

# Madhyamaka in Tibet: Thinking Through the Ultimate Truth

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## 국문요약

본고는 티벳 중관 사상의 지배적인 해석적 줄기를 철학적으로 재구축한다. 논자는 마크 시더리츠(Mark Siderits)가 용수의 중관에 대한 관점으로 특징 지은 것, 특히 시더리츠가 용수에 대해 주장한 것처럼 궁극적인 진리는 논리를 여윈 것이라는 관점과 중관에 대한 티벳 중관학의 해석의 특징들을 구별한다. 그러한 과정에서 논자는 중관학파가 유가행파와 양립한다는 해석에 대하여 미팜(1846-1912)이 제시한 해석에 주목하여 입증한다. 미팜의 이론은 진제와 속제의 언설불가능한 통합에 대해 설명함으로써 중관학파와 유가행파의 교각역할을 한다.

불교학리뷰 (Critical Review for Buddhist Studies)

20권 (2016. 12) 171p~197p

논자는 모든 진리를 틀에 의지하는 것(*framework-dependent*)으로서 이해하는 해석 체계로서의 중관학파에 주목함으로써 불가해한 진리가 유가행파 및 중관학파와 양립가능하다는 것을 주장한다. 즉, 모든 진리가 중관학파의 특수한 틀과 관계되며, 틀에 의지하는 진리는 항상 관습적인 것 또는 *상대적인* 진리들일 뿐이며 틀에 의지하지 않는 진리는 존재하지 않는 것이다. 그러나 그러한 틀의 구조 자체는 생각과 표현의 범위를 넘어서는, 즉 “틀에 규정될 수 없는 것(*unframeable*)” 것인데, 왜냐하면 개별적 진리는 필수적으로 어떤 특수한 틀 안에 가둬지기 때문이다. 틀의 경계를 초월하고 완전히 틀 안에 가둬질 수 없는 것이 바로 궁극적 진리이다.

한편 공(空)은 중관학파에서 궁극적 진리에 관한 핵심적 은유이며, 언설 불가능한 (틀을 벗어난) 궁극성은 유가행파에서 “의타기”(*paratantra*)와 “알라야식”(*ālayavijñāna*)과 같이 다른 방식들로 나타난다. 불가해한 궁극성은 물론 유가행파에서도 유지되지만 중관학파의 해석과 같등을 일으킬 필요는 없었다. 이는 일체가 공이기 때문이며, 또한 연기에 의한 것이기 때문(이고, 공이 공한 것과 마찬가지로 연기 역시 의존적이기 때문)이다.

주제어: 중관학파, 유가행파, 미팜(Mipam), 공(空), 언설불가능(*inconceivable*)

## 1. Introduction

This paper is a philosophical reconstruction of dominant interpretative strands of Madhyamaka thought in Tibet. I distinguish features of Tibetan interpretations of Madhyamaka from what Mark Siderits has characterized as the view of Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka, and in particular, his claim that for Nāgārjuna, an ultimate truth is an incoherent notion. In doing so, I make a case for an interpretation of Madhyamaka that is compatible with Yogācāra.

Siderits presents the notion of the ultimate truth in Madhyamaka to be incoherent, a vacuous truth. He thus describes the ultimate truth to lack meaningful sense. That is to say, to be an ultimate truth is to be meaningless because there is none; or in his words, “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth.”<sup>1)</sup> As a vacuous truth, talk of an ultimate truth for Siderits is on par with claims to a square circle. This is clear when we consider a parallel instance of incoherence in the following question: Is a square circle green or purple? Such questions are irrelevant because a square circle is an impossibility. Similarly, for Siderits questions about the ultimate are irrelevant because they are not well formed. That is to say, to attribute properties to what lacks coherent reality is to spin wheels and proliferate superimpositions, which leads to suffering. According to Siderits’s interpretation, to stop presuming an ultimate truth is Nāgārjuna’s therapeutic appeal; that is, to stop looking for an ultimate truth beyond the merely conventional is to stop spinning the wheels of *samsāra*. As an alternative, he offers what he calls a “conservative interpretation of emptiness [that] starts with the idea that if

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1) Siderits, 2003, 113.

nothing has intrinsic nature, then the very idea of ultimate truth – ‘of how things are *anyway*’ – is incoherent.”<sup>2)</sup>

Siderits makes a point to distinguish his “anti-realist” conception of the ultimate from a claim that the ultimate truth in Madhyamaka is an inconceivable reality. He associates claims to a reality beyond concepts with Yogācāra, not Madhyamaka, and describes Yogācāra as a form of “realism”.<sup>3)</sup> In doing so, he suggests that appeals to what is inconceivable - or attempts to express the inexpressible - are part of the problem, not the solution, to overcoming metaphysical reification in Madhyamaka. He thus delimits conceptual proliferations (*prapañca*) to conceptual *excesses*, not to conceptual constructions themselves.<sup>4)</sup>

Siderits refers to his interpretation of the two truths in Madhyamaka as a “semantic” interpretation, for which there is only one truth (the conventional) because there is no ultimate truth. He calls the alternative, for which the ultimate truth is inconceivable, the “metaphysical” interpretation.<sup>5)</sup> In doing so, he delimits interpretative possibilities of the two truths to a false dichotomy of semantic and metaphysical interpretations and ignores the possibility of alternative, phenomenological interpretations, which are attested in Yogācāra traditions. While Siderits’s anti-realist interpretation of Madhyamaka is provocative, it does not represent a reading of Madhyamaka consistent with the ways that Madhyamaka has been interpreted in Tibet. Below I contrast Siderits’s reading with Tibetan interpretations of Madhyamaka, with particular

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2) Siderits, 2016, 135-36.

3) Siderits, 2004, 414n6.

4) Siderits, 2016, 134-135.

5) On his two models, see Siderits, 2007, 182.

attention to the interpretation of Madhyamaka offered by Mipam (1846-1912).

## 2. Conceivable and Inconceivable Ultimates

Siderits's conception of ultimate truth differs from Tibetan interpretations in important ways. For instance, Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), the influential figurehead of the Geluk (*dge lugs*) tradition of Mahyamaka, claimed that there is nothing that exists ultimately, like Siderits. Yet for Tsongkhapa, ultimate emptiness *conventionally* exists. Thus, the ultimate truth exists as an absence for Tsongkhapa; it is an absence of intrinsic nature, not an incoherent notion. The claim that there is nothing that exists ultimately, and that to exist is to exist conventionally, is one shared by Tsongkhapa and Siderits. Yet Tsongkhapa's ultimate truth is not at all an incoherent notion; it is a coherent and conceivable notion of a lack of intrinsic nature that *conventionally* exists.

In marked contrast to Tsongkhapa's emphasis on determining absence (of intrinsic nature), another major interpretation of the ultimate truth among Tibetan traditions is that it is inconceivable, a view that Siderits's associates with the Yogācāra tradition, not Madhyamaka. Despite Siderits's narrowly circumscribed idea of what constitutes legitimate *madhyamaka*, the interpretation of the ultimate as inconceivable is shared by many Tibetans who themselves identify as Mādhyamikas. In fact, most non-Geluk traditions of Madhyamaka in Tibet, such as what we will see below, explicitly subscribe to this kind of view. Significantly, this kind of interpretation of the ultimate

truth is one that is neither an incoherent notion nor a conceivable absence. Rather, the ultimate here is held to be beyond the categories of thought and so cannot be adequately conceived even as an absence because it is utterly undetermined by thought.

I will argue that this view of an inconceivable ultimate is compatible not only with Yogācāra, as Siderits claims, but with Madhyamaka, too, by drawing attention to Madhyamaka as a system of interpretation that acknowledges all truths as framework-dependent. That is, since all truths are relative to a particular framework in Madhyamaka, framework-dependent truths are always only conventional, or *relative* truths; there are no framework-independent truths. Yet the structure of the framework itself is “unframeable” (beyond the scope of thought and expression) because discrete truths are necessarily conceived within a particular framework. What transcends the boundaries of the framework (and cannot be completely enframed within it) is the ultimate truth.<sup>6)</sup>

The comprehensive structure of all things (a.k.a. “emptiness” or the “ultimate truth”) is undetermined; it is unframable or unframed. Despite being unframed and inconceivable, this kind of ultimate truth can be (paradoxically and metaphorically) enframed as what goes beyond all frameworks. One way this can be done is to describe the ultimate by means of negation, as we see in the case of Tsongkhapa, where emptiness itself is empty. Another way this can be done is to describe the ultimate truth as

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6) The very idea of the framework (Davidson) is framework-bound, but also can point beyond to what transcends the framework (the unframed). On the truth of this paradox of “closure” and “transcendence,” see Priest, 2002.

*other*, noumenal, and not dependently arisen, as is reflected in Dölpopa's (1292-1361) representation of a transcendent ultimate in the Jonang (*jo nang*) tradition, articulated in his signature doctrine of "other-emptiness" (*gzhan stong*).

Yet another way this can be done is through affirming the unity of the two truths, which is the model that I highlight in this paper and that we see in the works of the Nyingma (*rnying ma*) polymath, Mipam. In this Madhyamaka interpretation, the ultimate truth is represented as an immanent absolute, one that is not completely detached from the framework of conventional truth. This interpretation of an "inconceivable" unity of two truths is different from Dölpopa's representation of an "inconceivable" ultimate that is beyond the domain of the relative truth. The late Madhyamaka scholar, Peter Paul Kakol, described this kind of difference as one between "Hegelian" and "Kantian" absolutisms:

There can be two kinds of absolutism: the 'Kantian' kind which sees an absolute beyond the phenomenal world, and the 'Hegelian' kind which equates the (inter-) relative (or dependent origination) with the absolute (presumably because...things that are interrelated are abstract aspects of a non-dual and concrete Absolute which contains them).<sup>7)</sup>

In contrast with Dölpopa's noumenal absolute, Mipam articulates something like the latter (Hegelian) immanent absolute when he asserts an indivisible *unity* of the two truths, where what appears is always empty and what is

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7) Kakol, 2009, 209.

empty always appears. Unlike Dölpopa, whose ultimate is a transcendent third substance between the dichotomies of entity and non-entity,<sup>8)</sup> *unity* collapses these dichotomies and cannot be enframed in this way. The ultimate truth of unity is inconceivable because all notions - of dependence and independence, multiplicity and singularity, existence and nonexistence - are framework-dependent, conceptually structured truths.

We might wonder how this unity or “Hegelian absolute” is different from Tsongkhapa’s depiction, which also describes a unity of the two truths. Recall that Tsongkhapa claimed that an ultimate truth is simply the absence of intrinsic nature of a conventional truth, and that the two truths are not essentially distinct.<sup>9)</sup> There is certainly a similarity here, but there are important distinctions to bear in mind as well. Firstly, while Madhyamaka begins with critiques of intrinsic nature, it does not necessarily end there; when an analysis of emptiness turns upon itself, analysis self-destructs. In this light, Tsongkhapa’s assertions of the ultimate as a negation can be seen as only a node in a dialectical analysis that culminates in a *synthesis* of appearance and emptiness when analysis is complete. This interpretation is precisely what Mipam argues, citing Tsongkhapa’s *Three Principal Aspects of the Path*:

As long as the two - the ineluctable appearance of dependent arising and

The understanding of emptiness free from assertions - are seen to be separate,

8) See Dölpopa, 2006, 513. See also Stearns, 1999, 133, 251n27.

9) Tsongkhapa depicts the relationship between the two truths as “essentially the same with different contradistinctions (*ngo bo gcig la ldog pa tha dad*), like an impermanent phenomenon and a product.” Tsongkhapa, 1998, 176.

One has still not understood the intent of the Buddha.  
 When they are seen to be in invariable, dependent relation,  
 As simultaneous without alternation,  
 All apprehensions of determinate objects dissolve -  
 One has perfected the analysis of the view.<sup>10)</sup>

In line with affirming the nonconceptual unity of appearance and emptiness, Mipam states:

Only at the start, if a lack of true existence is not taught, there will be no method to eradicate the beginningless habit of mistakenly apprehending entities; and if merely that [lack of true existence] is taught as the ultimate, some narrow-minded people will think, “A mere absence - the elimination of the object of negation - is the abiding reality!” This grasping at emptiness will become an incorrigible view. There are two ways to grasp: grasping at emptiness as an entity and grasping at emptiness as a nonentity.<sup>11)</sup>

Grasping at the ultimate as a nonentity - as the ultimate that is a mere absence of intrinsic nature - is still holding on to a conceptual view. It is a stage but not the culmination of a process of inquiry. The inconceivable ultimate is beyond grasping to categories of intrinsic natures and their emptiness(es); it is where conceptual analysis ends.

This interpretation can be found in the way that Nāgārjuna showed that

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10) Tsongkhapa, 2001; see Mipam, 1990, 107-108.

11) Mipam, 1990, 88. See also Duckworth, 2011, 141-42.

nothing has intrinsic nature because everything depends on something else. That is, things are constituted by what they are not; any intrinsic identity of anything is only ever constituted by what is extrinsic to it, as Thich Nhat Hanh poetically said, “the flower is made of non-flower elements.”<sup>12)</sup> Yet when we consider that there is nothing that has an independent identity when we begin to analyze, we find that there is nothing that is *really* dependent on anything else, either, when we go further. This is because, for things to be dependent, there must be more than one thing standing in a relation (of dependence). But since not even one thing is established (as independent), there cannot be any really separate thing to which it could be related. Thus relation itself is no more real than identity: what we are left with is an intertwining or *unity* (without sameness or difference). I call this kind of synthesis, reached when analysis breaks down at its limit, *entanglement*.

In other words, if everything is dependent on what it is not, the lines that divide one thing from another are blurred. This does not make everything dissolve into singularity because - like the extended “wholes” of Abhidharma - oneness, too, is only ever a conceptual construction. The lines that divide and join - one and many, sameness and difference, self and other - are always framework-dependent, never objectively real. Therefore, in entanglement (or *unity*) things cannot be said to have any external relations, but only to provisionally (or conventionally) exist within a structural “whole” that is inconceivable.

Siderits refers to this kind of view as the “Indra’s net” interpretation of Madhyamaka. That is, Siderits distinguishes his anti-realist interpretation of

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12) Hanh, 2014, 84.

Madhyamaka from one that claims that everything is connected to everything else, “Indra’s net”.<sup>13)</sup> Yet what I wish to point out here is that in the Madhyamaka view of unity that I put forward here, *nothing is really connected to anything else*. Nothing is truly the same, nor is anything truly different; this is why their entangled reality is *inconceivable*.

Siderits rejects this interpretation for two reasons: (1) he claims that this interpretation sounds too “metaphysical” and thus reflects precisely the kinds of claim that Mādhyamikas seek to reject; and (2) he claims that the collapse of a real distinction between self and other would entail the collapse of the distinction between benefit and harm as well.<sup>14)</sup> Yet Siderits’s first reason for rejecting “Indra’s net” - his choice of a metaphysics that starts with absence rather than presence - is not an avoidance of metaphysics, but an aesthetic choice for a metaphysics solely framed in terms of a lack of intrinsic nature. His second reason for denying “Indra’s net” fails, too, because the collapse of a self-other distinction does not necessarily entail the collapse of other distinctions like happiness and suffering, or benefit and harm. These can (and do) function even without selves.

Furthermore, we can see how this interpretation of unity is at play in Nāgārjuna’s *Madhyamakakārikās* when, after denying intrinsic nature, Nāgārjuna expresses the meaning of dependent arising as the meaning of emptiness.<sup>15)</sup> In doing so, he shows that emptiness, too, is derivative. This is because emptiness is derivative upon that which is not empty in the way that any discrete thing is always derivative upon what is other than itself:

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13) Siderits, 2016, 135.

14) Ibid.

15) Nāgārjuna, *Madhyamakakārikā* XXIV.18.

If there were something non-empty, then there would be something empty.

Since there is nothing that is non-empty, how can there be something empty?<sup>16)</sup>

In other words, emptiness is relational. There is no single thing to get the process started, to *ground* the world; everything is empty. This is because absence does not have a privileged place (and neither does presence) because emptiness, as the quality of things, is always ever a derivative, relational concept. For Mipam (and Gorampa in the Sakya school), this derivative notion of emptiness (as absence) is known as the “enframed” (*rnam grangs pa*) or conceptual emptiness.

If we move beyond our conceptions of reality to how it actually is, we find that the way things are is not framework-dependent in the way that our conceptual, relative truths are. The way things are is always inconceivable, entangled, or “unenframed” (*rnam grangs ma yin pa*). This is the ultimate truth *as it is* (not simply as it is conceived). This latter (inconceivable) ultimate is indispensable for understanding the nature of the ultimate truth in the works of Mipam and most other non-Geluk Mādhyamikas in Tibet. Mipam lays out this important distinction between these two ultimates as follows:

The ultimate truth that is enframed, merely a negation as an absence of true establishment, is an object of mind and an object of language. The unenframed is the unity of appearance and emptiness that does not fall to the side of either appearance or emptiness. It is signified by words such as “unity of the two

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16) Nāgārjuna, *Madhyamakārikā* XIII.7.

truths,” “freedom from constructs,” “the Middle Way,” but these are merely indicators, like the finger pointing to the moon; the meaning is far beyond the domain of language and mind.<sup>17)</sup>

This kind of inconceivable ultimate is compatible with Yogācāra, or with certain interpretations of it, as Siderits correctly notes. Yet Siderits’s insistence on interpreting Madhyamaka as semantic anti-realism - interpreting the ultimate as an incoherent notion rather than inconceivable - narrowly confines his interpretation of Madhyamaka. For this reason, he fails to appreciate how an inconceivable ultimate is compatible with Madhyamaka as well as Yogācāra. Indeed, this kind of interpretation is predominant in Tibet.

### 3. The Yogācāra of Madhyamaka

Whereas emptiness may be the principal metaphor for ultimate truth in Madhyamaka, the inexpressible (unenframed) ultimate is expressed in different ways in Yogācāra: in terms such as the “dependent nature” (*paratantra*) and the “basic consciousness” (*ālayavijñāna*). An inconceivable ultimate is certainly consistent with Yogācāra, but need not conflict with a Madhyamaka interpretation. This is because, while the ground of things is empty, it is also dependently arisen (and dependence is dependent, too, just as emptiness is empty).

The dependent nature is the ground of things, a ground that is inexpressible

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17) Mipam, 1990, 366.

in itself. Any expression of what it is, whether one or many, composed of atoms, galaxies, or common sense objects like tables and chairs, are all the imagined nature (*parikalpita*) - conceptual constructions that are not real. In the words of W. V. O. Quine: “physical objects are conceptually imported... posits... comparable to the Gods of Homer.”<sup>18)</sup> In Yogācāra, the lack of the reality of any of these constructions in the nature of reality is referred to as the consummate nature (*pariniṣpanna*). Thus, the dependent nature is the ground of emptiness; no conceptual superimpositions can capture the infinite complexity of the basic nature of reality, however it may be sliced or diced into aggregates, elements, Homeric gods, chemicals, electrons, *et cetera*.

The inconceivability of emptiness in Madhyamaka can map onto the inconceivability of the dependent nature in Yogācāra parlance: functionally (if not ontologically) they are the same, even while the range of the former is associated with undistorted gnosis and the latter with distorted consciousness. Nevertheless, the fact that the dependent nature is represented as a *cognitive* ground in Yogācāra is significant.<sup>19)</sup> This is because it is the inconceivable structure of the world as a *lived* reality; it is not radically transcendent, like the noumena of a “Kantian absolutism,” for it is always tied into a cognized

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18) Quine, 1951, 41.

19) For instance, Asaṅga characterized the dependent nature as follows in the *Mahāyānasamgraha* I.21: “What is the characteristic of the dependent nature? It is a cognition comprised by unreal imagination concerning the basic consciousness potentiality.” Asaṅga, *theg pa chen po'i bsdus pa*, D. 4048, 13a. In Tibet, Mipam also described the dependent nature in cognitive terms: “In the perspective of thoroughgoing conceptuality, while there is dualistic appearance, the awareness that exclusively appears as such, but is not established in duality, is called ‘the dependent nature.’ It is the basis for the arising of distortion, the imagined nature.” Mipam, 1987, 669. See also Duckworth, 2008, 48.

and thus cognitive world. Significantly, the dependent nature, like emptiness, is not a mind-independent thing (there are no such things in Madhyamaka, and if there were, they are not the direct concern of Buddhist philosophy). Thus, the dependent nature is intertwined with cognition in a way akin to the basic consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), which is another way the (inexpressible) structure of (distorted) reality gets articulated. Mipam shows the compatibility of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra in his commentary on the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*:

The system of Mind-Only also accepts that the cause of all dualistic appearances that manifest as places (*gnas*), objects (*don*), and bodies (*lus*) is the basic consciousness, which substantially exists conventionally. Yet since the basic consciousness is not established as a duality while manifesting in various ways, it is said to be like an illusion, and so on. Therefore, it is certainly reasonable that this tradition realizes that the nondual consciousness is not a truly established entity and that it lacks attributes. Consequently, one should understand that the consummate viewpoint of the chariots of Mind-Only and Madhyamaka are in harmony.<sup>20)</sup>

Like emptiness, the basic consciousness can represent an inconceivable ultimate - the entanglement that is the structure of interdependence. Significantly, the basic consciousness, while called a “consciousness” (*vijñāna*), does not itself cognize objects, nor does it serve the role of solely a subjective mind. Rather, it is the structure of subjective and objective worlds: the world in dynamic interaction of cognitions, faculties, and

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20) Mipam, 1987, 97-98; see Dharmacakra Translation Committee, 2014, 129.

objects; the coupled agent and environment (or however you want to slice the pie or conceive the inconceivable). It is important to recognize that the basic consciousness is not a subjective mind, but is the structure and structuring of the world.<sup>21)</sup> In this light, it is more of a neutral monism (neither mind nor matter) than a subjective cognition. Thereby, the basic consciousness (when not reified as a discrete entity) can be compatible with Madhyamaka as another name for the inconceivable causal functioning of emptiness. Unlike the way that discrete entities are denied (as is the case with explicit reference to emptiness), the basic consciousness can refer to the living, cognitive structure within which a world takes place, a world where subjects and objects not only fall together, but rise together too (as mutually substantiating).<sup>22)</sup> Mipam's commentary on the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*

21) The *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* states: "Mahāmāti, the basic consciousness simultaneously reveals forms of body, place, and material objects (*longs spyod*) appearing to mind." D.0107, 77a. See also Asaṅga, *Mahāyānasamgraha* I.21: "The nature of the basic consciousness is the resultant cognition with all potentialities; it comprises all bodies of the three realms and all existences." *theḡ pa chen po'i bsdus pa*, D. 4048, 7a; see also *Yogācārabhūmi* (*rnal 'byor spyod pa'i sa rnam par gtan la dbab pa bsdu ba*), D.4038, 7a; English trans. in Waldron, 2003, 185. See also, Mipam, 1987, 21.

22) Asaṅga, *Mahāyānasamgraha* I.27: "Both the foundational consciousness [and the engaged consciousnesses] are conditions for each other. A verse from the Abhidharma says: 'All phenomena are conjoined with consciousness, and those [consciousnesses] are likewise [conjoined with phenomena]. They are constantly paired as cause and effect of each other.'" *theḡ pa chen po'i bsdus pa*, D. 4048, 7b. The basic consciousness is twofold: its structure of manifest, dependently arisen phenomena is its aspect of maturation. Its structuring, or causal aspect, is not manifest, but consists in potential in the impressions of actions from beginningless time. These twin aspects - result and cause, form and structure - are interdependent. The former is completely consistent with Madhyamaka, as an interdependent matrix of the synchronic world. The latter articulation of a diachronic causal process is an assertion unique to Yogācāra.

supports this line of interpretation:

If one understands the self-luminous, nondual consciousness, which the proponents of Mind-Only assert, to be a consummate, dualistic consciousness—merely a consciousness inexpressible in terms of what is the perceived and perceiver, truly established and not empty of its essence—then this is what is to be negated. However, if one understands that this cognition has a nature that is primordially without origination and is the self-luminous gnosis free from perceiver and perceived and directly experienced by self-awareness, then it is what is to be affirmed. This is necessarily asserted in both tantra and Madhyamaka.<sup>23)</sup>

Like the notions of emptiness and interdependence in Madhyamaka (and the inexpressible dependent nature), the basic consciousness is neither one nor many. It is neither the same nor different than phenomenal consciousness.<sup>24)</sup> It is not a single cosmic consciousness, nor is it the isolated continuum of a single mind. It is also not the matrix of a world of discretely bound, disconnected individuals.<sup>25)</sup> Rather, it too is entangled, intertwined as the source and substance of unity-in-diversity, emptiness. In other words, the nature of the basic consciousness is neither one nor many; it is empty, inconceivable.

The basic consciousness serves as the source and substance of everything, yet is not reducible to any of its expressions. It is not bound to the duality

23) Mipam, 1987, 100; see Dharmacakra Translation Committee, 2014, 131.

24) Asaṅga, *Mahāyānasamgraha* I.27, see translation in note 22, above.

25) See Asaṅga, *Mahāyānasamgraha* I.60 on the “shared” and “unique” aspects of the basic consciousness; *theg pa chen po'i bsdus pa*, D. 4048, 12a.

of source (cause) and expression (effect);<sup>26)</sup> its two aspects of latency (*sa bon*) and maturation (*rnam smin*) are in step with the way that emptiness is also not bound to any *conception* of it. That is, emptiness, as the enframed ultimate, can be understood as the derivative quality of things (lacking intrinsic natures), but is not just limited to that; it is also the unenframed ultimate that is inconceivable. Likewise, the basic consciousness need not be bound to spatiality and temporality because it is the structure that enables these frameworks. Like emptiness, it enables phenomena to appear, as Nāgārjuna said: “Everything is possible for whom emptiness is possible; nothing is possible for whom emptiness is impossible.”<sup>27)</sup> Arguably, such is also the case with the basic consciousness and the dependent nature (or your preferred choice of metaphor to express the inexpressible). In light of the interpretation of the ultimate as inconceivable, Madhyamaka and Yogācāra are compatible.

Asaṅga supports the case for a basic consciousness compatible with emptiness in his *Mahāyānasamgraha*, when he said that “the basic consciousness is like an illusion, a dream, and an optical illusion.”<sup>28)</sup> Certain Mādhyamikas, like Candrakīrti, have also equated the basic consciousness with emptiness: “Since it permeates the nature of all phenomena, one should know that the term ‘basic consciousness’ indicates only emptiness.”<sup>29)</sup> With

26) See Asaṅga, *Mahāyānasamgraha* I.14-16; *theḡ pa chen po'i bsdus pa*, D. 4048, 5b-6a.

27) Nāgārjuna, *Madhyamakakārikā* XXIV.14.

28) See Asaṅga, *Mahāyānasamgraha* I.61; *theḡ pa chen po'i bsdus pa*, D. 4048, 12b.

29) Candrakīrti, *Madhyamakāvātārabhāṣya* under VI.42 (1999), p. 133: *dn̄gos po thams cad kyi rang bzhin rjes su zhugs pa'i phyir stong pa nyid kho na kun gzhi'i rnam par shes pa'i sgras bstan par rig par bya'o*.

emptiness understood as an inexpressible nature, Candrakīrti's words are not a far cry from Wittgenstein's famous claim in his *Philosophical Investigations* that "a nothing would serve just as well for a something about which nothing could be said."<sup>30</sup>) Describing the indescribable, as in the case of articulating an inexpressible dependent nature or basic consciousness, courts reification. Indeed, the difference between "Mind-Only" and Madhyamaka, according to Mipam, rests on resisting this subtle reification:

If proponents of Mind-Only have to realize the lack of all duality, the awareness free from subject and object, naturally luminous and clear, inexpressible and non-distinct from the nature of the consummate nature free from the twofold self, then it is needless to mention that the proponents of Madhyamaka realize this!...Merely the slight philosophical assertion that posits the essence of ineffable cognition as truly established remains to be negated; authentic proponents of Madhyamaka assert the unity of the primordially pure luminous clarity of one's mind and the emptiness of that nondual cognition. Therefore, other than the distinction of whether this slight fixation is eliminated or not, Madhyamaka and Mind-Only are mostly the same in terms of the practices of meditative equipoise and post-meditation.<sup>31</sup>)

Mipam shows that Madhyamaka and Yogācāra (a.k.a. "mind-only") do not necessarily conflict in claims about an inconceivable ultimate reality.

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30) Wittgenstein, 1953, §304.

31) Mipam, 1987, 626-27.

Rather, the difference lies in the way that this ultimate truth is understood (in a way that is reified or not).

## 4. Conclusion

To conclude, like Mark Siderits's appeal to an incoherent ultimate, Tsongkhapa's representation of the ultimate as solely the absence of intrinsic nature is incompatible with Yogācāra. Siderits, like Tsongkhapa, argues for a Madhyamaka interpretation that is completely distinct from Yogācāra. Yet the ultimate is a coherent notion in Tsongkhapa's interpretation of Madhyamaka; it is an absence of intrinsic nature.

As for Mipam, and most non-Geluk interpretations of Buddhism in Tibet, Madhyamaka is compatible with Yogācāra, and the ultimate is interpreted as inconceivable, which is referred to as the "unframed ultimate," in contrast to a mere absence of intrinsic nature that is the "enframed" ultimate. In the works of Mipam, it is unity that represents Madhyamaka, a sort of "Hegelian absolute" that is the synthesis of two truths of appearance and emptiness. This brand of Madhyamaka can be compatible with Yogācāra.

The ultimate in this interpretation contrasts not only with Siderits's incoherent ultimate, but also with the "Kantian absolute" that we see in Dölpopa's "other-emptiness," at least as it is understood as a noumenal reality divorced from relative appearances. Dölpopa's ultimate, one that is neither dependently arisen nor empty of its own essence, is incompatible

with a straightforward affirmation of the unity of two truths. Mipam's interpretation of Madhyamaka, however, bridges Madhyamaka and Yogācāra by articulating an inconceivable unity of the two truths. His model thus represents a grand synthesis of Mahāyāna traditions.

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Abstract

## Madhyamaka in Tibet: Thinking Through the Ultimate Truth

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This paper is a philosophical reconstruction of dominant interpretative strands of Madhyamaka thought in Tibet. I distinguish features of Tibetan interpretations of Madhyamaka from what Mark Siderits has characterized as the view of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka, and in particular, his claim that for Nāgārjuna, an ultimate truth is an incoherent notion. In doing so, I make a case for an interpretation of Madhyamaka that is compatible with Yogācāra, with particular attention to an interpretation offered by Mipam (1846-1912). Mipam's presentation bridges Madhyamaka and Yogācāra by articulating an inconceivable unity of the two truths.

I will argue that an inconceivable ultimate is compatible with Yogācāra and Madhyamaka by drawing attention to Madhyamaka as a system of interpretation that acknowledges all truths as framework-dependent. That

is, since all truths are relative to a particular framework in Madhyamaka, framework-dependent truths are always only conventional, or *relative* truths; there are no framework-independent truths. Yet the structure of the framework itself is “unframeable” (beyond the scope of thought and expression) because discrete truths are necessarily conceived within a particular framework. What transcends the boundaries of the framework (and cannot be completely enframed within it) is the ultimate truth.

Whereas emptiness is the principal metaphor for ultimate truth in Madhyamaka, the inexpressible (unframed) ultimate is expressed in different ways in Yogācāra: in terms such as the “dependent nature” (*paratantra*) and the “basic consciousness” (*ālayavijñāna*). An inconceivable ultimate is certainly consistent with Yogācāra, but need not conflict with a Madhyamaka interpretation. This is because, while the ground of things is empty, it is also dependently arisen (and dependence is dependent, too, just as emptiness is empty).

**Key words :** Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, Mipam, emptiness, inconceivable

2016년 9월 21일 투고  
2016년 11월 22일 심사완료  
2016년 12월 2일 게재확정