

limited by the sociopolitical considerations briefly touched on in chapter 1. Such limits are particularly evident in the Ge-luk school, which adopted the teachings of Dzong-ka-ba as they had been interpreted by his disciples—Gyel-tsap, Kay-drup, and the authors of the monastic manuals. Their views have come to define a strict orthodoxy within the tradition that is all the more severe in that their works spell out positions quite explicitly. Hence, there is a remarkable doctrinal agreement within the Ge-luk school and philosophical differences are rather small.

This doctrinal unanimity does not prevent diversity. Debate trains the mind to make subtle distinctions, enabling scholars to find room for expressing different views within the constraints of orthodoxy. Moreover, Ge-luk scholars often disagree on how Dzong-ka-ba's ideas are to be implemented. This is particularly true in the realm of Madhyamaka, an abstruse subject that lends itself to subtle differences, slippages, and unnoticed confusions. In what follows I discuss Madhyamaka philosophy, particularly in relation to Gen Nyi-ma's approach, to show how despite significant differences, Dzong-ka-ba's interpretation of Madhyamaka embodies the deconstructive approach described in chapter 11. I will also justify my claim that at its best, debate represents a deconstructive strategy.

We will begin with a claim encountered in the last chapter: that Madhyamaka is not amenable to the descriptive method of classical philosophy. Because ultimate reality is beyond description and thus cannot be grasped, a deconstructive approach is necessary. But throughout the history of Madhyamaka, scholars have disagreed over the extent to which Madhyamaka should be limited to this deconstructive approach and should exclude systematic thinking.

In India, Bhavya and Candrakīrti argued about the best way to understand emptiness. Believing that one can approach though not capture emptiness through the classical tools of Indian logic, Bhavya supported the use of arguments (*prayoga*, *sbyor ba*) to establish emptiness provisionally. In his view, Madhyamaka is ultimately deconstructive yet offers ample room for systematic philosophical discussion. Candrakīrti rejected this approach even provisionally, finding it antithetical to the Madhyamaka deconstructive standpoint. Classical logical tools are inappropriate to the task of awakening students to the Madhyamaka insight.²⁵ Usual philosophical categories such as ontology and epistemology are part of the problem, not the solution.

Related disagreements exist in Tibet, though they do not map onto the so-called Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika distinction, a very muddled subject that I plan to explore in a separate work.²⁶ Particularly relevant here is the view

of Dzong-ka-ba and his tradition, which differs from Indian Madhyamaka in several respects. One of Dzong-ka-ba's innovations is in applying to Prāsaṅgika a systematic and consistent framework based on a realist interpretation of Buddhist epistemology.²⁷ In his approach, the ineffability of the ultimate is weakened and the gap between the two truths bridged. Emptiness is described philosophically, though not with full semantic adequacy, and integrated into a larger philosophical structure. In this way, Dzong-ka-ba removes the paradoxical element from Madhyamaka and creates an impressive clarity, which other interpretations often lack (though his approach has its own internal tensions).

In the context of Madhyamaka, Dzong-ka-ba's realism manifests itself in an insistence on the laws of logic in the context of the ultimate. That is, he insists not only that thinking must follow the laws of logic while investigating the ultimate, a point on which there is little disagreement, but also that its conclusions must conform to the laws of logic. This issue is central to the Madhyamaka approach. Consider, for example, the famous fourfold schema: things are not existent, or nonexistent, or both existent and nonexistent, or neither existent nor nonexistent.²⁸ This formulation seems at first highly paradoxical—a flagrant contradiction of the law of the excluded middle, which states that for any x , if x is not a , then it is non- a . How then can something be neither existent nor nonexistent?

At this point, Dzong-ka-ba and such critics as Śākya Chok-den part company. The latter holds that the very purpose of the tetralemmic formulation is to undo the mind's habit of holding onto objects and to establish a new, self-undermining way of thinking. Madhyamaka reasoning follows the laws of logic not to produce some coherent philosophical conclusion but to oblige the mind to abandon its compulsion to reify. This therapeutic release is a first step toward a cure. The adequate answer to the question "How can something be neither existent nor nonexistent?" is not a positive assertion but a letting go of the habit of thinking in terms of a something. There is no thing that can be neither existent nor nonexistent, and understanding this truth is precisely the point of the whole enterprise.²⁹

As a realist, Dzong-ka-ba disagrees with this formulation, which he holds to be inconsistent. It can only lead to confusion, a belief one is thinking something when in fact one has descended into an incoherence hidden by protective but meaningless verbal quibbles. For Dzong-ka-ba, tetralemmic negations cannot be taken literally: they are to be interpreted as being modified by a modal operator, so that what is being negated is not the object itself but the tropic component.³⁰ This is the putative "object of negation" (*dgag bya*), which is designated by a variety of terms, including "ul-

timiate existence" (*don dam par yod pa*), "real existence" (*bden par grub pa*), and "intrinsic existence" (*rang bzhin gis grub pa*), and is the target of Madhyamaka reasonings. The statement that things do not exist is then understood to mean that they do not exist ultimately (*don dam par*) or inherently (*rang bzhin gyis*). Reality can thus be understood through conceptual schemes that follow the classical canons of rationality.

Yet Dzong-ka-ba goes further. Earlier Madhyamaka thinkers such as Bhavya had used modal operators to limit the paradoxical nature of Madhyamaka, but their domestication of Madhyamaka deconstruction had not gone very far, for they never attempted to bridge the radical gap between the two truths—as does Dzong-ka-ba in a move that seems to be entirely original within the history of Madhyamaka. The "identification of the object of negation" (*dgag bya ngos 'dzin*),³¹ which is at the core of his Madhyamaka interpretation, is described as the prerequisite for understanding emptiness. The putative object of negation is the tropic component, determined by a modal operator such as *intrinsic existence*. Thus Madhyamaka deconstruction does not concern existence proper. Things do not exist ultimately, as Nāgārjuna's deconstructive reasonings demonstrate, but they do exist conventionally (and therefore can be said to exist). Madhyamaka reasonings do not affect the existence of phenomena, including emptiness, that can be understood according to the canons of rationality presupposed by a moderate realist interpretation of Buddhist epistemology. Essencelessness can then be integrated within a global account in which reality can be described coherently, without any conflict between the two truths. This account also strengthens the validity of the conventional realm, which gains a kind of existence (albeit only conventional).

The crucial identification of the object of negation is not as straightforward as the brief sketch above might suggest. Though it is necessary to understand emptiness, Dzong-ka-ba also recognizes that such an identification is problematic until one has realized emptiness. It presupposes the separation of two approaches to conceptualizing things: the conventional mode, in which things exist as objects of mostly linguistically embedded practices, and the ultimate mode, in which things exist intrinsically (and therefore can be the object of negation). Yet to distinguish these two modes, one must have already realized emptiness and become able to see the second mode as deceptive and the first one as valid; until then, they remain confused. Thus, Dzong-ka-ba's approach seems to be beset by a circularity of which the tradition is well aware. The generally agreed-on solution is to take the identification of the object of negation prior to realizing emptiness as being only provisional—that is, something one can understand only ap-

proximately. In terms of Ge-luk epistemology, only after realizing emptiness can an individual understand fully the difference between the conventionally existing object and its nonexistent reified essence; until then, the object of negation is identified not by valid cognition but by correct assumption (*yiid dpyod*). Such a solution introduces further difficulties. At the very least, it constitutes a sleight of hand that hides the radical difference between the two truths. Emptiness can be called “describable” in the Madhyamaka system only by making its description a unique sort; no other phenomena are described provisionally, contingent on the realization of emptiness.

Given this difficulty in Dzong-ka-ba, the range of approaches among Ge-luk thinkers is not surprising. In particular, they differ on the role of the identification of the object of negation, though all understand that such an identification is necessary and can only be provisional. Teachers in Pa-bong-ka’s lineage, such as Geshe Rab-ten, stress meditative experience. The task of identifying the object of negation is not discursive but experiential, as one observes how the mind grasps objects (particularly oneself) as having intrinsic existence. This mindful process can be greatly helped by introspective exercises during which one imagines oneself to be under great emotional duress, a situation in which the self-grasping tendency becomes obvious and easier to identify. The putative object of negation—the object grasped by ignorance—is thereby identified provisionally by the meditator and can be taken as the target of deconstructive Madhyamaka reasonings, which monks have learned during their studies.

This approach, which is advocated by Pa-bong-ka in his text on the Gradual Path, insists on the importance of meditation and limits the role of conceptual inquiry. In discussing Candrakīrti’s refutation of the self, Pa-bong-ka makes clear the limited role that he sees for debate: “You could use these words in debate and they would serve to silence your opponent, but you have not identified the object of refutation until you have determined it through experience. . . . You must recognize the object of refutation through vivid, naked, personal mental experiences brought on by an analytic process.”³² The preliminary experiential determination of the object of negation is necessary to avoid the danger of erroneously negating the conventional existence of things.

By ensuring that conventional existence is not affected by the deconstructive strategy, this approach risks completely separating emptiness and conventional existence. The Madhyamaka reasonings are then taken to apply only to a constructed and hence irrelevant object of negation. Ge-luk teachers are quite aware of the danger of creating an artificial (*blos byas*)

emptiness that has no relation with reality.³³ Geshe Rab-ten often warned students against this error; he used to speak ironically of the difficulty of Madhyamaka, a philosophy in which one is never sure whether one's method is a part of the solution or a part of the problem.

GEN NYI-MA'S APPROACH TO MADHYAMAKA

Although Gen Nyi-ma never explicitly rejected the emphasis on introspection, several of his more outspoken students did. **One of his more advanced students explained to me privately that reliance on the experiential identification of the putative object of negation presupposes an immediacy that is not available, given that such an identification can be made only after one has realized emptiness.** I was rather taken aback by this statement, for at that time I (like many teachers) accepted Pa-bong-ka's approach as authoritative. I later came to recognize its problems.

Gen Nyi-ma was considered by other Ge-luk scholars to be a Madhyamaka expert, and his approach differed from most others in several ways. Textually, Gen-la focused on Nāgārjuna's *Treatise* instead of Candrakīrti's *Introduction*. In fact, Gen Nyi-ma's Madhyamaka teachings were often little more than dialectical demonstrations of Nāgārjuna's approach in the *Treatise*. Pedagogically, Gen-la differed in that he did not provide a complete gloss of the text but just focused on important passages. Once the key passages had been analyzed in depth, students were supposed to be able to tackle the rest of the text on their own. Needless to say, an authoritative transmission (*lung*) was out of the question. Philosophically, Gen-la took an unusual approach to the identification of the object of negation. Instead of proceeding introspectively, Gen-la would insist on a more classical deconstructive approach. A few words about his strategy will demonstrate the degree to which Madhyamaka in all versions, including Dzong-ka-ba's, is deconstructive and how debate embodies this philosophy.

For Gen-la, the preliminary to any further inquiry was a relentless taking apart of things. Such an undermining of concepts implies not that they had no bearing at all on reality but that things do not have any essence that can be pinned down. Hence, they do not exist ultimately or intrinsically. Yet phenomena do exist, because they function when one uses them linguistically. As Dzong-ka-ba claimed, their essencelessness does not contradict their existence..

Such an approach stays quite close to classical Madhyamaka formulations while drawing on Dzong-ka-ba's object of negation. But unlike some other Ge-luk thinkers, Gen-la did not insulate conventional existence from

Madhyamaka reasonings. The object of negation is taken not as an observable entity, a kind of fixed target, but as the guardrail that prevents the undermining of essentialization from degenerating into nihilism, which is nothing but an essentialization of negation. The student is thus taken along the Middle Way, between the extremes of reification (eternalism) and negation (nihilism). This middle ground cannot be seized once and for all, however; it needs to be approached by a constant self-corrective oscillation, which undermines positive as well as negative answers. In this way, the mind, prevented from locking itself into any one stance, is pushed into a new dimension of openness.

Gen-la would start the process by pointing to some common object. When I studied with him, the example was a buffalo. Gen-la asked, "What is the buffalo?" "Are the legs the buffalo?" "Is the head the buffalo?" "Are the horns the buffalo?" As readers may remember, Gen-la had tried the same kind of annoying interrogation on me when I had first met him. But now I was prepared to cope with the questions and I understood the point of the exercise: the undoing of any attempt to pin down the concept by which the object could be identified. No part of the buffalo can be taken as corresponding to the concept of the animal. Even the sum total of the parts is not the buffalo, for the animal is never perceived in its totality: to identify it, one need not identify all its components.

After shooting down all positive answers, Gen-la would insist that the failure to define the buffalo does not mean that it does not exist. The buffalo exists; otherwise, how could one be injured by its horns? Nobody has ever been injured by the horns of a rabbit! Hence, the negative nihilist extreme will not do. To understand the buffalo, Gen-la would introduce the notion of conventional existence. The buffalo exists conventionally, not ultimately. That is, the buffalo exists as the object of effective linguistically embedded practices, which are sufficient to guarantee its existence. We can point to the buffalo and effectively use the concept of the buffalo, but we cannot go beyond this practice. In particular, we cannot grasp the buffalo as if it were more than an object of linguistic designation. Whenever we try to do so, we lose contact with our practices and become trapped by our illusory constructions. And yet, we constantly make the attempt.

This explanation of the notion of conventional existence was important and unusual for Gen-la. Only rarely did he offer students a positive explanation to give them some insight into the notion of conventional existence. Those who understood would be able to follow later teachings without getting lost, entering a deconstructive movement guided by the view that things can exist as objects of conventional practices although they do not