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The Emptiness of Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika, by C.W. Huntington, Jr., with Geshe Namgyal Wangchen. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989. xvi + 276 pp. + bibliography + index. \$35.00 (cloth).

The Emptiness of Emptiness is the first complete annotated translation into a Western language of one of the greatest classics of Indian Buddhism, the *Madhyamakāvatāra*. It is accompanied by an extensive and detailed introduction covering a wide range of relevant topics. Given that the volume is itself in two parts (the introduction and the translation), I have opted for dividing my discussion of the work accordingly, though in reverse order.

The original Sanskrit is, of course, lost, though there surface from time to time rumors of a Sanskrit original from Tibet now in the hands of the Chinese. Huntington's annotated translation is therefore based primarily on the Tibetan. It is clear from the annotations, however, that the author has scrupulously searched for, made reference to, and cited the available Sanskrit fragments, a great virtue of the work. Huntington also has made extensive reference to the Tibetan translation of the *Bhāṣya*, Candrakīrti's autocommentary to the text, to a host of other relevant texts of Indian Buddhism, and to a great deal of secondary source material, making his translation a sound piece of philological research. The translation itself is excellent. Anyone who has worked with Indian philosophical verse is aware of the problems involved in the translation of such works. Huntington's translation, however, makes the task seem straightforward. It is at once accurate and readable, a rare accomplishment. Although one might quibble with the choice of some terms, e.g., "nondefinitive sense" for *neyārtha*—"provisional" seems to me preferable—his translation choices are for the most part clear-cut and at times even insightful. One significant drawback is that the index to the volume is essentially an index to the introduction alone, a great impediment to the scholar who wishes to make reference to the translation. This, however, does not detract from the quality of the translation itself, which is unusually accessible, clear and accurate.

The introduction to the work is written in the same lucid prose as the translation. It is a bold undertaking in which the author discusses a wide variety of issues relevant to the study of Madhyamaka: methodology, history, historiography, doctrinal context, soteriology and the use of philosophical language. Given that the translation was done under the guidance of an eminent Tibetan *dge bshes* of the dGe lugs pa school, however, it is ironic that the main thrust of Huntington's introduction should be so at odds with the dGe lugs pa reading of the *Madhyamaka*. Huntington's reading of Candrakīrti

has clearly been influenced by Wittgenstein, American pragmatists (e.g., James) and neo-pragmatists (e.g., Rorty) and deconstructionists. A dGe lugs pa (and many of their Sa skya predecessors) would take exception with much of what Huntington writes in his introduction, and I would like to devote the remainder of this essay to the task of pointing out what some of these differences are. My aim here is not to demonstrate that Huntington's is a misreading of Candrakīrti, thought I do believe that there are evaluative criteria that can be employed to decide questions of authorial intent. My goal here is more modest. It is simply to show that there is at least one interpretation of Candrakīrti that varies radically from the one presented in the introduction to this work. Which comes closer to the mark will be left up to the reader.

1. The influence of the deconstructionists on Huntington's reading is perhaps more evident in his discussion of philosophical views (*dṛṣṭi*). Early in the book (p. xii) he states:

Early Mādhyamika explicitly claims to operate as a rejection, or deconstruction, of all attempts to create a value-free, objective view of truth or reality... Ultimately, the Mādhyamika's rejection of all views is more the rejection of an attitude or *way of thinking* than the rejection of any particular concept.... Accordingly, the significance of the words and concepts used within the Mādhyamika system derives not from their supposed association with any objectively privileged vocabulary supporting a particular view of truth or reality, but from their special efficacy as instruments which may be applied in daily life to the sole purpose of eradicating the suffering caused by clinging, antipathy, and the delusion of reified thought.

In Huntington's view, then, the Madhyamaka eschews all philosophical views¹ and it rejects technical philosophical terminology that has as its aim the setting forth of a normative and true philosophical viewpoint. Being a pragmatic philosophy for living a truly free and non-clinging life, it has no need for such things. The claim that all things are empty, for Huntington, is not a philosophical view but "the groundlessness of all experience" (p. 26). By maintaining that emptiness is itself empty (hence the title) the Mādhyamika extricates him/herself from the foundationalist predicament of having to justify a belief system through rational means. Hence:

The Mādhyamika philosopher rejects our most fundamental empirical propositions and the matrix of rationality in which they are cast as matters of strictly normative and ultimately groundless belief.

More specifically, according to the Mādhyamika, concepts of logic as well as practical concepts dealing with empirical phenomena like causation, are all grounded in a particular way of life which is itself groundless. Everyday experience is empty of a fixed substratum for the justification of any type of knowledge or belief, and precisely this lack of justification—this being empty even of “emptiness”—is itself the truth of the highest meaning. (p. 10)

The dGe lugs pas' view of the Madhyamaka finds such a position anathema. According to them, though the ultimate task of the Madhyamaka is indeed a pragmatic one, the elimination of an *innate* (Tib. *lhyan skyes*) ignorance that reifies the self and the world into something it is not, it also is viewed as a philosophical system in its own right. As such, it functions to subvert faulty conceptual structures that are learned or acquired (*kun brtags*).² It deals with philosophical terms and concepts, has beliefs, and advocates a philosophical position.³ Further, the elimination of philosophical misconceptions and the acquisition of right view is seen as a necessary stepping-stone to the elimination of innate ignorance. What Huntington does, a dGe lugs pa would claim, is to conflate the theory and practice of the Madhyamaka by making it seem as though the Madhyamaka is all practice. According to the dGe lugs pas, the theoretical super-structure, with all the full-blown philosophical accoutrements, though distinct from the practice, is considered as a prerequisite to and is fulfilled in the practice, the series of spiritual exercises that lead to the elimination of the subtle innate ignorance that abides in the minds of all sentient beings.

Over and above this, however, the dGe lugs pas present a plethora of philosophical objections to the view that the Mādhyamikas hold no philosophical position. For example, in his *Tong thun chen mo*, the great dGe lugs pa exegete mKhas grub dGe legs dpal bzang (1385–1438) states that the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika's claim to “be in accordance with the world or with worldly conventions” is not a repudiation of the use of philosophical terminology, concepts or beliefs:

As for those who claim that (the Prāsaṅgikas believe in being in accordance with) those who are untrained in philosophy, they are quite mistaken. This is because no one trained in philosophy could possibly come to accept the majority of the technical ways Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas use terminology...⁴

It is difficult to imagine how anyone who has read even a portion of Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā* could possibly doubt his commitment to

the rational and systematic justification of the philosophical truth of the doctrine of emptiness. The fact that emptiness is itself empty is, according to most Tibetan scholiasts, not meant to imply that it requires no rational justification. Rather it is a corrective to those who would reify the doctrine of emptiness into an independent philosophical concept with no connections to the human predicament.

Later in the *sTong thun chen mo* mKhas grub rje states:

What do we mean by saying that Prāsaṅgikas set forth the conventional in accordance with the world? All ordinary beings and āryans still in training have innate mundane minds, and following mere names, they engage in effective action without analysis. Likewise, the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamika sets forth the conventional following mere words, without analysis. (But suppose one interprets “according with worldly convention” to mean that) what worldly idiots who are ignorant of tenets claim exists one should also claim to exist and what they regard as non-existent one should also claim to not exist. If one takes this as the meaning of “positing things in accordance with the world” then one has gone far astray.⁵

Hence, from the dGe lugs pa perspective, the Mādhyamika rejects neither philosophical beliefs (tenets) nor the use of philosophical terminology. “According with worldly usage” does not oblige the Mādhyamika to reject philosophical concepts and terminology in favor of common parlance. It means, instead, that the Mādhyamika uses terminology with the awareness that, when subjected to an ultimate analysis, referents to such terms cannot be found.⁶ Madhyamaka, therefore, is not a form of ordinary language philosophy.

One of the most extensive refutations of the view that the Prāsaṅgikas have no position of their own and that they only refute the positions of their opponents through the use of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments, never relying on positive syllogistic reasoning, is to be found in the *sTong thun chen mo*.⁷ After laying out the opponent’s position in great detail (including purported proof-texts from the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, *Yuktisaṃskāra*, *Catuḥśataka*, *Madhyamakāvatāra*, and *Prasannapadā*), mKhas grub rje presents a series of arguments aimed at repudiating such a view. Unfortunately, the discussion in the *sTong thun chen mo* is too detailed and extensive to cite here. It behooves us, however, to outline some of the more interesting portions of the text.

(a) His first argument is fairly straightforward. The belief in no-beliefs is itself a belief. Hence, the opponents contradict themselves by holding a belief after all. Of course, the conundrum here

arises from the self-referential nature of the proposition.⁸

(b) His second objection has as a presupposition the *siddhānta* schema, a systematization of all of Buddhist philosophy in which the Prāsaṅgika school is posited as the “highest” school of tenets. mKhas grub rje states that for someone who maintains that the Prāsaṅgikas hold no philosophical position all notions of distinct philosophical schools or traditions vanish, and gradations in philosophical accuracy become impossible, leaving one with no ground from which to evaluate other systems. This reduces one to having no basis from which to claim that one’s own view is the superior one, that one’s beliefs are the “ultimate purport” (*dgongs pa mthar thug pa*) of the Buddha. In short, it leaves one a relativist. It is possible that this consequence of the view that the Prāsaṅgikas hold no philosophical position may not seem problematic to a modern Western interpreter, but it was (and still is) considered devastating by traditional scholars.

(c) In an interesting argument, mKhas grub rje asks his opponent what it is that makes Candrakīrti a Prāsaṅgika. Is not one’s philosophical identity determined by the philosophical beliefs one holds? Indeed, if one has no beliefs at all how can one even call oneself a Buddhist? If it is enough that Candrakīrti argue against his opponents and make certain claims for their sake, without believing in anything himself, then, he says, “it follows, absurdly, that the Conqueror Śākyamuni is a Cittamātrin because, though he does not accept the tenets of the Cittamātran himself, when he taught the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* he accepted them merely for the sake of other disciples.

(d) If the Buddha, as a Prāsaṅgika, had no beliefs of his own, then there is no point in reading scripture. There is neither a reason nor a way to interpret it, and the entire Madhyamaka *neyārtha / nīlārtha* hermeneutic becomes pointless.

(e) Finally, mKhas grub rje states that there are a plethora of passages (which he cites) in which both Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti make one-pointed philosophical claims, “‘this is so,’ ‘this is not so,’ ‘this is correct,’ ‘this is not correct.’” Given that these quintessential “Prāsaṅgikas” make such claims, is it not fitting to maintain that they hold the views which they so vehemently assert?

It is equally interesting that mKhas grub rje ascribes the following motivation to those who believe that the Prāsaṅgikas accept no philosophical position:

They think that the reasoning of the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas is refuting everything. Then, once refuted, realizing that all those forms

of reasoning can be used to refute what they themselves accept, they repudiate the fact that all the absurdities urged on others are applicable to themselves. Should such absurdities *be* urged, being totally unaware of how to avert such arguments (when turned against them), their one last hope is to say, "we accept nothing at all."¹⁰

Hence, for mKhas grub rje, the claim that there is no view is the refuge of the intellectually feeble:

Those who are poor in intellect and fortune may not be able to understand the system (of Candrakīrti), but at least they should not slander it by saying that *there is no such system!* To say "we do not accept any system, whether Prāsaṅgika or Svātantrika Madhyamaka" clearly identifies one as not being a Mādhyamika. So do not take up such a contradictory system which prides itself on being the best among philosophical schools.¹⁰

2. A major difference between Huntington and the dGe lugs pas occurs in the area of epistemology and logic. As we have seen above, Huntington maintains that our ordinary experience is groundless, that is cannot be justified epistemologically, and he takes this to be the meaning of the Mādhyamika claim that emptiness is itself empty. A dGe lugs pa would respond that "our most fundamental empirical propositions and the matrix of rationality in which they are cast" are not at all groundless, for they find their ground, their justification, in the conventionally valid knowledge of the world ('jig rten pa'i that snyad pa'i tshad ma), which, as we have seen above, does allow for philosophical discourse.¹¹ The radical critique set forth by the Mādhyamika may mean that nothing will be found when subjected to reasoning which analyzes the ultimate nature of things (*don dam dpyod byred kyi rigs pa*), but this does not mean that things are left groundless at the conventional level. At this level "our most fundamental empirical propositions" are left intact and philosophy is still possible.

Huntington also maintains that Candrakīrti's refutation of the *svatantra* is a repudiation of all syllogistic reasoning in general, leaving Candrakīrti with the reductio (*prasaṅga*) as his only logical tool:

The Prāsaṅgika maintained that this sort of syllogistic argumentation, even with the modifications introduced by Bhāvaviveka, is inappropriate in the service of the concept of emptiness, for "emptiness" is not to be sought after in the propositional structure of an inferential judgment. According to the Prāsaṅgika one must be led toward a gradual realization of emptiness *solely* by means of a critique directed at his own prejudices and presuppositions about so-called empirical

experience and the arguments either consciously or unconsciously posited to support these preconceived ideas. (p. 34, my emphasis)

I have shown elsewhere¹² that in dGe lugs pa exegesis the refutation of the *svatantra* is not viewed as a repudiation of logic in general. Indeed, according to most Tibetan Mādhyamikas, syllogistic reasoning is not only permissible but appropriate. The point being made in the Bhāvaviveka/Candrakīrti debate is, in part, that a full-blown syllogism, especially one in which the *trairūpya* conditions are viewed as inherent to the structure of logical inference, is not always necessary. Hence, *prasaṅga* arguments are not the *sole* tool available to the Prāsaṅgika, though they are *a* tool, together with formal syllogistic reasoning.

3. I have shown in the introduction to my translation of mKhas grub rje's text, *A Great Dose of Emptiness*, that the dGe lugs pas hold several claims to be corollaries of each other: (1) the methodological claim that the Prāsaṅgikas have no philosophical view—relativism, (2) the epistemological claim that they repudiate inference and syllogistic reasoning—skepticism, (3) the soteriological claim that the proper method of Prāsaṅgika meditation is to empty the mind—quietism, and (4) the ontological claim that they negate the existence of all phenomena—nihilism. All of these views are considered by them to be related, and all are rejected as faulty. Consistent with the dGe lugs pa analysis of these problematic areas, Huntington at times also seems to subscribe to the fourth view by taking the *catuskoti* at face value (i.e., literally):

Most contemporary scholars believe that the term emptiness refers neither to existence nor non-existence. (p. 18)

Contemporary dGe lugs pa scholars, however, *do not* hold to such a position. It is precisely in response to someone who does that the following dialogue takes place in the *sTong thun chen mo*:

[mKhas grub rje:] By advocating that the sprout does not exist one is advocating that it is non-existent...,

[Opponent:] These are not in direct contradiction, for although the Svātantrikas and all the lower schools understand reality in terms of the law of excluded middle, in the Prāsaṅgika system reality is not understood in terms of the law of excluded middle. Hence there is no fault.

[mKhas grub rje:] Then it would follow, absurdly, that (two things) could never be in direct contradiction, that they could never mutually

exclude each other, for (according to you) one is unable to understand something to be non-existent by negating its existence.... Desist (in claiming) that the Prāsaṅgika refutes the realist by relying on internal contradiction. Moreover, it follows, absurdly, (from your views) that there is no difference between right tenets and wrong ones, whether they be Prāsaṅgika or realist tenets. This is because (for you) the point expressed by a philosophical tenet can neither be disproved by a valid cognition (*pramāṇa*) nor established by one.¹³

According to the dGe lugs pa interpretation of the *catuṣkoti*, the “existence” that is repudiated must be qualified. It is “inherent existence” that the Mādhyamika refutes, not existence in general. This is how the dGe lugs pas manage to uphold the principle of the excluded middle in their interpretation of the tetralemma. Later in this same section of the *sTong thun chen mo* (pp. 107–108) mKhas grub rje cites a variety of passages from Candrakīrti in order to show how Candrakīrti himself distinguishes “between existence and inherent existence,” upholding the latter and rejecting the former.

For mKhas grub rje and the dGe lugs pas that follow him the repudiation of existence is tantamount to nihilism:

Nowadays it seems that quite a few Mādhyamikas also accept, as do the realists, that if something is essenceless it must be non-existent. However, the realists, being expert philosophers, accept that things inherently exist without being nihilists in regard to karma and its effects. The Mādhyamikas of today, however, advocate that karma and its effects do not exist, and yet these idiots consider theirs the highest view!¹⁴

4. Who were the Madhyamikas’ opponents? From their works, it is clear that they were varied, including non-Buddhists, and a host of Buddhist schools such as the Ābhidharmikas and Yogācāras. Intuitively one might say that the Mādhyamikas argue for their beliefs against these different opponents, but for Huntington this is not possible, since what the Mādhyamikas are doing is not philosophy. Instead, it is something more akin to therapy of the Wittgensteinian kind:

I suggest that the Mādhyamika philosophers can be best understood by entirely disposing of the idea that they are presenting a series of arguments against one set of claims and in favor of another.... Like Wittgenstein and the pragmatists, with whom they have much in common, the Mādhyamikas “keep trying to find ways of making anti-philosophical points in nonphilosophical language.” (p. 10)

Now if the Mādhyamikas are not philosophers who argue against other philosophical traditions then what are they arguing against? Huntington states:

The Mādhyamika sets itself in opposition to a philosophical tradition which was preoccupied with the search for more and more precise technical terminology and had neglected the practical application of philosophical theory... (a tradition) that had severed theory from practice. (p. xii, my insertion)¹⁵

Hence, according to Huntington, since the Mādhyamikas cannot be arguing truth with fellow philosophers they must be urging scholastics to practice. What a terribly poor picture this paints, however, of the great Abhidharma and Yogācāra masters! Was the Abhidharma truly the dry scholasticism that Huntington implies it was? Was Asaṅga merely twiddling his thumbs the twelve years he spent in the cave? Isn't it both the kinder and the more accurate interpretation to say that Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti were not criticizing their opponents for their lack of practice, but for their *faulty beliefs*? This, however, is not an option for Huntington.

There are a number of other issues which, though important, cannot be dealt with here due to restrictions on space. Among them are Huntington's claim that the Mādhyamika holds a non-referential view of language (pp. 30–32), and his very Theravāda *vipassanā*-like interpretation of Madhyamaka meditation (pp. 35, 81–82), both problematic. All this notwithstanding, I cannot sufficiently emphasize that Huntington's introduction is a clear, well-written and provocative piece of scholarship, additionally amazing given the fact that he has been so heavily influenced by the French deconstructionists!

That the views criticized by mKhas grub rje in the above passages correspond to many of Huntington's own views is in a sense a tribute to Huntington. It implies, of course, that the views he holds are views held by mKhas grub rje's opponents, great scholars in their own right. Regardless of what position one takes on these issues, it is a great virtue of Huntington's volume that he introduces them in a lucid, straightforward and advocative style. If there is a major drawback to his presentation it is only that he gives the reader little clue as to the fact that there are living contemporary interpretations of Candrakīrti, traditional Tibetan readings of the Madhyamaka, that are substantially at variance with his own views.

NOTES

1. This position is further amplified on pp. 8, 10, 15, 27, 47, 98, 106–8, 110, etc. In many of these passages its connection to pragmatism is also further developed.
2. On the distinction between these two forms of ignorance see TTC pp. 132–134; all references to the *sTong thun chen mo* (TTC) are to the Madhyamika Text Series edition [New Delhi: Lha mkhar yongs 'dzin bstan pa rgyal mtshan, 1972].
3. For the dGe lugs pa interpretation of Madhyamaka passages (e.g. from the *Vigrahavyāvartani*) that seem to suggest otherwise, see my forthcoming translation of mKhas grub rje's *sTong thun chen mo, A Great Dose of Emptiness* [Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press].
4. TTC p. 84.
5. TTC pp. 172–173.
6. Notice that this is different from claiming that Madhyamaka posits a non-referential view of language. Words, as long as they are used in accordance with common usage, do have referents. The fact that under an ultimate analysis those referents cannot be found does not mean that, within the realm of conventions, the referents are non-existent. There is only one arena in which philosophy can be undertaken, and that is the realm of worldly usage, but philosophers are part of the world and technical philosophical terminology does not fall outside of "worldly usage." Hence, the Prāsaṅgikā Mādhyamikas' claim that the referents of terms cannot be found when a term or concept is subjected to an ultimate analysis does not stand in the way of the philosophical enterprise, or so a dGe lugs pa would argue.
7. See TTC pp. 296–311.
8. The argument goes on and is actually more complex than I make it out to be here; see TTC pp. 296–7.
9. TTC p. 296.
10. TTC p. 302.
11. See note 6.
12. "The Prāsaṅgikas on Logic: Tibetan dGe lugs pa Exegesis on the Question of Svatantra," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 15 (1988), pp. 55–62.
13. TTC pp. 98–99.
14. TTC p. 109.
15. See also his p. 17 for a similar remark.

José Ignacio Cabezón