

Tsongkhapa and the Teachings of the Wisdom Tradition

Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) was the founder of the Gelugpa or “Yellow Hat” order of Tibetan Buddhism. This soon became the dominant order in Tibet, making Tsongkhapa Tibet’s most influential teacher. Not only was this great reformer the leading teacher of the known or exoteric teachings, but according to Theosophical sources, he was also the leading teacher of the secret or esoteric teachings, the Wisdom Tradition. Some of these hitherto secret teachings were brought out in the late 1800s under the name Theosophy. We would therefore expect that, allowing for the differences necessitated by a different audience, and for what in his time had to remain secret, the basic or core teachings of Theosophy would be the same as the basic or core teachings of Tsongkhapa. But they are not. No, Tsongkhapa specifically and pointedly denied the first and third of what were brought out in 1888 by H. P. Blavatsky as the three fundamental propositions of the Secret Doctrine.

Tsongkhapa is described in Theosophical sources as “the reformer of esoteric as well as of vulgar Lamaism”:

When our great Buddha—the patron of all the adepts, the reformer and the codifier of the occult system, reached first *Nirvana* on earth, he became a Planetary Spirit; *i.e.*—his spirit could at one and the same time rove the interstellar spaces *in full consciousness*, and continue at will on Earth in his original and individual body. For the divine Self had so completely disfranchised itself from matter that it could create at will an inner substitute for itself, and leaving it in the human form for days, weeks, sometimes years, affect in no wise by the change either

the vital principle or the physical mind of its body. By the way, that is the highest form of adeptship man can hope for on our planet. But it is as rare as the Buddhas themselves, the last Khobilgan who reached it being Tsong-ka-pa of Kokonor (XIV Century), the reformer of esoteric as well as of vulgar Lamaism.¹

Tsongkhapa is also described in Theosophical sources as “the founder of the *Gelukpa* (“yellow-cap”) Sect, and of the mystic Brotherhood connected with its chiefs,”² and again as “the founder of the secret School near Shigatse, attached to the private retreat of the Teshu-Lama”:

As a supplement to the *Commentaries* there are many secret folios on the lives of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and among these there is one on Prince Gautama and another on His reincarnation in Tsong-Kha-pa. This great Tibetan Reformer of the fourteenth century, said to be a direct incarnation of Amita-Buddha, is the founder of the secret School near Shigatse, attached to the private retreat of the Teshu-Lama. It is with Him that began the regular system of Lamaic incarnations of Buddhas (*Sang-gyas*), or of Śākya-Thub-pa (Śākyamuni).³

The Teshu-Lama, or Tashi-Lama, more properly known as the Pañchen Lama, is the head of Tashi-lhunpo monastery located near Shigatse. This is where the secret Brotherhood alleged to have been the source of the Theosophical teachings was said to be centered. Tsongkhapa is therefore seen in Theosophical writings as being not only the reformer of exoteric Buddhism and the founder of the Gelugpa order, but also as the reformer of the esoteric teachings that we may call the Wisdom Tradition, and the founder, or at least re-organizer, of the secret school or Brotherhood in Tibet that the Mahatma/Bodhisattva⁴ teachers behind the Theosophical movement belonged to.

Further, Tsongkhapa’s reforms are seen in Theosophical writings as necessary correctives that he undertook, as a Buddha incarnation, in order to put the Buddha’s teachings back in line with the Buddha’s secret doctrines:

The records preserved in the Gon-pa, the chief Lamasery of Tashi-lhumpo, show that Sang-gyas left the regions of the “Western Paradise” to incarnate Himself in Tsong-kha-pa, in consequence of the great degradation into which His secret doctrines had fallen. . . . Until the Tsong-kha-pa period there had been no Sang-gyas (Buddha) incarnations in Tibet.⁵

We may then expect his exoteric reforms to be directly related to the esoteric teachings.

It is clear that the Mahatma/Bodhisattva teachers behind the Theosophical movement regarded themselves as followers of Tsongkhapa and his Gelugpas.⁶ The teacher referred to as the Maha-Chohan, the chief of the secret Brotherhood, is recorded as saying, after specifically referring to Tsongkhapa, “we, the humble disciples of these perfect lamas”:

Among the few glimpses obtained by Europeans of Tibet and its mystical hierarchy of “perfect lamas,” there is one which was correctly understood and described. “The incarnations of the Bodhisattva Padmapani or Avalokitesvara and of Tsong-kha-pa, that of Amitabha, relinquish at their death the attainment of Buddhahood—*i.e.* the summum bonum of bliss, and of individual *personal* felicity—that they might be born again and again for the benefit of mankind.”* In other words, that they might be again and again subjected to misery, imprisonment in flesh and all the sorrows of life, provided that by such a self sacrifice repeated throughout long and dreary centuries they might become the means of securing salvation and bliss in the hereafter for a handful of men chosen among but one of the many races of mankind. And it is we, the humble disciples of these perfect lamas, who are expected to allow the T.S. [Theosophical Society] to drop its noblest title, that of the Brotherhood of Humanity to become a simple school of psychology? No, no, good brothers, you have been labouring under the mistake too long already.⁷

What teachings did these Mahatmas/Bodhisattvas of the secret Brotherhood give out as their basic or core teachings?

The brotherhood of humanity formed the first object of the Theosophical Society, closely related to compassion, which forms the cornerstone of Tibetan Buddhism. Besides this, their basic or core doctrinal teachings were formulated as the three fundamental propositions of the Secret Doctrine. These are given in the Proem to H. P. Blavatsky's book, *The Secret Doctrine*, the major sourcebook of the Theosophical teachings:⁸

Before the reader proceeds to the consideration of the Stanzas from the Book of Dzyan which form the basis of the present work, it is absolutely necessary that he should be made acquainted with the few fundamental conceptions which underlie and pervade the entire system of thought to which his attention is invited. [p. 13]

The Secret Doctrine establishes three fundamental propositions:

(a) An Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless, and Immutable PRINCIPLE on which all speculation is impossible, since it transcends the power of human conception and could only be dwarfed by any human expression or similitude. It is beyond the range and reach of thought—in the words of *Māṇḍūkya Upanishad*, “unthinkable and unspeakable.” To render these ideas clearer to the general reader, let him set out with the postulate that there is one absolute Reality which antecedes all manifested, conditioned, being. [p. 14]

Further, the Secret Doctrine affirms:

(b) The Eternity of the Universe *in toto* as a boundless plane; periodically “the playground of numberless Universes incessantly manifesting and disappearing,” called “the manifesting stars,” and the “sparks of Eternity.” . . . This second assertion of the Secret Doctrine is the absolute universality of that law of periodicity, of flux and reflux, ebb and flow, which physical science has observed and recorded in all departments of nature. [pp. 16-17]

Moreover, the Secret Doctrine teaches:

(c) The fundamental identity of all Souls with the Universal Over-Soul, the latter being itself an aspect of the Unknown Root; and the obligatory pilgrimage for every Soul—a spark of the former—through the Cycle of Incarnation (or “Necessity”) in accordance with Cyclic and Karmic law, during the whole term.
[p. 17]

What, then, does Tsongkhapa have to say on these three ideas, the fundamental propositions of the Secret Doctrine? Even though Tsongkhapa’s major works are now available in English translation, I will purposely avoid quoting them here, reserving this for an appendix. I will instead quote statements of his views made by modern Geluggas, to avoid any possibility of taking his words out of context, as someone not trained in his tradition could easily do. It is obvious to all that the present Dalai Lama, being the direct heir to the unbroken Gelugpa tradition of Tsongkhapa, represents his views authoritatively.

Ultimate reality in the Gelugpa tradition is “emptiness”; that is, the fact that everything lacks, or is empty of, any real or independent existence of its own. Things do exist, but only in dependence on other things. They exist depending on causes and conditions. Things arise due to causes, and disappear due to causes. Nothing remains unchanged. Therefore, everything lacks an unchanging inherent nature, or *svabhāva*, that would allow it to exist always staying the same. Everything is empty of such an inherent existence, or *svabhāva*. This is the doctrine of emptiness, *śūnyatā*. While some have attempted to find in this emptiness an “absolute Reality which antecedes all manifested, conditioned, being,” as is postulated in the first fundamental proposition of the Secret Doctrine, for Geluggas emptiness is not this. As the Dalai Lama explains:

It’s important for us to avoid the misapprehension that emptiness is an absolute reality or an independent truth. [pp. 114-115] It is important to clarify that we are not speaking of emptiness as some kind of absolute strata of reality, akin to, say, the

ancient Indian concept of *Brahman*, which is conceived to be an underlying absolute reality from which the illusory world of multiplicity emerges. Emptiness is not a core reality, lying somehow at the heart of the universe, from which the diversity of phenomena arise. [pp. 117-118]⁹

The Dalai Lama's longtime translator is Thupten Jinpa, who completed the traditional Gelugpa monastic curriculum, receiving the highest degree, Geshe Lharam. He made a special study of the writings of Tsongkhapa. He then went on to take a Ph.D. at Cambridge University. His thesis has been revised and published in 2002 as *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*. In this book we have the most comprehensive and authoritative statement in English of Tsongkhapa's philosophical thought, that of the Middle Way or Madhyamaka. The following quote from this book summarizes from Tsongkhapa what the Dalai Lama said in the above quote.

What is being denied by all these terms of exclusion is the notion that something positive, perhaps a deeper reality, is being affirmed in the aftermath of negation. This is in direct contrast to those who think that the ultimate nature of reality according to Madhyamaka thought is some kind of an absolute—something along the lines of Leibnizian plenitude or Vedānta's Brahman—that serves in some way as the fundamental substratum of reality. According to Tsongkhapa, anyone who characterizes the ultimate nature of reality in positive terms ultimately falls victim to the deeply ingrained human tendency towards reification [i.e., attributing reality to something that is not real]. No matter what terms you may use to describe it, be it Brahman, plenitude, buddha-nature, the absolute, and so on, such a reified entity still remains an essentialist, metaphysical concept. Only a thoroughgoing negation can lead to full liberation from our tendency for grasping.¹⁰

Jinpa's term "essentialist" comes from *svabhāva*, "essence," or "inherent nature," understood to mean "inherent existence,"

or “intrinsic being.” *Svabhāva* is a key term in the Theosophical teachings. It occurs seven times in the Stanzas of Dzyan given in *The Secret Doctrine*, and is used in the Mahatma letters to describe a basic reality:

We will perhaps be near correct to call it *infinite life* and the source of all life visible and invisible, an essence inexhaustible, ever present, in short Swabhavat [*svabhāva*].¹¹

It is this, above all, that Tsongkhapa’s Gelugpa Madhyamaka doctrine repudiates. The ultimate truth of emptiness is, more fully, the emptiness of inherent existence. This is literally the emptiness of, or lack of, *svabhāva*. As explained by Jinpa, Tsongkhapa’s repudiation of *svabhāva* is total and unequivocal.

First and foremost, he [Tsongkhapa] wants to make it clear that the Mādhyamika’s rejection of *svabhāva* ontology must be unqualified and absolute. . . . The negation of *svabhāva*, i.e. intrinsic being, must be absolute and universal, yet it should not destroy the reality of the everyday world of experience. . . . [p. 297] [T]he Mādhyamika’s emptiness is the absolute negation of intrinsic being—i.e. it is a mere absence of intrinsic being with no positive content. [p. 299]¹²

That is, Tsongkhapa’s denial of *svabhāva* is absolute, with no implication of affirming *svabhāva* in some deeper reality. It is not like saying John Doe does not see with his left eye, thereby implying that he sees with his right eye. Tsongkhapa’s denial of *svabhāva* is a non-implicative, absolute negation. Moreover, this absence of *svabhāva* is itself the ultimate nature of reality.

In that Tsongkhapa saw the Madhyamaka’s *śūnyatā* (emptiness) to be a non-implicative, absolute negation is beyond question. It is, however, not a mere negation *per se*; it is an absolute negation of *svabhāva* (intrinsic being). By maintaining this, Tsongkhapa is suggesting that the absence of intrinsic being is the ultimate nature of reality!¹³

Tsongkhapa, then, denies *svabhāva* altogether, saying that the very absence of *svabhāva* is the ultimate nature of reality. So the ultimate nature of reality is the fact of emptiness, the fact that everything lacks an absolute essence. Emptiness here is a description of the way things are, not a description of what is. Theosophy, too, describes its ultimate reality, which it calls “space,” as emptiness, adopting an early translation of *śūnyatā*.¹⁴ But in Theosophy it is a description of what is, not a description of the way things are. In *The Secret Doctrine* we read:

“What is that which was, is, and will be, whether there is a Universe or not; whether there be gods or none?” asks the esoteric Senzar Catechism. And the answer made is—SPACE.¹⁵

As Blavatsky had explained earlier in another place:

Hence, the Arahat secret doctrine on cosmogony admits but of one absolute, indestructible, eternal, and uncreated UNCONSCIOUSNESS (so to translate), of an element (the word being used for want of a better term) absolutely independent of everything else in the universe; a something ever present or ubiquitous, a Presence which ever was, is, and will be, whether there is a God, gods or none; whether there is a universe or no universe; existing during the eternal cycles of Maha Yugas, during the *Pralayas* as during the periods of *Manvantara*: and this is SPACE, . . . Space, then, or *Fan, Bar-nang (Mahā-Śūnyatā)* or, as it is called by Lao-tze, the “Emptiness” is the nature of the Buddhist Absolute.¹⁶

Space or emptiness (*śūnyatā*) as taught in Theosophy is a description of what ultimately is, a name of the omnipresent, eternal, boundless, and immutable principle taught as the first fundamental proposition of the Secret Doctrine. It is not, as in Tsongkhapa’s teachings, a description of the way things are, the fact of their emptiness, or lack of *svabhāva*. It is not the total negation of *svabhāva*, absolute essence, but on the contrary is even equated with it. Blavatsky explains further:

Prakṛiti, Svabhāvat or *Ākāśa* is—SPACE as the Tibetans have it; Space filled with whatsoever substance or no substance at all; *i.e.*, with substance so imponderable as to be only metaphysically conceivable. . . . “That which we call form (*rūpa*) is not different from that which we call space (*Śūnyatā*) . . . Space is not different from Form. . . .” (Book of *Sin-king* or the *Heart Sutra*. . . .)¹⁷

This is not at all how Tsongkhapa teaches emptiness. For him, following the *Heart Sūtra* just cited, form is indeed not different from emptiness. But this emptiness is not space as described above. Rather, it is the ultimate nature of things. It is a nature (*svabhāva*) that is no nature (*niḥsvabhāva*). Everything is empty, without *svabhāva*. There is no underlying metaphysical essence, no “one absolute Reality.” Jinpa explains further:

Since Tsongkhapa’s ontology contains no notion of an underlying unitary substratum, it cannot be defined by any criterion as monistic. Although Tsongkhapa undeniably accepts that emptiness is the sole ultimate (*paramārtha*), there is no suggestion that it (emptiness) is some kind of underlying hidden absolute with unique ineffable metaphysical properties. For emptiness too is ‘relative’ in that its identity and existence are contingent upon the things on which it is defined. For Tsongkhapa, apart from the emptinesses of individual things and persons, there is no ‘universal,’ all-encompassing emptiness that can be characterized as some kind of great ‘mother-emptiness.’¹⁸

But the Wisdom Tradition teaches exactly a universal emptiness or space that can be characterized as a great mother-emptiness.

Space is called in the esoteric symbolism “the Seven-Skinned Eternal Mother-Father.” It is composed from its undifferentiated to its differentiated surface of seven layers.¹⁹

Moreover, the Stanzas of Dzyan refer to this Mother-Father as *svabhāva*. Describing the period of rest before the manifestation of a new universe, they say:

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Darkness alone filled the boundless all, for father, mother and son were once more one, . . . [1.5]

. . . Darkness alone was father-mother, Svabhavat, and Svabhavat was in darkness. [2.5]²⁰

From this father-mother, space or emptiness, having an essence or *svabhāva*, and being a substance so imponderable as to be only metaphysically conceivable, springs the universe at the time of re-awakening. According to a secret commentary:

“The Initial Existence in the first twilight of the Mahā-Manvantara [after the MAHĀ-PRALAYA that follows every age of Brahmā] is a CONSCIOUS SPIRITUAL QUALITY. . . .

“It is substance to OUR spiritual sight. It cannot be called so by men in their WAKING STATE; therefore they have named it in their ignorance ‘God-Spirit.’

“. . . As its substance is of a different kind from that known on earth, the inhabitants of the latter, seeing THROUGH IT, believe in their illusion and ignorance that it is empty space. There is not one finger’s breadth [ANGULA] of void Space in the whole Boundless [Universe]. . . .”²¹

“All is empty” teaches Mahāyāna Buddhism. Tsongkhapa explains that all is empty of any inherent existence or *svabhāva*, and that this fact of their emptiness is the sole ultimate reality. Theosophy explains “all is empty” as meaning that all consists of the imponderable something called space, an emptiness that is the sole ultimate reality. While everything in the phenomenal universe lacks any *svabhāva* or inherent existence of its own, it all consists of space, the one and only thing that does have an inherent nature or *svabhāva*. So Tsongkhapa and Theosophy fundamentally disagree on the most basic teachings of *svabhāva*, or an ultimate nature, and emptiness, or the ultimate reality.

As a last resort, can we possibly find something akin to the first fundamental proposition of the Secret Doctrine in the idea of the buddha-nature (*tathāgata-garbha*) that is held to be found within all? No, insists Tsongkhapa! As put by Jinpa:

Tsongkhapa is extremely sensitive to any temptation to perceive buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) as some kind of absolute, primordial entity similar to an eternal soul. He vehemently argues that to subscribe to any notion of a substantial entity called an essence is equal to adhering to the non-Buddhist concept of *ātman*. For Tsongkhapa, to adhere to such concepts is, as it were, to bring back the ghost of an eternal self through the back door!²²

We are therefore unable to find any point of agreement, as we would expect to find, between the teachings of Tsongkhapa and the first fundamental proposition of the Secret Doctrine, an omnipresent, eternal, boundless, and immutable principle. On the contrary, Tsongkhapa pointedly refutes any such thing, and makes this denial the basic platform of his teachings. It is one thing to not speak about an esoteric teaching, leaving the possibility that one actually accepts it but cannot speak about it; it is another to pointedly refute it, and to make this the central platform of one's teachings. It could even be said that the first fundamental proposition of Tsongkhapa's Gelugpa order is the denial of an omnipresent, eternal, boundless, and immutable principle. This is a very real problem for Theosophists, who hold Tsongkhapa to be the reformer of the secret Brotherhood to which their Mahatma/Bodhisattva teachers belonged.

The third fundamental proposition of the Secret Doctrine fares no better with Tsongkhapa. It is the fundamental identity of all souls with the universal oversoul, itself an aspect of the unknown root. In East Asian Buddhism, the *tathāgata-garbha* (the buddha-nature) is equated with the "one mind" (*eka-citta*) or universal mind. It is also equated with the *ālaya-vijñāna*, "storehouse consciousness," or "foundational consciousness." This is likened to the ocean and its waves. A wave rises and falls, like the individual consciousness that comprises an individual person, yet does not differ from the ocean, like the storehouse consciousness is the same as the one mind. But as just seen, Tsongkhapa rejects any understanding of the *tathāgata-garbha* as a universal mind in the sense of something that all minds or consciousnesses or souls could be one with. For him, any such

statement found in the Buddhist sūtras requires interpretation. Thus, the *tathāgata-garbha* is understood by Tsongkhapa as the emptiness of the mind. The *ālaya-vijñāna* as equated with the *tathāgata-garbha* is understood as emptiness. The *ālaya-vijñāna* as an individual consciousness, the highest part of the aggregate of consciousness (*vijñāna-skandha*) of a person, was specifically denied to exist by Tsongkhapa, even conventionally.²³ Like the *tathāgata-garbha*, the mind of clear light (*prabhāsvara-citta*) was understood as an individual potential. Any idea of a universal oversoul was pointedly rejected by Tsongkhapa. There is no universal oversoul that all souls could be one with, nor is there an unknown root that it could be an aspect of.

What, then, are students of the Wisdom Tradition to do, when Tsongkhapa, who their Mahatma/Bodhisattva teachers claim to follow, specifically and pointedly refutes the first and third fundamental propositions of the Secret Doctrine? I have attempted to show elsewhere that the doctrinal position of the Wisdom Tradition is Great Madhyamaka, and that this agrees with the fundamental propositions of the Secret Doctrine.²⁴ It is well known that when the Great Madhyamaka teachings were brought out in Tibet by Dolpopa and his Jonangpa order, they were forcefully refuted by Tsongkhapa and his Gelugpa order. It is also well known that one of Theosophy's main purposes, in harmony with its brotherhood ideal, is to attempt to reconcile all the religions and philosophies of the world. Less known in the West is that in the latter part of the 19th century, the same time that the Theosophical teachings were being brought out, another movement with similar aims was launched in Tibet. This is the Ri-mé, or non-sectarian movement. One of its main teachers was Ju Mipham. Mipham attempted a reconciliation of the long opposed Jonangpa and Gelugpa doctrinal positions. As described in a recent article by Dorji Wangchuk:

[Mi-pham] attempted to reconcile these seemingly irreconcilable positions. According to him, it is only in their approaches, and not in their intended goal that the Jo-nañ-pas and the dGe-lugs-pas differ. Mi-pham viewed the difference between the

Jo-nan emphasis on the positive aspect and the dGe-lugs stress on the negative aspect as a difference in the strategies (*thabs: upāya*) employed to argumentatively establish (*sgrub*) *nirvāṇa* and eliminate (*'joms*) *samsāra*, respectively.²⁵

Mipham is saying that the approach of the Jonangpa position is to emphasize the positive aspect by the strategy of establishing *nirvāṇa*, the intended goal, while the approach of the Gelugpa position is to emphasize the negative aspect by the strategy of eliminating *samsāra*, our worldly existence, in order to reach the same intended goal of *nirvāṇa*, the state of enlightenment. The one approach is to establish what is; the other approach is to eliminate what is not. Thus the first uses positive descriptions of what is; the other uses negative descriptions or negations of what is not. To say, then, that buddha-nature truly exists, as say Jonangpas, or that there is an omnipresent, eternal, boundless, and immutable principle, as say Theosophists, does not have to contradict that everything is empty of inherent existence, as say Gelugpas. But for six hundred years these two approaches have been seen as irreconcilably contradictory, and it will take more than a simple statement like this to reconcile them. So Mipham explains, using the needed technical terms, specifically how the two could agree. As summarized in the same article:

Although often ignored by both the parties, Mi-pham indeed saw a common element upon which they could agree. According to him, Dol-po-pa had accepted the idea that reality as experienced in meditative equipoise is free from manifoldness. Hence, if what one experiences in meditative equipoise is indeed ultimate reality, then even for Dol-po-pa, the highest reality is “freedom from manifoldness.” . . . Similarly, according to Tsonkha-pa, so long as one holds the “appearances [of phenomena characterised by] dependent origination” (*snañ ba rten 'byuñ*) and their emptiness (*stoñ pa*) apart, one has not yet perfected one’s view. One’s view becomes only then perfect when the “appearances” [of phenomena] and their “emptiness” are perceived simultaneously. . . . This “union of appearance and

emptiness” is, for Mi-pham, identical with “freedom from manifoldness.” Thus, according to him, both Dol-po-pa and Tsoñ-kha-pa, like many other Indian and Tibetan scholars and sages, were referring to one and the same absolute truth upon which, ironically, both vehement disputes and reconciliation hinged.²⁶

If this is true, that both were referring to one and the same absolute truth, it would be a matter of each approach using the strategy or means it regarded as necessary to reach the goal. The ultimate test of whether or not any given doctrinal position is an appropriate means, according to both Mahāyāna Buddhist values and Wisdom Tradition values, is that it must result in the furthering of compassion in the individual, and of brotherhood in the world. It is certainly the case that Tsongkhapa’s teaching of the ultimate reality of emptiness, as the fact that everything lacks any inherent existence, has passed this test, despite the seeming lack of any self who could feel compassion. Jinpa says:

Perhaps the most important test of valid insight into emptiness for Tsongkhapa is how one’s understanding manifests in action. If, as a result of prolonged contemplation on emptiness, the individual becomes more and more desensitized to the sufferings of the world, there is a serious flaw in one’s understanding of the teachings on no-self. According to Tsongkhapa, a deepening of one’s understanding of emptiness must naturally lead to a deepening of one’s belief in the principles of causality and karma. In other words, profound awareness of the truly empty nature of things and events must manifest in compassionate ethical behaviour. . . . One could say that compassionate action is the *authentic* way of being in no-self. . . . One could say that in the ethical sense, this refers to living a totally altruistic way of life, for all actions that pertain to others now stem from a perspective that is no longer rooted in the notion of a ‘truly’ important, egoistic self. From the philosophical point of view, such a way of life represents a mode of being that is free from grasping at supposedly ‘real’ entities.²⁷

The basic ethical teachings of Tsongkhapa have been seen to agree with those of the Wisdom Tradition, while the basic doctrinal teachings have been seen to disagree. Students of the Wisdom Tradition, those who look upon Tsongkhapa as a main teacher in their lineage, will not say of the doctrinal teachings that one is right and one is wrong. So they are obliged to try and reconcile them. While the reconciliation proposed by Mipham has not yet found acceptance among Tsongkhapa's Gelugpas, nor is it likely to any time soon, it may well fare better among students of the Wisdom Tradition.²⁸

Notes

1. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett from the Mahatmas M. & K. H.*, transcribed and compiled by A. T. Barker, first edition, London: 1923; second edition, corrected, London: 1926; third and revised edition, edited by Christmas Humphreys and Elsie Benjamin, Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1962, pp. 43-44; . . . in chronological sequence, arranged and edited by Vicente Hao Chin, Jr., Quezon City, Philippines: Theosophical Publishing House, 1993, p. 62.

2. *The Theosophical Glossary*, by H. P. Blavatsky, 1892; photographic reprint, Los Angeles: The Theosophy Company, 1971, p. 305.

3. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, [compiled by Boris de Zirkoff,] vol. 14, Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1985, p. 425, from her "Amita Buddha, Kwan-shai-yin, and Kwan-yin—What the 'Book of Dzyan' and the Lamaseries of Tsong-kha-pa Say."

4. The teachers behind the Theosophical movement were not known as Mahatmas in Tibet, but rather as Byang chubs, pronounced Chang chub, the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit word Bodhisattva. See on this: *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, letter no. 49, 1st and 2nd eds., p. 285; 3rd ed., p. 281; chronological ed., letter no. 20, p. 75 (Byang-tzyoobs, Tchang-chubs); and *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 16 (Byang-tsiub); vol. 6, pp. 97, 101, 109, 273 (Byang-tsiubs). Mahatma is only an Indian name for them adopted by Theosophical writers then living in India, because it was better known among the people there. See: *Esoteric Buddhism*, by A. P. Sinnett, fifth ed., 1885,

pp. 7-8. Nonetheless, the term Mahātma can be found in old Buddhist texts such as the *Yukti-ṣaṣṭikā* by Nāgārjuna, verses 4, 50, 54, 58. For an English translation of this text, see: *Nagarjuniana: Studies in the Writings and Philosophy of Nāgārjuna*, by Chr. Lindtner, 1982, pp. 100-119. This text has also been translated as “The *Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā* of Nāgārjuna,” by Fernando Tola and Carmen Dragonetti, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1983, pp. 94-123; reprinted in their 1995 book, *On Voidness: A Study on Buddhist Nihilism*, pp. 19-51. A new translation is *Nāgārjuna’s Reason Sixty with Chandrakīrti’s Reason Sixty Commentary*, by Joseph John Loizzo and the AIBS Translation Team, 2007.

5. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 14, p. 427. See also vol. 4, p. 11, which appears to be the original source of this statement.

6. Among the many Theosophical references indicating this are, for example: *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 6, p. 198: “In Sikkim and Tibet they are called Dug-pas (red-caps), in contra-distinction to the Geluk-pas (yellow-caps), to which latter most of the adepts belong.” *Ibid.*, p. 272: “Even Csoma de Kőrös knew very little of the *real gelukpas* and Esoteric Lamaism.” Vol. 4, p. 18: “a lamasery, with a school attached where the orphans of Red Caps, and the converted Shammars should be instructed in the ‘Good Doctrine’ of the Gelukpas.” Vol. 14, p. 433: “None of these has ever received his information from a genuine Gelugpa source: all have judged Buddhism from the bits of knowledge picked up at Tibetan frontier lamaseries, in countries thickly populated by Bhutanese and Lepchas, Bōns, and red-capped Dugpas, along the line of the Himālayas. . . . None of these have anything to do with the real philosophical Buddhism of the Gelugpas, or even of the most educated among the Sakyapa and Kadampa sects.”

7. “View of the Chohan on the T.S.,” more commonly known as the Maha-Chohan’s letter, published in a number of places, including *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, chronological ed., p. 480, and also is available online here at: www.easterntradition.org. The asterisked quote within this quote is given in the original as from “Rhys Davids,” but appears instead to be a paraphrase from *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*, edited by Clements R. Markham, London: Trübner and Co., 1876, p. xlvii.

8. *The Secret Doctrine*, by H. P. Blavatsky, 2 vols., first edition, 1888; many reprints; I use the definitive edition prepared by Boris de Zirkoff (pagination unchanged), Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978, vol. 1, pp. 13-17. The fundamental propositions of the Secret Doctrine are also found re-stated and expanded in *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, by Alice Bailey, New York: 1925, pp. 3-7.

9. *Essence of the Heart Sutra: The Dalai Lama's Heart of Wisdom Teachings*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002.

10. Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002, p. 60.

11. *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*, letter no. 15, 3rd ed. p. 89. See also letter no. 11, 3rd ed. p. 60: "To comprehend my answers you will have first of all to view the eternal *Essence*, the Swabhavat not as a compound element you call spirit-matter, but as the one element for which the English has no name." In addition, see letter no. 22, 3rd ed. p. 136: "Study the laws and doctrines of the Nepaulese Swabhavikas, the principal Buddhist philosophical school in India, and you will find them the most learned as the most scientifically logical wranglers in the world. Their plastic, invisible, eternal, omnipresent and unconscious Swabhavat is Force or *Motion* ever generating its electricity which is life."

12. Thupten Jinpa, "Delineating Reason's Scope for Negation: Tsongkhapa's Contribution to Madhyamaka's Dialectical Method," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 4, Aug. 1998, pp. 297, 299. This is restated in his book, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy*, on pp. 62-63. I have quoted this from his journal article rather than from his book, because when he slightly rephrased this in his book, he took out the word "*svabhāva*" and used instead the words "essentialist" and "intrinsic existence," respectively, in the two occurrences.

13. Thupten Jinpa, *ibid.*, p. 295. This is paraphrased in his book on p. 61. Note that the word "suggesting" used in Jinpa's sentence, "Tsongkhapa is suggesting that the absence of intrinsic being is the ultimate nature of reality," is only a concession to modern scholarly norms of usage. It has become customary in scholarly circles to only "suggest" things, not to declare them. But in fact, Tsongkhapa is here doing more than just suggesting; this is his firmly held position.

14. “Space” as the translation of *sūnyatā* was adopted from the early translation of the *Heart Sūtra* by Samuel Beal, found in his book, *A Catena of Buddhist Scriptures from the Chinese*, London: Trübner & Co., 1871, pp. 282-284. This translation was quoted by Blavatsky in her notes to T. Subba Row’s article, “The Aryan-Arhat Esoteric Tenets on the Sevenfold Principle in Man,” published in *The Theosophist*, vol. 3, no. 4, January, 1882, pp. 93-99. This article along with her notes was reprinted in *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 3, where the “space (*sūnyatā*)” quote occurs on pp. 405-406.

Then in the Proem to *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1, pp. 14 ff., where the three fundamental propositions are given, absolute abstract space is one of the two aspects under which the first proposition, namely, an omnipresent, eternal, boundless, and immutable principle, is said to be symbolized. The second of the two aspects under which it is said to be symbolized is absolute abstract motion. However, when speaking of this boundless, immutable principle, it is often simply called “space,” as in the esoteric Senzar Catechism quoted immediately below.

The reason that space must be primary, when the omnipresent, eternal, boundless, and immutable principle is symbolized under two aspects, is that for motion to exist, there must be something to move (see Mahatma letter no. 22, 3rd ed. p. 139). Hence, space is in some sense substantial, however imponderable, and cannot here be a mere absence. [Later research indicates that “space” is here the translation not of *sūnyatā* but of *dhātu*, meaning both “basic space” (Tib. *dbyings*) and “element” (Tib. *kham*s), as in the one element.]

15. *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1, p. 9.

16. Blavatsky’s notes on “The Aryan-Arhat Esoteric Tenets on the Sevenfold Principle in Man,” in *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 423.

17. Blavatsky’s notes, *ibid.*, pp. 405-406 fn.

18. Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason*, pp. 174-175.

19. *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1, p. 9.

20. *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1, pp. 27, 28.

21. *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1, p. 289. These are “Extracts from a private commentary, hitherto secret.”

22. Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason*, p. 139. On the *ātman* question, see “Ātman/Anātman in Buddhism and Its Implication for

the Wisdom Tradition,” by Nancy Reigle, available on this website: www.easterntradition.org.

23. This denial of even the conventional existence of the *ālaya-vijñāna* is found in Tsongkhapa’s *Notes on the Eight Great Difficult Points of the Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* (*rTsa ba shes rab kyi dka’ gnad chen po bryad kyi brjed byang*), written down from his lectures by his disciple rGyal-tshab-rje. It was made known in Lobsang Dargyay’s article, “Tsong-Kha-pa’s Understanding of Prāsaṅgika Thought,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1987, pp. 55-65. He summarizes this point on p. 60 as follows:

(1) Negation of *ālayavijñāna*: Tsong-kha-pa claims that the Prāsaṅgika system denies the existence of *ālayavijñāna* even on the conventional (*saṃvṛti*) level, not to mention on the ultimate (*paramārtha*) level.

These eight difficult points, or unique tenets, formed the subject of a Ph.D. thesis by Daniel Cozort that was later revised and published as *Unique Tenets of the Middle Way Consequence School*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 1998. This book includes translations of three commentaries on them. The text itself of the eight difficult or crucial points was translated by David Seyfort Ruegg in *Two Prolegomena to Madhyamaka Philosophy: Candrakīrti’s Prasannapadā Madhyamaka-ṛtīḥ on Madhyamakakārikā I.1, and Tsoñ kha pa Blo bzañ grags pa/rGyal tshab Dar ma rin chen’s dKa’ gnad/gnas bryad kyi zin bris, Annotated Translations. Studies in Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka Thought, Part 2. Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde*, vol. 34. Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien, 2002. The denial of the *ālaya-vijñāna* is the first of these eight difficult or crucial points, or unique tenets.

24. See “The Doctrinal Position of the Wisdom Tradition: Great Madhyamaka,” available on this website: www.easterntradition.org.

25. From Dorji Wangchuk, “The rÑiñ-ma Interpretations of the Tathāgatagarbha Theory,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens*, vol. 48, 2004, p. 199.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201. For a source statement by Mipham on this, see *Speech of Delight: Mipham’s Commentary on Śāntarakṣita’s Ornament of the Middle Way*, translated by Thomas Doctor, Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion

Publications, 2004, pp. 130-133; the same statement in *The Adornment of the Middle Way: Shantarakshita's Madhyamakalankara with Commentary by Jamgön Mipham*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005, pp. 139-140.

The technical term, “freedom from manifoldness” (*nisprapañca*, *spros dang bral ba*), is not at all easy to render into meaningful English. Thomas Doctor uses “freedom from constructs” here (p. 133), while the Padmakara Translation Group here uses “absence of conceptual extremes” (p. 139).

27. Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason*, p. 183.

28. In a recent account of Mipham’s position on emptiness and his qualms about the Gelugpa understanding of it, Mipham is shown as holding that Tsongkhapa’s final understanding of emptiness is the same as his, but that Tsongkhapa taught a provisional understanding of emptiness that his Gelugpas mistook for definitive and final. See *Mipham's Dialectics and the Debates on Emptiness*, by Karma Phuntsho, London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005:

Mipham’s reconciliatory tone is heard best in his repeated approbation of Tsongkhapa and his final understanding of Emptiness. [p. 211]

. . . despite the fact that most of [Mipham’s] polemical writings are critiques of Tsongkhapa’s interpretation and the Gelukpa understanding of Emptiness, he even went as far as to eulogize Tsongkhapa and identify his final understanding of Emptiness with the Primordial Purity (*ka dag*) of Dzogchen thought. He repeatedly argued that Tsongkhapa and other eminent Gelukpa masters like Changkya Rolpai Dorje (1717-86) held views consonant with the Nyingmapa and other Ngarabpa viewpoints, although they taught a provisional understanding of Emptiness that their followers, the Gelukpas, mistook for definitive and final. [p. 16]

Naturally, the Gelugpas, who received Tsongkhapa’s teachings in a direct lineage of transmission, find this hard to accept. Nonetheless, if something like this is not the case, there is no real way to achieve the reconciliation that Mipham attempted.

Appendix 1:
Tsongkhapa on No Ultimately Existing Principle

1. From his very early work, *Golden Garland of Eloquence: Legs bshad gser phreng*, translated by Gareth Sparham, vol. 1: First Abhisamaya, Fremont, Calif.: Jain Publishing Company, 2008, pp. 457-459 [single brackets are Sparham’s] [[double brackets are my additions]]:

The assertion, then, [of Dolpopa Shayrap Gyeltsen] that the later works of Maitreya, and the scriptures of the two brothers [Asaṅga and Vasubandhu] are getting at an unconditioned, ultimately established, final outcome [[*pariniṣpanna*]] empty of all conditioned phenomena is simply the fabricated nonsense of coarse minds. . . .

And in the section of the emptiness of ultimate reality it [[*Defense of the Three Sūtras*]] says,

“Even nirvāṇa is empty of nirvāṇa.” The ultimate reality—nirvāṇa—is empty of imaginary nirvāṇa. But does [the Lord] not say that nirvāṇa is “unmoved [[*kuṭastha*]]?” Though that is the philosophy of some thinkers in the Listener vehicle, ultimately there is no dharma called “nirvāṇa” at all.

Thus here and elsewhere, in many sections, it says again and again that there is an agreement between both [the Lord’s] statements that the ultimate, and emptiness are empty of their own-being [[*svabhāva*]], and [the Lord’s] assertion that the ultimate and emptiness are unmoving and permanent as the fundamental state that is not empty of being actual emptiness. This [*Defense*] says, “the true nature of dharmas does not exist in its imaginary aspect, and does *not* not exist in the state of

non-duality” intending the way dharmas actually exist, worried that negating the own-being free from all extremes in a demonstration of what is finally there when the two things that have to be negated have been negated will lead to establishing [that final reality] as an actual extreme [of total annihilation]. It does not say so within asserting that that [true nature of dharmas] is established as permanent and unmoving in fact, because in the emptiness of the unconditioned section it says, “If even in the Listener system they do not ultimately exist, what need to mention that this is also the case in the Emptiness system.” It thus says that the unconditioned is not established as fact.

2. From his middle period work, *Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, translated by Geshe Ngawang Samten and Jay L. Garfield, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 217, commenting on chapter 7, verse 33cd:

Since, as explained earlier, produced things do not exist inherently in any way, how could these four unproduced phenomena—cessation occasioned by analysis, cessation not occasioned by analysis, space, and reality—exist inherently? They cannot! This is explained clearly.

It follows from the extensive refutation of the true existence of produced things that there is no way that unproduced phenomena can truly exist. The point of asserting this in this text is that even those who maintain that the unproduced truly exists must maintain that it is an object of authoritative cognition. In that case, this argument refutes them: “The object to be measured is not measured.” Even if they maintain them to be objects to be achieved, “Whatever is to be achieved is not achieved” refutes them. Even if they maintain that it abides on a certain ground, “Whatever endures does not endure” refutes them. Even if they posit them as the cause of achievement, they are refuted as it is explained in the “Examination of the Aggregates.” Those who posit them in terms of characteristics and characterized should be refuted as it is explained in the “Examination

of the Elements.” Following these examples, the arguments explained in the other previous chapters could be reformulated as refutations.

If these arguments could not refute the true existence of the unproduced as objects to be achieved, etc., it would be impossible to refute the true existence of produced things. These cases are completely similar. Thus, if one develops a good understanding of the arguments advanced by the master, in each chapter all such misunderstandings will be eliminated. Therefore, to say that although the produced are not truly existent, the unproduced are truly existent is the statement of a philosophical neophyte.

3. From one of his last works, the *Medium-Length Exposition of the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, the section on “special insight,” translated by Jeffrey Hopkins in *Tsong-kha-pa’s Final Exposition of Wisdom*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2008, p. 101, referring to Nāgārjuna’s *Praise of the Element of Attributes*:

He says that the absence of an inherently established nature in these phenomena is the element of attributes [*dharmadhātu*] that is the object of meditation, and he says that just meditation on it is the supreme purifier of the mind. Therefore, how could it be suitable to cite this [*Praise of the Element of Attributes*] for the position that the emptiness that is the absence of the inherent establishment of phenomena appearing in this way is an annihilatory emptiness and that, therefore, a truly existent emptiness separate from it is to be posited as the emptiness that is the object of meditation!

This is like propounding that in order to remove the suffering of fright upon apprehending a snake in the east despite there being no snake there, the demonstration that there is no snake in the east will not serve as an antidote to it, but rather one should indicate, “There is a tree in the west.” For, one is propounding that in order to remove the suffering upon adhering to the true existence of what appears in this way to sentient beings, realization that those bases [that is, objects]—which are

apprehended to truly exist—do not truly exist will not serve as an antidote, but that rather one must indicate that some other senseless base truly exists.

The same section of this same Lam-rim work of Tsong-kha-pa's has also been translated by Robert Thurman. Since these works are often not easy to understand, it is always helpful to compare another translation when available. Here is this same passage from *The Life and Teachings of Tsong Khapa*, Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1982, pp. 150-151:

Therefore, Nāgārjuna, from the very same *Praise*, says, . . . , i.e., that the Ultimate Realm [[*dharmadhātu*]] to be contemplated is the very intrinsic nonreality of all things, and that such contemplation is the supreme cultivator of the mind.

Thus, how can it be proper to quote this (in support of) the position that, since the emptiness which is intrinsic realitylessness of things is a nihilistic emptiness, one must employ some different, truly established emptiness as the emptiness to be contemplated? This would be like saying that, to dispel the pain of terror from mistakenly thinking there is a snake to the east, "Showing there is no snake there would not serve as remedy, so one must show that there is a tree to the west!" For, what one is saying here is that the realization of the truthlessness of the objects of truth-habits is no remedy to cure beings' suffering from truth-notions about such apparent things, and that rather one must show that some other irrelevant object truly exists.

4. From his most definitive work, the *Essence of Eloquence*, translated by Robert A. F. Thurman as *Tsong Khapa's Speech of Gold in the Essence of True Eloquence: Reason and Enlightenment in the Central Philosophy of Tibet*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 193-194:

Therefore, anyone who maintains that the statements of the intrinsic unreality of all things in scriptures such as the *Transcendent Wisdom* intend all superficial things and do not intend the

absolute, contradicts the *Elucidation* and the treatises of Aryasanga and Vasubandhu, and also departs from the system of the Holy Father and Son [Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva].

The inquiry into the intention of the statement of intrinsic unreality asks both the intention in declaring unreality and the actual mode of unreality, and the answer deals with both in order. To explain the first, (the Buddha) collected all the statements of unreality or identitylessness with regard to all different categories of things, from form to omniscience, into three unrealities, intending that the explanation of their mode of unreality be easy to understand, since all superficial and ultimate things are contained within these three. However, though (the Buddha) needed to use such a technique, who is there in his right mind who would say that the ultimate was not included among the things declared to be unreal, when the *Mother Scripture*, etc., declared that all things, such as the five aggregates, the twelve media, and the eighteen elements, are non-existent, identityless, unreal; and particularly mentions the intrinsic unreality of all the synonyms of the absolute, such as “emptiness,” the “ultimate element,” and “reality,” etc.?

The same passage has also been translated by Jeffrey Hopkins in his book, *Emptiness in the Mind-Only School of Buddhism; Dynamic Responses to Dzong-ka-ba's The Essence of Eloquence: I*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999, pp. 83-85:

Hence [it is contradictory for some, namely, Dol-bo-ba and others] to explain that the statements in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras, and so forth, that all phenomena are natureless are in consideration [only] of all conventional phenomena [which, according to them, are self-empty in the sense of being empty of their own true establishment] but do not refer to the ultimate [which, they say, is itself truly established and empty of being any conventional phenomenon]. They thereby contradict the *Sūtra Unraveling the Thought* as well as the texts of Asaṅga and his brother [Vasubandhu] and are also outside the system of the Superior father [Nāgārjuna], his spiritual sons, and so forth.

It is thus: [When Paramārthasamudgata] asks about that in consideration of which [Buddha] spoke of non-nature, he is asking (1) about what [Buddha] was thinking when he taught non-nature and (2) about the modes of non-nature. Also, the answer indicates those two respectively. From between those two, let us explain the first [that is, what Buddha had as the basis in his thought when in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras he taught that all phenomena are natureless. There, Buddha] said that the limitless divisions of instances of phenomena ranging from forms through to exalted knowers-of-all-aspects have no nature or inherent nature. These phenomena are included in the three non-natures [that is, three natures—imputational, other-powered, and thoroughly established natures]. Thinking that when it is explained how those are natureless, it is easy to understand [the individual modes of thought that were behind his statement in the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras], he included [all phenomena] into the three non-natures [that is, three natures. For] all ultimate and conventional phenomena are included within those three. Also, with respect to the need for [Buddha's] doing thus, in the Mother Sūtras [that is, the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras] and so forth, all phenomena—the five aggregates, the eighteen constituents, and the twelve sense-spheres—are described as without thingness, without an inherent nature, and natureless. In particular, mentioning all the terminological variants of the ultimate—emptiness, the element of [a Superior's] qualities, thusness, and so forth—he said that these are natureless. Therefore, who with a mind would propound that the ultimate is not among the phenomena about which it is said that phenomena are natureless!

Note to Appendix 1

One may ask, if there is no ultimately existing principle such as the omnipresent, eternal, boundless, and immutable principle taught as the first fundamental proposition of the Secret Doctrine, what, then, does exist? As summed up by Thupten Jinpa, for Tsongkhapa

there is only conventional existence, only the lived-in world of our everyday experience. Jinpa sums this up in his 2002 book, *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*:

. . . for Tsongkhapa, to exist is to exist on the conventional level. On the ultimate level, however, no entity's existence remains tenable. [pp. 211-212]

Existence consists of both conventional and ultimate realities. Emptiness, the mode of being of all things and events, is the ultimate, while all other phenomena, both transitory and non-transitory, are conventional realities. However, emptiness cannot be said to exist in-and-of-itself, for this would mean that it is an absolute. So, although emptiness is not a conventional reality, it nevertheless exists on the conventional level. This is because nothing exists as an absolute. Seen in this way, conventional existence equals existence. Thus, one can say that for Tsongkhapa, to exist is to exist in the conventional sense. [pp. 152-153]

Therefore, according to Tsongkhapa, metaphysical postulates such as *ātman*, *brahman*, eternal *dharmas*, indivisible atoms, *ālaya* consciousness, *svasaṃvedanā* (self-cognizing awareness), and so on are all unnecessary phantom additions to the repertoire of existing things and events. Because of their essentialist metaphysical nature, according to Tsongkhapa, if these entities were to exist, they would possess a categorically distinct ontological status. This is because if they existed, they would have to do so as absolutes. But as we have seen, any notion of absolute is untenable from Tsongkhapa's point of view. . . . By including this third criterion, Tsongkhapa wishes to demonstrate that metaphysical postulates such as *ātman*, *ālaya*, eternal *dharmas*, and so on cannot be accepted as conventionally existent, for these metaphysical categories are incapable of withstanding ultimate analysis. . . . For Tsongkhapa, as shown earlier, the conventional (*saṃvṛti*) and the ultimate (*paramārtha*) are not two distinct entities with a categorically different ontological status. Rather, they are two aspects of one and the same world. There is only one world, the lived-in world of our everyday experience. [pp. 155, 157, 158]

**Appendix 2:
On Errors in H. P. Blavatsky's Writings**

It is important to recognize that many of H. P. Blavatsky's statements are not her own. That is, they are not her own in the sense of coming from her adept teachers, but rather they come from the published books available at the time she wrote. This means that, since the information found in these early books is very often faulty, so Blavatsky's statements are very often faulty. In the case at hand, that of Tsongkhapa, Blavatsky wrote:

In an article, "Reincarnations in Tibet," everything that could be said about Tsong-kha-pa was published.¹

All of the information found in this article, published in 1882, has been regarded by Theosophists as coming from Blavatsky's adept teachers, when in fact some of it came from books that were then available. About Tsongkhapa, Blavatsky wrote in this article:

It was because, among many other reforms, Tsong-Kha-pa forbade necromancy (which is practiced to this day with the most disgusting rites, by the Böns—the aborigines of Tibet—with whom the Red Caps, or Shammars, had always fraternized), that the latter resisted his authority. This act was followed by a split between the two sects. Separating entirely from the Gelukpas, the Duggpas (Red Caps)—from the first in a great minority—settled in various parts of Tibet, chiefly its borderlands, and principally in Nepal and Bhutan. But, while they retained a sort of independence at the monastery of Sakya-Jong, the Tibetan residence of their spiritual(?) chief Gong-ssu Rinpoche, the Bhutanese have been from their beginning the tributaries and vassals of the Taley-Lamas.²

Compare this with what is found in an 1876 book by Clements R. Markham, *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet, and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*, a book that is directly referred to by Blavatsky in her article. From p. xlvi:

In the middle of the fourteenth century a great reforming Lama arose in Tibet, named Tsong-khapa, who proved to be an incarnation of one of the Dhyani Buddhas, named Amitabha. . . . He forbade clerical marriages, prohibited necromancy, and introduced the custom of frequent conferences among the Lamas. His reforms led to a schism in the Tibetan church. The old sect, which resisted all change, adhered to their dress, and are called Shammars, or Dukpas, and Red Caps. Their chief monastery is at Sakia-jong, and they retain supremacy in Nepal and Bhutan.

Then on p. lii, after repeating that “the adherents of the older, but now heretical Red sect, still have a large monastery at Sakia-jong, and have retained supremacy among the Buddhists in Nepal and Bhutan,” Markham adds in a footnote:

The Abbot of the Red Cap monastery at Sakia, in Tibet, has the title of Gongso Rimboché. (Turner, p. 315.)

From this comparison, it is clear that Markham is the source of Blavatsky’s above-quoted statements. But this was not known to Theosophists; and A. P. Sinnett in his influential Theosophical classic, *Esoteric Buddhism*, quoted this very same passage from Blavatsky’s article, saying about it:

. . . for the complete trustworthiness of which in all its mystic bearings I have the highest assurance . . .³

Blavatsky, too, repeated this information again in her article, “Tsong-kha-pa—Lohans in China”:

Tsong-kha-pa gave the signs whereby the presence of one of the twenty-five Bodhisattvas or of the Celestial Buddhas (Dhyāni-

Chohans) in a human body might be recognized, and He strictly forbade necromancy. This led to a split amongst the Lamas, and the malcontents allied themselves with the aboriginal Bōns against the reformed Lamaism. Even now they form a powerful sect, practising the most disgusting rites all over Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, and even on the borderlands of Tibet.⁴

Diehard Theosophists might here say that this information is in fact vouched for by Blavatsky's adept teachers, and that it happens to correspond to what Markham wrote, so Blavatsky was free to use his statements as a source. However, a few lines later in Blavatsky's above-quoted article, she wrote:

The Tashi-Lamas were always more powerful and more highly considered than the Taley-Lamas. The latter are the creation of the Tashi-Lama, Nabang-Lob-Sang, the sixth incarnation of Tsong-Kha-pa—himself an incarnation of Amitabha, or Buddha.⁵

Similarly, a few lines later in Markham's above-quoted book, we find the source of this erroneous statement that the Dalai Lamas are the creation of the Tashi-Lama:

Thus arose the two powerful Abbots of Galdan and Teshu Lumbo, both of the Gelupka or Yellow sect; but the former were soon eclipsed by the superior piety and learning of the incarnations of Teshu Lumbo; and the sixth in succession of those incarnations made himself master of all Tibet, and founded the successions of the Dalai and Teshu Lamas as they now exist. This was Navang Lobsang. He rebuilt the palace or monastery of Potala, at Lhasa, in 1643, and in 1650 he visited the Emperor of China, and accepted the designation of Dalai (or ocean) Lama. After a long reign he went away to reappear as two infants, if not three; for, although he was the fifth Teshu Lama, he was the first Dalai; and since his time there have been two great incarnations of equal rank: the Dalai Lama at Potala, who is an incarnation of the Buddhisatwa Avalokiteswara (or Padma Pani); and the Teshu Lama at Teshu Lumbo, the incarnation of the Dhyani

Buddha Amitabha, and also of Tsong-khapa, who was himself the incarnation of Amitabha.⁶

Again, Blavatsky later repeated her erroneous statement in a footnote in her article, “Tsong-kha-pa—Lohans in China”:

It is curious to note the great importance given by European Orientalists to the Dalai Lamas of Lhasa, and their utter ignorance as to the Tda-shu (or Teshu) Lamas, while it is the latter who began the hierarchical series of Buddha-incarnations, and are *de facto* the “popes” in Tibet: the Dalai Lamas are the creations of Nabang-lob-Sang, the Tda-shu Lama, who was Himself the sixth incarnation of Amita, through Tsong-kha-pa, though very few seem to be aware of that fact.⁷

In the latter half of the twentieth century, full and reliable historical information about Tibet has become available. It is now well known that Nawang Lobsang was the fifth Dalai Lama, and he created the Tashi Lamas, or Panchen Lamas, not the other way around, as is stated and repeated by Blavatsky. The source of this confusion is obviously Markham’s book. Nawang Lobsang was not the first Dalai Lama and fifth Teshu Lama, the sixth incarnation of Tsongkhapa, as Markham says. Markham was led to make this error by information he gives in an intervening paragraph, one that Blavatsky also quotes from him:

Gedun-tubpa, another great reformer, is said to have received the spirit of Tsong-khapa in 1419, and to have died in 1474. He built the monastery at Teshu Lumbo in 1445, and it was in the person of this perfect Lama, as he was called, that the system of perpetual incarnation commenced. He was himself the incarnation of the Buddhisatwa Padma Pani, and on his death he relinquished the attainment of Buddha-hood that he might be born again and again for the benefit of mankind.⁸

This information is correct enough, but Gedun-tubpa (dGe ’dun grub pa) was retroactively made the first Dalai Lama,

not the first Tashi Lama, even though he in fact founded the monastery of Teshu Lumbo, or Tashi-lhunpo. The incorrect assumption made by Markham that Gedun-tubpa was the first Tashi Lama, or Panchen Lama, caused his error, an error then copied by Blavatsky. This is a straightforward error of historical facts, one that could hardly have been made by an adept living in Tibet. In brief, Markham got it wrong, and Blavatsky copied this error and put it forth as fact. Many Theosophists think it is gospel truth coming from her adept teachers, when in fact it is nothing more than an old error repeated. I do not think that, when Theosophists know this, they would be willing to attribute such an error to Blavatsky's adept teachers.

So with the other errors copied from Markham. Sakya-Jong is the chief monastery of the Sakya order, only one of three main "red hat" orders. Markham's statement that it is the headquarters of the Red Cap sect is therefore incorrect.

. . . the great monastery of Sakia-jong, the head-quarters of the Red Cap sect of Buddhists.⁹

It is the headquarters of only the Sakya order, not the Nyingma and Kagyu orders, which are also "red hat" orders. Moreover, to call the "red hats" all Dugpas is also incorrect. It is a different "red hat" order, the Kagyu, or more precisely, the Dugpa Kagyu sub-order, which actually has the name Dugpa (*'brug pa*), also phoneticized as Dukpa or Drukpa. This is the state religion of Bhutan. Blavatsky wrote in this same article, about the other "red hat" order, the Nyingma:

The "Dug-pa or Red Caps" belong to the old Nyingmapa sect, who resisted the religious reform introduced by Tsong-Kha-pa between the latter part of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries.¹⁰

Thus, Blavatsky, like other writers of the time, referred to all three of the "red hat" orders as Dugpas. So with further errors. There is no evidence that Tsongkhapa "forbade necromancy,"

as stated by Markham and repeated by Blavatsky, or even that necromancy was then practiced in Tibet, with or without “the most disgusting rites.” On the contrary, another major article written by Blavatsky, or in this case translated by her on behalf of her Tibetan informants, specifically counters the idea that Buddhists were Spiritualists, i.e., necromancers, as was claimed by Arthur Lillie in his book, *Buddha and Early Buddhism*. The whole point of this article, titled “Tibetan Teachings,” is that Buddhists, like Hindus, avoid contact with the dead, so would hardly be involved in invoking the spirits of the departed, like Spiritualists were then doing in Western countries. This article, too, like “Reincarnations in Tibet,” although having much new information, is not free from erroneous information copied from then existing books. It certainly includes important and hitherto unknown information about Tsongkhapa, including the following:

Our world-honoured Tsong-kha-pa closing his fifth Dam-ngag reminds us that “every sacred truth, which the ignorant are unable to comprehend under its true light, ought to be hidden within a triple casket concealing itself as the tortoise conceals his head within his shell; ought to show her face but to those who are desirous of obtaining the condition of Anuttara Samyak Sambodhi”—the most merciful and enlightened heart.¹¹

And this:

A prophecy of Tsong-kha-pa is current in Tibet to the effect that the true doctrine will be maintained in its purity only so long as Tibet is kept free from the incursions of western nations, whose crude ideas of fundamental truth would inevitably confuse and obscure the followers of the Good Law. But, when the western world is more ripe in the direction of philosophy, the incarnation of Pan-chhen-rin-po-chhe—the Great Jewel of Wisdom—one of the Teshu Lamas, will take place, and the splendour of truth will then illuminate the whole world. We have here the true key to Tibetan exclusiveness.¹²

But it also includes some unfortunate errors, that can only have been copied from then existing books, such as the following statement:

In the book known as the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, in the section on “the Supreme Ātman—Self—as manifested in the character of the Arhats and Pratyeka Buddhas,” it is stated that “Because from the beginning, all sentient creatures have confused the truth, and embraced the false; therefore has there come into existence a hidden knowledge called Alaya Vijñāna.”¹³

This statement was repeated by Blavatsky in her article, “The Secret Books of ‘Lam-rim’ and Dzyan.”¹⁴ Compare Samuel Beal’s 1871 book, *A Catena of Buddhist Scriptures from the Chinese*, pp. 124-125, where Beal is translating a work by Jin Cha’u that has been quoting the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*:

But now it may be asked “From what cause then did these worlds innumerable spring?” We reply, “They come from the heart (ātman) alone; they are made by that alone.” But because from the very first, all sentient creatures have confused the truth, and embraced the false; therefore has there come into being a hidden knowledge called, “Alaya vijnyāna,” and because of this, all the various transformations in the world without and the senses within, have been produced. Hence the Scriptures say, “Because of the primeval fallacy (fallacious cause), the whole phenomenal world has been originated, and from this cause too has sprung not only the various modes of birth, but the idea of Nirvāna itself.”

Beal added a footnote just before this paragraph began, which is the source of Blavatsky’s statement, “the Supreme Ātman—Self—as manifested in the character of the Arhats and Pratyeka Buddhas”:

The whole of this section is expressed in technical language, which it is difficult to put in an English form. The Supreme Self

(âtman) or Heart, is supposed not only to manifest itself under three forms or persons, but to occupy four “lands,” or discharge four supreme functions. 1. In its supreme condition, perfectly at rest, and yet ever glorious; 2. As manifested in the character of all the Bôdhisatwas; 3. As manifested in the character of the Rahats and Pratyêka Buddhas; 4. As manifested in the condition of Holy men (Buddhists) and worldly philosophers (heretics).

In 1871, when this was published, little was known of the doctrines of the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna Buddhism. So it is not surprising that Beal mistranslated their technical term *ālaya-vijñāna* as “hidden knowledge.” But as has long since been known, the correct meaning is “storehouse consciousness,” or “foundational consciousness,” or “substratum consciousness,” or “mind basis-of-all.” It has nothing to do with any hidden knowledge. This is clear even in Beal’s translated paragraph cited above. The whole phenomenal world has originated from the *ālaya-vijñāna*, and this itself has come into being from the primeval fallacy of people confusing the truth and embracing the false. This is basic Yogācāra doctrine, and has been known at least since the time of D. T. Suzuki’s 1904 article, “Philosophy of the Yogācāra”:

The Āliya is a magazine, the efficiency of which depends on the habit-energy (*hsi ch’i* in Chinese) of all defiled dharmas, and in which all the seeds are systematically stowed away. In one respect this vijñāna of all seeds is the actual reason whereby the birth of all defiled dharmas becomes possible, but in another respect its own efficiency depends on the habit-energy which is discharged by multitudinous defiled dharmas since beginningless time. In other words, the Āliya is at once the cause and the effect of all possible phenomena in the universe.¹⁵

These few examples are sufficient, I believe, to show that along with whatever new things Blavatsky brought out are a number of erroneous statements that were copied from the published books available at the time. The explanation for this

is, I think, not far to seek. Blavatsky, like the secretary of any busy executive today, was given certain basic materials and then left on her own to make a coherent presentation of them. This meant supplementing them with whatever sources were then available. She herself would not necessarily have known that the publicly available sources were faulty, any more than anyone else at that time would have. Her adept teachers were busy men, and simply did not have time to check everything she wrote. This is only common sense, and would have been taken for granted in any other situation. Blavatsky repeatedly disclaimed infallibility for her writings. It is quite unreasonable to assume that everything she wrote is free from errors, as some of her followers assumed. Because much of her material came from her adept teachers, they thought that all of it did. In her article, “My Books,” Blavatsky wrote that these “friends, as unwise as they were kind,” spread this idea, “and this was seized upon by the enemy and exaggerated out of all limits of truth.” She there continues:

It was said that the whole of *Isis [Unveiled]* had been dictated to me *from cover to cover* and *verbatim* by these invisible Adepts. And, as the imperfections of my work were only too glaring, the consequence of all this idle and malicious talk was, that my enemies and critics inferred—as they well might—that either these invisible inspirers had no existence, and were part of my “fraud,” or that they lacked the cleverness of even an average good writer.¹⁶

So even though Blavatsky’s writings contain much hitherto unavailable information found nowhere else, they must be read critically like anything else.

Notes to Appendix 2

1. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 14, p. 427.
2. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 12.
3. *Esoteric Buddhism*, by A. P. Sinnett, 5th ed., 1885, p. 182.

4. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 14, p. 427.
5. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 12.
6. Clements R. Markham, ed., *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet, and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*, London: Trübner and Co., 1876, p. xlvii.
7. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 14, pp. 427-428.
8. Markham, op. cit., p. xlvii. This is quoted by Blavatsky in *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 13 fn.
9. Markham, op. cit., p. xxviii; see also pp. lii, 179-180.
10. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 4, pp. 10-11.
11. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 6, pp. 99-100.
12. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 6, p. 105.
13. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 6, pp. 100-101.
14. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 14, p. 423.
15. *Le Muséon*, n.s., vol. 5, 1904, p. 377.
16. *H. P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol. 13, pp. 195-196.

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