoint of that system, the more reality one attributes to phenomena the less advanced his or her view of the ultimate nature of phenomena

---

[6] I am using the quotation marks here, because many Tibetan Buddhist thinkers agree that the ultimate transcends the subject/object dichotomy.

[7] 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*), in The Collected Works of Rong-ston Shak-kya Rgyal-mtsen, vol. B, *kha*, Dehra Dun, India: Sakya College, 1999), 562-565, and other meditative instructions in the same volume.

[8] Deshung Rinpoche, trans. by Jared Rhoton, *The Three Levels of Spiritual Perception* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 471. A similar approach is accepted by thinkers from other traditions, such as the 16th century Kagyü (*bka' brgyud*) master Dakpo Trashi Namgyal (*dvags 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. See Karl Brunnhölzl, *The Center of the Sunlit Sky: Madhyamaka in the Kagyü Tradition* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2004), 303-310.

is. Alternatively, the less reality is attributed to phenomena—including ultimate reality itself—the more subtle such a view will be. This explains why the view of Niḥsvabhāvavāda that denies real existence of any phenomena whatsoever is considered to be the pinnacle of Buddhist views.[9]

Majority of Tibetan thinkers understand Niḥsvabhāvavāda as identical with Madhyamaka itself, and treats its views as their own. The claim of its doctrinal superiority, therefore, is readily acceptable in the Tibetan intellectual world. This claim is problematic for several reasons, such as the obvious bias of one-sided partisanship wherein one doctrinal system is used to judge other systems, and the competing claims of such thinkers as Shakya Chokden who elevate certain Yogācāra systems to the level of Madhyamaka, thereby forcing Niḥsvabhāvavāda to share its high status with Alīkākāra,[10] and so forth. Even if one unquestionably accepts the doctrinal superiority of Niḥsvabhāvavāda over all other systems of thought, within that doctrinal hierarchy which it tops, negations are not the only criteria for apprizing the depths of views on reality, including those of Niḥsvabhāvavāda. Therefore, to better understand the complexity of the descriptions of ultimate reality and the processes of its realization, we have to look at combinations of negations and affirmations, the latter pertaining to the above mentioned mental elements. The way one treats positive and negative aspects of reality directly bears on his or her understanding of ineffability, because—as has been mentioned above—virtually all Mahāyāna thinkers treat the ultimate reality as ineffable.

Several characteristic positions on ineffability

The following chart demonstrates the differences in opinion on the question of whether the subject realizing ultimate reality is a part of that reality itself, and on the question of whether the ineffable ultimate belongs to the categories of positive or negative phenomena or transcends those categories altogether:

ineffable ultimate reality	*mental elements*
a. treated as neither negation nor affirmation	c. treated as comprising an inseparable part of ultimate reality
b. treated as either a non-affirming negation or an affirming negation	d. not treated as comprising a part of ultimate reality

---

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

[10] For an extensive treatment of this issue, see my *Echoes of Empty Luminosity*, especially chapters 2 and 3.

The two sections in the left column are mutually exclusive, as are the two sections in the right column. There are therefore four possible combinations of the elements contained in the left and right columns:

a-c. This combination expresses the view of the above-mentioned Deshung Rinpoche and other contemporary Sakya thinkers who take the union of clarity and emptiness as the ultimate. Gowo Rapjampa Sönam Senggé (*go bo rab 'byams pa bsod nams seng ge*, 1429-1489), who does not treat the ultimate as either negation or affirmation, also holds this position when he says that in the context of descriptions of direct realization of the ultimate,

> … the convention "ultimate reality" is applied to the object [wherein] without the realized reality and the realizing mind appearing separately, that very mind is manifested inseparably from the freedom from proliferations.[11]

According to this view, ultimate reality is ineffable and is neither negation nor affirmation. Nevertheless, such reality has a "part" that by itself is an affirmative or positive phenomenon.

a-d. This combination is possible when ultimate reality is taken to be beyond any descriptions whatsoever, while the "subject" that "realizes" it is described in a positive way.[12] This position is held, for example, by Rendawa Zhönnu Lodrö (*red mda' ba gzhon nu blo gros*, 1349-1412) in his *Lamp Illuminating Thatness: Explanation of [Candrakīrti's] 'Engaging in the Middle'*. In that text, Rendawa explains that direct realization of reality is the nature of the perfection of wisdom, but it does not realize any object. Since it has no object, it is not a mind or consciousness (*shes pa*), because minds are characterized by cognition of objects (*yul rig pa*). Nevertheless, it is a non-conceptual primordial mind (*rnam par mi rtog pa'i ye shes*, *nirvikalpajñāna*).[13]

b-c. This combination is possible only when the ultimate is treated as the union of negation and mental elements. This view is asserted in the system of Shakya Chokden who treats ultimate reality as an affirming negation (*ma yin dgag*, *paryudāsapratiṣedha*) which he explains as a combination of a positive phenomenon of primordial mind (*ye shes*, *jñāna*) and a

---

[11] *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…* 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), 216, for the Tibetan text. My translation differs slightly from Cabezón's translation on page 217.

[12] I am using the quotation marks, because in this context ultimate reality is not treated as an object, and therefore can neither have a subject nor be realized by a subject.

[13] See *Dbu ma la 'jug pa'i rnam bshad de kho na nyid gsal ba'i sgron ma* (Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1995), 92-93.

non-affirming negation.[14] He does not see a contradiction in something being ineffable on the one hand and being asserted as a negation on the other.

b-d. This combination is possible when ultimate reality is treated as a non-affirming negation. Such is asserted by Tsongkhapa Lopzang Drakpa (*tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*, 1357-1419) and Geluk thinkers who follow him.[15]

These interpretive differences stem in part from differing views on the role of words and concepts in the description and conceptualization of the ineffable. There are at least two such different approaches followed by Tibetan thinkers. According to the first approach, in order to directly realize ultimate reality, first one has to form its correct conceptual image (*don spyi*, *arthasāmānya*), and then maintain that image, thereby cultivating an understanding of emptiness which will eventually change from conceptual to non-conceptual.[16] This position is closely linked with the idea that the ultimate reality can at least partially be taken as an object of words and concepts. Geluk thinkers who hold this position assert that even that ultimate which is an object of concepts *is* an actual ultimate. This is not surprising given the fact that Geluk thinkers accept that whatever exists has to be an object of concepts, and maintain this approach in all contexts, from the level of Collected Topics (*bsdus grwa*) literature through to the level of Madhyamaka. Even the directly and non-conceptually realized ultimate is an object of concepts, although it is not a conceptual object of that mind which directly realizes it.

It is interesting to note that in 15th century Tibet, Geluk thinkers themselves contested the issue of whether the understanding of emptiness should be cultivated through maintaining a conceptual image of a non-affirming negation. For example, Gungru Gyeltsen Zangpo (*gung ru rgyal mtshan bzang po*, 1383-1450), a Sera (*se ra*) abbot and an influential teacher with many disciples, taught that the application of the mode of apprehension in remainder of negation of the object of negation (*dgag bya bkag shul gyi 'dzin stangs sbyor ba*) was specifically argued for by Khedrup Gelek Pelzang (*mkhas grub dge legs dpal bzang*, 1385-1438), and then spread by his followers.[17]

According to the second approach, in order to directly realize ultimate reality, one has to negate all concepts including those of ultimate reality itself. What one maintains then is a state free from any objects whatsoever. This approach is linked with the idea that no words or concepts can reach the ineffable ultimate reality at all, and a conceptually understood "ultimate"

---

[14] For details, see my *Echoes of Empty Luminosity*, 242-244.

[15] See, for example, Jeffrey Hopkins, *Tsong-kha-pa's Final Exposition of Wisdom* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2008), 333, 357.

[16] Notice that technically speaking, according to Geluk, in this process one does not cultivate a conceptual image of the ultimate reality itself, but rather accustoms one's mind to ultimate reality via its conceptual image. Geluk critics often miss this subtle but important distinction.

[17] As reported by Künga Drölchok (kun dga' grol mchog) in the *Detailed Analysis of the Liberation Story of the Great Paṇḍit Shakya Chokden* (*Paṇḍi ta chen po shākya mchog ldan gyi rnam par thar pa zhib mo rnam 'byed pa*), in Collected Works of Śākya mchog ldan, vol. 16 (Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunzang Tobgyey, 1975), 27.

is subsumed under the category of conventional, not ultimate reality. Advocates of this approach strongly emphasize a distinction between two types of the ultimate—the metaphorical ultimate (*rnam grangs pa'i don dam*, *paryāyaparamārtha*) and the non-metaphorical ultimate (*rnam grangs ma yin pa'i don dam*, *aparyāyaparamārtha*), and relegate the latter to the level of conventional reality only.[18] This latter approach in one or another form is shared by majority of non-Geluk Tibetan thinkers. It is clearly articulated by Shakya Chokden on whose system I am concentrating in the rest of this paper.

Shakya Chokden's approach to ineffability

In his works written from 1489, Shakya Chokden differentiates between two types of freedom from proliferations: the freedom from proliferations as the factor of non-affirming negation (*spros bral med dgag gi cha*) and the naturally luminous mind free from proliferations (*spros pa dang bral ba'i sems rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba*). The first one is an emptiness which Shakya Chokden describes as a mere non-affirming negation of all phenomena. Because it is an object of conceptual minds only, it is not an ultimate reality and not a genuine freedom from proliferations.[19] The second one is the actual ultimate reality, which Shakya Chokden describes as an affirming negation, the primordial mind, and a self-characterized phenomenon (*rang mtshan*, *svalakṣaṇa*).[20] He furthermore treats it as compounded (*'dus byas*, *saṃskṛta*) in the sense of undergoing production, disintegration, and abiding (*skye 'jig gnas gsum*) because of being impermanent.[21] Only this type of freedom from proliferations can serve as an object of direct perception (*mngon sum*, *pratyakṣa*), and yogic direct perception (*rnal 'byor mngon sum*,

---

[18] Although Tsongkhapa also distinguished between metaphorical and non-metaphorical ultimates, he treated both conceptually understood ultimates and directly realized ultimates as actual non-metaphorical ultimates. What he took as metaphorical ultimates were non-erroneous conceptual subjective minds comprehending those ultimates and non-conceptual wisdom of meditative equipoise directly realizing those ultimates. (See Jeffrey Hopkins, *Tsong-kha-pa's Final Exposition of Wisdom* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2008), 138 ff.) It is interesting to notice that accepting even conceptual minds comprehending ultimate reality as metaphorical ultimates in part might be based on Tsongkhapa's position that conceptually understood ultimate is a non-metaphorical ultimate, and therefore the subjective mind comprehending it has to be a metaphorical ultimate, similar to the subject of directly realized ultimate being a metaphorical ultimate.

[19] *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), 394.

[20] *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 Works, vol. 19, 102.

[21] *Golden Lancet: Resolved Abundant Discourse on the 'Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows' Treatise* (*Sdom gsum gyi rab tu dbye ba'i bstan bcos kyi 'bel gtam rnam par nges pa legs bshad gser gyi thur ma*), in Collected Works, vol. 6, 498. For details of the question of compoundedness of primordial mind, see my "Reburying the Treasure—Maintaining the Continuity: Two Texts by Shakya Chokden on the Buddha-Essence," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 34, no. 6 (2006), note 39.

yogipratyakṣa) in particular.

Although Shakya Chokden does not insist that one *has* to identify the ultimate in order to directly realize it,[22] he argues that if one *does* identify it, the ultimate has to be identified only as the latter type of freedom from proliferations. Connecting the two types of freedom from proliferations with the topics of the second and third wheels of Doctrine (*chos 'khor*, *dharmacakra*), in the *Rain of Ambrosia: Extensive [Auto-]Commentary on the 'Profound Thunder amidst the Clouds of the Ocean of Definitive Meaning'* he argues that the first type of freedom from proliferations can not be an actual ultimate reality:

> From among the two, freedom from proliferations as the factor of non-affirming negation and the naturally luminous mind free from proliferations, the first is [taught in] the explicit teachings of the middle wheel, while the second is the main topic taught by the final wheel. Thus—to leave aside the case of not upholding (*'dzin pa*) an illustration of the ultimate—as long as it is upheld, it is ascertained exclusively as the latter [type of freedom from proliferations]. This is because the first [type of freedom from proliferations] is ascertained only as an exclusion of other isolates (*ldog pa gzhan sel*), a generally characterized [phenomenon] (*spyi mtshan*, *sāmānyalakṣaṇa*), and an object realized by mind in an exclusionary way (*blos rnam bcad du rtogs bya*), and therefore it is not directly seen by primordial mind of buddhas.[23]

The above twofold division is not the only one used by Shakya Chokden when he discusses freedom from proliferations. In the context of addressing both tantric and non-tantric Buddhist systems together, he divides the actual freedom from proliferations, the primordial mind free from proliferations, into two subtypes, explains that one is taught in sūtras and another only in tantras, and argues that the latter is superior to the former. (He focuses specifically on the Highest Yoga Tantra (*bla med kyi rgyud*, *anuttarayogatantra*) when he discusses distinctions between sūtric and tantric views.)

---

[22] According to Shakya Chokden, negation of all conventional phenomena through Madhyamaka reasoning is sufficient for getting access to the realization of the ultimate. One does not necessarily have to form a conceptual idea of the ultimate prior to such realization. I address this issue in detail in the third chapter of the *Echoes of Empty Luminosity*.

[23] spros bral med dgag gi cha dang / spros pa dang bral ba'i sems rang bzhin gyis 'od gsal ba gnyis las / dang po 'khor lo bar ba'i dngos bstan dang / gnyis pa de 'khor lo phyi ma'i bstan bya'i gtso bo yin pas / don dam pa'i mtshan gzhi mi 'dzin pa'i skabs phar zhog // 'dzin phyin chad phyi ma kho nar nges te / dang po de ni ldog pa gzhan sel dang / spyi mtshan dang / blos rnam bcad du rtogs bya kho nar nges pas sangs rgyas kyi ye shes kyis mngon sum du ma gzigs pa'i phyir. *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), 394-395. (Hereafter, *Rain of Ambrosia*.)

This hierarchical division of the actual freedom from proliferation poses a problem, because it seems to run contrary to the approach of Sakya Pendita Künga Gyeltsen (*sa skya paṇḍita kun dga' rgyal mtshan*, 1182-1251), which by Shakya Chokden's time became accepted as the mainstream Sakya tradition. The following passage from Sakya Pendita's *Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows* might be read as implying that he accepts sūtric and tantric views on freedom from proliferations as identical:

> 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.[24]

Despite its apparent clarity, this passage provides an 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 / non-being, existence / non-existence, and so forth. Thereby, shifting the focus of the sūtric / tantric distinction away from the "object," one can emphasize that their difference lies in different ways of realizing that "object."[25] Because the Highest Yoga Tantra teaches an uncommon "subject," such as the great bliss (*bde ba chen po*, *mahāsukha*) arisen from empowerments (*dbang*, *abhiṣeka*) that realizes that common "object," it is superior to non-tantric Mahāyāna systems.

Shakya Chokden follows this explanation in his *Rain of Ambrosia*, where he 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 one the tantric view is *not* superior, but it *is* superior in terms of the second one. This is because the tantric system presents an uncommon subject—supremely unchangeable bliss (*mchog tu mi 'gyur ba'i bde ba*) that experiences the

---

[24] 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 sngags khyad par 'phags. See Rhoton, Jared Douglas (tr). *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes: Essential Distinctions among the Individual Liberation, Mahāyāna, and Tantric Systems* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), for the Tibetan text (p. 308) and alternative translation (p.129)
[25] See, for example, Kelden Tsering (*skal ldan tshe ring*), *Presentation of Tenets of Glorious Sakyapas* (*Dpal sa skya pa'i grub mtha'i rnam bzhag*, Zhang kang then mā dpe skrun khang, 2001), 98.

object, primordial mind free of proliferations.[26] That subject and the means of its utilization are taught only in Tantra.

Notice that from among the two types of freedom from proliferations mentioned above—a non-affirming negation and primordial mind which is an affirming negation—only the latter can be realized by the primordial mind. It is made clear by the passage itself[27] and by Shakya Chokden's basic position that non-affirming negations are objects of concepts only. Therefore, in his view, sūtric and tantric teachings agree that both the "subjective" and "objective" parts of the process of direct realization of freedom from proliferations *are* the primordial mind. Nevertheless, only the Highest Yoga Tantra teaches the supremely unchangeable bliss, and this is what makes its view superior despite even the fact that such bliss is also a type of primordial mind.

In the *Wish Fulfilling Meru: Discourse on the History of Madhyamaka*, on the other hand, he draws the reader's attention to the next two lines in the *Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows* cited above, and argues that what Sakya Pendita asserts as one is the view determined by listening and thinking (*thos bsam gyis gtan la dbab bya*), not 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 Tantra more efficient, resulting in achievement of buddhahood in a single lifetime, and so forth.[28] Notice that *in this context* freedom from proliferations is treated as the object of concepts only, i.e., the first type of freedom from proliferations mentioned above.

Thus, Shakya Chokden approaches the issue of superiority of the tantric view of freedom from proliferations over the sūtric from two different angles mentioned above. Despite different ways of addressing the views of sūtras and tantras, Shakya Chokden 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." In either way, he achieves the same point of showing the superiority of the tantric view over the sūtric, and argues that this is the

---

[26] *Rain of Ambrosia*, 376. See also ibid., 361.

[27] The passage reads: lta ba'i ming yul spros bral la bshad pa dang yul can ye shes la bshad pa gnyis las / snga ma'i dbang du byas na de las lhag pa sngags su ma bshad mod / phyi ma'i dbang du byas na snga ma las lhag par grub ste yul can mchog tu mi 'gyur ba'i bde bas yul spros bral gyi ye shes de nyid nyams su myong ba'i phyir. *Rain of Ambrosia*, 376.

[28] *Dbu ma'i byung tshul rnam par bshad pa'i gtam yid bzhin lhun po*, Collected Works, vol. 4, 227-232, translated in Yaroslav Komarovski (trans. and introduction), *Three Texts on Madhyamaka by Shakya Chokden* (Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2000), 17-20 (hereafter, *Wish Fulfilling Meru*; I provide a slightly different translation of the *Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows*'s passage there).

approach of Sakya Pendita as well. Due to the special features of this view, he puts it into a separate category of Madhyamaka.[29]

In sum, Shakya Chokden posits three types of views on the ultimate, treating all of them as Madhyamaka views and describing them as freedom from proliferations: a. metaphorical ultimate, b. non-metaphorical ultimate taught in sūtras, and c. non-metaphorical ultimate taught in tantras. "Paradoxically," although the first type is a sheer non-affirming negation that itself does not include any positive mental elements and is not described in positive or affirmative terms, in his opinion   it is not the genuine ultimate reality precisely because such negation can be taken as, and in fact has to be, an object of sounds and concepts only. The second and third types are inexpressible and are not objects of sounds and concepts. Nevertheless, following multiple texts on Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and Tantra, Shakya Chokden articulates and elaborates on these views in minute detail. Furthermore, their inexpressible status does not prevent the tantric view from being higher than the sūtric one.

Also "paradoxically," despite the fact that Shakya Chokden was one of the most vicious critics of Tsongkhapa's system, he is in agreement with Tsongkhapa in his interpretation of the ultimate reality as a negation. It is true that descriptions of the ultimate given by the two thinkers can be seen as direct opposites: Shakya Chokden treats ultimate reality as an impermanent phenomenon and an affirming negation, while Tsongkhapa does the opposite and classifies it as a non-affirming negation which is a permanent phenomenon. Nevertheless, both thinkers agree that the ultimate *is* a negation, and that negations they respectively assert can be directly realized by yogic direct perception. It is this aspect of their systems that makes them similar to each other and distances them from other thinkers mentioned above who treat the ultimate neither as a positive nor a negative phenomenon.

Outlining different types of freedom from proliferations helps Shakya Chokden to justify his own "unorthodox" approach to Mahāyāna doctrinal systems and reconcile this approach with the "mainstream" Sakya position articulated by Sakya Pendita in the aforementioned passage from the *Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows*. Shakya Chokden's approach can be summarized as follows. The actual non-metaphorical ultimate is ineffable, and overall its descriptions or verbalizations are not necessary for triggering its direct realization. Nevertheless, such descriptions can be helpful as well, and if they are given at all, the ultimate *has* to be explicitly or implicitly described as primordial mind which is an affirming negation. The Buddha in the explicit teachings of the middle wheel, as well as Nāgārjuna in his Collection of Reasonings taught the most excellent *means of realizing* that genuine, non-metaphorical ultimate reality. Nevertheless, those sets of teachings did not teach the non-metaphorical ultimate reality *itself,* and instead taught only the metaphorical ultimate

---

[29] See *Wish Fulfilling Meru*, 17ff.

which is a non-affirming negation. The non-metaphorical ultimate was taught as the main topic of the final wheel, as well as in tantras. It was also clearly explained in the writings of Asaṅga and other Yogācāra thinkers who propounded the view of Alīkākāra, which is a genuine Madhyamaka view alongside with Niḥsvabhāvavāda. Therefore, those who resort to verbalizations of the ineffable have no choice but to rely on these teachings which correctly describe the indescribable ultimate. Although the ultimate view of the Highest Yoga Tantra is more profound than that of Alīkākāra, both systems correctly describe it as primordial mind. Thus, primordial mind described by *both* systems is the genuine non-metaphorical ultimate and genuine freedom from proliferations. The proximity of the Highest Yoga Tantra and Alīkākāra views on the ultimate allows Shakya Chokden to appeal to the authority of the former in order to "legitimize" the view of the latter as a genuine Madhyamaka view. Demonstrating that the tantric view of reality is very close to the Alīkākāra view expressed by the third turning of the wheel, and arguing that such description is absent in the Niḥsvabhāvavāda system that derives from the explicit teachings of the second turning of the wheel, he presents the Alīkākāra system as being equal to Niḥsvabhāvavāda, and in terms of descriptions of the ultimate even surpassing it—the position that can be seen as a trademark of his unique doctrinal system.

Conclusion

Comparison of divergent verbalizations of the ineffable shows that Shakya Chokden and other Tibetan thinkers encounter the same issue of verbalizing the ultimate while at the same time maintaining that it transcends words and concepts. What makes their approaches different is *how* they handle this issue. Shakya Chokden's approach is unique in terms of bringing different doctrinal systems of Mahāyāna close to each other, and arguing that despite their divergent verbalizations of the ineffable—or the lack thereof, as in Nāgārjuna's Collection of Reasonings—all Niḥsvabhāvavāda systems, as well as systems of Alīkākāra and Tantra, provide sufficient means for getting access to its direct realization. The ultimate realized as the result of following those systems is always primordial mind which is an affirming negation. Following this approach, Shakya Chokden himself makes positive statements about the ultimate on the one hand and accepts its ineffable character on the other. He also utilizes a vast variety of divergent Mahāyāna writings to prove his point and also prove that those writings themselves in one or another way come down to the same point. As the result, voluminous texts composed by Shakya Chokden provide clear and detailed descriptions of divergent positions on the issue of ineffability held by different Indian and Tibetan thinkers. At the same time, they provide refreshing and provocative perspectives on this issue—perspectives that he developed through his encyclopedic knowledge and sharp intelligence. His approach thereby contributes

to our own understanding of the complicated topic of verbalizations of ineffability, and possibly also brings us closer to that ineffable reality which we will never be able to fully verbalize.

Bibliography

Brunnhölzl, Karl. *The Center of the Sunlit Sky: Madhyamaka in the Kagyü Tradition*. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2004.

Cabezón, José Ignacio *and* Geshe Lobsang Dargyay. *Freedom from Extremes: Gorampa's "Distinguishing the Views" and the Polemics of Emptiness*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2007.

Deshung Rinpoche, trans. by Jared Rhoton, *The Three Levels of Spiritual Perception*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995.

Gorampa Sönam Senggé (*go rams pa bsod nams seng ge*). *Distinguishing the Views: Moonrays of Essential Points of the Supreme Vehicle* (*Lta ba'i shan 'byed theg mchog gnad kyi zla zer*). Collected Works, vol. 5, 417-510. Bir, India: Yashodhara Publications, 1995. Also, Tibetan text and translation in Cabezón, José Ignacio *and* Geshe Lobsang Dargyay. *Freedom from Extremes: Gorampa's "Distinguishing the Views" and the Polemics of Emptiness*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2007.

Hopkins, Jeffrey. *Tsong-kha-pa's Final Exposition of Wisdom*. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2008.

Kapstein, Matthew. "We Are All Gzhan stong pas." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics,* vol. 7 (2000): 105-125.

Kelden Tsering (*skal ldan tshe ring*). *Presentation of Tenets of Glorious Sakyapas* (*Dpal sa skya pa'i grub mtha'i rnam bzhag*). Zhang kang then mā dpe skrun khang, 2001.

Komarovski, Yaroslav. "Echoes of Empty Luminosity: Reevaluation and Unique Interpretation of Yogācāra and Niḥsvabhāvavāda Madhyamaka by the Fifteenth Century Tibetan Thinker Śākya Mchog Ldan." Ph.D. Thesis, University of Virginia, 2007.

————. "Reburying the Treasure—Maintaining the Continuity: Two Texts by Shakya Chokden on the Buddha-Essence." *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 34, no. 6 (2006): 521-570.

————. (trans. and introduction). *Three Texts on Madhyamaka by Shakya Chokden*. Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2000.

Künga Drölchok (*kun dga' grol mchog*). *Detailed Analysis of the Liberation Story of the Great Paṇḍit Śākya mchog ldan* (*Paṇḍi ta chen po shākya mchog ldan gyi rnam par thar pa zhib mo rnam 'byed pa*). In Collected Works of Śākya mchog ldan, vol. 16, Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunzang Tobgyey, 1975.

Rendawa Zhönnu Lodrö (*red mda' ba gzhon nu blo gros*). *Dbu ma la 'jug pa'i rnam bshad de kho na nyid gsal ba'i sgron ma*. Sarnath, Varanasi: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1995.

Rhoton, Jared Douglas (tr). *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes: Essential Distinctions among the Individual Liberation, Mahāyāna, and Tantric Systems.* Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2002.

Rongtön Sheja Künrik (*rong ston shes bya kun rig*). *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-mtsen, vol. B, *kha*, Dehra Dun, India: Sakya College, 1999.

Sakya Pendita Künga Gyeltsen (*sa skya paṇḍita kun dga' rgyal mtshan*). *Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows* (*Sdom pa gsum gyi rab tu dbye ba*). Sa skya bka' 'bum, vol. 12 (na), 1a-48b. Also, Tibetan text and English translation by Rhoton, Jared Douglas. *A Clear Differentiation of the Three Codes: Essential Distinctions among the Individual Liberation, Mahāyāna, and Tantric Systems.* Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2002.

Shakya Chokden (*shākya mchog ldan*). *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 Works of Śākya mchog ldan, vol. 19, 1-137. Thimphu, Bhutan: Kunzang Tobgyey, 1975.

————. *Golden Lancet: Resolved Abundant Discourse on the 'Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows' Treatise* (*Sdom gsum gyi rab tu dbye ba'i bstan bcos kyi 'bel gtam rnam par nges pa legs bshad gser gyi thur ma*). Collected Works of Śākya mchog ldan, vol. vol. 6, 439-vol. 7, 229.

————. *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*, 319-499. Bir, India: Yashodhara Publications, 1996.

————. *Wish Fulfilling Meru: Discourse on the History of Madhyamaka* (*Dbu ma'i byung tshul rnam par bshad pa'i gtam yid bzhin lhun po*). Collected Works of Śākya mchog ldan, vol. 4, 209-248. English translation in Komarovski, Yaroslav (trans. and introduction). *Three Texts on Madhyamaka by Shakya Chokden*. Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2000; French translation of its concluding part in Tillemans, T. and Tomabechi, T. "Le *dBu ma'i byung tshul de Śākya mchog-ldan*," *Asiatische Studien* 49, no. 4 (1995): 891-918.

Visiting Assistant Professor
Department of Languages and Cultures of Asia
University of Wisconsin - Madison