

# When Tibetans Found Their Voice: Tibetan Buddhist Philosophy From 1200-1600

By James Blumenthal

When Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen began teaching his controversial Other-Emptiness or *Shentong* philosophy in the early fourteenth century, he made his mark in what was evolving into the most dynamic and vibrant period of Tibetan Buddhist philosophical discourse in the country's history.

Though Buddhism had been flourishing in Tibet since the eighth century, it was not until the thirteenth century that Tibetans began to find their own distinct voice, not only as inheritors of a Buddhist philosophical tradition, but also as interpreters, contributors, and innovators of that tradition. It was an exciting period that produced great thinkers like Sakya Pandita, Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen, and Je Tsongkhapa, who each made important contributions to the history of not only Tibetan philosophy, but to Buddhist philosophy as a whole.

The followers, critics, and defenders of these three great Tibetan philosophers participated in extensive and energetic debates that were both documented by historians and elaborated upon in their own polemic tracts. Copious amounts of polemic philosophical writings composed by notable voices in the philosophical debates emerged en masse. This was the primary period in which delineations of schools of thought and traditions of practice began to be clearly defined: Dolpopa's *Jonang* and Tsongkhapa's *Gandenpa* (later known as Gelugpa) schools broke off from the mainline Sakya tradition, and Kagyu and Nyingma schools were more clearly delineated as well.

Of course, there were many important figures before this period and since, and it is difficult to draw straight

lines to divide periods in Tibetan thought, but the years roughly between 1200-1600 CE were particularly fervent and represent a landmark time in Tibetan Buddhist philosophical history.

## SAKYA PANDITA (1182-1251)

The major figure who first ignited this classical period of Tibetan Buddhist thought was Sakya Pandita. When Sakya Pandita composed his masterpiece, *Treasury of Reasoning on Valid Cognition*, a unique and innovative commentary on the thought of the landmark Indian logician Dharmakirti, it was the first time a Tibetan had composed a commentary in the tradition of the great Indian *shastra* authors. He did not rely primarily on Indian sub-commentators, as early Tibetans had, but rather quoted and wrote directly about primary sources. In effect, this earned Sakya Pandita a place among the great Indian authors on Buddhist logic and epistemology; he was not solely reiterating what other commentators had said, but was interpreting Dharmakirti anew.



Thangka of Sakya Pandita in a gesture of debate and wearing a red pandita's hat. Photo courtesy of Nick Dawson.

## A TIMELINE OF MAJOR INDIAN AN

### INDIAN PHILOSOPHERS

#### 1st CE

Nagarjuna (c. 1st CE)  
Aryadeva (c. 1st CE)

#### 4th CE

Asanga (300-390)

#### 5th-6th CE

Vasubandhu (400-480)  
Buddhapalita  
(c. 470-540)  
Dignaga (480-540)  
Bhavaviveka  
(c. 500-570?)

#### 7th CE

Chandrakirti (600-650)  
Dharmakirti (600-660)

#### 8th CE

Shantideva  
(e. early 8th CE)  
Shantarakṣita (725-788)  
Kamalashila (740-795)  
Haribhadra (c. 8th CE)

#### 10th-11th CE

Atisha (982-1054)  
Jayananda  
(c. late 11th CE)



Of course, Sakya Pandita was concerned with refuting earlier Tibetan accounts of Dharmakirti's thought, specifically that of two figures associated with the Kadam school of Atisha – Chaba Chökyi Senge, and Ngok Lotsawa – and in some senses saw himself as a traditionalist presenting Dharmakirti's view authentically. But this does not detract from the importance to the Tibetan tradition of a Tibetan thinker, who was confident enough to write in the mode that other Indian Buddhist masters had before him, with a unique and innovative voice. In this sense, Sakya Pandita paved the way for two other towering and innovative Tibetan thinkers to come: Dolpopa and Tsongkhapa. Chaba Chökyi Senge should be noted as a forerunner of this line of innovative thinking in Tibet as he was also an outspoken critic of the Indian scholar Chandrakirti. During his time, it was probably unprecedented for a Tibetan to be outwardly critical of one of the great *panditas*.

Like Sakya Pandita, Dolpopa and Tsongkhapa contributed profoundly to the establishment for Tibetans of their own philosophical voice. In fact, these two figures have been so important and so influential that a disproportionately large percentage of the Tibetan philosophical writing since their time has been geared toward support, criticism, interpretation, refinement, or elaboration on their views. There have been many other important figures in Tibetan Buddhist history, including the fourteenth century systematizer of the Dzogchen tradition, Longchen Rabjam, and in the later periods, most notably the famous proponents of the Rimé (non-sectarian) movement of the nineteenth century including Jamgon Kongtrul, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, and Ju Mipham. But when it comes to Tibetans finding their own philosophical voice within the larger Buddhist tradition, Sakya Pandita, Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen, and Je Tsongkhapa were arguably the groundbreakers.

## DOLPOPA SHERAB GYALTSEN (1292-1361)

In the year 1330, Dolpopa gave the first teaching on his controversial Shentong or Other-Emptiness view at Jonang Monastery. It was controversial because the presentation seemed to contradict all mainline understandings of the Madhyamaka or Middle Way school of thought that was embraced (with slightly varying interpretations) by all Tibetans. As well, he seemed to contradict the thought of his Indian Buddhist predecessors like Nagarjuna and the great Indian commentators who followed him, such as Bhavaviveka, Chandrakirti, and Shantaraksita, among others. All of these towering Indian figures described the view of emptiness as espoused in the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras, first systematized by Nagarjuna as meaning that all phenomena ultimately lack an intrinsic, unchanging nature. In other words, they are empty of a (permanent) self (*Rangtong*). Dolpopa, rather than asserting a Rangtong or Self-Emptiness view as did his predecessors, instead asserted a view called Other-Emptiness or Shentong.

His view begins in a similar way to the Rangtong presentation. He asserts that all phenomena which arise on the basis of causes and conditions are empty of a self. So far this resonates with the views of his Madhyamika predecessors. However, he places this understanding at the level of a relative or conventional truth and makes a quite remarkable



Thangka of Dolpopa Sherap Gyaltsen, with his disciples Nyawon Kunga Pal and Chogle Namgyal, compliments of Jonang Foundation, [www.jonangfoundation.org](http://www.jonangfoundation.org)

# 100 TIBETAN BUDDHIST THINKERS

## TIBETAN PHILOSOPHERS

### 12th-13th CE

Chaba Chökyi Senge  
(1109-1169)  
Sakya Pandita (1182-1251)

### 14th-15th CE

Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen  
(1292-1361)  
Longchen Rabjam  
(1308-1363)  
Rendawa (1349-1412)  
Je Tsongkhapa (1357-1419)  
Gyeltsab Je (1364-1432)  
Kaydrup Je (1385-1438)

Gendun Drub, Dalai Lama I  
(1391-1474)  
Taktsang Lotsawa (b. 1405)  
Shakya Chokden (1428-1507)  
Gorampa Sonam Senge  
(b. 1429)  
Jetsun Chökyi Gyalten  
(1469-1544)

### 16th-17th CE

Karmapa VIII Mikyo Dorje  
(1507-1544)  
Panchen Lama I Lobsang  
Chökyi Gyaltsen (1570-1662)

### 19th-20th CE

Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro  
Thaye (1813-1899)  
Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo  
(1820-1892)  
Ju Mipham Gyatso  
(1864-1912)  
Gendun Chöpel (1903-1951)



claim when describing ultimate truth. He claims that the ultimate truth is the mind which is the Buddha Nature, that it is the unchanging *Dharmakaya* or Truth Body of the Buddha. This is the ultimate nature of our mind and it is not empty of itself. Rather, it is empty of everything other than itself. It is empty of conventionalities. It is empty of anything other than *Dharmakaya* or Buddha Nature, thus the name Other-Emptiness or Shentong in Tibetan.

Dolpopa wrote about this view of reality in a number of important texts, but first and most famously in his monumental treatise, *Ocean of Definitive Meaning: A Mountain Doctrine*, which he composed in 1333. At that time, Jonang Monastery was an affiliate of the seat of the Sakya tradition, Sakya Monastery, and many Sakya scholars felt betrayed by his controversial teaching. His view seemed to contradict the orthodox Sakya understanding of *Madhyamaka* which saw any claim of an unchanging nature of the mind to be incompatible with their *Madhyamaka* view. Extensive debates, both oral and written, followed shortly and continued for several hundred years. In Dolpopa's defense, he traces the Indian origins of his view to a commentary on the Kalachakra Tantra and considers his presentation to be a tantric view of reality.

### JE TSONGKHAPA (1357-1419)

The third of the three great innovative Tibetan thinkers to emerge in this period was the towering figure of Tsongkhapa, who probably had the greatest impact on Tibetan philosophy of them all. A monastic reformer,

erudite scholar, and tantric master, Tsongkhapa founded Ganden Monastery and initiated the tradition known today as Gelug. Tsongkhapa's collected works number nineteen large volumes on nearly every topic of Buddhist thought and practice – from The Four Noble Truths to the subtlest details in Buddhist philosophy to commentaries on highest yoga tantra – and display an incredible breadth and depth of knowledge of the Indian Buddhist canonical literature. Thus, it is impossible to summarize his contributions

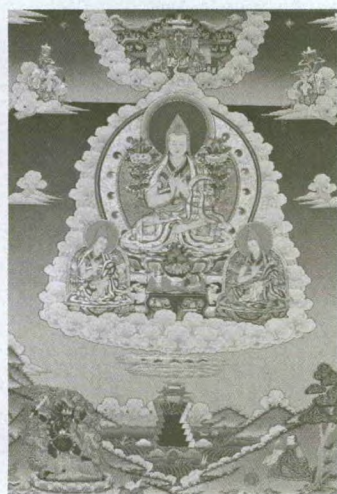
in a short article such as this. However, in the realm of philosophy there are two inter-related contributions of his that I would like to highlight.

Much like Sakya Pandita's original contribution to the commentarial tradition on *Dharmakirti*, Tsongkhapa holds a similar place of prominence in the area of exegesis on the thought of *Chandrakirti*. In fact, no figure has done more to bring *Chandrakirti*'s interpretation (known as *Prasangika-Madhyamaka* in Tibet) of Nagarjuna's *Madhyamaka* thought into prominence. Save for the large commentary on *Chandrakirti*'s *Entrance to the Middle Way* by the late eleventh century *Madhyamika*, Jayananda, there is very little Indian material written directly on *Chandrakirti*, though Tibetan followers of *Chandrakirti* associate figures like Shantideva and Atisha with his *Prasangika* line of thinking.

The *Prasangika-Madhyamaka* school was introduced to Tibet by Jayananda's Tibetan disciple, Patsab Nyima Drag, who translated the works of *Chandrakirti*, among others, into Tibetan and taught Jayananda's interpretation of that view in central Tibet, particularly among monks associated with the Kadam tradition. Two centuries later, Tsongkhapa took exception to many aspects of the Jayananda/Patsab presentation of *Chandrakirti*'s thought. He wrote a number of treatises elaborating on his own presentation of the thought of *Chandrakirti*, including his direct commentary *Illumination of the Thought of [Chandrakirti's] "Entrance to the Middle Way."*

In addition to challenging Jayananda's and earlier Tibetan understandings of *Chandrakirti*'s thought, Tsongkhapa added another unique feature in his own philosophical project. He forged a marriage between the *Prasangika-Madhyamaka* view of *Chandrakirti* and the logico-epistemological tradition of Dignaga and *Dharmakirti*. This joining of the two philosophical movements was unique and of particular note given the outwardly antagonistic perspective *Chandrakirti* seemed to have for the then emerging Buddhist logico-epistemological tradition of *Dharmakirti*. Tsongkhapa was not the first to merge *Madhyamaka* thought with *Dharmakirti*'s tradition, for Shantaraksita was an important commentator and synthesizer of the two. But Tsongkhapa was the first to attempt to merge *Dharmakirti* with the so-called *Prasangika* or Consequentialist interpretation of *Madhyamaka* by *Chandrakirti*. Tsongkhapa does appear to have been influenced by Shantaraksita's interpretations of *Dharmakirti*.

Tsongkhapa became such an enormous and formidable philosophical figure in Tibet that all subsequent Tibetan



Thangka of Je Tsongkhapa with his disciples, Gyaltsab Je and Kaydrup Je. The Perfection of Wisdom sutra rests on a right-facing lotus. Photo courtesy of Nick Dawson.



Madhyamikas, even those who disagreed with Tsongkhapa's thought, could not ignore it. If they wanted to assert a competing view, they had to at least address Tsongkhapa's view and what they would presume to be Tsongkhapa-like or Gelug-like criticisms. Though Tsongkhapa's stature was enormous, he hardly went without criticism. His most famous philosophical challengers all emerged after his death, but include many of the great philosophical minds of this period including Taktsang Lotsawa, whose eighteen-point criticism was rebutted by the first Panchen Lama, Lobsang Chökyi Gyaltsen, among others. The eighth Karmapa, Mikyö Dorje, wrote a criticism which was responded to by Sera Je textbook author Jetsun Chökyi Gyaltsen. Shakya Chokden, a follower of the Other-Emptiness view first propounded by Dolpopa, also wrote a criticism of Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka.

Among all of these polemical tracts against Tsongkhapa's view, perhaps the most serious attack came from the Sakya scholar Gorampa Sonam Senge. Gorampa was concerned with factionalization within the Sakya tradition. Both Dolpopa and Tsongkhapa emerged out of the Sakya tradition, but both spearheaded movements that were evolving into distinct traditions; Dolpopa's Jonang School, and The Gandenpas (later known as Gelugpas) emerging from among Tsongkhapa's disciples. Gorampa took responsibility for presenting the orthodox Sakya critique of both in his text *Distinguishing the Views*, a polemic tract with significant chapters dedicated to the refutation of Dolpopa's view and Tsongkhapa's view. In a sense, it was a move toward establishing Sakya orthodoxy, along the lines of Tsongkhapa's Sakya teacher, Rendawa, and in contrast with the thought of these two renegade Sakya philosophers.

Of course, a Gelug response issued forth shortly afterwards in the form of a text begun by Jetsun Chökyi Gyaltsen and completed by his disciple Panchen Delek Nyima, with a specific chapter entitled "Response to Go[rampa]." The two also responded to the Other-Emptiness criticism of Shakya Chokden in the same text with a chapter entitled "Response to the great Shakya Chok[den]."

By the nineteenth century, innovative thinking, particularly within the Gelug tradition of philosophical exegesis was, for the most part, coming to a close as orthodox interpretations of the writings of Tsongkhapa and his Indian predecessors were codified in monastic textbooks (*yig cha*) and other similar materials. Some of these textbooks were

authored much earlier, but this was the period in which their acceptance as normative was solidified.

At the same time, a new field of innovative thinkers began to emerge from the other Tibetan traditions. The Rimé or Non-sectarian movement had begun to take shape under the guidance of great masters like Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, and Ju Mipham, among others. And the twentieth century has seen important contributions by modernists like Gendun Chöpel, political thinkers like Samdong Rinpoche, and the broad-ranging brilliance of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. But these later developments are best left for another article.

Volumes could be written about these fascinating philosophical innovations and the enlightening philosophical debates that took place during this classical period of Tibetan philosophy between 1200-1600 C.E. What becomes clear is that this vibrant period in Tibetan philosophical writing and philosophical exchange is the period in which Tibetans found their own unique philosophical voice, where the full sophistication of the philosophical tradition emerged, and where the distinct schools began to delineate and define their unique philosophical views. It represents a singular high-point to date in the philosophical thought of Tibetan Buddhism. ☸

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*Dr. James Blumenthal is a frequent contributor to Mandala. An Associate Professor of Buddhist Philosophy at Oregon State University and a Professor of Buddhist History and Tibetan Language at Maitripa Institute in Portland, Oregon, he is the author of The Ornament of the Middle Way: A Study of the Madhyamaka Thought of Santaraksita (2004) and editor of Incompatible Visions: South Asian Religions in History and Culture (2006). In 2004, he had the honor of translating Nagarjuna's Sixty Stanzas of Reasoning for His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the occasion of His public teachings on the text in Pasadena, CA.*