The Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy of India and Tibet contains several major strands, and while some strands were eventually construed to be flawed, one became dominant in Indian Mahāyāna. Its hegemony continued in Tibet, where it became the largely unquestioned pinnacle of Buddhist thought. It is the Madhyamika or “Middle Way” philosophy, initially developed by Nāgārjuna (fl. third century).

In the context of Mahāyāna Buddhism, sweeping claims rarely survive a careful review of the historical evidence, but in saying that the Madhyamika eventually became the pinnacle of Indo-Tibetan Mahāyāna thought, one is unlikely to run afoul of historical contradictions. The superiority of the Madhyamika is nevertheless not a simple matter, for the term applies to a wide range of stances. In Tibet especially, the great variety of systems called “Madhyamika” (Tib. dbu ma) might lead one to conclude that the term simply became an obligatory epithet for a tradition’s most cherished philosophy, whatever it might be. This conclusion, however, would belie the commonalities that Madhyamika thinkers share—commonalities that become evident when they trace themselves back to Nāgārjuna, the revered originator of Madhyamika thought.

This essay will thus focus on Nāgārjuna’s initial articulation of Madhyamika, and it will then examine the central developments in the Indian and Tibetan traditions he inspired.
Traditionally depicted as being at once philosopher, contemplative adept, and alchemist, Nāgārjuna composed various texts that provide the philosophical underpinning for the burgeoning Mahāyāna influences in Indian Buddhism. Chief among his texts is *Wisdom: Root Verses on the Middle Way* (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā), which received the most commentarial attention and has had the greatest impact. Although sometimes questioned in their authorship, five other texts are also especially important sources for his philosophical views, including the *Precious Garland* (Ratnāvali), in which his arguments are integrated with aspects of Buddhist practice. In various ways, these philosophical works evince the forces at work in the rise of Indian Mahāyāna.

One aspect of the Mahāyāna especially important to Nāgārjuna's philosophy arises from the shifts in attitudes and practices that bear on the nature of a Buddha or “awakened” being. Prior to Nāgārjuna, visual depictions of the historical Buddha represented him not iconically as present, but aniconically as absent. Such depictions include an empty throne or a set of footprints. As these depictions suggest, all that remained were traces of the Buddha, including his relics and, most important, his teachings. Around Nāgārjuna's time, however, new depictions arise in which the Buddha is fully present in a remarkable physical form. The Buddha thus reemerges in the Buddhist world, and in part this means that, for him, nirvāṇa did not signify an utter cessation or end. Instead, this period witnesses the development of a new notion of nirvāṇa as “unlocated” (apratiṣṭhita). The Buddha is not situated in the suffering world of cyclic existence (saṃsāra), nor is he located in some quietistic cessation (niruddha). Instead, he is not bound by either state but remains free to continue expressing enlightened activity in the world.

Whatever may have motivated such shifts in attitudes about the Buddha, the result is a corresponding reconfiguration of nirvāṇa as the final goal of Buddhist practice. Earlier Buddhism emphasizes the cessative quality of nirvāṇa; it is the end of suffering, an escape from the “prison of saṃsāra.” In the Mahāyāna, however, mere cessation is no longer the final goal. Nirvāṇa becomes a radical transformation that is indeed the cessation of saṃsāra, but also the full “blossoming” or “awakening” (bodhi) of a buddha's capacities to aid others in their search to end suffering. In a typical trope, one Mahāyāna literary text presents the figure of Śāriputra, a disciple of the Buddha, who rhetorically represents a pre-Mahāyāna view. Assembled with others to hear the Buddha's teaching, Śāriputra overhears someone speak of how beautiful the setting is, but as he surveys the environment, all he sees are the peaks and valleys of saṃsāra, a world filled with ordure. His thoughts become known to the Buddha, who, to make a dramatic point, momentarily alters Śāriputra's perception, such that now he beholds the environment as a magnificent and breathtakingly beautiful heaven. The point is an obvious one: achieving freedom from saṃsāra no longer requires an escape to nirvāṇa, but rather a transformation such that saṃsāra itself becomes nirvāṇa.

This literary reconfiguration of nirvāṇa crucially requires a philosophical complement, for it poses insurmountable problems for the form of philosophy, generally characterized as the Abhidharma, that precedes Nāgārjuna and the Mahāyāna. For Abhidharma theorists, the constituents of body and mind—and indeed, the world itself—are all products of karma. That karma is caused by “ignorance” (avidyā), whose distortions lead inevitably to suffering. Thus, as the products of ignorance, the constituents of mind, body, and world are saṃsāra, an incessant stream of suffering. Moreover, since ignorance is central to the causal process that produces those constituents, they are by their very “nature” (svabhāva) products of ignorance. Thus, the cessation of ignorance—the root cause of saṃsāra—must also lead to the cessation of those constituents. In this way, on the Abhidharma view the cessation of saṃsāra does not permit a continued presence in the world because with the cessation of ignorance comes not only the cessation of saṃsāra for the one who has ended ignorance, but also the end of that being's mind and body in a final nirvāṇa (parinirvāṇa) where no products of ignorance are possible. To accommodate the notion that the attainment of final nirvāṇa no longer entails a Buddha's utter absence, the Mahāyāna thus requires a philosophical view whereby the end of suffering still permits participation in the world—a view whereby the constituents of mind, body, and world are not, in their very nature, the products of ignorance. The need for such a philosophy is central to Nāgārjuna's context, and it is answered by one of his best-known aphorisms:

Saṃsāra is not at all different from Nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is not at all different from saṃsāra. (Wisdom 25.19)

From the perspective of early Buddhism, Nāgārjuna here presents so radical a view that one might consider him to be breaking entirely with his Buddhist predecessors. His writings, however, rely heavily on the Abhidharma, and his philosophical project rests on some fundamental presuppositions that he inherits. One issue in particular is the notion, cited above, that ignorance fuels saṃsāra, and that the way out of saṃsāra requires the elimination of ignorance. This principle lies at the core of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, most especially the claim that suffering (the first truth) has an origin (the second truth). For the Abhidharma traditions, suffering's origin was generally conceived as the aforementioned ignorance: a cognitive defect that distorted each moment of awareness. Articulated as a belief, it is the notion that for each person there is an absolute, unchanging, nondependent Self (ātman) that is the one who perceives, who acts as an agent, who controls the mind and body, and so on. For Abhidharma theorists, this distorted belief in an absolute Self not only leads to ineffective actions motivated by the belief, but also drives the causal process of compulsive rebirth in saṃsāra. And Nāgārjuna very much agrees when he says that “when [the attitudes] 'I' and 'my' have ceased, the appropriation [of the next embodiment] ceases. Through the cessation of appropriation, birth ceases” (Wisdom 18.4).
Early Buddhist arguments against this notion of an absolute Self take various forms, but they often refer to the constituents of the mind and body, known as the "aggregates" (skandha). One well-known strategy is a mereological critique, whereby this alleged Self is analyzed in relation to its constituents, the aggregates. Just as a chariot, when analyzed in terms of its parts, cannot exist as either identical to or different from those parts, so, too, the Self cannot exist as identical to or different from the aggregates. Nagarjuna also endorses this argument (e.g., Wisdom 18.1), whose intricacies deserve more attention than is possible here. Nagarjuna's key revision is to move beyond a critique merely of a Self in persons; instead, he redirects and sharpens the analysis in an attempt to demonstrate that even the aggregates lack any essential identity.

The word "essence" here renders a key Sanskrit term, *svabhāva*, which is the main object of Nagarjuna's critiques. In part to serve the mereological analysis mentioned above, the Abhidharma traditions formulated precise accounts of the constituents of mind, body, and world. In the Abhidharma of the Sarvāstivāda, one of Nagarjuna's main objects of critique, these constituents are termed "elements" (*dharmas*), and they are "substantially real" (*dravyasat*) or "ultimately real" (*paramārthasat*) in that they are irreducible. In contrast, things that are reducible to these primary elements are real only in terms of designations (*prajñāpatisat*); that is, they are only conventionally real (*vyavahiirasat*). On this analysis, a vase, for example, would exist only conventionally because it can be reduced to the particles that compose it. In contrast, the particles themselves, being irreducible, exist ultimately. Moreover, a thing that exists ultimately—or "substantially" in Abhidharma terminology—is not only irreducible; it also exists in terms of its "own nature" (*svabhāva*). In this way, the Abhidharma formulates the notion of "two truths" or "two realities" (*svabhāva svabhāvam*), the ultimate reality of substantially existent things and the conventional reality of whatever is made from them.

Although Nagarjuna does not always clearly target a particular Abhidharma tradition, he indubitably focuses on the notion that an ultimately existent thing—be it a material element or an irreducible component of mind—exists in terms of its *svabhāva*. For Nagarjuna, this means at least that if an entity exists "essentially" (*svabhāvataḥ*), its identity—what it truly is—must be established without any dependence on any other entity for its existence. In contrast, an entity might exist *parabhāvataḥ*, that is, in terms of another (*para*) entity's nature (*bhiiva*). To return to the example of the vase, it exists not in itself (*svabhāvataḥ*), but rather by virtue of the existence of something else, namely, the particles that compose it. As such, the vase only exists conventionally; to exist ultimately, it must exist in itself, that is, *svabhāvataḥ* or in terms of its *svabhāva*. It is this sense of *svabhāva*—as marking what is intrinsic or essential to an ultimately real thing—that Nagarjuna targets in his arguments. He will seek to demonstrate that any search for an ultimately real identity—something that exists with *svabhāva* or essential identity—always ends in failure.

In targeting *svabhāva* or "essence," Nagarjuna expands the definition of ignorance. Later commentators note that, in addition to the "essencelessness of persons" (*pudgalanairātmya*) that the Abhidharma philosophers seek to demonstrate, Nagarjuna argues for the "essencelessness of things" (*dharmanairātmya*). Hence, while Abhidharma thinkers maintain that the world's basic elements (*dharmas*) are ultimately real because they are irreducible, for Nagarjuna even these basic building blocks do not ultimately exist. In short, the upshot of Nagarjuna's arguments is that no person or thing whatsoever exists essentially (*svabhāvataḥ*), and since essential existence is what constitutes ultimate existence, no person or thing whatsoever exists ultimately. Instead, all things are "empty of essence" (*svabhāvasūnyam*), and this "emptiness" (*sūnyatā*) is the final answer to any inquiry into whether any entity exists ultimately.

Some of Nagarjuna's detractors interpret his philosophy of emptiness as nihilism, but on examination, a nihilistic interpretation is difficult to defend. Wisdom's first chapter argues against the possibility of ultimately real causation. The crux of the argument appears in this aphorism:

A causal condition for either an already existent thing or a not yet existent thing does not make sense. A causal condition for something non-existent is a condition for what? And what would be the purpose of a causal condition for something that already exists? (Wisdom 1.6)

The argument here plays on the fundamental problem that Nagarjuna sees in asserting the identities of things. To say that the essence or intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) of a seed is to be a cause for an effect such as a sprout, one must define that essential nature in terms of the effect, for as he later says, "It does not make sense for something that is not producing anything to be a cause" (Wisdom 20.22). If, however, the cause can only be defined in terms of an effect, then the effect must already exist at the time of the cause because it makes no sense to define an entity's identity in relation to an entity that does not exist. Or, as Nagarjuna puts it, "A causal condition for something non-existent is a condition for what?" On the other hand, if the effect does indeed exist such that another entity can be defined as its cause, then what purpose does that cause serve? The effect exists, so the cause is unnecessary.

This analysis of identity rests on a dyadic relationship, and although Nagarjuna examines more complicated relations, the dyadic analysis is the most straightforward and the most frequently employed. The dyadic argument is clearest, perhaps, in his analysis of the relationship between desire (*rāga*), thought to be an irreducible mental constituent, and a desirous mind (*rakta*)—that is, one in which desire is occurring. In that analysis he begins, "If the desirous mind, in exclusion from desire, existed before desire, then desire would exist in dependence on the desirous mind such that when the desirous existed, there would be desire" (Wisdom 6.1). The problem, of course, is that to define that moment of mind as by its nature desirous, one must appeal to the presence of desire, but desire cannot itself be defined except as that which is occurring in a desirous moment of mind. One response would be to claim that the two occur simultaneously, but Nagarjuna responds, "It is not possible for desire and the desirous to arise simultaneously because desire and the desirous would then not depend upon each other" (Wisdom 6.3).
be that they mutually define each other, but in order for them to be defined in relation to each other, they must be separately established—they must be distinct things, which means that they each already have an essential identity or svabhāva. And so Nāgārjuna asks, "If desire and the desirous, while different, arise together, then do they arise together because they are already established separately? If desire and the desirous are already established separately, then why do you imagine that they arise together?" (Wisdom 6.6–7). There is no need to appeal to their mutual co-arising because they are already established separately. But of course, they cannot be established separately, for neither makes sense except in relation to the other. And so Nāgārjuna concludes, "Thus, desire is not established either with the desirous or without the desirous. And as with desire, none of the elemental things (dharmas) are established either together or separately" (Wisdom 6.10).

The point of this analysis is that any candidate for a thing’s true identity—any alleged essential nature or svabhāva—inevitably requires an appeal to something other than that thing. And then the same problem appears: to be real, that other thing must likewise have an essential nature, which again leads to the same appeal. Thus, when Abhidharma theorists claim that an ultimately existent thing must exist with an essential nature, they create an impossible requirement: that there be at least one entity whose essential identity involves no appeal to anything else. But Nāgārjuna seeks to demonstrate that all notions of identity are necessarily interdependent; hence, if essential identity of this kind is required for an entity to ultimately exist, one must conclude that ultimate existence is impossible. Instead, all things must be empty of any such ultimate essence. As Nāgārjuna puts it, "There is no thing whatsoever which occurs independently. Therefore, there is no thing whatsoever which is not empty" (Wisdom 24.19).

To construe Nāgārjuna’s philosophy of emptiness as nihilism, one must make a crucial mistake that he explicitly warns against. One way to express Nāgārjuna’s conclusion is to say that when analyzed in terms of whether they ultimately exist—that is, whether they have an essence or intrinsic nature—things cannot be said to exist ultimately. In short, all things are ultimately empty of essence, and that emptiness is the final outcome to any examination of their true or essential existence. The tempting mistake here is then to conclude that emptiness—the utter lack of any essence—is itself an ultimately real nothingness that is the essence of things. In other words, one can construe emptiness as a new, ultimate essence itself, and one thus concludes that, being ultimately empty, all things are ultimately nothing.

This nihilistic interpretation would hold if emptiness itself were immune to the critiques that Nāgārjuna raises against any entity that is alleged to be ultimately real, but he explicitly applies the same critique to emptiness. He says, “If there were some [entity that is] the non-empty, then there would be some [entity that is] the empty. There is no non-empty; how could there then be the empty?” (Wisdom 13.7). Emptiness itself faces the same problem of the dyadic relation cited above, for it can only be defined in terms of the nonempty. But since the nonempty is equally contingent (on emptiness), neither can exist ultimately. Emptiness, too, is only contingently or conventionally real. In this way, no philosophical truth can withstand analysis, and all views—including the philosophy of emptiness—are contingent. Not heeding this argument, those who insist on turning emptiness into a “view” (drṣṭi)—that is, those who seek to proclaim its ultimate, noncontingent truth—are indeed nihilists. And as Nāgārjuna said, “The victors [i.e., the Buddhas] have said that emptiness is the death of all views, but they said that, for those whose view is emptiness, there is no cure” (Wisdom 13.8).

For Nāgārjuna, not only does the view of emptiness require a rejection of nihilism, but it must also be understood in tandem with interdependence. That is, in saying that no thing is ultimately real, Nāgārjuna is not denying any reality whatsoever. Instead, in saying that, in ultimate terms, all things are empty of essence, he is also saying that to the extent that things exist conventionally, they are necessarily interdependent. And in a crucial aphorism, he therefore remarks, “We say that emptiness is that which is interdependence” (Wisdom 24.18). And this clarifies his remark that nirvāṇa and saṃsāra are not different. They cannot be ultimately distinct because neither can be ultimately established in its own identity. Instead, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa exist only conventionally in mutual interdependence.

**Indian Developments**

In penning Wisdom and his other philosophical texts, Nāgārjuna probably had no intention to spawn a new “school” of thought. Indeed, the notion of a “school” (siddhānta, Tib. grub mtha’) is a later development in Indian thought whereby various seminal thinkers and their texts were sorted under rubrics that later became central to Tibetan exegesis. Nevertheless, not long after Nāgārjuna, Indian commentators began to identify themselves as adhering to a philosophy that they call “Mādhyamika,” and numerous commentators appear all the way up to the virtual disappearance of Buddhism in India in the fourteenth century. Immediately after Nāgārjuna comes Aryadeva, who may have been his student. He writes his own independent work on Mādhyamika that further integrates Nāgārjuna’s thought with Buddhist practice. After Aryadeva comes Bhavaviveka, the first significant commentator on Nāgārjuna’s Wisdom. The next major commentator is Bhāvaviveka (fl. sixth century), who critiques some features of Bhavaviveka’s work, and then Candrakīrti (fl. c. 625), who critiques Bhāvaviveka in turn. Candrakīrti’s two major works are the Prasannapadā (“Clear Words”), a commentary on Nāgārjuna’s Wisdom, and the Madhyamakavatāra (“Entry into Mādhyamika”), an independent work; both texts are especially important to the development of Mādhyamika in Tibet. He and Bhāvaviveka are later seen by Tibetan exegetes as espousing significantly different approaches to Nāgārjuna’s basic thought, as will be discussed below. Near Candrakīrti’s time comes Śāntideva (fl. c. 675); like Aryadeva, he combines Mādhyamika with contemplative practices in a way that is seminal for the Tibetan spiritual exercise tradition (blo sbyong). Three subsequent philosophers are
important for understanding late Indian Mādhyamika and Tibetan developments: Jñānagarbha (fl. c. 700), Śāntarakṣita (fl. c. 725–788), and Kamalaśīla (fl. c. 740–795). The last two are especially central figures, for they actually traveled and taught in Tibet. Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla do not comment directly on Nāgārjuna, but rather compose independent works. Several other Indian writers make Mādhyamika treatises, but those mentioned here are the most relevant to the overall arc of Indian Mādhyamika, especially in relation to its continuation in Tibet.

To understand the history of Mādhyamika after Nāgārjuna, one must take account of two important developments in Mahāyāna thought. First, perhaps within a century after Nāgārjuna’s death, a new form of Mahāyāna philosophy arises. This new trend, the Yogācāra, also speaks of “emptiness” (Śūnyatā), but with a new meaning. Initially articulated in a systematic way by Asaṅga and Vasubandhu (both probably active in the fourth to fifth centuries), for the Yogācāra emptiness is interpreted within the framework of the “three natures” (trisvabhāva). In brief, for ordinary beings the flow of experience—or mind itself—arises such that an experiencing subject appears to be established in opposition to experienced objects. Innovatively, the Yogācāra maintains that this subject-object duality is the subtlest manifestation of ignorance, and thus that this duality is actually a distortion. Described as the “constructed nature” (parikalpitasvabhāva), this duality within ordinary experience is a false overlay on the “relative nature” (paratantrasvabhāva), the causal flow of experience or mind itself. When mind is seen as it truly is—undistorted by that duality—one experiences the “perfect nature” (parinispānasaṃvabhāva), namely, the causal flow of mind empty of subject-object duality.

Bhāvaviveka, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva will all strive to refute the Yogācāra interpretation of emptiness, for they see it as affirming the possibility of ultimate existence. Indeed, Yogācāra thinkers explicitly affirm that mind itself exists ultimately, although only in a form that makes naïve essentialism about perceiving subjects and perceived objects impossible. Certainly, all Indian Mādhyamika thinkers reject the notion that even mind could ultimately exist, but by the eighth century, some Indian Mādhyamikas are willing to employ Yogācāra techniques and arguments in the service of a Mādhyamika analysis. Thus, Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla, unlike their predecessors, do not see Yogācāra as entirely flawed, and they make free use of Yogācāra methods. They endorse a sequence of analyses that lead from the Abhidharma mereological reduction of things into irreducible elements, a Yogācāra reduction of those elements to mind itself, and then finally a Mādhyamika analysis that demonstrates that not even mind ultimately exists. Integrated into a contemplative practice most clearly articulated by Kamalaśīla, this approach eventually becomes known as “Yogācāra-Mādhyamika,” and it is the form of Mādhyamika that first reaches Tibet.

A second crucial development that significantly impacts Indian Mādhyamika is the formation of the Buddhist epistemological tradition. Arising within the context of Yogācāra thought, the epistemological tradition begins with Vasubandhu, but it is first systematically articulated by Dignāga (fl. c. 500). His project is then taken up by Dharmakīrti (fl. c. 625), whose rigorous reworking of Dignāga’s thought becomes paradigmatic for the Buddhist epistemological tradition. The articulation of Buddhist epistemology is embedded in a context cutting across Indian philosophical traditions, and it largely concerns the question of what constitutes a “valid cognition” or pramāṇa. Particularly important in the Mādhyamika context is the status of perception (pratyakṣa) and inference (anumāna), which Dignāga and Dharmakīrti consider to be valid. Dharmakīrti gives a particularly thorough account of inference, in part because it is crucial to the reasoning that Buddhist thinkers use in their analyses, but also because it is the main tool that Indian philosophers use to defend their positions in debate.

While Bhāvaviveka and Candrakīrti agree in their dismissal of Yogācāra thought and method, they diverged strongly in their attitudes toward Buddhist epistemology. Bhāvaviveka, to whom only Dignāga’s theories were available, readily adopted the tools of Buddhist epistemology, and he critiques his predecessor Buddhāpālita for failing to do so. For Candrakīrti, however, the epistemological tradition endorses a subtle version of essentialism, and he thus strongly criticizes Bhāvaviveka for adopting its methods. In part, Candrakīrti objects to the notion that a Mādhyamika thinker can defend any thesis at all, and he harkens back to the statement, “I have no thesis,” found in Nāgārjuna’s Vāgābhavavartanī. Although variously interpreted, Candrakīrti’s main point is that the inferential reasoning of the epistemological tradition occludes the interdependence that pertains between, for example, the negation of a thesis and its affirmation. Likewise, inference requires a subject of the thesis to be established by the inference, but in a debate, how could a Mādhyamika thinker and his opponent agree on a thing, such as an effect, as the subject of the thesis? For Mādhyamikas, there is ultimately no such thing as effects, so how can they agree sufficiently with their opponents about what an effect is before going on to prove its essencelessness? In the end, the Mādhyamika who used inferential proof statements might have to accept implicitly the opponent’s essentialist views in order for those proof statements to have any traction. For these and other reasons, Candrakīrti maintains that a Mādhyamika can only use “consequences” (prasāṅga), whereby one points out the inconsistencies in the opponent’s position without resorting to an “autonomous inference” (svatantrānumāna), in which the Mādhyamika would seek to prove his own thesis.

Candrakīrti’s rejection of the Buddhist epistemological tradition involves other issues such as the alleged essentialism in its account of perception. Yet despite Candrakīrti’s efforts, his critique received little attention in India, and his texts held little sway among Indian commentators. Indeed, Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla both readily embrace the epistemological tools developed by Dharmakīrti, and they see no problem in using inferences to prove their points. Their use of Yogācāra methods and Buddhist epistemology were central to the Mādhyamika that they brought to Tibet, and the epistemological orientation of their work was especially influential for Tibetan thinkers. At the same time, Candrakīrti’s critiques finally found a ready audience when they crossed the
MĀDHYAMIKĀ IN TIBET

The Tibetan reception of Mādhyamika helped create a vibrant philosophical tradition that remains vital in many Tibetan institutions of Buddhist learning. The sheer magnitude of the commentarial literature—exceeding many thousands of pages—is often matched by exegetical brilliance and striking innovation. It is thus not possible to do justice here to the full range of Tibetan Mādhyamika thought. Nevertheless, although traditional Tibetan thinkers remain prolific in their philosophical writings, the overall contours of Tibetan debates on Mādhyamika were largely in place by the fifteenth century, and those contours themselves spring from crucial developments some three hundred years earlier. In many ways, these developments focus on the challenges raised by Candrakīrti.

The Tibetan reception of Buddhism is generally depicted through two “Diffusions of the Teaching” (Tib. bstan dar), the Early and the Later Diffusions. The former begins in the period of the Tibetan empire. During this time, a large number of Buddhist texts are translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan. The Early Diffusion ends in the ninth century with the empire’s collapse and an ensuing period of turmoil in central Tibet. The Later Diffusion begins in the tenth and eleventh centuries from eastern and western Tibet, and the task of translation is renewed with vigor. A number of previously untranslated epistemological works by Dharmakīrti greatly impact Tibetan thinkers, but of perhaps even greater significance is the translation of other previously unavailable works: the main oeuvres of Candrakīrti.

In the Early Diffusion, Mādhyamika thought reached Tibet through the efforts of Śāntarakṣita and Kamalāśīla, both of whom taught in Tibet. As noted above, they articulated Mādhyamika through the tools of the epistemological tradition, and they employed Yogācāra arguments as steps toward a final Mādhyamika negation of essence. At the same time, other trends strongly influenced the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet. Indian tantric Buddhism and, to a lesser extent, Chinese Chan Buddhism impacted the interpretation of Mādhyamika within Buddhist practice. Buddhist tantrics speak of emptiness, but their interpretation trends more toward the Yogācāra. Thus, to realize emptiness is to be absorbed in the direct intuition of the mind in its true nature, devoid or empty of the “adventitious defilements” (agunatakamala), especially subject-object duality, that make the mind into the locus of saṃsāra. In the tantras is also found the notion of the “Buddha-nature” (tathāgatagarbha), a facet of Yogācāra thought, whereby all beings are understood to have the potential—or even the actuality—of buddhahood fully present within them. In many tantric contexts, the goal of practice is to allow this innate buddhahood to emerge unobstructed, in part through ritual identification with a Buddha, but also through yogic techniques that physiologically induce states in which these adventitious obstructions are allegedly weakened or suspended. While highly varied, Chan practice shares some of these features, in that many contemplative techniques aim to clear away ordinary mind so as to allow one’s original mind (i.e., one’s own Buddha-nature) to manifest spontaneously.

Tantric and Chan influences probably account for the emergence of a notion of “sudden” enlightenment in the early period, and traditional sources maintain that Kamalāśīla debated with a Chinese Chan master, Moheyan, so as to defend an approach that becomes known as “gradual.” One of the main distinctions between these two is the role of reason, especially the highly systematic inferential reasoning found in the Buddhist epistemological tradition. In his Bhāvanākarma (“Stages of Meditation”), Kamalāśīla argues against Moheyan’s view, which he depicts as maintaining that “one should not think anything at all” (na kimic cintayitavam). For Kamalāśīla, this view leads to a disastrous abandonment of moral practice, but it also blocks the realization of emptiness because it makes rational analysis impossible. He asks, “Without analysis of what is real, how is the essencelessness of things realized? For without some analysis of it, such as, ‘In their very nature things are empty,’ how would there be the penetrating realization of emptiness?” For Kamalāśīla reason plays a central role, for on his view liberative insight does not spontaneously emerge from simply stopping thought; it must instead arise through the careful cultivation of a particular realization that results from rational analysis. Traditional accounts maintain that Kamalāśīla prevailed over Moheyan, but the role of reason remained a crucial issue.

In many ways, reason’s role is central to the controversy evoked by the translation of Candrakīrti’s major works at the outset of the Later Diffusion. Although Candrakīrti’s round rejection of the Buddhist epistemological tradition found little favor among his fellow Indian scholiasts, the Later Diffusion witnessed a further influx of philosophical and tantric materials that leaned toward an interpretation of enlightenment as “sudden.” It appears that Candrakīrti’s skepticism about the reach of reason cohered with these materials. So, too, it coincided with a growing community of practitioners who rejected (or did not receive) training in the intricacies of Buddhist scholasticism—a scholasticism that was only growing more technical with the new translation of Dharmakīrti’s works.

Whatever led to the sudden relevance of Candrakīrti, the debates that began around his works in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries continue to this day. Recently recovered materials (previously thought to be lost) have energized academic research on this crucial period in Tibetan intellectual history, and as new publications appear, previous work will undoubtedly face revision. Nevertheless, in general terms, the debates spurred by Candrakīrti’s works can be roughly situated between two camps: on the one hand, defending the Mādhyamika interpretation of Kamalāśīla and Śāntarakṣita are the scholars of Sangphu (gsang phu) monastery, founded by the renowned translator and exegete Ngog Loden Sherab (rNog blo ldan shes rabs, 1059–1109). Here, the sixth abbot Chapa Chokyi Senge (Phya pa chos...
kyi seng ge, 1109–1169) plays an especially important role. In the other camp stand those who promulgate Candrakīrti’s view, necessarily supplanting the approach of Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla. Here one finds Patsab Nyima Drag (Pa tshab nyi ma grags, b. 1055), who eventually took up residence in Gyal Lhakhang monastery (rGyal lha khang) after a long sojourn in Kashmir where he translated Candrakīrti’s two major works. In this camp also stands the Kashmiri scholar Jayānanda (fl. twelfth century), who traveled in the Tibetan cultural region and there composed his commentary on Candrakīrti’s *Entry into the Mādhyamika*. Another key figure is Mabja Changchub Tsondru (rMa bya byang chub brtson ‘drus, 1109–1169). Although initially one of Chapa’s top students, Mabja switched camps and studied with both Patsab and Jayānanda. In some ways, his views bridge the two camps, though in the end he effectively abandons Chapa’s interpretation by favoring Candrakīrti’s approach.

As mentioned above, the crux of this debate is the role of reason, but this issue can be articulated through Candrakīrti’s notion of buddhahood, especially as interpreted by Jayānanda. Clearly, to eliminate ignorance one must realize emptiness, but according to Jayānanda, Candrakīrti says: in knowing emptiness, a Buddha is not knowing anything at all. Instead, this knowing is actually a nonknowing that only metaphorically can be referred to as a cognition of emptiness. Thus, in the liberative awareness of the ultimate that is emptiness, there is no object known, nor any mind engaged in the act of knowing. Moreover, in the state of buddhahood, ignorance cannot be active. In lieu of cognitions distorted by ignorance, a Buddha has only uncontaminated gnosis of the ultimate. And since that gnosis is not a knowing of anything at all, Candrakīrti concludes that in a Buddha’s awareness “mind and mental facets” (*cittacaitta*) have ceased. It is only from the perspective of ordinary beings that a Buddha appears to make decisions so as to engage in compassionate activities that lead beings out of suffering. From a Buddha’s own perspective, no conscious decisions are made, no deliberate actions are taken, and no cognitions occur.

The obverse of this radical view of buddhahood is that all cognitions necessarily involve ignorance, and hence, from an ultimate perspective no cognition could be fully reliable. Here, Candrakīrti’s rejection of the epistemological tradition makes good sense, for that tradition confidently asserts the full reliability of perception and well-formed inference. Thus, following the epistemologists, Mādhyamikas such as Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla maintain that, if one employs inferential reasoning properly, one can carefully rephrase arguments that lead to a correct understanding of emptiness. At first, this understanding will only be conceptual, but by employing the contemplative techniques recommended by Kamalaśīla, one can eventually attain a direct intuition of emptiness that no longer relies on reasoning and concepts. On this model, inferential reasoning initially determines the proper object of one’s meditation on emptiness; only then may one attempt to cultivate a direct intuition of that object. For Candrakīrti—at least as Jayānanda interprets him—this approach is wrongheaded because it begins from the false assumption that the meditation on emptiness could involve any object at all. Reason does have a role: to negate all essence, and then eventually to negate itself, for reasoning requires conceptual structures (*prapañca*) that are themselves manifestations of ignorance.

Thus interpreted, Candrakīrti’s thought has far-reaching implications for Buddhist thought and practice, but it also may have especially suited the early part of the Later Diffusion. The scholasticism of Chapa’s approach, heavily reliant on advanced training in the technicalities of Dharmakīrti’s epistemology, may have run counter to much Tibetan Buddhist practice at that time. The Later Diffusion witnessed, for example, the rise of the Mahāmudrā tradition, which drew on Indian sources that often circumvented—or even derided—philosophical technicalia. In Mahāmudrā, the target state of meditative practice involves the complete suspension of all conceptual structuring (*prapañca*) so as to experience the nature of mind itself, which is the locus of both *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. Here, the scholastic emphasis on determining the meditative object through inferential reasoning would not only be useless, but would also actively create more conceptual structuring, which would further occlude the mind’s nature. Perhaps Candrakīrti’s rejection of Buddhist epistemology offered an opportunity to bring the burgeoning monastic academies more in line with such styles of Buddhist practice, which were only becoming more widespread.

Whatever the reasons may be, Chapa’s defense of Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla largely failed, and Candrakīrti’s interpretation—filtered through Patsab, Jayānanda, and others—became dominant. Harkening back to Candrakīrti’s warning against the use of “autonomous inferences” (*svatantrānuumāna*), Tibetan exegetes began to speak of the Śvātantrika (*Syllogistic*) Mādhyamika as a moniker for the approach defended by Chapa. In contrast, the Candrakīrtian interpretation became known as Prāsaṅgika (Consequentialist), reflecting Candrakīrti’s admission that Mādhyamikas should use “consequences” (*prasaṅga*) in debates with opponents, rather than asserting their own theses to be proven.

The shift away from the Syllogistic approach, while perhaps more suited to the practices of the time, came at a price recognized by Mabja, Chapa’s wayward student. Candrakīrti’s works imply that ordinary human cognition cannot be epistemically reliable, and some of his interpreters enthusiastically endorse this position. Patsab in particular maintains that, even in relation to conventional reality, no cognition is a *pramāṇa* (i.e., a fully reliable “valid cognition”). This radical position clearly calls into question not only ultimate analyses of essence, but even conventional concerns about morality, proper ritual practice, and so on. Mabja begins the task of restoring a place for valid cognition in the Mādhyamika fold, but this task is left to Je Tsong Khapa.

Je Tsong Khapa (rje tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa, 1357–1419) is a towering figure of Tibetan intellectual history, and his impact on the course of Tibetan Mādhyamika is prodigious. In the centuries between his birth and the translation of Candrakīrti’s major works, a number of influential thinkers leave their mark on Tibetan Mādhyamika, and he inherits their efforts. By his time, Tibetan traditions have become organized into three overall sects: the Ancients (rNying ma), who
identify as the tradition established by Indian masters active in the Early Diffusion, and the Sakya (Sa skya) and the Kargyü (kKa' brgyud), two diverse traditions that trace themselves back to India through lineages that arrive at the outset of the Later Diffusion. Je Tsong Khapa receives instruction in all three lineages, but his Mādhyamika learning is indebted especially to the Sakya philosopher Rendawa (Red mda’ ba gzhon nu blo gros, 1349-1412). The Sakyapa have become the acknowledged masters of Buddhist epistemology, especially through the works of Sakya Paṇḍita (Sa skya paṇḍita Kun dga’ rgyal mtshan, 1182–1251), but Sakya Paṇḍita himself continued to see a limited role for inferential reasoning in the context of Mādhyamika. Je Tsong Khapa will argue against this position, and in doing so, he creates an entirely new and innovative synthesis of Indian Mādhyamika thought. His efforts will lead to the formation of what eventually is known as the Gelug (dGe lugs, the “Virtuous tradition”), the sect that becomes dominant and maintains political control over the central government until the loss of Tibetan independence in 1951. Je Tsong Khapa’s interpretation of Mādhyamika is intricate, and it is not easily treated briefly. One can nevertheless point to several features at the core of his innovative approach. The first is a return to Candrakīrti’s rejection of Yogācara, even as a provisional step in Mādhyamika analysis and practice. Although the triumph of Consortiumalist (Prāsaṅgika) Mādhyamika at the outset of the Later Diffusion rested on Candrakīrti’s skepticism about the role of Buddhist epistemology, his concerns about Yogācāra went largely unheeded. All of the practice lineages in Tibet continued to employ techniques and interpretations drawn from the Yogācāra, and Mādhyamika texts generally still reflected the integration of Yogācāra and Mādhyamika promulgated by Sāntarāksita and Kamalaśīla. Je Tsong Khapa eschews that integration, and he pointedly critiques Yogācāra philosophy and methodology. One possible motivation for this choice is the “other-emptiness” (gzhan stong) view of Kunyang Dölpopa (Dol-po-po Shes-rab-rgyal-mtshan, 1292–1361). Espousing what he called the “Great Mādhyamika” (dbu ma chen po), Dölpopa developed a unique synthesis of Mādhyamika and Yogācāra thought that rested on a strongly ontological interpretation of Buddha-nature. For Dölpopa, all of the qualities of buddhahood, even the physical marks and signs, were already fully present in the nature of the mind, and this nature is “empty” not of its own essential nature; rather, it is empty of all that obscures it, namely, all of conventional reality itself. For Je Tsong Khapa, this was an especially egregious misinterpretation of both Mādhyamika and Yogācāra, but it rested primarily on the ontologizing of the mind’s nature that is fundamental to Yogācāra. Je Tsong Khapa’s efforts to refute Dölpopa fall within a larger concern about two tendencies that Je Tsong Khapa saw in Mādhyamika interpretations. These can be termed “undernegation” and “overnegation.” The flaw of undernegation leads to absolutism (yod mtha’), while overnegation entails nihilism (med mtha’). Dölpopa’s radical notion of other-emptiness clearly failed to negate the essential nature (svabhāva) of Buddha-nature itself, but even less obviously absolutist approaches can still miss the mark. Two problems can cause undernegation. First, one must properly “recognize the negandum” (dgag bya ngos bzungs); that is, in order to refute essential nature, one must precisely identify what it is. Here, careful attention to phenomenal experience is necessary so as to identify the essentializing habits that underlie ordinary cognition, but reason also plays a crucial role. Indeed, it is only through inferential analysis that one can clearly determine precisely what is meant by the “essential nature” that is refuted by Mādhyamika analysis. The second problem that incurs undernegation stems from a failure to employ the proper mode of negation. Drawing on earlier Indian and Tibetan predecessors, Je Tsong Khapa emphasizes the distinction between an “affirming negation” (Skt. paryuḍāsa; Tib. ma yin dgag) and a “nonaffirming negation” (Skt. prajñapratīṣṭhāda; Tib. med dgag). Although originally drawn from Sanskrit grammar, for Je Tsong Khapa these modes of negation amount to the distinction between a negation that implies something in place of what has been negated, and a negation that makes no such implication. Thus, one might ask, “Is the soup hot?” A negative response shows that it is not hot, but it also implies that it is some other temperature. In contrast, one might ask, “Are square circles green?” Here, a negative response does not imply that square circles are some other color, but rather that there are no such things as square circles, such that they could have any color. For Je Tsong Khapa, it is crucial to understand that the negation of essential nature must be of the latter kind. Already it is clear that Je Tsong Khapa’s Mādhyamika returns inferential reasoning (and its operations such as negation) to a central role in Mādhyamika discourse, despite Candrakīrti’s qualms. The role of reason and the Buddhist epistemological tradition become even clearer when one considers the problem of overnegation. For Je Tsong Khapa, the Mādhyamika critique of essence must not negate the viability of all conventional activities (bya byed thams cad), including especially the use of inferential reasoning in conventional contexts. Overnegation occurs when conventional reality is negated in this way, and it is avoided by positing two modes of analysis: the ultimate and the conventional. Ingeniously drawing on Dharmakīrti’s theory of probative nonperception (anuplabdhihetu), Je Tsong Khapa notes that when a valid cognition fails to find (ma rnyed) an object that should otherwise be found in the locus under examination, that object necessarily does not exist in that locus. For example, an apple on the table should be perceived by valid visual cognition when the proper conditions are in place, and if it is not then perceived, the apple does not exist there. However, if the form of valid cognition in question does not have the capacity to detect the object in question, the nonfinding of that object does not prove its absence. Thus, an apple on the table would not be perceived by valid aural cognition, so even if I do not hear it, that nonhearing does not establish the absence of the apple there. In an analogous manner, a valid cognition analytic of the ultimate (don dam du dpyod pa’i tshad ma)—that is, one that seeks essences—will fail to find an essentially real apple on the table (or anywhere), and this establishes that there is no essentially real apple. But since its scope of analysis is the ultimate, that cognition’s failure to find an ultimately real apple in no way negates the existence of a conventionally real apple. Indeed, if an apple is there, the
appropriate valid cognition analytic of the conventional (tha snyad du dpyod pa'i tshad ma) will find it.

In this way, Je Tsong Khapa not only restores the place of inferential reasoning at the heart of Mādhyamika thought and practice, but also strongly endorses the validity of reasoning in conventional contexts, where decisions about monastic codes, ritual procedures, and the like can be fully and rationally adjudicated. But as with Patsab's sweeping dismissal of valid cognition, Je Tsong Khapa pays a price for his embrace of it. In the conventional contexts, the Gelug tradition often tends toward a narrow epistemological realism that has implications for institutional conservatism. In ultimate contexts, the embrace of Buddhist epistemology leaves unanswered the question of whether the mental structures required for reasoning are themselves expressions of essentialism. Je Tsong Khapa's system requires, for example, that although it is a negation, emptiness must nevertheless be an existent (yod pa), knowable (shes bya) object (yul) that is realized in meditation.

Here, Je Tsong Khapa's critics, such as the incisive Sakya thinker Gorampa Sönam Senge (Go rams pa Bsdams nas seng ge, 1429–1489), see major flaws in Je Tsong Khapa's Mādhyamika. For Gorampa, reason does indeed play a crucial role, but in the final analysis, even the structures that would permit emptiness to be presented as an object in cognition must themselves be negated by Mādhyamika analysis so as to result in a realization that is utterly unstructured (Tib. spros bral). Although initially suppressed, Gorampa's works have sparked much fertile debate among Gelug thinkers and their critics. They also informed the thought of a more recent Tibetan philosopher, the revered Ju Mipham ('Ju mi pham rnam rgyal rgya mtsho, 1846–1912), whose innovative philosophy stands in some ways between Gorampa and Je Tsong Khapa. In any case, Tibetan intellectuals continue to ponder the intricacies of Mādhyamika, and their debates clearly animate their vibrant traditions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SUGGESTED READING


