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To Know a Buddha: A Tibetan Contemplative History and Its Implications for Religious Studies

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the introduction, critique, and re-framing of other-emptiness (gzhan-stong) by Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen (1292–1361), Tsongkhapa Lobsang Drakpa (1357–1419), and Jamgon Kongtrul (1813-1899) respectively. Each author's writings on emptiness were deeply informed by his own contemplative and visionary experiences. Such peak religious moments—along with historical, social, and textual context--must be considered seriously to provide the richest possible history of other-emptiness.
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Introduction

This dissertation aims to offer a model for incorporating visionary and contemplative practice into the way religious studies understands the transmission of religiously significant concepts. To that end, it represents an exploratory effort at a theory of contemplative experience. In particular, I focus on the history of the transmission and transformation of a controversial idea regarding emptiness in the Tibetan tradition. This idea is Dölpopa Sherab Gyaltsen’s (Dol-po-pa Shes-rab rGyal-mtshan, fourteenth century) dual definition of emptiness: conventional phenomena are empty of their own nature (rangtong, rang-stong), while ultimate reality is empty of all that is other than itself (zhentong, gzhan-stong). Dölpopa first conceived of zhentong during a prolonged tantric retreat and later framed it as a “rediscovery” of the original intent behind many sūtric and tantric texts. In the fifteenth century, one of the brightest luminaries of the Tibetan philosophical traditions, Tsongkhapa Lobsang Drakpa, critiqued Dölpopa’s work and offered his own very different vision of Madhyamaka based on his own visionary contacts. And in the nineteenth century, Jamgön Kongtrül offered a new version of zhentong that synthesized it with Kagyü views of emptiness, and this version has become very influential in contemporary Tibetan Buddhist thought. I use these three case studies to argue that each author’s visionary experiences provided the catalyst for the way he frames his distinctive philosophy and that such moments must be
included in a rich history of zhentong

In the first chapter, I open with a critique of the dominant views of epistemology in religious studies that (following Kant) assume the conceptual mind to be the sole valid mode through which humans know themselves and the world around them. Instead, I offer alternative models emerging in the academy before turning to Tibetan models to enrich these Western views of the mind. I present Jeffrey Kripal’s model of the human as “bimodal,” that is, consisting of the ordinary conscious self and (at the same time) of a vast and extraordinary aspect that may be responsible for some of the remarkable stories common in religious traditions.

Using the work of Anne Klein, I will then demonstrate that those two modes of human reality are connected by a person’s flow of subtle winds.¹ Based on these texts and on significant Tibetan authors, I will argue for a contemplative epistemology that acknowledges that meditative practice can deeply impact the practitioner’s subjective state and that through such training (among other catalysts) the mind may become capable of forms of perception or gnosis unavailable in ordinary mental states. The first chapter closes with a set of

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¹ “Subtle winds” here translates the Sanskrit vāyu or prāṇa, Tibetan rlung. These terms are often translated as “energy,” but that term in English has too broad a semantic range to capture the specific meaning of “subtle energies that circulate throughout the body,” and in addition it has been used by New Age authors in ways that give it connotations beyond what I want in this context. I will use the terms “subtle wind” and “energy” interchangeably, but by “energy” I mean (as will be explained more fully in chapter two) a flow of subtly physical substance that links the physical body and the non-physical mind.
characteristics that seem to mark powerful moments of visionary encounter within the *zhentong* discourse. The second chapter examines Dölpopa’s life and the historical context of his momentous philosophical innovations, exploring what was distinctive about his formulation of the Buddhist path. It also applies the model and checklist from the first chapter to one of Dölpopa’s visionary experiences and explores his distinctions between the way ultimate reality is experienced and the way it is subsequently expressed and what these offer to a contemplative epistemology. In addition, this chapter suggests that Dölpopa’s sense of his own identity (as an emanation of a significant figure from his practice tradition) was intimately connected with his formulation of Madhyamaka.

The third chapter examines two crucial periods of pressure against the *zhentong* discourse in the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively. Tsongkhapa Lobsang Drakpa (*Tsong-kha-pa bLo-bzang Grags-pa*, 1357-1419) offered a devastating critique of Dölpopa’s work, and then in the seventeenth century Tsongkhapa’s followers, the Gelukpa (*dGe-lugs-pa*) order, gained political control of central Tibet and suppressed Dölpopa’s philosophical lineage almost entirely. Using these events, I intend to explore the impact of both the rhetorical and political attacks on the development of the *zhentong* discourse.

After exploring these historical moments in the third chapter, the dissertation will examine Jamgön Kongtrül (*’Jam-mgon Kong-sprul bLo-Gros mTha’-yas*,...
1813-1899) as a case study of a major figure in whom visionary experience can clearly be seen driving philosophical innovation. Kongtrül was considered a reincarnation in a lineage that leads back to Dölpopa’s most significant successor, Tāranātha. Kongtrül (along with his distinguished colleagues) led a major revival of zhentong as part of a larger nonsectarian (Rimé, Ris-med) movement sweeping nineteenth century Kham (Khams), Eastern Tibet. Unlike Dölpopa’s zhentong, however, Jamgön Kongtrül’s iteration of the idea was sufficiently reworked to make it compatible with the broadest possible variety of Tibetan tantric and other peak practices. Jamgön Kongtrül’s zhentong, like Dölpopa’s, was shaped by visionary encounters, this time with (among others) Dölpopa and his most illustrious successor, Tāranātha, again demonstrating the importance of a model of mind that includes “non-ordinary” states of mind and of acknowledging the importance of adept-philosophers’ identity with significant figures from the past.

Through engaging with Dölpopa, the intervening period, and Jamgön Kongtrül, this work explores the vital role that visionary experience plays in the transmission and transformations of zhentong. The bimodal model, with subtle winds connecting the two modes, seeks to make sense of such experiences in service of a more inclusive epistemology.
Chapter 1: Toward a Contemplative Theory of Visionary Experience

Literature review: Sources for this section of the project tend to be book chapters and articles rather than books, so to avoid overcrowding I will list only the most important sources for my argument. First, Jorge Ferrer and Jacob Sherman’s *The Participatory Turn* provided an excellent source as well as an important hub for finding most of the other texts listed here. Their introduction offers a summary of what they call the “linguistic turn” in religious studies, by which they mean scholars’ tendency to analyze religious data in terms of its linguistic content and the social construction of that content. According to the more thorough linguistic reductions, deities and spirits become discursive entities, contemplative experiences are caused by expectations based on a tradition’s dogma, there can be no unmediated experience, etc.

However, summarizing other scholars’ critiques and adding their own, Ferrer and Sherman argue that this linguistic emphasis is based on neo-Kantian assumptions and ultimately fails to provide an objective assessment of traditions’ claims. Instead, the introduction argues, there is an increasing move toward recognition of the reductive nature of linguistic constructivism; Ferrer and Sherman go on to advocate a participatory paradigm in which “the mystery” creatively responds to human participation to produce the wide array of phenomena reported in religious traditions. I use their critique of the old paradigm
and their call for a more inclusive model of religious experience without venturing into their participatory ontology.

The primary source for the linguistic paradigm is Steven T. Katz’s “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. Since both proponents and critics of the strictly linguistic model take this article as the definitive articulation of that position, I also treat Katz’s arguments in this way. Many Western authors have now critiqued this piece; in particular, Richard King’s *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and the ‘Mystic East’* provides a strong postcolonial critique of linguistically reductive treatments of the epistemological claims (e.g., that unmediated experience is possible) of Indian traditions.

As a step toward a more inclusive epistemology, I consider a Tibetan model of mind (using two traditional sources) that includes a broader range of human mental states and then engage with two contemporary authors’ presentations in particular. Jeffrey Kripal, in the conclusion of *The Serpent’s Gift*, proposes what he calls a “bimodal model of human consciousness that can take seriously the altered states of consciousness and energy that constitute so many of the origin points of the history of religions, while staying true to the legitimate concerns and
ethical commitments of Enlightenment reason.”

Anne Klein’s article “Mental Concentration and the Unconditioned” and her “Seeing Mind, Being Body” inform my arguments for the subtle winds as a legitimate epistemological and transformative category. The winds or “energy” has fallen out of Western models of the person (contra the medieval emphasis on humors, for instance), but rlung (Tibetan for “wind” or “air”) remains an important element in Tibetan models. It will be addressed in more detail in the chapters that follow, but briefly it refers to (according to Tibetan definitions) a very subtle form of matter that flows through “channels” in the body, sustaining physical life and health and providing a subtle material “vehicle” for the mind. In other words, energy is both physical and intimately related with the functioning of the (nonphysical) mind. This betwixt and between status violates Cartesian assumptions of a mind/body dualism, and it provides a link between mind and materiality that proves vital to tantric forms of Tibetan Buddhist practice.

Building on the arguments in these sources, my proposed contribution to the field of religious studies is to provide a model for incorporating contemplative elements into the study of the origin and transmission of insights in Tibetan Buddhism. One basic premise is that models of transmission that privilege texts

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2 Kripal, Jeffrey John. The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 163. For Kripal, this bimodal orientation is one of three parts of a larger gnostic orientation toward the study of religion; the other two aspects, concerning bodily energies and a “specific bimodal empowered logic derived from” the first two components (p. 163), fall outside the current scope of this dissertation.
above embodied praxis are missing meditative and visionary elements that can prove crucial for understanding how and why innovative figures reshaped their received traditions. For example, Dölpopa first conceived of *zhentong* ("other-emptiness," the idea that ultimate reality is empty of everything conventional but not empty of its own nature) following a visionary experience during a prolonged retreat. He then argued that this was the true intent of Buddhist sūtras that had previously been interpreted as holding all things to be empty of their own nature.

Finally, this model seeks to mediate between the assumptions of what Ferrer and Sherman called the linguistic turn in the academic study of religion and the gnoseological\(^3\) approach of the Tibetan tradition under consideration. When, following Steven Katz and others, scholars assume that only linguistic and culturally mediated events are valid transmitters of knowledge, they fail to account for the profound impact of visionary events—events that, in Dölpopa’s case, proved deeply unsettling and that led him to hold a philosophical position radically different from that in which his tradition had trained him. Furthermore, linguistic exclusivism rests on unquestioned European Enlightenment-derived epistemological and ontological assumptions, as a growing number of scholars

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have argued. On the positive side, this orientation toward context allows scholars to read the tradition in terms of factors that figures within the tradition tend to disregard, particularly social and historical settings. The tradition itself, while highly valuing the meditative endeavor, downplays innovations and visionary experiences as recoveries of original textual intent. The bimodal, energetic model offered in this dissertation seeks to draw on both epistemological traditions—textual and contemplative—and hold them in a fertilizing tension. By so doing, it offers a more inclusive narrative of innovative moments in the Tibetan tradition and, I hope, others as well.

Chapter 2: The Omniscient Dölpopa

The zhentong narrative requires a prologue since the reader needs to understand the state of the tradition Dölpopa inherited in order to grasp the pressures toward innovation and the extent to which zhentong was innovative. In fourteenth century Tibet, several major thinkers wrestled with the issue of how to fit sūtra (earlier Buddhist traditions treating the lack of inherent existence of phenomena as well as buddha nature) together with tantra (later traditions that emphasized realizing one’s own buddha nature). The earlier Indian teachers of Tibetan lineage holders were themselves in the process of resolving this issue, so that in the twelfth century or so, when large-scale transmissions from India to Tibet had largely stopped, Tibetans found themselves the inheritors not only of massive quantities of (often
seemingly conflicting) teachings but of the question of how to resolve tensions between different bodies of teachings.

We have much clearer information on Dölpopa and his life and thought than is available for the period treated in the “prologue.” The primary source for information on Dölpopa’s life is Cyrus Stearns’ excellent *The Buddha From Dolpo* (1999, updated 2010) in which the author pulls information from several biographies of Dölpopa to construct as complete a history of his life as possible; several small but important treatises on zhentong are also included. Jeffrey Hopkins has published several works on the Jonang school and its zhentong doctrine: *Mountain Doctrine*, a massive translation of one of Dölpopa’s major texts with annotations and commentary; *Tsongkhapa’s Final Exposition on Wisdom*, which deals with Dölpopa’s life and work in the context of Tsongkhapa’s reaction against him; and *The Essence of Other-Emptiness*, a concise work by Dölpopa’s most important successor to the Jonang leadership, Tāranātha.

For various reasons, Jonang literature has become more available during the past several decades, and Western scholars have only within the past decade or so begun to translate works from this school. Thus, this is an exciting time to be working with material about the Jonang school since (as Hopkins argues in *Tsongkhapa’s Final Exposition on Wisdom*) parts of Tsongkhapa’s—and, on that basis, the later Gelukpa tradition’s—formulation of emptiness are a reaction
against Dölpopa’s zhentong. One contribution I hope this dissertation offers is simply placing Dölpopa within that broader context. Stearns’ *Buddha From Dolpo* does an excellent job of presenting all available information concerning Dölpopa and his successors, and this dissertation seeks to enhance Stearns’ portrait of Jonang thought by incorporating Dölpopa’s impact on Tsongkhapa and the latter’s formulation of emptiness as well as specifying the changes between Dölpopa’s *zhentong* and Jamgön Kongtrül’s version, which was heavily influenced by Kagyü interpretations of that term. There is not yet sufficient information available to trace the development of the term through the Kagyü order, though it and analogues have as long a history in that order as in the Jonang school.

Chapter one offers a very broad overview of the Buddhist attempts to harmonize sūtra and tantra that informed Dölpopa’s thinking. These works provide crucial background information on the problem that Dölpopa and his contemporaries (and after him Tsongkhapa in his own way) were trying to solve: How does the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) literature, with its emphasis on the lack of an inherent nature in anything whatsoever, fit together with the emphasis in the higher tantras on realizing buddha nature, often using different language in discussions of the ultimate? Indian Buddhists had developed a hermeneutical device that allowed them to reconcile the disparate sūtric traditions they had inherited, i.e. the early texts emphasizing the lack of an inherent self
assumed to exist apart from the aggregates from which beings are composed (form and four mental qualities); the prajñāpāramitā literature that emerged from the time of the early Mahāyāna and was systematized by Nāgārjuna and his successors as the Madhyamaka (Middle Way, Tib. dBu-ma) philosophy; and a later set of sūtras emphasizing buddha nature as a quality of all living beings (associated with the Yogācāra school).

Indian Mahāyāna exegetes reconciled these three interconnected literatures using a narrative framework: The historical Buddha had first taught the early sūtras, emphasizing emptiness of self but not of phenomena, for those who were unable to deal with emptiness in its full form; this was called the “first turning of the Wheel of dharma.” Then, for more apt disciples, he taught the definitive “second turning” Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, considered in scholastic circles the true intent behind the various teachings. Finally, as a corrective to disciples’ tendency to fall into nihilism upon studying and contemplating emptiness, the Buddha taught the “third turning” sūtras, emphasizing the buddha nature that remains after the second turning’s negation of conventional phenomena. With the advent of Buddhist tantra, Indian exegetes added another layer to the narrative: While the Buddha was teaching the sūtras to his ordinary disciples, he simultaneously manifested in the form of Vajradhara to teach the tantras to his most awakened students.
This interpretive framework, of course, has little to do with the historical development of Buddhist doctrine and flattens a millennium’s worth of development into the supposed eighty-odd years of Shakyamuni Buddha’s lifetime. Nonetheless, it allowed Indians and their Tibetan students to create unity out of an otherwise chaotic proliferation of practices, lineages, and views. Even with this framework, however, Tibetans still encountered different lineages among their Indian masters (some of whom hailed from Kashmir and the west of the Indian world at that time, some from Bengal and the east), and after the end of significant contact between Indian teachers and Tibetan students (roughly twelfth century, though some contact occurred as late as the sixteenth century), Tibetans were left to meld the mass of Indian teachings into a coherent whole.

Dölpopa entered this interpretive scene during the fourteenth century, a period when several great syntheses occurred to piece together the various systems inherited from India. There was his own use of zhentong as a category to integrate sūtric and tantric understandings of emptiness, which became the foundation for the Jonang school. Two of his contemporaries, Longchen Rabjam and Rangjung Dorje (the Third Karmapa) also wrote major texts synthesizing sūtra and tantra in ways that became foundational for the Nyingma (rNying-ma) and Kagyü (bKa’-brgyud) schools respectively. Clearly, Dölpopa’s innovative zhentong arose out of an atmosphere of questioning and re-evaluation of the received tradition in an
attempt to arrive at more coherent overviews of the sūtric and tantric teachings.

As for Dölpopa’s thought itself, he clearly arrived at *zhentong* through deep meditative practice on the Kālacakra tantra during a year-long retreat he undertook shortly after leaving Sakya monastery. Fittingly, his expression of Madhyamaka borrows heavily from terminology used in the Kālacakra tantra and its associated commentaries, using words such as “self” (i.e., ātman, Tib. *bdag*) that were not (and still are not) generally used in sūtric descriptions of emptiness. In addition, Dölpopa distinguished between a view (*lta-ba*) of reality as one realizes it during meditative equipoise and a philosophical tenet system (*grub-mtha’*) written subsequently to describe the ultimate. Both the meditative setting (and yogic practices used to shift the flow of the Kālacakra practitioner’s subtle winds) and the distinction between descriptions appropriate for meditative equipoise vs. subsequent states are key distinctions Dölpopa offers to an academic model of contemplative epistemology.

**Chapter 3: The Politics of Emptiness**

For the period between Dölpopa’s time and Jamgön Kongtrül’s, I begin with another broad overview of larger social and political factors that influenced the ways Dölpopa’s ideas reached and impacted Jamgön Kongtrül. Tibetan accounts of the history of the Jonang school after Dölpopa’s time are spotty at best, with texts by his successors providing glimpses into the state of their order. Stearns has
provided a sketch of this period in his *The Buddha From Dolpo*. Other sources include Samuel’s *Civilized Shamans* for a broader context of that period and the trends reshaping Tibetan politics during that time; David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson’s *A Cultural History of Tibet* is helpful as well.

The fifteenth century saw the most influential critic of Dölpopa’s *zhentong*, who would make a huge impact on the landscape of Tibetan philosophy: Tsongkhapa Lobsang Drakpa. The most significant biographical material available in English for this major figure seems to be Robert Thurman’s *The Life and Teachings of Tsong Khapa* (Tibetan Library of Works and Archives, 1982). This edited volume includes excerpts from biographies of Tsongkhapa as well as translations of verses he wrote following contemplative experiences. Information in this volume suggests that Tsongkhapa, too, came to his version of emptiness (this one framed in explicitly anti-*zhentong* language) following a visionary encounter with historical figures who feature prominently in the formulation of sūtric accounts of emptiness.\(^4\) Ironically, though Tsongkhapa has had a much greater impact than Dölpopa on contemporary Tibetan traditions, Thurman’s modest volume represents the only English work to deal with Tsongkhapa’s life itself. In the seventeenth century, the Jonang order was forcibly suppressed (largely due to its political affiliations) by the ascendant Gelukpa order, and all

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texts on zhentong were sealed. Stearns is again the best source for this period, though Samuel and other authors provide a good picture of the larger context.

Using these sources, I first explore the visionary experience that informed Tsongkhapa’s interpretation of Madhyamaka. Significantly, Dölpopa experienced imaginal journeys to Shambhala, the secret land of the Kālacakra tantra, while Tsongkhapa experienced blessings from two great sūtric masters of the Madhyamaka tradition. I would argue that these two figures’ visionary orientations reflect and are reflected in their later textual orientations. Dölpopa, having experienced zhentong during his retreat, went on to elaborate a grand synthesis of sūtra and tantra in which even in the context of Madhyamaka, emptiness is described using the language of the Kālacakra Tantra. Tsongkhapa, on the other hand, oriented his systematization toward sūtric definitions of emptiness and criteria for valid knowledge. Tsongkhapa’s main teacher, Rendawa (Red-mdag-'ba gZhon-nu bLo-gros), had studied with one of Dölpopa’s closest students and had actually accepted zhentong before strongly rejecting it and actually leading a campaign against it.⁵ This is clearly important for understanding Tsongkhapa’s reaction to zhentong. However, it is clear also that neither Dölpopa nor Tsongkhapa doubted the validity of their respective visionary insights into the true nature of emptiness and that each of them, in his own way, was in a dialectical

relationship with his tradition. Indeed, each of them was primarily trained in the Sakya tradition, and each ended up founding a new lineage that significantly diverged from that root tradition.

In addition to highlighting the differences between Dölpopa’s and Tsongkhapa’s visionary experiences that shaped their versions of Madhyamaka, I use this section to bring attention to the importance of political power in shaping the philosophical landscape of Tibet. In this case, Tsongkhapa and his early followers, while strongly antagonistic toward zhentong, did not have the capacity to silence Dölpopa’s successors by their logical arguments. They may have attracted lay patronage toward the nascent Geluk tradition and thus indirectly undermined the Jonang capacity to flourish, but the textual evidence from this period indicates that scholars continued to engage with zhentong despite Tsongkhapa’s firm rejection of the doctrine. In other words, Dölpopa’s zhentong was not rejected solely on the basis of intellectual discourse; indeed, Tāranātha (seventeenth c.) effected a significant revival of it. The Jonang order was suppressed not by philosophical argument but by the political and military force of the new Gelukpa hegemony established in Lhasa with military assistance from the Mongols. Further, the Mongols were connected with the Gelukpa sect due to their ties with lamas from that order. This chapter explores the complicated set of influences that led to the virtual disappearance of the Jonang order from the
Central Tibetan landscape. Indeed, although some Jonang monastic establishments in Amdo (northeastern Tibet) never stopped practicing their distinctive traditions, the Jonang order was believed to be extinct until the exile period, and in 2011 it was again recognized as one of the legitimate orders of Tibetan Buddhism.

Chapter 4: Jamgön Kongtrül's Re-Invention of Zhentong

As the narrative approaches the time of Jamgön Kongtrül (nineteenth century), sources become more plentiful. E. Gene Smith’s Among Tibetan Texts offers an excellent though brief look at politics in the areas of Eastern Tibet in which Jamgön Kongtrül and the Rimé (ris med, nonsectarian) lamas were active. Samuel’s Civilized Shamans provides a broader picture of political trends throughout Tibet before and during the nineteenth century, and several books on Kongtrül include information on his political and social setting (Richard Barron’s The Autobiography of Jamgön Kongtrül and Ringu Tulku’s The Ri-me Philosophy of Jamgön Kongtrül the Great are primary sources). In addition, John Pettit’s Mipham’s Beacon of Certainty provides valuable information about the background of the region of Kham in which Kongtrül and his colleagues were active. Barron’s translation of Jamgön Kongtrül’s autobiography is the primary (and very rich) source for information regarding that figure’s life, the people from

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whom he received teachings, the texts in which he was trained, the retreats he undertook, and the visionary experiences he reports.

As with the previous chapter, I first address the historical setting of Kongtrül’s *zhentong*, this time starting with an overview of the transmission of Jonang *zhentong* and the Kagyü school’s analogues. I then present Kongtrül’s biography, with an emphasis on the visionary experiences he reports that impacted his formulation of *zhentong*, again using the bimodal, energetic model. Significantly, Kongtrül considered himself an emanation of Tāranātha, who (as chapter three discusses) played a major role in reviving Dōlpopa’s *zhentong*. I then argue that Kongtrül’s *zhentong* combines elements of both the Jonang and Kagyü textual traditions.

The historical context of Jamgön Kongtrül’s life and work provides important background information on events that seem to have shaped his approach to the Rimé ideals. Both before and during Jamgön Kongtrül’s time, Eastern Tibet saw armed sectarian violence, with even high-ranked tulkus (*sprul-sku*) occasionally killed by opposing factions. In addition, Jamgön Kongtrül himself experienced harmful sectarian behavior from the time he was a young man. Born into a Bönpo family (though he held that his biological father was a local Nyingma lama), he joined a Nyingma monastery and felt great devotion to the
central figure of that tradition, Guru Rinpoché. He even revealed terma\textsuperscript{8} (concealed treasure texts, *gter-ma*) during this period. However, as a precocious student and a skilled physician, he had attracted the attention of a local chieftan who took him to a Kagyü monastery in the region, where he was recruited to become a secretary to Karma Thekchok Tenphel, the Öngen incarnation at Palpung monastery.\textsuperscript{9} He was then forced to renounce his Nyingma affiliation by giving back his earlier monastic vows and re-taking them from a Kagyü lama. This seems to have been a distressing situation for the sensitive young man. His terma texts, likewise, he was persuaded to destroy. On top of these manipulations of his sectarian identity, he was then “recognized” as an incarnate lama from the Kagyu monastery so that the government of the region would be unable to requisition him for their own service.\textsuperscript{10}

However, his new affiliation brought him into contact with Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (*'Jam-dbyangs mKhyen-brtse'i dBang-po*), and together these two lamas would spearhead the Rimé movement. It was Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo who would encourage Jamgön Kongtrül to resume his terma activities, who would recognize him as an emanation in a lineage that included Tāranātha

\textsuperscript{8} Such texts are considered teachings by Guru Rinpoché, planted in the earth or in the mind-streams of his disciples to be discovered in the future when conditions became appropriate.


\textsuperscript{10} Ibid. pp. 23-24.
(Dölpopa’s great successor), and most importantly who would inspire the Rimé vision of the great Tibetan traditions as all leading in the direction of awakening. Due to the efforts of lamas of the previous generation, the Jonang texts on zhentong (as well as non-Jonang texts in support of zhentong) had once again become available, and they seem to have had a major impact on Kongtrül.

Not only did Kongtrül experience several visionary encounters with Dölpopa and other Jonang lineage holders, he even set zhentong on center stage by using it to tie sūtric and tantric systems together in his own philosophical writings. Jamgön Kongtrül’s zhentong, however, was compatible with Nyingma Dzogchen (rDzogs-chen) and Kagyü Mahāmudrā (Chagya Chenpo, Phyag-rgya Chen-po) in ways that Dölpopa’s zhentong was not. As part of the narrative of zhentong’s textual transformations, I will specify these differences and highlight their importance for the Rimé movement.\(^\text{11}\)

In treating the visionary aspect of Jamgön Kongtrül’s zhentong, I explore the ways his imaginal contact with Dölpopa and Tāranātha provided Kongtrül with a sense of continuity between the teachings of a (Jonang) lama considered a part of

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\(^{11}\) The details of these differences are somewhat technical. Briefly, Dolpopa held that simply recognizing the contents of ordinary mind is not itself liberative; in order to transform ordinary existence into awakened mind, one must use the yogic techniques outlined in the Kālachakra Tantra. This view is incompatible with both Dzogchen and Mahamudra teachings that even deluded appearances are already manifestations of awakened mind and that recognizing their awakened nature is a liberative experience. Though this may seem like a minor difference, it means that Dolpopa’s zhentong could not be fully applied outside the Jonang school. Jamgön Kongtrül’s zhentong, by contrast (following Kagyu traditions of zhentong), simply does not make this statement. In this and other ways, it reframed zhentong as a more inclusive category, one which now fell much more in line with Nyingma formulations of Madhyamaka.
his own reincarnation lineage and his own (very Kagyü-influenced) version of Zhentong. I argue that these encounters provided a form of legitimation that Kongtrül took very seriously.

**Toward Conclusions**

Through this engagement with Tibetan intellectual and political history and through these three case studies in particular, my goal is to demonstrate, first, that the development of zhentong in Tibet makes sense only when peak visionary and contemplative experiences find a valid epistemological place in philosophical history. In addition, Dölpopa’s, Tsongkhapa’s, and Jamgön Kongtrül’s visionary experiences were deeply personal and changed the ways they “read” their lives and the key texts of their tradition. This emotional engagement by these masters (and their students) helps make sense of the passion and at times violence involved in Tibetan philosophical disputes. In short, this dissertation proposes an epistemological model theoretically sophisticated enough (based on Tibetan categories of knowledge and gnosis) to offer robust descriptions of non-ordinary mental states and inclusive enough to break out of the “epistemology of limitation”¹² that currently constricts the language available to scholars of contemplative traditions.

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Chapter 1: Toward a Contemplative Theory of Visionary Experience

It would be better, if necessary, to frankly acknowledge that the phenomena of mystical experience are beyond our reach and live with the consequences of that admission than to reduce mysticism to less than it is for the sake of method.\(^\text{13}\)

The primary aim of this chapter is to lay the methodological groundwork for an exploration of several key moments in the history of the zhentong discourse in which visionary experience catalyzed by tantric practice drove philosophical innovations, using a model that incorporates non-ordinary\(^\text{14}\) states of energy. The preliminary step is to examine the academic trends that have often kept authors focused on texts (frequently to the exclusion of embodied elements of practice) and resistant to acknowledging that forces other than ordinary consciousness could be at work at such moments. Following that, I will present a more inclusive epistemological and theoretical framework for the kinds of visionary experiences that shaped the zhentong discourse, closing with a set of characteristics that seem to be common to many of the moments of visionary encounter found in the biographies of Dölpopa, Tsongkhapa, and Jamgön Kongtrül (and other Tibetan


\(^{14}\) By non-ordinary, I mean experiences that find no place in people’s ordinary experience of the world. Buddhist yogis might argue that visionary experiences reveal a level of reality closer to the way things really are and that a direct experience of emptiness is the most “ordinary” state of mind possible. This could be called a fruitional perspective, located as it is in what the tradition would consider an awakened state of mind. Instead, this discussion will assume a non-fruitional perspective on what is “ordinary,” defining it according to the ways non-adepts engage their world(s).
There are two widespread Western assumptions that must be addressed as I begin this project: that there cannot be unmediated experience (i.e., that any proposed apprehension of emptiness must be mediated through concepts) and that the human organism consists of nothing but the physical body and the ordinary, conceptual mind. Following this presentation of the dominant position in the academy, I will offer theory from the Tibetan tradition that can help to fill the gaps in our current theoretical toolkit for thinking and writing about visionary experience. To that end, I will begin by examining the dominant constructivist model of mystical experience as articulated by Steven Katz in his seminal “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism” and offer the most relevant critiques of his position as well as alternative models proposed more recently. In the process, I hope to show that the complete constructivist\textsuperscript{15} model unnecessarily restricts human knowledge to that which can be acquired and conveyed through representative language, a move not shared by the sophisticated philosophical traditions of many cultures. This chapter closes with a model of the human as having two modes of operation, one ordinary and one extraordinary, connected by energy.

\textsuperscript{15} Robert Forman, in \textit{The Problem of Pure Consciousness}, identifies several versions of a constructivist model: complete, in which expectation fully determines mystical experience (which he ascribes to Katz); incomplete or partial, in which received tradition conditions but does not fully determine experience; and catalytic, in which the “generating problems” of a tradition determine the types of practices and engaged in and solutions sought by the practitioner (13-15).
Katz’s Constructivist Approach

Steven Katz’s contribution to the study of comparative mysticism can be summarized as the insight that different religious traditions describe their peak mystical experiences using language specific to their belief systems. He highlighted the importance of culture and expectations in shaping (he might say determining) religious experience, and he further argued that an experience free from cultural mediation is impossible. This position, very influential for several decades, is now coming under greater scrutiny, not least for its lack of transparency regarding its own cultural location. My work is part of that scrutiny, and the Eurocentricity of Katz’s assumptions will be addressed below. However, Buddhist adepts hold that their systems of meditation make an unmediated experience of ultimate reality (in this case, emptiness) possible. If a supposed experience of emptiness is in fact constructed by the practitioner’s expectations, then it is not valid contact with the ultimate as described in the Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

Each of the three major authors considered in this dissertation—Dölpopa, Tsongkhapa, and Jamgön Kongtrül—had his own experience of emptiness, which he considered a direct, nondual, and nonconceptual gnosis of the actual nature of reality. Each then formulated a philosophical description of that emptiness and endorsed a particular set of practices that would enable his disciples to realize the
ultimate for themselves. I do not intend to argue that any one of these figures had such a realization (supporting or denying such claims being clearly not my job), but I do choose to begin with an openness to the possibility that such a realization might be possible and that non-Western traditions (in this case, Tibetan Buddhism) may have analytical tools and categories to offer Western scholars as we try to understand and theorize extraordinary experiences like my case studies’.

Katz’s 1978 “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism” challenged the limitations of prevailing perennialist approaches to mysticism in Religious Studies, approaches that attempted to reduce the diversity of mystical traditions to a limited set of typologies (sometimes to one supposedly universal peak experience). Katz’s famous “plea for the recognition of differences”\(^\text{16}\) and his cogent presentations of the substantial discrepancies between reports from different traditions provided an opening for other scholars’ readings of traditions within their own contexts (though it put pressure against scholars’ work on the resonances between different systems). Katz ends his piece with a call for further research into the traditions themselves and for a better epistemological framework to use with reports of extraordinary experience,\(^\text{17}\) both of which fields have advanced since the publication of his work and have enriched the field considerably. In the 1980s and


\(^{17}\) Ibid. 66.
90s, the emphasis on difference and context became normative in the field of religious studies, and Katz’s work was the received wisdom of the field during its turn away from comparison. Katz offered important correctives to perennialist modes of comparison, but since my concern here is Katz’s arguments against unmediated experience and for context as determinative of extraordinary experience, I will let his beneficial contributions to the field of comparative mysticism rest.

Katz becomes relevant to the topic at hand when he offers

…the single epistemological assumption that has exercised my thinking and which has forced me to undertake the present investigation: There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated.18 (italics his)

This assumption forms the basis for his attempts to demonstrate the impossibility of unmediated knowledge of any kind. The rest of his article offers examples of reports of nonordinary19 cognition from different traditions (of nirvana, God, etc.) as illustrations of different adepts’ traditions informing—and, indeed, constructing—those seemingly transcendent moments.

Katz offers these examples as part of his larger project of critiquing the

19 Kripal uses this term in The Serpent’s Gift to refer to experiences and cognitions which fall outside the realm of everyday consciousness.
perennialist claims of a common essence to peak mystical experiences, but his primary objective is to support his assumption about the impossibility of direct experience. This assumption is itself grounded in a Kantian epistemology, as “Language” implies and “On Mysticism” makes clear. Shortly after the passage from “Language” quoted above, Katz states that unmediated experience is impossible “because of the sorts of beings we are,”20 a phrase echoed at the end of the piece and again in his 1988 rebuttal to critics in “On Mysticism;” in none of these instances is this enigmatic pronouncement justified or explained. If we use the rest of “Language” to unpack this claim, it seems clear that this is a corollary to Katz’s “single epistemological assumption.” This assumption no doubt seems warranted to Katz based on Kant’s arguments against a simple epistemological process in which we perceive phenomena around us as they are; in “On Mysticism,” Katz states outright that the “roots of [his] thinking on the nature and conditions of experience are Kantian….”21 However, Kant’s epistemology sets strict limits on the human capacity to contact reality directly, as Donald Rothberg explains:

In [Kant’s] Copernican Revolution, the knower and the known are now seen as fundamentally interconnected in the knowledge of phenomena, that is, in the system of appearances in the everyday world. There is no direct,

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20 Ibid. 26.
unmediated knowledge of reality; all knowledge and all human experience are structured by human categories and the forms of human sensibility, that is, time and space. The main historical claims to direct mystical or metaphysical insight into reality have no means of justification. Such claims, therefore, can never become accepted as a genuine part of human knowledge.22

Thus, Katz’s one epistemological assumption commits him to a specifically modernist and European perspective on what is and what is not a valid experiential claim.

Perhaps ironically, Buddhist philosophers would accept Kant’s notion of consciousness as playing a vital role in structuring perceptions of phenomena. As Anne Klein points out in a discussion of direct perception according to Tibetan presentations of the various schools of Buddhist philosophy,23 for the Vaibhasika, Cittamatra, and Madhyamaka schools, “despite its name, direct perception does not know actual phenomena nakedly but knows them through certain types of sense-data. These sense-data, moreover, are not related solely with objects but comingled with projections from the side of the subject.”24 The Madhyamaka school, for instance, holds that a perceived object exists in dependence on its parts,

23 Tibetan Buddhists organize their systems of epistemology as follows: There are four major philosophical schools—Vaibhasika, Sautrantika, Cittamatra, and Madhyamaka—that present progressively more analyses of phenomena and perception, with Vaibhasika considered the “lowest” system and Madhyamaka the “highest.” Their presentations of epistemology differ, but the four schools are presented as part of a philosophical education preparing students for the insights of the Madhyamaka system, which all schools hold as presenting their definitive interpretations of Buddhist doctrine.
its previous moment of existence—and on being designated by the mind perceiving it. This is not to say that a pot, for instance, ceases to exist if no one is available to call it a “pot,” but it does serve to highlight the role of conceptual designation in crystallizing an object, and it recognizes the role culture plays in forming an individual’s experience of reality.\textsuperscript{25}

However, in the context of Buddhist philosophy this realization of the interdependence of minds and their perceived objects does not preclude the possibility of directly realizing reality. Rather, by recognizing the enmeshed condition of consciousness, a practitioner can question and deconstruct her ordinary assumption that she already perceives reality directly. Indeed, as will be treated in more detail below in a discussion of Klein’s “Mental Concentration and the Unconditioned,” a (perhaps the) major difference between Kant’s view and Buddhist epistemologies lies not in their respective descriptions of the process of a consciousness perceiving an object but in their views of that consciousness itself. According to Tibetan epistemologies, consciousness can be trained, purified, and ultimately transformed so that it becomes capable of experiencing reality directly.

Immanuel Kant, on the other hand, inherited European assumptions about consciousness and its limitations—including a lack of discourse on non-ordinary ways of knowing and the possibility of the radical transformation of subjectivity.

\textsuperscript{25} Klein, \textit{Knowledge and Liberation}, p. 93.
According to Charles Taylor’s analysis in *Sources of the Self*, Kant followed in Jean-Jacque Rousseau’s trajectory of emphasizing the interiority of morality, of rationality as the ultimate arbiter of moral behavior. Earlier philosophers maintained a role for God or some connection to the natural order to inform the human notion of the good, but Kant shifted away from a dependence on empirical observations that try to access the reality of the external world. This move was part of Kant’s shift toward reason as the only trustworthy aspect of human experience. Even sensory perception offers no guarantee of accessing reality directly because of the pre-conscious categories of the mind that structure this experience. In this way, European philosophers’ emphasis shifted deeply away from the noumenal level of reality (and religious truth claims), the understanding of which had been a goal of earlier philosophers, and toward that which (according to Kant) we can grasp through *a priori* reasoning: the phenomenal. This shift was part of the broader Enlightenment move away from religious epistemic authority and toward the burgeoning sciences.

For Kant, this move away from the noumenal was consonant with his own indifference toward or downright rejection of the Protestant Christian tradition in which he was raised, Pietism, “an evangelical movement [that] usually involved an

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insistence on a *personal* experience of radical conversion or rebirth, and an abrogation of worldly success.”

Kant’s parents embraced this religion, though it does seem particularly unsuitable for someone with their illustrious son’s decidedly rational turn: “Pietism was a ‘religion of the heart,’ very much opposed to intellectualism and characterized by an emotionalism that bordered at times on mysticism.”

Although Manfred Kuehn, author of *Kant*, a premier biography of the great philosopher, paints the mature Kant as more indifferent toward religion than reacting against his received tradition, Kant’s views of the noumenon as inaccessible to human experience do directly counter his cultural inheritance of “mystical” Pietism.

Kant, then, explicitly rejects the authenticity of first-hand experience of religious truth (in this case, God) in favor of truths accessible through reasoning untainted by inadmissible assumptions. As Taylor says, “Kant gives a firm but quite new base to the subjectivization or internalization of moral sources which Rousseau inaugurates. The moral law is what comes from within; it can no longer be defined by any external order. But it is not defined by the impulse of nature in me either, but only by the nature of reasoning…."

Kant’s turn from a variety of ways of knowing the world, toward an

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29 Ibid., pp. 34-5.
epistemology in which only reasoning offers reliable truths, undergirds neo-Kantian assertions like Katz’s that “the type of beings we are” can never experience the world directly and cannot receive religious truths through purportedly unmediated experiences. A comparable skepticism by Buddhist philosophers, to be explored below, arrives at a radically different conclusion regarding human epistemological and gnoseological capacities: that conceptuality can help to erode even our most pervasive and invisible ways of structuring “direct” experience and that, through retraining the mind, conceptuality can ultimately give way to nonconceptual, direct experience. Returning now to Katz, his second relevant assertion is that previous exposure to a received tradition fundamentally conditions a practitioner’s experiences: A tradition’s “images, beliefs, symbols, and rituals define, in advance, what the experience [a mystic] wants to have, and which he then does have, will be like”\(^{31}\) (italics his). Katz later backs away from this deterministic position with a more moderate formulation of the relationship between expectation and experience: “What I wish to show is only that there is a clear causal connection between the religious and social structure one brings to experience and the nature of one’s actual religious experience.”\(^ {32}\)

Certainly experience is impacted by doctrine—to a point. Forman’s distinction between complete and incomplete constructivism is helpful here.

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., 40.
Forman identifies Katz’s epistemological model as complete constructivism because the latter often describes received tradition as *determining* rather than merely influencing mystical experience. An incomplete constructivist model, however, posits previous training as greatly influential on mystical experience but also recognizes that such experience often surprises the percipient or even deeply transforms her reading of her tradition.³³ Katz’s piece in its entirety does not support a limited reading of this causal relationship. Because there is no room in his system for contact with a noumenal level of reality, any experience of an ultimate must be limited.

Finally, Katz’s assumptions about what constitutes valid evidence of what can and does happen in non-ordinary experiences are revealed by what does not count:

*There are NO pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences.* … That is to say, *all* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways.³⁴ (italics his)

Directly after Katz makes his forceful assumption regarding the impossibility of unmediated experience, he rules out all accounts of such experiences as permissible evidence, and he does this through Kantian categories of external phenomena shaped by human perceptions of them. In so doing, Katz dismisses

³⁴ Ibid. 26.
experiences that fail to accord with his “single epistemological assumption.” As we will see below, Kant’s perspective—on which Katz’s is based—itself rests on a particular (and vexed) relationship with religion and the “mystical.”

Deconstructing the Epistemology of Limitation

A growing body of scholarship has located Katz’s complete constructivism within a specifically Euro-American philosophical tradition that assumes the inability of the human subject to cognize except through socially constructed categories. This cultural location of complete constructivism undermines its universalizing assumptions and points to the need in religious studies for a genuinely pluralistic and inclusive approach to the claims and assumptions of the traditions of diverse cultures. Ferrer and Sherman, Richard King, Sallie King, Robert Forman and others have offered thorough demonstrations of the Eurocentrism of Katz’s position; their work informs this section. As we saw above, Katz declares himself a Kantian in “On Mysticism;” a neo-Kantian perspective informs Katz’s epistemological assumption that there can be no unmediated experience, and a materialist perspective undergirds Katz’s assumptions about “the sorts of beings that we are.” Richard King succinctly problematizes these assumptions:

His explicit claim that his work is not based upon any assumptions about the nature of reality illustrates Katz’s continuing faith in the Enlightenment ideals of dispassionate and objective scholarship. In so far as Katz takes this
stance he is of course open to the criticism that he has failed to acknowledge the social location of his own position.\textsuperscript{35}

King then goes on to locate Katz’s assumptions culturally.

For Kant, knowledge of things as they are (\textit{noumena}) remains strictly beyond human apprehension. This recognition of the agency of the human subject in the construction of a world-picture and the impossibility of an unmediated cognition of reality has had such a lasting influence upon Western intellectual thought since the Enlightenment that it is often simply taken for granted.\textsuperscript{36}

Anne Klein offers a counter-example of this assumed limitation of the human epistemological or gnoseological\textsuperscript{37} capacity in “Mental Concentration and the Unconditioned: A Buddhist Case for Unmediated Experience.” Early in this article, she poses a question that emphasizes the cross-cultural issues at play as modern Western academics produce theories about the contemplative practices of other cultures and times:

…[W]hen we investigate mārga literature [describing the path to awakened being], we confront some of the fundamental issues that divide us, as contemporary Euro-Americans, from the worldview in which it was conceived. How are we to understand a literature whose fundamental theses are anathema to most contemporary Western intellectual traditions?\textsuperscript{38}

Using the Gelukpa (\textit{dGe-lugs-pa}) scholarly tradition as an example, Klein

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} See Pettit, \textit{Beacon}.
considers the question of religious re-conditioning of subjectivity and whether this can lead to an unconditioned state. In this system, a rigorous and explicit conceptual re-conditioning is held to work such a transformation on the mind of the practitioner that her mediating mental factors eventually dissolve, leading to a non-conceptual experience of the specific absence known as emptiness embraced in the Gelukpa tradition.

The contrast between Katz’s articulation of contemplative experience and Klein’s presentation of the Gelukpa path to the unconditioned begs the question: Who has the authority to answer questions of ontology and epistemology, and from where does that authority derive? Curiously, this question seems to be a non-issue for Katz. He simply assumes he has it and declares that practitioners’ claims to the contrary hold no weight as evidence. Katz’s critics, of course, raise this question and answer it in different ways, but it seems clear that the answer cannot be that contemporary neo-Kantian assumptions automatically trump, say, Nāgārjuna or Meister Eckhart. Ferrer and Sherman, in the introduction of The Participatory Turn, offer a corrective to the Eurocentric view:

…[T]he recognition of a variety of culturally specific criteria that determine what counts as valid knowledge leads many contemporary interpretive writers to regard the long-assumed epistemic superiority of critical rationality simply as one more element in the modern Western narrative, whose ultimately axiomatic status belies its claim to supremacy. In this light, for example, Flood recommends considering scholarly (outsider) and
traditional (insider) accounts of religion as legitimate competing narratives, and argues that in this contest neither side can claim epistemological privilege on a priori grounds.\(^{39}\)

Clearly, there is growing pressure in the field against Katz’s position.

In a similar vein, Sallie King points out: “The assumption that there are no unmediated experiences… negates the very foundation of yoga, most of Buddhism, large segments of Hinduism, and philosophical Taoism.”\(^{40}\) Katz’s response is not sympathetic:

King objects (263) that my position calls into question what Asian (and other religions) say about themselves. True enough. But this is what scholarship, as compared to confessionalism or theological pronouncements from within a tradition, is about. This reflectiveness about doctrinal and confessional claims is what comprises academic self-consciousness; any and all hermeneutical sophistication requires nothing less.\(^{41}\)

Of course, the irony of this passage is that Katz’s epistemology is based upon just such a lack of reflexivity.

However, with the growing realization of the Eurocentrism of many assumptions in religious studies, there seems to be an option which is at once critical, self-conscious, and willing to engage emic categories. R. King points out that classical Indian philosophies offer various versions of constructivist

\(^{39}\) Ferrer and Sherman, *Participatory Turn*, 7.

\(^{40}\) S. King, “Two Epistemological Models,” 263.

epistemologies,⁴² and Jeffrey Kripal offers a bimodal model of the human (which we will explore below) that is deeply compatible with Asian traditions. Furthermore, scholars like Klein and others demonstrate the sophistication of emic theories, which can in no way be dismissed *a priori* or categorically subjugated to European philosophies.

In addition, Western authors are increasingly recognizing the importance of incorporating elements of human being other than language into their models of contemplative experience and contemplative writing. For instance, Ferrer and Sherman in *The Participatory Turn* argue for a new “turn” in critical theory to build on—but grow beyond—what they call the “linguistic turn.”

The ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy shifted the focus of inquiry from the inner representations and innate categories of a Cartesian-Kantian subject to the analysis of the elements of language…. …[A] growing number of scholars boldly asserted that classical philosophical puzzles were ‘nothing but’ problems of language that could be either resolved or dissolved through a variety of linguistic analyses and reconstructions.⁴³ Ferrer and Sherman propose a new “turn” in Religious Studies, building on the insights of the linguistic phase but growing beyond it, a “participatory turn” in which scholars recognize that religious discourses and phenomena emerge out of the encounter between practitioner and a potentially sacred reality. The most

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relevant aspect of this participatory turn for my argument is that Western scholars have begun to acknowledge “the potential pitfalls and ideological implications of privileging Western epistemological frameworks in the assessment of religious, and especially non-Western, truth claims.” Instead, according to Ferrer and Sherman, “it is increasingly claimed that looking at our intellectual concerns against and through the background of non-Western frameworks may not only serve as a wholesome corrective for our inevitable cultural biases, but may also bring fresh perspectives on unsolved problems and debated questions.” This chapter offers both Western and Tibetan correctives to the “disembodied, rationalistic, and cognicentric” aspects of “Western epistemology.”

Toward an Inclusive Epistemology

Having reviewed the dominant (if somewhat dated) position in the academic study of mysticism and the increasing pressure in the field against a reductive linguistic reading of contemplative truth claims, I will now shift to present a more inclusive approach to visionary phenomena and experiences. First, in dealing with extraordinary experiences such as visions and personal realizations of ultimate reality, it is important to acknowledge that such reports deserve serious consideration. That is, although any individual report of such an experience may

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44 Ferrer and Sherman, *Participatory Turn*, p. 7.
46 Ibid.
be contested (as often happens within the Tibetan tradition), this category of human experiences deserves to be read as accounts of experiences people do have—and sometimes spend a lifetime trying to understand—rather than as suspect religious phenomena to be explained away using reductive approaches. The Western academy has largely resisted working with these materials in such a sympathetic way, while other traditions have developed sophisticated ways of understanding them, so it follows that scholars working in this field will find important conversation partners in non-Western scholarly traditions. In this case, I will engage Tibetan material from epistemological texts and from the highly regarded fourteenth century master Longchen Rabjam.

Before I present these Tibetan epistemological and gnoseological insights and ways of framing visionary experience, it will be helpful to present an example of a vision in which Jamgön Kongtrül encountered Tāranātha, an important figure in the transmission of Dölpopa’s zhentong, and Vajrakila, a deity whose ritual Kongtrül was performing intensively when he dreamed of a magnificent temple, in the center of which I saw the great and glorious Vajrakumara, slightly vague as though cloaked in mist. On either side were the ten wrathful deities of Vajrakila’s retinue, shining like the rays of the sun on crystal; these were about two or three stories high. At that point, the venerable Tāranātha appeared, looking slightly emaciated: placing a kila dagger on my head, he recited [a mantra] and said, “If you, too, add this
ending to the mantra, the blessing will come more quickly.\textsuperscript{47}

This example of visionary contact contains elements that connect with other moments in the history of zhentong that are important to my argument. I will present, at the end of this chapter, a set of characteristics of visionary experience based on such recorded encounters between Kongtrül and significant beings (which resonate with similar reports about Dölpopa, though in his case we have only biographies written by his primary students). For now, however, I would like to call attention to the circumstances in Kongtrül’s waking life that surrounded this dream vision: He had been focused on this deity during waking life (for many days); during the vision, he felt that he was in the presence of the deity and then of Tāranātha, an important proponent of Dölpopa’s zhentong and source for Kongtrül’s own formulation of that doctrine; and Kongtrül received new information from Tāranātha regarding the mantra he had been reciting as part of the Vajrakila ritual. Also, the vision is profoundly embodied, involving as it does Kongtrül’s being blessed through Tāranātha’s placing the ritual dagger on Kongtrül’s head.

Turning now to the epistemological underpinnings of such visionary experiences and direct realization of reality, one emic theory is the Gelukpa

presentation of epistemology that supports their path to awakening. This model of mind offers a framework that finds room for both visionary experience and direct apprehension of ultimate reality, two forms of cognition considered taboo in the epistemology of the linguistic turn in Religious Studies that are nonetheless essential to understand the history of zhentong.

To begin with, Tibetan Buddhist epistemology offers several systems for classifying types of minds, but for the sake of simplicity I will focus on the seven-fold division. These seven types of minds are “direct perceivers,” “inferential cognizers,” “subsequent cognizers,” “correctly assuming consciousesses,” “awarenesses to which the object appears but is not ascertained,” “doubting consciousesses,” and “wrong consciousesses.” Thus, direct perception forms an important part of this epistemological system—though not, as will be discussed below, in the simple way that it seems to us to function. Direct perceivers have two major divisions: sensory and mental. Sensory direct perception occurs in the first moment of the eye, for instance, perceiving color and form. This first instant of sensory perception does not recognize the object in the sense of conceptually labeling it: “Sense direct perceivers do not name their objects nor reflect on them.

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48 Gelukpa scholars locate their discussion of epistemology within a presentation of the Sautrāntika school they call “Sautrāntikas Following Reasoning.” Although this discussion takes place within the context of presenting the beliefs of a “lower” system, Gelukpa scholars would accept the summary of their position offered above. (See the excellent introduction to Elizabeth Napper’s translation of Lati Rinpoche’s Mind in Tibetan Buddhism, pp. 11-39, for a more thorough treatment of this system of epistemology.)
Non-conceptual in nature, they merely experience." According to Buddhist epistemology, visual direct perception, for instance, only recognizes color and shape; it is incapable of recognizing the object and labeling it. Subsequent moments in the process of perceiving and labeling an object mix conceptual thought with direct perception to make such a recognition:

In the first moment of seeing an impermanent object such as a tree, direct perception—the eye consciousness—is active; then there is a moment of mental direct perception (manasa-pratyaksha, yid kyi mngon sum) which cannot be noticed by ordinary persons. Following this, conceptuality begins to operate. Thus, in the first period there is only direct, clear perception by the eye consciousness; once conceptuality begins, it operates simultaneously with subsequent moments of direct perception. This means that while the eye consciousness, for example, is apprehending the specific characteristics of its object, the thought derived from that eye consciousness superimposes a meaning-generality onto that object.

Thus, direct perception, in this epistemological system, includes a nearly infinitesimally small moment in which (contra Kant’s insight) direct perception is not yet structured by learned categories. However, according to Tibetan epistemologies, this first moment is so brief that ordinary (i.e., not highly realized) beings actually cannot perceive it, so what would commonly be considered direct perception is still not actually direct but is already mixed with conceptuality by the

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50 Lati Rinpoche, Mind, p. 18.
51 Klein, Knowledge and Liberation, p. 130.
simple act of recognizing and labeling objects.\footnote{52}{See Klein, Knowledge and Liberation, pp. 94, 130 ff. Also, Klein’s category (based on Tibetan sources) of the “energetic sensibility” (Klein, Anne C. “Seeing Mind, Being Body: Contemplative Practice and Buddhist Epistemology.” In A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy, edited by Steven M. Emmanuel. Blackwell Companions to Philosophy 50. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) would be an instance of a very subtle direct perception of touch.}

The second type of direct perception (by an ordinary mind), mental direct perception, is subdivided into two types. The first of these is said to take place in the moment after a sensory direct perception: “The Ge-luk-bas assert that at the end of a continuum of sense direct perception of an object there is generated one moment of mental direct perception; this in turn induces conceptual cognition of that object, naming it and so forth.”\footnote{53}{Lati Rinpoche, Mind, p. 18.} Simply holding direct perception to be possible opens the potential of experiencing ultimate reality (i.e., emptiness) directly. We will return to this point at greater length below in the context of yogic direct perception.

The second type of mental direct perception supports the possibility of visions not as forms of mental aberration or of the religious imagination instantiating the adept’s expectations but as contact with unseen layers of reality. “The second type of mental direct perception includes various types of clairvoyances (abhiñā, mngon shes) such as the ability to know others’ minds, to remember one’s former lives, to perceive forms and sounds too subtle to be
apprehended by the sense consciousnesses, and so forth.”\textsuperscript{54} The ability to see (for instance, as Kongtrül did above) one’s tutelary deity is considered by Tibetan Buddhists an accepted form of knowledge, though most people will never access it. It is, so to speak, “super-normal” without being “super-natural”—in other words, it is paranormal.

Among these seven types of minds, direct perceivers offer a basis for visionary experiences like Kongtrül’s in which a practitioner has a dream encounter with a transcendent being. Whereas Katz and his followers would assume that such a dream was simply produced by expectations cultivated during the percipient’s waking state, this Tibetan classification of types of consciousness presents the possibility that such an experience was an instance of direct mental perception of a subtle form inaccessible to ordinary sense perception.

Here we find an epistemological basis for visionary experiences of the kind that shaped the zhentong discourse. This schema of ways of knowing the various levels of reality assumes an ontological system very different from the modern, physicalist ones prevalent in the academy. However, given the worldwide prevalence of beliefs regarding non-physical entities and the recent turn toward a greater appreciation of non-Western epistemologies, there seems to be little empirical reason to assume that the currently dominant materialist paradigm has an

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 19.
exceptional claim for the validity of its assumptions.

Another form of direct perception supports the Buddhist claim that an unmediated, direct experience of ultimate reality is possible. Yogic direct perception (rnal-'byor mgon-sum) is the mode of knowledge that makes this crucial moment possible, according to Tibetan Buddhist epistemology. Unlike sensory direct perception, which comes about due to contact between the physical organs of the senses (with their respective capacities to apprehend their objects) and external objects, yogic direct perception arises due to “a union of calm abiding (shamatha, zhi gnas) and special insight (vipashyanā, lhag mthong).” In other words, the reason (according to Tibetan Buddhist epistemologies) that a direct experience of ultimate reality, i.e., emptiness, is possible is that the mind is completely focused through calm abiding and lucid through special insight. Sensory direct perceptions depend on external objects, and for these mental states to be comprehensible to us, they must be conjoined with conceptual labels. Yogic direct perception, by contrast, does not arise on the basis of contact with external objects but due to these two special states of mind. In Kant’s writings (and other post-Enlightenment systems of philosophy) the possibility is never explored that one could transform one’s mind from its ordinary, unfocused, and deluded state to a fully concentrated state with insight into the nature of reality. Yet this very

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55 Lati Rinpoche, Mind, p. 20.
process of transformation is what makes the direct experience of reality possible in Buddhist systems. As we will see in the chapters on Dölpopa and Tsongkhapa, different Tibetan luminaries frame this process differently, but none of them doubts that such a transformation is possible.

A Tibetan model of epistemology, then, supports both visionary experiences (as legitimate contact with a level of reality more subtle than the ordinary senses perceive) and awakening (as legitimate contact with reality itself, unstructured by cultural conditioning). But the Buddhist traditions also offer a related classification of reality into conventional and ultimate, with objects perceived by ordinary minds constituting conventional reality and emptiness—i.e., buddha nature—itself as ultimate reality. These are not two separate ontological modes but rather two modes of perceiving existence itself. To use the language of our zhentong authors, the unbounded, luminous buddha nature is the most real element of a person, while her limited identity constitutes her conventional self. The bimodal, energetic model presented below resonates profoundly with this presentation of the two modes of being without using the tradition-specific language of Tibetan Buddhism.

This Tibetan model of the person as two (that are ultimately completely nondual) also connects with visionary experience. According to Longchenpa, “in the postmeditation experience of those who have attained spiritual levels [i.e., who
have experienced emptiness directly], there are the universes and other sensory appearances that they perceive in common with others of similar attainment.” In other words, a practitioner who had achieved a high level of realization might experience appearances at the level of conventional reality that would be inaccessible to those without such deeply transformed minds. This would be the traditional Tibetan understanding of the kind of experience Jamgön Kongtrül relates in the example of visionary experience described above: A highly realized practitioner experiences some authentic contact with a major figure from his tradition, receiving blessings and (in this case) additional instructions intended to benefit his practice. Now that we have very briefly explored Tibetan explanations for non-ordinary states of mind such as visionary experience and the direct perception of reality, we will explore some Western counterparts.

**Western counterparts of Tibetan models of visionary and direct experience**

In the chapters that follow, we will explore in more detail the Tibetan epistemologies that support the Buddhist gnoseological claims that liberation and buddhahood are possible and that specific practices of the tradition can bring about

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these states. But before we engage so deeply those very specific frameworks, it is worth noting the movements Western scholars working with contemplative traditions are already making toward using emic categories to support their work. Such scholars are clearly seeking a more inclusive epistemology, and several authors have proposed dualistic models which would deal both with ordinary and non-ordinary states of mind. S. King’s “Two Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism” presents a partial constructivist model in which cultural context conditions direct experience, but she still holds experience itself as ultimately not reducible to expectations and prior conditioning. She uses the examples of drinking coffee and listening to music as experiences about which one can have a great deal of intellectual knowledge, and which can be influenced by this knowledge, but which are decidedly not pre-determined by that framing. As she says, “…there is something even in mundane experience that eludes the grasp of language,”58 which (to use the language of Tibetan epistemology presented above) is to say that although sensory perception is mixed with conceptual labeling, it also contains an element of direct awareness. As a complement to the constructivist epistemology, King offers her own “Buddhist-phenomenological epistemological model”59 to deal with direct experience. This model takes sensory data as a raw level of experience which then gets interpreted through linguistic and

58 S. King, “Two Epistemological Models,” 266.
59 Ibid., 270.
cultural filters. Thus, King brings unmediated awareness out of an exalted mystical context and into daily life. The fact that King has formulated this model based on a Buddhist epistemology of direct sensory experience points to a lacuna in the “linguistic turn” to which non-Western cultures offer sophisticated solutions.

**Kripal’s Bimodal Model**

In *The Serpent’s Gift*, Kripal offers an argument for a bimodal model of human psychology, with ordinary states of consciousness as one major mode and non-ordinary states (trance, visionary experience, energetic encounter, etc.) as a second. In the conclusion he poses the question driving the book: “…[H]ow might we now come to an at once more objectively critical or distant and more subjectively satisfying or intimate understanding of the full scope of the human being as the latter is manifested in the history of religions?”

In a sense, this dissertation constitutes an attempt to answer this question through a deep engagement with emic Tibetan sources.

Kripal frames his answer in terms of the gnostic method he has described in the book, using both reason (reductive social analytic methods of the modern academy) and faith (“a way of knowing the world and oneself via religious doctrines”\(^{61}\)) to produce a gnostic openness to radical empiricism.\(^{62}\) Significantly,

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61 Ibid., 4.
62 “Radical empiricism” refers to the willingness to accept even data (like near death experience accounts, remote viewing, etc.) that refuse to fit into a materialist scientific worldview but that nonetheless seem to occur. See Kripal,
his gnostic third way fits neither the academic nor the religious model and transgresses both. It violates the materialistic rules of the reductive, social scientific approach to religious phenomena by acknowledging erotic energy as a real force behind religious experiences past and present. And such a third category runs counter to religions’ self-understanding of sexual energy as a force to be denied and sublimated. Indeed, even the title of the book in which this model is found, *The Serpent’s Gift*, refers to a gnostic interpretation of the Garden of Eden story in which the serpent is good, offering knowledge (which Kripal reads as the erotic), while the biblical god is jealous and petty, denying his creations access to a vital element of themselves.\(^{63}\) In this way, Kripal’s gnostic approach is no pastiche of elements from faith-based and reductive methods but a new way of working with the phenomena and narratives of religion that draws on both of these established methods but conforms to neither. Another key element of Kripal’s bimodal model—perhaps its most taboo aspect for Western academia—is his emphasis on energy. For him, as the quote above suggests and as we will see in more detail below, “bodily energies” are key players in human life.

Kripal identifies “three separate movements” of his gnostic approach:

(1) [A] bimodal model of human consciousness that can take seriously the altered states of consciousness and energy that constitute so many of the

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\(^{63}\) See particularly *Serpent’s Gift*, pp. 1-4.
origin points of the history of religions, while staying true to the legitimate
corns and ethical commitments of Enlightenment reason; (2) an analysis
of the role that bodily energies play in empowering the cognitive, moral, and
imaginable capacities of the intellectual life; and, finally, (3) a specific bimodal
empowered logic derived from (1) and (2) that can be fruitfully applied to
contemporary theoretical debates within the study of religion.  

Kripal’s investment in treating nonordinary states as valid phenomena for study, as
well as his gnostic method for Religious Studies, point to the credibility (and
perhaps necessity) of efforts to break out of the limitations of strictly contextualist
models for scholarly research. We have seen how Kripal’s engagement with
mystical traditions helps to open the range of phenomena religious studies scholars
can approach without excessive reduction. We now add the second element of
what I have called the bimodal, energetic model: the subtle winds that underlie
both ordinary and non-ordinary human functioning according to the Tibetan
tradition and that are the focus of tantric practices.

Energetic Sensibility
Anne Klein’s energetic sensibility offers a way to use Kripal’s bimodal model to
describe the visionary experiences reported by (or of) Dölpopa and Jamgön
Kongtrül. “Energy” could be summarized as a living, extremely subtle physical
substance that circulates through the bodies of humans and all other living beings

64 Ibid., 163.
65 The Tibetan categories of direct perception (mngon sum) and inferential cognition (rjes dpag) seem to line up in
some ways with these two categories of faith and reason without necessarily providing a direct parallel. Exploring
the intersections of these pairs of categories might provide further insights.
and that (like the Force from Star Wars) connects these beings with their environments. The term “energy” has such a broad range of meanings in English that I am, when possible, using the term “subtle winds” (a more literal translation of the Tibetan *rlung*) in its place. Thus, “energy” in this context refers to the subtle, physical flow of the body’s inner “winds.”

The subtle winds bridge the two modes of the human since—being an integral part of a human person—they are accessible during ordinary conscious states and also play a crucial role in visionary and other supernormal experiences. (Indeed, in the cultural systems in which energy plays an important role, it not only integrates the individual; it also weaves that individual into the larger tapestry of other humans, non-human animals, the environment, and ultimately the cosmos.)

The next chapter will explore the Kālacakra tantra’s presentation of the body’s energy system and how the practitioner can bring about a radical and liberative transformation in that system. Although the idea of the flow of energy throughout the body has fallen out of favor in Western thought, it plays a crucial role in many cultures’ models of a complete human. The Buddhist model of a human incorporates body, speech/winds, and mind, and both exoteric and esoteric systems of meditation include instructions on how best to work with the body’s energetic
flows to promote particular states of mind.  

Klein points to the importance of energy to a more comprehensive understanding of Buddhist thought and practice:

Buddhist theories of knowing and Buddhist practices of contemplation require that we understand beings as possessing three interfusing dimensions: the physical body, the energy that fuels verbal speech and all other expression, and mind. Epistemologies that too graphically or stringently separate mind and body—as Western orientations typically have done—or that omit the energetic dimension altogether will not be able to see clearly what is occurring in Buddhist texts or practices.

The reported biographies of my two case studies, Dölpopa and Jamgön Kongtrül, also point to the need for a category of subtle winds in order to offer a rich history of the development of the zhentong discourse, as we will see in the following chapters.

The section above presented a sketch of the domains of human experience covered by the category of “energy.” The energetic sensibility is the capacity to be aware of the body’s energetic flows and state. Klein describes it as a sensory faculty as follows: “...[T]he energetic sensibility integrates a subtle sense of touch with an awareness which is not interpretive but which simply and immediately knows what that touch signifies. A common example is butterflies in the stomach: you know immediately how that feels and what it means about your psycho-

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66 Klein, “Seeing Mind,” 573
67 Ibid., p. 575.
emotional state.”  This sensibility is a basic, nonverbal awareness of the energetic state of the body and its system of subtle winds that allows the practitioner to practice effecting changes within that system. As we will see in the chapter on Dölpopa, the cultivation of specific energetic states is central to the tantric project of self-transformation.

Not only do the subtle winds link and suffuse body and mind; they also link the individual human with the larger field of mind/energy in which such beings function. Klein and several authors from Samuel’s and Johnston’s *Subtle Body* volume argue, in their various ways, for connections between the individual’s energetic system and her environment. As Susan Greenwood puts it in the context of shamanism and magic,

...[L]et me act as an advocate on behalf of the perspective of magical consciousness to suggest that we entertain the view that during the experience of magic spirits share a degree of corporeal materiality and possess mind. Accepting this proposition allows us to imagine that their minds… and ours can meet in a wider consciousness; or put another way, mind and matter have consciousness.  

Klein echoes this sentiment, also arguing for the continuity of the subtle winds across “individuals” and their environments using the Tibetan category of *bla* (“la”), the life-force of a person—or a lake, tree, mountain, and so forth: “…*[B]la bypasses the Cartesian dualism through emphasizing an important resonance

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68 Ibid., p. 574.
between ‘internal’ and ‘external,’ between Yeshe Tsogyal [believed to be an emanation of a buddha], for example, and the lake that sprang up at her birth.’’

Traditionally, scholars of religion might have been very reluctant to maintain a true agnosticism about a model of the world that so profoundly violates not only our Cartesian assumption that mind and matter are fundamentally separate but also our deeply (if unconsciously) held sense that humans are actors upon an inert environment.

The body’s energy system, with its connection to other energies in the environment (to be explored further in the next chapter), is vital to a rich understanding of the genesis and development of many crucial religious phenomena, including zhentong, the special focus here. That philosophical view was born at the interface between Dölpopa’s understanding of Madhyamaka (according to the standard interpretations of his day) and his immersion in the yogic practices of the Kālachakra tantra. I will show in the next chapter that these practices are explicitly intended to manipulate the body’s subtle winds in specific ways. Thus, the energetic sensibility is very much available to the conscious mind; indeed, a practitioner in a tantric tradition works with energy from the time she begins to cultivate a basic practice to focus the mind, deepening her sensitivity and control over her energy, until (ideally) she masters the most refined means of

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Support for a Model that Includes Subtle Winds

We just met several authors (primarily Kripal and Klein) whose works articulate in a Western register insights that resonate with and support Longchenpa’s and the Gelukpas’ epistemologists’ sense of non-ordinary reality\(^71\) being nonetheless reality, allowing these authors to suggest contemporary theoretical frameworks to support academic inquiry into non-ordinary religious phenomena. In this section, since these are emerging ideas, I will review a few authors’ arguments for including something like them in the discourse on contemplative experience.

In particular, the idea that scholars “bracket” the truth claims of the traditions they study seems suspect. For instance, Katz (after an argument that mystical experience cannot be used to justify religious dogma) lays out his own system of bracketing early in “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism”:

> Despite the strict limitation being placed on the justificatory value of mystical experience, it is *not* being argued either that mystical experiences do not happen, or that what they claim may not be true, only that there can be no grounds for deciding this question, i.e. of showing that they are true *even* if they are, in fact, true.\(^72\)

Despite this move to deny that his arguments will undermine the truth claims of

\(^71\) The level of reality contacted through visions is non-ordinary in the sense that most people never or very rarely experience, e.g., deities communicating with them directly. But Tibetan Buddhists would insist that this is not because the deities are not typically present but because most people are unable to perceive them. From that perspective, visions of transcendent beings are more ordinary than consensus reality—and the sheer lucidity of emptiness is more ordinary still.

mystics and their traditions, Katz proceeds over the course of the rest of his article to argue that mystical experiences that claim to be unmediated are in fact mistaken. What Dölpopa and Jamgön Kongtrül claim—direct, nonconceptual experience of reality itself—is exactly what Katz says is impossible for “the type of beings we are.” This is a striking example of bracketing as intellectual sleight-of-hand.

Jeremy Northcote, in his brief but persuasive “Objectivity and the Supernormal,” claims that the use of bracketing to (ideally) suspend judgment about religious and/or “supernormal” truth claims does not in fact offer a legitimately agnostic stance to the analyst writing about a culture or religious group that believes in phenomena such as the subtle body or bodily energy. Instead, such a posture often simply functions to dismiss the claims by not engaging them seriously or by reducing them to functions of social or political interactions more accessible to (or perhaps culturally plausible to) researchers, which can seriously distort the phenomena and/or experiences under consideration. For instance, we could bracket Dölpopa’s claim to have realized emptiness in a profoundly new way during his Kālacakra retreat and interpret this as a culturally appropriate means of establishing his religious authority. Such reading against the grain can be a valuable exercise, but reading (mostly) with the grain, as I am doing, offers its own set of fascinating research questions—some of which challenge physicalist assumptions about the nature of reality and human experiences.
Returning to Northcote’s critique of bracketing, he argues that it replicates the assumptions of the physicalist paradigm that undergirds social scientific research:

...I contend that current bracketing approaches... do not offer a solution to the problem of bias in sociological accounts of the supernormal. The problem is that bracketing approaches, which claim to only deal with the social aspects of religious and quasi-religious activities and to leave the empirical validity of such activities an open question, inevitably make a demarcation between ‘social’, ‘physical’, and ‘supernormal’ reality that invalidates certain ontological claims (such as those that make little distinction between social, physical, and paraphysical reality).\(^7\)

Such “demarcation” among the categories of social, individual, external, internal, and so on inevitably replicates contemporary Western assumptions about the boundaries between (for instance) body and mind. Physicalist contemporary neuroscience offers one example of such a division with its model of the physical brain generating the epiphenomenal mind (though this is changing with the work of scientists like Richard Davidson, Daniel Siegel, and others). Matter is composed of cells that communicate via neurotransmitters in a classical Newtonian dance of tangible particles devoid of mind; this matter, as the only ontologically significant substance in a materialistic biomedical model of organisms, must generate the ephemeral mind that depends on the brain for its existence. Daniel Dennett, in his influential *Consciousness Explained*, succinctly states this position

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in the prelude to the book: “In the chapters that follow, I will attempt to explain consciousness. More precisely, I will explain the various phenomena that compose what we call consciousness, showing how they are all physical effects of the brain’s activities.”74

Bickle, Mandik, and Landreth summarize the materialist view in “The Philosophy of Neuroscience”75 with their description of eliminative materialism (EM), a perspective that has existed since the 1970s and gathered strength since the 1990s. According to proponents of EM, our common-sense assumptions about human cognition and motivation are completely wrong; human cognition, learning, emotion, etc., are all functions of the physical processes of neural networks. In other words, our subjective experience of having desires, intentions, etc., is mistaken in the sense that it obscures the neurons, neural networks, and higher levels of physical structure that produce our inner sense of ourselves. EM theorists looks to the neuroscience of the future to explain cognition and subjectivity in purely materialistic terms.76

This model suggests that body and mind are interconnected in that body causes mind, but a clear distinction can still be made between the physical, empirically accessible body and our sense of having a subjective, private mind—

76 Ibid.
which, in reality, arises due to the physical structures in the brain. Of course, social scientists (and, increasingly, medical doctors and others) are aware that the mind can also influence the body and demonstrate effects on blood pressure, wound healing, etc., but mind and body are still typically considered ontologically discrete categories. The subtle winds, which might help to explain the mind’s ability to influence the body, remain a taboo topic for many biomedical researchers.\(^{77}\) Thus, “mind” and “body” are typically sharply demarcated, with “energy” left entirely out of physicalist models of the human.

While Northcote’s critique of bracketing was written about analysts of groups who hold beliefs in paranormal events, it also applies to my two case studies of remarkable Tibetan masters who were deeply engaged with the process of transforming (what they perceived as) their ordinary bodily energies into awakened energies, events which were not, in their culture, considered paranormal per se, but rather were regarded as a mark of great contemplative acumen. Tibetan Buddhist tantra and related practices often focus on refining, revealing, and manipulating those energies, and a bracketing approach that excludes that major component of my subjects’ transformative systems seems to me to occlude the very phenomenon driving this investigation. As Kripal remarks, “Indeed, the sacred as sacred—or what we have encountered here as the psychical and the

\(^{77}\) Alejandro Chaoul, personal communication, June 2012.
paranormal as the experiential core of comparative folklore, mysticism, and
mythology—is precisely what has been eclipsed in the contemporary study of
religion.” Kripal, Klein, and others offer new possibilities to explore a rigorous
engagement with non-ordinary moments from perspectives other than simple
reductionism.

Northcote addresses this drawback of bracketing—that it may obscure
phenomena under consideration—as well:

The problem is not only that a bracketing approach generally fails to
eliminate ‘clashes’ between the analyst’s perspective and the perspectives of
those being studied, but it may also undermine the strength of the analysis
by providing, at best, a very limited perspective and, at worst, one that has
completely misrepresented the processes involved.79

In this passage, he succinctly summarizes my concerns about presenting case
studies on Dölpopa and Jamgön Kongtrül that neglected the role of the energetic
sensibility in their philosophical innovations.

Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston, in their co-edited volume Religion and
the Subtle Body in Asia and the West, also point to the potential of models of what
they call the subtle body (what we might call the energy body) to enrich Western
academic categories of analysis: “Subtle-body processes do not fit neatly into the
Western categories of mind (consciousness) or body, but hint at the need for

78 Kripal, Authors, p. 245.
modes and modes of understanding that go beyond these divisions.”

Jeffrey Kripal offers just such a model, describing the human as containing two modalities, ordinary waking consciousness and a wild irruption of the non-ordinary (and potentially sacred) that we rarely access but that is responsible for many of the supernormal phenomena in the history of religious traditions. Such non-ordinary experiences, in Kripal’s analysis, involve the erotic energies of the human body. In a paper written for an address given at Wheaton College, Kripal says,

…I have written extensively elsewhere about this deeper dialectic of asceticism and eroticism, about the complicated ways that gender and sexual orientation play into the same, and about the universal neuroanatomy that underlies it all—the human spine, which, of course, really and literally connects the genitals and the brain. The connection between sex and spirit, then, is neither simply a fantasy of the ancient authors, a local cultural construction, or a perversion of modern authors like myself. It is a universal neuroanatomical fact.

While Kripal focuses on the intersection of sexuality and extreme religious experience, his work contributes to an energetic understanding of visionary experience by underscoring the importance of the physical—even at its most subtle levels—for understanding, in a way that avoids materialistic reductionism, what might be happening to people who experience such moments. In *Authors of the Impossible* and *The Serpent’s Gift*, he presents the human as two:

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Each human being, each reflection of the Adam of Light, is Two, that is, each person is simultaneously a conscious, constructed self or socialized ego and a much larger complexly conscious field that normally manifests itself only in nonordinary states of consciousness and energy, which the religious traditions have historically objectified, mythologized, and projected outward into the sky as divine, as “God,” and so on, or introjected inwards into the human being as nirvana, brahman, and so on.  

In other words, each person is capable of far more than our everyday lives. Each of us carries the something “sacred” (for lack of a better word) within us that accounts for phenomena such as psy abilities, near death experiences, contact with and/or possession by deities or other non-physical beings, and so on. According to Kripal’s reading of the religious traditions, accounts of non-ordinary events and experiences express an important truth:

…[W]hatever paranormal phenomena are, they clearly vibrate at the origin point of many popular religious beliefs, practices, and images—from beliefs in the existence, immortality, and transmigration of the soul; through the felt presence of deities, demons, spirits, and ghosts; to the fearful fascinations of mythology and the efficacy of magical thinking and practice. But if the paranormal lies at the origin point of so much religious experience and expression, it should also lie at the center of any adequate theory of religion. …[T]hese experiences are often genuine and real in the simplest sense that they are experienced as such by those undergoing them, that they are not

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82 Kripal, Serpent’s Gift, 164.
83 Kripal uses this term to denote phenomena and experiences outside the usual range of human experiences and outside ordinary states of consciousness. I use this term with the understanding that many traditions (including the Tibetan ones under consideration here) would not consider experiencing oneself as a buddha, for instance, as non-ordinary in the sense of being counter to the way things really are. Quite the contrary, most Tibetan masters would say that experiencing the internal other, so to speak, of one’s buddha nature is actually a return to the way things already are and have always been. Thus, “non-ordinary” in this context simply refers to states of consciousness other than ordinary waking life.
Because non-ordinary events play such a major role in religious traditions (including the zhentong discourse), we need to acknowledge their impact and generative power and come up with adequate models of the human.

One example of Kripal’s use of the “human as two” model is his engagement with the “filter” model of mind, which postulates that mind is a non-physical, aware field that manifests itself through the physical brain rather than being created by the brain. This model is compatible with near death experience narratives, remote viewing, cases of children claiming to remember previous lives (and in some cases offering details of those lives that would be nearly impossible for them to have acquired through ordinary means), and other phenomena that simply make no sense under a strict materialist model. Kripal offers his own hypothesis that pushes the filter model a step further into mystical terrain:

My own intuitive sense is that paranormal phenomena are expressions of a deeper nondual reality that possesses both “mental” and “material” qualities that manifest according to the subjective or objective structure of an experience or experiment. … This is yet another reason why the paranormal and the mystical should not be separated, why we cannot study the one without the other: both forms of experience are pointing to or expressing this nondual or both-and level of the real.85

This passage suggests that although Kripal calls his model of the human “bimodal”

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84 Kripal, *Authors*, p. 251.
85 Ibid., pp. 256-7.
because we observe two distinct modes of human being, it is in the end profoundly nondual. As Kripal explains, his “model, a kind of dual aspect monism, is at once a form of metaphysical nondualism and an epistemological dualism. In other words, we experience and ‘know’ reality to be two, even though in reality it is not. It is metaphysically nondual but epistemologically dual.”

This model is also compatible with the models underlying Tibetan Buddhist assumptions about the human, the role of practice, and so on, that rest on the assumption that everything that exists is an expression of primordial purity (even when, to ordinary minds, it may seem anything but pure). Kripal suggests that people typically have very limited access to their own “second states” but that trauma can trigger a shift from the everyday to the non-ordinary or sacred:

The human person really is not identical to the social ego, to the everyday awareness of the name. …[O]ne of the most efficient (if also unfortunately dangerous) ways to realize this [superhero] behind the [social self] is through the psychological mechanism of dissociation, which itself is usually triggered by some form of physical, psychological, or sexual suffering.

Elite religious practices can have a seemingly analogous effect without involving trauma. A master of the Kālacakra Tantra, Dölpopa spent a year in solitary retreat, at least part of which he spent in total darkness, devoting himself to practices designed to still his body’s ordinary flows of subtle wind (see the

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86 Personal communication, Kripal, Jeffrey J., September 1, 2014.
87 Kripal, Authors, p. 143.
following section and the next chapter for further details). There is no evidence that any of this had adverse psychological effects on him, but such austerities certainly involved significant shifts to Dölpopa’s physical state.

Kripal’s bimodal model is rooted in a sense of the human as embodied: “…[T]he mystical and occult transformations of the human being are never simply matters of ‘the soul’ or even of ‘the spirit.’ They are also and always matters of energy, which is another way of saying of the body”\(^{88}\) (emphasis in original). Indeed, in tantric Buddhist systems full awakening is accomplished through transforming and/or purifying the body’s subtle winds, so such systems devote considerable attention to practices that work directly with the subtle body and energetic flows. This—in the context of Klein’s advocacy of the energetic sensibility—brings us to the role of energy in a model of the human that could undergird the visionary moments of zhentong’s history. I have compiled a list of characteristics of the visionary experiences that Dölpopa and Kongtrül report; shortly, I will connect each characteristic more directly with the core issues addressed by the bimodal, energetic model.

I propose that the history of zhentong is best told through moments of visionary encounter followed by the process of formulating a new presentation of Madhyamaka through the lens of the visionary experience. As I will argue more

\(^{88}\) Kripal, Serpent’s Gift, p. 144.
fully in my chapters on Dölpopa and Jamgön Kongtrül, such moments of encounter (in these cases) are preceded by intensive scholarly study in the adept’s tradition and typically include the following features:

**They occur in socially isolated settings, such as retreat or during times of sleep, when the ordinary sense of identity is unusually relaxed and permeable.**

I was struck, as I read Jamgön Kongtrül’s accounts of his many extraordinary visionary experiences, how much more frequently he reports such states occurring during dreams than during waking states. Those significant dreams, in turn, happened much more often when he was on retreat, practicing intensively or receiving teachings with a group, or on retreat. Dölpopa’s and Tsongkhapa’s biographies also reflect that pattern, which suggests to me that social isolation is a significant precondition that may facilitate visionary experience.

However, the fact that someone practicing meditation in a cave by herself has no *human* companions does not mean for Tibetans that she is *alone*. As Klein emphasizes in her *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*,

> traditional Tibetans do not understand themselves as “individuals” in the contemporary Western social, economic, or psychological sense. Further, they are rarely, if ever, alone in the sense that a Westerner in an apartment in a city to which she has just moved and knows no one, is alone. Tibetan renunciates, who may meditate in solitude for years in the Tibetan vastness… model forms of autonomy difficult to replicate in the West, yet even they are still embedded in a traditional context. No matter how isolated, even high in a solitary cave, one remains part of a community of
values, and of people and spirits also.\footnote{Anne C. Klein, Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, feminists, and the art of the self. Beacon Press, 1995, p. 40.}

Clearly someone from or in a traditional culture could be in a setting without other humans and yet experience herself as still intimately connected with human and/or non-human others. By social isolation, therefore, I only mean a setting in which the adept is not interacting with materially present others or, in the case of the Jonang community’s construction of a giant stūpa, that a community shares a sacred view of themselves and their environment.

**During those times, the mind and energy are focused.**

As we saw above, Longchenpa says that one who has “attained spiritual levels” is able to perceive “universes and other sensory appearances that they perceive in common with others of similar attainment.”\footnote{Longchen Rabjam, Philosophical Systems, p. 113.} Such “spiritual levels” are entered through yogic direct perception, which arises on the basis of “a union of calm abiding (shamatha, zhi gnas) and special insight (vipashyanā, lhag mthong).”\footnote{Lati Rinpoche, Mind, p. 20.}

During those times, the mind and energy are focused. (i.e., calm and focused) mind as a precondition for mystical experience: “Recollection refers to that procedure wherein the mystic learns to focus one-pointedly his or her mind,
will, imagination, and emotions on some object or goal,” which allows the chatter of the ordinary mind to die away. “Once mystics stop this process of silently talking to themselves, they transform their mode of consciousness and begin to have their first tangible encounters with that spiritual world that otherwise remains imperceptible to the five senses.”

This is certainly the case with Dölpopa and Jamgön Kongtrül, who both reported visionary experiences much more frequently during periods of intensive practice, and those practices themselves would assume a focused state of mind as a prerequisite for the actual practice.

Hollenback describes the “empowerment” of the imagination as a state resulting from recollection and enabling a mystic’s imagination to become “an organ of supernormal perception,” capable of receiving veridical information that would ordinarily not be accessible to a person. Here we have again echoes of mental direct perception due to a calm and focused mind as well as Longchenpa’s statement that those who have “attained spiritual levels” are able to perceive phenomena hidden from those who have not. Hollenback’s examples of non-ordinary phenomena arising from an empowered imagination include the ability to know what is taking place at a distance and telekinesis, the first of which would be a classic instance of mental direct perception. The Tibetan tradition includes, as we saw in Napper’s commentary on Gelukpa epistemology and Longchenpa’s

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93 Ibid., p. 22.
quotation above respectively, experiences of previous lives and of unseen worlds as additional non-ordinary (but veridical) perceptions. Tibetan Buddhist language for such states would be different, considering contact with a deity, for instance, to be an instance of mental direct perception—but not a perception relayed through the imagination so much as a legitimate function of more subtle levels of mind.

According to Buddhist models of mind, the practitioner would have to clear away the gross defilements that would impede deeper levels of concentration as a prerequisite to this sort of post-meditative experiences (nyams) or realization (rtogs-pa). These two descriptions—of mental direct perception that arises as a result of the mind’s being clarified (at least to a certain degree) and focused on a single object and of the empowered imagination as a sensory organ in its own right—highlight circumstances under which the mind seems to be able to access information not typically available to it.

The categories of physical and mental are often experienced as profoundly unified through a focus on energetic experience. In fact, the conscious manipulation of subtle winds is a primary focus of Dölpopa’s practice of the Kālacakra tantra, and Jamgön Kongtrül also actively pursued similar practices.

The category of energy itself straddles mental and physical, so that focusing on the

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94 Meditative experience (nyams) and realization (rtogs-pa) are related in that each occurs within the context of a meditative practice (though not necessarily within the formal session itself), but an experience is just that—fleeting, conveying a certain content possibly (as in the case of some of Jamgön Kongtrül’s visions, for instance) requiring interpretation. A realization, however, is stable, abiding, a lasting insight.
flow of energy and the channels of the subtle body would naturally soften the lines between body and mind (which are less rigid in Tibetan culture than in European-derived cultures to begin with).

The categories of internal and external, self and other, may also be unified. This is one explicit goal of Kālacakra practice, as we will see in the next chapter. The “other” whom the adept experiences is likely to be deeply connected to him or her. Both Dölpopa and Jamgön Kongtrül felt that they were incarnations of at least one of the realized Others they encountered, and in both cases their formulations of zhentong reflect this contact. This will be explored at length in chapters two and four when we examine (in chapter two) Dölpopa’s sense of connection with Kalkī Puṇḍarīka, a major figure in the story of the Kālacakra Tantra’s origins and the author of an important commentary on that text. Dölpopa’s conviction that zhentong represented the ultimate meaning of both the sūtras and the tantras is certainly connected to his sense of himself as uniquely in contact with (or in fact as) Kalkī Puṇḍarīka, a figure more qualified than other Tibetan masters of his day to expound the true, pith meaning of Madhyamaka in terms of the Kālacakra Tantra. In chapter four, we turn to Jamgön Kongtrül’s repeated visionary encounters with figures from the Jonang zhentong lineage, particularly those linking him with Tāranātha, the school’s second most celebrated luminary. Kongtrül’s emphasis on Jonang formulations of emptiness is best explained by his
(and his associates’) conviction that he had a powerful connection with Tāranātha from a previous life, so in his case also there is a strong, intimate connection between an important figure from the past and the version of Madhyamaka that Kongtrül holds as definitive.

**Such encounters seem to have a profound impact on the practitioner who experiences them and, in these cases, provide a new lens through which to read their traditions.** Both Dölpopa and Jamgön Kongtrül offer examples of adepts in both meditative traditions and philosophy whose visionary experiences (strongly influenced by their meditations) transformed the ways they read their received textual traditions. Much of chapters two and four is devoted to this aspect of these two lamas’ visionary reworkings of Madhyamaka, so the hermeneutic function of an encounter almost feels like a separate topic, and yet there are many instances of similar results of similar experiences in Tibetan Buddhism (not to mention other traditions). Tsongkhapa, for instance, formulated his influential version of Madhyamaka following a visionary encounter with Mañjuśrī, a buddha related to wisdom, and several Indian masters of Buddhism associated with sūtric traditions. Each of these three figures’ descriptions of emptiness through Madhyamaka was, for him, deeply connected with a felt sense of “deep identity,” so that his innovation had deeper roots than textual readings and therefore carried a more significant emotional charge and liberative meaning.
Conclusion

This chapter opened by pointing out the limitations of a Eurocentric approach to Religious Studies and then called for a more inclusive approach that would be able to take the subtle winds and non-ordinary states of awareness seriously. The most important part of this opening chapter was its presentation of the energetic, bimodal model of the human and the set of common characteristics of visionary experiences that I will use to analyze Dölpopa’s and Jamgön Kongtrül’s reported encounters with their inner Others in chapters two and four. Because the following chapters will focus on specifically Tibetan situations, we will explore emic models in more detail there, making connections to the bimodal, energetic model before we consider it again in the conclusion. In particular, this model and the aspects of Tibetan epistemology we examine are intended to support richer descriptions of peak contemplative experiences (e.g., visions and realizations of emptiness) than are available with either the constructivist or perennialist views of contemplative experience. One benefit of taking particular Tibetan masters as case studies is that we see a variety of practices and outcomes that have impacted the history of Tibetan Madhyamaka. Also, each case study offers us an opportunity to explore different aspects of Tibetan constructions of identity and gnoseological possibility; all of this is tied together by the historical circumstances of Dölpopa’s, Tsongkhapa’s, and Jamgön Kongtrül’s lives and philosophical milieux. My
overall goal is to combine traditional academic approaches (historical and textual analysis and a willingness to question the tradition’s account of itself) with the richness of an emic contemplative epistemology to offer a more complete history of zhentong.
Chapter 2: The Omniscient One from Dolpo

Text, context, and contemplative experience in the birth of shentong

This chapter focuses on Dölpapa Sherab Gyaltsen (1292-1361) and some of the forces at play as he introduced a new95 nomenclature for emptiness with his category of *zhentong* (*gzhan-stong*, “emptiness of other”), which I will describe in more detail below. Dölpapa serves as the first case study in my argument for the bimodal, energetic model I presented in the first chapter. To offer some context for Dölpapa’s *zhentong*, I will briefly summarize the philosophical challenges facing Tibetan thinkers in the fourteenth century, then provide a look at a few formative moments from Dölpapa’s life before examining his *zhentong* in more detail and closing by making the case that the story of his innovation can be told more richly and accurately by including both external factors (e.g., history, his biography, his textual studies) and the internal factor of visionary experience, heavily featuring the flow of subtle winds.

The Puzzle: Fitting Sūtric and Tantric Emptinesses Together

The narrative of Dölpapa’s realization of *zhentong* requires a prologue in order for the extent of his innovations to be apparent as well as to frame the history of

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95 Dölpapa did not simply invent this new description of emptiness out of whole cloth; he built on the insights and descriptions of earlier masters in his lineage. But he was the first to introduce *zhentong* to a wider audience in Tibet and to make it a central part of his formulation of Madhyamaka. For more information, see Stearns, *Buddha from Dolpo*, chapter two (pp. 41-84).
contestation surrounding the zhentong discourse generally. This prologue takes us back to the development in India of the various lineages that would eventually make their ways into Tibet from the seventh or eighth century until the early to mid-second millennium AD. By the late first millennium, Mahāyāna Buddhists in India had established two connected but distinct methods for addressing ultimate reality and practicing to realize it experientially: sūtra and tantra.

In the Buddhist traditions, sūtras are exoteric texts considered to have been taught by Sakyamuni Buddha during his lifetime. The Pāli Buddhist canon’s philosophical section contains texts on the impermanent, selfless, and ultimately unsatisfying nature of unawakened life and was largely written before the common era from teachings memorized earlier and transmitted orally. The Mahāyāna canon, however, contains texts scholars understand (as the tradition does not) as having been written after the time of the Buddha, and it stayed open centuries longer than the Early Buddhist Tripitika. One result of this long-open canon is that as the Mahāyāna tradition developed in India, new sūtras were incorporated presenting the new developments of the tradition, so various communities favored and emphasized different sūtric texts and commentaries.

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98 Ibid., pp. 149-150.
One important way that Mahāyānists made sense of the diversity of their canon was through the hermeneutical device of the “three turnings of the wheel of dharma.” According to Snellgrove,

Three such “turnings of the wheel” were recognized by the later followers of the Mahāyāna, one relating to the teachings received by the Early Disciples (śrāvaka)…, and the other two relating to the two main philosophical schools of the Mahāyāna itself. The tantras are generally excluded, for only a few of them can have been in circulation when this theory of the “three turnings” was first enunciated.

The first turning, as mentioned above, included the foundational doctrines and ethical teachings enunciated in Pāli Buddhist texts. The second comprised the Perfection of Wisdom literature, a genre that developed over centuries, emphasizing emptiness of inherent existence, and was crystallized by “Nāgārjuna, who probably lived sometime between the mid-first century and mid-second century A.D. and his disciple and successor Āryadeva.” This “turning” emphasizes primarily logical reasoning (along with some poetic invocations) to deconstruct the seeming reality of ordinary appearances and emphasize the empty nature of all phenomena. The famous first verse of Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Commentary on the Root Verses of the Middle Way) states, in Stephen Batchelor’s translation, “No thing anywhere is ever born from

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99 “Turning the wheel of dharma” referred to a buddha’s teaching of basic doctrines to re-introduce them to a world system in which the teachings of the previous buddha had been lost.
100 Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, p. 80.
101 Ibid., p. 81.
itself, from something else, from both or without a cause.\footnote{Stephen Batchelor, “Verses from the Center,” Martine and Stephen Batchelor, April 2000, \url{http://www.stephenbatchelor.org/index.php/en/verses-from-the-center}.} The rest of the first section of the text refutes the existence of the conditions that might give rise to phenomena. Candrakīrti’s Madhyamakāvatāra (Entrance to the Middle Way or Introduction to the Middle in the Padmakara Group’s translation) offers another classic example of a second turning presentation of emptiness in verses 180-201 of chapter six, which survey the sixteen forms of emptiness. A few verses will give us a taste of the language employed throughout the section:

   According to its very nature,  
   Form is void of form.  
   Sound, smell, taste, and touch are also void,  
   And likewise all the workings of the mind.  
   
   That form and so forth have no real existence  
   Is classified as outer emptiness.  
   And that the outer and the inner have no real existence  
   Is designated emptiness both out and in.  
   
   That all things lack inherent being,  
   This is what the Sage described as emptiness.  
   And by the nature of this very emptiness,  
   Emptiness itself, he said, is also void.  
   
   The voidness of the so-called void  
   Is known as emptiness of emptiness.  
   It was set forth to counteract the thought  
   That emptiness is something real.\footnote{Candrakīrti and 'Jam-mgon 'Ju Mi-pham-rgya-mtsho, Introduction to the Middle Way: Chandrakīrti’s Madhyamakāvatāra, Boston, Mass.: Shambhala, 2002, 6.183-186.}
This passage offers a taste of second turning descriptions of emptiness, emphasizing the lack of true existence of all phenomena, experiences, and even concepts (such as emptiness itself). Other passages in both Nāgārjuna’s and Candrakīrti’s works emphasize the logical impossibility of the true establishment—i.e., independent existence—of anything whatsoever.

Like the second turning, the third turning builds on the texts that preceded it but brings a new perspective to established issues. This turning is associated with the Yogācāra school, which was “founded as a separate school by Asaṅga, seen by tradition as a monk ordained in the Vibhajyavādin Mahīśāsaka fraternity. His ‘teacher’ was one Maitreyanātha, or Maitreya, who may have been a human teacher, or seen by Asaṅga as the heavenly Bodhisattva Maitreya.”104 The other major author of the third turning was Vasubandhu, traditionally considered Asaṅga’s brother and a convert to Mahāyāna from Pāli Buddhism. This turning presented a model of consciousness to account for the phenomenology of relative existence, and its major texts hold that seemingly external appearances are in fact projections of the mind that arise due to karmic propensities. It also describes reality as already pure but obscured by the appearances of relative phenomena: “‘Emptiness’ is seen as undefiled due to its very nature, the brightly shining state

104 Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, p. 128.
of the transcendental citta [heart-mind], but this purity is hidden by adventitious
deformations (Mv. 1.23, cf. p. 68).”

Some important Yogācāra texts on buddha-nature include “the Yogācāra-
bhūmi-śāstra, attributed to Asaṅga” and the “most important,” the
“Saṃdhinirmocana (‘Freeing the Underlying Meaning’; Powers, 1995). The Sūtra
sees itself as a ‘third turning of the Dharma-wheel,’ surpassing the first two
‘turnings’....” Another important third turning text is the “Laṅkāvatāra
(‘Descent into Laṅkā’) Sūtra” These sūtras, together with commentaries by
Asaṅga and Vasubandhu that systematize the Yogācāra doctrines, provide an
account of the way the perceived world manifests as a product of the perceiver’s
carmic tendencies: “Visible entities are not found, the external world is merely
thought/mind (citta) seen as a multiplicity [of objects]; body, property and
environment—these I call thought-only (citta-mātra)’ (Lanka. 154...).”

Yogācāra texts present buddha-nature as the pure, undefiled reality that gets
covered by the various appearances of unawakened life:

The Yogācāras reflected much on the relationship between a ‘pure’ ultimate
reality and a defiled, impure samsāra found ‘within’ it. ‘Reversal’ [of the

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105 Ibid., p. 138, citing the “Madhyānta-vibhāga [of Asaṅga/Maitreya] (My.); (tr. S. Anacker) in his Seven Works of
Vasubandhu, Delhi, MB, 1984;(tr. T.A. Kochumutton) Chapter 1 is translated in his Buddhist Doctrine of
Experience, Delhi, MB, 1982.” (Harvey, Introduction to Buddhism, p. xxiv.)
106 Harvey, Introduction to Buddhism, p. 127.
107 Ibid., pp. 127-8.
108 Ibid., p. 128.
109 Ibid., p. 133.
“usual flow of the worldly mind,” leading to awakening] does not bring about a change in ultimate reality; for what is changeable is impermanent. Its purity is intrinsic to it: ‘As is pure gold, water free from dirt, the sky without a cloud, so it is pure when detached from the imagination’ (Lanka. 131). ‘Emptiness’ is seen as undefiled due to its very nature, the brightly shining state of the transcendental citta [mind], but this purity is hidden by adventitious defilements ([Madhāyānta-vibhāga of Asaṅga/Maitreya] 1.23…).\(^{110}\)

As this summary of Yogācāra doctrine shows, the texts of the third turning also posit emptiness as the nature of reality, but the language used to describe this ultimate nature emphasizes its luminosity, evoking a different feeling-tone than second turning analyses of conventional reality that portray emptiness as the relative’s sheer lack of existence.

In *Mipam on Buddha-Nature*, Douglas Duckworth discusses “a dialectic of presence and absence”\(^ {111}\) to describe the great Nyingma master Jamgön Mipham Rinpočhe’s approach to the issue of harmonizing second and third turning descriptions of emptiness. In this case, the context is Mipham’s methods of affirming and negating, key elements in any master’s presentation of Madhyamaka. Negation as an approach to realizing ultimate reality is emphasized (as we saw in the quotations above) in Nāgārjuna’s works and those of his major successors and commentators who favor analytical, deconstructive approaches to

\(^{110}\) Ibid., pp. 137-8.

emptiness. Affirmation most often occurs in the context of “affirming negations” (Skt. *paryudāsapratisheda*, Tib. *ma-yin dgag*), philosophical inquiries in which (for instance) no self is found, but buddha-nature remains after all adventitious obscurations have been negated.

Duckworth explains his shift from the terms of the tradition to a language of presence and absence: “The English terms ‘affirmation’ and ‘negation’ refer to the realm of linguistic representation. To depict the issues at stake in a more meaningful way, I use the words ‘presence’ and ‘absence,’ which have more of an ontological connotation—*what is* rather than simply its linguistic representation.”¹¹² This simple pair of sentences points to an issue crucial to understanding why debates between proponents of “self-emptiness” and those of “other-emptiness” have stirred up so much passion in the history of Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhism: the language an author uses to describe the nature of reality produces a visceral response, particularly in those who devote their lives to realizing the nature of reality, defined in the terms of their traditions. As we will see below when we consider those who responded negatively to Dölpopa’s *zhentong*, when Dölpopa took the third turning of the wheel as the most definitive presentation of Buddhist doctrine, he also used third turning language, which was unusual in Tibet at his time and led to sharp criticism from some scholars.

Returning now to the story of the various turnings of the wheel of dharma, as this massive and diverse corpus of Mahāyāna texts was transmitted to Tibet beginning in the seventh century AD and largely concluding by the twelfth century, the Indian bearers of the tradition maintained that all these variations on Buddhist doctrine had been taught by the Buddha in his lifetime and that disagreement among them could be resolved by considering that some texts were definitive in meaning (Skt. nītārtha, Tib. nges-don), while others required interpretation (Skt. neyārtha, Tib. drang-don). Indeed, this view is still held by Tibetan practitioners. Yet the textual evidence indicates that harmonizing these various sūtric interpretations of emptiness required great skill and ingenuity, with different categories of scriptures held as definitive by different communities and traditions. As Peter Harvey reports, “The Yogācāras criticized the Mādhyamikas for tending toward nihilism, with phenomena supported by nothing but other unsupported phenomena, while the Mādhyamikas criticized the Yogācāras for tending towards substantialism, setting up mind as an ultimate entity when all was equally ‘empty’ of inherent existence/nature.” Clearly, there were tensions between adherents of these two major schools of Mahāyāna thought, even

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114 For a fuller treatment of this topic, see Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, pp. 70-116.

115 Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, p. 130.
if their ultimate goal—realizing buddhahood—was similar.

Just to add another element to this rich variety of approaches to awakening, Indian Buddhist tantra had been developing in India since the second century AD and was flourishing by the time teachers were traveling to Tibet. This “flavor” of Buddhism seems to have grown organically out of non-tantric Mahāyāna texts and practices and to have been influenced by the broader tantric milieu in India during the first millennium AD (which it also influenced), so that the origins of Buddhist tantra are hotly contested by contemporary scholars. According to Peter Harvey, “From the... eighth century, tantric modes of Buddhism increasingly became the dominant ones in India, and tantric Buddhism saw itself as a new and more powerful spiritual vehicle, whose means bring Buddhahood, not just worldly protection [an aim of earlier, proto-tantric Buddhist practices].”

As these Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna doctrines were being formulated and integrated with each other in India, they were also transmitted to Tibet beginning around the seventh century A.D. “The Yogācāra Madhyamaka is generally considered to have been founded by Śāntarakṣita, who also brought the scholastic tradition of Indian Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century.”

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117 Ibid., p. 183.
118 John Whitney Pettit, 'Jam-mgon Ju Mi-pham-rgya-mtsho, and Khro-šul 'Jam-r dor, Mipham’s Beacon of
combined the Yogācāra description of the role of the mind in forming what is perceived as the external world with the Madhyamaka emphasis on all phenomena as empty—even, ultimately, the mind. For this reason, Pettit says (following the Tibetan scholarly tradition) that “in the final analysis, Śāntarakṣita’s view of emptiness is the same as that of Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti”—that is, the same as the paradigmatic authors of the second turning. But Śāntarakṣita’s perspective was “eclipse[d] by the commentaries of Candrakīrti in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.”¹²⁰ In the eleventh century, “the ageing monk-professor Atiśa came from India [to Tibet] on a missionary tour in 1042.”¹²¹ “Atiśa presented a “mix of Madhyamīka and the Tantras,” sparking a new Tibetan engagement with Indian texts and practices that gave rise to powerful new schools,¹²² while Yogācāra and the third turning sank lower in the estimation of many Tibetan scholars.

Thus, in the centuries before Dölpopa’s time, Tibetans came to accept Madhyamaka formulations of emptiness as the definitive sūtric interpretation of emptiness, and the “new schools” (including the Sakya tradition in which Dölpopa was trained) catalyzed by Atiśa’s visit to Tibet emphasized Candrakīrti’s interpretations of Nāgārjuna as the preferable interpretation of Madhyamaka.

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²⁰ Ibid.
²¹ Ibid.
²² Ibid.
The sūtric method of realizing emptiness (in the late Indian tradition and in Tibet at Dölpopa’s time), then, was to analyze phenomena and beings to see how they arise in dependence on shifting causes. A practitioner uses contemplative practices to break down the deeply felt sense that things are substantial and enduring, and if anything seems to exist independently, it must be analyzed further until it dissolves.

Returning to thirteenth and fourteenth century Tibet, Atiśa (as we have seen) presented second turning texts as definitive alongside the Buddhist tantras. At the level of sūtra, then, the normative position in Dölpopa’s time was that emptiness is properly characterized as a lack of inherent existence, and the Yogācāra teachings of the third turning were considered interpretable in meaning. This ranking of the second turning as the highest presentation of doctrine ended up privileging the language of the second turning as well as the doctrine, so that any mention of buddha-nature as permanent and providing a basis for conventional reality was understood as provisional in meaning rather than definitive.

For Tibetans, sūtric deconstructions of ordinary reality were often held to be the necessary (but not ultimate) process by which a practitioner’s mind is turned away from ordinary perceptions so that tantric practice can be effective—i.e., liberative. Thus, many Tibetans in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (with some notable exceptions such as Dölpopa) held the third turning sūtras as either
not definitive in meaning or as sharing definitive status with the second turning, so
the emphasis on buddha-nature finds its full expression in the tantras for Tibetans.
The tension between deconstruction of the ordinary and affirmation of the ultimate
(which, though considered existent and permanent in the third turning is still not a
“findable” person or phenomenon) thus plays itself out in Tibet in the sūtra-tantra
tension rather than in the second turning-third turning tension felt in the
development of non-tantric forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The Buddhist tantras maintained their connection with the key doctrinal
elements of non-tantric Mahāyāna Buddhism, but (building on third turning
developments) used new methods to attain the goals of practice.

If the world was non-different from Nirvāṇa, any object or action could
potentially be used as a route to ultimate truth, if the motive and method
were right, using skillful means. Rites could be used to harness the
unconscious forces of passion or hatred and ‘magically’ transmute them into
their opposites. If all was ‘thought-only’, complex and vivid visualizations
could be developed as a new, and transforming, world of experience.¹²³

Tantric texts and practices are diverse and difficult to characterize as a group, but
they often emphasize identifying oneself with a chosen deity (i.e., buddha) in order
to realize the clear and luminous nature of the mind “beneath” its adventitious
stains. “The aim of the Vajrayāna adept was to become conscious of the identity
between Vajra-sattva [vajra, the diamond-like stability and power of the

¹²³ Harvey, Introduction to Buddhism, p. 182.
“awakened mind,” sattva, being] and his ‘own’ empty ‘nature’, so as to ‘become’ such a ‘being’. In other words, instead of cultivating the mind and accumulating merit over the three great eons of the non-tantric Mahāyāna formulation of the bodhisattva’s path, the Vajrayāna practitioner could (according to tantric teachings) accomplish buddhahood in a single lifetime by recognizing her empty and blissful buddha nature as it already existed.

Such practices, for all the novelty of their methods, retained their deep connection with third turning themes:

Vajrayāna practice is based on the buddha essence (tathāgatagarbha) that all sentient beings possess. Like tathāgatagarbha taught in the sūtras, in Vajrayāna the buddha essence is already perfect and complete. As it is identical with the ultimate nature, it is unfabricated (asamskṛta, ‘dus ma byas) and unborn (anutpada, ma skyes pa). Even though the Pāramitāyāna has a similar understanding of the tathāgatagarbha, its methods proceed on the assumption that enlightenment is produced through the coordination of vast merit and ultimate wisdom, which requires aeons of development. In tantra, the function of merit and wisdom is simply to unveil original enlightenment. Clearly, themes from all three turnings of the wheel resonate with this account of the Buddhist path, and in particular both the second turning emphasis on emptiness and the third turning language of buddha-nature play important roles in tantric theory and practice.

124 Ibid., p. 183.
125 Pettit, Mipham’s Beacon, p. 64.
For all the compatibility between Nāgārjuna’s second turning analytical approach to emptiness and the tantric technique of directly identifying one’s existing buddha-nature, there were still differences between the sūtric terminology describing emptiness as the absence of true existence and tantric descriptions of emptiness and great bliss as the nature of the mind—and thus of reality. We will see later in this chapter and again in the next that different authors might have very different answers to the question of the extent to which the languages of second turning approaches to emptiness and tantric descriptions of reality should be kept separate.

To summarize, the different sūtric systems in Dölpopa’s time were harmonized by the hermeneutical device of considering the sūtras on emptiness as a lack of inherent existence to be the definitive teaching of the Buddha, while sūtras on buddha-nature were held to be provisional. The tantras, which were more compatible with these latter texts, were held in high esteem and offered Tibetans a language of presence to complement the second turning texts on emptiness.

Having provided some intellectual context, we turn now to the life and thought of Dölpopa himself.

The Omniscient Dölpopa

Dölpopa lived after the major periods of transmission of texts from Indian teachers to Tibetan students; by the fourteenth century Tibetan masters were working on
their own syntheses of the diverse teachings of late Indian Buddhism into an internally consistent system. Fourteenth and fifteenth century Tibet saw several great systematizations that attempted to fit teachings on sūtra and tantra, received from Indian teachers, together in various ways. In the fourteenth century, there was Longchen Rabjam (kLong-chen Rab-'byams, 1308-64) in the Nyingma tradition who laid the philosophical foundation for that tradition; the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje (Rang-byung rDo-rje, 1284-1339), who did the same for the Kagyū tradition; and Dölpopa Sherab Gyaltsen (Dol-po-pa Shes-rab rGyal-mtshan, 1292-1361), who inadvertently founded the Jonang tradition as separate from the Sakya. These three authors, in their various ways, produced formulations of Madhyamaka that used language from the highest tantric systems of their respective traditions, “flavoring” their discussions of emptiness with a language of presence, as we will discuss in more detail below. And the fifteenth century saw the great Tsongkhapa (Tsong-kha-pa bLo-bzang Grags-pa, 1357-1419), whose formulation of the Madhyamaka philosophical system—which relied heavily on logic and an emphasis on emptiness as a mere lack of substantial existence rather than drawing on tantric language—deeply influenced subsequent Tibetan scholastic philosophy.

Dölpopa, born in 1292 and working in the fourteenth century, was thus situated in a time of great Tibetan intellectual creativity. He was born into a
Nyingma family, and from the age of five he received tantric initiations and teachings in that lineage; he ordained as a novice monk at the age of 12, and his family wanted him to continue to study the tantras of their tradition. The young Dölpopa, however, had already met and received teachings and initiations from “Kyitön Jamyang Drakpa Gyaltsen, a Sakya teacher who would become one of his two most important masters.”¹²⁶ The student inclined toward the study of “the vehicle of the perfections and the treatises on epistemology,”¹²⁷ specialties of the Sakya school, and when his parents insisted that he study Nyingma tantras, he ran away from home in 1309 to continue his studies with Kyitön in upper Mustang (now Northern Nepal) and later followed that master to Sakya monastery in Central Tibet.¹²⁸

At Sakya the precocious young student “continued to concentrate on the simultaneous study of the vehicle of the perfections, epistemology, and cosmology and psychology” despite friends’ suggestions that he focus on one genre of teachings at a time. Instead, he added an additional sūtric text (“the Way of the Bodhisattva,” *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*) and “several tantric texts such as the *Vajrāvalī Tantra* and the *Buddhakapāla Tantra*.”¹²⁹ Based on Dölpopa’s biographies, Stearns notes that during this formative period of his education,

³¹²⁶ Stearns, *Buddha from Dolpo*, p. 11.
³¹²⁷ Ibid., 10.
³¹²⁸ Ibid. p. 11.
³¹²⁹ Ibid. p. 11.
Dölpopa received countless teachings from [Kyitōn] at Sakya, the most important of which seem to have been the *Kālacakra Tantra*, the Bodhisattva Trilogy, the Ten Sūtras on the Essence, the Five Sūtras of Definitive Meaning, and the Five Treatises of Maitreya. These are the main scriptures and treatises that Dölpopa would constantly teach during the last half of his life and cite as scriptural sources for his controversial theories.¹³⁰

Such glimpses of the young Dölpopa from his biographers (two of whom were close students who personally observed many of the events they chronicled) point to his intellectual rapacity and refusal to slow down and study one text at a time.

The fact that his formulation of *zhentong* as the “Great Madhyamaka” is shaped so strongly by his liberal borrowing from the Kālacakra tantra’s terminology in the context of a sūtric discussion of emptiness is less surprising given this early tendency toward studying multiple genres of text at once—even against the advice of his friends. “In only a year and a half he would master... the Mahāyāna subjects [of ‘the vehicle of the perfections, epistemology, and cosmology and psychology’] and their commentaries”¹³¹—a remarkably short time to gain fluency with such a large body of work. Perhaps this method of reading multiple texts from multiple strands of Mahāyāna thought at once impacted the way Dölpopa viewed the Buddhadharma as a unified whole, leading him later to write that sūtras should be interpreted by means of tantras and vice versa:

`Tantras should be understood`

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 12.
¹³¹ Ibid., p. 11.
by means of other tantras.

Sūtras should be understood by means of other sūtras

Sūtras should also be understood by means of tantras.

Tantras should also be understood by means of sūtras.

Both should be understood by means of both.\(^{132}\)

As the young Dölpopa was absorbing the various streams of dharma teachings on offer at Sakya monastery, his teachers also included the brothers Sengé Pal, with whom he studied epistemology, and Kunga Sönam (1285-1346), from whom he received the extensive teachings of the Path with the Result (Lam ’bras), the most important Sakya system of tantric practice, as well as the textual transmission of many tantras of the Hevajra cycle. Dölpopa thus pursued intensive study of both the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions taught at Sakya and became a great expert in these fields, but especially in the vehicle of the perfections, epistemology, and cosmology and psychology.\(^{133}\)

Dölpopa’s early training, then, included tantra but emphasized “the vehicle of the perfections,” texts from the second turning in the tradition of Nāgārjuna and his interpreters, both Indian and Tibetan.

\(^{132}\) Ibid., p. 103.
\(^{133}\) Ibid., p. 13.
Dölpopa began teaching publicly in the Sakya tradition at the age of 21 (and at the request of his now-reconciled parents), bringing his boundary-crossing style of study into his teachings: “…Dölpopa gave an extensive exposition to a large audience on the four major topics of the vehicle of the perfections, epistemology, cosmology and psychology, and monastic discipline. … His teachings were received with unprecedented acclaim, although some criticized him for teaching too many texts at once.” Dölpopa, as will be shown more completely below, thus bucked the trend in Tibetan scholarship of his time when he combined different (sūtric) topics during his early teaching career, and when he introduced the zhentong model of emptiness, those criticisms would resurface more vehemently over his addressing sūtric and tantric approaches to emptiness in the same texts and teachings.

After traveling through Western and Central Tibet to receive teachings, meet masters from other schools, and undergo academic examinations, “at the age of only 28, he ascended to the monastic seat of Sakya,” meaning that he became the primary teacher and lineage-holder for that august institution—a major honor for such a young man. He had already acquired the epithet kun khyen (kun-mkhyen, “the omniscient”) by this time and had emerged as a leading scholar of his time.

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135 Ibid. p. 15.
However, the next year (1321) Dölpopa visited Jonang monastery and its hermitages for the first time, and the brilliant young scholar was humbled by the experience. The following is Stearns’ translation of Dölpopa’s account (as recorded by a student) of his introduction to the hermitage which would become the nucleus of a new tradition focused on his own zhentong teachings.

However many scholars might gather, I never became humbled, and my confidence just grew greater and greater. But when I went to Jonang, and every dedicated male and female meditator had realized the nature of reality through meditation, I was extremely humbled. Toward them, uncontrolled faith and pure vision arose.\(^{137}\)

After this trip to Jonang, Dölpopa visited Central Tibet, where he met Rangjung Dorje, the third Karmapa, who prophesied that Dölpopa would soon come to a more profound view of emptiness than the one he currently held,\(^{138}\) according to the following account by Mangto Ludrup Gyatso (16\(^{th}\) c.).

\[\text{…[T]his lord [Dölpopa] met with Karma Rangjung Dorje and, it is said, when [Dölpopa] upheld the philosophical tenet of the emptiness of self-nature, the Karmapa prophesied that he would later become an adherent of the emptiness of other. In general, I think the tradition of emptiness of other was first upheld by Karma Rangjung Dorje. Those at Jonang became adherents to the emptiness of other after the great omniscient [Dölpopa].}\(^{139}\)

Tāranātha (1575–1634) offers a similar account, though he places Dölpopa’s

\(^{137}\) Ibid. p. 15.
\(^{138}\) Ibid. p. 15, 49-50.
\(^{139}\) Ibid. p. 49.
meeting with the Karmapa before his trip to Jonang. Rangjung Dorje, though he wrote about emptiness in ways compatible with Dölpopa’s zhentong, never used that term in his own works, yet he is considered by some in the Kagyu tradition to be a zhentongpa (i.e., an adherent of the zhentong view). This episode is intriguing but not attested in Dölpopa’s earliest biographies, and even if Dölpopa was greatly impacted by the Karmapa’s thought on emptiness, the Jonang master’s zhentong is specifically incompatible with the Kagyu tradition’s highest practice, Mahāmudrā, so it is unlikely that he simply adopted the Third Karmapa’s formulation of an emptiness of other. However, this contact and the tantalizing hints it offers of influence or at least philosophical compatibility between Dölpopa’s (and the Jonang tradition’s) zhentong and the third Karmapa’s (and many later Kagyü lamas’) formulation of emptiness will receive more attention when we consider Jamgön Kongtrül’s zhentong and its location in the Kagyü tradition.

The next year Dölpopa returned to Jonang to study the Kālachakra tantra with Yönten Gyatso and then entered a retreat to practice those teachings. The young master’s center of gravity had now shifted to the Jonang hermitage, and though it is unclear when he left his position at the head of Sakya monastery, by 1322 Dölpopa was embedded in life at Jonang and was seriously practicing the

140 Ibid.
Kālachakra Tantra. Before long Dölpopa was teaching the Kālachakra and commentaries in public and private settings.\textsuperscript{141}

However, around 1324, Dölpopa’s view of emptiness and the connections between the sūtras and tantras would be radically altered during a year-long Kālachakra retreat at the Khachō Deden hermitage at Jonang, a retreat Stearns calls “the pivotal event in Dölpopa’s spiritual development.”\textsuperscript{142} There seems to be no record of exactly what Dölpopa experienced during this retreat, but it was during this period, according to the later Jonang luminary Tāranātha, that “[t]he exceptional zhentong view arose in [Dölpopa’s] mind.…”\textsuperscript{143} Shortly after this retreat, Dölpopa was asked to take over leadership at Jonang, which he eventually agreed to do, yet he waited for at least five years to teach or write about zhentong.\textsuperscript{144}

A second event seems to have opened Dölpopa to teaching the new doctrine: his construction of a massive stūpa at Jonang beginning in 1330. “The construction of the stūpa at Jonang was carefully based on descriptions in the \textit{Stainless Light} [the major commentary on the Kālachakra Tantra], so that it would fulfill all the criteria necessary to be considered the same as the Glorious Stūpa of

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid. p. 16.  
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid. p. 18.  
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid. p. 18.  
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., p. 18.
the Planets, in which the Buddha had first taught the *Kālachakra Tantra*.” As with the experience during Dölpopa’s year-long Kālachakra retreat that first led to his conception of zhentong, it is impossible to determine the exact connection between the construction of this stūpa and his beginning to teach about zhentong. However, the stūpa was clearly designed to instantiate the site where (according to the narratives around the Kālachakra tantra) the Buddha manifested in the form of Kālachakra and taught that system of practice. In both of these cases, Dölpopa’s experience of and then teachings about the ultimate nature of reality are explicitly catalyzed by and filtered through the Kālachakra system and its commentaries, as we will see in more detail below.

Indeed, Dölpopa was considered by some (including himself\(^{146}\)) to be an incarnation of the emperor Kalkī Pundarīka of Shambhala, the mythical land in which tales of the Kālachakra tantra are set. The evening before Yönten Gyatso (Dölpopa’s instructor in that tantra and its practices) met his remarkable student for the first time, he dreamed of the Shambhala emperor Kalkī Pundarīka… raising the victory banner of the Buddhist teachings at Jonang. This auspicious dream caused Yönten Gyatso to give Dölpopa the complete Kālachakra initiation, the transmission of the Bodhisattva Trilogy [commentaries on the Kālachakra],

\(^{145}\) Ibid. p. 20.
\(^{146}\) Ibid. p. 29, p. 330 n. 114.
and the profound instructions of the Six-branch Yoga.\textsuperscript{147}

Dölpopa himself, after completing his extensive annotations to the \textit{Stainless Light} (a major commentary on the Kālachakra Tantra, held to be composed by Kalkī Pundarīka) made the following revealing statement: “Ah la la! Whose work are all these? They’re incredible! ... When I look at this kind of an understanding of the profound definitive meaning, I wonder who I am.”\textsuperscript{148} In a culture in which a tulku (sprul-sku, reincarnate lama) is expected to show humility in acknowledging that he (or occasionally she) is the reincarnation of a great being, a statement like this points to the strength of Dölpopa’s identification with Pundarīka, although he does not explicitly claim the connection in this case.\textsuperscript{149}

Dölpopa’s strong sense of connection with Kalkī Pundarīka adds another layer to connect his \textit{zhentong} with the Kālachakra Tantra and its distinctive teachings, in addition to the textual connections. There are clearly causal lines pointing from earlier Indian and Tibetan texts presenting a presence-friendly emptiness to Dölpopa’s formulation of \textit{zhentong}, as well as from the Kālachakra and its body of commentaries and practices to Dölpopa’s presentation of the ultimate nature of reality and how to reach that. The section below on \textit{zhentong} will address the Kālachakra’s influence on Dölpopa at greater length. In fact, it

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid. p. 16.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid. p. 28.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid. pp. 28-29. In addition, on p. 29, Stearns cites multiple biographies to establish that Dölpopa held this view of himself. A section below will address Dölpopa’s identification at greater length, and the chapter on Jamgön Kongtrül will explore his multiple self-identifications based on visions.
was during the Jonang community’s intense physical labor on the great stūpa instantiating the space in which Buddha taught the Kālacakra tantra that Dölpopa began teaching about zhentong and that he wrote one of his most important works, his Mountain Doctrine. This event and the Kālachakra retreat together seem to have played a definitive role in Dölpopa’s realization and formulation of the new synthesis which was to form the foundation for later Jonang doctrine. Leaving Dölpopa’s narrative, we will now apply the bimodal model to his realization of zhentong and to lay out the basic features of this system, but we will return to these incidents later.

Dölpopa and the Bimodal Model

Now that we have explored Dölpopa’s biography and background in the section above, I would like to show how a bimodal model, with the flow of subtle winds connecting the two modes in human experience, makes sense of his innovation. As we have seen, Dölpopa received an excellent education in the philosophical systems of his time, studying both sūtra and tantra with an emphasis on sūtric descriptions of emptiness and a tendency to read texts from these different genres in terms of each other. During this period of his life, his view (lta-ba) did not fall significantly outside the mainstream Sakya interpretation of emptiness; it was only following both the Kālacakra retreat at Jonang Monastery and then his construction

150 Ri Chos Nges-don rGya-mtsho Zhes-by-a-ba mThar-thug Thun-mong Ma-yin-pa ’i Man-ngag
of the massive stūpa that he fulfilled Karmapa Rangjung Dorje’s (possibly apocryphal) prophecy and embraced a new view of emptiness.

Dölpopa’s early exposure to a broad sampling of the Sakya tradition of his time meets the first criterion I laid out in the previous chapter, that a dedicated practitioner who experiences a radically innovative visionary or contemplative experience typically has already internalized her or his tradition and will receive the innovation through the “language” (verbal, visual, symbolic, or otherwise) of that tradition. For Dölpopa to formulate zhentong (which he called the Great Madhyamaka, Skt. *mahāmadhyamaka,151 Tib. dbu ma chen po), he needed to have the full Madhyamaka and Kālacakra traditions already internally available to him because his philosophical expression (grub-mtha’) is essentially a fusion of those two systems. It is important to recognize that the Kālacakra yogic system (to be discussed in more detail below) was not sufficient by itself to induce a realization like Dölpopa’s, as shown by the other great masters of that system who had no such realizations.152 Also, Dölpopa was not simply bringing that meditative system to its full conclusion; his zhentong used its language and basic assumptions but applied them in ways that had never before been presented as part of the Kālacakra commentarial tradition. Thus, Dölpopa transformed the way the

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151 The asterisk in front of this term indicates that it is a translation into Sanskrit of a Tibetan word for which no Sanskrit original has been discovered.
152 For instance, Dölpopa’s contemporary and fellow great master of the Kālacakra system, Butön, maintained a more traditional interpretation of that tantra and its commentaries.
Kālacakra itself was interpreted even as he used that body of texts to transform “sūtric” Madhyamaka.

In Dölpopa’s case, there seem to have been two physically unusual periods connected with his full realization and teaching of zhentong: his year-long Kālacakra retreat at Jonang and the construction of the giant stūpa. During the retreat, Dölpopa would have been physically and socially isolated in a small hut or cave, and at least for part of the time, he would have been in total darkness as he practiced the completion stage yogas (see below for details). As Klein points out in Meeting the Great Bliss Queen and as was mentioned in the previous chapter, traditional Tibetan societies conceptualized persons and the construction of individuality differently than contemporary, Western societies do. Therefore, to say that Dölpopa was isolated here means more that he existed outside his usual network of relationships with his human companions, not that he experienced himself as alone. Indeed, given his sense of close connection with Kalkī Puṇḍarīka and given also that tantric practice typically involves invoking the presence of the lama, meditative deity, and dakini (ḍākinī, enlightened mind expressed as female form) and other non-human persons, Dölpopa most likely would not have had a

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153 Such “isolation,” however, would not have meant that a solitary practitioner experienced himself as alone. Such a practitioner would have been understood by his tradition as still connected with his teachers, fellow students, disciples, sponsors, protector deities, and so on. Rites such as dedicating the merit of each day’s practice to all beings serve to reinforce such a sense of interconnection.

154 Anne C. Klein, Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self, Boston: Beacon Press, 1995; see chapter two, pp. 25-57, in particular.
subjective sense of isolation. Nonetheless, his being removed from routine social interaction during this time would have helped to soften his identification with his social mode of being, making it easier for the “extra-” normal aspects of his being to come to the foreground.\(^{155}\)

In addition to Dölpopa’s defining vision during his Kālacakra retreat, he also had many subsequent experiences:

In the years following the completion of the Jonang stūpa, Dölpopa traveled to many different areas, where he mostly stayed in meditation retreat. … He also experienced a number of visions, both of pure lands and specific tantric deities. In particular, he directly beheld the pure land of Shambhala, the source of the Kālacakra teachings, and once claimed to have actually gone there by visionary means.\(^{156}\)

Again, visionary experience seems to be linked with retreat. These visions must also have reinforced Dölpopa’s sense of identification with Kalkī Puṇḍarīka

During the construction of the giant stūpa at Jonang, Dölpopa and those around him likely would have experienced a different kind of shift in their orientation toward an ordinary sense of their environment. The stūpa “was carefully based on descriptions in the *Stainless Light* [a major commentary on the *Kālacakra Tantra*], so that it would fulfill all the criteria necessary to be considered the same as the Glorious Stūpa of the Planets, in which the Buddha had

\(^{155}\) (Maybe bring in *Great Bliss Queen* connection material here.)
\(^{156}\) Stearns, *Buddha from Dolpo*, p. 29.
first taught the *Kālacakra Tantra.*"157 The community building the stūpa would have understood the structure as a powerful connection with the awakened realm of Kālacakra. Although this situation must have been intensely social, with members of the Jonang community and others (including Dölpopa himself) working tirelessly on its construction, it serves as an example of a physical setting that helped catalyze a shift from the ordinary mode to the non-ordinary because of its orientation toward non-ordinary reality.

The stūpa was built in an atmosphere of incredible activity. Many types of skilled artisans and laborers gathered from different parts of Tibet to contribute to the great work. Building materials and foodstuffs were brought from all directions. Kitchens and refreshment areas were set up for the many hundreds of workers who labored while chanting manis and praying to the masters of the lineage. Dölpopa himself sometimes carried earth and stones and sometimes worked on the building of the walls. … The intense physical labor of the external construction of the stūpa was accompanied by many extraordinary discourses by Dölpopa on the ultimate significance of the Buddha’s doctrinal message.158

It was also during the construction of the stūpa that Dölpopa first taught *zhentong,* and the process of construction seems to have affected him deeply:

His biographer Lhai Gyaltsen … [says] Dölpopa’s precise realization of the nature of absolute reality was due to ‘the blessings of his construction of inconceivably marvelous threefold representations, such as those of the masters, buddhas, bodhsattvas, and the great stūpa temple.’159

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157 Ibid., p. 20.
And Dölpopa himself says:

Is this discovery by a lazy fool
due to the blessing of the Kalkī emperor?

Although I have not physically
arrived at Kalāpa,\(^\text{160}\)
has the Kalkī entered my faithful mind?

My intelligence has not been
refined in threefold wisdom,
but I think raising Mount Meru
caused the Ocean to gush forth.\(^\text{161}\)

Stearns explains, “The raising of Mount Meru refers to Dölpopa’s construction of
the massive stūpa, and the Ocean that flowed forth from the blessings and energy
awakened during that endeavor was his most famous work, *Mountain Dharma: An
Ocean of Definitive Meaning (Ri chos nges don rgya mtsho).*\(^\text{162}\)

In such a non-ordinary social space, the next characteristic of the bimodal
practitioner is possible: such a person’s mind is, to use Hollenback’s term,
recollected. In Buddhist terms, Dölpopa had mastered at least the basic level of
calm abiding (Skt. *śamatha*, Tib. *zhi-gnas*) necessary for the advanced tantric
practices of the Kālacakra’s six yogas. These will be explained in greater detail

\(^\text{160}\) “Kalāpa is the name of the court of the Kalkī emperors of the legendary land of Shambhala, which is the
stronghold of the Kālacakra teachings.” (Stearns, *Buddha From Dolpo*, p. 322, n. 73.)

can now be said that these lines are from a series of verses that Dölpopa wrote at the end of his annotations to the
Dolpo*, p. 322, n. 75).

\(^\text{162}\) Stearns, *Buddha From Dolpo*, p. 22.
Jeffrey Hopkins distills the teachings on calm abiding from several Gelukpa texts in his “Calm Abiding” chapter of *Meditation on Emptiness* to offer the following statement in the context of the good (and non-ordinary) “qualities of meditative stabilization”:

In order to attain faith in meditative stabilization, it is necessary to contemplate the disadvantages of not having stabilization—such as losing the value of virtuous practice through distraction—and the advantages of having it—such as steadiness of mind whereby feats, clairvoyance, magical emanation, and so forth can be achieved.

This description, offered as factual information, clearly points to the Tibetan traditions’ potential to contribute to a contemplative epistemology.

The basic level of facility with the mind associated with calm abiding assures that the practitioner’s attention will remain focused in whatever way she chooses, whether on an external object (e.g., a statue of a buddha), on a relatively coarse internal object (e.g., the breath), or on increasingly subtle internal objects such as the various flows of subtle wind in the body. Such a capacity to focus the mind and hold it to an object is a *sine qua non* for the higher Tibetan Buddhist meditation practices, just as recollection is for paranormal experiences in Hollenback’s case studies.

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164 Ibid., pp. 72-72.
The Subtle Winds and the Kālacakra Yogas

And now we reach the heart of Dölpopa’s experiences and of the argument for including energy as an epistemological category in academic models of mystical or contemplative experience. Dölpopa was a practitioner of the Kālacakra tantra, a system (like most tantric bodies of practice) that emphasizes bodily energetic flows and (to a greater extent than most tantric systems) the interconnections between the body’s subtle winds and those of the larger environment and cosmos. These connections are very important for understanding Dölpopa’s own understanding of how he realized zhentong, and they will be addressed at greater length below.

Before we discuss the Kālacakra’s connections between the practitioner’s inner and outer worlds, some background may be necessary for readers unacquainted with Buddhist tantra; following that section, I will explain why the category of “subtle winds” (Skt. prāṇa, Tib. rlung) is necessary to understand the role of visionary experience in my case studies’ formulation of Madhyamaka.

Some differences between sūtra and tantra were addressed above, but a special feature of tantra is that it works specifically with the body’s subtle winds in sophisticated and subtle ways. Alejandro Chaoul, based on sources from the Bön tradition, presents a concise summary of the energy system or subtle body under the major categories of the three channels, the five energetic centers, and the five
vital breaths (i.e., what are called in this dissertation “subtle winds”).165 (An image follows this paragraph to illustrate the subtle body.) “The channels are the architectural support of the subtle body and act as pathways through which fluids and energies travel. … Subtler channels are the roads through which vital breath currents travel, nurturing the subtler dimensions of the body.”166 There are three major channels: the central channel, running near the spine from the area of the crown of the head to just below the navel (though its precise location has been a subject of debate, addressed below); the right, branching off near the top of the central channel, running parallel beside it, and meeting again at the bottom of the central channel; and the left, which is a mirror image of the right. “Along this supporting structure of the channels lie the energetic centres or cakras. Their numbers and locations vary according to the tradition describing them or even according to the specific practice in which they are engaged, but in general the most important ones are located along the central channel… [at the] Crown, Throat, Heart, Navel and Secret energetic centres.”167 The various types of subtle winds or vital breaths (Skt. prāṇa or vāyu, Tib. rlung) are associated with energetic centers and flow through the channels to maintain the functions of the body (e.g., the “fire-like… vital breath [resides] at the navel center”168). In addition, the

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166 Ibid.
167 Ibid.
168 Ibid.
Kālacakra and other systems posit “drops,” which are very subtly physical, that travel through the channels and cause either ordinary states of mind or the four bodies of the buddha the practitioner wishes to become.169

Lest this three-fold system of channels, winds, and orbs should sound too tidy, it should be noted that Tibetans also seemed to wrestle, for instance, with where the central channel was located exactly and whether it was physical and “real” (in the sense that it was an observable part of the body) or was helpful for tantric practice but imagined by the practitioner.170 Much of the thirteenth century Tibetan debate Willa Miller recounts in her dissertation on Gyalwa Yang-gon-pa’s (rGyal-ba Yang-dgon-pa) writings on the vajra body (rdo-rje lus), which is subtle or “energetic,” sounds uncannily reminiscent of contemporary persons’ struggles to understand the subtle body.

The Tibetan questions Miller addresses around the status (physical, real, imaginary, etc.) of the “architecture” of the three components of the vajra body and those around the exact location of the central channel reflect a familiar uncertainty: Do the channels exist as “real” structures in the physical body? They are considered physical, though subtle, so why do physicians not observe these

169 Nor-bzan-rgya-mtsho, Stainless Light, p. 183.
structures in bodies? Furthermore, different tantras describe the central channel as being in slightly different locations, and the colors associated with the various channels also differ by text. How is a practitioner of tantra to understand the truth status, so to speak, of the subtle body? According to Miller’s reading of Gyalwa Yang-gon-pa and his student’s commentary on his master’s work, the central channel is a real thing (*dngos-po*), exists in the center of the body, and is not imaginary. It is a subtle form of physical matter.

Thus, the body’s energy system is seen as both producing normal biological functioning and as available to be profoundly transformed so that (through the

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171 Miller, “Vajra Bodies,” pp. 195-199
practice of Buddhist tantra) the awakened aspects of these energies can show through clearly. As for the subtle winds’ role in biological functions, Dr. Yeshi Donden (on the basis of the medical tantras of Tibet) says, “Wind is of five types: life-sustaining wind, ascending wind, pervasive wind (existing in all parts of the body), fire-accompanying (or digestive) wind, and downwards-voiding wind. These are the five major types of winds, or currents, that exist in the body.”

These five major winds are each associated with a location and a function. For instance, “The life-sustaining wind is located at the crown of the head, and it mainly courses from that area through the chest. With respect to its functions, it enables the swallowing of food, inhalation, spitting out saliva, burping, and sneezing. It provides clarity to one’s mind and to the sense organs and holds life in the sense that it provides the physical basis for the mind.” In addition to these major categories of wind, there are also further subdivisions into “five secondary winds. These can be divided into many more aspects and categories….”

The subtle winds also provide the basis for the tantric transformation of the subtle body. The Ornament of Stainless Light, a commentary on the Kālacakra tantra, says, “Therefore, on the paths of the generation and completion stage six-

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174 Ibid., p. 45. Donden notes that “Regarding the location of the life-sustaining wind..., the tantric systems of the Old and New Translation Schools differ. The New Translation Schools reverse their locations, putting the life-sustaining wind at the heart and the pervasive wind at the crown of the head.” (Ibid., p. 46)
175 Ibid., pp. 46-47.
branched yoga, the potential of these eight drops [very subtle energetic essences] to create the faults that arise in ordinary beings is purified, and the potential to create the qualities of the four bodies is developed in terms of ever-increasing quality until the ultimate result is actualized.”\textsuperscript{176} These “paths of generation (or creation) and completion” are standard stages of tantric meditation, though those associated with the Kālacakra tantra differ in some ways from “mainstream” highest yoga tantra systems. This will be discussed in detail shortly. What I would like to emphasize in this section is that the subtle winds of the human body\textsuperscript{177} are considered not only to facilitate normal bodily functioning, e.g., through the main and secondary winds; they will also allow the functioning of the practitioner’s awakened forms, which is the primary significance of the three main channels. Tibetan Buddhism, through tantras and other elements of the tradition, offers support to the idea that energy crosses the boundaries between ordinary physical embodiment and radically non-ordinary functioning.

As for the stages of tantric practice, these (according to most traditions’ ideal presentations of the complete path) would follow (both in the progression of training and in content) sūtric training in ethics, philosophy, cosmology, and other traditional topics. The creation and completion stages of practice refer to two

\textsuperscript{176} Nor-bzaṅ-rgya-mtsho, \textit{Stainless Light}, p. 184.
\textsuperscript{177} The subtle winds of the human body are contiguous with those of the environment and of non-physical beings, an important connection for practitioners of the Kālacakra Tantra that will be discussed briefly below.
types of practices within the system of a given tantra, with the creation stage focused on “the purification of birth, death, and the intermediate state through a purifying path that results in the three bodies of a buddha, the purified aspect of these three.” The creation stage of the Kālacakra Tantra uses sādhana, a practice liturgy focused in this case on a deity, to support the practitioner’s “pure view” of herself and her environment. “There is a close relation between the internal and external Kālacakra. The channels, winds, and drops that constitute internal Kālacakra are closely associated with the five natural constituents present in the external environment—earth, water, fire, wind, and space. Moreover the external elements influence the internal elements.”

In Dölpopa’s case, the Kālacakra Tantra and its energy-body practices played a direct role in his realization of zhentong:

On returning to Jonang [from Sakya monastery], Dölpopa began another strict retreat at Khachö Deden, meditating on the Six-branch Yoga of Kālacakra for one year. During this period of intense meditation he experienced realization of the first four of the six branches. Kunpang describes the results of this retreat:

> On the basis of both individual withdrawal and mental stability he beheld infinite figures of the buddhas and pure lands. On the basis of breath control and retention, exceptional experience and realization arose because of the blazing of a blissful warmth.

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178 Ibid., p. 327.
179 Ibid., p. 329.
180 Kunpang Chödrak Palsang, *Biography of the Omniscient Dharma Lord*, 308; cited in Stearns, *Buddha From*
The realization of the shentong view first arose in Dölpopa’s mind at this time.\textsuperscript{181} This passage demonstrates the intimate links between energetic practices and the arising of realization. Dölpopa’s biographer attributes the master’s “exceptional experience and realization” to the Kālacakra-related yogas he practiced during this retreat that Stearns calls “the pivotal event in Dölpopa’s spiritual development.”\textsuperscript{182}

Clearly, the energetic practices of the Kālacakra tantra in some way caused states of realization to arise in this case. Much Western academic work on Buddhism has focused on practices that effect mental change; even Klein, who argues for an “energetic sensibility” in her article “Seeing Mind, Being Body,” had titled a previous book chapter “Mental Concentration and the Unconditioned.” While it is true that Buddhist practitioners have expended a great deal of effort to reform and transform their minds, Dölpopa’s practices during this key period in his life were clearly focused on his energetic system rather than his intellectual mind.

**Divisions between categories of internal and external, self and other, may dissolve**

The Kālacakra Tantra, as we have seen, offers an excellent look at the way the category of subtle winds undermines the practitioner’s sense of the world’s division into external and internal. Dissolving this duality seems to be important to many types of visionary experience, and certainly we see it at work in Dölpopa’s

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\textsuperscript{181} Stearns, *Buddha From Dolpo*, pp. 16-17.

\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., p. 18.
biography. One instance of this drawn from Dölpopa’s biography is the period during which he and the Jonang community were working to build the giant stūpa. That structure, as mentioned, was designed to instantiate the celestial realm in which the Kālacakra tantra was originally taught and of which one’s own body is regarded as an analogue or potential replica. It would have been filled with sacred objects, believed by the community to be powerfully charged with awakened energy. Dölpopa composed the following verse linking the construction of the stūpa to his realization of zhentong: “My intelligence has not been/ refined in threefold wisdom,/ but I think raising Mount Meru [the stūpa]/ caused the Ocean to gush forth.” As Stearns writes, “the Ocean that flowed forth from the blessings and energy awakened during that endeavor was his most famous work, Mountain Dharma: An Ocean of Definitive Meaning (Ri chos nges don rgya mtsho).”

In addition, we saw above that Dölpopa identified strongly with Kalkī Puṇḍarīka, attributing his most notable achievements to that figure. Dölpopa (along with other key figures in his life) regarded himself as an emanation of Kalkī Puṇḍarīka, which raises questions (for someone living through a Western perspective on what an individual is) about Dölpopa’s identity and agency in realizing zhentong. This is another sense in which the practitioner’s experience of the categories of self and other grows fuzzy at the edges: To what extent did

183 Cited in Stearns, Buddha From Dolpo, p. 22.
184 Ibid.
Dölpopa “create” zhentong, and to what extent did Kalkī Puṇḍarīka explain the true meaning of the texts through him? This question often arises regarding the work of illustrious Tibetan authors, including Tsongkhapa, considered in the next chapter, and Jamgön Kongtrül, the subject of the fourth chapter.

To Dölpopa’s own experience and the experience of some of his contemporaries (if surviving texts are to be believed), Dölpopa indeed instantiated Kalkī Puṇḍarīka:

In Sakya, the night before Dölpopa arrived at Jonang, his teacher Kunpang Drakpa Gyaltsen dreamed of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara surrounded by many monks traveling to Jonang enveloped by light rays of the Dharma. And that same night, in Jonang itself, the master Yönten Gyatso dreamed of the Shambhala emperor Kalkī Puṇḍarīka (who was an emanation of Avalokiteśvara) raising the victory banner of the Buddhist teachings at Jonang.185

As we will see in the chapter on Jamgön Kongtrül, it was (and is) not uncommon for the associates of an important lama to consider that person an emanation of an important figure from their tradition. (Of course, over-zealous students might have interpolated bogus dreams into their accounts of their master’s life, but there is no compelling evidence that these narratives were not part of Dölpopa’s biography during his lifetime.)

I would like to consider two possibilities for Dölpopa’s connection to Kalkī

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185 Stearns, Buddha From Dolpo, p. 16.
Puṇḍarīka: first, that holding a living master to be an emanation of a buddha is a culturally comprehensible “metaphor” for the spiritual power and authority he was considered to hold; and second, that it is possible there was a moment of encounter or a deep identity between Dölpopa and a supernatural being who catalyzed his realization of zhentong. The first is easier for modern Westerners to digest intellectually, and even if the second is true, the first may still function as an important way of communicating the power of an adept’s experience to the rest of his society. The second interpretation is impossible to rule out, and identification with a buddha is the explicit goal of Highest Yoga Tantra systems, so for Kalkī Puṇḍarīka to manifest through or as a highly accomplished adept of the Kālacakra system would be entirely in keeping with emic models of the way the world works. Of course, these identifications of Dölpopa with Kalkī Puṇḍarīka occurred before he became such an adept, but again the tradition would understand him as being drawn to the Kālacakra system in the first place due to strong predispositions in that direction.

In addition, Dölpopa’s culture understood a human person not as a closed system but as part of an interwoven energetic and physical tapestry, so the participation of supernatural beings in human systems was (and is) considered quite possible. According to that worldview, a moment of what an outsider might call “innovation” in the Tibetan tradition may be understood emically as a recovery
of meaning that occurs based on the blessings of the practitioner’s lineage and/or
tutelary deity. In this perspective, the question of the “authorship” of a text or a
philosophical position like zhentong is formulated differently, attributable to a
sublime being and a moment of contact rather than to the personal efforts of a
remarkable individual like Dölpopa.

Dölpopa also taught extensively from commentaries considered to be the
work of Kalkī Puṇḍarīka, commentaries that are integral to zhentong, and he
interpreted other texts in light of those as well.

[Dölpopa] especially taught the Kālacakra Tantra, the Bodhisattva Trilogy,
the Ten Sūtras on the Essence, the Five Sūtras of Definitive Meaning, the
Five Treatises of Maitreya, certain works of Nāgārjuna, and many esoteric
instructions. He is said to have taught all these texts in accordance with the
Stainless Light, Kalkī Puṇḍarīka’s great commentary to the Kālacakra
Tantra.¹⁸⁶

These texts clearly influenced Dölpopa’s zhentong, and they colored the way he
read and taught the other vital texts of his tradition. Hence, we also see a strong
connection between contemplative experience and textual influence, and beyond
this we see that Dölpopa would have had a strong personal investment in his
particular descriptions of reality. From his perspective, he was Kalkī Puṇḍarīka,
recovering the original intention of the great sūtras and tantras, which Tibetans had
lost following the transmission of Buddhist teachings from India.

¹⁸⁶ Stearns, Buddha From Dolpo, p. 18.
Dölpopa’s Zhentong

Dölpopa’s zhentong is difficult to summarize succinctly, so in this section I will trace key themes (e.g., whether ultimate reality should be described as ultimately established, what remains following the practitioner’s analysis of conventional reality, and other distinctive features) and demonstrate some of the ways his system differed from other—more commonly accepted—systems of his time, using Longchen Rabjam’s work as a counterpoint to Dölpopa’s. The following sections on zhentong will briefly address the characteristics important for understanding the extent to which Dölpopa’s thought was a departure from more traditional formulations of Madhyamaka; how he reformulates the tension between interrogating (and, in modern parlance, deconstructing) ordinary reality and affirming a luminous, non-reified presence; and the specific ways in which his system uses language from the tantras and is impacted specifically by the Kālachakra Tantra.

Dölpopa’s Thought as Innovative

Until Dölpopa’s time, Tibetan philosophers usually wrote about emptiness (Skt. śūnyatā, Tib. stong-pa-nyid) as the lack of an inherent nature of phenomena and beings. The writings of Nāgārjuna (second to third centuries AD) and Candrakīrti (seventh century) formed the foundations for this approach, which framed emptiness by deconstructing seemingly truly existent phenomena and emphasized
interdependent origination as the arising and dispersing of phenomena. Nāgārjuna, whose writings crystallized the teachings of the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras characteristic of Mahāyāna approaches to emptiness, refutes inherent existence using logic while at the same time maintaining that it is not the case that nothing exists. The following famous verses of Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* demonstrate the flavor of description of emptiness that emphasize the lack of inherent existence.

I salute the Perfect Buddha, the most worthy of worthy ones, who has proclaimed the peaceful Causal Nexus where all deliberations cease,

where there is no extinction, no arising, no cessation, no permanence, no individuality, no generality, no coming and no going.\(^{187}\)

In Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism of the late first millennium CE, this apophatic language was standard in sūtric discussions of the ultimate nature of reality, which Nāgārjuna and his successors held to be beyond the capacities of ordinary mind to apprehend. In the passage cited above, permanence and cessation are both specifically negated. However, Dölpopa’s *zhentong*, in keeping with third turning sūtras, emphasized the permanence of the ultimate: “…[A]bsolute truth, indivisible space and pure awareness, is the Primordial Buddha, … permanent, stable, eternal,

\(^{187}\) MMK I, quoted in Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, p. 82.
everlasting, all-pervasive thusness….”

A Madhyamaka Interlude

Some discussion of Madhyamaka is necessary here, since Tibetan authors typically locate their own highest views of emptiness under that umbrella term and since they seldom acknowledge the potentially problematic nature of that move. “In Tibet, the four major systems of Buddhist tenets [Vaibhāsika, Sautrāntika, Cittamātra, and Madhyamaka] are ranked according to the subtlety with which they identify and rectify the various forms of ignorance considered to prevent liberation and omniscience.” The first two are forms of Nikaya Buddhism (“Hīnayāna” in the language of Tibetan texts), while the second two are Mahāyāna. In the Geluk school, for example, students study each system in turn, learning to analyze phenomena for inherent existence according to the systems’ increasingly subtle methods of deconstructing seemingly substantial entities. According to the Geluk presentation, in the Vaibhāsika system, conventional truths are those phenomena that are compounded or separable into parts. Thus, a vase is a conventional truth because it can be broken into pieces, but a partless particle is an ultimate truth because it is indivisible. In Sautrāntika followers of reasoning system (a classification unique to the Geluk), “impermanent things fully appear to direct perception, and permanent phenomena fully appear to conceptual thought.

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188 From Dölpopa’s Fourth Council, translated in Stearns, Buddha From Dolpo, p. 192.
189 Klein, Knowledge and Liberation, p. 19.
…[T]hese two categories of phenomena are synonymous with ultimate and conventional truths respectively.”\(^\text{190}\)

In the Mahāyāna systems, Cittamātra (Yogācāra) in its most influential presentations negates the supposed reality of the external world by holding external objects to be conventional and non-existent in reality, while instantaneous moments of thought are held to be ultimately valid. “The process of enlightenment [in Cittamātra] may be expressed in the simplest of terms as freedom from the duality of the lower states of consciousness, as expressed in subject (apprehender = grahaka) and object (apprehended = grahya), resulting in the tranquilizing the Basic Consciousness which is then manifest as Mind Only or Consciousness Only.”\(^\text{191}\) This system (which deeply impacted Dölpopa and influenced his thought) emphasizes buddha nature as the already-pure ground of being, with practice intended to remove obscurations to recognizing this purity. As the \textit{Uttara Tantra Shastra} states,

\begin{quote}
Its nature is without beginning, middle, or end; hence [the state of a buddha] is uncreated. Since it possesses the peaceful dhyānakāya, it is described as being “spontaneously present.” Since it must be realized through self-awareness, it is not a realization due to extraneous conditions. These three aspects being realized, there is knowledge.\(^\text{192}\)
\end{quote}

\(^{190}\) Ibid., p. 21.  
We will explore the Yogācāra or Chittamātra system in more detail later.

Madhyamaka, considered the highest view by Tibetan philosophers (but formulated differently by different authors), finally brings the student to her system’s most profound view of emptiness. All Tibetan formulations of Madhyamaka hold Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti in high regard, but those formative authors’ texts are open to a wide variety of interpretations. Most Tibetans further divide Madhyamaka into Svātantrika and Prāsangika, which again are differentiated along different lines by Tibetan authors. We will examine Dölpopa’s formulation, which does not use these categories, in greater detail below. Longchen Rabjam’s presentation of Prasangika Madhyamaka differs interestingly from Dölpopa’s Great Madhyamaka (dBu-ma Chen-po). In defining the two levels of truth, conventional and ultimate, Longchenpa takes a position which would be largely acceptable to most lamas of his generation.

…[R]elative truth is characterized by the manifestation of dualistic perception and the elaboration it entails. That is, relative truth takes the form of obscuration…. All the phenomena of samsara (ordinary mind and mental states, as well as the data of objects that are perceived) are relative. …

As to what characterizes ultimate truth, it is in essence a freedom from dualistic elaborations. In that it cannot truly be realized by means of verbal descriptions and the like, it cannot be understood by means of anything other than itself. … It is free of all conceptual elaboration, and it is impervious to

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any system of tenets. … However, even “the middle way [Madhyamaka, *dbu-ma*], free of conceptual elaboration,” is not something that can be established.\(^{194}\)

In this passage, Longchenpa’s description of relative truth as obscuring reality is reminiscent of Yogācāra presentations of the two truths, yet he clearly avoids saying that ultimate truth is truly established. Also, we might note that Longchenpa’s discussion of Madhyamaka emphasizes distinctions in the way reality is *understood* rather than how it exists from its own side. Such a focus on experience will be important as we explore different formulations of Madhyamaka and the way *zhentong* was received.

**Dölpopa’s (Re-)Vision of Emptiness**

Before Dölpopa’s time, Buddhist scholar-practitioners had devised a variety of approaches to the profound topic of emptiness as expressed in the Yogācāra and Madhyamaka systems, and we will examine the considerable influence of Yogācāra philosophy and the Kālacakra Tantra’s language on Dölpopa, but what was most revolutionary about his zhentong expression of Madhyamaka was that he blended the terminologies of Yogācāra and the Kālacakra Tantra with more traditional descriptions of the highest Madhyamaka view. Before Dölpopa’s time, no one had proposed, in the context of Madhyamaka, two terms describing distinct kinds of emptiness—which is just what Dölpopa’s *zhentong* constituted.

\(^{194}\) Longchenpa, *Treasury of Philosophical Systems*, p. 115.
According to him, conventional phenomena are empty of their own nature, an emptiness he called *rangtong* (*rang-stong*) or self-emptiness (i.e., lack of an inherent self-nature), which accords with the more conventional views of emptiness held by other lamas of his day. But Dölpopa proposed a higher form of emptiness, the ultimate’s (i.e., buddha-nature’s) emptiness of all that is other than itself; this he called *zhentong* (*gzhan-stong*).

Carefully distinguishing empty of self-nature and empty of other,
what is taught as relative is taught
to be empty of self-nature,
and what is absolute is taught
to be precisely empty of other.\(^{195}\)

Thus, Dölpopa distinguished conventional and ultimate on the basis of the type of emptiness that is a phenomenon’s final mode of being. Relative (or conventional) phenomena, such as the supposed self of persons, do lack a true or established nature. In this way, Dölpopa held that *rangtong* and *zhentong*, far from being contradictory, were both necessary and complementary to each other. *Rangtong* applied to the level of conventional phenomena and was necessary to understand them correctly, while *zhentong* described ultimate reality accurately. Much of the later *rangtong*/*zhentong* debates seem to assume that one of these categories is correct while the other is mistaken, but Dölpopa posits the two as complementary categories.

\(^{195}\) Stearns, *Buddha from Dolpo*, p. 137.
Thus, like other lamas of his day, Dölpopa held that all phenomena that appear to everyday levels of the mind (e.g., self-existent persons, pots, etc.) were in fact mistaken appearances which completely lacked their own nature or capacity to exist truly from their own side. Thus, the phenomena of conventional reality are empty in the sense that they lack self-nature; they are rangtong, and descriptions of such imputed phenomena correspond to descriptions of conventional truth in Madhyamaka (though, as addressed below, Dölpopa also divides rangtong and zhentong along the lines of Yogācāra’s Three Natures).

Ultimate truth (Skt. paramārthasatya, Tib. don-dam bden-pa)\(^{196}\), by contrast, does not lack its own nature according to Dölpopa. This way of apprehending phenomena (which he calls by many synonyms, including “sugata essence,” “thusness,” “absolute dharmakaya,” “Great Madhyamaka,” “great luminosity,” and others\(^{197}\)) is empty in the sense that it is altogether separate from conventional or deluded apprehensions of phenomena. For Dölpopa, ultimate reality is the subtle ontological basis\(^{198}\) for all of existence (another position on which he was critiqued) and can only be recognized when the practitioner’s subtle winds have ceased to circulate due to yogic practices. This will be addressed in greater detail in the section on the impact of the Kālachakra tantra on Dölpopa’s


\(^{198}\) Not all interpreters of Dölpopa’s thought would agree with this statement. For instance, Karl Brunnhölzl argues in *Center of the Sunlit Sky* that Dölpopa was not in fact asserting an ontological basis of reality.
thought below. Thus, the type of emptiness appropriate to ultimate truth is zhentong, emptiness of all that is not ultimate. Among Dölpopa’s many doctrinal innovations, this assertion of two distinct types of emptiness\(^{199}\) is the most radical and profound.

Dölpopa treated rangtong in the same way that scholars of his time treated the views of the “lower” philosophical systems. He held it—although it was not the final nature of ultimate reality—to be necessary in the contemplative pedagogical process leading from an ordinary view of persons and phenomena (in which those conventional objects seem to existent inherently, and beings’ ultimate mode of existence, buddha-nature, is not apparent) to a liberated view in which conventional phenomena are recognized as dependently arisen, and buddha-nature free of conventionalities dawns in the practitioner’s experience.

**Zhentong’s Tantric Orientation**

To get a sense of the tantric orientation of Dölpopa’s new systematization of emptiness, it is important to realize how distinct his Great Madhyamaka was from other formulations of Madhyamaka. His zhentong emphasized existent truly established (Skt. satyasiddha, Tib. bden-par grub-pa), permanent buddha-nature that a practitioner could nonconceptually apprehend as neither entity nor non-entity

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\(^{199}\) Dölpopa’s zhentong, of course, is deeply informed by ideas of buddha nature from Yogācāra and the Kālacakra Tantra, but by synthesizing ideas from those systems with the Madhyamaka and formulating two categories of Madhyamaka thought to correspond with the emptiness of conventional phenomena and the emptiness of the ultimate, he created an innovative doxology.
but a sublime third category, as opposed to competing formulations that held that realizing emptiness meant realizing the mere lack of phenomena’s inherent existence. For a taste of Dölpopa’s descriptions of such a state of being, here is a short selection from his homage at the beginning of his *Mountain Dharma (Ri-chos)*:

Having bowed to that which, though isolated from all phenomena, is the body of uncontaminated, innumerable attributes,

Though devoid of a self of phenomena and of persons, is thusness, self, and pure self,

Though beyond all extremes of existence and non-existence, permanence and annihilation, resides as just permanent, stable, and everlasting,

Though without the nature of all things, is the natural clear light,

That which is to be known like a great treasure under one’s own home, \(^{200}\)

…I will reveal in accordance with pure scriptures like one with the divine eye revealing it. \(^{201}\)

Here we see Dölpopa’s use of terms such as self (*bdag*) and permanent (*rtag-pa*)—but placing them immediately after statements suggesting that what he bows to is neither a self nor permanent in the ordinary senses of those terms. As we will see below, these terms are important for the Kālacakra tantra.

A contrast may help to clarify the distinction between Dölpopa’s approach and those of his contemporaries. The following is Longchen Rabjam’s distinction

\(^{200}\) This comparison is borrowed from the *Uttaratantra*.

between sūtric and tantric approaches to emptiness; I include the quote at length to illustrate how Longchenpa’s language clearly esteems tantra (in his terms, the “secret mantra”) more highly than sūtra, using Dzogchen terminology in his descriptions of emptiness without eliding sūtric and tantric forms of emptiness.

The inner approach of the secret mantra is remarkably superior to the outer dialectical approach. Although these approaches have the identical purpose of bringing one to a definitive conclusion regarding the ground of being—that is, the utterly lucid heart essence—and the phenomena it supports, there is a difference with respect to understanding.

Coming to a definitive understanding of the ground, path, and fruition, just as they are, by means of the dialectical [sūtric] approach entails some delusion, whereas the secret mantra approach entails no such delusion.202

Longchenpa goes on to explain that the ground of the dialectical approach is limited to

a mental construct concerning ultimate truth, which is investigated through logic and evaluated through deductive reasoning. The path aspect is a process of striving to settle the mind in that context—that is, simply a process of calm abiding and profound insight. The fruition aspect is conceived of as something that tends to be attained after many eons. … As for the profundity of the mantra approach, without relying on logical argumentation, one simply focuses on the key points of the body, speech, subtle channels, energies, and bindu. In this way, one comes to a definitive understanding of the essence of dharmakaya—which is non-conceptual timeless awareness, rather than some mental construct—as the ground of being.203

Longchenpa thus succinctly illustrates several of the themes mentioned above as

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202 Longchen Rabjam, Philosophical Systems, p. 240.
203 Ibid.
issues under consideration by Dölpopa’s generation of scholars concerning the relationship between sūtra and tantra/mantra: how similar are they? do they fit together sequentially or simultaneously? is their result the same? Longchenpa resolves these issues by holding that “although these approaches have the identical purpose of bringing one to a definitive conclusion regarding the ground of being—that is, the utterly lucid heart essence,” the techniques of the two approaches yield different qualities of understanding, and further that a sūtric understanding of the nature of reality remains more limited than a nonconceptual understanding gained through secret mantra.

Dölpopa, on the other hand, melds sūtric and tantric emptinesses into one system by casting sūtric-oriented emptiness (defined as a lack of inherent existence) as a stepping stone to the supreme understanding of emptiness as the ultimate as free of all that is other than itself; indeed, some later authors refer to zhentong as “tantric emptiness,” though Dölpopa himself does not use that designation. Instead, he uses two hermeneutical strategies to recast established ways of investigating emptiness. First, he combines the Yogācāra or Cittamātra (Mind-Only) doctrine of the three natures with the Madhyamaka doctrine of the two truths to provide a sūtric framework for his zhentong; second, he de-emphasizes the three turnings strategy for harmonizing the different types of

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204 Ibid.
Mahāyāna sūtras and instead turns to the Kālachakra Tantra’s four eons to establish zhentong as the superior doctrine.

As for the first of these two hermeneutical moves, some earlier Indian and Tibetan scholars (following Śāntaraksita and Kamalaśīla in the 8th century) read Yogācāra’s Three Natures as a preliminary stage to the realization of Madhyamaka’s two truths.205 The Vast Explication (Brhattīkā),206 a somewhat unorthodox Yogācāra text that informed Dölpopa’s view of that school, describes the Three Natures as follows.

That which is the form of entities apprehended by childish ordinary persons as characteristics suitable to be form and so forth is known as “imagined form.”

Precisely that, in whatever aspect it becomes an object of consciousness appearing as an external entity, is known as “imputed form.”

That which is free from the aspects of both the imagined and the imputed, and is solely the fully established thusness, is known as “the form of the true nature.”207 Stearns explains, “According to Dölpopa, the phenomena of the imagined nature are simply nonexistent. The elements and so forth that appear to be external have no existence outside the consciousness of the beholder, and are thus totally

205 Ruegg, Madhyamaka, pp. 87-100.
206 This text has been variously attributed to Vasubandhu by Butōn and to Śāntarakṣita by Tsongkhapa; see Stearns, Buddha from Dolpo, p. 361, n. 361.
207 Stearns, Buddha from Dolpo, p. 98.
Both the imagined and dependent natures are two-fold, but exploring their subdivisions is not relevant here. The dependent nature gets its name from the fact that (unlike the imaginary nature, the phenomena of which do not exist) they do exist but only provisionally. According to Stearns’ summary of Dölpopa’s interpretation of the three natures doctrine, “…[A]ll imagined and dependent phenomena are nonexistent in reality, while the fully established nature is fully established in reality, is never nonexistent as the true nature of phenomena, and always exists in truth.”

The absolute nature, which Dölpopa calls the fully established nature, is primordial awareness, buddha-nature.

The fully established nature is the ultimate reality that can withstand rigorous and reasoned examination from the perspective of the absolute, and is empty of both the imagined and the dependent natures. In this way, all imagined and dependent phenomena are nonexistent in reality, while the fully established nature is fully established in reality.…

Many schools of Yogācāra philosophers framed the ultimate basis of experience as fleeting moments of mind, but the Vast Explication presents primordial awareness (Skt. jñāna, Tib. ye-shes) as the ultimately existent basis for all of existence. As we will see in the next chapter, Dölpopa’s adoption of primordial awareness as the

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208 Ibid., pp. 99-100.
209 Ibid., p. 100.
210 Ibid.
211 Stearns, Buddha From Dolpo, p. 100.
truly existent substrate of all existence drew sharp criticism from Tsongkhapa.

By way of contrast, Longchenpa presents the Yogācāra or Chittamātra system a little differently. His descriptions of the first two natures (imputed and dependent) are similar to Dölpopa’s, but his presentation of the established nature offers a more typical\textsuperscript{212} fourteenth century Tibetan understanding of the three natures: “The absolute also has two aspects. First, there is ‘the unchanging absolute’—that is, the way of abiding, the ultimate ground of all experience, the basic space of phenomena that is utterly lucid by its very nature, ‘buddha nature.’”\textsuperscript{213} In a footnote to this passage, translator Richard Barron explains, “The ultimate is the true nature of phenomena as it can be confirmed by correct reasoning. It is ultimately real, uncompounded, not imputed, and a pure state of nonconceptual consciousness devoid of dualistic perceptions of object and subject.”\textsuperscript{214} Barron’s note sounds very much like Dölpopa’s descriptions of the ultimate—except that Dölpopa describes the ultimate as truly established because it appears to an ultimate consciousness, not because it is established by reasoning. We will explore this difference in more detail in the next chapter.

To return to Longchenpa’s description of the first aspect of Chittamātra’s

\textsuperscript{212} Of course, no presentation can be called “typical,” especially during such a period of intellectual ferment, but Longchenpa’s presentation would have been more familiar and comfortable to a majority of scholars and lamas at that time.

\textsuperscript{213} Longchen Rabjam, \textit{Treasury of Philosophical Systems}, p. 84.

\textsuperscript{214} Barron’s note to Longchen Rabjam, \textit{Treasury of Philosophical Systems}, p. 418, n. 169.
established nature, he explained that some proponents of that system “accept a flawless ground” (i.e., basis of consciousness, which is to say reality). “They do not maintain that there is something such as a basis of all ordinary experience. They do, however, accept that there is an ultimate ground of all experience.” So far, this sounds very much like Dölpopa’s truly established nature. But what they posit as that nature (according to Longchenpa) is different: “For them, consciousness as the basis of all ordinary experience is lucid consciousness that has not differentiated into the coordinating mental faculty or any of the five sense consciousnesses. As a result of one’s habituation to this state, one’s karma will propel one toward rebirth in the realm of form.”

This points to another of Dölpopa’s innovations in dharma terminology. Chittamātra texts describe a “mind basis of all” (ālayavijñāna, kun-gzhi rnam-shes) that is the neutral basis of all that we perceive through the various consciousnesses. Dölpopa, however, also posited a “universal-ground primordial awareness’ (kun-gzhi ye-shes)” that was the truly established nature, synonymous with Great Madhyamaka (dBu-ma Chen)—i.e., zhentong—and buddha nature. This informs Dölpopa’s idea of the truly established nature and his interpretation of Chittamātra or Yogācāra.

215 Longchen Rabjam, Treasury of Philosophical Systems, pp. 84-85.
216 Ibid., p. 85.
217 Stearns, Buddha From Dolpo, p. 91.
Returning now to Longchenpa’s presentation of Chittamātra’s established nature, he describes the second aspect of the established nature as follows: “Second, ‘the unerring absolute’ is the incorruptible spiritual path, together with its fruition, because one proceeds authentically and does not regress once the destination has been reached.”218 This description resonates with Dölpopa’s, but the language of true establishment, permanence, true self, and so forth is absent here, along with any mention of Dölpopa’s “universal-ground primordial awareness.”

Madhyamaka, by contrast, deconstructs any attempt at establishing a truly or ultimately existent basis of reality. In all Tibetan formulations of Madhyamaka (inherited from India), there are two truths: conventional and ultimate. Conventional truth is the way phenomena appear to beings, which—though it is a mistaken mode of apprehension—accords with the way things function and appear by consensus. The ultimate truth of a being or object’s existence, on the other hand, is its empty and selfless mode of existence. A pot (the favorite example of Tibetan philosophical texts) thus exists conventionally because people similarly socialized and speaking the same language will all perceive it as a pot, and it performs the function of holding liquids. In addition, the pot’s nominal existence

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218 Longchen Rabjam, *Treasury of Philosophical Systems*, p. 86.
is not contradicted by a valid cognizer that cognizes the ultimate. However, when one analyzes the pot to see whether or not it exists from its own side, one finds that it was produced and will disintegrate; thus, its unfixed or empty nature is the ultimate reality of that object. In almost all formulations of Madhyamaka except Dölpopa’s, buddha-nature or primordial awareness is considered conventionally true (in the sense that it functions and is susceptible to realization by beings) but not ultimately established. Thus, for both conventional and ultimate cognizers, according to most formulations of Madhyamaka, nothing is held to be truly or inherently existent. At the conventional level, phenomena are composite and arise due to causes and conditions, and at the level of ultimate reality, nothing is found by the meditator to withstand analysis. Even buddha nature is not held to be permanent. There is no self-existent substratum underlying the constant, appearing-yet-empty dynamism of existence.

These two systems, Yogācāra and Madhyamaka, were both acknowledged by Tibetans and their Indian masters as valid Buddhist systems of thought, but there were substantial differences between the two that different masters harmonized in different ways. Some important figures in the tradition did this by ranking Yogācāra as a preliminary stage to the view of Madhyamaka, with the Yogācāra or the third turning sūtras treated as interpretable (Skt. neyārtha, Tib.

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219 This is the Gelukpa position, as I understand it. Other schools might disagree.
drang-don) in meaning, while the Madhyamaka or second turnings were definitive (Skt. nītārtha, Tib. nges-don). This is the predominant method of harmonizing the systems that Tibetans received from their Indian masters.

In particular, Śāntaraksita and Kamalaśīla (both 8th century and crucial in the early transmission of Indian Buddhism to Tibet) treat Yogācāra as subordinate to Madhyamaka, writing that one uses the doctrine of the three natures to break the mind’s addiction to the self-existence of external objects before going on to consider the final emptiness of the mind as well. This perspective was widely held during the early diffusion of Indian (and Central Asian) Buddhisms to Tibet, and Dölpopa would certainly have been aware of it.

However, Dölpopa fused Yogācāra with Madhyamaka very differently. He held rangtong, phenomena’s lack of an existent self-nature (derived from the Madhyamaka traditions), subordinate to zhentong, the truly established ultimate free from all conventional phenomena (which he related to Yogācāra’s established nature). Unlike other formulations of Madhyamaka, Dölpopa’s description of zhentong as the highest Madhyamaka view used Yogācāra and Kālacakra terms to describe a state of awareness that opens for the practitioner following the removal of all mental and energetic obscurations. He accomplished this synthesis by positing the “Great Madhyamaka” (dBu-ma Chen-po) which he usually defined as synonymous with buddha-nature and which he supported with quotations from
sūtras by both the Yogācāra and Madhyamaka schools—and from tantras and their commentaries, particularly those of the Kālachakra literature. Thus, Dölpopa did not simply invert the hierarchy and place Yogācāra at the apex of the various Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophies; he envisioned a completely novel synthesis in which sūtras and tantras addressing the same topic, emptiness, should be read in light of each other.

The Kālachakra tantra’s Four Eons doctrine formed the basis for his second great hermeneutical innovation, this one a turn away from the three turnings narrative and toward one in which the Great Madhyamaka (i.e., zhentong) was taught during the Kṛta-yuga, while “ordinary” Madhyamaka (i.e., rangtong) was taught during the increasingly degenerate eras that succeeded it.²²⁰

Dölpopa claimed that his zhentong or Great Madhyamaka constituted the dharma of the Kṛta-yuga and that other Tibetan masters’ understanding of Madhyamaka were based on teachings originating in the Tretāyuga. He included texts and doctrines traditionally classified as Yogācāra and as Madhyamaka in this category of the Kṛta-yuga dharma. This was a marked move away from the three turnings lens, which classified sūtras according to their topics so that a text treating

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²²⁰ According to the Kālachakra Tantra and related commentaries, there are four eons (yugas) in the current world-cycle: the perfect Kṛta-yuga and the increasingly degenerate Dvāparayuga, Tretāyuga, and Kaliyuga (in which, according to Kālachakra chronology, we currently dwell). (See the Berzin Archives, “Buddhist Cosmology,” http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/sutra/level4_deeening_understanding_path/universe/buddhist_cosmology_comparison_abhid.html.)
the three natures would automatically be considered Yogācāra, and a text on
emptiness would fall under Madhyamaka, while tantras were not included in this
scheme at all. In addition, he included the Kālachakra and some other tantras in
the dharma of the Kṛta-yuga, thus creating affiliations across these different
categories of Buddhist teachings that Dölpopa saw as teaching the Great
Madhyamaka.

Dölpopa’s four yugas treatment of these topics, like the three turnings
synthesis, relies on a mythological chronology, but no such overarching synthesis
of the sūtras and tantras even resembling his complete reframing was available in
Tibet before his time. For this reason among others, I will argue in the next section
that Dölpopa’s chronology—and indeed his entire hermeneutical structure—are to
a significant degree results of whatever contemplative or visionary experience he
had during his Kālachakra retreat at Jonang hermitage.

This move, subjugating the commonly-held sūtric definition of emptiness to
a (seemingly) new interpretation that had been greatly impacted by the Kālachakra
tantra and presence-friendly, greatly offended some of Dölpopa’s peers. Indeed, as
the next chapter will examine at greater length, a generation later the great
Tsongkhapa (whose thoroughly sūtric emptiness would impact the thought of all
subsequent scholars) formulated his own comprehensive system of philosophy
partly as a reaction against Dölpopa’s zhentong.
The Kālachakra Connection

Dölpopa’s grand synthesis took shape during his intense Kālachakra retreat at Jonang monastery, and that system of philosophy and practice left a deep mark on his zhentong in several ways. Before investigating the mark the Kālachakra tantra left on Dölpopa’s system of thought, it is important to point out that his interpretation of the Kālachakra tantra is also informed by his zhentong philosophy, and other lineages of Kālachakra practice treat its affirmation of buddha nature as open to interpretation, not as definitive (as Dölpopa did). Nonetheless, Dölpopa is recognized to this day even by his detractors as a great master of that body of practices. Thus, although the following section outlines the impact the Kālachakra tantra made on Dölpopa and his thought, he clearly played an active role in selecting and interpreting themes from that tradition.

The Kālachakra Tantra probably originated in Central Asia and was transmitted from there to India and from India to Tibet. It is unique among anuttara yoga tantras (highest yoga tantras, the most radical and latest Buddhist tantras) for originating outside of India and for its use of ideas and language from a variety of philosophical traditions. The root text is a deeply syncretistic document, using terminology from all four major Buddhist philosophical systems of its time (Vaibhāsika, Sautrāntika, Cittamātra, and Madhyamaka), as well as major non-Buddhist Indian systems. Tellingly, eleventh to twelfth century Indian accounts
record that the first human recipient of the Kālachakra Tantra was

“Anupamaraksita (c. eleventh-twelfth centuries,)” who “studied Buddhism and other Indian systems of thought.” Vesna Wallace’s *The Inner Kālachakratantra* describes the nature of the text’s borrowing from various Buddhist and non-Buddhist systems.

The syncretism of this tantric system is a self-conscious absorption, or appropriation, of the modes of expression that are characteristic of the rival religious systems of India. This self-conscious syncretism variously permeates several areas of the *Kālachakratantra*, such as its theoretical system, language, medicine, and cosmology…. For this reason, the term syncretism does not quite fit this tradition, whose rhetorical strategies and linguistic divergences, though cleverly disguised, are firmly rooted in Buddhist doctrine.222

We will see in the next chapter that Dölpopa’s adoption of some of this non-Buddhist terminology would invite sharp criticism from his philosophical opponents. For the moment, I would like to focus on the language and several key topics of the Kālachakra Tantra which Dölpopa adopted as he formulated his unique system of “dharma language” (*chos skad*).223

The Kālachakra tantra uses terminology typically associated with non-Buddhist systems as it frames its doctrines. For instance, it calls “the Buddha Kālacakra… both ‘the self (*ātman* [Tib. *bdag*]) of one’s own body, speech, mind,

221 *Sadangayogatīka* (Peking *Bstan ’gyur*, vol. 47, #2084: 238.2.5-242.4.2), cited in Wallace, *Inner Kālachakra*, p. 28.
223 Stearns, *Buddha From Dolpo*, p. 22.
and passion’ and… ‘the supreme, immutable bliss characterized by perfect awakening in a single moment’ (eka-ksanābhisambodhi).”

It frames its own descriptions of conventional human existence in terms borrowed from the Sāmkhya system (which informs Kaśmīr Śaivism), speaking of purusa and prakrti and the three gunas (sattva, rajas, and tamas), though it reinterprets these terms to suit its own Buddhist agenda. It also correlates the stages of human development with the ten avataras of Visnu. Dölpopa adopts many of these terms, thus creating a new “dharma language” (chos-skad) for his zhentong, as Cyrus Stearns describes:

Dölpopa did two things with language that were largely unprecedented in Tibet. …[I]t is probable that he first developed a special terminology or Dharma language that involved the appropriation of key terms from Mahāyāna sūtras and treatises, terms that were acceptable in their original context within scripture, but were almost never used in ordinary scholarly discourse. Then he created, or at least made first extensive use of, several Tibetan terms such as gzhan stong (zhentong, “emptiness of other”) and kun gzhi ye shes (“universal-ground primordial awareness”) to express scriptural themes he wished to emphasize. He also drew into his vocabulary some key terms such as dbu ma chen po (“Great Madhyamaka”) that had been in use in Tibet for centuries, but are not found in any Indian scriptures or commentaries.

Clearly, Dölpopa’s use of terms from the Kālachakra Tantra falls within Stearns’

226 Stearns, Buddha From Dolpo, p. 50.
first category. As an example of this use of language, his following verses describing absolute truth are typical:

It is not conditioned,
it is unconditioned space.

It is not unstable,
it is permanent, stable, and eternal.²²⁷

As Stearns notes, Dölpopa’s use of such terms “was one of the areas where Dölpopa’s contemporaries reacted strongly.”²²⁸ As we will see in the next chapter, later Gelukpa critics of Dölpopa who accepted the Kālachakra Tantra as legitimate nonetheless offered scathing rebukes of such language, regarding terms like “ātman” as used in the Kālachakra Tantra to be interpretable rather than definitive.²²⁹

Another point on which Dölpopa differs from other masters of the Kālachakra Tantra (particularly later Gelukpas) is his interpretation of the Ādibuddha or “primordial” buddha, which had been introduced before the time of that tantra but given additional emphasis and a unique interpretation in that body of literature.

Wallace, in her The Inner Kālacakratantra, notes some discrepancies

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 176.
²²⁸ Ibid., p. 51.
²²⁹ Ruegg, Philosophy of the Middle, pp. 299-319
between the Kālachakra itself and the *Vimalaprabhā*, an important commentary on it, and summarizes the tradition’s treatment of the Ādibuddha topic thus:

…[A]nalysis of the Kālacakra literature reveals that when the Kālacakra tradition speaks of the Ādibuddha in the sense of a beginningless and endless Buddha, it is referring to the innate gnosis that pervades the minds of all sentient beings and stands as the basis of both *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. Whereas, when it speaks of the Ādibuddha as the one who first attained perfect enlightenment by means of imperishable bliss, and when it asserts the necessity of acquiring merit and knowledge in order to attain perfect Buddhahood, it is referring to the actual realization of one’s own innate gnosis.  

Dölpopa emphasized the Ādibuddha as a permanent and truly existent buddha within each sentient being, setting it equivalent to zhentong in passages like the following, taken from a series of synonyms for “a ground empty of everything relative.”

Precisely that ground of emptiness is the sugata essence,… and the Buddha of the ground, the Primordial Buddha [Ādibuddha]. It is the Tathāgata free from the very beginning, initially liberated enlightened mind with the nature of space, Buddha even before all the buddhas.  

Clearly, Dölpopa (widely considered the emanation of the Kalkī Pundarīka, author of the *Vimalaprabhā*) found inspiration in the commentary’s interpretation of the

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Ādibuddha and used it to bolster his *zhentong* definition of emptiness. This is another example of his willingness to read sūtras and tantras in terms of each other, since his Kālachakra practice deeply informed his presentation of Madhyamaka (setting the Great Madhyamaka equivalent to *zhentong* as well).

It also underscores the extent to which Dölpopa (re-)reads his tradition not just through a lens that harmonizes sūtra and tantra but through the filter of his own Kālachakra practice. Indeed, Hopkins flatly states “Döl-bo-ba’s system is mainly based on the *Kālachakra Tantra* and the three bodhisattva commentaries by Kalkī Puṇḍarīka, Vajragarbha, and Vajrapāṇi” on that text. Dölpopa repeatedly emphasizes that simply recognizing the conceptual mind as inherently pure or already awakened is ineffective as a path to liberation; only the Kālachakra system of six-limbed yoga can effectively clear away conceptual obstructions to the practitioner’s primordial identity as a buddha. This system offers techniques for stopping the conceptual mind through control of the body’s subtle energies (as do many forms of tantric practices).

**Stopping the Winds**

Because Dölpopa held that this stoppage of the winds of ordinary consciousness

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232 Hopkins, *Mountain Doctrine*, p. 36. Stearns describes the three bodhisattva commentaries mentioned as follows: “The Bodhisattva Trilogy (Sems ’grel skor gsum) is (1) *Vimalaprabhā* or *Stainless Light* (Toh 1347), which is an immense commentary on the *Kālacakra Tantra* by Kalkī Puṇḍarīka; (2) *Hevajrapindārthaḥtikā* (Toh 1180), which is a commentary on the *Hevajra Tantra* by Bodhisattva Vajragarbha; and (3) *Laksābhidhanāduddhṛtalaghatantrapindārthaḥvivarana* (Toh 1402), which is a commentary on the *Cakrasamvara Tantra* by Bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi.” (Stearns, *Buddha from Dolpo*, p. 316, n. 27.)
was necessary for awakening, he critiqued the view, found in both the highest Nyingma practice, Dzogchen (*rDzogs-chen*), and its counterpart in the Kagyü tradition, Mahāmudrā (*Phya-rgya chen-po*), that by simply recognizing the nature of mind one can attain awakening. Both the Nyingma and the Kagyu systems posit paths leading from sūtra to tantra to these peak practices, which work by resting in the mind’s natural or uncontrived nature. Dölpopa offers the following rebuttal of that position in his *Fourth Council*:233

I cannot yield to those who accept, “Since buddhahood is reached by recognizing your very essence, you do not need to accumulate the two assemblies and purify the two obscurations, because recognizing the very essence naturally purifies them, without rejection.”234

Stearns comments on the likely targets of Dölpopa’s rebuke:

The Tibetan controversies about instantaneous enlightenment through recognition of the nature of the mind have been studied by David Jackson. As he shows, it is mainly members of the Kagyü traditions in Tibet who have maintained this doctrine, although it is certainly common in Chinese Ch’an Buddhism and in the teachings of the Great Perfection. … In contrast to these views, Dölpopa claims that the definition of an ordinary sentient being or a buddha, and of saṃsāra or nirvāṇa, is determined by the presence or absence of the incidental and temporary obscurations that veil the true nature of reality. It is not determined solely by recognition of the nature of reality.

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233 The full title of the *Fourth Council*, as translated by Stearns, reads “Great Reasoning That Has the Significance of a Fourth Council. *Bka’ bsdu bzhi pa’i don gtan tshigs chen po.*” (Stearns, *Buddha from Dolpo*, p. 422.)

234 Ibid., p. 106.
the mind or the thoughts.\textsuperscript{235}

The chapter on Jamgön Kongtrül will explore the relationship between Dölpopa’s zhentong and Mahāmudrā in greater detail, but to offer a brief illustration of Dölpopa’s specific criticism of these systems and his insistence on the Kālachakra Tantra’s practices as uniquely liberative, I will return to Longchenpa, a great master of the Nyingma lineage who systematized teachings on Dzogchen, to show Dölpopa’s zhentong’s incompatibility with that system.

In his Precious Treasury of Philosophical Systems (\textit{Grub-mtha’ Rin-po-che’i mDzod}), Longchenpa presents sūtric Buddhist paths (“cause-based approaches”), the Mantrayana or tantric approach, and Dzogchen approaches to transformative practice (which are categorized as part of the Mantrayana as the Nyingma Atiyoga, or highest yogic practices). According to this presentation, the sūtric and lower tantric paths involve some conceptual entanglement, but the special quality of Dzogchen is that its practice entails only resting in unfabricated, primordial awareness. Longchenpa presents the two truths at the level of Madhyamaka (a cause-based approach, the most basic of these three categories) as follows:

\begin{quote}
The basis on which relative truth can be characterized consists of the six
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid., p. 107; Stearns refers to Jackson’s \textit{Enlightenment by a Single Means}, Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1994. In his attacks on traditions that emphasize the recognition of the nature of mind as liberative, Dölpopa (as is typical of polemical passages in philosophical texts) to a certain extent presents and defeats a “straw man” version of Kagyü and Nyingma contemplative perspectives—much as Tsongkhapa, writing in the fifteenth century, would present a similarly feeble version of zhentong to critique.
avenues of consciousness and the data of the objects they perceive. … As for ultimate truth, the basis on which it is characterized is held to be the basic space of phenomena, which is pure in its very essence.

…[A]s for the characteristics of these two levels, relative truth is characterized by the manifestation of dualistic perception and the elaboration it entails. … As to what characterizes ultimate truth, it is in essence a freedom from dualistic elaboration. In that it cannot truly be realized by means of verbal descriptions and the like, it cannot be understood by means of anything other than itself. It is beyond concepts, for the sullying factors of ordinary mind and mental states subside within the basic space of phenomena. It is free of all conceptual elaboration, and it is impervious to any system of tenets. 236

As we saw above, Longchenpa says early in the secret mantra (i.e., tantra) section of his Precious Treasury of Philosophical Systems,

The inner approach of the secret mantra is remarkably superior to the outer dialectical approach. Although these approaches have the identical purpose of bringing one to a definitive conclusion regarding the ground of being—that is, the utterly lucid heart essence—and the phenomena it supports, there is a difference with respect to understanding.

Coming to a definitive understanding of the ground, path, and fruition, just as they are, by means of the dialectical approach entails some delusion, whereas the mantra approach entails no such delusion. … A for the extent of [the dialectical] approach, it consists of nothing more than coming to a definitive conclusion about the relative level of truth… and using this understanding solely to make ethical decisions about what to accept and what to reject. 237

Longchenpa contrasts the fruits of this dialectical approach with those of secret mantra: “As for the extent of the [secret mantra] approach, one comes to a

237 Ibid., p. 240.
definitive understanding of basic space—timelessly present as the maṇḍala of utter lucidity—as the ground aspect of tantra, the continuum of being.” Yet even the secret mantra approach is not the highest system of practice in Longchenpa’s Nyingma school: Dzogchen holds that distinction.

In a section titled “The Superiority of the [Atiyoga] Approach,” Longchenpa offers the following description of the Nyingma Atiyoga, Dzogchen:

To begin with, in Atiyoga it is maintained that basic space—mind itself that is pure by its very nature, utterly lucid, and spontaneously and timelessly present as a supreme state of natural abiding—is the ground of being, uncontrived and unchanging as naturally occurring timeless awareness. In comparison, all the lower approaches obscure this naturally occurring timeless awareness with the veil of hope and fear, because they require the acceptance and rejection involved in attempting to achieve something.

Although Longchenpa’s “basic space” (chos-dbyings) is framed as “the ground of being, uncontrived and unchanging”—language very similar to Dölpopa’s as he describes his own zhentong—his critique of “acceptance and rejection” runs counter to Dölpopa’s formulation of adventitious obscurations as needing to be removed so that buddha nature can fully manifest. Longchenpa’s statement that what makes a “lower approach” less powerful than the higher ones is that “they require the acceptance and rejection involved in attempting to achieve something” is precisely the view being refuted in passages from Dölpopa’s works like the

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238 Ibid., pp. 240-241.
239 Ibid., p. 302.
Since primordial awareness and consciousness are just like light and darkness, and exist like nectar and poison, it is completely impossible for them to have a common ground, so do not mix them together as one! …In the exceptional, sublime Kṛtayuga Dharma teachings, the ground of purification is the universal-ground primordial awareness that is like the sky, the object of purification is the incidental stains that are like the clouds, the purifying agent is the truth of the path that is like a relentless wind, and the result of purification is the separated result that is like the sky free of clouds.  

Here we have a very clear statement of Dölpopa’s position that ordinary consciousness (sems) is what obscures primordial wisdom (ye-shes); the “purification” he mentions is the tantric path, described by Stearns as follows: “According to tantric teachings, the ordinary vital action winds (karma-vāyu, las rlung) are drawn into the central channel during the practice of yoga and transformed into the ‘vital wind of primordial awareness’ (jñānavāyu, ye-shes

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Until this has been accomplished, the practitioner remains under the power of ordinary consciousness, which is mounted on the vital action winds."  For Dölpopa, then, the idea of recognizing ordinary, conceptual thoughts as the nature of mind constitutes a serious misunderstanding of the nature of the mind—and of the path.

At the beginning of the “path” section of his Mountain Doctrine, Dölpopa emphasizes the need for a period of training to clear away obstructions to beings’ innate buddhahood: “Although in that way all inseparable qualities of the ultimate buddha, the body of attributes, abide integrally in all sentient beings, it is not that the path—the two collections [of merit and wisdom] are not needed. This is because adventitious defilements must be removed.…” In the Nyingma traditions, too, the need for a path is recognized, and Dzogchen is traditionally practiced following long years of training, including tantric practices intended to clear the channels (rtsa) and winds (rlung) of obscurations. Such practices are considered preliminary to Dzogchen; thus, Dölpopa’s critiques of Dzogchen (and perhaps even more directly) Mahāmudrā perspectives may not treat his “opponents” with complete fairness, as is traditional in polemics between schools.

As Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā are the peak practices of their traditions, the Atiyoga, or unsurpassable yoga, in Dölpopa’s system is the Kālachakra, which

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241 Stearns, Buddha from Dolpo, p. 105.
242 Dölpopa, Mountain Doctrine, p. 199
specifies certain types of practices for fully realizing buddhahood. Dölpopa refers to those early in his section on the path. “When... you meditate in the manner of not meditating, you need uncommon, profound quintessential instructions for stopping the breath, binding the channels, and so forth in order to generate many approaches of meditative stabilization that combine calm abiding and special insight....”

Thus, Dölpopa holds that simple recognition of the mind as primordially pure is incapable of liberating the practitioner; only the yogic exercises described in the Kālachakra literature can produce the quiescence necessary for full awakening.

Of course, Dölpopa’s critique of Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā as mistaking ordinary mind (sems) for primordial wisdom/gnosis (ye-shes) runs counter to those traditions’ understanding of their practices. Dölpopa also divides awareness into consciousness (rnam-shes) and primordial awareness (ye-shes) and is clearly interpreting Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā practices as conflating the two, whereas his own system classifies consciousness as a conventional truth, an adventitious stain to be cleared away, and primordial awareness as an ultimate truth uncovered by the path. As we will see in the chapter on Jamgön Kongtrül’s reinterpretation of zhentong, the Rimé masters would harmonize Dölpopa’s system with Dzogchen

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243 Ibid., p. 201.
244 Stearns, *Buddha from Dolpo*, p. 7.
245 Ibid., p. 250.
246 Again, practitioners of these systems would strongly deny such charges; distinguishing between these types of minds is vitally important to them.
Putting it All Together: Text and Extraordinary Experience in Dölpopa’s Zhentong

Dölpopa himself, once he began teaching and writing about zhentong, claimed that he was simply recovering the original intent of the Buddha in teaching the sūtras and tantras and (as was and is typical for Tibetan authors) made extensive use of widely-accepted texts to support those claims. He wanted above all to connect his seemingly new teachings with established texts and doctrines. Dölpopa was an intellectual product of his textual and contemplative training, as his biographies clearly demonstrate with their extensive lists of the sūtric and tantric topics he studied; he was very much embedded in the Sakya tradition before his realization of zhentong. He had received transmissions of sūtras, tantras, and commentaries which held (or at least were interpreted to the young Dölpopa as holding) a rangtong view of emptiness and which carried its own clear hermeneutical tradition designed to harmonize seemingly inconsistent elements within the overall body of teachings.

However, as also recounted above, Dölpopa experienced a major shift in his orientation toward his received tradition during his first extended Kālachakra retreat at Jonang. This period was clearly the catalyst for his unique formulation of
zhentong. As Stearns documents at length in *The Buddha From Dolpo*, the term zhentong had been used before Dölpopa’s time, and there are hints of Jonang predecessors who held some of the views expressed by Dölpopa, but it is quite clear that his synthesis of the Buddhist corpus of texts was a departure from anything in use before his time. 247 Dölpopa’s division of emptiness into rangtong and zhentong; his attribution of zhentong to passages in a wealth of sūtras, tantras, and commentaries; and his hermeneutics of the four yugas only came about after the Kālacakra retreat. The evidence points to a dramatic shift in the way Dölpopa thought about and through the texts and practices he had received in their more normative forms.

It seems appropriate, given the role of contemplative and visionary experience in Dölpopa’s life and formulation of doctrine, to call his a contemplative hermeneutics in which the “overplus of meaning,” to use Rudolf Otto’s term, 248 he experienced on the Kālachakra retreat and during the construction of the great Jonang stūpa became the dominant filter through which he read, interpreted, and recombined the fundamental texts of his tradition for the rest of his life. For Dölpopa, the visionary encounter during his Kālacakra retreat provided the lens that re-organized his received traditions into zhentong. To the

extent that such an encounter seems to have genuinely overturned his deeply held views, it cannot have been the anticipated outcome of his practice, pointing instead to the capacity of praxis to open the adept to abrupt and novel re-orientations. Whether such re-orientations are indeed catalyzed through identity or contact with non-human entities is an open question, but in either case extensive exposure to received tradition and deep meditative practice seem to be necessary prerequisites to a novel, properly contemplative hermeneutic.

Furthermore, Dölpopa’s biography suggests (as do Tsongkhapa’s and Jamgön Kongtrül’s) that the lineages of contemplative practice he inherited are, like all complex cultural systems, fundamentally unstable since they depend on generation after generation of elite practitioners to internalize received tradition and pass it to students who will maintain the continuity of the tradition. Given the emphasis in these Tibetan traditions on the dharma as experienced through contemplative practice, it seems that there is an inherent danger (from the perspective of the tradition) in this process of lineage transmission: that, like genetic transmission between organisms, the transmission of a contemplative body of teachings and practices will necessarily include changes in each generation. Of course, an adept as innovative as Dölpopa may be very rare in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, but his extreme case points to the living and dynamic nature of any lineage intended to be internalized and transmitted on the basis of the teacher’s
personal practice experience.
Chapter 3: The Politics of Emptiness

From the latter fourteenth century to the mid-seventeenth, Dolpopa’s zhentong faced serious critique from Tsongkhapa and his followers, the new Gelukpa sect, and it also enjoyed periods of more positive evaluation from thinkers outside the Jonang order. Under Tāranātha (1575–1634), the second great luminary of that order (after Dolpopa), Jonang zhentong experienced a brief revival, only to be banned in Central Tibet following Tāranātha’s death and the Gelukpa ascent to power in the time of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama. This chapter presents Tsongkhapa’s reaction to Dölpopa, the expression of power through politics and philosophical discourse as the sectarian situation in Central Tibet deteriorated over the course of these centuries, and the suppression of the Jonang order.

Tsongkhapa

The great Tsongkhapa Lobsang Drakpa (Tsong-kha-pa bLo-bzang Grags-pa, 1357–1419) shared some aspects of early training with Dolpopa: Both came early to the religious life, both were renowned for their prodigious scholarship and meditative attainments, and both (though they studied with masters from various traditions) had Sakya lamas as their primary teachers.

The great Tsongkhapa was born 1357, in the Tsongkha region of Amdo, eastern Tibet. The following account is mostly derived from the first chapter of
Life and Teachings of Tsong Khapa, “a short biography drawn by Geshe Ngawang Dhargey from a number of traditional sources, notably Khaydrub’s Haven of Faith… supplemented with Tsong Khapa’s own Song of Realization… and Jamyang Choje Tashi Palden’s Song of the Mystic Experiences.”

Tsongkhapa took lay vows at the age of three from Rolpe Dorje, the Fourth Karmapa, and was later taken under the care of Choje Dondrup Rinchen, who (following a vision) held his young student to be an incarnation of Manjushri. Tsongkhapa practiced many types of tantra with this teacher before leaving for Central Tibet at the age of 16. There, he studied with many celebrated masters in different traditions. By the age of 19, he was a famous scholar.

Sometime during this period of study and receiving teachings, Tsongkhapa had an encounter crucial to our narrative.

As [Je Tsongkhapa] had a great admiration for Nyapon Kunga Pel whom he met at Tzechen in U-tsang and from whom he received many discourses, he went to him and requested instructions on the Perfection of Wisdom; but this master was unwell and referred him to his disciple, the Venerable Rendawa. … This master had innumerable spiritual qualities and Tsong Khapa later came to regard him as his principal teacher. Their relationship became such that simultaneously they were each other’s Master and disciple. He also received teachings on the Middle Way (Madhyamika) philosophy from Rendawa.

This relatively brief passage offers a wealth of insights into Tsongkhapa’s

249 Thurman, Life and Teachings, p. 1.
250 Thurman, Life and Teachings, pp. 7-8.
251 Ibid., pp. 8-9.
connections with Dolpopa’s lineage and also raises important questions. First, we learn that Tsongkhapa had received teachings from one of Dolpopa’s main disciples, Nya Ön Kunga Pal, and sought him out for further instruction. This suggests at least an openness to zhentong during this formative period of his career, before Rendawa’s influence and before his own visionary experience would lead him to his own innovative version of Madhyamaka. Tsongkhapa also received teachings on the Kālacakra tantra from another Jonang master, “Chokle Namgyal (phyogs las rnam rgyal, 1306-1386),” so he clearly had no aversion to the tradition during the early stage of his career. (Tsongkhapa also studied Dzogchen, and his Madhyamaka could be read as critiquing Dzogchen, too.)

In fact, Tsongkhapa’s Sakya teacher Rendawa (Red-mda’-ba gZhon-nu bLo-gros, 1349-1412) was a student of two of Dolpopa’s leading disciples, Nya Ön Kunga Pal and Mati Panchen. Rendawa studied the Pramāṇavārttika, Dharmakirti’s classic text on logic and epistemology, with Nya On Kunga Pal and must have been deeply engaged with the Jonang tradition because he reacted very strongly to its tenets. Early in his career Rendawa found zhentong convincing, but after repeatedly examining the Indian texts undergirding Dolpopa’s theory, he bitterly rejected it. He would also level serious criticisms against the Kālacakra

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252 Without knowing which “discourses” Tsongkhapa received, we can’t know whether he ever held or accepted a zhentong view, but he would certainly have known that Nya Ön was associated with Jonang Monastery and its distinctive view of emptiness.


tantra that had so strongly influenced zhentong and was closely associated by that time with the Jonang tradition (as well as with Buton). With the support of Sangyé Pel (then abbot of Sakya monastery), Rendawa “embarked on a crusade to discredit the Jonang tradition and call into question the internal contradictions he perceived in a literal reading of the Kālacakra Tantra.”²⁵⁵ Rendawa was thus remembered as a bitter critic of zhentong, the Kālachakra tantra, and the Jonang order generally.²⁵⁶

But it seems that Rendawa had another change of heart before the end of his life, and Stearns offers a translation of a section of Rendawa’s final text, Jewel Lamp Illuminating the Definitive Meaning of the Glorious Kālacakra, which contains the following passage advocating Dolpopa’s zhentong:

According to the tradition of [the Kālachakra] tantra, the classification of the two truths is like this: all the phenomena of the incidental stains that arise from the confusing circumstances of ignorance are relative truth, because they obscure the perception of thatness and are reference points for total affliction. Because that is also not established as the object of a perfect primordial awareness, it is empty of self-nature, a nihilistic emptiness, and an inanimate emptiness. All the phenomena of luminosity, the nature of original mind, are absolute truth. And not because it has been proven able to withstand reasoned analysis… It is the absolute because it is a nonconceptual field of experience.

This remarkable statement sounds like a reversal of the refutations Rendawa

²⁵⁵ Stearns, Buddha From Dolpo, p. 57.
offered against his Jonang teachers. As we will see, it also can be read as a very serious refutation of Tsongkhapa’s own potent critiques against Dolpopa’s zhentong. However, during the prime years of Rendawa’s career (when the young Tsongkhapa was presumably chief among his disciples), his position seems to have been quite different, formulating emptiness as a non-affirming negative. In fact, according to Stephen Batchelor, Tsongkhapa was staying at Reting Monastery near Lhasa in 1402 with Rendawa when he presented his distinctive views on emptiness in his *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path (Lam Rim Chenmo)*. Clearly Rendawa had reached the stage of refuting the Jonang view of emptiness and had not yet returned to that view (if the passage from his final text indeed indicates such a return). The formulation of the ultimate in the LRC emphasizes the lack of true existence of all phenomena whatsoever, even ultimate reality; this is the view Tsongkhapa would embrace and popularize. It is (not coincidentally) diametrically opposed to Dölpopa’s view, as we will see following a brief biographical sketch of Tsongkhapa.

All of this suggests that when Tsongkhapa began to study with Rendawa, the latter had not yet broken with his former master, since Nya Ön referred the bright young student to him. This is a fascinating development. Had the break already

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happened, but was it still so amicable that Nya Ön referred Tsongkhapa to Rendawa anyway? Given the virulence of Rendawa’s attacks against the Jonang school, this seems unlikely but remains a possibility. Had Rendawa not yet begun to question zhentong and a literal interpretation of the Kālachakra, or was his investigation of the Indian source texts still at an early stage in which he still accepted Dölpopa’s interpretations? Most speculative of all, did Rendawa’s conversations with the young but brilliant Tsongkhapa help shape his position vis à vis the Jonang doctrines? Jeffrey Hopkins, in his *Tsong-kha-pa’s Final Exposition of Wisdom*, argues that Tsongkhapa’s formulations of emptiness are at times directly responding to Dolpopa’s zhentong, though the latter is not named in the passages Hopkins cites, a common tactic in Tibetan polemical texts. This will be explored in detail below.

At any rate, Tsongkhapa sought Nya Ön Kunga Pel as a teacher, and he became a student of Rendawa, who would become his principal teacher. Significantly, Tsongkhapa received teachings on Madhyamaka from Rendawa. Dölpopa called his zhentong the Great Madhyamaka (*dBu-ma Chen-po*), and Tsongkhapa’s formulation of Madhyamaka would in many ways be a direct refutation of Dölpopa’s thought, as we will explore in more detail below. Also significantly, Tsongkhapa (unlike Rendawa in his middle years) continued to value

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258 Literal in the sense of not requiring interpretation, as Dölpopa treated the Kālacakra tantra, unlike Butön and his other non-zhentong contemporaries.
and practice the Kālachakra tantra, and that tantra remains important to the Gelukpa tradition (especially to the Dalai Lamas) to this day.\textsuperscript{259}

Tsongkhapa’s biography includes an account of his receiving and practicing the Kālachakra tantra from

Nyento, a learned scholar and practitioner of Kālachakra, who was also a disciple of Buton Rinpoche.\textsuperscript{260} … In their ensuing conversations the Master told Tsong Khapa that his predispositions would enable him to reach the pinnacle of the Completion Stage of that practice, and proceeded to give him the external, internal and secret Kālachakra teachings.\textsuperscript{261}

Tsongkhapa also received a transmission of the Kālachakra from “the Jonang lama Chokle Namgyel (Phyogs-las rNam-rgyal, 1306-1386),”\textsuperscript{262} another indication of his early openness to that tradition, but the Jonang interpretation of that tantra is not the one the Geluk tradition has embraced.

At some time after the age of 40 (following his complete awakening to the Middle Way philosophy described below), Tsongkhapa performed a retreat on the Kālachakra, with the result that “he had a vision of Kālachakra, who said that he would become a second Dharmaraja Chandrabhadra, the famous king who

\textsuperscript{259} Indeed, the eighteenth to nineteenth century Gelukpa scholar Losang Chökyi Nyima critiqued Dolpopa’s Great Madhyamaka based on the Kālachakra Tantra but maintained respect for the tantra itself. (Ruegg, \textit{Buddhist Philosophy}, pp. 297-321.)

\textsuperscript{260} Butön and Dölpopa were considered the two great Kālachakra masters of their day; Butön did not subscribe to Dölpopa’s interpretation of Madhyamaka on the basis of that tantra. (Find textual reference to cite?)

\textsuperscript{261} Thurman, \textit{Life and Teachings}, p. 15.

\textsuperscript{262} “Tsongkhapa,” Treasury of Lives.
received the Kālachakra system from Vajradhara….”263 Although Tsongkhapa himself may not have had political ambitions, this prophetic vision resonates with the Gelukpa order’s rise to full political supremacy several centuries later. Certainly his followers would have considered him a Dharmaraja, king of the dharma, and so included this detail in his hagiography. Clearly, Tsongkhapa’s quarrel was not with the Kālachakra tantra itself.

**Tsongkhapa’s Understanding of Madhyamaka as Visionary**

Tsongkhapa continued to seek teachings from various masters and to return to Rendawa. He performed many retreats of various lengths and began to teach at the request of his gurus. In addition, his secret autobiography relates that he entered into a guru-disciple relationship with Mañjuśrī:

> Tsongkhapa is said to have initially relied on his teachers to communicate with various deities on his behalf. His Nyingma teacher Namkha Gyeltsen, for example, was believed to be able to communicate with Vajrapāṇi and to have acted as an intermediary between the deity and Tsongkhapa…. In the same way Tsongkhapa initially relied on his teacher Umapa Pawo Dorje (*dbu ma pa dpa’ bo rdo rje*…), to act as an intermediary with Mañjuśrī.264

In time, Tsongkhapa began (he believed) to communicate directly with various buddhas, especially Mañjuśrī: “After intensive practice, many retreats and a great deal of meditation, Tsong Khapa received visions of many deities. He also

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constantly sought Manjushri’s advice on his choice of abode and study material.”

Despite his apparent success, however, “secretly he felt that it was vital for him to master the import of Nāgārjuna’s profound view and that scriptures and teachers were unable to provide him with these.” Accordingly, he chose (after consulting with Mañjuśrī) eight disciples to accompany him on a four-year retreat that has become a famous page in the history of the Gelukpa school. Some years later, after yet more study, practice, teaching, and retreat, Tsongkhapa

returned to Wolka Cholung, the scene of his four-year retreat, this time to undertake an intensive one-year retreat in which he concentrated upon the Middle Way schools of thought in greater detail. During this period he received a vision of Nāgārjuna with his five chief disciples known as the “Holy Father and Sons”. Buddhapalita, one of the sons and also the author of a famous composition by the same name, placed his text on Tsong Khapa’s head to give him inspiration and blessings. The Sustaining Buddha is the best commentary to Nāgārjuna’s Fundamental Stanzas on the Middle Way and the very next day while Tsong Khapa was perusing the eighteenth chapter of this commentary, he gained complete nonconceptual understanding of emptiness.

At last, in 1397 at the age of 40, Tsongkhapa had achieved what he considered a complete realization of emptiness.

As with Dölpopa’s realization of Madhyamaka, we see again in

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265 Thurman, Life and Teachings, p. 22.
266 Ibid., p. 16.
267 Ibid., p. 21.
268 Ibid., p. 96.
Tsongkhapa’s life story the intimate connection between visionary contact with significant figures and the formulation of an innovative version of Madhyamaka.

In both cases, the yogi went on to frame his version of emptiness in terms of authoritative (Indian) texts, but both men also seem to have felt completely convinced of the authenticity of their realizations because of their visionary context. In other words, the realization of emptiness was deeply personal, as were the polemics that distinguish the history of the zhentong discourse, whatever authors’ political and philosophical motivations may have been. Despite Dölpopa’s and Tsongkhapa’s appeals to texts and logic, they both staunchly advocated novel interpretations of Madhyamaka on the basis of peak religious experiences that were deeply and personally meaningful to them.

**Tsongkhapa’s Madhyamaka**

Tsongkhapa’s formulation of Madhyamaka differs from Dölpopa’s in significant ways. Two key differences for the purposes of a comparison with Dölpopa’s thought are that Tsongkhapa’s Madhyamaka does not use the language of the tantras in describing emptiness, and it characterizes ultimate truth as the non-affirming lack of inherent existence of all persons and phenomena whatsoever.

This section will examine these differences and Jeffrey Hopkins’ argument in *Tsong-kha-pa’s Final Exposition of Wisdom* that many of those differences are intentional refutations of Dölpopa, ending with a summary of what Hopkins sees as
the “root difference” between the two great masters: whether or not something “realized by pristine wisdom” is necessarily an ultimate.\textsuperscript{269}

As Jeffrey Hopkins demonstrates in a chart at the beginning of his \textit{Tsong-kha-pa’s Final Exposition of Wisdom} designating the sources of some quotations Tsongkhapa includes in his medium-length \textit{Lam Rim} section on special insight,\textsuperscript{270} out of 76 quotations found in the medium-length special insight section but not in the special insight section of the \textit{Lam-rim Chen-mo}, only one is from a tantra, the \textit{Guhyasamāja}. Citations of tantric literature in the \textit{Lam-rim Chen-mo} are comparably rare.\textsuperscript{271} Tsongkhapa’s Madhyamaka focuses on what Dölpopa labeled \textit{rangtong}: the analytical deconstruction of the practitioner’s assumptions about the inherent existence of persons and phenomena. Tsongkhapa, following Candrakīrti (the favorite of his master Rendawa and of Tibetan Madhyamaka scholars in general), insists on an ultimate reality that is realized as the simple lack of the (assumed) inherent existence of phenomena each time he formulates his view of emptiness. The following passage, from his 1415 \textit{Medium-Length Exposition of the Stages of the Path},\textsuperscript{272} clearly lays out his version of emptiness.

This procedure [a yogi’s refutation of an inherent self via reasoning] is the

\textsuperscript{269} Ibid., p. 361.
\textsuperscript{270} Hopkins, \textit{Final Exposition}, pp. 18-19.
\textsuperscript{271} Dolpopa, by contrast, draws freely from both sūtras and tantras as he frames his Great Madhyamaka. Hopkins’ \textit{Mountain Doctrine}, a translation of Dolpopa’s \textit{Ri Chos}, offers lists of sūtric and tantric sources cited in that work on pp. 25-29.
\textsuperscript{272} \textit{Skyes bu gsum gyi nyams su blang ba’i byang chub lam gyi rim pa}
excellent thought also of the protector Nāgārjuna because his *Sixty Stanzas of Reasoning* indicates that the apprehension of true existence—called the assertion of inherent existence—is abandoned through realizing the suchness of things, the absence of inherently existent production, by means of the reason of dependent-arising… and the perception that inherent existence does not exist does not occur without rejecting the object of the apprehension of things as inherently established.\(^{273}\)

As the last sentence of this selection highlights, Tsongkhapa strongly argues that the sense of *anything* as inherently existent—even buddha nature—must be rejected as the object of negation (*dgag*-*bya*). For Tsongkhapa, even the ultimate truth, emptiness, is not truly established, since it is nothing but a non-affirming negative, the lack of an inherent self of persons or phenomena that implies nothing to replace that negated self. A mere absence, he argues in his *Lam-rim Chen-mo*, cannot be reified as inherently existent:

…*[T]he sword of reasoning cuts through phenomena, revealing that they lack even a shred of the two selves [of persons and phenomena], and brings forth certainty about selflessness. So if a thing possessed of the two selves does not exist, then how could the non-existence which is its negation be established in reality? … [W]hen you see no truly existent thing anywhere at all, you also do not give rise to the conception that the nonexistence of that truly existent thing is something truly existent.\(^{274}\)

Thus, Tsongkhapa forcefully denies that ultimate reality is established in itself; it is simply the lack of inherent existence of all phenomena and selves whatsoever.

Reading between the lines, we see that Tsongkhapa is reading Dölpopa’s

\(^{273}\) Hopkins, *Final Exposition*, p. 55.

\(^{274}\) Tsongkhapa, *Great Treatise*, p. 343.
zhentong as positing the ultimate as an established self, whereas Dölpopa included the conceptual negation of an ordinary self as a preliminary stage to realizing the fully established buddha-nature which is zhentong. It is this second step that runs so counter to Tsongkhapa’s own formulation of Madhyamaka. Tsongkhapa’s concern is, firstly, according to his reading of sūtric Madhyamaka authors, that there can be no reified ultimate; and, second, that if a practitioner is left with any self that seems truly existent, she will have failed to cut the root of misapprehension that binds beings to cyclic existence.

As for the first concern, it is telling that Tsongkhapa’s formative visionary encounter related to Madhyamaka—unlike Dölpopa’s with the tantric deity Kālachakra—involved great sūtric masters of logic and reasoning. Buddhapalita (who in Tsongkhapa’s vision placed his text on Tsongkhapa’s head to bless him with final understanding of emptiness) helped to formulate the Prāśaṅgika school of Madhyamaka that Tibetans received from their Indian masters, and Tsongkhapa emphasized logical analysis as the supreme means of inquiry into the true establishment of phenomena. Indeed, one of his most significant innovations was his insistence on the capacity of conceptual thought (in this case, logical analysis) to point in the direction of the nonconceptual ultimate. (Again, this contradicts Dölpopa’s—and others’—assertions that conceptual consciousnesses are the wrong epistemological vehicles for fully and directly apprehending ultimate reality and
was a point that the nascent Geluk tradition had to defend against critique from other traditions.\textsuperscript{275} Tsongkhapa’s position clearly found support in his visionary contacts and was not simply a result of his being persuaded by texts and (human) teachers; for that reason, it makes sense that he would be so emotionally invested in disproving “wrong” forms of Madhyamaka.

**Refuting Zhentong**

Now that we have briefly reviewed Tsongkhapa’s presentation of Madhyamaka, we turn to Hopkins’ argument that Tsongkhapa often specifically refuted Dölpopa’s zhentong (though never by name). Two aspects of this intentional refutation that Hopkins highlights are Tsongkhapa’s emphases on textual traditions as needing to be kept separate (vs. Dölpopa’s reading tantras in light of sutras and the reverse) and on ultimate reality as a mere absence (vs. Dölpopa’s emphasizing presence).

\textsuperscript{275} See Klein, “Mental Concentration,” p. 271. In this article, Anne Klein mentions the objections of Nyingma (rNying-ma) scholars to the Gelukpa emphasis on conceptual thought as a means of approaching the non-conceptual ultimate reality. She also addresses this issue at length in *Unbounded Wholeness* in her and Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche’s discussion of the Bönpo Dzogchen text *Authenticity of Open Awareness* (gTan tshigs gal mdo rig pa’i tshad ma/ rDzogs chen gsgrags pa skor gsum/ gTan tshigs nges pa’i gal mdo/ Sensnyid rdzogs chen gyis tshad ma gtan tshigs sgra don gtan la dhab pa, Klein and Wangyal, *Unbounded Wholeness*, p. v, n. 1): “…[D]espite its attention to the categories of reasoning and causality, we see that (unlike in Geluk Sautrāntika or Sautrāntika-based Madhyamika theories of knowing, for example) there is for *Authenticity* and its associated texts no epistemological narrative by which conceptual reflection can exist in, cause, or actively catalyze authentic open awareness” (Anne Carolyn Klein and Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, *Unbounded Wholeness: Dzogchen, Bon, and the Logic of the Nonconceptual*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 140). In other words, Tsongkhapa’s work raised controversy before becoming philosophically (and politically) dominant in the centuries following his death, with plenty of objections from other schools of thought. The Sakya tradition in which Tsongkhapa was trained (and from which he sought to distinguish himself) also offered a mixed reaction to his work. Jose Cabezón, in his *Freedom from Extremes*, translates the great Sakya master Gorampa’s (*Go-rams-pa Bsdod-nams-sen-ge*, 1429-1489) refutations of both Dolpopa and Tsongkhapa. Cabezón’s introductory section on Tibetan polemics (pp. 18-33) offers an analysis of the Jonang and Gaden (*Dga’-ldan*, the early name for the Geluk tradition) efforts to distinguish their philosophical views from those of the Sakya tradition from which both separated.
...Tsong-kha-pa... reacted to Dol-po-pa’s dynamic synthesis with his own analysis of the classical texts, opposing such an amalgamation. … Writing a book under the rubric not of intertwining texts but of distinguishing them, he titled it Treatise Differentiating Interpretable and Definitive Meanings: The Essence of Eloquence—even the name of which can be seen to be in response to Dol-po-pa’s Mountain Doctrine, Ocean of Definitive Meaning. Tsong-kha-pa’s sense that the separateness of many texts needed to be emphasized comes to light when we consider the context of his reaction to Dol-po-pa’s synthesis.276

Tsongkhapa, of course, keeps sūtric and tantric descriptions of reality separate, and although I am comparing his (sūtric) Madhyamaka with Dölpopa’s tantric-flavored Madhyamaka, it should be noted that Tsongkhapa did write extensively on tantra. Tantric practice was and is an important part of the Gelukpa path, but when these two masters’ versions of Madhyamaka provide the locus of comparison, Dölpopa’s has a strong tantric aesthetic and presence-friendly language about ultimate reality that in Tsongkhapa’s work is restricted to works on tantra.

Beyond the simple absence of language from tantras or other “higher” vehicles (comparable to Dölpopa’s “permanent,” “truly established” ultimate or Longchenpa’s “basic space” [Tib. chos-dbyings]) in Tsongkhapa’s presentation of Madhyamaka, there are points at which he draws distinctions between the perspectives of different authors even within that general system of tenets. One in particular relates to the fundamental disagreement over whether something perceived by an ultimate mind must be ultimately established. In the

276 Hopkins, Final Exposition, p. 270.
“Supramundane Special Insight” section of Tsongkhapa’s *Medium-Length Exposition*, he “distinguishes between many different usages of the term ‘ultimate’ in the literature of the Middle Way School.”

Though indeed the object, the noumenon, is taken as the ultimate, there are also many descriptions of the subject—the rational consciousness—as an ultimate, as set forth in:

- Jñānagarbha’s *Differentiating the Two Truths*: Because of being undeceiving, a rational [consciousness] is an ultimate.
- and moreover in Kamalashīla’s *Illumination of the Middle*: The statements also that production and so forth do not ultimately exist are asserted to mean the following: All consciousnesses arisen from correct hearing, thinking, and meditating are non-erroneous subjects; hence, they are called “ultimates”….

Tsongkhapa adds a third textual authority: “The thought of Bhāvaviveka’s *Blaze of Reasoning* in describing the ultimate as twofold—a non-conceptual pristine wisdom and a wisdom concordant with that—and the thought of Kamalashīla’s *Illumination of the Middle* in describing two ultimates are the same.”

Tsongkhapa is thus carefully separating the words and intentions of these important Madhyamaka authors even as he establishes his claim that a rational consciousness can be an ultimate truth.

According to Hopkins, Tsongkhapa’s second major area of refutation is his insistence that emptiness is the lack of inherent existence, not a permanent buddha-

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277 Ibid., p. 345.
278 Ibid.
279 Ibid., p. 346.
nature empty of adventitious stains: “In order to undermine Dol-po-pa's view that the ultimate reality of the mind is endowed with ultimate Buddha qualities of body, speech, and mind, [Tsongkhapa] attempted to show—through some of the very works that his predecessor cites as sources—that ultimate reality is a mere emptiness through concentration on which those qualities could be engendered.”

Dölpopa, in his *Mountain Doctrine*, writes, “It is said that the noumenal thoroughly established nature exists because the emptiness that is the [ultimate] nature of non-entities…—due to being just the fundamental nature—is not empty of its own entity, and it is also said that it does not exist because of being empty even of other-powered natures.”

Thus, according to him, the ultimate is established. (Although this passage does not mention why it is established, Dölpopa argues elsewhere that this is because it is experienced by an ultimate consciousness, primordial wisdom.)

Tāranātha (a later Jonang luminary) takes Dölpopa’s position a step further and states that the ultimate is “truly established or truly existent” (emphases mine). Tāranātha elaborates on what it means for the ultimate to be truly established in his *Essence of Other-Emptiness*:

The pristine wisdom of emptiness, beyond proliferation, truly exists in …

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280 Ibid.
unreal ideational consciousness in the manner of being its noumenon. …[U]ltimate truths are also “devoid of the two extremes”: emptiness is truly established, and all phenomena included within the two, apprehended-object and apprehending-subject, such as ideation and so forth, are without true existence, and therefore [ultimate truths] are beyond the two extremes of existence and non-existence, permanence and annihilation.

…The noumenal wisdom is primordially established by way of its own nature and never changes; hence, it is not empty of its own entity and always exists.\footnote{Tāranātha, \textit{The Essence of Other-Emptiness}, translated by Jeffrey Hopkins, Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publicaions, 2007, pp. 81-82.}

When Tāranātha calls emptiness (i.e., the ultimate truth) “truly established,” he clearly is not arguing for a truly established self of persons or phenomena. It is the “noumenon” of conventional reality and thoughts, unchanging because it is “beyond proliferation.” Notably, Tāranātha, following Dölpopa, considers the ultimate truly established “by way of its own nature,” and Dölpopa held it to withstand reasoning, a position Tsongkhapa critiqued.

In Tsongkhapa’s refutation of this position, we have an instance of his using one of Dölpopa’s sources for his doctrine and offering an explanation that counters his predecessor directly (though not by name). In Jeffrey Hopkins’ words,

Contrary to Dol-po-pa’s view that other-emptiness is ultimately established in the sense that it can withstand analysis, Tsong-kha-pa holds that everything, including the ultimate, is not established because of not being able to withstand analysis…: “Therefore, when [an ultimate truth] is analyzed with the reasoning investigating whether it is truly established or not, it is not truly established in the sense of being able to withstand
Tsongkhapa then specifically refutes Dölpopa’s interpretation of a citation by Jñānagarbha:

Moreover, with respect to the master Jñānagarbha’s statement [in his *Commentary on the “Differentiation of the Two Truths”*], “Because of being a truth ultimately, it is an ultimate truth,” since he also describes a rational consciousness as the ultimate, he is saying that what is non-deceptive in its perspective is a truth. His thought is not that [an ultimate truth] is truly established in the sense of being able to withstand analysis because in his text the true establishment of all phenomena is refuted.  

Tsongkhapa draws the following absurd conclusion from Dölpopa’s claim that ultimate reality must be ultimately established to avoid the extreme of non-existence:

…[T]o propound [as Döl-po-pa does] that “if the ultimate is not ultimately established, then a conventionality is not conventionally established,” is to [absurdly] say that if a negative of truth [that is, a negative of true establishment] is not truly established, then the subjects that are the bases of the negation would be truly established.  

As we saw above, Dölpopa’s ultimate is buddha nature, an affirming negative rather than the mere negation of inherent existence (as is Tsongkhapa’s), so this absurd consequence misses its mark. Nonetheless, the barb is clearly aimed at Dölpopa.

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285 Ibid., p. 332.  
286 Ibid., p. 333.
Another instance of Tsongkhapa’s directly refuting one of Dölpopa’s textual sources reframes a citation from Nāgārjuna’s *Sixty Stanzas of Reasoning*, “only nirvāṇa is a truth,” and “statements in Nāgārjuna’s *Praise of the Element of Attributes*” that Dölpopa uses to “[support] his notion that the mode of subsistence ultimately or truly exists.”²⁸⁷ In his *Mountain Doctrine*, Dölpopa writes, “…[T]he body of the final mode of subsistence, reduced to one, is the ultimate body. It is said that, except for the body of the element of attributes, no phenomenon exists in the dispositional mode of subsistence; [Nāgārjuna’s *Sixty Stanzas of Reasoning*] says, ‘Only nirvāṇa is a truth,’ and ‘There are no phenomena that are not enlightenment’….”²⁸⁸

Tsongkhapa refutes this position in his *Middle Length Exposition* as follows:

…Nāgārjuna’s *Sixty Stanzas of Reasoning* says:

These two, cyclic existence and nirvāṇa,
Do not [inherently] exist.
The thorough knowledge itself of cyclic existence
Is called “nirvāṇa.”

He explains that both cyclic existence and nirvāṇa are not inherently existent and that [theemptiness which is] just the object of the knowledge that cyclic existence is not inherently established is posited as nirvāṇa. Therefore, how could this be a position asserting that the emptiness that is the absence of true existence of cyclic existence is an annihilatory emptiness?²⁸⁹

²⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 337.
²⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 338-9.
Also, Dölpopa cites Nāgārjuna’s *Praise of the Element of Attributes* to support his characterization of buddha nature (the *tathāgatagarbha*, what Hopkins translates as “the matrix-of-One-Gone-Thus”) as the definitive teaching supported by both second and third turning sūtras and commentaries:

 [...] although a Buddha in which all qualities such as the powers and so forth are integrally complete exists primordially in all sentient beings, the defilements are extinguished through striving at the path clearing away obstructions, but the clear light is not consumed; for example,]

When a garment [made from a hard mineral] that is stained

With various defilements and to be cleansed [of defilement] by fire

Is put in fire, its stains

Are burned but it is not.

So, similarly, with regard to the mind of clear light

Which has the stains of desire and so forth,

Its stains are burned by the fire of wisdom [on the path]

But [since it does not burn the clear light, the qualities of the clear light do not become non-existent the way iron is consumed or worn away, and hence] that [path] does not [burn away] the clear light.

…[Ultimately the element of attributes cannot be refuted;

For example,] just as water existing on the sphere of earth

Resides [in its nature] without defilement,

So the pristine wisdom inside afflicting emotions

Similarly [always] abides without defilement [never suitable to be non-
The text in brackets is Dölpopa’s interlinear commentary on Nāgārjuna’s verses, showing his process of rereading familiar texts through the lens of zhentong. (To be fair to Dölpopa, every Tibetan commentator on Madhyamaka, Tsongkhapa included, engaged in a similar process of highlighting some aspects of key texts and downplaying others or declaring them “interpretable” in meaning.)

Tsongkhapa refutes such uses of Nāgārjuna’s text with the following passage:

…Nāgārjuna’s *Praise of the Element of Attributes* itself says:

Through the three called impermanence, [coarse] emptiness,  
And suffering, the mind is purified.  
The doctrine supremely purifying the mind  
Is naturelessness [that is, the absence of inherent existence].

and:

The naturelessness of phenomena  
Should be meditated upon as the element of attributes.

He says that the absence of an inherently established nature in these phenomena is the element of attributes that is the object of meditation, and he says that just meditation on it is the supreme purifier of the mind. Therefore, how could it be suitable to cite this [*Praise of the Element of Attributes*] for the position that the emptiness that is the absence of inherent establishment of phenomena appearing in this way is an annihilatory
emptiness and that, therefore, a truly existent emptiness separate from it is to be posited as the emptiness that is the object of meditation!291

This criticism in particular seems to be directed against Dölpopa’s reading of this line.

Hopkins offers an example of Tsongkhapa’s specific repudiation of Dölpopa on a topic relevant to the question of whether conventional consciousnesses (such as inferential cognizers, Tib. *rjes-dpag*) would be appropriate means of apprehending ultimate truth. Dölpopa says in his *Mountain Doctrine* that “mistaken karmic appearances of sentient beings are the private phenomena just of sentient beings;… they utterly do not occur in the mode of subsistence…. Consequently, they are not established even as mere appearances to a cognition of the mode of subsistence, and appearing in the face of mistake does not fulfill the role of appearing in the mode of subsistence.”292 In other words, conventional appearances offer no accurate approach to ultimate reality because they are completely mistaken. Dölpopa then supports this statement with a citation from Śāntideva.

Dölpopa, who considers conventional minds to engage only with conventional reality (and thus not to offer a stepping-stone to ultimate reality), contends, in Hopkins’ words, that “[t]hese mistaken phenomena do not even

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291 Ibid., p. 339.
appear to a pristine wisdom that has extinguished mistakenness.” In other words, conventional phenomena simply cannot point to the true nature of reality because imaginary, conventional phenomena are themselves the obstructions to primordial awareness:

The holy master [Āryadeva] says that just as when one has awakened from sleep, dream appearances vanish and just as when the eyes become free from visual defect, appearances of hairs and so forth vanish, so to pristine wisdom… the phenomena of the three realms, minds and mental factors as well as their objects and so forth do not appear, because for pristine wisdom those as well as their seeds have stopped, been extinguished, and have vanished.

A given conclusion about the ultimate is true or not true for Dölpopa not based on whether the rules of conventional logic support it but on the type of mind establishes the existence or nonexistence of a phenomenon. The question of the relationship between (in the words of Tibetan epistemology) conventional and ultimate speaks strongly to current questions about peak religious experiences, so we will examine this topic in more detail, both later in this chapter and in the conclusion.

Tsongkhapa, whose philosophical and contemplative system emphasizes the value of conceptual thought and logic as a means to realizing the ultimate, countered with a different definition of conventional truths (Skt. saṃvṛti, Tib. Kun-
Chandrakīrti’s *Clear Words* describes three meanings for *saṃvṛti*—(1) obstructing suchness, (2) mutually dependent objects, and (3) worldly conventions. Since he explains the last as having the character of object of expression and means of expression, knower and object of knowledge, and so forth, it is not just subjective conventions—consciousnesses and expressions—but also objects of knowledge and objects of expression.\(^{296}\)

This passage seeks to establish Tsongkhapa’s emphasis on conventional valid cognition and to refute the kind of claim we saw from Dölpopa above.

Tsongkhapa draws a distinction between “conventionally existent” and “objects that are only imagined to exist”\(^{297}\) (like the horns of a rabbit). He then goes on in the same text to refute a version of the claim that conventional phenomena are in no sense “true” that sounds more specifically like Dölpopa’s descriptions of conventional truths. As Hopkins puts it, “Without mentioning Dol-po-pa by name, Tsong-kha-pa concludes in his *Illumination* that these distinctions refute the opinion that existing for a mistaken consciousness is the meaning of existing conventionally.”\(^{298}\)

In the Special Insight section of his *Lam-rim Chen-mo*, Tsongkhapa builds on this epistemological groundwork to posit logical analysis (which relies on conventional phenomena) as the final arbiter of true establishment:

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\(^{297}\) Ibid., p. 328.

\(^{298}\) Ibid.
A proper analysis of whether these phenomena—forms and such—exist, or are produced, in an objective sense is what we call “a line of reasoning that analyzes reality,” or “a line of reasoning that analyzes the final status of being.” …When such a line of reasoning analyzes or searches for production and so forth, it does not find a trace of them; they are “unable to withstand analysis.” …Since such analysis does not find production and so forth, it refutes production, cessation, and so forth that exist essentially, that is, in reality. For if they existed essentially, that analysis would have to find them, but it does not.\(^{299}\)

Of course, using analysis to cut through mistaken assumptions about inherent existence goes back to the earliest strata of Buddhist traditions, and Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti both emphasized the use of such techniques in their philosophical works.

**Implications for Contemplative Studies**

This disagreement between Dölpopa and Tsongkhapa speaks to larger concerns relevant to contemplative epistemologies. To what extent is, can, or should conceptual awareness be involved in a practitioner’s quest for a nonconceptual ultimate?

Dölpopa, as we saw in chapter two, held that the negation of conventional phenomena as ultimately established was a necessary part of the path from ignorance to complete awakening, but he considered this movement to be a

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\(^{299}\) Tsong-kha-pa. *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*. Edited by Joshua W.C. Cutler and Guy Newland. Vol. 3. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2002, pp. 156-7. This, however, does not refute their merely conventional existence, just their inherent existence as imputed by mistaken awareness, as the context of this passage makes clear. In this way, Tsongkhapa respects conventional reality by not negating mere appearance.
preliminary stage leading (ideally) to the apprehension of a truly established luminous mind. This primordial awareness is Dölpopa’s final arbiter of conventional vs. ultimate phenomena and selves: what it perceives as truly existent (i.e., buddha-nature) is fully established, while what it does not perceive (i.e., all conventional phenomena and selves) is not truly established. This unmistaken awareness, in Dölpopa’s system, cannot be generated by sūtric practice but requires yogic breath-cessation techniques such as those taught in the Kālachakra system. (The same, of course, could be said for various forms of Highest Yoga Tantra, including the Kālachakra system, that Tsongkhapa practiced but whose distinctive terms he did not incorporate into his presentation of Madhyamaka.) Conceptual consciousnesses, for Dölpopa (and other Tibetan masters), are necessary to help erode false apprehensions of conventional phenomena as truly existent, but they cannot generate the cognitive state of full awakening.

Tsongkhapa, by contrast, holds that emptiness must be realized by means of an analytical investigation following Madhyamaka logical guidelines, which then would dissolve into a nonconceptual apprehension of the ultimate. This analysis begins with a conceptual understanding of emptiness, and as the analysis continues, the practitioner’s understanding of emptiness becomes less and less conceptual, with more frequent moments of valid inferential cognitions of emptiness until finally the conceptual image drops away altogether and the
practitioner’s awareness is nonconceptual direct perception. Tantric practice, according to Tsongkhapa, is simply a faster way of achieving this essentially sūtric model of realizing the lack of inherent existence of selves and phenomena.

…[T]he Perfection Vehicle practitioner on the path of seeing and the Lower Vehicle practitioner on the path of seeing are no different in terms of their direct experience of reality…. Here [in tantra], the direct perception of reality is very quick indeed. But not only is it fast, you also attain a collection of excellent qualities superior to those of other Great Vehicle paths. … The difference between this path and the other two paths in eliminating the obscurations to omniscience is one life in these degenerate times as compared to three countless eons. Similarly, there is a great difference in the speed of elimination of the obscurations of afflictions.  

And yet Tsongkhapa, like Dölpopa, held that a sūtric understanding of emptiness functioned as an important preliminary to tantric practice.

Tsongkhapa’s presentation of Madhyamaka, unlike Dölpopa’s, steers clear of tantric terms, but the proto-Geluk master’s engagement with tantric practice was no less profound than his controversial predecessor’s. Tsongkhapa frames the mind of clear light—the most subtle element of the body/mind complex realized through the most advanced esoteric practices—in language that sounds reminiscent of Dölpopa’s zhentong. In the context of a commentary on the Guhyasamāja Tantra, Tsongkhapa quotes Nāgārjuna’s Pañcakrama’s description of all the buddhas’ exhortation to Prince Siddhartha on the night of his awakening: “This

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meditative absorption [on “the great emptiness”] is not pure; through it you will not attain the ultimate. Concentrate on the clear light, which is supreme and like space.” The account continues with the prince’s attainment: “The wonderful all-empty state, a great wisdom bright and clear, by the kindness of the gurus, he clearly sees.”

Tsongkhapa comments on a following quotation,

…during the times of the three appearances, mistaken dualistic appearances exist, and they cannot be totally eradicated until the imprints of dualistic appearances are completely purified. In order to achieve purification by eradicating them totally, meditation is necessary with the realization of the meaning of reality by innate bliss, and this is not found anywhere except in the highest vehicle [i.e., Highest Yoga Tantra].

Tsongkhapa’s presentation of the Guhyasamāja tantra describes the process of this realization in language reminiscent of Dölpopa’s: As the tantric practitioner brings the subtle levels of the energy body under control, the winds supporting grosser levels of consciousness are subdued, with “mind dissolving into states of mind, states of mind dissolving into close-to-attainment, and close-to-attainment dissolving into clear light.…” The mind of clear light, as the very most subtle element of the human mind/energy/body complex, is not a reified entity, but it is nevertheless the only element not to dissipate on the road to buddhahood. Without going too deeply into the rich literature on the mind of clear light, as presented in Anuttarayoga Tantras (Highest Yoga Tantras), we can see that in the end

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301 Ibid., p. 464 and n. 838.
302 Ibid., p. 467.
303 Ibid., p. 477.
Tsongkhapa’s emptiness is far from the nihilistic emptiness Dölpopa accuses “rangtongpas” of presenting. Tsongkhapa does follow the tantric traditions in presenting the most basic level of reality and/or the human in language that suggests presence; he simply rejects such language in his formulation of Madhyamaka.

Another contribution to a contemplative epistemology is the Tibetan (and broader Buddhist) emphasis on practice as a transformative path. Buddhology\textsuperscript{304} rests on the premise that beings are capable of multiple levels of cognition and that with the proper training, anyone—even someone who begins by living almost entirely through conventional, conceptual modes of apprehending reality—can reformulate awareness in such a way that it opens to levels of reality inaccessible to our accustomed levels of mind. As we have seen in passing, both Dölpopa’s and Tsongkhapa’s views of the ultimate nature of reality have implications for their versions of the transformative path.

Tsongkhapa’s emphasis on logical analysis as the favored cognitive means for entering into a correct view of reality reflects his overall view of conceptual consciousnesses as indispensible for the spiritual path—though they only serve to make possible a nonconceptual realization of emptiness rather than constituting such a realization themselves. Anne Klein, in “Mental Concentration and the

\textsuperscript{304} That is, theories of awakening
Unconditioned” and in the introduction and conclusion of Knowledge and Liberation, describes the Gelukpas’ (followers of Tsongkhapa) view of the relationship between conceptual and non-conceptual mental states:

Progress toward [“direct cognition of impermanence and selflessness”] is said to have three broad phases: hearing, thinking, and meditating. Both hearing and thinking, as well as many stages within meditation, involve various levels of conceptuality. … The shimmering mental image of, for example, …a correct space-like image of emptiness, is also conceptual. These various modes of conceptual thought are stages on the way to direct perception, which is by definition non-conceptual and can even be, in the case of a direct cognition of emptiness, non-dualistic.305

In other words, the practitioner in this system begins by internalizing the “correct” verbal definition of emptiness and becoming familiar with the method of logical inquiry which refutes inherent existence. Through that process, she becomes able to grasp the meaning-generality (don-spyi) of, for instance, impermanence, which is not verbal but which remains conceptual.306 Klein suggests that the process of recognizing subtle impermanence begins with a meaning-generality; the practitioner would then reflect on examples of coarse impermanence such as a candle flame going out or the death of a loved one. “Through reflection, one develops an image of coarse impermanence.” One then reflects on the momentary change behind such dramatic moments and in that way clarifies one’s understanding of subtle impermanence. “Formerly, the image of impermanence

305 Klein, Knowledge and Liberation, p. 206.
306 Anne Klein in comments to author, October 2013.
was mixed with actual impermanence; at the time of direct perception, the imagistic part falls away and one is left with a direct cognition of momentary disintegration.”

With time and practice, the properly understood meaning-generality becomes familiar, and the experience of observing phenomena to determine whether or not they exist inherently becomes more natural.

In tandem with this intellectual development, the practitioner also develops the mind’s capacity for calm abiding, which produces a consciousness stable and powerful enough to bring the logical inquiry to a more subtle level, at which point it becomes possible for the practitioner’s increasingly subtle and less-conceptual mind to dissolve altogether into a nonconceptual experience of emptiness.

Through Gelukpa descriptions of this process, we see how broad a range of mental states can be called conceptual, from the instructions that induce the meaning-generality to the mental image of impermanence to the most subtle image that finally gives way to a fully nonconceptual apprehension of impermanence.

Thus, following Tsongkhapa’s insistence on analysis as a prerequisite to a full realization of emptiness, the Gelukpas held a correct conceptual understanding of emptiness to be an essential step along the path to complete understanding.

Using this tool of analytical reasoning (understanding themselves to be upholding

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309 Anne Klein in comments to author, October 2013.
Indian Buddhist traditions), this lineage interrogates everything including buddha-
nature and finds it empty of inherent existence.

According to Klein’s presentation of the Gelukpa system, “Emptiness is a
non-affirming negative, a mere absence of an inherently existent self that never did
exist but, until its absence is actually cognized, is deeply conceived to exist. To
realize emptiness is to realize the lack of such a self.”310 Thus, for a student
practicing this system, a concept like Dölpopa’s zhentong that held anything as
truly established would provide a false refuge from the liberating realization of
emptiness. For this reason, Tsongkhapa’s critique of that concept is fierce and
unequivocal. For his part, Dölpopa considered such a non-affirming version of
ultimate reality to be a nihilistic misreading of the core texts; as we saw in the last
chapter, he held the negation of conventional reality to be merely a necessary
preliminary to realizing zhentong as an affirming negative.

Thus, both Dölpopa and Tsongkhapa include analysis and direct perception
as vital on the path to ultimate reality, and both highly value sūtra and tantra, but
they make significantly different moves as they present their respective systems.
Part of this, no doubt, is due to the training they received (both largely in the Sakya
tradition) before their respective visionary receptions of Madhyamaka. Another
part of this difference is certainly due to the very different natures of their

310 Klein, Knowledge and Liberation, p. 215.
respective realizations of emptiness: by means of intensive practice of the 
Kālacakra tantra (and identification with Kalkī Puṇḍarīka) on the part of Dölpopa 
and by means of the visionary blessings of Buddhapalita and other sūtric masters in 
Tsonkha’s case. The fact that both men experienced these encounters or deep 
identities as completely veridical and authoritative makes the versions of 
Madhyamaka that arise from such experiences an intensely personal matter. Now 
we will shift away from philosophical debates and these two authors’ contributions 
to a Tibetan contemplative epistemology to turn to a separate element involved in 
shaping the history of the zhentong discourse: politics.

The political setting of the suppression of zhentong

From Dölpopa’s time to the mid-seventeenth century, his formulation of emptiness 
made a powerful impact on the Tibetan philosophical scene. We have already seen 
how his thought helped to shape Tsongkhapa’s work; there were also masters in 
other lineages who engaged Dölpopa’s work deeply. But with the rise of the 
Gelukpa government in Lhasa in the seventeenth century, Dölpopa’s voice would 
be excluded from the philosophical discourse of Central Tibet for over a century 
and his influence obscured. Some account of Tibetan history is necessary to 
understand the political reaction against zhentong and the Jonang order. As we 
saw above, Tsongkhapa objected vehemently on philosophical grounds to 
Dölpopa’s zhentong, but he and his nascent Gelukpa order (called Gandenpa at that
time after their premier monastery, Ganden) were at that time only one of several religious groups competing for philosophical and political dominance. However, the Gelukpas would gain political ascendancy in the mid-seventeenth century and use the military might of their Mongol allies to suppress the Jonang (and Karma Kagyü) orders in order to eliminate their rivals for Tibetan political power and for the hearts and minds of the various Mongol tribes. This was possible due to a shift in the basic nature of Tibetan politics from the late thirteenth century to the seventeenth, with power shifting from the aristocracy to religious figures and increasingly often to lineages of reincarnate lamas based in monasteries that also functioned as regional power centers.\(^{311}\)

The beginning of this shift occurred when Sakya Pandita (Kunga Gyaltsen, 1182-1251), the head of the Sakya school, was summoned to the court of the Mongol Prince Godan to serve both as a spiritual preceptor and as a Tibetan leader who could submit that country to Mongol influence. Mongol policy at that time was to administer client territories through local religious figures in order to undermine the power of the traditional ruling class,\(^{312}\) and their arrangement with the Sakya order was typical of their pattern of engagement with the Tibetans over the next several centuries, during which time the Tibetans were unable to form a cohesive political unit without outside intervention, first from the Mongols and

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\(^{312}\) Wylie, "Mongol Conquest," p. 112.
then from the Manchurians.

Also, it is important to note that the end of Sakya Pandita’s life falls only about 40 years before the birth of Dölpopa and a century before Tsongkhapa was born. As Jose Cabezón notes in the introduction to *Freedom From Extremes*, during this period, the Sakya tradition as well as their nascent Jonang and Ganden (later Gelukpa) offshoots were eager to distinguish their doctrinal formulations, in part in order to appeal to sponsors (in their cases, mostly Tibetan aristocratic families) and also, no doubt, with the objective of supporting practitioners in their lineages with internally coherent contemplative training systems. Thus, the political dynamics (described below) provide a necessary backdrop to understand the development of the relationship between the Jonang order and the Gelukpas who would one day suppress them. One additional theme deserves to be highlighted here: Geoffrey Samuel’s *Civilized Shamans*, which succinctly summarizes the following history, also makes the case that in Tibet political and spiritual or “shamanic” power became fused in the person of the lama. He traces this fusion to the earliest period of Tibet’s engagement with Indian Buddhism, but it seems that this combined power developed to become the dominant political pattern of the land from the thirteenth century to the ascent of the Gelukpas to power in Central Tibet in the late seventeenth century, at which point it became

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firmly established. Thus, the period treated below represents a time of gradual transition from a political system with the aristocracy as holders of political power and sponsors of religious centers to the empowerment of religious centers and their (increasingly reincarnate) lama leaders themselves.

Sakya Pandita entered into the first Tibetan relationship with a Mongol ruler after receiving Prince Godan’s summons in 1244.\footnote{This summons came shortly after the Mongols learned of the Tibetan state and sent small parties to test the Tibetans’ defenses. The Tibetans at that time were too fragmented and militarily weak to consider challenging the formidable Mongols. (For revision, find textual reference.)} Sakya Pandita began his journey to the Mongol capital of Kansu, Lan-chou, in that year, accompanied by his newly-ordained nephew Phagpa Lodro Gyaltsen and Chakna, another nephew. He arrived in 1247 and became the prince’s religious preceptor, serving as a highly-placed missionary in the Mongol government. When he passed away in 1251, he passed his mantle to Phagpa, who continued the mission with gusto, teaching Godan’s successor, Kublai Khan, and initiating him into tantric practices.\footnote{Shakabpa, Political History, pp. 62-64.} The first Karmapa Lama, Karmapa Pakshi, also visited the Mongol court during the time of Phagpa’s residence there, and his order (the Karma Kagyü) would remain on good terms with Mongol tribes for several centuries.\footnote{Ibid., p. 65.} Meanwhile, the Tibetans were governed through Sakya officials, and their control over the country was held together despite regional divisions by the Mongol forces behind the regents. As Snellgrove and Richardson relate,
So long as the strong hand of Kublai (died 1265) and his successor Timur (died 1307) was in control, the Sa-skya Viceroy [of Tibet] (Ti-Shih) had the backing of firm authority. But thereafter the Emperors, while inviting leading lamas from all over Tibet, paid very little attention to the affairs in the country. Thus with the declining power of the Yüan dynasty the power of Sa-skya also declined, hastened by internal dissensions resulting from the system of succession by birth and by the… large numbers of expectant heirs, not all of whom could be satisfied.318

In addition, after the death of Kublai Khan, Mongol favor grew to include the Karma Kagyü sect, and Rangjung Dorje, the third Karmapa, was invited to the Mongol court in China twice.319 Thus, by the early fourteenth century, the pattern of religious leaders and institutions in Tibet wielding power with foreign backing had begun in earnest.

Also, the early fourteenth century is the period when the Jonang school was still digesting (and defending) Dölpopa’s zhentong; Rendawa was alive and probably still a supporter of zhentong, and Tsongkhapa would be born mid-century. In other words, the philosophical ferment of the time echoed, and perhaps was furthered by, the political unrest surrounding the end of the Sakya rule. After all, the nascent Jonang and Geluk traditions were vying for philosophical prestige, which could easily translate to financial and political support from Tibetan or Mongol lay leaders. In the context of describing what qualities helped new Tibetan sects succeed, Cabezón says, “The financial support of patrons was

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318 Snellgrove and Richardson, Cultural History, pp. 151-2.
319 Ibid., pp. 66-67.
essential, but this, in turn, depended upon other factors: the charisma and vision of the founding figure; the commitment, persistence, and intellectual abilities of his successors; the public perception of the order’s monks… and so forth.”

As we saw above, the founders of the Jonang and Geluk schools had legitimate philosophical and contemplative differences, which their successors inherited and continued to clarify, so the fourteenth century conflict between these two orders was by no means simply a political power play. However, as Cabezón points out in his introduction to *Freedom From Extremes*, the virulent polemics of Tibetan philosophical discourse were sometimes accompanied by physical violence. For instance, in 1290 the ruling Sakya sect destroyed the seat of the Drikung (‘Bri-khung) Kagyü sect, their old rivals. During the period from the end of the Sakya rule (early fourteenth century) to the beginning of the Gelukpa government based in Lhasa (late seventeenth century), sectarian violence increasingly made the patronage and protection of secular leaders and/or the outright sectarian control of political power necessary for survival, as the following brief sketch of this period demonstrates.

Following the Sakya ascendancy in Tibet, Changchub Gyaltsen (1302–1364 or 1371) came to power, initiating the Phamo Drupa dynasty. He was affiliated

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320 Cabezón, *Freedom From Extremes*, p. 42.
36 Snellgrove and Richardson, *Cultural History*, p. 152.
with the Kagyü sect, and once he had consolidated his hold on power in Central Tibet in 1354, he attacked Sakya monastery itself.\(^{322}\) He received the title Tai Situ from the waning Yüan dynasty but received no military help from the Mongols and emphasized the Tibetan character of his rule.\(^ {323}\) In 1409, Tsongkhapa—supported by Drakpa Gyaltsen, then the Phamo Drupa ruler of Central Tibet—instituted the annual prayer festival (monlam) in Lhasa and built Ganden monastery, the first (retrospectively identified) Gelukpa order.\(^ {324}\) Clearly, in these very early days of the proto-Geluk tradition, the Kagyü-affiliated rulers of Ü (\(dBus\)) and Tsang (\(gTsang\)) could support a promising young group of practitioners without concern for sectarian issues. Clearly also, Tsongkhapa and his disciples appealed to secular rulers and built their fledgling order with an eye toward maintaining the necessary political support. According to Samuel, the emerging Geluk tradition recognized the political importance of its monasteries very early on: “The Gelukpa order rapidly realized the political significance of the large bodies of \(trapa\) [monks] in its \(gompa\) [monasteries], and many monasteries were built in strategically important places.”\(^ {325}\) One example is Tashi Lhunpo, built by a follower of Tsongkhapa who would be posthumously recognized as the First Dalai Lama, Gendun Drup (\(dGe-'dun-grup\), 1391-1475).

\(^{321}\) Ibid., p. 153.
\(^{322}\) Ibid.
\(^{323}\) Ibid.
\(^{324}\) Shakabpa, Political History, pp. 83-85.
\(^{325}\) Samuel, Civilized Shamans, p. 514.
Taking advantage of the complex pattern of loyalties among the nobility and the absence at that time of uncompromising opposition to the new order, he founded in 1445 another monastery, bKra-shis-lhun-po (Tashilhunpo) near Shigatse on the very edge of the territory dominated by the powerful princes of Rin-spungs [Rinpung] who had the militant support of the Karma-pa Red Hat Hierarch [i.e., the Sharmapa Lama].

The Gelukpa order, forming at a time of political instability and sectarian tensions, clearly had to make savvy decisions as it established itself as a new religio-political power in Central Tibet.

From the fifteenth to late seventeenth centuries, the Geluk school found consistent sponsorship and grew in importance both politically and philosophically. They became dominant in Ü, while the Karma Kagyü received the support of the Rimpung dynasty in Tsang. Samuel summarizes this period concisely:

A succession of ‘strong men’ were effective rulers over one or another central Tibetan province [Ü and Tsang] for a few decades each. After their deaths, the dynasties they founded rapidly collapsed, as regional powers established their independence and the central administration rapidly became nominal. … It seemed as if no regime was capable of effectively governing more than one of the two central provinces directly, and that the other province routinely became a center of opposition to the ruling regime.

During the period from the death of Changchub Gyaltsen (as noted above, the charismatic founder of the Phamo Drupa dynasty) to the ascension of the Gelukpas

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326 Snellgrove and Richardson, Cultural History, p. 182.
327 Samuel, Civilized Shamans, p. 501.
to power in the mid-seventeenth century, there was often no effective central
government over Ü and Tsang, with regional leaders (lay or monastic) governing
and often squabbling with each other. The eastern provinces of Kham and Amdo
were culturally affiliated but effectively politically independent from the various
governments of Central Tibet.

During this same period, the Jonang school also experienced growth and
political entanglements. As mentioned above, Rendawa launched a bitter attack
against Dölpopa’s zhentong in the late fourteenth century, and his student
Tsongkhapa formed his powerful version of Madhyamaka with Dölpopa as one of
his major (but usually unnamed) adversaries. By the fifteenth century, the Geluk
critique of zhentong was in full force in an intellectual climate that could be
ciaustically polemical at times—but the Geluk lamas lacked sufficient political
influence to silence their rivals by force at that time.328 Thus, the Jonang school
continued to develop until the mid-seventeenth century.

According to a history of the school written by its last luminary, Tāranātha
(1575–1634), Dölpopa’s teachings flourished in Tsang for about 80 years after his
death. “After that point, Tāranātha said, the teaching of those scriptures [on which
Dölpopa based his Great Madhyamaka] was not as influential as before, because

328 Although our focus here is on the Jonang tradition vis a vis the Geluk, the latter also strongly critiqued the
Dzogchen-friendly Madhyamaka of the Nyingmas and Bönpos.
many people became obsessed with the provisional meaning and having the highest view, as well as gaining reputation, power, and large entourages.” This perspective, of course, is from someone located in the Jonang tradition and does not give the (Gelukpa) critics credit for having genuine philosophical and contemplative differences from Dölpopa’s position, yet it is telling that Tāranātha’s critique is as much about the social and political implications of the Gelukpas’ maneuvers as about their “obsess[ion] with the provisional meaning.” Whereas zhentong emphasized tantric elements and refuted the idea that ultimate reality was even perceptible by the conventional mind, the Geluk approach to the ultimate (as we have seen above) accepted that the intellect should play a large role in the process of recognizing the ultimate. Thus, they tended to emphasize debate in their monastic curriculum, and public debates between schools or masters from different lineages were publicly accessible to local rulers and festival-goers in ways that solitary tantric practice was not.

Between Dölpopa’s passing in 1292 and the sixteenth century master Kunga Drölchok, not many texts on Dölpopa’s zhentong are available from Jonang authors, but several Sakya masters did engage with his work. Shakya Chokden (1428-1507) was the most influential of these, and he may well have been introduced to zhentong by the Sakya master Rongtön Sheja Kunrik, though the

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329 Stearns, *Buddha From Dolpo*, p. 60.
Kagyü tradition claims that the Seventh Karmapa, Chödrak Gyatso, was the catalyst for Shakya Chokden’s embrace of that view.\textsuperscript{330} Significantly, Shakya Chokden’s version of \textit{zhentong} differed from Dölpopa’s, which the former critiqued as overly reified in his text \textit{Distinguishing the Views} (\textit{Lta-ba'i san 'byed theg mchog gnad kyi zla zer}).\textsuperscript{331} Indeed, both the Sakya and Kagyü schools (and others) had ambivalent relationships with the new order. Some Sakyapas in particular embraced Tsongkhapa’s non-affirming negative as the ultimate nature of reality, while others (including Shakya Chokden) critiqued that acceptance as out of line with more traditional Sakya views of Madhyamaka.\textsuperscript{332} At any rate, it is clear that during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries \textit{zhentong} was still influential both within the Jonang school and among the larger Tibetan intellectual community despite the Geluk attacks. Also, the Jonang teachings of \textit{zhentong} and the Kālachakra Tantra spread to several monasteries in the eastern provinces of Amdo and Kham, beginning with Jampa Khawoche who studied with Dölpopa himself and then returned to his native Kham and founded a Jonang hermitage. In Amdo, Chöje Gön in Dzamtang (founded in 1425 by Ratnashrī) “became the main

\textsuperscript{330} Ibid., p. 61. According to the Seventeenth Karmapa, there has been a special relationship between the Karmapas specifically and \textit{zhentong} from the time of the Third Karmapa. This supports the historical record of Kagyü masters drawing connections between their school’s distinctive view (first framed by the Third Karmapa, as described in the next chapter), and it is fascinating to hear that the current Karmapa maintains this warm connection. In fact, he has attended Jonang prayer festivals and has in various ways lent them his personal support. He said this marked support for that school came from his sense that it is currently in a vulnerable position. (Ogyen Trinley Dorje, Seventeenth Karmapa. Interview by author, April 16 2013.)

\textsuperscript{331} Cabezon, \textit{Freedom From Extremes}.

\textsuperscript{332} Stearns, \textit{Buddha From Dolpo}, p. 68.
monastery of Jonang tradition in Amdo. As sectarian turmoil engulfed Central Tibet in the seventeenth century, these outposts—particularly those in Amdo—were effectively shielded from the Gelukpa government’s suppression of Jonang views.

Politically speaking, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were also very unstable, with no single ruler able to unite Ü and Tsang; the eastern provinces of Kham and Amdo largely (as usual) functioned independently of Lhasa, though they were culturally and religiously connected with the central regions. Although these various regions functioned with relative autonomy, Ü and Tsang are geographically close to each other and to the Yarlung Valley around Lhasa and formed the heart of Tibet proper. Moreover, this central region formed the heartland of the old Tibetan empire, and any aspirant to rule the region would begin by trying to bring those provinces under his control. This lack of any one tradition’s ability to suppress the others in the central region may help to explain why the various schools were able to engage in relatively free discourse during these centuries.

The next major Jonang master was Kunga Drölchok (1507-1566), who became the primary teacher in the Jonang school and who also created a Rimé-like atmosphere of appreciating teaching lineages from various traditions. He clearly

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333 Ibid., pp. 76-77.
identified with Dölpopa, claiming that he “was… able to partially benefit the Jonang tradition because, in a previous lifetime, he had been a fellow student along with Dölpopa at Sakya Monastery. …[There] they became vajra brothers bound by the sacred commitments.”\textsuperscript{334} During this period, the Jonang school was increasingly seen as separate from Sakya in terms of doctrine, though Stearns notes that masters from the two schools often shared similar practices and that Sakya masters were to be found among the students of Jonang lamas. Indeed, during this time (and for most of Tibetan history in most sects), students typically sought out gifted teachers from all traditions, with less regard for their “official” sectarian identity than for their personal accomplishments. Sectarian rivalries over doctrine could become intense, but the instances of actual violence between sects nearly always occurred when there was a significant political element to the conflict.

Politically, the Jonang order faced no existential threats during the sixteenth century and were able to practice Dölpopa’s \textit{zhentong} without censorship.\textsuperscript{335} The Gelukpas continued to gain support and followers during this period, but their main political rivals were the Karma Kagyü-affiliated Rinpung nobles of Tsang.

The Geluk-Karma Kagyü rivalry intensified during the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. In the early fifteenth century, the Rinpung family stepped

\textsuperscript{334} Stearns, \textit{Buddha from Dolpo}, pp. 66-67.

\textsuperscript{335} Ibid., pp. 67-69.
into the power vacuum left when the Phamo Drupa government collapsed amid inheritance squabbles. This new power backed the Karma Kagyü and soon began to make inroads on the Gelukpa-affiliated rulers of Ü; monks and monasteries were often involved in outright battles during this time. The following is an example of this sectarian violence:

Donyo Dorje [a Rinpung ruler]… wanted to build a monastery in Lhasa on behalf of the Kar-ma-pa sect; but the Lhasa administrator, who supported the Ge-lug-pa sect, refused him permission. The monastery was then built outside of Lhasa and Palkhang Chozay put in charge; but monks from the neighboring Ge-lug-pa monasteries descended on it one night and razed it. A Karmapa Lama, Chosdrak Gyatso, narrowly escaped being killed. He took refuge in Lhasa.  

As this grim episode illustrates, sectarian rivalry during this period (and, frankly, much of Tibetan history) could be intense and violent, with monks and lamas often involved as combatants, as victims of rival armies, or as mediators who tried to broker peace between parties. The Geluk-Karma Kagyü conflict in Central Tibet intensified during the sixteenth century, with Lhasa sometimes under the control of one faction and sometimes of the other. Both Kagyü and Geluk monasteries continued to function there (though some Geluk monasteries in outlying areas which had fallen under Kagyü-friendly rulers had been forcibly converted), but monks of the subordinated order could face the threat of violence when they left their monasteries in Lhasa. Shakabpa relates that some Gelukpa monks would turn

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336 Shakabpa, *Political History*, p. 87.
their characteristic yellow hats inside-out when the left their monastery so as to blend in with the red hats of the Karma Kagyü sect.\textsuperscript{337}

This conflict would come to a head by the mid-seventeenth century as the result of both the Gelukpas’ and the Karma Kagyüpas’ recruiting rival Mongol tribes to support them. In 1577 the Gelukpa hierarch Sonam Gyatso (posthumously recognized as the Third Dalai Lama) left Tibet for Altan Khan’s capital, where he spent at least two years teaching the dharma to the Mongol Khan, in return for which he received the title Dalai Lama and the loyalty of Altan Khan’s followers. After the passing of the Third Dalai Lama, his reincarnation, Yönten Gyatso, was reborn to an aristocratic Mongolian family and lived in Mongolia until the age of 12. Thus, the Gelukpas had (by intent or chance or some combination of the two) secured the fervent loyalty of Altan Khan’s tribe.\textsuperscript{338}

In 1619, the Mongol-backed Kagyü and Geluk end game began with a group of Mongols visiting Lhasa under the pretext of pilgrimage and setting up camp outside the city (while keeping in close contact with Mongolian monks in the major Gelukpa monasteries in the area, Drepung, Ganden, and Sera). The group was “too many for a gang of bandits and too few for the army.”\textsuperscript{339} In 1620 they attacked the military camps of the Kagyü-affiliated Tsang ruler, and another Tsang

\textsuperscript{337} Ibid., pp. 89-90.
\textsuperscript{338} Ibid., pp. 93-97.
\textsuperscript{339} Ibid., p. 101.
army was soon gathered to fight the Mongols. The mediation of several leading
hierarchs defused the situation, and the Mongols withdrew from Tibet. The
sectarian tensions remained high, however, and in 1635 the chief of a rival tribe of
Mongols, the Chogthu, sent his son, Arsalang, with 10,000 troops to destroy the
Geluk sect once and for all at the urging of Karma Tenkyong of the Tsang ruling
class. However, Gushri Khan, the head of the Gelukpas’ Mongol supporters,
intercepted Arsalang and somehow persuaded him not to attack the Gelukpas but
to fight on their side. A Mongol-on-Mongol war ensued, with Gushri Khan
destroying the Chogthu tribe’s home camps and nullifying the Kagyüpas’ military
support, but the struggle for supremacy over all of Tibet was not yet over. The
ruler of Tsang, Karma Tenkyong, and Donyo Dorje, the Bönpo ruler of Kham,
planned to launch simultaneous assaults on Central Tibet from the west and east
respectively. Incidentally, they agreed also to suppress the Gelukpa sect if and
when they were successful. Gushri Khan, however, discovered their plan and
marched in 1639 to crush Donyo Dorje, which was accomplished by 1641.
Despite the intentions of the Fifth Dalai Lama, the Khan then marched to Tsang to
subdue Karma Tenkyong as well. Tellingly, this campaign ended with the siege of
Tashi Zilnon, a Karma Kagyu monastery built by the rulers of Tsang and used as a
fortress. By early 1642, Karma Tenkyong and his family were captive, and Central
Tibet was unified under the Gelukpa government of the Fifth Dalai Lama in Lhasa,
a situation the country had not seen since the days of the Tibetan empire, which ended in the ninth century.\textsuperscript{340} For the first time in centuries, Tibet had an effective central government. However, that government was Gelukpa, with both lay and monastic officials, but with a great deal of power concentrated in the hands of religious hierarchs. The Gelukpas’ political power would soon translate into the power to censor philosophical discourse.

The Jonang school, in the meantime, had seen a resurgence under its second greatest master after Dölpopa, Tāranātha (1575-1634). Considered the reincarnation of Kunga Drölchok (the sixteenth century Jonang master), Tāranātha respected all schools of Tibetan Buddhism—even those antagonistic to Jonang—and at the same time worked to revive Dölpopa’s views, which had fallen into intellectual disrepair since the fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{341}

For example, in the early 1590s Tāranātha wrote that it had been many years since the complete instructions of the Six-branch Yoga [of the Kālachakra tantra] had been given in the Jonang assembly. The instruction manual of Dölpopa’s Dharma heir, Choglé Namgyal, was still being used at Jonang to teach the Six-branch Yoga transmitted from Dölpopa, but very few people understood the philosophical tenets of Dölpopa and his disciples.\textsuperscript{342}

Because of this situation, Tāranātha (unlike Kunga Drölchok) referred often and explicitly to Dölpopa in his writings and emphasized zhentong as the final intent of

\textsuperscript{340} Ibid., pp. 100-111.
\textsuperscript{341} Stearns, \textit{Buddha From Dolpo}, pp. 70-71
\textsuperscript{342} Ibid., p. 71.
the Buddhadharma.\textsuperscript{343}

In Tāranātha’s case, too, visionary experience played a role, this time in renewing what Tāranātha considered the true intent of Dōlpopa’s teachings. In 1604 Jonang monastery itself faced an immediate threat of attack during a conflict between the rulers of Tsang and Jang (another region in Central Tibet). Tāranātha, understandably close to despair at the prospect of his tradition’s end, was meditating at the great stūpa built by Dōlpopa himself when an image of the latter transformed into the actual presence of Dōlpopa and encouraged Tāranātha to take heart and continue the work of restoring the Jonang lineage. The following night, Tāranātha experienced a vision of Dōlpopa in the form of a celestial bodhisattva who “spoke four lines of verse that expressed the essence of his doctrine. At that very moment Tāranātha arrived at the deepest level of Dōlpopa’s zhentong teachings, and all his uncertainties and doubts were completely removed.”\textsuperscript{344}

Again we see visionary experience informed by but transforming textual experience, this time in the service of reviving a tradition rather than initiating a new perspective. Fortunately, Jonang monastery was spared direct violence during the Jang-Tsang conflict, but its reprieve was to prove short-lived.

While Tāranātha lived, he made great efforts to revive the doctrine of

\textsuperscript{343} Ibid., p. 70.
\textsuperscript{344} Ibid., p. 72.
Dölpopa, and the result was a brief Jonang renaissance in Central Tibet. In texts by Jonang masters of Tāranātha’s time and shortly before, there are several mentions of both students and masters from other schools (notably the Kagyü) who were familiar with Dölpopa’s zhentong but had misunderstood key elements of the doctrine. Khyentse Wangchuk, a Sakya student of Kunga Drölchok, visited a Kagyü monastery in 1550 and overheard a scholar saying that Dölpopa held buddha nature to be a permanent entity; no one corrected this statement, but Khyentse Wangchuk knew that Dölpopa did not posit buddha nature as such an entity.  

Around 1620, Tāranātha himself carried on a correspondence with the Sixth Sharmapa of the Karma Kagyü tradition, who thought that the Jonang view was that “the first turning of the Dharma wheel taught the existence of a veridically established absolute, the second taught the nonexistence, and the third taught the existence.” Dölpopa, however, had written that the three turnings were in harmony (as were rangtong and zhentong), and Tāranātha corrected the Sharmapa’s view. Incidents like this show both that masters from outside the Jonang school were still aware of and engaged with Dölpopa’s ideas and that the quality of their understanding of his texts was not always high. His texts are often difficult and open to multiple interpretations at some points.

Toward the end of his life, it seems that Tāranātha may have made the

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345 Stearns, Buddha From Dolpo, p. 70.
346 Ibid., p. 72.
extraordinary decision not to return in his next life as a Jonang tulku to continue this work of restoring and spreading Dölpopa’s zhentong view—if the text in which these claims are made is to be believed. A newly recovered biography by his primary consort, Jetsun Trinle Wangmo (Ratna Badrini, 1585?-c.1668?), reveals that inauspicious conditions at Takten Ling, the monastery Tāranātha built not far from Jonang monastery, as well as a request from a Gelukpa dharma protector, may have undermined his intent to remain affiliated with the Jonang tradition in his next lifetime. According to a translated excerpt in Stearns’ The Buddha From Dolpo, Jetsun Trinle Wangmo records that Tāranātha told her that he had encountered a Ganden (i.e., Geluk) dharma protector following a monk of that order, and this fierce spirit had requested him to “come to benefit the Genden [i.e., Ganden/Geluk] doctrine,” a request he accepted! Shortly after this encounter, he continued, the officials of Takten monastery delivered a letter to Tāranātha stating that after his chosen successor to the seat of the monastery, Sangye Gyatso (who was then serving as leader of the tradition), in the future the “master of the monastic seat must come from the progeny of our nephew.”347 (This nephew had been appointed treasurer of Takten by officials of the government of Tsang,348 illustrating again the thorough entanglement between political actors and monastic institutions.)

347 Ibid., pp. 74-75.
348 Ibid., p. 353, n. 296.
By this time, the tulku institution, whereby the reincarnation of the master of a lineage would be recognized and trained to resume his position as “master of the monastic seat,” had become quite common, with Tāranātha himself recognized as the reincarnation of Kunga Drölchok, an illustrious former leader of the Jonang order. The Takten officials’ notice to him that the nephew’s heirs would be masters of the monastic seat thus signaled that they had chosen the other primary method besides tulku selection of passing on monastic power, using nephews as surrogate sons to inherit the leader’s position. This decision—and perhaps the fact that Tāranātha was informed of it rather than being involved in the decision-making process—seems to have signaled to him fractures in his community’s support for his leadership. Again, as at so many points in the history of zhentong, we see inseparability of doctrinal, contemplative, and political concerns. At any rate, Tāranātha clearly read this incident as confirmation that he should align himself with the Geluk tradition in his next lifetime. Because he died several years before the Gelukpa ascent to power and suppression of the Jonang order, that sect had not yet become the means of suppressing the teachings of his revered Dōlpopa. Jetsun Trinle Wangmo records that after hearing Tāranātha’s intention, she pleaded with him to take rebirth in the Jonang lineage, but he replied by pointing out how divided the local population was—presumably in their support for him—and

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349 Almost all reincarnating lineages were and remain male.
would not change his decision.  

Tāranātha’s reincarnation is tied up in several ways with the suppression of the Jonang tradition in Central Tibet. In 1635 a boy was born in an aristocratic Mongolian family who would be recognized as the reincarnation of Tāranātha—and the Gelukpa teacher Jamyang Chöje, the founder of Drepung monastery. This person, known as Yeshe Dorje, Losang Tenpai Gyaltsen, or simply the Jamyang Tulku, was the first Jetsun Khalkha, the Geluk-affiliated Mongolian chief hierarch. He was recognized as such by “the Fifth Dalai Lama, the First Panchen Lama, … and the Tibetan State Oracle”—in other words, by the highest officials of the Gelukpa government. In a single brilliant strategic stroke, the Gelukpas had ended the Jonang lineage of masters and had initiated for their own school a reincarnating lineage which would wield great influence in Mongolia to modern times. The final stroke of political genius (replete with irony) is that this Jamyang Tulku himself would request the Fifth Dalai Lama to convert Tāranātha’s own monastery, Takten Phuntsog Ling, to the Geluk philosophical tradition.

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350 Ibid., p. 75.  
351 Ibid., pp. 73-4.  
353 Ibid., p. 73. Also, Smith, Among Tibetan Texts, pp. 242-3, has an account of the suppression of the Jonangpas in
According to the autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama, in 1650 the young Jamyang Tulku requested that Takten be converted from its Jonang tenet system to the Geluk. The Dalai Lama complied with this suspicious request, but this was probably in part because of the political connections between Tāranātha and the rulers of Tsang. “…Tāranātha was one of the main religious advisors to the rulers of Tsang during their struggle against the Geluk powers of Central Tibet for political supremacy.” Tāranātha had also met with some Mongol visitors and perhaps received an invitation to Mongolia, and the last thing the nascent Gelukpa government needed was another Mongol-on-Mongol conflict tied to Tibetan sectarian politics. To his credit, the Fifth Dalai Lama was generally quite nonsectarian in his approach as ruler of Tibet, much more so at times than the more conservative Gelukpa hierarchy who surrounded him in Lhasa. In fact, he was even suspected of being a “crypto-Nyingma” because of his affinity for that tradition and his notable accomplishments in it. His conversion of Takten to the Geluk tenet system was atypical of this very astute ruler who generally supported the non-Geluk schools and monasteries when they were not politically dangerous to the newly reunited Tibet.

which he blames “Tāranātha’s machinations” and mentions that only intervention of Karmapa V saved the Karma Kagyü order from a similar fate.

354 Ibid.
When it comes to Tāranātha (the Jonangpa, not his supposed Geluk reincarnation), however, the Great Fifth seems to have had a negative personal connection as well. Apparently that Dalai Lama received his birth name from Tāranātha, who was a kinsman of his mother, and the young child evidently showed such promise that several schools wanted to recognize him as a tulku in their own lineages, possibly including the Jonang. In fact, the Fifth Dalai Lama records that he was unable to recognize the implements of his predecessor (the Fourth Dalai Lama) in the traditional test to establish him as a reincarnation of his predecessor, but the search committee chose him as the correct candidate anyway.

Something seems to have happened to sour the Fifth Dalai Lama’s connection with Tāranātha (if it was ever sweet), because the former referred to the latter as “a lecherous villain without equal” shortly before Tāranātha’s death.

At any rate, when Tāranātha’s official reincarnation, the Jamyang Tulku, requested for Takten monastery to be converted to a Geluk teaching institution, the political advantages were obvious, and the Gelukpas finally got their chance to suppress Dölpopa’s teachings on *zhentong* by locking up the printing blocks at Jonang and Takten. During this period of Geluk hegemony, the *zhentong* texts of authors from other schools were also placed under lock and key, including

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357 Ibid., p. 203.
359 Norman, *Secret Lives*, p. 223-4. Norman’s citation for this passage, however, is incorrect.
individual Sakya authors who supported zhentong or critiqued Tsongkhapa,\textsuperscript{360} even though the Gelukpas’ main political rivals were the Kagyüpas. While the Jamyang Tulku studied at Tashi Lhunpo under the Panchen Lama, the Panchen Lama was sent to convert Tāranātha’s Takten monastery to the Geluk tenet system and way of practice, so he went and gave initiations and reading transmissions required for Gelukpa practice. But according to the Fifth Dalai Lama’s diary, the monks at Jonang and Takten monasteries continued to practice the old Jonang traditions, and even the new Gelukpa monks sent to populate the monasteries with their order quickly took up the old system, which suggests that it must have been appealing. For that reason, in 1658 “the Geluk authorities expelled the monks to other monasteries, made harsher regulations concerning the Geluk conversion, and gave the monastery the new name Ganden Puntsok Ling…. From this point the Jonang tradition ceased to exist as an independent entity in Tsang and Central Tibet.”\textsuperscript{361} Some monasteries in remote regions of Kham and Amdo—areas that did not find themselves genuinely ruled by the Lhasa government—did maintain the Jonang lineage openly down to the present day, and by the eighteenth century even monks at Jonang monastery could once again openly teach the distinctive view of their tradition.\textsuperscript{362} As we will see in the next chapter, Jonang zhentong would play a major role in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century Rimé (nonsectarian) movement that unfolded

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\textsuperscript{360} Cabezón, Freedom From Extremes, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{361} Stearns, Buddha From Dolpo, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{362} Ibid., p. 78.
\end{flushright}
primarily in Kham, outside the reach of the Gelukpa government, but Dölpopa’s voice had been silenced for the time being in the ongoing philosophical and contemplative discourse among masters in Central Tibet.

However, Dölpopa’s critics were free to write polemical tracts against him. David Seyfort Ruegg translated a chapter from Losang Chökyi Nyima’s (Blo-bzang Chos-khy Nyi-ma) Crystal Mirror of Philosophical Doctrines (Grub-mtha’ Shel-gyi Me-long) in which the author compares Dölpopa’s zhentong with several different non-Buddhist tenets. Yet, despite his critique of zhentong, Losang Chökyi Nyima still shows great respect to Dölpopa as a master of the Kālachakra system. In the century and a half between the suppression of the Jonang school (and any pro-zhentong authors) and the stirrings of the Rimé movement in Kham, the Gelukpa view of emptiness, based on Tsongkhapa’s works, was to have a major impact on the philosophical expressions of the other schools in Tibet.

However, by the mid-seventeenth century the term zhentong had been taken up by masters in the Kagyü tradition, and during the century and a half of suppression by Geluk forces that lineage would continue to contemplate its meaning(s) and harmonize it with the negation of conventional reality so prevalent in Tsongkhapa’s works. The next chapter will deal with this Kagyü connection and with the revitalization of zhentong in Jamgön Kongtrül’s writings.

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Chapter 4: Zhentong Revisited

The virtually universal phenomena of possession, an altered state in which a divine or demonic being temporarily takes over the body of the possessed, speaks to a… notion of the human as multiple, as do the common psychiatric phenomenon of multiple personalities, various mythologies of the incarnation of avatara in Christianity and Hinduism, and a large technical literature documenting children around the globe who accurately remember their previous lives as someone else…. All of these diverse forms of human experience boil down to the same basic truth: “There is an other in here.”

From the Suppression of Jonang to the Rimé Movement

With the forcible conversion of Jonang Monastery, Takten Ling, and other Jonang-affiliated monasteries and retreat centers in Central Tibet, the Gelukpas may have hoped to silence Dölpopa’s philosophical voice and quell Tāranātha’s political influence for good. While the new rulers of Tibet did succeed in suppressing their Jonangpa (and Kagyüpa and Bönpo) rivals’ political power, their efforts proved inadequate to exclude zhentong from the philosophical discourse indefinitely. The Jonang zhentong spark still lived in Amdo, far Northeastern Tibet, and nearly a century after the forcible conversion of Jonang Monastery in 1658, masters from other lineages were still able to receive transmissions of Jonang teachings and initiations openly in the Tsang region of Central Tibet. By the mid-eighteenth century Mongol support of the Gelukpa regime in Lhasa had evaporated, and with

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364 Kripal, Serpent’s Gift, pp. 142-3.
365 Stearns, Buddha From Dolpo, pp. 76-77.
a weakened government in Central Tibet, the conditions were right for a resurgence of the zhentong view. This chapter will trace the re-emergence of Jonang zhentong, examine a Kagyü analogue (the thought of the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje), and then examine Jamgön Kongtrül’s reformulation of zhentong.

This renaissance of the zhentong discourse in Central Tibet and Kham begins in earnest with Rigzin Tsewang Norbu (1698-1755), who, “In one of his versified autobiographical accounts, … notes that even as a child he felt great faith whenever he heard the names of Dölpopa and his immediate disciples” and was later recognized as a reincarnation of Mati Panchen, one of Dölpopa’s chief disciples366 (as well as of the Ta Lama Pema Norbu).367 Tsewang Norbu and his student the Eighth Tai Situ in many ways laid the groundwork for the full flowering of the Rimé movement as realized by Jamgön Kongtrül and Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo. Affiliated with the Nyingma Kathog Monastery, Tsewang Norbu received and transmitted Nyingma, Jonang, and Kagyü teachings. Tsewang Norbu’s relationship with Jonang teachings began in 1725. He had travelled to Central Tibet to meet and receive teachings from “the Twelfth Karmapa Jangchub Dorje … and the Eighth Shamarpa Pelchen Chokyi Dondrub…. He also met the

366 Ibid., p. 78.
Third Trewo Lama Karma Tendzin Dargye…who became his third root lama, and introduced him to the Jonang tradition.”

Tsewang Norbu lost no time following up this introduction to the Jonang teachings and soon made two attempts to meet with Drubchen Kunzang Wangpo, a Jonang lama, at Genden Khacho, formerly a Jonang monastery. The first, in 1726, was unsuccessful since Kunzang Wangpo was in strict retreat, and Tsewang Norbu continued on his trip to Nepal. But when he returned the next year, he was able to meet with the Jonang master and receive instructions on zhentong and other distinctive teachings of the Jonang lineage. At this time, Tsewang Norbu was around 29 years old. He went on to transmit the Jonang teachings he had received to several of the Kagyü luminaries of his day: the Thirteenth Karmapa, the Tenth Sharmapa, and the Eighth Tai Situ. This transmission would greatly impact the coming Rimé movement through the influence of Tai Situpa.

The Eighth Tai Situpa, Chokyi Jungné, (1700-1774) seems to have had a long-standing interest in the Jonang teachings. He was recognized and enthroned at Tsurphu at the age of 14, and his teachers there included the Thirteenth Karmapa, the Tenth Sharmapa, and Tsewang Norbu—who in 1714 had not yet

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368 Ibid.
369 Ibid., Stearns, Buddha From Dolpo, p. 78.
370 Stearns, Buddha From Dolpo, 79.
been introduced to the Jonang teachings by the Third Trewo Lama. However, in 1723 the young Tai Situpa visited Jonang monastery and unsuccessfully attempted to get their texts released. Despite not accomplishing this goal, the young Situpa seems to have been moved by his visit, noting in his diary that many of the monks there still maintained the Jonang tradition and recording “great sadness at the misfortune that had so quickly overtaken Tāranātha’s monastery.” Tai Situ Chokyi Jungné’s diary gives a fascinating glimpse into the Jonang situation in Central Tibet at this time: Dölpopa’s teaching and practice lineage continued (perhaps had never been fully suppressed), but his followers were denied access to the distinctive texts of their lineage. Because pro-zhentong texts were prohibited in the areas under Geluk control, zhentong had effectively vanished from the philosophical landscape.

As Smith says of Tai Situ’s fruitless attempt to access Jonang texts, “The prohibition against copying and printing Jonang pa books would continue for a hundred years after Si tu’s death until, in 1871, the Zhwa lu Ri sbug Sprul sku Blo gsal bstan skyong was granted permission to reopen the printer at Dge ldan Phun tshogs gling [the Geluk name for Takten] for printing the Jonang books. Nevertheless, during the eighteenth century, the [zhentong] doctrine spread and its following increased,” due largely to Tai Situ’s influence on the following

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372 Stearns, *Buddha From Dolpo*, pp. 79-80; see also Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts*, 95.
Tai Situ’s visit to Jonang Monastery occurred in 1723, two years before Tsewang Norbu’s Jonang instructions from the Third Trewo Lama and three years before Tsewang Norbu’s own first trip to a Jonang monastery. Perhaps Tsewang Norbu’s own early interest in the Jonang lineage had already aroused the young Tai Situ’s curiosity; in any case, the latter seems not to have accepted the zhentong doctrine fully until 1748, when he and Tsewang Norbu spent time together in Boudha, Nepal, and the latter insisted that he embrace that view.

Situ had clearly been very interested in the Jonang tradition for many years, but it was his teacher Tsewang Norbu who now insisted that he accept the zhentong view, which he taught him in great detail, apparently at the stūpa of Bodnāth. Situ says Tsewang Norbu ordered him to uphold the profound view of the zhentong and told him acceptance of this view would create an auspicious pattern of events that would lead to Situ’s longevity and the vast spread of his activities. … In the end it would be Situ, more than anyone, who would create the environment for the widespread acceptance of the zhentong teachings in Tibet during the next century.374

Through Kagyü teachers, the zhentong view experienced a remarkable revival, but as the following section shows, the form of zhentong that would spread during the Rimé movement was significantly different from Dölpopa’s form.

**Kagyü Zhentong**

Tai Situ’s zhentong, while it restored that view to mainstream Tibetan

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373 Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts*, 90.
374 Stearns, *Buddha From Dolpo*, 80.
philosophical discourse, was no simple reiteration of Dölpopa’s *zhentong*. Though the term was (and continues to be) associated with the Jonang school, the Kagyü tradition had its own analogues to *zhentong* in writings from the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje (a contemporary of Dölpopa), and others. A brief overview of his thought will help to clarify Jamgön Kongtrül’s own iteration of that view and how it synthesizes the Jonang and Kagyü iterations of *zhentong*.375

Rangjung Dorje, the Third Karmapa (1284–1339), laid the foundations for subsequent Kagyü masters to adopt the *zhentong* view, though he never uses the terms “*rangtong*” and “*zhentong*” in his writings.376 Instead, his writings offer “a creative synthesis of Yogācāra, Madhyamaka, and the teachings on buddha nature.” As we saw in the chapter exploring Dölpopa Sherab Gyaltsen’s view, the dominant received wisdom in fourteenth century Tibet held that the so-called second turning of the wheel of dharma (in which the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras were taught and which includes Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*) was definitive in meaning, while the first and third were to be interpreted to bring their teachings into alignment with those of the Second Turning. Dölpopa challenged that assumption, as we saw in the second chapter, and the Third Karmapa also

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375 Kongtrül cites Rangjung Dorje less frequently than he does the Jonangpa Tāranātha or the Sakyapa Shakya Chokden, but Kongtrül’s formulation of *zhentong* is clearly very influenced by Kagyü thought on synthesizing sūtra, tantra, and Mahāmudrā. That is why I have chosen to focus later in this chapter on the work of the Third Karmapa rather than on Shakya Chokden.
377 Ibid., xvi.
presented the Third Turning teachings (about buddha nature, often associated with Yogācāra) as not subordinate to Madhyamaka. Instead, he harmonizes those two systems, using both of their frameworks to interrogate reality. As we saw in the Dölpopa chapter, Yogācāra texts explain that there are three natures—the imaginary, the dependent, and the perfect (which Dölpopa calls fully established)—in order to lead students from an unexamined acceptance of imaginary and dependent phenomena as real to the realization that those are both not ultimately true.

A verse from the Third Karmapa’s “Treatise on the Distinction between Consciousness and Wisdom” offers an example of his seamless combination of language from the Yogācāra philosophical system with Madhyamaka language:

The sole all-knowing one
Taught sentient beings from his realization
That these three realms are merely mind:
They neither arise from themselves, nor from something other,
Nor from both, nor without a cause.

“[T]hese three realms are merely mind” refers to the Yogācāra tenet that seemingly external objects and the observing subject are in fact not separate; instead, the perception of external objects arises in the mind due to the ripening of karmic tendencies, hence other schools’ designation of Yogācāra as “Mind Only”

378 Rnam par shes pa shes pa dang ye shes byed pa’i bstan lcogs.
379 Brunnhötzl, Luminous Heart, 361.
(Cittamātra). “They neither arise from themselves, nor from something other, nor from both, nor without a cause” uses the famous tetralemma of Madhyamaka logicians to refute the true existence of the three realms (desire, form, and formless).

For most of Tibetan philosophical history, and certainly during the period when Dölpopa and the Third Karmapa were active, the trend in thinking about the different Buddhist philosophical systems has emphasized divisions between those systems and has harmonized them by ranking them hierarchically, with the “lower” systems beginning the student’s investigation of reality but not leading to full awakening. According to this way of relating the systems to each other, one would theoretically proceed in order from the Vaibhāsika to the Sautrāntika (both considered “Hīnayāna” systems), after which one would deepen one’s understanding of emptiness by studying Yogācāra, and these studies would then prepare the student to understand the Madhyamaka system.

But Madhyamaka, while it offers many logical arguments against the true existence of phenomena, focuses on negating apparent reality, whereas the third turning teachings on buddha nature offer some descriptions of the goal of practice, i.e., ultimate states of being, and so is often considered more compatible with tantra. As Karl Brunnhölzl explains,
…in contrast to the Mādhyamikas’ reluctance to speak about the specifics of seeming reality and the Buddhist path of purifying the deluded mind (or mind at all), the Yogācāra system, besides presenting sophisticated analyses of ultimate reality, also elaborates on how the deluded mind operates, how it can make the transition to the unmistaken wisdom that sees this mind’s own ultimate nature, and what the characteristics and the fruition of this wisdom are.\(^{380}\)

The Yogācāra system’s broader treatment of mind—mistaken and unmistaken—makes it a valuable complement to the Madhyamaka deconstruction of seeming reality, Brunnhölzl suggests.

Indeed, the various *zhentong* systems (among which we may, for our purposes, classify Rangjung Dorje’s thought) find in the Yogācāra authors a philosophical language compatible with both Madhyamaka and the various tantric systems.\(^ {381}\) For thinkers like the Third Karmapa, who held the Second and Third Turnings both to be definitive, the language of the two bodies of teachings seemed complementary rather than contradictory. Brunnhölzl captures the way these two turnings fit together in Rangjung Dorje’s work with his summary of a chapter of the auto-commentary on his text *The Profound Inner Reality*\(^ {382}\): “The extensive discussion of the two realities in chapter 9 of the [auto-commentary] declares that, ultimately, all notions of ground, path, and fruition are just superimpositions.

What exists ultimately, but free of all reference points, is naturally pure mind

\(^{380}\) Brunnhölzl, *Luminous Heart*, p. 5.

\(^{381}\) Maybe this accounts for the strong tendency toward synthesis in most *zhentong* presentations!

\(^{382}\) *Zab mo nang gi don zhes bya ba’i gzhung.*
without any adventitious stains….”\(^{383}\) This description shows the seamless integration of a Madhyamaka sensibility about the lack of inherent existence with a Yogācāra language of existent mind.

Also, the Third Karmapa held, as did zhentong followers proper, that authors and texts could not be neatly divided into schools the way received doxographies tended to do. For instance, Asaṅga is commonly considered to be a Yogācāra author, and indeed he is one of that school’s primary sources, but the Third Karmapa emphasized the compatibility of his thought with the central author of the Madhyamaka tradition, Nāgārjuna:

Rangjung Dorje’s position of these two explanations not being contradictory does not represent some plain mixture of Vijñaptivāda and Madhyamaka, but the subjective and objective sides of the very same cognitive process toward buddhahood. This means that Asaṅga’s system outlines the progression and refinement of mundane and supramundane states of mind (the subject) in terms of first conceptually and then directly realizing the ultimate reality of dependent origination free from reference points (the final object) as emphasized by Nāgārjuna.\(^{384}\)

In this passage, Brunnhölzl succinctly summarizes the Third Karmapa’s method of treating the Madhyamaka (Second Turning) and the Yogācāra (Third Turning) philosophical systems as profoundly compatible. Unlike Dölpopa, who emphasized the Third Turning as definitive, Rangjung Dorje seems more inclined

\(^{383}\) Brunnhölzl, *Luminous Heart*, p. 87.

\(^{384}\) Ibid., p. 105.
to treat both as definitive in meaning; unlike most Tibetan scholars of his time, the
Third Karmapa refused to hold the Second Turning as definitive and the Third as
provisional.

**Rangjung Dorje Compared with Dölpopa**

By presenting a philosophical system that included elements from both
Madhyamaka and Yogācāra (and was profoundly compatible with Mahāmudrā),
the Third Karmapa became the preferred source for later Kagyü thought on buddha
nature, and he was sometimes regarded by later masters in his lineage as a
zhentongpa, even though he never used that term in his writings. To understand
why, we begin by examining the similarities between Rangjung Dorje’s view and
Dölpopa’s zhentong.

Perhaps the greatest resonance between Rangjung Dorje’s thought and
Dölpopa’s is that (as discussed above) they both articulated philosophical systems
in which Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and a tantric practice were profoundly
integrated. Two verses from his famous “Mahāmudrā Aspiration Prayer” perfectly
display this seamless integration:

18. Looking at an object, there is none; I see it is mind.
   Looking for mind, mind is not there; it lacks any essence.
   Looking at both, dualistic clinging is freed on its own.
   May I realize luminosity, the enduring condition of mind.

19. Free from being mind-made, this is mahāmudrā;
free of extremes, it is mahāmadhyamaka; this contains all, and so is “mahāsaṃdhī” too. Through knowing one, may I gain firm realization of the meaning of all.  

These verses, like many in the “Mahāmudrā Prayer,” include Yogācāra (“Looking at an object, there is none; I see it is mind”) and Madhyamaka (“Looking for mind, mind is not there; it lacks any essence”) under the broad umbrella of Mahāmudrā. In much the same way that Dölpopa’s deep engagement with the Kālachakra Tantra informed the ways he read Madhyamaka and Yogācāra texts, Rangjung Dorje’s similar engagement with Mahāmudrā offered a lens for his reading of the more foundational texts.

Another tantalizing similarity in the second verse is the Third Karmapa’s use of the word “mahāmadhyamaka.” This is the Sanskrit for “dBus-ma Chen-po,” Dölpopa’s “Great Middle Way.” Although there is little evidence for any significant influence between Rangjung Dorje and Dölpopa, this term is used by both authors with a similar meaning (i.e., that Madhyamaka’s clearest expression is ultimate reality itself). Rangjung Dorje, however, very rarely uses this term, while it features centrally in Dölpopa’s writings on zhentong.

This synthesizing treatment is a distinctive similarity because of the prevailing trend in Tibetan scholarship before and after Rangjung Dorje’s and

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386 See Stearns, *Buddha From Dolpo*, pp. 15 and 49.
Dölpopa’s time to separate the major tenet systems. Gelukpa monastic universities in particular showed this tendency, and as they gained power, their textbooks increasingly influenced other schools’ monastic curricula. The type of synthesizing evident in Dölpopa’s and Rangjung Dorje’s work (and later echoed in Jamgön Kongtrül’s zhentong and the Rimé movement) became a hallmark of the different systems of zhentong, so it is not surprising that Rangjung Dorje’s view should be posthumously identified with zhentong.⁴⁸⁷

Another of Rangjung Dorje’s similarities with Dölpopa’s zhentong is that at times he uses language that is more typical of Yogācāra and tantric texts than of Madhyamaka. Although the Third Karmapa does not present ultimate reality as truly established, he does repeatedly state that it exists: “You may wonder, ‘So what does exist ultimately?’ What exists is naturally pure mind beyond the entire web of imagination, that is, the basic element of sentient beings, their buddha heart…. This buddha heart is indeed nothing but the stainlessness [in terms of] the mistakenness of the eight collections [of consciousness] mentioned above.”⁴⁸⁸ In the language of Madhyamaka (particularly as presented by Tsongkhapa), for a phenomenon to exist means that it exists from its own side as a permanent and unchanging entity. Rangjung Dorje argues against this interpretation of the classic

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⁴⁸⁷ The movements toward integrating diverse systems of teachings and toward emphasizing the distinctive characteristics of different systems have been present in Tibetan Buddhism from early times, and zhentong has often been used by lamas with a strong Rimé-like propensity to highlight similarities (or at least respect for all schools).

⁴⁸⁸ Brunnhölzl, Luminous Heart, p. 161.
Madhyamaka scriptures and commentaries in his autocommentary on *The Profound Inner Reality*, where he says explicitly,

Some people may think, “This [buddha nature] is justified in the texts of mantra and the texts of Yogācāra, which [both] explain the meaning of the two realities as the buddha heart in this way, but in the Madhyamaka texts it is taught that all phenomena are without nature. Therefore, there is no teaching [in them] that the Tathāgata heart and the basic element exist.” You should not be confused by [just] the words of the Mādhyamikas. [For, Nāgārjuna’s] *Dharmadhātustava* discusses this extensively in passages such as the following:

…

…[M]ind that is so luminous
Is soiled by stains of craving and so forth.
The afflictions burn in wisdom’s fire,
But its luminosity does not.

The sūtras that teach emptiness,
However many spoken by the victors,
They remove all afflictions,
But never ruin this dhātu.\(^{389}\)

By citing Nāgārjuna, the author of some of the most skeptical inquiries into conventional reality, the Third Karmapa emphasizes that even that great philosopher balanced the analytical negation of appearances with meditative experience of the buddha nature that remains when the incidental stains of apparent reality have been overcome. It is significant that the Third Karmapa specifically admonishes the reader not to be misled by “[just] the words of the Mādhyamikas.”

This suggests that these Mādhyamikas were believed to have accessed wisdom

\(^{389}\) Brunnhölzl, *Luminous Heart*, pp. 165-6. First brackets are my addition; the rest are from the translation.
beyond what their texts convey.

Rangjung Dorje also emphasizes the already-present quality of buddha nature, another central theme in Dölpopa’s works. As we will see below in the section on Jamgön Kongtrül’s *zhentong*, the way the Third Karmapa highlights this is very different from Dölpopa’s formulation, but this emphasis on uncovering rather than gradually developing one’s enlightened qualities is nevertheless a strong connection between the two thinkers, derived from important texts (particularly the *Uttaratantra*) which both drew from heavily. Rangjung Dorje uses another quotation from Nāgārjuna’s *Dharmadhātustava* to underscore the innate presence of buddha nature at the heart of beings: “Covered by the web of the afflictions,/ It is called a ‘sentient being.’/ Once it’s free from the afflictions,/ It should be expressed as ‘buddha.’”\(^{390}\)

This last similarity is deeply connected with one of the most significant differences between Dölpopa and Rangjung Dorje: The former holds that awakened mind operates through a completely separate type of knowing from the unawakened mind, while the latter describes buddha mind as the true nature of all experiences, even the unawakened ones. In his *Fourth Council*,\(^ {391}\) Dölpopa has the following strong criticism of the perspective held by Rangjung Dorje and many

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\(^{390}\) Ibid., p. 140.

\(^{391}\) *Great Reasoning That Has the Significance of a Fourth Council, Bka' bsdu bzhi pa'i don gtan tshigs chen po.*
Since primordial awareness and consciousness are just like light and darkness, and exist like nectar and poison, it is completely impossible for them to have a common ground, so do not mix them together as one!

... Thus it has been taught, but many [adherents] of the flawed Tretāyuga and later eons, who are not expert in that, claim that the object of purification and the ground of purification are one, which is the same as claiming that the clouds and the sky are one.

Here, the ground of purification, thusness with stains, is the unconditioned universal-ground primordial awareness, but the object of purification is the conditioned stains, so please consider whether or not those two are one. 392

In Dölpopa’s system, the ground of purification is buddha nature and is permanent and truly established, while the adventitious stains are impermanent and not truly established. Buddha nature is ultimate truth, while adventitious stains belong to conventional truth, and whatever is true from the perspective of one of those truths (according to Dölpopa) cannot be true from the other. Thus, in his system, there can be no ultimate identity of buddha nature and conventional mind.

392 Stearns, Buddha From Dolpo, p. 162.
Toward the end of the *Fourth Council*, Dölpopa includes verses passionately refuting ideas he considers particularly pernicious, among them this idea that thoughts, when recognized, are the dharmakāya: “I cannot yield to those who accept that even these afflictions, concepts, and groups of consciousness ‘are the dharmakāya if realized, but the stains if not realized….‘”393 In a text of advice to a student, Dölpopa offers a concise statement of his own position: “Buddha is taught to be the kāya of primordial awareness and the incidental impurities are taught to be the groups of consciousness. In that way, primordial awareness and consciousness are taught to be extremely different, like light and dark or nectar and poison.”394

The reason Dölpopa takes a stand so contrary to Rangjung Dorje’s is that Dölpopa’s *zhentong* is based on the Kālachakra Tantra, which teaches that the vital karmic winds are the support for consciousness, and while they circulate through the body’s energy system, the primordial awareness of buddhahood cannot emerge. These vital winds are brought into the central channel and thus stilled during the practices of the Six-Branch Yoga (the completion-stage practice of the Kālachakra Tantra).395 Thus, consciousness (as the deluded and dualistic perception of objects by a subject) is contrasted with primordial awareness (luminous buddha-mind

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393 Stearns, *Buddha From Dolpo*, p. 188.
394 Ibid. p. 109.
freed of all incidental stains). The two are based on different subtle winds in the body, and as long as the vital karmic winds function, primordial awareness cannot be experienced. Indeed, Dölpopa says, in the letter of advice to a student cited above, that

> Even if confusing appearances are realized to be just confusing appearances, as long as this circulation of the vital winds and mind has not ceased, this appearance of confusion will not cease. … To stop the circulation of the vital winds and mind, the exceptional Dharma of Shambhala to the north, the heartfelt advice of the Kalkīs on the tenth level, the uncommon oral instruction of the sugata essence as Kālachakra, is required; other minor instructions cannot stop it.³⁹⁶

In this case, the synthesizing Dölpopa sounds very much like an exclusivist.

Because Dölpopa’s zhentong is so heavily informed by the Kālachakra Tantra, it is necessarily incompatible with Rangjung Dorje’s Mahāmudrā-derived view, which the latter explains in his autocommentary on *The Profound Inner Reality* with passages like the following:

> Due to the unimpeded play of that very mind’s own essence through momentary consciousness, [while] its nature abides as emptiness and it is lucidity by nature (which represents the basis for everything), the individual manifestations of the collections of mental factors and the seven collections of consciousness appear in an unimpeded and momentary way from that [empty and lucid ground].³⁹⁷

In other words, the luminous buddha nature provides the very foundation for the

³⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 108.
³⁹⁷ Brunnhötlzl, *Luminous Heart*, p. 139.
everyday manifestations of mind which ordinary beings reify as a subject experiencing external objects. This perception of duality, in Rangjung Dorje’s view, is the mistake that prevents beings from recognizing their own buddha nature and attaining buddhahood. In this system, there is no real separation between the deluded conventional mind and primordial awareness; even dualistic thoughts are the unimpeded play of the basic awareness, though they may seem to be otherwise. “Unfabricated dharmatā that defies the intellect/ is the perfect, ultimate limit—may I be certain of it./ Simply not realizing this stirs the ocean of conditioned existence;/ just realizing this, there is no enlightenment elsewhere.”

A connected difference between Dölpopa and Rangjung Dorje is that Dölpopa often used language from the Kālachakra Tantra and its major commentaries, while Rangjung Dorje employed language from more conventional interpretations of Madhyamaka and from Mahāmudrā. Indeed, as examined in the section on Dölpopa’s view, his entire classification system is based on the four Yugas described in the Kālachakra Tantra. In this way, he includes not only texts widely regarded as Madhyamaka under that doctrinal umbrella but also works by Asaṅga and other authors typically considered to write from a Yogācāra perspective. He builds his category of “Great Madhyamaka” (dbu-ma Chen) from these seemingly disparate sources which do, in fact, address common themes,  

398 Dorje, Eighth Situpa, p. 23.
sometimes in ways more similar than the late Indian and Tibetan scholars typically acknowledged. This category is broad enough to cover both sūtric and tantric works, contrary to more conventional presentations of Madhyamaka. Because Dölpopa’s perspective on this system is refracted through the Kālachakra Tantra and its major commentaries, he tends to use language found in the canonical source texts but not considered definitive in meaning by other Tibetan commentators, e.g., “permanent” (g.yung drung) and “self” (bdag). A few passages will illustrate this tendency, starting with one from his Fourth Council in which Dölpopa is refuting the idea that samsāra and nirvāṇa are identical: “As the sugata essence is permanent, are the incidental stains also permanent?”

In a passage from the autocommentary on the Fourth Council in which Dölpopa argues that absolute truth (as opposed to conventional truth) must be truly established in order to exist at all, he again uses language considered taboo in most systems of Madhyamaka: “…[I]f purity, the sublime self, great bliss, and the permanent were negated, the sugata essence would be negated. But if that were negated, all phenomena, such as the impermanent and the impure would be negated.”

By negated, Dölpopa here means shown not to exist; he holds ultimate reality to be the foundation for the mistaken appearances of conventional reality.

Rangjung Dorje, while he presents a presence-friendly version of

399 Stearns, *Buddha From Dolpo*, p. 223.
400 Ibid., p. 238.
Madhyamaka, does not venture into the linguistic frontiers of Dölpopa’s zhentong—perhaps one reason that his view seems not to have provoked his contemporaries and later scholars in the ways Dölpopa’s writings did. On the contrary, the Third Karmapa maintains the traditional view of the four major Buddhist tenet systems (mentioned in the Dölpopa chapter), and the language he uses from the Uttaratantra and the Mahāmudrā tradition is much less controversial than Dölpopa’s innovative language. In his Autocommentary on The Profound Inner Reality, he also argues for the existence of buddha nature (although without referring to it as truly established and permanent):

> The unchanging [perfect nature] is expressed through the name “emptiness,” because it is empty of the characteristics of both the imaginary and the other-dependent. Since this is never other, it is called “suchness.” Because it is the unmistaken actuality to be realized, it is “the true end.” Because it is the cessation of the characteristics of the [above] two, it is “signlessness.” Because it is the sphere of the noble ones, it is “the ultimate.” Because it is the cause of the dharmas of the noble ones, it is the “dharmadhātu.” These are its synonyms.  

Although this passage suggests that the ultimate exists to the extent that it is “the unmistaken actuality to be realized,” it also clearly states that this ultimate is legitimately expressed as being “empty of both the imaginary and the other-dependent.” This phrasing strongly suggests Dölpopa’s zhentong, emptiness of other, without ever explicitly formulating that as a category of emptiness distinct

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401 Brunnhölzl, Luminous Heart, p. 178.
from the emptiness of self-nature which was the assumed definition of emptiness in the time both masters were writing.

These two sections—the return of Jonang zhentong to the philosophical discourse of Central Tibet and the Third Karmapa’s zhentong-friendly formulation of Madhyamaka—provide the context for a full appreciation of Jamgön Kongtrül’s presentation of zhentong-Madhyamaka in the section of his Treasury of Knowledge dedicated to tenet systems (Frameworks of Buddhist Philosophy). The Treasury of Knowledge is one of his most important works, and it presents and synthesizes various systems of zhentong, offering a glimpse of the evolution of the discourse since Dölpopa’s time. It also reflects his own Rimé perspective and the deep connection he felt to Tāranātha.

Jamtön Kongtrül’s Early Life

Jamtön Kongtrül’s biography begins with a Rimé flavor: He was born in 1813 into a Bönpo family in Lingtri in Ü (dBus), and the man reputed to be his biological father was a Nyingmapa lama.

I was born in a place called Rongyap, a small secluded valley, into a household of moderate means. My nominal father was a lay Bön priest named Sönam Phel…. My mother, Tashi Tso, was a very gentle and patient person by nature…. My actual clan was said to be the Khyungpo. … The successor of this lineage, Khyungpo Lama Yungdrung Tendzin, was reputed
to be my actual father.402

An account of the Khyungpo clan’s history follows this introduction of the man Jamgön Kongtrul considered to be his biological parent and a second father figure, which suggests that Kongtrül identified strongly with this Nyingmapa member of the Khyungpo clan.

The young Kongtrul received the name Tendzin Yungdrung from Sönam Lodrö, the “abbot of Menri Monastery in Tsang Province,”403 and he seems to have shown remarkable inclination toward spiritual practice from an early age. He would only wear monk’s robes from the time he could walk, and he learned the alphabet at five: “...I knew the letters merely upon seeing them...” As Kongtrul grew older, inclinations that his tradition would interpret as evidence of dharma activity in previous lives continued: “In my childhood games, I would spend my entire time playing at bestowing empowerments, erecting miniature temples and ancient castles, making tormas out of earth, and performing torma rituals and lhasang ceremonies. ... So there were many very excellent signs of my connection with and propensity toward the Buddhist teachings.”404

One fascinating aspect of Jamgön Kongtrül’s identity is the way he and other Rimé masters identified him as a reincarnation or emanation of several great

403 Ibid., p. 9.
404 Ibid., p. 8.
figures from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and his account of his very early
childhood would be seen as supporting such narratives (a topic explored at greater
length below). He had visions and premonitions as a small child, as well as great
faith in Guru Rinpoché—the latter not surprising, perhaps, in a child with a
Nyingma lama as an important father figure. Both of these might have suggested
illustrious previous lives to the adults in the child’s life, and in addition Kongtrül
recounts more specific hints of illustrious past lives: “I remembered many
previous existences without being able to put a name on them, and many
circumstances and situations about which it was difficult to say anything at all with
certainty—many joys and sorrows which came to mind both in waking
consciousness and in visions.”405 A Bönpo yogi, Kongtrül recounts, indeed
recognized the child as possessing uncommon inclinations and “prophesied to
[Kongtrül’s] grandfather and others” that the boy would “become famous.”406

However, the young Kongtrül’s precocious inclinations toward dharma
practice did not protect him from what sounds like an abusive father (his mother’s
husband, Sönam Phel, not the Khyungpo Lama reputed to be the boy’s natural
father):

In general, my foster father was very strict. He would not tolerate from me
anything but just sitting quietly when I practiced my reading or writing, or
when I was sitting in formal ceremonies. At the slightest childish behavior,
he would beat and discipline me. I had no freedom to go even out the door unless so ordered. … [When I got scolded.] I would be very hurt, upset, and discouraged, but as I reflect on it later, the fact that I am now at least acceptable in the ranks of human beings is due to the kindness of that old father of mine, and I see him as extremely caring.  

Although the adult Kongtrul excuses his father’s disciplinary excesses, this early period of education must have been difficult for the sensitive child Kongtrül seems to have been.

So much for the apparently abusive “foster” father. The mother features very little in this part of the autobiography, but she is mentioned in Kongtrül’s account of his birth, and in 1848 she came to live with him in the hermitage outside Palpung Monastery. The boy’s biological father offered support and guidance: “As for Khyungpo Lama, he was very loving and affectionate toward me, and I on my part was always very glad to see him. Daily he would explain to me how to recognize various deities and so forth. But he passed away during the summer of my seventh year.”

Thus Jamgön Kongtrül received some instruction in both the Bön and Nyingma traditions from a very early age.

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407 Ibid., pp. 10-11.
408 I wonder, as a modern American, whether this harsh early treatment might have contributed to Kongtrül’s almost excessive compliance, which he describes in somewhat problematic language: “From a very early age, I was quite humble and gentle by nature. No matter who ordered me to do something I was very accommodating, whether I could do it or not and whether their ordering me was appropriate or not. Therefore, both the weak and the powerful found me very personable and treated me only with kind affection” (Kongtrül, Gem, p. 14, emphasis mine). The rest of Jamgön Kongtrül’s autobiography certainly supports his claim to try to gratify the wishes of lamas, patrons, and followers. In fact, others’ requests resulted in Kongtrül’s writing the works he is best known for. Yet there is something troubling in the tone of the passage above.
409 Ibid., p. 76.
410 Ibid., p. 11.
The young Kongtrül’s first engagement with organized practice came through the Bön monastery near his home. “From the age of eight or nine, I began performing rituals, reading texts, and reciting liturgies from the Bön tradition.” Later, on the advice of the same Bönpo yogi who had named him, Kongtrul did practices related to “the deity Shridevi…. After I performed the longer ritual, the shorter daily recitation, and several other related rituals, I experienced signs in dreams which agreed with those described in the texts of the practice.”

In addition, he had copied several “volumes of ritual texts and liturgies” by the time he was ten, and he loved their mentions of the nature of mind. He was also interested in painting and medicine from an early age, so he studied medicine “with a doctor named Karma Phuntsok and learned to identify the majority of medicinal herbs that were available.” Clearly, this was a very precocious child.

However, when Jamgön Kongtrül was 16, a feud among various families in his home region erupted, along with heavy taxation and other difficult conditions, and Kongtrül’s “foster” father was imprisoned in Chödé Palace. His mother urged him to join a monastery, “but…there was no monastery in our immediate vicinity that really appealed” to the young Kongtrül. Later that year, he was sent to the

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411 Ibid.
412 Ibid., p. 10.
413 Ibid., p. 13.
area where his father was imprisoned.\textsuperscript{415} Around this time (age 16), Kongtrül was taken under the wing of “Tsephel of the Khangsar clan, the chieftain of Chödê,” whom he had impressed (presumably with his intelligence and education), and traveled with him as his secretary.\textsuperscript{416} During this time he also met Jigmé Losel from Zhechen Monastery, whom he impressed with his knowledge of the Bön tradition. Before too long, he was introduced to the Öntrul incarnation of Zhechen Monastery (Jamtog Lama Gyurmé Thutop Namgyal) and began studying with him.\textsuperscript{417} This Jamtog Rinpoche of Zhechen would remain an influential presence—and then an influential memory—for some time to come in the young man’s life, and Kongtrül maintained his connection with the monastery for the rest of his life. As Richard Barron writes in his translator’s introduction to Gem, “The devotion that the young man [Kongtrul] had for this master is evident in his descriptions of their relationship.”\textsuperscript{418} The section below on his connections with important lamas will explore this connection with Zhechen at greater length.

Jamtog Kongtrül’s exile from his home allowed him to connect to influential figures who would offer the young prodigy opportunities to fulfill his considerable promise, and so his ascent to widespread renown had begun. Having entered Zhechen Monastery at 16, he received mind-nature instructions at 18 from

\textsuperscript{415} Ibid., pp. 13-14.  
\textsuperscript{416} Ibid., pp. 14-15.  
\textsuperscript{417} Ibid., pp. 14-15.  
\textsuperscript{418} Ibid., p. xx.
Gyurmé Tenphel,\textsuperscript{419} learned to rest in the nature of mind during a pilgrimage,\textsuperscript{420} and took ordination in the Nyingma lineage at age 19 from Zhechen Öntrul at that master’s suggestion. He describes that momentous event as follows: “On that occasion, I had an appropriate understanding of the symbolic meaning of what was going on, and a feeling of certainty that I had really received it, and all of it seemed very appropriate. The lineage of the precepts was the tradition of the Early Translation School.”\textsuperscript{421} This unequivocal affirmation that he had received the precepts correctly will be important later in understanding the young Kongtrül’s first personal brush with sectarian sentiment.

Also, later in the year that he received ordination, Kongtrül received teachings on many texts, including “the retreat manual known as \textit{The Ocean of Certain Meaning} by Dölpopa,”\textsuperscript{422} marking the beginning of the budding master’s engagement with the Jonang tradition. As Kongtrül grew into a pivotal Rimé figure, preserving instruction lineages in danger of dying out, he collected and transmitted major Jonang works, and in addition he came to be recognized by Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo as a reincarnation of Tāranātha’s aide and of Tāranātha himself. This more intimate connection with the Jonang lineage will be considered in a later section.

\textsuperscript{419} Ibid., p. 16.
\textsuperscript{420} Ibid., p. 17.
\textsuperscript{421} Ibid., p. 19.
\textsuperscript{422} Ibid.
Early the next year (1883), the Chöde chieftain brought the young Kongtrül with him to Palpung Monastery, a momentous move for the young man and one that reflected the leader’s high opinion of him. No further mention is made in the autobiography of Kongtrül’s father, though his mother does reappear later.

Kongtrül said a heartfelt goodbye to his teacher at Zhechen, Öntrul Rinpoche, who told him, “Always focus your mind, rely on your mindfulness and alertness, and don’t be sectarian.”

However, almost as soon as Kongtrul arrived at Palpung, he faced the first (and probably the most traumatic) sectarian coercion of his life: The Öngen incarnation of Palpung explained to me that it was necessary for me to stay [at Palpung] for some time into the future, and that when the Refuge Lord [the 9th Tai Situ, Pema Nyingjé Wangpo] returned, it was very important for me to request the vows of a fully ordained monk. Although I explained to him the way in which I had received the vows already when I stayed at Zhechen, he spoke very disparagingly of this and said, ‘It is essential that you request the vows from the Kagyü hierarchs.’

The young Jamgön Kongtrül longed to meet Tai Situ Rinpoché, the “Kagyü hierarch” to whom this Öngen Rinpoché was referring—but this episode is the only account of a prominent event in Kongtrül’s long career in which he resists the demand made of him by a spiritual authority figure. Although Kongtrül was forced to re-ordain, the ceremony in which he would have given back his Nyingma

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423 Ibid., p. 21.
424 Ibid., p. 22.
vows was never performed, and he seems to have felt that the second ordination was less valid than the first: “…[D]ue to the impression I had that my previous ordination was blocking the experience, I did not feel that I had truly received the ordination.”

Barron offers the following gloss on this episode and on the politically motivated recognition that followed of Kongtrül as a tulku in the Kagyü lineage: “[Kongtrül’s] distress at this heavy-handed treatment was compounded when he was recognized as a tulku officially aligned with Palpung, further ensuring that he would remain with this institution…. We cannot overestimate the impact of such events on a sensitive and insightful mind like Kongtrül’s.” This recognition of the young man as “Kongtrül,” the reincarnation of “a student and attendant during the later part of the previous Situ’s life, who had been known as Kongpo Bamteng Tulku,” effectively attached him to Palpung Monastery strongly enough that he was not requisitioned again in the way that had brought him to Palpung from Zhechen in the first place. However, it was not to be his final or definitive recognition.

This less than optimal entry to the Kagyü tradition seems not to have diminished Jamgön Kongtrül’s enthusiasm for his new school: He quickly began to master its texts and practices, and he felt real devotion to many of the Kagyü

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425 Ibid., pp. 22-23.
426 Ibid., p. xx.
hierarchs, particularly Tai Situ Rinpoché. (Indeed, he became an important holder of the Kagyü practice lineages in his own right, so that later Jamgön Kongtrül incarnations became powerful figures along with much older reincarnating lineages.) The next several years in his autobiography show him more or less constantly engaged in study with his new teachers. However, he does note that during this time he experienced obstacles due to having allowed his connection with the Nyingma tradition to “diminish somewhat.”

Meeting Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo Rinpoché

In 1840, nearly seven years after Kongtrül’s move to Palpung, he met Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo (1820–1892), “the kindred spirit who, more than any other mentor, would foster in him a profound respect for all the spiritual traditions available in Tibet, including the Bön tradition that had been his birthright.” This meeting marked the beginning of a remarkable collaboration which profoundly shaped the Rimé movement as a whole and has left indelible marks on contemporary Tibetan Buddhism. The first encounter between these two masters came about when Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo studied Sanskrit grammar from Jamgön Kongtrül, and the two quickly formed a mutual teacher/student relationship.

428 Ibid., p. 29.
429 Ibid., p. xx-xxi.
Kongtrül was about 27 when he met Khyentsé Rinpoché, and his introduction to this near-contemporary master marks the beginning of a new phase in both masters’ lives. Kongtrül clearly had nonsectarian leanings already, but it was Khyentsé who crystallized such tendencies into a decided approach to studying and teaching the dharma. In addition, shortly after that meeting, Kongtrül reports the first of several dreams in which he seemed to recognize his own previous incarnations. These self-identifications mingle with other accomplished masters’ recognitions of Kongtrül’s previous incarnations, creating a complex set of identities that framed his current lifetime. The two sections below will address, first, the connection between Jamgön Kongtrül and Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo and their impact on the Rimé movement, and second, the network of previous identities informing the way Kongtrül and his contemporaries interpreted his life and work. Following these two sections, this chronological account of Kongtrül’s life will resume.

Kongtrül and Khyentsé Rinpochés were remarkable masters who most likely would have left a mark in any period, but there seems to have been something remarkable about their collaboration, some alchemy by which each catalyzed the spiritual growth of the other and together sparked a renaissance in Easter Tibet. Khyentsé’s impact on Kongtrül was certainly profound, both as recorded in his autobiography and as his student, Nesar Karma Tashi Chöphel, reported in his
short text *The Marvelous Gem-Like Vision*,\(^{430}\) written after the passing of his master. Tashi Chöphel summarizes it best:

Khyentsé Rinpočhe was… the foundation for Kongtrül Rinpočhe’s truly vast assimilation of the teachings, so vast that no one could compare to him. Kongtrül Rinpočhe himself told me on many occasions, “It goes without saying that, from early on in my life, I had not been lacking in an unbiased respect for the teachings, but nothing had actually opened my eyes to the state of pure vision, in which I could hold all of these teachings in my mind without any contradiction. Since I met Khyentsé Rinpočhe, however, I have felt a natural sense of freedom, in that I am confident that I can hold any and all of the Sage’s teachings in perfect balance, without seeing any inconsistency between them. Meeting him was also, for me, the dawning of my real familiarity with the Buddhadharma.”\(^{431}\)

Meeting Khyentsé Rinpočhe seems to have precipitated a return to Kongtrül’s natural ecumenism and to Öntrül Rinpočhe’s parting advice not to be sectarian, but this return far exceeded the unreflective proto-Rimé of the young Kongtrül. Khyentsé explicitly emphasized abandoning sectarian bias and embracing all legitimate lineages of Buddhadharma. Kongtrül, in a rare critical assessment of contemporary lamas, states clearly:

> Nowadays, as far as even the most famous lamas and scholars are concerned, other than those who hold their own specific traditions and several mainstream lineages of teaching, there are few who could equal Khyentsé Rinpočhe’s extremely fine regard and pure view for all the teachings of the Sage without bias, and their careers are meager. In particular, in these latter times there are many who, while they themselves

\(^{430}\) *Rje dun gzigs ’jam mgon ngag gi dbang phyug yon tan rgya mtsho ’i zhabs kyi ’das rjes kyi rnam par thar pa ngo mtshar nor bu ’i snang ba*

\(^{431}\) Kongtrül, *Gem*, p. 393.
do not act forthrightly and do not have a pure spiritual outlook, still speak of the relative superiority and inferiority of different Buddhist traditions, or the relative purity or impurity of different lineages….\textsuperscript{432}

This statement is all the more remarkable when one considers the many eminent masters with whom Kongtrül was associated.

Khyentsé seems to have been the most influential of Kongtrül’s many masters.

I, too, although I have been someone who has longed from his heart for the Buddhist teachings, have not turned out to have the mental strength to make up my own mind, and so have not accomplished my wishes successfully. From this point on, however, gradually the lotus of my faith in all the teachings of the Sage (without sectarian distinctions) and in the holders of those teachings unfolded in an unbiased manner. My spiritual career, too, has improved, and I have not committed the grievous fault of rejecting the teachings. All this is due to the grace of this precious lord guru [Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo Rinpoché].\textsuperscript{433}

Khyentsé Rinpoché’s influence on Kongtrül, specifically in the area of pacifying sectarian enmity, was profound.

**The Many Lives of Jamgön Kongtrül**

Not long after his momentous first meeting with Khyentsé Rinpoché, Kongtrül had a “dream” in which he felt that he was a “realized scholar” sitting in Samye Monastery with Shantarakshita, Padmakara, and Trisong Detsen.\textsuperscript{434} This episode seems to confirm two subsequent recognitions of Kongtrül as Vairotsana (by

\textsuperscript{432} Ibid., p. 86.
\textsuperscript{433} Ibid., p. 86.
\textsuperscript{434} Ibid., p. 45.
Khyentsé and Dabzang Tulku), although Kongtrül does not identify the scholar in his dream by name. This was the first of several important recognitions of Kongtrül’s previous lives, both through his own dreams and other visionary states and through the reported visions of others.

In marked contrast to his recognition as “Kongtrül,” these subsequent recognitions seemed to carry significant phenomenological weight with him, informing Kongtrül’s sense of identity and the way he seems to have been perceived by the community of other remarkable masters with whom he was associated. Following his auspicious dream of being a scholar in Samyé Monastery (and thus closely associated with the origins of Buddhism in Tibet and with Guru Rinpoché), Kongtrül was recognized as an emanation or reincarnation of Vairotsana (who was associated with the transmission of the Nyingma textual tradition in Tibet) by Dabzang Tulku and then by Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo, and later by Chokgyur Lingpa.

**Jamgön Kongtrül’s Jonang Connections**

In addition to the many identifications Kongtrül made with masters from various lineages, his most powerful connection was with Tāranātha by way of Tsewang Norbu (and the latter’s previous incarnation as Tāranātha’s chamberlain).

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435 Ibid., pp. 89-90.
Kongtrül’s sense of being inseparable from that Jonang master informs the large role that Jonang *zhentong* plays in Kongtrül’s reinterpretation of that philosophy. After all, Tāranātha had worked so hard to re-introduce Dölpopa’s thought into the Central Tibetan emptiness discourse in the mid-17th century; if we accept that Kongtrül enjoyed a special relationship with the Jonang master, then it seems logical for Kongtrül also to revive Dölpopa’s *zhentong* in the 19th century.

In 1842 Kongtrül had begun to rebuild the old hermitage above Palpung Monastery, and late in the year he performed a propitiatory ceremony there. Soon after that, Tai Situ Rinpoché “bestowed on the hermitage the name of Kunzang Dechen Ösel Ling.” This would be Kongtrül’s home at Palpung for the rest of his life. Shortly after his move to the hermitage, he had another auspicious dream: “I was close to slipping over the edge of a very steep icy abyss, when on the ledge above me appeared Rigdzin Tsewang Norbu, cheerful and smiling and radiant; he pulled me up by the hand and we went to a very pleasant meadow.”

Tsewang Norbu, perhaps not coincidentally, had been a teacher of the 8th Tai Situpa, Chökyi Jungné, and his most important *zhentong*-related action was persuading that teacher to embrace that view, as discussed in the historical section above. Thus, Tsewang Norbu played an important role in the resurrection of *zhentong* in Central Tibet and its dissemination during the Rime movement, and Jamgön Kongtrül’s

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438 Ibid., p. 56.
439 Ibid.
visionary encounter with him foreshadows other visions that would connect him
strongly with the Jonang lineage.

Kongtrül, in addition to being recognized as an emanation of Vairotsana
(and of Minling Terchen, Gyalwa Chokyang, Yön-gé Mingyur Dorje,
Khyungdruk Dorje, and Aryadeva), was recognized in various ways as being
intimately connected to Tāranātha. To begin with, Jamgon Kongtrül had visionary
experiences connecting him with Tāranātha. During the winter solstice of 1842-
43, while Kongtrül was performing a Vajrakila ritual, he had a dream

of a magnificent temple, in the center of which I saw the great and glorious
Vajrakumara, slightly vague as thought cloaked in mist. On either side were
the ten wrathful deities of Vajrakila’s retinue, shining like the rays of the sun
on crystal; these were about two or three stories high. At that point, the
venerable Tāranātha appeared, looking slightly emaciated; placing a kila
dagger on my head, he recited [a mantra] and said, “If you, too, add this
ending to the mantra, the blessing will come more quickly.”

With this dream, we have an instance of both a typical encounter between Kongtrül
and an important deity and also of the sort of instruction and blessing that he
receives from Tāranātha in this non-ordinary state of consciousness.

In the summer of 1843, Lama Karma Norbu gave Kongtrül teachings on
several texts, “all based on these works by Jonang Jetsun Rinpoché [Tāranātha].”

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440 Ibid., p. 88-90.
441 Ibid., p. 98.
442 Ibid., p. 205.
443 Ibid., p. 220.
444 Ibid., p. 57.
445 Ibid., p. 58.
In the eighth month of that year, Kongtrül went to “upper Ling Province” for three months to receive

the empowerments of most of the classes of tantra found in the collected works of Tāranātha (the Kalachakra foremost among these), as well as the oral transmissions for five or six volumes of Tāranātha’s writings. During this time, I experienced in my dreams some significant indications and a great sense that I was receiving blessings.  

Kongtrül also dreamed at other times of encounters with Tāranātha and Dölpopa, and in 1871 Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo had an auspicious dream that persuaded him that Kongtrül was a reincarnation of Jamgon Kunga Drolchok, whose reincarnation in turn was Tāranātha himself.

Kongtrül also recounts a “meditative experience” that puts his promotion of the Jonang system in direct dialogue with his Rime approach:

...[A]t one point, I found myself entering a large stupa, only to be told that due to harm inflicted by an injurious earth spirit there was a flaw on the southwest corner of the lowest step; if the view and philosophy of the Jonang tradition were restored to its former glory, I felt, the stupa would have no such flaw. In a similar vein, someone who appeared to be a scholar read to me from many writings that discussed the need for the respective systems of other philosophical schools to be preserved just as the founders had envisioned.

And at one point Kongtrül reports, “I dreamed of seeing a human-sized standing form of the Four-Armed Avalokiteshvara, and of finding a large crystal and polishing the lower portion only to find that the stone changed into a radiant white

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446 Ibid., p. 59.
447 Ibid., p. 160.
448 Ibid., p. 187.
Thus, Kongtrül reports a great many visionary encounters with significant figures from the Jonang tradition—and many other encounters with non-Jonang figures, as well. But his strongest self-identification seems to have been with Tāranātha.

In 1854 (12 years after the encounter with Tsewang Norbu), Kongtrül received the transmission from Karma Ösel Gyurmé of “the empowerments and oral transmissions from the collected works of Jonang Jetsun Rinpoché [Tāranātha] that [Kongtrül] had not previously received.”

That evening, Kongtrül dreamed that the venerable Tāranātha had prepared for a major empowerment that he was intending to confer on me. I had the clear impression of being Tsewang Norbu and serving Tāranātha. It seems that Tsewang Norbu attested to the fact that he was the rebirth of Tāranātha’s regent, Yeshe Gyatso, and the venerable Tāranātha himself had said that he, Tāranātha, and Yeshe Gyatso were both aspects of the same mindstream. So I felt that my dream had some significance.

This passage is very telling, despite its modest tone. In a brief account of Kongtrül’s later life and funeral observances, his student and attendant Nesar Karma Tashi Chöphel writes, “...I myself heard Kongtrül Rinpoché say, ‘Even if I am not an actual emanation of Jonang Jetsün Rinpoché, I am certain that it would be all right to consider me as one of his main students, someone for whom he felt great affinity.’ The student he meant was Tāranātha’s regent Yeshé Gyatso, whose

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450 Ibid., p. 95.
451 Ibid.
mindstream was identical to the venerable Tāranātha’s.”452 This is the only place in the supplemental text where the student mentions his master’s identification with a great figure from the Tibetan Buddhist past, and it seems to have been his most significant previous-life identification.453

Later Years

As we have seen, Jamgön Kongtrül grew from a brilliant young student to a capable teacher and mediator, and with the rise of his reputation, his life became more involved with politics, teaching, and other distractions from retreat and personal practice. With middle and later age came some troubles distinct to this phase of his life. In 1871, when Kongtrül was 58, Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo declared that he would no longer leave his quarters,454 and more teaching and state ritual requests came Kongtrül’s way. Then, in 1874 a quarrel erupted between some of the monks of Palpung Monastery and Kongtrül for reasons never specified in the autobiography, and though Kongtrül simply moved to his hermitage near the monastery, the incident seems to have had a heavy negative impact on him:

…[M]y own thought was that the minds of these people might have been disturbed by demons of broken samaya, and I felt only compassion toward them, not the slightest malice. But as soon as I had repaid Öntrul’s kindness to me, I felt my mind turn away from all these lamas and monks, and for

452 Ibid., p. 374.
453 Nowhere in his autobiography does Kongtrül associate himself with the previous Kongtrül whose incarnation he was supposed to be.
fourteen years I did not go near the monastery, which meant that my teaching activities at the meditation center effectively came to a halt as well.\textsuperscript{455}

For the affable Kongtrül, such a turning away must have been a painful experience, but he does report visiting the monastery during that time as required for rituals and other administrative duties. Seven years later, an attempt by Kuzhap Rinpoche to heal the breach was ineffective, and Kongtrül suffered an illness which he felt was due to the conflict.\textsuperscript{456}

By this time, the older generation of Kagyü hierarchs was passing away, and Kongtrül found himself cast in the role of teacher to the highest of these, the 10\textsuperscript{th} Tai Situpa, Pema Kunzang Chögyal, and the Fifteenth Karmapa, Khakyab Dorje.\textsuperscript{457} Khyentsé Rinpoche passed away in 1892, and Kongtrül (now 79) was deprived of his main teacher and colleague. Kongtrül had experienced various illnesses during his life, but in 1894, shortly after he turned 82, his health took a turn for the worse, and the last sentence of the main text of the autobiography (following a description of his illness and the extensive practices performed by his students) suggests a certain resignation to the approach of the end of his life: “Due to [his students’] efforts [to prolong his life], one would have expected anyone’s illnesses to clear up, but given the weight of my advancing years, it was difficult to hope that my

\textsuperscript{455} Ibid., p. 173.
\textsuperscript{456} Ibid., pp. 203-4.
\textsuperscript{457} In fact, Jamgön Kongtrül’s reincarnation would be recognized as the son of the (non-monastic) 15\textsuperscript{th} Karmapa.
health would undergo any improvement.”  

He would live for five more years, the last in poor health. According to a supplemental text by his attendant, “Kongtrül Rinpoche continued to engage in such an amazing array of superb activities until he reached the age of eighty-seven. Then, at a certain point he began to turn his attention toward benefiting others to be guided. But during that whole year he gave no definite indication whatsoever of his passing.…”

When Kongtrül Rinpoche was eighty-five or eighty-six, he showed more signs of gradual aging—his health slowly worsened, his eyesight began to fail, and so on. In particular, during the fifth month of the Fire Bird Year [1897-1898], without him showing any visible signs of illness, Kongtrül Rinpoche underwent a change of heart. That is to say, for many days from morning until night he regaled his attendants and others in his retinue with countless and varied stories of the religious and secular histories of India and China, from early times until the present day.

In response to this ominous sign, his disciples requested him to live longer, but from mid-1897 his health “went up and down, but steadily worsened,” and in late 1899 he passed away.

**Jamtog Kongtrül's Zhentong**

Now that we have explored Kongtrül’s life and visionary connections with the Jonang lineage, we turn to his formulation of *zhentong*. As we saw above, Kagyū “zhentong” differed in significant and interesting way from Dölpopa’s version of

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459 Ibid., p. 378.
460 Ibid., p. 379.
461 Ibid., p. 380.
Madhyamaka, yet as we will see in this section, Jamgön Kongtrül’s zhentong in many ways fused Kagyü and Jonang versions of that philosophical system. I suggest that this was very much informed by Kongtrül’s identification with Jonang luminaries, especially Tāranātha.

In book six of his *Treasury of Knowledge (Shes-by mDzod)*, Jamgön Kongtrül positions zhentong Madhyamaka at the peak of his presentation of philosophical tenet systems. By this point in the zhentong discourse, Dölpopa’s presentation of that system had been elaborated, debated, and re-interpreted by various philosophical luminaries. In characteristic Rimé fashion, Jamgön Kongtrül bases his own presentation of zhentong primarily on those of two previous participants in the discourse: Tāranātha of the Jonang school and Shākya Chokden of the Sakya. Jamgön Kongtrül’s presentation (as we will explore in more detail below) differs from Dölpopa’s in several important ways, but perhaps the most basic difference is that while Dölpopa was introducing a set of new dharma terms and a unitary lens through which to read the foundational texts of his tradition, Jamgön Kongtrül was harmonizing several different versions of zhentong. Thus, his own presentation emerges as the core elements of the various iterations of zhentong, and he has Tibetan authors to cite in addition to the Indian originals.

Jamgön Kongtrül’s presentation of Zhentong-Madhyamaka begins after his section on Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka, which signals that the former is the highest
philosophical system in his doxographical arrangement.\footnote{Tibetan presentations of tenet systems invariably begin with the lower views and proceed to the higher ones, so that the last system to be elaborated represents the author’s own final view.} At the beginning of the Zhentong-Madhyamaka section, Jamgön Kongtrül both indicates that it is a school of Madhyamaka (by the section title, most notably) and that it has deep ties to the Yogācāra school: “The two systems of Yogācāra and Certainty about the Ultimate/ do not differ in terms of the essence of their views.”\footnote{Kongtrül, \textit{Treasury}, p. 249.} Kongtrül is drawing a very particular connection between these two systems at the same time that he distinguishes them from each other. He holds that both the Yogācāra and the Zhentong-Madhyamaka systems ultimately derive from the texts of Maitreya, which he considers as representing the Madhyamaka view. The commentary on the root verse above is very rich, so I will quote it at length:

> The general philosophical tenet system of these [texts (of Maitreya)] was taught in detail by many excellent disciple lineages, such as [those originating with] Dignāga and Sthiramati. The uncommon philosophical tenet system [of Maitreya’s texts] remained with supreme disciples, who transmitted it orally. In Tibet, this [uncommon explanation] was transmitted by the lotsāwas Zu Gawé Dorjé and Tsen Kawoché and was first established as a system of standard texts (\textit{yig cha’i srol}) by the mahāsiddha Yumo [Mikyö Dorjé] and others. The uncommon key points of this view were elucidated in the teachings of the lord of victors Rangjung Dorjé, the omniscient [Longchen] Drimé Özer, and others, who also clearly maintained that this [view] was the final definitive meaning. In particular, the omniscient dharma lord Dölpopa the Great proclaimed the lion’s roar of “Zhentong-Madhyamaka.” Later, Serdok Paṇchen [Shākya Chokden], the exalted Tāranātha, and others clarified the uncommon key points of this

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system of philosophical tenets. [These are the masters who] appeared as the founders and promulgators of this great chariot-system.\textsuperscript{464}

This passage lays the foundation for Jamgön Kongtrül to present zhentong as harmonizing Yogācāra and Madhyamaka thought while at the same time maintaining some space between Zhentong-Madhyamaka and the Cittamātra system, which all the authors in the zhentong discourse recognize as a lower school than Madhyamaka (and thus unsuitable as the vehicle for their highest truths).

These authors often “reclaim” texts like the Uttaratantra that were considered to be among the teachings of Maitreya and thus (according to most standard doxographies) to present a Cittamātra or Yogācāra view, arguing instead on the basis of their contents (or other authoritative criteria) that they present a Madhyamaka view. But they are careful, even so, to distinguish the Yogācāra system founded on Maitreya’s texts from the Madhyamaka views found in them.

**Connections between Zhentong-Madhyamaka and Yogācāra**

In order to understand Jamgön Kongtrül’s presentation of Zhentong-Madhyamaka’s connections with the Yogācāra system, we will examine them here in greater detail. As mentioned above, the most profound connection between Yogācāra and Jamgön Kongtrül’s Zhentong-Madhyamaka is that they both find their origins in the Dharma Treatises of Maitreya, which most scholars considered

\textsuperscript{464} Ibid., p. 250.
just Yogācāra or Cittamātra. These arguments against zhentong as Cittamātra hinge on the idea that Maitreya himself identified his texts as holding the Madhyamaka view, and attempts to discredit those scriptures as Madhyamaka based on the assertions of scholars who held Nāgārjuna and his Second Turning teachings as definitive are simply using one authoritative figure against another. There is no reason, according to Shākya Chokden in particular, for the rangtongpas’ presentation to trump the zhentongpas’, as we will see below.

Jamgön Kongtrül refutes the assumption that Zhentong-Madhyamaka is nothing more than Cittamātra in a brief section that includes a quotation from Dölpopa and a lengthy citation from Shākya Chokden. The first states: “The five Dharma Treatises of Maitreya do not contain different views. The Ornament of Clear Realization does not explain the Rangtong view.” The Shākya Chokden citation is much longer, and it presents the argument that “those who assert that the view of the Highest Continuum [Skt. Uttaratantra, Tib. rGyud bLa-ma] is the Chittamātra view” are mistaken because “the exalted Maitreya and Asaṅga have explained that [the Highest Continuum] is Madhyamaka” and because those two were prophesied by the Buddha in the same way that Nāgārjuna was. Thus, Shākya Chokden argues, the personal qualifications of the foundational authors of

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465 Abhisamaya-alaṅkāra.
466 Kongtrül, Treasury, p. 251.
467 Ibid., p. 252.
the zhentong tradition of Madhyamaka are no less valid than those of the rangtong tradition. He then goes on the offensive against the rangtong authors who malign the zhentong tradition by arguing that their texts are merely Cittamātra: “If [the Highest Continuum] is not considered Madhyamaka because it explains that the consummate [nature] is ultimate reality, how could the many earlier and later Tibetans who assert that ultimate reality is emptiness in its aspect of a nonimplicative negation be considered Mādhyamikas?” The long quotation from Shākya Chokden ends with the following quote from a commentary on Maitreya’s works: “It is explained clearly that sūtras teaching that all phenomena have no inherent nature (nihsvabhāva, ngo bo nyid med pa) are not to be taken literally. Anyone who accepts such [statements] as literal is a propounder of nihilism.” This passage offers a strong textual basis for the essential zhentong position.

Later in his Zhentong-Madhyamaka section, Jamgön Kongtrül also distinguishes between “Chittamātras and Proponents of Cognition (Vijñaptivādins),” mentioning Tāranātha and again citing Shākya Chokden:

The explanation that Proponents of Cognition (Vijñaptivādins) and Chittamātras are the same is derived from: (1) the confusion of the many Tibetans who accept that all [forms of] awareness and primordial wisdom

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468 A common appellation for one’s opponents
469 Kongtrül, Treasury, p. 252.
470 Ibid., p. 253.
are necessarily mind and mental events; (2) their mistake of not distinguishing primordial wisdom from consciousness; and (3) their failure to train properly in dharma terminology of the final teachings [of the Buddha, that is, the teachings of the third dharma wheel].

This distinction between ordinary levels of mind and primordial wisdom (ye-shes), as we have seen before and as we will explore in more detail in the conclusion, is critically important to pro-zhentong authors. Dölpopa distinguished between the all-base consciousness (ālaya, kun gzhi) and the “universal-ground primordial awareness” (kun gzhi ye shes), his successor Tāranātha reinforced the point, and Shākya Chokden (whose zhentong differs in significant ways from Dölpopa’s) provides the above succinct reminder of the difference between different levels of consciousness. These three authors thus seem to be distinguishing between taking phenomena as reflections of ordinary consciousness (rnam-shes) and seeing all things as being fundamentally nothing other than primordial wisdom (ye-shes).

The passage cited above, in addition to its harmonizing function, also distinguishes between a “general philosophical tenet system” descending from Maitreya’s texts (which would be identified with Cittamātra) and an “uncommon philosophical tenet system,” which Jamgön Kongtrül is clearly equating with his Zhentong-Madhyamaka category. He will argue later in this section (mostly through a citation from Shākya Chokden) that Maitreya’s texts do present a

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471 Ibid., p. 266.
472 Stearns, Buddha From Dolpo, pp. 90-91.
Madhyamaka view, contra the received wisdom of most non-
zhentong Tibetan authors. Therefore, Maitreya’s five major
texts, in addition to providing the basis for the Cittamātra or
Yogācāra tradition, also underlie the Zhentong-Madhyamaka
tradition. That tradition, as represented in the lineage of Tsen
Kawoché to Yumo Mikyö Dorjé to Dölpopa, Rangjung Dorje, and
Longchenpa, is clearly the lineage of Jamgön Kongtrül’s
synthesizing zhentong. Thus, although Rangjung Dorje
never used the term “zhentong,” he is included in the lineage
of Mādhyamikas with Certainty About the Ultimate, as is Longchenpa. Jamgön Kongtrül seems to
be deliberately constructing what contemporary scholars might
call a comparative category when he writes about Zhentong-Madhyamaka, one large enough to hold
Dölpopa’s zhentong along with Rangjung Dorje’s Mahāmudrā-friendly view and to
accommodate differences in (what Kongtrül sees as) the nonessential elements of
each thinker’s system.

This commentary also makes it clear that Jamgön Kongtrül considers
zhentong to be a philosophical tenet system, not only a view accessible only
following realization, as Karl Brunnhölzl and others have suggested Dölpopa’s
zhentong was. In his Center of the Sunlit Sky, Brunnhölzl cites the following
passage from David Ruegg which succinctly states the sort of distinction
Brunnhölzl is making with respect to Dölpopa’s view:

[O]ne could assume an incompatibility, at one and the same level of
reference, between two philosophical propositions, both of which cannot be true in accordance with the principle of contradiction. Alternatively, one might perhaps suppose a complementarity—perhaps even an incommensurability—between two doctrines that relate to different levels of reference or discourse, and which are accordingly not mutually exclusive or contradictory.  

Brunnhölzl applies this to Dölpopa’s zhentong to comment that it was never intended to be a philosophical system (grub-mtha’) that uses reason and logic to establish what the ultimate is; rather, it was a statement of the view (lta-ba) at which Dölpopa had arrived due to realizing the truth directly. This, Brunnhölzl holds, was a very important distinction which later authors in the zhentong discourse often overlooked. Indeed, Jamgön Kongtrül includes zhentong as the peak of his presentation of tenet systems (grub-mtha’), a position from which it harmonizes elements of the views of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka. We have here an echo of Dölpopa’s distinction, framed differently perhaps in Kongtrül’s presentation of tenet systems, harmonizing and systematizing as Kongtrül’s system does all previous zhentong thought.

This distinction between a philosophical tenet system and a view realized through experience is very important not only to understand the history of the zhentong discourse and the distinctions between the various pro-zhentong authors

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474 Brunnhölzl, Sunlit Sky, p. 513.
but also to bring a distinction between appropriate presentations at different levels of consciousness to the academic discussion of contemplative practices and traditions. Dölpopa makes this distinction not in terms of philosophical system (grub-mtha') and post-realization view (lta-ba) but in terms of “profound meditative equipoise free from all proliferations” and of “making distinctions” after such a state has ceased:

…[A]lthough the meaning of the last two wheels of doctrine and of the vajra vehicle is one, when they are practiced, you set in equipoise in the conclusive profound noumenon devoid of proliferation in accordance with the middle wheel, and then when making distinctions in subsequent attainment [after meditative equipoise], you individually discriminate phenomena in a correct way, at which time you make identifications upon good differentiation in accordance with what is said in the final wheel and in the vajra vehicle. When [this procedure is followed], practice of the meaning of all the scriptures of the great vehicle becomes complete, unmistaken, and just thoroughly pure.475

As this passage shows, not only is this distinction between the approach to reality as experienced in meditative equipoise vs. in subsequent attainment a key to Dölpopa’s presentation of zhentong, but it also functions to resolve apparent contradictions between the second and third turning teachings.

**Secret Mantra Madhyamaka**

Following Jamgön Kongtrül’s Zhentong-Madhyamaka section is a brief section on

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Secret Mantra Madhyamaka, the final topic in Book Six of the *Treasury of Knowledge*. The root verse on which this section is a commentary connects it with Third Turning topics and specifies tantric commentaries as the source texts for this lineage of Madhyamaka: “The Madhyamaka of the profound Mantra [approach] is the basic state of all phenomena. It is natural luminosity distinguished by great bliss; it is primordial wisdom, the union of clarity and emptiness, bliss and emptiness. This is taught clearly in the *Five Stages*, Commentaries by Bodhisattvas, and other texts.”

The *Five Stages* is a commentary by Nāgārjuna on the Guhyasamāja Tantra, and the Commentaries by Bodhisattvas are the major commentaries on the Kālachakra Tantra. By introducing commentaries on major tantric works as the source texts for a school of Madhyamaka, Jamgön Kongtrül is clearly following in the footsteps of Dölpopa and Rangjung Dorje by merging the perspectives of sūtra and tantra. (And he is clearly departing from Tsongkhapa’s legacy of carefully distinguishing between sūtric and tantric descriptions of reality; even the title of the section, “Secret Mantra-Madhyamaka,” reveals a synthetic approach typical of zhentong authors.)

The commentary portion of the Secret Mantra-Madhyamaka section, like the Zhentong-Madhyamaka section, opens by connecting this form of Madhyamaka to the Yogācāra tradition descended from the texts of Maitreya: “Since the

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476 Kongtrül, *Treasury*, p. 269
477 Ibid., p. 405, n. 876.
Madhyamaka found in the approach of the profound Secret Mantra places a strong emphasis on nondual primordial wisdom, it is very much in harmony with Yogācāra-Madhyamaka.”

Although this opening and the overall tone of this section are reminiscent of the Zhentong-Madhyamaka section, Secret Mantra-Madhyamaka is not merely a reiteration of the previous topic. The two main portions of the Secret Mantra-Madhyamaka section are “Madhyamaka as It Relates to the Generation Stage” and “Madhyamaka as It Relates to the Completion Stage.” Each stage has two sub-stages. In the first sub-stage of the generation stage, Jamgön Kongtrül explains that “The Zhentong mode of explanation [applies to how the deities] are created within nondual primordial wisdom, because [it clarifies how] the seed syllables and emblems that arise within emptiness are not beyond the primordial wisdom of the dharmadhātu.” In the second sub-stage, “The way those created deities arise without conceptual elaborations is first ascertained by [being aware of the deities’] clarity and emptiness.”

In the completion sub-stages, the order is reversed, with rangtong described as superior during the phase of the dissolution “of the entire maṇḍala” and zhentong superior for resting in “the actual primordial wisdom of the completion stage.” Thus, in keeping with Dölpopa’s position, Jamgön Kongtrül holds both rangtong and zhentong to be necessary components of a thorough system to transform consciousness into

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478 Kongtrül, Treasury, p. 269.
479 Ibid., p. 270.
480 Ibid., p. 271.
primordial wisdom.

The Secret Mantra-Madhyamaka section concludes with this telling note: “It is taught that the distinction between Sūtra-Madhyamaka and Mantra-Madhyamaka is based on their differences with regard to the subjective agent, that is, the qualities of their realizations; they do not differ in terms of the object [of their realization]: freedom from conceptual elaborations.” This final note seems very much in line with previous Kagyü interpretations of zhentong and is certainly not ontologically reifying as Dölpopa’s zhentong was accused of being.

Jamgön Kongtrül’s Moments of Encounter

Now that Jamgön Kongtrül’s historical context, biography, and presentation of zhentong have all been presented, it is time to consider how his visionary experiences fit with our bimodal energetic model of transformative experience. In Dölpopa’s case, we saw that one decisive encounter during a Kālacakra retreat left him with a radically different reading of his received tradition, and the building of the immense stūpa of Jonang Monastery somehow triggered him to begin teaching this new view of ultimate reality. Jamgön Kongtrül’s case provides us with a different type of visionary impact on philosophical writings. In this case, the adept reports frequent visionary experiences, in particular a series of encounters with important lamas from the history of Jonang zhentong. He then formulates a

\[481\] Ibid., p. 272.
version of zhentong that harmonizes his Kagyü tradition’s presence-friendly teachings with the Jonang masters’. The following sections will draw the connections between specific aspects of Kongtrül’s process of encounter and the model presented in the first chapter.

**Immersion in tradition before moment of encounter** To begin with, Jamgön Kongtrül’s many moments of encounter were deeply informed by the religious traditions in which he had been educated since his childhood. Indeed, he was a visionary from early childhood, so according to the Tibetan belief in reincarnation as factual, his cultural conditioning could have spanned multiple lifetimes already.

In addition, we have clear evidence that he was socialized into the world of Tibetan Buddhist deities and buddhas from an early age, and he began to study Sanskrit, astrology, medicine, and the various traditional Tibetan academic subjects from the time of his youth. In addition, he received training in philosophy and various tantras. In short, Kongtrül was exceptionally well-versed in his received tradition. Hollenback, in explaining why mystical experiences seem to be so context-dependent, theorizes that “…that metamorphosis of the imagination that I call its ‘empowerment’… also causes it to objectify the contents of the mystic’s conscious and subconscious thoughts and desires.”

As we have seen above, Kongtrül’s

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experiences of visionary contact certainly expressed themselves through deities from the Tibetan Buddhist imaginaire.

**Conducive social setting** By this I mean settings which are conducive to visionary and other contemplative experiences: states of sleep and dream, which by definition involve separating the experiencer from ordinary social contact; situations in which people gather to receive teachings or empowerments and possibly to practice those after receiving them; and situations of retreat in which practitioners intentionally separate themselves from ordinary society, even typical monastic life. Pilgrimage or (in Dölpopa’s case) intensive physical labor by an entire community could also function as conducive settings, but these do not seem to apply in Kongtrül’s case.

Nearly all of Kongtrül’s reported visions (the ones recounted above as well as the vast majority not included) occur in states of deep meditation or in the altered states of dream and/or sleep. By definition, such mental states isolate the one experiencing them from her or his social roles and obligations and isolate him. In addition, many of his visions came during periods of retreat, teachings, or empowerments, which provide a further separation from life in ordinary society.

For instance, Kongtrül’s first reported self-recognition was the dream in which he

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483 Even experiences that occur during dream states seem—from their descriptions—not to be ordinary dreams but ones that convey non-ordinary information such as percipients’ identities in previous lives, small changes to be made in mantras or rituals, revealed treasures, etc.

484 I will use masculine pronouns here because the subject of the chapter is male; they are also a small protest against the fact that so few of the extraordinary figures in this lineage are female.
felt he was a “realized scholar” at Samye. This might well have been a state of consciousness different from ordinary dreams, but at least Kongtrül seems to have been in a sleep-like state—and thus socially isolated and more permeable—when it occurred.

Kongtrül’s autobiography shows that for him particularly powerful dreams often followed significant or energetically charged external events. For instance, in the winter of 1842-43, Kongtrül was engaged in a Vajrakila ritual when he dreamed of Vajrakumara and Vajrakila’s retinue appearing in a fantastic setting and then of Tāranātha appearing in their midst to offer Kongtrül a special ending for the mantra he was using in the ritual. Kongtrül experienced another “empowered” dream in 1854 in which he felt that he was Tsewang Norbu (in that master’s previous incarnation as Tāranātha’s regent, Yeshe Gyatso) and that Tāranātha was bestowing “a major empowerment” on him. This dream seems to have impacted Kongtrül’s sense of his own “long identity” very deeply, to the point where he identified himself to his attendant as Tāranātha’s chamberlain—and through the chamberlain, as the great Jonang master himself.

As these last two examples illustrate, Kongtrül seemed to be more likely to experience significant dreams that conveyed potentially non-ordinary information to him when he was or had recently been engaged in serious meditative practice.

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485 Kongtrül, Gem, p. 378.
486 Ibid., p. 57.
487 Ibid., p. 374.
This supports Hollenback’s thesis that an empowered imagination can become a means of “supernormal” perception: “The experience of quite a few mystics suggests that the imagination is not just a weaver of fantasies, dreams, and illusions but that, under conditions of recollective concentration, it can sometimes transport the mystic to distant locations and sometimes give the mystic accurate knowledge of what is occurring there.” Based on this study, we might add that an elite practitioner’s mind, when focused and “empowered,” can also provide access that deeply impacts her or his sense of identity and the way emptiness is apprehended or at least communicated.

The importance of a conducive social setting (isolation, preferably preceded by a powerful dharmic event) to a moment of visionary encounter can be indirectly proved by its opposite: Kongtrül reports that as he was drawn into social interactions and politics more regularly, his visionary life quieted down. When Kongtrül was between ten and fifteen years old, he reports that he trained himself to recognize dreams as dreams (an important first step in the advanced practice of dream yoga) and had many auspicious dreams and visions, but that “Later on in my life, such excellent dreams and visions have all faded away like clouds in the sky; this is certainly due to the influence of contaminated or misappropriated...
offerings.” Kongtrül is referring here, at least in part, to the many offerings he received once he became well-known later in life. It was (and is) customary for recipients of teachings or empowerments to make offerings to the teacher or vajra master in return for the instructions they receive.

Kongtrül was much in demand among the population generally, but he also became an important advisor to the government of Dergé, as was customary for major religious figures living in the government’s jurisdiction. He ended up performing rituals of protection and defense for the rulers of Dergé when war broke out in Eastern Tibet: “I was summoned to Dergé to conduct certain rituals, so I went and performed the Vajrakila ritual to avert recurrent cycles of negative energy and... rituals focusing on the protective deities and lhasang ceremonies to promote harmony with the local spirits.” He certainly would have received extensive offerings for service like this which was certainly perceived as an important element of warfare. Kongtrül’s services were requested on various occasions during the conflict, and lamas in his position were typically unable to refuse such a summons.

For the duration of the war, Kongtrül seems to have been very much involved (if reluctantly so) in trying to minimize the dangers of war. At one point, he was personally in danger of being held hostage by the invaders: “...[T]he

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489 Kongtrül, Gem, p. 12.
490 Ibid., p. 129.
delegation from the Nyarong chieftain came to Dergé Gonchen and began taking hostages, rounding up all the lamas and notable laypeople who were under that jurisdiction. Although I was contacted by them briefly, ...the matter was dropped.”491 Such circumstances seem to have been very trying for the sensitive Kongtrül: “...[T]he queen of Dergé and her son were taken hostage by the Nyarong chieftain, and my mind could find no peace whatsoever.”492

Indeed, Kongtrül’s monastery was threatened: “Our monastery of Palpung was in danger of being attacked, ...but just at that point the Dongkham Thripa, the leader [of the troops from Central Tibet], suddenly fell ill.”493 Kongtrül (also a renowned doctor) was summoned to treat the man poised to destroy his home, which he did. This episode raised Kongtrül in the eyes of the invading forces, allowing him to intercede to save Palpung. “I made a petition on behalf of everyone connected with Palpung, ...and this landed well on the ear of the commander, who gave me his promise that everyone under the jurisdiction of Palpung... would be spared any aggression.”494

These incidents dragged Kongtrül directly into the terrible and messy conflict raging in his homeland, and he received offerings for services requisitioned by both sides. During these years, Kongtrül’s autobiography records

491 Ibid., p. 138.
492 Ibid., p. 136.
493 Ibid., p. 139.
494 Ibid.
markedly fewer significant visionary events. Thus, although Kongtrül only
mentions “contaminated or misappropriated offerings” as obstacles to his visionary
life, there is every reason to believe that such offerings involved Kongtrül in a
much greater degree of political and social interaction than he was accustomed to.
The fact that his inner life seemed to be significantly disturbed by his society’s
outer turmoil indirectly supports the theory that a socially liminal setting is
conducive to mental recollection and visionary experience.

**Mind is recollected** Many of Kongtrül’s visionary experiences occur during times
when his mind and energy would have been “recollected,” in Hollenback’s term, or
to use a Buddhist category employed by Klein, in a state of mental concentration
(zhi-gnas). Both of these authors, in distinct ways, point to the importance of a
focused mind and the energy flow that supports such a mental state. Sometimes
Kongtrül experiences visionary contacts during retreats, meditative sessions, or
significant rituals, but the far more common pattern is for such contacts to occur
following practices that focus the mind.

The following section from Kongtrül’s autobiography shows this for both
retreat and ritual: “From the seventh through the eighth month [during 1855] I was
in personal retreat. ... On the evening I began, I dreamed of a *terma* [concealed
treasure] discovered by Duddul Dorjé, said to be the heart of Vairochana, from
which many... relics were growing. I dreamed that I ate some of these relics and
gave more to others.” Kongtrül was a “treasure revealer” (tertön, gter-ston) who occasionally recovered “hidden” physical objects in waking states, a fascinating practice beyond the scope of this chapter. Such an encounter in a dream state would have been understood by Kongtrül and his colleagues as highly blessed and as impacting the recipient’s energetic state and giving him access to knowledge even though he ingested the objects in a dream state.

The sequel to this episode suggests that a period of waking time spent in a concentrated energetic state can induce visionary contact during the states of sleep and dream. After Kongtrül ended this retreat, he went to Dzongsar Monastery to meet with Khyentsé Rinpoche, who offered Kongtrül various empowerments including that “for the Sakya tradition of Vajrakila.... The evening after the preparatory ritual, I dreamed that I met Vajradhara Pema Nyinjé [i.e., the 9th Tai Situpa]. He conferred on me the oral transmission for the four volumes of his collected works in a very short time, after which he spent a long time ordaining me and entrusting me with these teachings.” This episode could have been triggered by the empowerment, with the retreat possibly serving as a supplemental condition. Given the great number of visionary encounters Kongtrül records, such a cause and effect relationship is uncertain. Also, this experience includes not only blessing

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495 Kongtrül, Gem, p. 96.
496 Vajradhara is a celestial buddha who serves as a central figure for devotion in the Karma Kagyü lineage. Kongtrül would have considered Tai Situpa, his teacher, to be the same in essence as Vajradhara.
497 Kongtrül, Gem, p. 97.
contact but the transmission of teachings and ordination. This strongly supports Hollenback’s claim that a recollected mind is a *sine qua non* for mystical contact with divine beings. It also suggests that such contact can introduce new information, so to speak, to the recipient of such contact.

**Experience of a division between physical reality and mental/energetic reality becomes less clear** Visionary episodes like these (and the empowerments or other special situations preceding them) are moments when the lines get blurred between physical and energetic realities, particularly in the case of a dream of consuming blessed substances. As Klein has demonstrated, even the most basic instructions for Buddhist meditation include elements that impact the body’s energy.\(^{498}\) The yogic or tantric practices that would be included in the practices Kongtrül reports doing would involve deliberate manipulation of the body’s energy in more subtle and systematic ways. During those practices, the yogi identifies with his chosen deity to the extent that he experiences his own energy body as the deity’s body, composed of light.

For instance, in late 1871 Kongtrül had gone to the Dilgo area of East Tibet to exchange empowerments and teachings with Khyentsé Rinpoche. The following description of a ritual Khyentsé performed during that period refers to several elements that are important to my argument: “[Khyentsé] gave me a scroll

\(^{498}\) See Klein, “Seeing Mind.”
painting of the Guardian Goddess of Mantra, which was imbued with the presence of the deity, and at the same time performed the conferral of life force for this protective deity. During this ritual I felt a sense of awe, as though the goddess herself had actually come, with my breath short and my body unable to move.”

During such a ritual, the participants would have intended to remain in a concentrated state of mind/energy; this is assumed and therefore goes unstated. Such a state facilitates the energetics of the transaction: The painting (probably due to previous ritual activity) is held to be imbued with the energetic presence of the deity it portrays and is therefore able to “attune” the energetic system of the person receiving its blessings. Khyentsé also “performed the conferral of life force” for the Guardian Goddess of Mantra, almost certainly a reference to bla.  

Thus we see an implied concentrated state linked with the energetic impact of a seemingly external object on the recipient of the ritual. Kongtrül is physically affected by the nearly tangible presence of the goddess and experiences shortness of breath and paralysis.

This is one way that a hard line between physical reality and the subtle winds that flow within and among bodies can be blurred; another is the idea that events in the physical world are deeply connected to the human inhabitants of that

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499 Kongtrül, Gem, p. 158.
500 This, as Klein discusses in “Seeing Mind,” is the life-force believed by Tibetans to reside in people, deities, or powerful objects in the natural world. The bla of a “power place,” for instance, can enhance the bla of those who visit it, and a powerful deity like this would strengthen the bla and thus potentially lengthen the life of the recipient of such a ritual.
world. (Indeed, Tibetans would see humans and their environment as parts of the same fabric rather than separate elements.) Kongtrül’s autobiography offers many examples of such events: an earthquake in the Water Tiger Year (1842-43) that “caused a great deal of destruction, but there was no damage in the area around the meditation center;”\textsuperscript{501} the appearance, during a ritual at a sacred site, of “a rainbow that covered half the sky, like a blue-green field on which many other colors were overlaid, reaching from the east toward the south and lasting the entire morning;”\textsuperscript{502} and, more ominously, the shattering of “a cymbal that had no visible flaw,” indicating an upcoming economic disruption to one of the participants.\textsuperscript{503} Such occurrences pack the autobiography and are assumed to be byproducts of the intimate web of interrelated causes by which the world comes into being.

**Categories of self and other blur**  As we have seen in detail in this chapter, in some of Jamgön Kongtrül’s most significant dreams, he experiences himself as someone “other than” his current identity.

**Encounter’s impact**  As with Dölpopa’s, Kongtrül’s visionary experiences deeply impacted his sense of who he was in this lifetime. He came to experience his own life story as having a very long narrative arc, and his identification with great figures from the past seems to have added depth and richness to the meaning he attached to his activities in his current lifetime. In addition, his associates—

\textsuperscript{501} Kongtrül, *Gem*, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{502} Ibid., p. 162.
\textsuperscript{503} Ibid.
particularly Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo—actively participated in this (supposed) recovery of his previous identities. The sense of Kongtrül’s being connected with Tāranātha in particular seems to have informed his enthusiastic re-introduction of the Jonang teachings to “mainstream” Tibetan discourse. As we have seen, Kongtrül’s zhentong was profoundly influenced by Jonang zhentong, an example of the deep impact of a visionary encounter like Kongtrül’s with Tāranātha and Tsewang Norbu.

**Conclusion**

Jamgön Kongtrül’s story interweaves historical context, personal biography, and (for Kongtrül and his colleagues) the “long autobiography” of previous lives to produce his striking reformulation of zhentong for the post-Geluk Tibetan philosophical discourse. The previous chapter covered the suppression of the Jonang school, and this one began with the gradual re-emergence of Jonang zhentong texts in Central Tibet. Lamas from the Nyingma and Kagyü schools (Tsewang Norbu and the 8th Tai Situpa in particular) made it possible for Jamgön Kongtrül to reformulate that system, with strong input from Jonang texts in addition to Kagyü formulations of Madhyamaka (strongly influenced by the Third Karmapa’s thought) and the Sakya author Shākya Chokden’s writings on zhentong. All of this, of course, was informed by Kongtrül’s visionary experiences, particularly the ones connecting him with the Jonang master Tāranātha. Analysis
of Kongtrül’s autobiography reveals patterns of influence on his visionary encounters consistent with Hollenback’s hypotheses about mystical experience. It also supports the bimodal energetic model as offering one way to think through such episodes without falling either to simple acceptance of the tradition’s assumptions about visionary experience or equally simple assumptions that any such reports must be no more than a product of culturally constructed expectations.
Conclusion

This dissertation grows out of my own simple wish to make sense of the history of zherlong in Tibet, to tell a story that could satisfy my own curiosity about the intellectual and political developments but also about the passion and even bloodshed that attends this history. Why did Dölpopa describe emptiness in ways that could easily be read as heretical? Why did Tsongkhapa react so strongly against Dölpopa’s Great Madhyamaka? How are contemporary forms of zherlong (the majority of them deeply influenced by Jamgön Kongtrül) related to Dölpopa’s original formulation? And, perhaps most puzzling to me personally, why is religious studies as a discipline so uncomfortable highlighting the role of visionary experience in driving this history? My own curiosity is now satisfied on these basic points: The history of zherlong was driven by peak moments of visionary experience, and the important texts of all three authors considered here were composed not simply to convey those experiences but to guide students in the direction of a correct conceptual understanding of emptiness. The transmission of Dölpopa’s, Tsongkhapa’s, and Jamgön Kongtrül’s core beliefs and transformative systems was of course deeply shaped by history and social context, but the passion driving each generation’s transmissions was not reducible to political considerations. This story can be told most clearly at the intersection of history,
epistemology, praxis, and expanded identity\textsuperscript{504} where the alchemical moments of this discourse unfolded. And it seems to me that the academic study of religion is justifiably reluctant to deal with visionary states and the like because, by their nature, such states are often problematic or difficult to accept within the traditions in which they occur—let alone within a community of scholars from (in this case) a radically different culture and time. Yet such traditions cannot be understood fully without our having some tools to analyze claims of such peak religious experiences.

So much for the questions that drove the first draft of this dissertation. The importance of much of the factual information I had gathered became clear only when I began to revise the draft, and the question (from Anne Klein) driving that engagement with this text was: What is at stake for Dölpopa, Tsongkhapa, and Jamgön Kongtrül as they engage in discussions of and practices for realizing the ultimate nature? From the materials considered in this dissertation, several themes emerge to answer this question. First, an accurate representation of emptiness (which each of these three offers in his formulation of Madhyamaka) is crucial for their students’ meditative practices to lead them to awakening. As Dölpopa says in his \textit{Mountain Dharma},

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\textsuperscript{504} By this I mean that Dölpopa, Tsongkhapa, and Jamgön Kongtrül each thought of himself as either intimately connected with or in some way an emanation of a very significant figure (or figures) from his tradition’s past.
When… through concentratedly focusing on body and mind the channels are bound, and wind and mind are stopped, meditative stabilization combining calm abiding and special insight is produced well. At that time, you need a complete pure view that exactly and thoroughly recognizes correctly that what exists is existent and exactly and thoroughly recognizes correctly that what does not exist is non-existent.\textsuperscript{505}

In other words, at the time of actually experiencing reality most directly, the practitioner should already be familiar with an authoritative verbal description of reality.

In addition, Dölpopa distinguishes between the way reality itself appears and the way it should be described after the experience of the ultimate has subsided.

Therefore, although the meaning of the last two wheels of doctrine and of the vajra vehicle is one, when they are practiced, you set in equipoise in the conclusive profound noumenon devoid of proliferation in accordance with the middle wheel, and then when making distinctions in subsequent attainment [after meditative equipoise], you individually discriminate phenomena in a correct way, at which time you make identifications upon good differentiation in accordance with what is said in the final wheel and in the vajra vehicle. When [this procedure is followed], practice of the meaning of all the scriptures of the great vehicle becomes complete, unmistaken, and just thoroughly pure.\textsuperscript{506}

Dölpopa wants his students to distinguish between an \textit{experience} of emptiness and a \textit{description} of emptiness, and by elaborating these categories through his texts, he also offers contemporary scholars of religion more sophisticated ways of analyzing the contemplative texts of the traditions we study. Of course adepts’

\textsuperscript{506} Ibid., p. 209.
texts can never match their experiences; of course what they write is deeply embedded in the context of their own tradition. But it does not follow that such experiences did not or cannot happen.

Here is where Dölpopa’s categories speak to what I have called a contemplative epistemology, a philosophical system (*grub-mtha*’), so to speak, that scholars could use to offer wild experiences and non-ordinary\(^{507}\) states of mind and subtle winds a place alongside the everyday functions of the human person as we tell the stories of religious ideas and communities. Tibetan epistemology offers to such a view of the person the categories of mental direct perception and yogic direct perception, as we saw in the first chapter, to provide a way to fit visions and contact with ultimate reality into accepted accounts of the perceptual capacities of persons.

In much the same way that Dölpopa considers the distinction between “meditative equipoise” and “subsequent attainment” to explain the differences between the second and third turning teachings on emptiness, a contemplative-friendly epistemology renders the old dispute between constructivists and perennialists obsolete by acknowledging various levels, so to speak, of human cognitive and gnoseological capacity. Conventional minds apprehend

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\(^{507}\) Such states are “non-ordinary,” it bears repeating, from the perspective of daily life rather than from, as Tibetan authors would say, the fruitional perspective of one directly experiencing reality.
conventional objects and can (per Tsongkhapa’s insight) be used in the service of apprehending ultimate objects. Ultimate minds apprehend ultimate objects. And the very history of zhentong suggests that we cannot assume that the experience of emptiness is the same for every great practitioner but depends on the methods used to cultivate it.

In addition, each of these three authors is strongly, personally invested in his formulation of emptiness, and the language used in the context of Madhyamaka clearly carries an emotional charge as well as simply conveying ideas. The “deep identity” of each connected him intimately with the significant figure(s) who influenced his articulation of the ultimate. In Dölpopa’s case, he was an emanation of Kalkī Puṇḍarīka, and his zhentong expressed the truth of Madhyamaka that (he felt) other Tibetan authors had lost. Tsongkhapa had visionary encounters with significant figures in the history of Indian commentaries on second turning interpretations of Madhyamaka that led him to understand that philosophical system fully. And Jamgön Kongtrül had strong connections with great Jonang masters of the past in his dreams and visions in addition to being identified as the reincarnation of Tsewang Norbu and through him as being deeply interwoven with Tāranātha’s mind-stream. Each man’s expression of Madhyamaka was not simply another textual composition; it was (to his own experience) a recovery of the true meaning of Buddha’s teachings on ultimate reality. With so much religious
meaning on the line, seemingly conflicting views of the ultimate were sure to stir up strong feelings in these masters and in their disciples.

In addition to polemics around the description of ultimate reality, the question of how its realization comes about lies at the root of Tsongkhapa’s quarrel with Dölpopa—and of Dölpopa’s with Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen. What role does or can conceptual thought play in apprehending a non-conceptual ultimate? What role do the subtle winds of the human body (and the environment, according to Tibetan culture) play in the path to awakening? A wide variety of answers is possible, but the views of these two masters demonstrate that the question is by no means simple.

Dölpopa, by insisting that ultimate minds can only manifest once conventional minds have subsided, offers a strong “discovery” model of buddhahood very much in line with the Uttaratantra and other third turning sūtras: one’s own buddha nature is already replete with all good qualities that will manifest as soon as one’s ordinary karmic subtle winds have been stilled. Conventional thought is useful in clearing away these obscurations, but because it can never apprehend the ultimate, it is not a reliable or sufficient guide toward the goal of buddhahood. Tsongkhapa, on the other hand, stands outside his contemporaries’ interpretations of Madhyamaka and the path to realizing emptiness by the emphasis he places on valid inferential cognition as leading to a
nonconceptual realization fo the ultimate.

And finally, these masters must have been aware of the real social and political impact that embracing a given orientation toward emptiness could have. Jamgön Kongtrül in particular was not only aware of the political aspects of sectarian conflict; he compiled his “treasuries” in part to preserve the teachings of smaller or otherwise vulnerable lineages in order to prevent them from dying out. And, as Brunnhölzl says in *Center of the Sunlit Sky*, zhentong became associated with the non-Geluk schools driving the Ri-me movement:

The Shentong view increasingly served as a kind of common “corporate identity” for those schools that were opposed—both doctrinally and politically—to the Gelugpas, whose institutional identity naturally lies in the unique system of Tsongkhapa. The sense of a common doctrinal ground was also one of the underlying forces of the nineteenth-century nonsectarian Rime movement in eastern Tibet, which included many Sakya, Nyingma, and Kagyü masters.  

Philosophy and politics in old Tibet were typically intertwined, and these masters must have been aware of the repercussions of their formulations of emptiness.

**The limitations of this study**

As much as this dissertation has come to include, a great deal has been left unaddressed. Among the major points of departure from this study that might suggest future research topics, the one I would most like to pursue is the

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508 Brunnhölzl, *Center*, pp. 503-4.
connections between zhentong authors and a distinctly nonsectarian attitude. Dölpopa—though he critiqued the recognition of thoughts as manifestations of ultimate mind—saw his formulation of Madhyamaka as drawing from various Buddhist philosophical schools and resolving apparent contradictions between different approaches. Tāranātha, by all accounts, greatly respected traditions other than the Jonang, and Jamgön Kongtrül was one of the major leaders of the Ri-me movement.

In addition, I would have liked to explore embodiment more fully in the context of these Tibetan authors. If by that term one understands the subtle body as well as the physical one, this approach could open other ways into understanding contemplative and other non-ordinary states of reality. This survey would also have benefitted from a close reading of specific texts in Tibetan with more attention to a narrower slice of those texts. And I would have liked to delve more deeply into the ways these authors describe the relationships between using language and realizing nonconceptual reality. These are just the areas I would have liked to include; no doubt there are many lacunae that have escaped my attention.

**Offerings to the study of religion**

And, finally, what does this exploration of zhentong and the epistemological issues related to the discourse have to offer scholars of religious and contemplative
phenomena? If nothing else, I hope it offers an example of the key role visionary experiences can play in religious innovations and offers a more inclusive epistemology able to hold contemplative truths as truths. In service of this goal, we have encountered a rich language to contextualize visionary experiences that I hope will be of service to scholars of other contemplative traditions as well.

Also, we have encountered Dölpopa’s distinction between the ultimate as one experiences it during meditative equipoise and as one expresses it in subsequent attainment. This is already a step beyond earlier assumptions that the great contemplatives of various traditions (religious or otherwise) were somehow simply trying to encode their peak experiences in words when they composed texts. Such a distinction in appropriate ways of using language also highlights the pedagogical role that expressions of ultimate truths play. They are not so much expected to describe reality accurately as to provide a target to guide the student’s progress along the path specified by her tradition. And finally, the texts and practices considered in this dissertation offer us a better understanding of the roles vital winds play in this tradition, both as agents of transformation of the subtle winds and subtle body and also as an important epistemological mode.

I hope that my colleagues will find material in this dissertation valuable to build on, reformulate, or react against. After all, a work instigated by Dölpopa’s

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509 Longchenpa also talks about seeing spiritual beings in a post-meditative state.
philosophy can ask nothing more than to provoke further reflection and debate among the author’s colleagues.
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