



Ontological Difference and the “Other-Empty”-“Self-Empty” Controversy in Tibetan Buddhism

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The orthodoxy and the prevailing might of the Gelugpas in Tibetan Buddhism are on the doctrinal level founded upon the alleged resolution to the two radically opposed views on emptiness and essence. Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), whom the Gelugpas established retrospectively as their founder, was reputed to have achieved, in his voluminous writings, the pinnacle of Prasangika Madhyamika thought in the Buddhist world. Tsongkhapa’s achievements were to a major extent made possible by the perceived victory won by him over rival Buddhist traditions of his time. A significant opponent that Tsongkhapa wrote passionately against was Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen (1292-1362), the founder of the Jonangpas who promoted the idea of *shentong*: absolute truth is empty of relative truths, but is itself not empty, hence “other-empty”. In other words, the dialectics of negation that characterises the Madhyamika method has its limit before the absolute, and in this way Dolpopa gave a whole new understanding of *tathagatagarbha* as an affirmative essence. Tsongkhapa attempted to refute this “essentialist” position by arguing that the very notion of “other-emptiness” was problematic and upheld *rangtong* or “self-emptiness”, for which any notion of essence implies its own negation, which is emptiness, or *sunyata*. In his conclusive response to the Jonang school in *Four Interwoven Annotations*, Tsongkhapa uses the analogy that if someone is distressed by the presence of a snake in the east, then contemplating the presence of a tree in the west is not going to relieve the distress. The two phenomena are unrelated to each other. Likewise, Dolpopa’s discourse on *shengtong* does not touch on the concerns of any genuine Madhyamika, and is hence utterly heterodox. With the political ascendancy of the Gelugpas under the 17th-century reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682), this doctrinal “heterodoxy” was an excuse they used to eliminate the Jonangpas as a viable tradition in Tibetan Buddhism. Yet in this deadly encounter between *shengtong* and *rangtong* lies a blindness on Tsongkhapa’s part to the subtle meaning of being contained in Dolpopa’s philosophy, which is what the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) calls the ontological difference between being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiende*). A snake and a tree are both *beings*, *particular* in essence and cannot possibly express the *wholeness* in the meaning of being. The doctrine of *shengtong* is therefore an example of the affirmation of the meaning of being in the Buddhist *understanding of being*. Yet the philosophical reinstatement of the ontological truth of *shengtong* embodies a hermeneutic threat to the orthodoxy of the Gelugpas, which, if politicised, is no small matter at all.