

Thinking Beyond Thought: Tsongkhapa and Mipham on the Conceptualized Ultimate

Jay L Garfield
Smith College
Harvard Divinity School
University of Melbourne
Central University of Tibetan Studies

**ROUGH DRAFT—COMMENTS INVITED
DO NOT QUOTE WITHOUT PERMISSION**

In Tibetan discussions of the two truths—and in particular in Geluk discussions, inflected as they are by Dharmakīrti’s epistemology—the nature of our knowledge of the ultimate truth leads to interesting epistemological and ontological problems. Given that the ultimate truth must be a possible object of knowledge, there must be a *pramāṇa* by means of which it is known. But only bodhisattvas on the path of seeing or above, or buddhas, are capable of directly perceiving the ultimate truth. So, for the rest of us, our knowledge of the ultimate is conceptual, and hence mediated by *rjes dpag (anumāṇa)* and so must be conceptual in nature. But the ultimate transcends all concepts, conceptions and signs. And so it would appear that we can know nothing about it. But that would suggest that we can’t even know this, or that there are two truths.

Moreover, the idea that ordinary beings and lower-level bodhisattvas cannot know emptiness at all would wreak havoc with Geluk understandings of *lam rim*, and of the role of study on the path, according to which our ability to verify our apparent perception of the ultimate depends upon the concordance of the object of direct perception in meditative equipoise with the understanding achieved in conceptual meditation and in subsequent realization (*bcad shes*). This raises important questions: is the object of inferential insight into the ultimate the ultimate truth, or some surrogate? If it is the ultimate, since the ultimate realized by buddhas and by bodhisattvas in advanced meditative equipoise transcends all conception, are there two ultimates or one? If two, what is their relationship to one another? If conceptual

realization grasps only a surrogate, given that that surrogate is deceptive, is it knowledge at all?

The rubric through which these questions are addressed by Geluk scholars and their interlocutors (such as Gorampa Sonam Sengye and Taktshang Loden Sherab) relies on the distinction between the *don dam rnam grangs ma yin pa* and the *don dam rnam pa* (sometimes *rnam grangs ma yin pa'i don dam* and *rnam grangs pa'i don dam*) or the *uncategorized vs categorized ultimate* (sometimes translated as the *non-nominal vs nominal ultimate* or as the *conceptualized vs nonconceptualized ultimate*, or as the *figurative or metaphorical ultimate vs the genuine or literal ultimate*).

As this set of pairs of terms indicates, it is hard to find a precise English translation for *rnam grangs* in this context. But the family of options helps us to fix on the relevant semantic range. The general idea is this: the *categorized* is that which is apprehended conceptually, that which is seen in terms of sets of distinctions, or, as we might put it in the language of Sellarsian epistemology, that which is *seen-as*; the *uncategorized* is that which is apprehended in the absence of the drawing of distinctions, the applications of concepts, or that which is merely *seen*, not seen *as* anything, not verbalized. In this discussion, I will consistently use *categorized* and *uncategorized ultimate* to translate *rnam grangs pa'i don dam* and *rnam grangs ma yin pa'i don dam*, respectively, unless in direct quotation from scholars using alternative vocabulary.¹

Here I explore the resources that this distinction and the accounts grounded thereon provide for an understanding of the distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual knowledge of ultimate truth and for an account of ultimate truth and

¹ The Tibetan vocabulary is grounded in Bhāviveka's distinction between the *apāryayaparamārtha* and the *pāryayaparamārtha* introduced in *Tarkajvālā*, but Tibetans are unanimous in urging that their distinctions are not Bhāvivekas, as that would run the risk of admitting that their position is in fact a *rang rgud pa* (*svātantrika*) position.

its role in epistemology more generally. I will begin with an exploration of the Geluk position as developed by Tsongkhapa and his commentators, and will then consider responses to that position by Mipham Rinpoche and Bötrül from the Nyingma perspective. I will conclude with some reflections on what we learn from this literature about rival Tibetan understandings of the relation between conceptual and nonconceptual knowledge.

The topic is of interest not only because it occupies so much of the attention of so many of Tibet's most eminent philosophers, but because it focuses questions about the relation between the conceptual and the nonconceptual in the context of the most important and most recondite kind of knowledge recognized in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, knowledge of the ultimate enabled by ultimate *pramāṇas*, and so raises questions about the role of direct perception and conceptual understanding in realization. We will see that examination of these issues gives us more reason to believe that paradoxical understandings of the ultimate are the most rational understandings, and the only way to avoid a dismal mysticism about ultimate reality.

1. The Geluk Position

Tsongkhapa argues (1998, 2002, 2006) for a particularly strong understanding of the identity of the two truths, and therefore for a particularly intimate connection between knowledge of the ultimate and knowledge of the conventional, *viz.*, that to understand the ultimate is to understand dependent origination, and hence to understand the conventional. He takes the basis of division of the two truths to be objects of knowledge: To know the conventional truth is to know dependently originated phenomena; to know the ultimate truth is to the emptiness of those phenomena. While conventional and ultimate phenomena are not different *phenomena extensionally*, they are, on this view, different *intensionally*, just as Hesperus and Phosphorus are extensionally, but not intensionally identical.²

² Also see Cowherds 2012, Thakchöe 2007 and Garfield 2015 for more on this issue.

In the *lhag mthong* section of *Lam rim chen mo*, Tsongkhapa argues that the basis of division of the categorized vs the uncategorized ultimate is not *objects of knowledge*, but kinds of cognitive state (*blo*). That is, whereas the two truths are divided based on *objects of knowledge*, with the conventional comprising dependently arisen phenomena, and the ultimate comprising the emptiness of those phenomena, regardless of the nature of the subject apprehending them, in the case of the distinction between the categorized and uncategorized ultimate, he argues, we are distinguishing not between two distinct *objects of knowledge* (*shes bya*), but between two distinct modes of subjectivity in reference to a single object, namely *emptiness*, the ultimate truth. Tsongkhapa is adamant that there is a single ultimate in the objective sense, although there are two distinct modes of apprehension, one conceptual and one non-conceptual, and that the latter is the goal. Nonetheless, it is crucial to his framework that each is served by *pramāṇa*, and that each constitute genuine, nondeceptive insight into ultimate truth. In *Lam rim chen mo*, referring directly to Bhāviveka's distinction, he says:

Commenting on this, in his *Blaze of Reasons* [Bhāviveka] says:

...

[ultimate] means that which is concordant with (*mthun pa*) the ultimate. Because that ultimate exists for a wisdom that is concordant with direct knowledge of the ultimate, it is said to be concordant with the ultimate.

When we say that something “does not exist ultimately” or “is nonexistent ultimately,” it has [this meaning], because that same text says:

Qualm: The ultimate is beyond all awarenesses, but the refutation of an essence of things is in the realm of letters. Thus, would not the refutation be nonexistent for that reason?

Reply: There are two types of ultimate. One of these operates without conceptual activity; it is supramundane, stainless, and without elaborations. The second operates with conceptual activity and is concordant with the collections of merit and wisdom it is called “sublime wisdom in the world” and it does involve elaborations. Here we hold this latter to be the qualifier in the thesis, “does not exist ultimately,” and so there is no fallacy.

Take this as referring to wisdom based on study and reflection that properly analyzes reality and to consciousnesses above that; it does not refer only to a noble being's post-equipoise condition. [Tsongkhapa 2002, Vol. III: 221]

Bhāviveka, using the language of *concordance* to refer to the categorized ultimate, suggest, at least on Tsongkhapa's reading, to indicate that the two kinds of apprehension of ultimate truth agree with respect to their object. The distinction between them must then be on the subjective side. And so, Bhāviveka continues (with Tsongkhapa's agreement) by explaining that when explicit claims are made about the ultimate, one is engaging with the categorized ultimate; when one engages non-conceptually, one engages with the uncategorized ultimate. Since these two kinds of apprehension engage with the same object, there is nothing wrong with understanding the claims made about the categorized ultimate to be true of the uncategorized ultimate, although it cannot be apprehended in terms of those claims.

In *Ocean of Reasoning*, Tsongkhapa draws this distinction explicitly in the context of the discussion of the nature of ultimate truth in the commentary on XXIV:10 of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

According to other treatises, the ultimate is twofold: the primary [non-categorized] ultimate truth and the secondary [categorized] ultimate truth. For instance the *Sayadvaya-vibhāga* says,

Since the refutation of such things as arising
Is consistent with reality,
We assert that it is ultimate.

And the *Madhyamakāloka* says:

Since non-*arising* is consistent with the ultimate, it is called
"ultimate." But it is not actual [***]. The actual is that ultimate
which is free from all fabrication.

Here "fabrication" refers not only to the fabrication that is the object of negation through reasoning but also to the fabrication of appearance. The freedom from fabrication of appearance is the vanishing of all fabrication of dualistic appearances in the perspective of one directly perceiving reality...

Here Tsongkhapa emphasizes both the fact that conceptual understandings of the ultimate, such as those deriving from *prasāṅgika* arguments, are understandings of the ultimate itself, and not of something else, *and* that the *actual*—that is, the actual *realization*—of the ultimate is a realization free from fabrication, including the fabrication of subject-object duality, but also the fabrication of appearance, that is, the imputation of conceptual categories to the object of perception. Once again, we have a single object, but two distinct modes of apprehension of it; each is correct, but one is more salutary than the other. The challenge to this framework is twofold: first, we require an account of what it is to apprehend and to *know* without the application of conceptual categories; second, we require an account of the *correctness* of conceptual apprehension despite its implication in fabrication. We will see that it is the latter issue that preoccupies Tsongkhapa’s critics. Tsongkhapa then turns to the relation between the categorized ultimate and conventional truth, emphasizing that while they are distinct with respect to their objects, they are intimately related:

However, in the case of the emptiness that is the negation—that is, the internal negation—of the ultimate arising of the person and the aggregates, the bases of emptiness must appear to conventional authoritative cognition, such as a visual consciousness that sees things directly. Therefore, it appears to a dualistic appearance from the perspective of the cognizing mind that sees it directly, but does not appear without dualistic appearance. Therefore, it is a secondary ultimate, but is a genuine conventional truth...

...

Through this argument, one should understand that the objects perceived through the wisdom through which the Buddha perceives empirical phenomena and the object posited through the wisdom of the other āryas in the post-meditative state, which are perceived through internal negation as illusion-like, are also secondary (categorized) ultimates. (2006: 495 - 496)

The point here is that when one perceives emptiness as the categorized ultimate, one perceives it as the emptiness of conventional phenomena. That requires that the conventional phenomena are apprehended to conventional authoritative cognition (*pramāṇa*), and as their emptiness and their dependently originated status are one

and the same, their emptiness appears to the same conventional authoritative cognition. While that might appear to be inconsistent with Tsongkhapa's commitment to the division of the two truths on the basis of knowledge, and the commitment to conventional *pramāṇas* for conventional phenomena and ultimate *pramāṇas* for ultimate phenomena, it is not. The union of the two truths requires that ultimate truth is also conventional; and it is the secondary—or categorized ultimate—that is also genuine conventional truth; the uncategorized transcends all convention. Nonetheless, he can then argue, even the uncategorized ultimate is identical to the conventional *extensionally* (*ngo po gcig*), although distinct *intensionally* (*ldog pa tha dad*). Hence he preserves the two bases of division—objects of knowledge for the two truths and subjects for the two classifications of the ultimate—while preserving the identity of the two truths. The categorized ultimate is the bridge; identical in object with, but subjectively distinct from the uncategorized ultimate; and subjectively identical with, but distinct in object from, the genuine conventional truth.

Tsongkhapa explains this idea further in *dBu ma dgongs pa rab gsal*. Here he is commenting on Candrakīrti's analogy of floaters in the visual field of someone afflicted by ophthalmia for conventional truth, and the absence of the floaters (falling hairs in the Sanskrit and Tibetan tradition) as analogous to the emptiness of intrinsic nature:

[Candrakīrti's use of the ophthalmia analogy indicates] only the listener's failure to realize exactly what is explained; it does not rule out the listener's conceptual realization of the nonexistence of hair.

...

Although the explanation of ultimate truth through an analogy does not lead to its realization in the way ultimate truth is seen by those free from the affliction of the cloud of ignorance, this does not mean that Candrakīrti accepts reality as non-realizable in a general sense. Ultimate truth is not ineffable, for definite scriptural texts and their verbal descriptions do embody its profound meanings. Furthermore it is not the case that ultimate truth is unrealizable by the mind associating with verbal descriptions. Therefore every single statement explaining the meaning of reality as beyond the scope of consciousness and verbal

description must be understood in the same light. (1998: 198-199, translated in Thakchöe 2007: 84-85)

This is a very helpful passage for understanding Tsongkhapa's insistence that the categorized ultimate must be taken seriously *as ultimate truth*. Suppose I suffer from the relevant ophthalmia and go to see the doctor. When my ophthalmologist explains to me that there really are no falling hairs in the air around me, and that I am simply suffering from an illusion due to injury to my retina, I both *come to know* that there are no such hairs *and I fail to stop seeing them*. Only after the surgery (I hope) will I stop seeing them altogether. But that transformation is a transformation of my subjectivity, not of my cognitive attitude towards the relevant object of knowledge (the absence of hairs.) I already *knew* that there are no hairs; otherwise I would not seek treatment; only later did I come to *see* the world without hairs. It follows, Tsongkhapa argues, that, just as my ophthalmologist spoke the truth when she said that it was my retina, not the environment, that was the problem, that she spoke the *truth*, and so that ultimate truth is expressible: to say that it is inexpressible, while true, is to express something ultimately true.³

Grag pa bshad sgrub (1675-1748) in his commentary on *Drang nges legs bshads snying po*, clarifies this point nicely:

Although the categorized ultimate and the uncategorized ultimate are discussed, this is just a matter of labels and how they are seen. The meaning of the ultimate truth is emptiness, and there is only one.

Consider both the uncategorized and the categorized ultimate. First of all, they have the same object; but they are two subjects of the ultimate truth. The first is like the emptiness of true existence of the sprout, and it's illusory aspects; the second is like the inferential sign through which is conceptually inferred. This second one is called "ultimate," but this is nothing but a designation; it is not reality. The non-categorized ultimate is also so-called by designation, but both its object and its subject are ultimate. The first is emptiness, and so is the ultimate; is just as it is: emptiness; the consummate; the absolute truth; the same as the

³ There is another issue lurking here, that of paradox in the ultimate. To be fair, Tsongkhapa, because of his allegiance to Dharmakīrti's logic, never countenances the possibility of true contradictions. Nonetheless, as a follower of Candrakīrti, he is certainly committed to paradoxes of this kind, even if he does not acknowledge that.

dharmadhatu. The second is the mental continuum that directly perceives emptiness like the wisdom of realization. This is truly called the non-categorized ultimate. (XXX)

Grags pa bshad sgrub begins by noting that there is no difference in *object* between the categorized and non-categorized ultimate; rather, he says, following Tsongkhapa closely, the difference between them is a matter of distinct modes of subjectivity. He offers a new and useful analogy. The uncategorized ultimate is like the final nature of a sprout; the categorized like the premises and inferences by means of which we come to know it. The former is what we come to see, the latter is the inferential means to coming to see it. Because it is conceptualized, or merely a means to the goal of direct perception it is not truly ultimate in the sense that it is the final goal of practice; the final goal of practice is not the realization of a new object of knowledge, but the transformation of subjectivity.

We should note several important consequences of Tsongkhapa's account at this point, before considering the positions of his critics. First, Tsongkhapa offers an account that explains the role of conception and language in the process of realization. They are, on his account, more than mere ladders to be cast aside. Language and thought can truly characterize ultimate reality, even if ultimate reality is characterized as uncharacterizable. Setting aside his aversion to paradox, we note simply that he has the clarity of mind to see that one cannot back away from true assertions about the nature of reality, or undermine the accuracy of a position to which one subscribes. To deny the correctness of the Madhyamaka texts, on Tsongkhapa's view, would be to give up not just on conceptuality, but also on the fact that nonconceptual thought directly perceived the ultimate.

Secondly, as Grags pa bshad sgrub notes, Tsongkhapa draws the distinction between the categorized and the uncategorized in terms of the distinction between inference and perception. This of course in part follows the *pramāṇavāda* tradition of Dignāg and Dharmakīrti to which he is wedded. But he is doing more than just following that tradition. The idea of a mode of apprehension without categorization may

seem mystical, and we will see that certain of Tsongkhapa's Tibetan critics take it in that direction. But it need not be.

Categorical apprehension on this view is simply inferential, discursive apprehension, mediated by explicit judgment. Uncategorized apprehension then is perceptual apprehension; spontaneous preconceptual engagement. Now, both Western philosophers since Kant, and Buddhist philosophers from Sautrāntika on up, argue that perception of the phenomena we experience is always conceptually mediated; to perceive is to perceive-as, and to perceive-as is to mobilize concepts. Nonetheless, there is a clear difference between perception and inference, and Tsongkhapa's mobilization of Candrakīrti's example makes that plain. Just being told that my eyes are bad doesn't get me to stop seeing the floaters, even though it gets me to stop believing in them. By locating the uncategorized ultimate as akin to perception *as opposed to inference* in that sense, Tsongkhapa ratchets down the mystical understanding of the nonconceptual, reducing it to the spontaneous, as opposed to the deliberate. The uncategorized ultimate is, then, simply the ultimate seen spontaneously; the categorized is the same ultimate understood conceptually, but not really seen; believed-that, but not believed-in.

2. The Late Nyingma critique

The Nyingma scholar Ju Mipham Rinpoche (1846-1912) takes a very different position, more sharply distinguishing the categorized from the uncategorized ultimate. On his view the categorized ultimate is ultimate in name only, a mere simulacrum of the ultimate, referred to as ultimate only by analogy with the genuine, uncategorized ultimate. In *Speech of Delight* he writes:

To begin with, it may be said that origination occurs at a conventional level, within the domain of the words and thoughts of learning and reflection, but that ultimately, there is no arising. When two modes are paired in this way, the latter is the categorized ultimate. Because it is categorized in the correspondence with with its partner, relative existence, and because it pertains to the category of the ultimate, it is called categorized. This is what is categorized as the partner to the relative when speaking of the two truths.

Since it is merely an entrance point that accords with the final ultimate truth, and since familiarization with this can overcome the apprehension of entities that is due to the habitual tendencies that have solidified since beginning of time, it should be understood that this is the ultimate, and that this is also a perspective from which the claim of no origination is positive. One should know that even when having perfected the investigation into this, it is no more than a way of having certainty during the ensuing attainment.

In terms of the final abiding way of authenticity, the deduction of no origination based on origination is mere mental other – exclusion, a mere conceptual reflection. Beyond all extremes of origination, no origination, and so forth, and leaving all objects of word and thought behind, the meaning perceived by the stainless wakefulness of the meditative equipoise of the noble ones is the unsurpassable uncategorized ultimate. From this perspective, no claim whatsoever is made.

Since the categorized ultimate is near to and in accord with this, it belongs to the category of the ultimate and is given the name the *according ultimate*. (63 - 65)

Here Mipham urges that the categorized ultimate is a mere concept, not reality. It is not placed on the subject side, as it is for Tsongkhapa, as a distinct perspective on ultimate truth, but is rather an object—a conceptual reflection, or a universal—that is called *ultimate* only by courtesy of its proximity to the actual ultimate. It is not *authentic*. It is not a *true* perspective on reality. He emphasizes the gulf between the categorized and the uncategorized ultimate in *Lion's Roar*:

The context such as the analysis whether the ultimate is within the domain of mind were not refers to the uncategorized ultimate; the categorized ultimate is not the expressed meaning because the categorized ultimate is in the context of a novice progressively engaging in emptiness from merely a conceptual perspective. As such, it cannot roam in the territory of a mind like the non-conceptual meditative wisdom of a sublime one, for which duality has subsided, like a beggar that has no power to sit on the universal Emperor's throne.

Duckworth comments:

The categorized ultimate concerns a perspective within a conceptual framework. In the content of discursive analysis, the categorized ultimate is known within that framework, where there is no such framework demarcating the uncategorized ultimate. In this way, Mipam portrays a provisional nature to conceptual categories. (Duckworth 2008: 31 to 32)

We can understand what drives Mipham in this direction. One can fairly ask about ultimate truth: is it correctly captured by conceptual categories or not? Is there a truthmaker for claims about ultimate truth or not? Whereas Tsongkhapa unwillingly and unwittingly walks into paradox by answering both “yes” and “no” to the first, and embraces the unity of the two truths by answering the second question in the affirmative, Mipham dodges explicit paradox by retreating to mysticism by answering a flat “no” to the first, and divorces the ultimate from the conventional by answering the second in the negative.

By taking the fact that the ultimate transcends all conception and expression to mean that no conception or expression can possibly be true of the ultimate (and by *denying* that nonetheless *that* conception and expression *is* true of it) Mipham must render the categorized ultimate entirely conventional, and hence a different object from the uncategorized ultimate. It therefore is entitled to the label merely in virtue of its similarity to, or utility in approaching, the genuine ultimate. Since nothing can be said of the genuine ultimate, no statement about it can be true, and so everything in the categorized ultimate is simply false. The contrast with Tsongkhapa’s position is hence stark.

Bötrül (c. 1900-1959) develops Mipham’s views further. In *Distinguishing the Philosophies* he writes:

The two ultimate valid cognitions are:
those that analyze the categorized in the uncategorized.
The two conventional valid cognitions are:
valid cognitions of confined perception and purity.

The Lord Mipam elucidated these delineations
in accord with the quintessential instructions of the school of early translations
and the intended meaning of sutras, tantras, and śāstras,
in the elegant discourse, sword of insight.

The categorized valid cognition analyzing the ultimate
establishes the temporary categorized ultimate;
the valid cognition that analyzes the uncategorized
establishes the consummate uncategorized.

The conventional valid cognition of confined perception
 establishes the mode of appearance — the impure relative;
 the conventional valid cognition of purity
 establishes the mode of reality — the pure relative. (2012: 34)

Here we see Bötrül distinguishing between the *temporary* categorized ultimate and the *consummate* (*yongs su grub pa*). The objects themselves are distinct, and the *pramāṇa* that gives us access to the categorized gives us no knowledge of the uncategorized.

Our tradition asserts that the categorized ultimate is
 an emptiness that is a negation of constructed extremes only partially, and that
 the uncategorized ultimate is
 free from all subtle and gross constructed extremes. (39)

Here Bötrül explicitly distinguishes the categorized from the uncategorized from the side of the object. The categorized is a kind of emptiness, but an emptiness that is not free from all extremes: there are still things true and false of it. The uncategorized is a different kind of emptiness, one of which nothing can be said at all, and so free of all extremes:

Our tradition asserts that the uncategorized ultimate
 is free from all assertions.
 Therefore the arguments of the great middle way
 are the great consequences. (41)

At this point we should note the subtle but important difference between the approaches of Tsongkhapa and his Geluk followers and Mipham and his new Nyingma followers regarding this issue. As we noted, Tsongkhapa is committed against his will to a contradiction, a paradox of expressibility and characterization that emerges at the limits of language that emerges naturally in the Madhyamaka tradition. This does not render him irrational, but perspicacious. And the paradox is explained by the fact that the categorized and uncategorized ultimate are the same object taken from distinct subjective standpoints. As a consequence, the transcendence of the ultimate of conceptual thought does not preclude its being conceptualized. But for Mipham and Bötrül, the objective distinction between the

categorized and uncategorized ultimate means that its transcendence of conception and expression is unmitigated by the paradoxical fact that we can express that, and conceive of it is the inconceivable. All of that is sent over to the categorized side. In attempting to avoid paradox, they are forced into mysticism. We see this consequence in the following passage:

Our tradition asserts ultimate emptiness
as the great uncategorized ultimate,
the expense beyond the constructed phenomena
of the relative objects found by a valid cognition of confined perception.

Emptiness is not an entity;
while appearance is not reified,
that appearance abides as the great emptiness —
this is a critical point that destroys the clinging to entities.

Emptiness is not an entity;
while emptiness is not reified,
the self – lucidity of emptiness is appearing phenomena —
this is a critical point of the dawning of dependent arising.

Since it is not an entity, it is free from being a permanent entity;
since it is not a nonentity, it is free from being the extreme of annihilation.
The expansive luminous clarity — profound, peaceful, and free from constructs —
is asserted as the great ultimate, the abiding reality.

This way is neither the domain of an analysis of the categorized ultimate nor
the domain of analysis of the conventional valid cognition of confined perception.
The great valid cognition that analyzes the uncategorized ultimate
is the unique meaning established by Prāsaṅgika reasoning. (42)

From the Geluk point of view—and, I might say, from the point of view of reason—
this locates the ultimate outside of the domain of objects of knowledge entirely. If
the goal of practice is to come to know ultimate truth, this is a disastrous
consequence. Nonconceptuality may have been taken too far.

3. What do we learn from this?

This is not the first time that I have argued that one of the virtues of Madhyamaka philosophy, and of Tsongkhapa's adumbration of Candrakīrti's interpretation of that system, is rationally paradoxical. By attending closely to this debate about how to understand the distinction between the categorized and the uncategorized we see

how important these paradoxes are, and how rational. One might think that the embrace of paradox is the first step from rationality to mysticism. On the contrary (and Tsongkhapa himself to the contrary notwithstanding), we discover that it is when one attempts to save the ultimate from paradox by distinguishing objectively the characterized from the noncharacterized, and valorizing the noncharacterized as the only genuine ultimate, that one slides into a position where the most important thing to realize becomes unknowable, and where the relationship between conventional and ultimate reality falls into mystery. Nonconceptual awareness is just fine, so long as that of which one is aware is conceptualizable.

References

- Bötrul. (2012). *Distinguishing the Views and Philosophies: Illuminating Emptiness in a Twentieth Century Buddhist Classic*. (trans. D Duckworth.). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Cowherds. (2012). *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Duckworth, D. (2008). *Mipam on Buddha-Nature: The Ground of the Nyingma Tradition*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Garfield, J. (2015). *Engaging Buddhism: Why it Matters to Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kassor, C. XXX
- Komarovsky, Y. (2012). *Visions of Unity: The Golden Shakyā Chokden's New Interpretation of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Komarovsky, Y. (2015). *Tibetan Buddhism and Mystical Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mipham. (2004). *Speech of Delight: Mipham's Commentary on Śāntarakṣita's Ornament of the Middle Way*. (trans. T. Doctor). Ithaca: Snow Lion.
- Thakchöe, S. (2007). *The Two Truths Debate: Tsongkhapa and Gorampa on the Middle Way*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

- Tsongkhapa. (1988). *dBu ma dgongs pa rab gsal*. Sarnath: Gelugpa Student Welfare Committee.
- Tsongkhapa. (2002). *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*. (Lamrim Chenmo Translation committee). Ithaca: Snow Lion.
- Tsongkhapa. (2006). *Ocean of Reasoning: A Great Commentary on Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. (Samten and Garfield, trans.) New York: Oxford University Press.