

Cittamātra as Conventional Truth from Śāntarakṣita to Mipham

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INTRODUCTION

Śāntarakṣita is best known for his synthesis of the apparently conflicting schools of Madhyamaka and Cittamātra in his *Madhyamakālaṃkāra*, or *Ornament of the Middle Way*.¹ In that text, he famously argues that while Cittamātra is true conventionally, Madhyamaka reveals the ultimate truth. Hence, the rubric of the two truths, a familiar device for reconciling apparent contradictions in Buddhist doctrine, used since the Pāli canon, comes to the rescue once again, demonstrating that even Mahāyāna schools whose proponents had been debating vigorously for at least two centuries could be reconciled.

So much is agreed upon by all scholars, canonical or modern. There is no consensus, however, regarding how to understand that synthesis, or whether it is successful. Is the sense in which Śāntarakṣita wants us to take Cittamātra seriously merely *provisional*? Is it to be *abandoned* for the Madhyamaka view by an advanced practitioner? In this case, this is hardly

a synthesis; it is a refutation with a consolation prize, the award of a silver medal to the Cittamātra position and gold to Madhyamaka. Or, on the other hand, is Cittamātra meant to be maintained *along with* Madhyamaka, respecting the unity of the two truths? In this case, work must be done to demonstrate how two apparently contradictory ontological doctrines can be reconciled. In order to answer these questions, however, we must also ask how Śāntarakṣita understands Cittamātra in the first place.

I think that Śāntarakṣita has hit upon some important insights in his synthesis and that we can make good sense of it as a genuine synthesis. But defending it as a genuine synthesis requires us in turn to read Cittamātra phenomenologically instead of idealistically. When we read it in that way, we discover, as Mipham did, surprising implications regarding the epistemology of introspection and self-knowledge. These implications in turn vindicate certain important dGe lugs ideas on these matters, and force us to think hard about such matters dear to Śāntarakṣita's heart as reflexive awareness.

I begin by considering the standard dGe lugs pa reading of Śāntarakṣita's synthesis and the problems it raises. I then suggest an alternative reading of Cittamātra and show that this understanding paves the way for a more sensible reading of *Madhyamakālaṃkāra*. I then turn to a detailed examination of Ju Mipham Rinpoche's commentary on the central verses of *Madhyamakālaṃkāra* where Śāntarakṣita takes on this issue, and explore Mipham's understanding of what it is to take the mind to be merely conventionally existent. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this reading of Śāntarakṣita for the philosophy of mind and the epistemology of self-knowledge.

THE SIDDHĀNTA READING AND THE PROBLEM

In the dGe lugs lineage, as reflected in the commentary of rGyal tshab rje, and in the philosophical systems (*grub mtha'*) of lCang skya and 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa, there is a straightforward way of understanding what Śāntarakṣita is up to in *Madhyamakālaṃkāra* when he defends Cittamātra as conventional truth and Madhyamaka as ultimate truth. Conventional truth is, as Nāgārjuna notes, the necessary stepping stone to ultimate truth. And, as Candrakīrti notes, conventional truth is always *deceptive*. Now, if Madhyamaka is taken to be the authoritative doctrine regarding ultimate truth, *and* if a doxographic framework in which Cittamātra is the penultimate doctrine on the way to Madhyamaka is taken for granted, then it is natural to take Cittamātra as the (albeit deceptive) conventional truth that is the stepping stone to the ultimate truth revealed in Madhyamaka.

In the following verses toward the end of *Madhyamakālaṃkāra*, Śāntarakṣita invites such a reading:

92. On the basis of Cittamātra,
One should understand the absence of external objects.
On the basis of our system,
One should understand that there is also a complete absence of self.
93. Whoever rides the chariot of these two systems
Guiding them with the reins of logic,
Will thereby attain the goal,
The realization of the Mahāyāna itself.²

The two systems are consistent, Śāntarakṣita states, because one explains conventional reality, and the other ultimate reality.³ But rGyal tshab rje's incisive comments on these verses themselves should give us pause, for they suggest a much more interesting, more radical possibility than the more traditional reading to which he reverts following (94):

Consider all phenomena comprised under causes and effects. They are not substantially different from consciousness. This is because they exist in virtue of being experienced through authoritative perception. This entailment is valid because given this premise, they necessarily exist substantially as consciousness. These phenomena should be understood conventionally in this way as merely mind, in virtue of lacking any external reality. But ultimately, even mind does not exist. For ultimately, it has neither a singular nor a manifold nature.⁴

rGyal tshab rejects the inconsistency of Cittamātra—at least as it is deployed by Śāntarakṣita—with Madhyamaka. The former, he indicates gives us an analysis of our experience of the natural world (“all phenomena comprised under causes and effects”) as known to us only through consciousness; the latter shows us that neither object nor subject exists ultimately; there is no contrast possible between their ontological status. This is an apposite development of Śāntarakṣita's insight. Inasmuch as *the world we experience* is only a world delivered by our consciousness, nothing *we immediately experience* can be substantially different from that consciousness. But that nondifference from consciousness does not *in the end* give consciousness a privileged position; both the subject and object side are ultimately known in the same way—through perceptual and conceptual mediation—and exist in the same way—as empty of intrinsic identity.

This apparently irenic reading has one important hermeneutical virtue. It explains the continuity between Cittamātra thought read as a kind of

idealism with the more realistic Madhyamaka, and does so, paradoxically, by showing how the more thoroughgoing antirealism of Madhyamaka in the end undermines the view that mind has a special ontological status. This reading, for all of its virtues, nonetheless faces a massive hermeneutical problem. Conventional truth, on a dGe lugs reading of Madhyamaka—a reading that is faithful to Candrakīrti's exposition⁵—is supposed to be truth as ordinary people take it to be, the world as we naively take up with it. So, on this reading of Śāntarakṣita's synthesis, ordinary people are *idealists*, and experience the world as illusory. Only when they become Mādhyamikas on this view do they come to accept the reality of external objects. As a piece of philosophical anthropology, this seems simply insane. If we are to take Śāntarakṣita's claim that Cittamātra captures conventional truth seriously, and if we understand conventional truth as, say, Candrakīrti understands it, we cannot also take him, as rGyal tshab and other dGe lugs pa commentators do, to read Cittamātra idealistically.⁶

Now, it is natural that dGe lugs pa commentators do accept and attribute to Śāntarakṣita an idealistic reading of Cittamātra. For one thing, they read early Cittamātra texts through the commentaries of Sthiramati, who, taking Vasubandhu's *Trīṣṭika-kārikā* and the *Vīmśatika* as authoritative, certainly adopted that reading. And for another, they read Madhyamaka polemics against Cittamātra through Candrakīrti, who in *Madhyamkāvatāra* attacks Cittamātra as idealist.⁷ And this is all hermeneutically reasonable. But there was another strain of Cittamātra thought from the beginning, represented in Vasubandhu's *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* and in Asaṅga's *Bodhisattvabhūmi* that Śāntarakṣita might have taken more seriously. It is to that phenomenological reading that we now turn.

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL READING OF CITTAMĀTRA

Toward the end of *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*,⁸ Vasubandhu introduces the simile of the elephant conjured in a roadside magic show⁹ to illustrate the relation of mind to its objects:

27. Like an elephant that appears
Through the power of a magician's mantra—
Only the percept appears;
The elephant is completely nonexistent.
28. The imagined nature is the elephant;
The other-dependent nature is the visual representation;
The non-existence of the elephant therein
Is explained to be the consummate.

29. Through the root consciousness
 The nonexistent duality appears.
 But since the duality is completely non-existent,
 There is only a representation.
30. The root consciousness is like the mantra.
 Reality can be compared to the wood.
 Imagination is like the perception of the elephant.
 Duality can be seen as the elephant.

Now, this simile *can* be read idealistically, but it need not be. We can see the space for a more interesting reading when we explore how Vasubandhu articulates the analogy. In (28) he tells us that the elephant is analogous to the imagined nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva/kun brtag rang bzhin*) and so we are to conclude that *that nature*—not any external object—is what is unreal in the same sense that the elephant is unreal in the conjuring trick. In (30) he specifically identifies the elephant with *duality*, and hence, by transitivity, duality with the imagined nature. So, if we focus specifically on this set of verses, Vasubandhu is arguing only that subject-object *duality* is unreal,¹⁰ and that, just as the mantra causes the elephant to appear, that duality in our experience is caused to appear by our root-consciousness, what we might anachronistically call our neurocognitive processes.

Let us now parse (30) with care. Part of the causal basis for experience is the root consciousness/our psychological processes, just as part of the basis of the audience's experience of the elephant is the mantra. But now we get to reality. To what is it compared? To the pile of sticks. They are certainly *material* in the analogy, and *external* to the minds of the audience. Moreover, they are seen *as sticks* by the magician doing the conjuring—and even by the audience when the spell wears off. So, imagination (*rnam rtog/vikalpa*) is like the *perception* of the elephant. Perception has as its material condition or *de re* object (*alambanā/dmigs rkyen*) *reality* or a pile of sticks, but delivers as its intentional *object* (*artha/don*) a subject-object duality *absent from reality itself*.

So, while the *intentional object* of perception is denied existence independent of the mind, neither perception nor the external world that occasions it is even *interrogated* ontologically. Vasubandhu hence argues that our ordinary experience involves a confusion of the nature of our experience with the fundamental nature of reality, caused by instinctive cognitive habits of which we are unaware, and leading us to ascribe the subject-object duality we superimpose in consciousness to reality itself as it is independent of that superimposition, thus confusing construction with discovery. This

phenomenological reading gains further support from a careful reading of (28) and (29), the verses that link those we have been examining so far:

28. The imagined nature is the elephant;
The other-dependent nature is the visual representation;
The non-existence of the elephant therein
Is explained to be the consummate.
29. Through the root consciousness
The nonexistent duality appears.
But since the duality is completely non-existent,
There is only a representation.

Here the point to be realized (28) is that there is no elephant at all in reality—that subject-object duality is imaginary, and that it arises (29) through our cognitive processes, in which we confuse a real percept (the other-dependent nature) with the unreal structure of subject standing over against object (the external elephant).

We thus see Vasubandhu to be arguing that experience (the dependent nature, characterized as percepts) is the joint product of a reality that I never directly apprehend (the sticks) and a set of psychological processes that are opaque to me (the mantra, or root consciousness). To the extent that I take my experience to be a direct deliverance of reality, to exist as it appears to me, or to be, *qua* experience, *external to me*, he argues, I am simply deceived. Where I seem to come upon a world neatly divided into *me*, the *experiencer*, and *it*, the *experienced*, all I find when I pay careful, reflective, attention is *experience*. The division into subject and object, and the subsequent reification or deprecation of one with respect to the other, depending on how I take things, is *my contribution*, not *my discovery*. So, then, on this view, what am I? I am certainly not an independent subject standing in relation to an object. Instead, I am, independent of my experience, just what the elephant *really* is: a pile of sticks beside the road that I have never encountered directly, and probably never will.¹¹

In *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* Vasubandhu is not defending an idealistic position, but a phenomenology. To take this text and others like it¹² as representative of Cittamātra thought is to take that school to be committed most centrally to the idea that our ordinary experience always confuses our own representations of reality, and the subject-object duality we impose on reality, with reality itself. To say that things are empty, on this view, is to say that they are empty of existing in the way that they are perceived, and to analyze their mode of apprehension in terms of three nature theory. This reading is at least equally well supported by canonical Cittamātra texts, even if it is elided in Indian Madhyamaka

critique of Cittamātra and in subsequent dGe lugs pa exegesis. And it may be the reading that Śāntarakṣita has in mind.

READING CITTAMĀTRA PHENOMENOLOGICALLY MAKES ŚĀNTARAKṢITA LOOK GOOD

As we noted above, Śāntarakṣita's synthesis would make no sense if we read Cittamātra as idealism.¹³ After all, it is hard to see how one could either take idealism seriously as an analysis of our ordinary view of reality, or how one could join a doctrine according to which the external world is nonexistent and the mind is substantially existent with one according to which they have an identical status, both selfless, as asserted in (93). The fact that a phenomenological reading of this school allows us to take Cittamātra seriously as an analysis of conventional truth renders Śāntarakṣita's synthesis cogent. This itself gives credence to that reading; indeed, Śāntarakṣita's analysis might be the best textual case for the claim that Cittamātra was read by at least some in India phenomenologically.

So, on this reading, Śāntarakṣita's project makes good sense. A lot of sense, in fact. It is important for any Madhyamaka account of the two truths that both are *truths*, and that they are consistent with one another. And Śāntarakṣita is a Mādhyamika, after all, even if he is *also* a Yogācārin (hence his standard Tibetan doxographic classification as a Svāntarika-Mādhyamika-Yogācārin). Let us then, with the dGe lugs pa tradition in which rGyal tshab is writing, and because of its independent philosophical interest, take Candrakīrti's account of the conventional nature of things seriously—a thing's conventional nature is the way it appears to ordinary people. Let us also, with Śāntarakṣita, take *that* to be the way things are *experienced*. And let us take Vasubandhu's account of *experience* seriously: things are experienced only as they appear as delivered by our senses, through input channels opaque to us, shot through with subject-object duality. If we take these three theses together, we can conclude that, *conventionally*, things are shot through with an erroneous subject-object duality and a pervasive confusion of appearance with reality.

Cittamātra then, by giving us an analysis of *appearance*, also gives us an *analysis* of our ordinary mode of taking up with the world, of conventional reality, even if it is not therefore an account the way in which that ordinary mode is *misconceived*. This is nonetheless an analysis of conventional truth because that is what it explores; that truth remains, on this analysis, deceptive because it obtains in one manner (as construction) but appears in another (as given).

On this account, despite providing an analysis of conventional truth, Cittamātra says *nothing* about the *ontology* either of mind or of the external world. That is the work of Madhyamaka, and that is what gives us the

ultimate truth. Śāntarakṣita's synthesis works precisely because he is *not* trying to reconcile two inconsistent *ontologies*—as he is on the dGe lugs reading—but rather reconciling a phenomenology with an ontology, and urging that we only get to the heart of the nature of reality when we move *beyond* phenomenology to ontology. This move from phenomenology to ontology, however, does not *undermine*, but rather *explains*, the phenomenology we develop in conventional analysis. As a Mādhyamika, he can have his conventional cake and eat it ultimately; as a Yogācārin, he can have the conventional truth of Cittamātra without discarding it in virtue of the ultimate truth of Madhyamaka.

The fact that phenomenology and ontology are so independent and yet constitute two indispensable levels of analysis is one of Śāntarakṣita's deepest and most original insights. It provides the basis for his own synthesis. But it is also a promising basis for the project of joining a Madhyamaka metaphysics to a Cittamātra phenomenology as we bring Buddhism to bear on contemporary discourse. Moreover, as I will now argue, this reading of Śāntarakṣita's project animates Mipham's reading of *Madhyamakālaṅkāra*, and underlies the deep insights into the philosophy of mind Mipham articulates in the context of his commentary.

MIPHAM ON THE MIND

We now turn to a close reading of Ju Mipham Rinpoche's commentary on the verses of *Madhyamakālaṅkāra* in which Śāntarakṣita articulates the sense in which Cittamātra delivers conventional truth. I focus on verses 63–64 and then turn to the summary in (78).

63. Therefore, these things
 Only have conventional characteristics.
 If one were to maintain that they exist ultimately,
 What can I do?

Here Śāntarakṣita asserts that despite the fact that Cittamātra focuses on cognitive states in its analysis of reality, those states are not asserted to exist ultimately. Everything that is said of them is said merely conventionally. Mipham immediately glosses conventional (*samvṛti/kün rdzob*) as *deceptive*, or as *false*, one of the three glosses offered by Candrakīrti in his analysis in *Prasannapadā*:

Here, “conventional” means that, with respect to the dichotomy between real and unreal, they are unreal, having a false nature. They never have

the nature of being real—of being truly existent; this reality is what is denied.¹⁴

Importantly, Mipham immediately, once again following Candrakīrti, clarifies the sense of *false* at issue: it is *not* to be nonexistent, but to exist in one way, and to appear in another:

Here, to be mere appearance, and to be truly empty is the nature of the conventional. If it existed in the way it appears, it would not be conventional. In that case, it would not even exist ultimately. Here, since it does not exist in the way it appears, it is conventional. In *that* case, it would have to exist ultimately. But all phenomena lack ultimate essence that transcends unity and multiplicity. Therefore, these mere appearances have the characteristics of the conventional. Therefore, these two truths clarify each other, and could never be inconsistent with one another.

On this reading, the sense in which the mind and its immediate objects exist merely conventionally is this: the mind, mental states, and objects appear to exist in a way that withstands analysis; they appear to have a definite nature. But they do not. Ultimately they are empty of the nature they appear to have.

Mipham's reading distances him from an idealist or ontological understanding of Cittamātra according to which the mind and appearances are taken to be truly existent, while external objects are taken to be nonexistent. But it also distances him from any view according to which the mind is self-revealing, and immediately available to consciousness. For if it were self-revealing, if it existed in the way it appears, if introspection were inherently veridical, the mind, according to Mipham, would be nondeceptive, and would exist ultimately. Mipham is thus taking Śāntarakṣita's account of Cittamātra as conventional truth as a platform for an analysis of the mind as fundamentally opaque to itself.¹⁵ Śāntarakṣita continues:

64. Apparent¹⁶ only when not analyzed,
Subject to arising and cessation,
And capable of performing functions,
Their nature is understood to be to exist conventionally.

Here we encounter yet another gloss on conventional existence, one that emphatically affirms conventional truth as a kind of truth, and hence the Madhyamaka background of this analysis. To exist conventionally is to be dependently originated, to be functional in the everyday world, and to be

taken for granted without analysis. Despite the fact that Śāntarakṣita is regarded in Tibet as a Yogācāra-svātantrika Mādhyamika, this could be straight out of Candrakīrti. Mipham emphasizes this realism, contrasting the nature of conventional existents with that of illusions:

This conventional reality is not such things as the horns of a rabbit, which are only expressed by words, are never seen, and cannot perform any function. Rather when we examine dependently arisen phenomena, although they are taken for granted when not examined—*only when not analyzed*—they thus *are apparent* to perception. These objects that are causes and effects—*subject* to instantaneous *arising and cessation*, that are seen, and that are *capable of performing* desired and non-deceptive *functions*, the *nature* of these objects is *understood* to be denoted by the word *conventional*. Here, the characteristic of the conventional is presented in three ways in terms of elimination, and in one way in terms of determination. (they appear, they are momentary, and they perform functions; and they are *conventionally real*).

Now things get interesting. Mipham turns to a consideration of the mode of appearance and the mode of existence of the cognitive. He explicitly takes as his example the *appearance* of a double moon, as when one gazes at the moon and presses one's eyeball, not the *appearing double moon*. And he argues that the appearance itself—the cognitive phenomenon—exists in one way, but appears in another. That is to say, it is a conventional existent, but as conventional, it is deceptive; it does not bear analysis; our awareness of the *appearance itself* is not awareness of it *as it is*, but only *as it appears*:

Consider a mistakenly grasped appearance such as a double moon: in this case, the *appearance* is merely consciousness itself appearing to itself. Therefore, one should not commit the error of not including it in the conventional. However, when we consider whether or not these apparent objects exist in the same way that they appear, they are just non-existent in that way.

Mipham then argues that we cannot take cognitive states to have some special status, conventionally existent in virtue of depending on causes and conditions, of being neither unitary nor manifold, etc., but nonetheless existing as they appear, apparent as the objects they are, available to nondeceptive introspection. He says that this would be to violate the dichotomy between the two truths, and to create a new, incoherent category, conventionally real in some respects, ultimately in others:

If they were taken to exist as objects, since they would not have the characteristics of the conventional, one might think that one had discovered a third category or objects of knowledge apart from the conventional and the ultimate. If one maintained that such things exist, but are not momentary, they would be permanent appearances, and would not be false.

Not only would this be ontologically incoherent, he argues, but to take inner experience to have this kind of privileged epistemic status would make discourse about inner life impossible. In a remark prescient of Wittgenstein's treatment of self-knowledge in *Philosophical Investigations*, Mipham notes that if we each could claim incontrovertible access to our inner experience, agreement about the meaning or truth of statements about mental life would be impossible, and we would abandon even the common practices of everyday life in which the possibility of both agreement and error are taken for granted:

And if this were the case, it would follow absurdly that there could be no mutually agreed upon counterexample to a truth claim. Since one would be even more foolish than ordinary people, one would be just like a cow.

Śāntarakṣita concludes his discussion of the conventional status of the mind and of the Cittamātra position by emphasizing that the analysis of the ultimate in Madhyamaka terms does not undermine the reality of these appearances, only their veridicality. While we have no guarantee that the appearance of mind to itself is veridical, this does not mean that it does not appear at all:

78. I do not refute entities
That have the nature of appearance.
Therefore the framework of proof
And conclusion is not confused.

Mipham emphasizes that this point amounts to a restatement of the Madhyamaka doctrine of the identity and mutual dependence of the two truths, but with an important twist relevant to self-knowledge. Even to say that appearances are empty of intrinsic nature is to grant their conventional reality, for if they were not real, they could not even be empty. But to say that they are empty is at the same time to say that they are only conventionally real, and to say *that* is to say that they are deceptive. Therefore, even the appearance of mind to itself is deceptive appearance.