



2005

## Book review of 'The Ornament of the Middle Way: A study of the Madhyamaka Thought of Santaraksita' by James Blumenthal

James B. Apple  
*University of Alberta*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

### Recommended Citation

Apple, James B.. 2005. Book review of 'The Ornament of the Middle Way: A study of the Madhyamaka Thought of Santaraksita' by James Blumenthal. *HIMALAYA* 25(1).  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol25/iss1/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).



# THE ORNAMENT OF THE MIDDLE WAY: A STUDY OF THE MADHYAMAKA THOUGHT OF SANTARAKSITA

JAMES BLUMENTHAL

REVIEWED BY JAMES B. APPLE

The *Madhyamakalamkara-karika* (MAK) is one of the major philosophical works of the Indian Buddhist scholar Santaraksita (c. 725-788). The MAK, consisting of 97 stanzas supplemented with an autocommentary (Vrtti: (MAV)) and commentary (Panjika: (MAP)) by Kamalasila (c. 740-795), is emblematic of the Yogacara-Madhyamaka synthesis in the later formations of Indian Madhyamaka thought. The treatise and its commentaries were first translated and introduced into ninth-century Tibet during the early dissemination phase (*snga dar*) of Tibetan Buddhist history and later, after two centuries of political instability, became a focus of systematic study in Tibet through the influence of Rgnog lo-tsa-ba blo-ldan-shes-rab (1059-1109). The MAK, along with Kamalasila's *Madhyamakaloka* (MA) and Jnanagarbha's *Satyadvayavibhangakarika*, were collectively known as "the three eastern Svatantrika (texts)" (*rang rgyud shar gsum*). These texts were actively studied in Tibetan scholastic centers, particularly from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. Geluk (*dge lugs*) traditions, beginning in the fifteenth century, did not place emphasis on the systematic study of these texts, but rather concentrated attention upon the thought of Candrakirti (c. 600-660), whose approach to Madhyamaka philosophy was strongly advocated by Tsong-kha-pa (1357-1419) and his immediate disciples.

Tsong-kha-pa and his immediate disciples such as Rgyal-tshab dar-ma-rin-chen (1364-1432), although not emphasizing Santaraksita's thought, did make note of it. *The Ornament of the Middle Way* by James Blumenthal provides for the first time in English a study and translation of Rgyal-tshab's "Memorandum on the Ornament of the Middle Way" (*dbu ma rgyan gyi brjed byang*: (*Brjed byang*)). The book centers on the interpretation of Santaraksita's MA/V through

incorporating the notes of Rgyal-tshab supplemented with a presentation and examination of the Geluk tradition's representation of Santaraksita's Madhyamaka.

Blumenthal's study confines itself to a descriptive rather than an interpretative analysis of Santaraksita's "middle way" philosophy (*dbu ma pa*). The introductory portion of the book provides an overview of Santaraksita and his writings, then outlines the scope of the study within the framework of Santaraksita's Yogacara-Madhyamaka synthesis. The core of the study consists of three parts. Part I, "Analysis of Texts and Arguments," provides a stanza-by-stanza narrative presentation of Santaraksita's MAK interspersed with Rgyal-tshab dar-ma rin-chen's memorandum notes to the MAK along with selections of Santaraksita's MAV. Part II, entitled "An Analysis of the Geluk Interpretation, Representation, and Criticism of Yogacara-Svatantrika-Madhyamaka and the Madhyamaka Thought of Santaraksita," examines Geluk representations of Santaraksita's thought and compares them to Santaraksita's "own presentation of ideas." This comparison, between a number of Geluk authors dating from the fifteenth to nineteenth century and the thought of Santaraksita as presented in Part I, is carried out through five selected areas of inquiry: hermeneutics of Mahayana Buddhist texts, path systems issues concerning the status of Hinayana arhats, Madhyamaka application of autonomous inferences, the two truths and the status of conventional truths, and self-cognizing cognition. Part III consists of a translation of Rgyal-tshab's *Brjed byang* with stanzas from Santaraksita's MAK inserted at appropriate points in the translation of the memorandum. The book also contains three appendices: the first consists of a translation of Rgyal tshab's topical outlines (*sa bcad*) found in the *Brjed byang*,

*The Ornament of the Middle Way: A Study of the Madhyamaka Thought of Santaraksita*

James Blumenthal

Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2004. Pp. 404.

the second and third are Tibetan text reproductions copied directly from the 1976 Sarnath edition of the MA and Brjed byang.

Blumenthal's study provides in readable English a book length exegesis and detailed description of the condensed arguments found in the MAK. The study clearly outlines the multiple levels of mereological analysis that Santaraksita applies in his multifaceted treatment of Indian Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophical systems. The strength of this study, despite its flaws, is that it illustrates the rhetorical manner through which later Geluk commentators utilized the MAK in their philosophical studies. In this sense, the study is a celebration upon the Geluk received cultural memory of commenting upon Santaraksita's MAK, and consists of a synchronic analysis of philosophical arguments through the amalgamation of traditional written and oral Geluk discourses on the MAK from the fifteenth to twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, the study has a number of problems that undermine the narrative description and synchronic points of the analysis it provides. These problems are in method and philology.

Diachronically the study fails to substantially address issues of context and genesis both in regard to the eighth-century Indian cultural milieu of Santaraksita and for the fourteenth-to fifteenth-century Tibetan scholastic arena of Tsong-kha-pa and his immediate disciples such as Rgyal-tshab. Any claim that this study somehow comes to terms with the thought of Santaraksita in "his own words" (p. 55) is problematic. The underlying flaw is not thoroughly incorporating Santaraksita's related works, such as the *Tattvasamgraha* (TS) and *Satyadvayavibhanganjanika* (SDVP), and further, failing to supplement them with the works of his immediate disciple Kamalasila, the MAP and *Tattvasamgrahanjanika* (TSP). This approach leads Blumenthal to exclude numerous details and texts. The study does not note the interlocutors of the eighth-century India milieu, such as the thought and followers of Uddyotakara, Kumarila, etc., providing no primary source documentation, in either Sanskrit or Tibetan, to substantiate the representation of such opponents by Santaraksita. For instance, the Vaisesika opponent is neither identified nor explained in MAK 10 (pp. 72-74). Likewise, tenets of the Samkhya system are confabulated, 'excellence' (*sattva*) among the three *gunas* is consistently translated as 'courage' (pp. 112, 113, 358n127), the 'five subtle elements' (*tanmatra, de tsam lnga*) as "five mere existences." Along these lines, the connections between Santaraksita's own works and his primary disciple Kamalasila, are not at all explored even though Blumenthal himself (p. 188) states that the MAP and TSP may be reliable sources for the thought of Santaraksita. As a result, opponents such as the Digambara Jains or Kumarila (MAV ad 36 (D=Derge) D63b5-6) are not specified based on the MAP (D99a4) nor is Kamalasila's refutation of Brahma (MAP D100b6-101a5). If the relationships between the MAK, MAP and the TS/P are mentioned, they are not thoroughly documented. For instance, the relationships between MAK

11, 12, 13, 16, 30 with TS 1989, 1990, 1991, 1999, 1255, respectively, are not noted. The Sanskrit citation of MAK 29 (p. 103) is mistakenly noted (p. 358n110) as correlating to TS 1255, when the citation actually corresponds to TS 1254. If there are Sanskrit notations, they are frequently erroneous, such as the notation of MAK 1 (p. 351n20), found in the *Bodhicaryavatara* (p. 103), that leaves out a half-quarter of a stanza ("svaparoditah"). On page 150 a well-known stanza from Bhavaviveka's *Madhyamakahrdayakarika* (3.12), "Without the ladder of correct customary truth, a wise man cannot ascend to the palace of reality (*tattva*)," is attributed to Santaraksita. Critical points of exegesis are thought away rather than thought through. For instance, Blumenthal chooses not to use Santaraksita's SDVP commentary on the two truths, following a Tibetan custom, and thereby forgoes an excellent opportunity to critically examine Santaraksita's position on the two truths. As recent scholarship has demonstrated, it is an error to dismiss the SDVP commentary as inauthentic merely on Tsong-kha-pa's understanding, particularly in light of Funayama (WZKS 1995:193) and Lee (JIBS 1993:203-205) who demonstrate through textual analysis that Santaraksita most likely wrote this commentary.

Although Blumenthal correctly notes the influence and reliance upon the thought of Dignaga and Dharmakirti by Santaraksita/Kamalasila, he does not adequately explain the relationships between these authors nor thoroughly document instances where Santaraksita's MAK/V is influenced or relies upon these thinkers, such as at MAK 28 (p. 102), MAK 48 (p. 124), and MAK 50 (p. 126). When Dharmakirti is mentioned, the source of his thought is incorrectly documented. Blumenthal cites (p. 84) a well-known stanza as being from the first chapter of Dharmakirti's *Pramanavarttika* when the source is *Pramanaviniscaya* I.38 (Cf. Ichigo, 1989n175; Vetter 1966; Williams 1998:25). The footnote (p. 356n73) accompanying this citation lists three secondary sources as a reference, none of which are listed in the bibliography. The bibliography does not list, utilize, or otherwise build upon essential previous Japanese and European studies of Santaraksita. Works by such Japanese scholars as Masaaki Hattori (*Dignaga on Perception*, 1968) and, most notably, Masamichi Ichigo ("Santaraksita's *Madhyamakalamkara*" in *Studies in the Literature of the Great Vehicle*, edited by Gomez and Silk, 1989) are not cited.

In brief, although Blumenthal has consecrated a great amount of effort to bring together a narrative study of the MAK and MAV, along with Tsong-kha-pa/Rgyal-tshab's memorandum and summary notes, the lack of careful and meticulous attention to philological details, to citation of sources, and to nuances of translation, leaves one to conclude that this study may not be a reliable source for the thought of Santaraksita or his interpreters.

James B. Apple, University of Alberta, Buddhist Studies