

Jñānagarbha's Madhyamaka Background

Tibetan tradition unfortunately tells us very little about the Jñānagarbha responsible for *The Commentary on the Distinction Between the Two Truths*. The few brief references to Jñānagarbha in Tibetan historical literature associate him with eastern India and with the philosophical circle of Śāntarakṣita.¹ Tāranātha describes Jñānagarbha as a member of the Madhyamaka lineage of Bhāvaviveka and indicates that he received instruction from a teacher named Śrīgupta in Bhaṃgala (Bengal).² An ordination lineage recorded in *The Blue Annals* also lists Śrīgupta as the teacher of Jñānagarbha and names Jñānagarbha as the teacher of Śāntarakṣita.³ The historical accounts linking Jñānagarbha to Śāntarakṣita gain circumstantial support from the tradition of classifying Jñānagarbha's *Commentary* with Śāntarakṣita's *Madhyamakālamkāra* and Kamalaśīla's *Madhyamakāloka* as one of the three chief works (the so-called *rang-rgyud-sbar-gsum*) of Svātantrika-Madhyamaka.⁴ But, as with so many important movements in Indian thought, the sketchy information offered by the historians forces us back into the philosophical literature to reconstruct the intellectual background. To learn more about Jñānagarbha we turn specifically to the branch of the Madhyamaka tradition known as Svātantrika.

The origin of the Svātantrika lineage is traced to the sixth-century philosopher Bhāvaviveka. This loose lineage, which ties together thinkers as different as Kamalaśīla, Avalokitavrata, and Haribhadra, is called "Svātantrika" (*rang-rgyud-pa*) in the Tibetan

tradition on the basis of a style of argument (the *svatantra anumāna*) that particularly characterized Bhāvaviveka's works. Bhāvaviveka's reputation has suffered until only recently from the enormous shadow cast by Candrakīrti over modern Madhyamaka studies. For most of this century the only access to his thought in western languages has been through translations of Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā*, where Candrakīrti treats Bhāvaviveka's style of argument as a distortion of the method of Nāgārjuna:

When the Master [Nāgārjuna] commented on the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, he did not state syllogisms (*prayoga-vākya*). [Bhāvaviveka] wants to show nothing more than his excessive skill in logic (*tarka-sāstra*). Even though he accepts the Madhyamaka viewpoint, this logician's statement of independent (*svatantra*) syllogisms is immediately characterized by the appearance of numerous problems.⁶

Edward Conze must have had such passages in mind when he made the comment that until recently epitomized the modern understanding of Bhāvaviveka: "Bhāvaviveka's Svātantrika system . . . seems to have upheld the well-nigh incredible thesis that in Madhyamaka logic valid positive statements can be made."⁷ Now that Bhāvaviveka's own writings are being translated from Tibetan sources, it is possible to have a more balanced, and even a more sympathetic understanding of his thought.

Bhāvaviveka's works show an author who not only had an innovative grasp of logical method, as Candrakīrti's comments suggest, but had a truly encyclopedic imagination. He wrote one of the first comprehensive compendia of Indian philosophy. In his *Madhyamaka-bhūdayakārikās* with their autocommentary, the *Tarkajvātā*, he outlines his own position, then compares it systematically to the positions of his opponents, ranging all the way from the Disciples (*śrāvakas*) to the Jains.⁸ His description of other schools is faithful enough to give us important information about systems such as the Vedānta whose early history is obscure.⁹ But he also has a satirical eye that enlivens what otherwise might be just a mechanical listing of different philosophical views. In his chapter on the Disciples, for example, he records the caricature of a Mahāyānist as someone who prattles mantras, bathes in sacred rivers, and is no better than a brahmin.¹⁰ The philosophical landscape changed substantially in the two cen-

turies that separated Jñānagarbha from Bhāvaviveka, but the tradition that stems from Bhāvaviveka never really lost either his fascination with the doctrines of other schools or his concern for logical procedure. It was natural for Jñānagarbha to treat the major philosophical figures of a later time, such as the Yogācāra commentators Sthiramati and Dharmapāla, and the logicians Dharmakīrti and Devendrabuddhi, as a reason to reevaluate and adapt the procedures of his own school.

Bhāvaviveka's major works, at least those whose authorship is not in doubt, show that he only partially anticipated the direction of this change. By the middle of the eighth century Madhyamaka works show signs of a more explicit attempt to include Yogācāra elements in a Madhyamaka synthesis. Śāntarakṣita, for example, uses a metaphor that gives equal weight to the Yogācāra doctrine of mind-only (*cittamātra*):

On the basis of mind-only one understands that there are no external objects, and on the basis of this [Madhyamaka] teaching, one understands that everything is empty.

Riding the chariot of these two systems [i.e., the Yogācāra and the Madhyamaka] and holding the reins of reason, one attains the Mahāyāna that is their goal.¹¹

His verses are reminiscent of the stages of meditation on mind-only in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*.¹² They also are reminiscent, in a different way, of Bhāvaviveka's verses on the ladder that ties the study of conventional reality to knowledge of the ultimate:

It is impossible to climb to the top of the palace of truth without the ladder of correct relative [truth]. Thus one should first focus one's mind on relative truth and be very certain about the general and specific character of things.¹³

The metaphor of the ladder seems to allow Bhāvaviveka to include a wide range of positions as preliminary stages in the study of emptiness. But Bhāvaviveka's attitude toward the study of mind-only, at least in his formal analysis of the Yogācāra system, was much less compromising than the image suggests. He did not treat it as a necessary step in the ascent to a higher level of understanding, as it

would be if it were a rung on a ladder. Nor did he treat it as one of two equal vehicles. To him it was like mud that had to be washed away before someone could move on to the correct understanding of ultimate truth:

[Verse:] If you think that another argument is used to refute this [idea that external objects are nothing but consciousness], it would be better to stay away from the mud and not to touch it than to wash it away.

[Commentary:] If you think that external objects actually do not exist, why consider them part of consciousness? If you think that someone first treats them as part of consciousness, then uses another argument, other than [the argument] that they are part of consciousness, to refute [the idea that they are part of consciousness], it would be better to stay away from the mud and not to touch it than to wash it away. . . . It is as if a certain fool were to leave a clean road and enter an unclean, muddy river. Others might then ask him, "Why did you leave the clean road and enter the mud?" If he said, "So that I can wash it off," the others would say, "You fool! If you have to wash it off, you should stay away from the mud and not touch it in the first place."¹⁴

The form of Śāntarakṣita's compromise was anticipated by Bhāvaviveka's image of gradual study, but the substance of the compromise seems to be a significant departure from Bhāvaviveka's own position.

It is important to say "seems" at this point until the status of the *Madhyamakaratnapradīpa* is finally settled. The *Madhyamakaratnapradīpa* is attributed to Bhāvaviveka in the Tibetan canon, and the text refers to itself as having been written by the author of the *Tarkajvālā*. But the fact that the text quotes from Candrakīrti and Dharmakīrti and shows other differences from the content of Bhāvaviveka's other works has tended to cast the traditional view of its authorship in doubt. Without getting into the question of authorship, which I think can only be settled when we examine the contents of the work as a whole, it is important to recognize that the doctrine of mind-only does appear in the *Madhyamakaratnapradīpa* as part of a graded system of meditation (*bhāvanā*). The text quotes two verses from the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* that describe a form of meditation on

mind-only.¹⁵ There are a number of ways to explain the difference. It is possible that Bhāvaviveka's other works deal only with the stage of the path concerned with *darśana* ("insight" or "philosophy"), while the *Madhyamakaratnapradīpa* explicitly takes up the stage of *bhāvanā* ("meditation" or "practice"). If so, Bhāvaviveka was more inclusive in practice than he was on the level of philosophical analysis. Regardless of how we resolve the question of authorship, the text is a reminder that we still know very little about the background of the Mahāyāna philosophical tradition. Our knowledge is particularly thin when it comes to the relationship between "philosophy" and "practice." Many of the accepted ideas of the relationships between philosophers may have to be revised when we understand more fully how the philosophical literature is related to questions of practice.

It is Śāntarakṣita's formula for the use of mind-only that led the Tibetan tradition to treat his position as a second, distinctive variety of Svātantrika thought. In the work of Bu-ston, Śāntarakṣita is classified as a Yogācāra-Mādhyamika and Bhāvaviveka as a Sautrāntika-Mādhyamika.¹⁶ Later, dGe-lugs-pa scholars adopted the terminology now used in western studies of the school: Śāntarakṣita was called a Yogācāra-Svātantrika-Mādhyamika and Bhāvaviveka a Sautrāntika-Svātantrika-Mādhyamika.¹⁷ The difference between the two forms of Svātantrika, as mKhas-grub-rje explains it, comes from their treatment of external objects:

There are two [forms] of Svātantrika: Ācāryas Bhāvaviveka and Jñānagarbha, among others, hold that form (*rūpa*), sound (*śabda*), and so forth are inert, external objects (*bāhyārtha*) other than mind (*citta*). Ācārya Śāntarakṣita and his followers hold that form, sound, and so forth are not objects other than mind and that neither external objects nor an inert basis [of cognition] exist.¹⁸

The problem with this classification for our purposes is the position of Jñānagarbha. The philosophical criterion, namely the way he treats the existence of external objects, seems to link him to the sixth century rather than to the eighth, but the historical evidence places him in the circle of Śāntarakṣita in the eighth century.

Before relegating Jñānagarbha to the position of a philosophical anomaly, it is worth looking at the sources to see how the dGe-lugs-pa

tradition developed its system of classification. In Tsong-kha-pa's *Legs-bshad-snying-po*, discussion of the Svātantrika approach to conventional objects begins with a key passage in the 25th chapter of Bhāvaviveka's *Prajñāpradīpa*:

Imagined nature consists of mental and spoken utterances such as "form," and to claim that this [imagined nature] does not exist is a denial (*apavāda*) of entities (*vastu*), since it is a denial of mental and spoken utterances. You may say that what do not exist are the objects of [mental and spoken utterances] that someone imagines [to exist], like the snake [that is imagined] in place of a rope. But [we reply that] imagined [objects] are not non-existent. [The rope] is not the object [the snake] that a mind confused by similarity imagines it to be. But conventionally it is not the case that a coiled snake is not [a snake]. To say that a coiled snake is not even a snake conventionally is to contradict common sense.¹⁹

In its original context, the argument is meant to be an attack on a Yogācāra position rather than a positive assertion of a Madhyamaka position, but it can be made to yield a positive statement of what Bhāvaviveka accepts as conventionally real. According to a verse quoted by Bhāvaviveka earlier in the argument, Yogācāra philosophers took the position that imagined reality (*parikalpita-svabhāva*), or the duality of subject and object, does not exist at all. To Bhāvaviveka this is an improper denial (*apavāda*) of things that do exist in a relative sense (*samvṛtyā*). The passage is loaded with weighty terminology, but it can be squeezed to yield a simple result. All we need to do is ignore Bhāvaviveka's studied double negative ("It is not the case that. . . is not. . .") and take it as an assertion of what he thinks exists conventionally. The parallel passage in Jñānagarbha occurs in the commentary on verse 24ab:

[Yogācāra objection:] But [imagined nature] does not depend on anything because it does not exist.

[Jñānagarbha's reply:] This contradicts perception (*pratyakṣa*). Subject and object are of imagined nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*), but both are generally accepted (*prasiddha*) as perceptible.

The argument is more abbreviated than Bhāvaviveka's, but it clearly makes the same point.

In the *Madhyamakālamkāra* Śāntarakṣita handles the existence of external objects quite differently.

Those who want to answer all false criticism should investigate relative (*sāmvṛta*) things. Are they merely mind and mental phenomena, or are they external? Some take the latter position and say that the scriptural statements of mind-only are meant to deny that there is an agent or enjoyer. Others think:

Cause and effect are nothing but cognition. Whatever exists in its own right exists as cognition.²⁰

The first approach to the doctrine of mind-only (introduced by the phrase "Some take. . .") is the one taken by Bhāvaviveka in the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Prajñāpradīpa*. The second approach (beginning with "Others think. . .") is Śāntarakṣita's. Here Śāntarakṣita is clearly distinguishing himself from earlier thinkers in the Svātantrika tradition.

Set side by side, the three passages show two different approaches to the conventional existence of external objects. Bhāvaviveka and Jñānagarbha allow objects to be accepted conventionally while Śāntarakṣita denies them. This difference became the basis for the distinction in Tibetan literature between the Sautrāntika-Svātantrikas (Bhāvaviveka and Jñānagarbha) and the Yogācāra-Svātantrikas (Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla). The distinction is helpful as a device for classifying different thinkers, but it can be misleading if it obscures the more complex historical relationships between them. Conceptual clarity is sometimes bought at the expense of historical accuracy. One problem with the Tibetan scheme of classification is that it overlooks the different purposes of the three passages. Bhāvaviveka and Jñānagarbha make their point in an attack on a Yogācāra position. Their primary purpose is not to state their own independent position. This is why the double negative in Bhāvaviveka's passage is so important and why there is nothing in Jñānagarbha's passage to correspond to the idea of investigating and finding a distinction between relative things. In Śāntarakṣita's passage the point is to make a positive assertion about conventional reality, not just to negate a negation. There is certainly a difference of approach, but the idea of using the conventional status of external objects as a distinguishing criterion only seems to have emerged after the time of Jñānagarbha.

An example of the complex relationships between different Svātantrika-Mādhyamikas in the period between the sixth and ninth centuries can be found in the argument against the real existence of things. The argument is the centerpiece of Madhyamaka thought. It would be hard to imagine Madhyamaka without it. But the argument can occur in a number of different forms, each showing a slightly different combination of interests. At the beginning of the *Madhyamakārikās* Nāgārjuna frames the argument in terms of arising from self and other:

Nothing ever arises anywhere from itself, from something else,
from both, or from no cause at all.²¹

Bhāvaviveka and Candrakīrti generally follow Nāgārjuna's statement of the argument, not only in their commentaries on the *Madhyamakārikās*, where commentarial style requires dependence on the master, but in their independent works as well.²² But in the Madhyamaka literature of the eighth century other ways of framing the argument take center stage. The *Tattvāvatāra* of Jñānagarbha's teacher Śrīgupta begins with the following verse:

In reality everything, both inside and out, is empty, because it is
neither one nor many, like a reflection.²³

This argument, based on the distinction between one and many, is repeated at the beginning of Śāntarakṣita's *Madhyamakālamkāra*:

In reality the things that we and others talk about are empty,
because they are neither one nor many, like a reflection.²⁴

Śrīgupta and Śāntarakṣita rely on these verses to make the same point Nāgārjuna made in his verse on "arising from self and other." Each of the verses functions for its author as the fundamental argument against the ultimate existence of things. But the substance of the argument on the one and the many is closer to the Yogācāra thought of Vasubandhu's *Vimśatikā* than to Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamakārikās*.²⁵

Jñānagarbha also uses the distinction between one and many to construct his argument, but the result is as different from Śāntarakṣita as it is from Nāgārjuna:

Many do not produce one, many do not produce many, one does not produce many, and one does not produce one.²⁶

The argument is almost a hybrid, borrowing Nāgārjuna's emphasis on the arising of things and combining it with the distinction between one and many found in Śrīgupta and Śāntarakṣita. The intellectual parentage of Jñānagarbha's verse has to include the Buddhist logicians, since Jñānagarbha has in mind particularly the arising of *cognitions* rather than the arising of objects.²⁷ But what is most striking from a historical perspective is that Jñānagarbha's argument occurs nowhere in Śrīgupta or in Śāntarakṣita's *Madhyamakālamkāra*, even though these two figures are closely associated with Jñānagarbha historically. It is picked up instead by Haribhadra in the *Abhisamayālamkāralokā*.²⁸ Haribhadra also shares key terminology with Jñānagarbha and quotes a number of his verses, but based on this argument alone, it would be plausible to argue that there was not one but two types of Svātantrika in the eighth century, one line leading from Śrīgupta to Śāntarakṣita, the other from Jñānagarbha to Haribhadra. It is more likely, however, that we face one tradition. The tradition is complex and flexible enough to incorporate and respond to sources as varied as the works of Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, and the Buddhist logicians.