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Jangchub Tsöndrü and the Traditions of the Middle Way*

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# *A Review of Reason and Experience in Tibetan Buddhism: Mabja Jangchub Tsöndrü and the Traditions of the Middle Way*

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*Reason and Experience in Tibetan Buddhism: Mabja Jangchub Tsöndrü and the Traditions of the Middle Way.* By Thomas Doctor. *Routledge Critical Series in Buddhism.* New York: Routledge, 2014, 156 pages, ISBN 9780415722469 (hardback), \$145.

Scholarship on the history of Tibetan Madhyamaka tends to direct its gaze closer to the historical “middle” than toward earlier periods in the introduction of Buddhist traditions in Tibet. Works written by prominent Madhyamaka thinkers who participated in the scholastic efflorescence of fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth century Tibet are often granted priority over those of their lesser-known predecessors. The works of later figures can often be found in well-preserved and readily available editions while the works of their predecessors remain difficult to access or even locate. In addition, Tibetan traditions often obfuscate their own intellectual histories by emphasizing the singular nature of a later, highly influential author’s work. The intellectual history preceding a figure like Tsongkhapa (Tsong kha pa blo bsang grags pa, 1357-1419), as is brought to light in the work at hand, may become obscured among his

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followers by the popular narrative claiming the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī as the ultimate source of his teaching.

With some notable exceptions in the last two decades, the works of the earliest figures who first engaged the core issues that would dominate philosophical discourse in Tibet from the fourteenth century onward have remained relatively unexplored. Thomas Doctor's study of the Madhyamaka philosophy of Mabja Jangchub Tsöndrū (Rma bya byang chub brtson 'grus, d. 1185) in *Reason and Experience in Tibetan Buddhism* is thus a welcome addition to an emerging body of scholarly literature on the early intellectual history of Madhyamaka in Tibet. *Reason and Experience* draws extensively from Mabja's *Ornament of Reason*<sup>2</sup> and *The Appearance of Reality*<sup>3</sup> to present a framework for the key issues at the heart of his highly influential reconfiguration of Buddhist epistemology in response to Candrakīrti's (circa seventh century) Madhyamaka.

Section one of the book presents Mabja's lineage from Gö Lotsawa's ('Gos lo tsā ba gzhon nu dpal, 1392-1481) chapter on early Kadampa masters Ngok Löden Sherap (Rngog blo ldan shes rab, 1059-1109) and Patsab Nyima Drakpa (Pa tshap nyi ma grags pa, b. 1055). Mabja is named as an important disciple of Chapa Chökyi Seng-ge (Bya pa chos kyi senge, 1109-1169), yet he is also said to have received teachings on the *Guhyasamāja* from Patsab and to have held a particular affinity for the Madhyamaka of the Kashmiri Paṇḍita Jayānanda (circa eleventh century) (8). This presents Mabja as a figure who received two conflicting views on the compatibility of Madhyamaka and Buddhist epistemology from his predecessors. Section one concludes with a brief consideration of the

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<sup>2</sup> See Mabja Jangchub Tsöndrū (Tib. Rma bya byang chub brtson 'grus), *Ornament of Reason* (Tib. *Dbu ma rtsa ba shes rab kyi 'grel pa 'thad pa'i rgyan*), ed. rGyal ba Karma pa (Rumtek: Dharma Cakra Center, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> See Mabja Jangchub Tsöndrū (Tib. Rma bya byang chub brtson 'grus), *The Appearance of Reality* (Tib. *Dbu ma rigs pa'i tshogs kyi rgyan de kho na nyid snang ba*), in *Selected Works of the Kadampas* (Tib. *Bka' gdams gsung 'bum phyogs bsgrigs*) vol. 1, no. 13 (Khreng tu'u: Si khron dpe skrun tshogs pa, Si khron mi rigs dpe sktun khang, 2006), 745-820.

history of Madhyamaka thought in India and Tibet. Here Doctor argues that when Candrakīrti's works were introduced to Tibet they immediately met with an established tradition of *pramāṇa*-based Madhyamaka taught by early Kadampa figures like Ngok Loden Sherap and Chapa Chökyi Seng-ge, both abbots at Sangphu monastery where Mabja himself studied. Indian and Tibetan scholars such as Jayānanda and Patsab who followed Candrakīrti's system largely rejected any reliable basis for *pramāṇa* or valid cognition, and their works were thus in immediate conflict with the Madhyamaka schools already established in Tibet in the twelfth century (11).

Section two focuses on Mabja's Madhyamaka as it is presented in *Ornament of Reason* and *The Appearance of Reality*. Here it becomes clear that Mabja's Madhyamaka constitutes an innovative negotiation of the doctrinal issues that emerged as Candrakīrti's works became available in Tibetan. Several interrelated issues that occupy the core of Tibetan philosophical discourse in the centuries after Mabja are brought to light by Doctor's presentation such as the status of the epistemological system of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti in light of Candrakīrti's Madhyamaka, the resulting implications that this holds for the position taken up by the Svātantrika (Tib. *rang rgyud pa*) Mādhyamikas, the issue of whether or not a Mādhyamika holds any position concerning both the status of appearances and the ultimate goal of Buddhahood, and the elevation of Candrakīrti's system of Madhyamaka over the Svātantrika system.

Mabja attempts to salvage Buddhist *pramāṇa* from the kind of categorical rejection leveled by Jayānanda and Patsab by maintaining a radical fallibilism with respect to the status of appearances. He rejects all notions that *pramāṇas* are related to their objects "by the force of fact" (Skt. *vastubalapravṛtti*, Tib. *dngos po'i stobs zhugs*), yet allows for a correct understanding of *pramāṇas* as relative truth (Skt. *saṃvṛtisatya*, Tib. *kun rdzob bden pa*) in light of their basis in a preanalytic experience of dependent origination (20). In addition to his fallibilism with respect to the relative truth, Mabja maintains a radical agnosticism with respect to the

status of Buddhahood. Doctor argues that this position is rooted in Mabja's suspicion of any impulse that gives rise to a need for an explanation of the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path (34). Readers who are familiar with some of the works of later Tibetan Mādhyamikas will note that Doctor's presentation in section two highlights Mabja's position on several issues that will dominate Tibetan polemics in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries.

Section three of *Reason and Experience* focuses on Mabja's impact on the intellectual history of Tibet by comparing his system both with that of his predecessors and with a select group of later Tibetan Madhyamaka authors. Doctor begins by tracing the origins of Mabja's Madhyamaka from the conflicting positions of his two teachers, Patsab and Chapa. He presents Mabja's approach as a middle position that seeks a kind of synthesis of Patsab's categorical rejection of any valid basis for perception and Chapa's reification of a substantial object of perception on both the relative and ultimate level (61). Doctor then moves forward in history and analyzes the impact that Mabja had on the works of Longchenpa (Klong chen rab 'byams pa dri med 'od zer, 1308-1364), Tsongkhapa, Gorampa (Go rams pa bsod nams seng-ge, 1429-1489), and Karmapa Mikyö Dorje (Mi bskyod rdo rje, 1507-1554). This presentation leads to a general discussion of how each of these figures negotiates the tension between tradition and innovation in their incorporation of Mabja's Madhyamaka.

The greatest contribution that *Reason and Experience* offers to the field lies in its illustration of the influence that Mabja's Madhyamaka exerted on later Mādhyamika authors. Doctor's presentation of the reception of Mabja's Madhyamaka in the works of Longchenpa, Tsongkhapa, Gorampa, and Mikyö Dorje demonstrates four different approaches to negotiating the tension between tradition and innovation. Longchenpa mischaracterizes Mabja as arguing for an unqualified assertion that Mādhyamikas maintain views of their own. Following this mischaracterization, he presents his own position, which bears a striking resemblance

to the more nuanced argument that Mabja actually presents in his *Ornament of Reason* and *The Appearance of Reality*. Longchenpa thus attempts to distinguish himself from Mabja by mischaracterizing the latter's position, and then proceeds to adopt the actual position found in Mabja's works and present it as his own unique view (67).

Doctor then examines Tsongkhapa's famous Svātantrika/Prāsaṅgika (Tib. *rang rgyud pa/thal 'gyur pa*) distinction in his *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path* (Tib. *Lam rim chen mo*) in light of Mabja's argument against the Svātantrika's claim that a sense object has some basis in its "own characteristic," and that sense perceptions are validated "by force of fact." As Doctor notes, Tsongkhapa's famous critique of the Svātantrika position has been largely understood as his own innovative and unique contribution to the intellectual history of Tibetan Madhyamaka among both emic and etic scholars (68). However, Doctor shows that Tsongkhapa, like Longchenpa, misrepresents Mabja's view and then proceeds to present Mabja's corrective to the subtle realism of the Svātantrika view as his own.

Next, Doctor argues that Gorampa's *Light Rays of the Authentic View* (*Dbu ma rtsa ba'i shes rab kyi rnam par bshad pa yang dag lta ba'i 'od zer*) is almost entirely composed of passages from Mabja's *Ornament of Reason*. Yet in his work, Gorampa rejects the Svātantrika/Prāsaṅgika distinction laid out by Tsongkhapa, and so must also ignore those sections of Mabja's *Ornament of Reason* that support Tsongkhapa. Gorampa thus reproduces passages from Mabja's *Ornament of Reason* verbatim without noting their source, remains largely critical of Mabja when he does mention him in his work, and selectively ignores those sections of Mabja's works that support the position of his primary opponent (75).

Finally, Karmapa Mikyö Dorje overtly praises Mabja and claims direct inspiration from his work, yet here too Mabja's system becomes distorted (79). Mikyö Dorje states that the Svātantrika does not make claims to a sense object having its basis in its "own characteristic," nor to a principle of "perception by the power of facts," two accusations

about which Mabja is clearly adamant in his works. To claim that this refutation of the Svātantrika is the position of Mabja Jangchub Tsöndrü is, for Mikyö Dorje, a misunderstanding perpetuated by later generations of Tibetan thinkers (82-83). Here Doctor shows that although Mikyö Dorje openly praises Mabja and claims him as an important influence, he somehow finds it acceptable to ignore the actual content of Mabja's major works (85).

Section three culminates in a discussion of the possible implications that these four case studies might have for the conception of authority and innovation in Tibetan intellectual culture. This last section represents the culmination of the entire project in *Reason and Experience*. Doctor has gone to great lengths to supply the reader with everything she might need to engage in a broader discussion on themes of tradition, authenticity, and innovation in Tibetan intellectual culture. Yet when he finally does approach this discussion, it is regrettably far too brief and underdeveloped. Much more could have been offered here to situate the case studies that Doctor has presented within a larger discourse on the topics of canonization, textual authority, and the tensions between innovation and tradition. Instead, the issue is addressed in a mere eight pages.

Nevertheless, Doctor does offer some brief insights on the broader implications of the intellectual history around Mabja's Madhyamaka. The most interesting observation is the relative lack of critique leveled against and between Doctor's four case subjects for either directly appropriating Mabja's work without any acknowledgment or claiming direct inspiration from him while perpetuating a distorted misrepresentation of his arguments. Doctor notes that Śākya Chokden (Shākya mchog ldan, 1428-1507) is perhaps the exception to this trend, having openly challenged Tsongkhapa's professed revelation from Mañjuśrī by pointing out that his position is merely a reproduction of Mabja Jangchub Tsöndrü's work. But overall, Doctor notes that it appears to have been permissible to make such claims, at least for a certain class of elite Tibet-



an intellectuals (91). He concludes by arguing that the process of innovation is sublimated into the mechanism of tradition itself. This process is rooted in widely known Buddhist structures for granting textual authority such as the Mahāyāna argument that anything “well-spoken” qualifies as *buddhadharma*. Here, Doctor adds that rather than drawing their authority solely from appeals to scriptural authority, figures like Longchenpa, Tsongkhapa, Gorampa, and Mikyö Dorje often demonstrated their level of realization by either going beyond scripture or manipulating received tradition itself in order to position themselves as the progenitors of a new and unique teaching that preserves and expresses the true meaning of the *Dharma* (92).

Section four contains a translation of *The Root Verses of The Appearance of Reality* interspersed into a topical outline (Tib. *sa bcad*) that corresponds to Mabja’s extensive treatise on *The Appearance of Reality*. Doctor provides an üchen edition of the root verses that reproduces the ümé manuscript edition published in 2006 in *The Selected Works of the Kadampa*. He then provides a transliteration of the topical outline of Mabja’s full treatise on *The Appearance of Reality*. Both topical outlines supply page numbers that will guide the reader to the corresponding sections of the Tibetan texts of Mabja’s complete treatise on *The Appearance of Reality*.

An informative look at Mabja’s contribution to philosophical thought in Tibet in its own right, *Reason and Experience* also serves as a companion volume to The Dharmacakra Translation Committee’s 2011 publication of Mabja’s *Ornament of Reason: The Great Commentary to Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way*, and will also function as a helpful companion volume to Doctor’s forthcoming translation of Mabja’s extensive treatise on *The Appearance of Reality*. These three works taken together will undoubtedly become required reading for anyone interested in the intellectual history of Madhyamaka in Tibet.