



HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 24
Number 1 *Himalaya; The Journal of the
Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*
No. 1 & 2

Article 24

2004

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Recommended Citation

Rossi, Donatella. 2004. Book review of 'Reflections on Reality: The Three Natures and Non-Natures in the Mind-Only School' by Jeffrey Hopkins. *HIMALAYA* 24(1).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol24/iss1/24>

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REFLECTIONS ON REALITY: THE THREE NATURES AND NON-NATURES IN THE MIND-ONLY SCHOOL

JEFFREY HOPKINS

REVIEWED BY DONATELLA ROSSI

This text is part of a three-volume series focused on tenets about emptiness pertaining to the Mind-Only Indian Buddhist School. These tenets have been analyzed and commented upon in great depth by the famous fourteenth century master Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang Grags-pa (1357-1419), who, apart from being the spiritual father of the dGe-lugs-pa School, represents one of the principal philosophical thinkers in the entire history of Tibetan Buddhism. He continues to inspire and challenge scholars and masters of all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism, both in Tibet and Mongolia, with his profound analytical knowledge and insight. The renowned Prof. Hopkins is a very prolific writer and one of the most prestigious experts on Tibetan and Buddhist Studies; by presenting this series to the specialized and non-specialized readership, he provides a very valuable tool for approaching and understanding Tsong-kha-pa's thought. His work is highly approachable and is endowed with great clarity of exposition, detailed synopses, thoroughness in the presentation of the relevant tenets and discourses, germane use of primary Indo-Tibetan written and oral sources, pertinent opinions of contemporary Tibetan scholars on the subject matter, cultural realism—as far as the Tibetan monastic structural society is concerned—and intellectually provocative and suggestive comments and ideas.

The series is centered on a fundamental work by Tsong-kha-pa known by its abridged title *The Essence of Eloquence* (tib. drang ba dang nges pa'i don rnam par phyed ba'i bstan bcos legs bshad snying po). The first volume of the series, *Emptiness in the Mind-Only School of Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) contains an annotated translation of two sections of the text, the Prologue and the section on the Mind-Only School. The third volume, *Absorption in No External World*, “examines a plethora of fascinating points on these

same sections . . . raised in six centuries of Tibetan and Mongolian commentary,” with the purpose of “bring[ing] to life scholastic controversies in order both to stimulate the metaphysical imagination and to show the non-monolithic nature of the interpretations of the followers of a seminal figure” (viii). The volume reviewed introduces and presents various aspects of the above-mentioned sections into six parts. Since through this venue it is not possible to present with much detail all the multi-faceted aspects and nuances of Hopkins' work (which clearly deserves to be read in order to appreciate its value), I will limit myself to an essential description of what in my humble opinion represents some of the focal issues.

In *The Essence of Eloquence*, Tsong-kha-pa concentrates his analysis on what is definitive and what is not definitive (therefore requiring interpretation) in the words of the Buddha—especially for what concerns the teachings expounded by the Victorious One on the three occasions known as the “turning of the wheels of the Dharma.” The textual basis for this discourse is given by a famous sutra known as the *Sutra Unraveling the Thought* (samdhinirmocana sutra), which, according to the tradition, was expounded by the Buddha himself in India. This sutra contains ten chapters centered on questions asked by nine Bodhisattvas and one Hearer, with Buddha's relevant replies. The seventh chapter presents in detail the principle of the so-called “three natures,” and it is on this basis that Tsong-kha-pa elaborates about the definitive and non-definitive interpretation of Buddha's doctrines. The issue of interpretation is a most important one in earlier and later Buddhist hermeneutics: it has been the source of many controversies, but it also represented a fundamental element for major philosophical and metaphysical developments. In this respect, Tsong-kha-pa quotes various passages from the *Sutra Unraveling the Thought*. In particular, the passage concerning the propaga-

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Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

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tion of the doctrine in three distinct phases says: “Initially, in the area of Varanasi in the Deer Park called “Sage’s Propounding,” the Supramundane Victor thoroughly turned a wheel of doctrine for those engaged in the Hearer Vehicle, fantastic and marvelous which none —god or human—had previously turned in a similar fashion in the world, through teaching the aspects of the four noble truths. Furthermore, that wheel of doctrine turned by the Supramundane Victor is surpassable, affords an occasion [for refutation], requires interpretation, and serves as a basis for controversy. However, based on just the naturelessness of phenomena and based on just the absence of production, the absence of cessation, quiescence from the start, and naturally passed beyond sorrow, the Supramundane Victor turned a third wheel of doctrine for those engaged in all vehicles, possessed of good differentiation, fantastic and marvelous. This wheel of doctrine turned by the Supramundane Victor is unsurpassable, does not afford an occasion [for refutation], is of definitive meaning, and “does not serve as a basis for controversy” (109). The reason the Buddha expounded doctrines that could be refuted and needed interpretation falls under the register of the famous ‘skilful means’ utilized by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in their incessant work meant to create the conditions of spiritual development for sentient beings, so that the truth about the nature of reality can be gradually absorbed and understood without fear by disciples of different levels of capacity. The three natures mentioned in the Sutra refer to “other-powered natures”, phenomena produced by causes and circumstances not determined by each single phenomenon; “imputational natures,” i.e., the appearing of self and other, or subject and object, as distinct and separated entities, due to dualistic conceptuality, which also unfold as “the establishment of a phenomenon by way of its own character as the referent of a conceptual consciousness or of a word” (43); “thoroughly established natures,” such as “the emptiness of a tree’s or a body’s establishment by way of its own character as the referent of a conceptual consciousness or of a term and the emptiness of its being a separate entity from the consciousness apprehending it [...]. The reason such is called a thoroughly established nature is that (1) it is an object of observation by a path of purification, (2) it does not change into something else, and (3) it is the supreme of all virtuous phenomena” (44). Related to the three natures are the two truths, the conventional one, which includes the so-called other-powered natures and imputational natures, and the ultimate one, defined as “a phenomenon that is a final object of observation purifying obstructions through taking it as an object of apprehension and meditating on it” (46). It is through the analysis and non-conceptual understanding of the real mode of being of phenomena that adepts can gradually come to realize the ultimate nature of reality and

abandon attachment to the biased view of duality that is at the source of all expressions of suffering.

Of special interest is Part Four of Hopkins’ work (273-391), which is dedicated to the views concerning the so-called “other emptiness” of the Buddha matrix (tathagatagarbha) and its relevant topics, as it has been promulgated by the famous master of the Jo-nang-pa school, Dol-po-pa Shes-rab rGyal-mtshan (1292-1361). His provocative ideas, supported by textual sources drawn from both the Sutra and Tantra Series, gave rise to the well-known controversy—unique to Tibet as far as the development of Mahayana doctrines is concerned—about the Buddha matrix as either being “empty of self” (tib. rang stong), the view sustained by the dGe-lugs-pa order, or as being “empty of other” (tib. gzhan stong), the view sustained by the Jo-nang-pas, that is to say, not empty of itself, but empty of accidental defilements and endowed with numerous enlightened qualities. Prof. Hopkins, quoting Shes-rab rGyal-mtshan, Tsong-kha-pa and several other pertinent sources, objectively presents these views, and shows in a very detailed fashion how the criticism, comments, elaborations and refuting conclusions (not always exhaustive) of Tsong-kha-pa and his followers took shape.

In the final Chapter, Dread of Reality (490-505), Prof. Hopkins offers us reflections on various aspects of the Tibetan approach to liberation as conceived by Tsong-kha-pa and his scholarly followers, which indeed “presents an intricately formulated series of paths, the very orderliness of which gives an impression of smooth, methodical progress. The elegance of the architecture of the system suggests that with the will to perform a graded series of practices, like following a map to a city, enlightenment is sure to be found” (490). This is actualized at first through analytical reasoning and then by permeation and absorption in non-conceptuality of the real nature of phenomena. Prof. Hopkins’ considerations about several factors related to the religious aspect of the system of Tibetan Buddhism and its socio-cultural implications are especially interesting and sagacious. He further considers how for dGe-lugs-pa scholars the power of well-reasoned faith is indispensable for overcoming all obstacles, including the dread of annihilation that the deluded mind could create to block spiritual realization of the nature of the mind and its purity; but also, and most aptly so, he points out that faith not based on reasoning but “on inklings [and] glimpses . . . is a central element in leading a practitioner, consciously or unconsciously, to [the] profound experience” (499) of the “manifestation of the mind of clear light” (502), which can only appear as a dreadful alien state by virtue of the mental afflictions experienced by the practitioner, and that instead becomes familiar and sacred precisely when “withdrawal of the energy of attachment” (505) is eventually actualized. As Prof. Hopkins says, “To withdraw from appearances, it



is necessary to come to disbelieve in their veracity, this being why Tibetan colleges put great emphasis on multiple approaches for reasoned understanding of the thoroughly established nature, emptiness. The underpinnings of habitual assent to the deceptive allure of the concreteness of objects' being established by way of their own character as the referents of their respective conceptual consciousnesses are challenged through argumentation internalized in meditation such that the reasonings themselves rise above mere verbiage with shattering import. It is clear that these approaches are meant not as superficial exercises in sophistry but to disturb and destroy the process of assent to the appearance of other-powered natures in the guise of the imputational nature[, so that the] psychology of cyclic existence and of finitude is put

under assault" (464-465).

The work ends with three interesting Appendixes (506-537), in which Prof. Hopkins continues the presentation of Tibetan discourses that developed around the issue of the two types of emptiness expounded by the Mind-Only School, comparing them with discussions and opinions of present-day scholars from the US, Japan, and Europe, "thereby demonstrating how the two forms of scholarship refine and enhance each other" (vii).

In conclusion, Prof. Hopkins' endeavor, which is the fruit of many years of assiduous dedication, is to be considered as a fundamental and inspiring work of definitive worth for the study of philosophical tenets that represent a most influential and engaging aspect in the history of Tibetan Buddhism.



Sweeping monk

PHOTO: DAVID GREENSHIELDS