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Louis de La Vallée Poussin, Theodore Stcherbatsky, and Tibetan Tradition on the Place of the Absolute in Yogācāra Buddhism

This paper examines the contrasting approaches to the study of Buddhism of two great early twentieth-century Buddhologists, Louis de La Vallée Poussin and Theodore Stcherbatsky. La Vallée Poussin understood Buddhism primarily as 'religion' and saw philosophic methods as subsumed in the religious experience of salvation; Stcherbatsky, coming from the Russian school, which had direct contact with Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism, saw Buddhism primarily as 'philosophy' and emphasised critical enquiry and logical consistency. The paper explores how this influenced their understanding of the place of the absolute in Buddhism generally and in Yogācāra Buddhism in particular. It compares their disagreement to differences at the heart of Tibetan scholasticism evident in the writings of Dolpopa (1292–1361) and Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) over the proper interpretation of Yogācāra. The paper also explores implications of the legacy of these two scholars for recent Western scholarship and for the understanding of Yogācāra.

Introduction

Debate over the classification of tenet systems (Skt. *siddhānta*, Tib. *grub mtha'*) and the arrangement of texts in doxographies according to the tenets they expound has an important place in Buddhist philosophy. Hermeneutics and epistemology are often attendant to these textual concerns. In the Tibetan schools and in Western scholarship, the problems of interpretation across languages and issues concerning the authority of texts have been much debated. Both Western and Tibetan traditions are concerned with the placement of authors, texts, and schools within a larger doxographical scheme.

It is noteworthy that the course of the debates seems consistently to follow well-known themes across boundaries of language and culture. Here we shall briefly explore one such instance in the Tibetan tradition and in the scholarship of two of the greatest figures in Buddhist Studies of the twentieth century. Our

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main focus will be on a historical episode — the disagreement early in the twentieth century between the Belgian scholar Louis de La Vallée Poussin (1869–1938) and the Russian Theodore Stcherbatsky (1866–1942) — on the place of the absolute in Yogācāra. Their disagreement about *nirvāṇa* is relatively well known and was the subject of a chapter in Guy Richard Welbon's work on early Western scholars of Buddhist Studies.¹ Their differences over Yogācāra are less well known, however. Here we are also concerned with the implication of this debate for the study of Yogācāra in modern Western Buddhist studies. Of particular interest to us is a resemblance to the disagreement between Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltzen (1292–1361) and Tsongkhapa Lozang Trakpa (1357–1419)² concerning doxographical classification of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka, a controversy which is at the heart of Tibetan scholasticism.

It is not the intention of this paper to argue that there exists a direct connection between these historical figures in the Tibetan tradition and the two Western scholars, although, as we will show, in the case of Stcherbatsky at least, a direct connection with the scholarship of Tsongkhapa certainly does exist; however, no such direct connection to Dolpopa is evident in the arguments of La Vallée Poussin. Rather, this paper primarily investigates the relationship between the material under study itself, namely the textual traditions of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka, and those who study it. We explore the possibility that this is an endemic debate. Certainly, there is an ongoing dialogue, and it is clear that the debate among those who study and interpret Mahāyāna Buddhist texts has at times become acrimonious and divisive. This debate may spring from an inherent feature of the material, from the human tendency to polarise argument, and perhaps also from the pedagogy of the Buddha himself that aims to cut through fixed views (*drṣṭi*) and the mind's clinging to "is" and to "is not" in order to lead to a direct *experience* of reality and to true mental freedom.³

In general terms, this paper proposes that La Vallée Poussin's characterisation of "soul like" elements in Yogācāra and his attempt to save Buddhism from accusations of nihilism parallels Dolpopa's emphasis on the permanent, substantial, and eternal aspects of the Ultimate and his concern to protect the ultimacy of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) against those who would characterise it as mere absence, while Stcherbatsky's characterisation and criticism of Yogācāra as "extreme idealism," and thus not fully critical in its approach, is in line with Tsongkhapa's characterisation of Yogācāra as mentalistic absolutism and his desire to avoid any kind of eternalism. There are also similarities in approach

1. *The Buddhist Nirvāṇa and its Western Interpreters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 248–95. Welbon's book introduces some aspects of the debate between Stcherbatsky and La Vallée Poussin from the perspective of their disagreement over the classification of the absolute in Madhyamaka. See also Andrew P. Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 42–47; J. W. de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America* (Tokyo: Kōsei Pub., 1997), 42–44; and M. Eckel, "Cooking the Last Fruit of Nihilism: Buddhist Approaches to the Absolute," in *Ultimate Realities*, ed. N. Cummings, (New York: State University of New York, 2001), 130–33.

2. Dol po pa Shes rab rGyal mtshan, Tsong kha pa Blo zang grags pa.

3. This point is discussed in Karl Brunnhölzl, *In Praise of Dharmadhātu: Nāgārjuna and the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje*, translated and introduced by Karl Brunnhölzl (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2007), 183–89.

to the absolute in La Vallée Poussin and Dolpopa on one hand, and Stcherbatsky and Tsongkhapa on the other, with the former pair favouring intuition or mystical insight and the latter pair favouring critical analysis and rationality. In modern terms, this might be conceptualised as a contrast between a more “religious” approach and a “philosophical” one.⁴

The Buddhist scholars, and also La Vallée Poussin and Stcherbatsky in their own way, were struggling with the issues of nihilism (*ucchedavāda*), which would deny any coherence and would undermine the possibility of a spiritual path, and absolutism (*śāśvatavāda*), which suggests the immutable existence of a soul, mind, or eternal being, and easily leads into the kind of theism that Buddhism eschews. In Buddhist philosophy, these positions are considered to be “two extremes” (*antadvaya*) and are to be avoided by all who aim to find the correct middle way (*madhyamā pratipad*).

Yogācāra

Yogācāra flourished in India from the Gupta period up until the decline of Buddhism in India early in the second millennium CE. It was transmitted to East Asia and was also very influential at the time of transmission of Buddhism to Tibet. The *Sandhinirmocanasūtra* is regarded as the foundational *sūtra* of the Yogācāra school.⁵ The mature phase of the school’s development in India probably occurred in the fourth and fifth centuries CE when it was systematised by the great scholar-sages Aśaṅga and Vasubandhu. Central to the present topic is the classification of five texts traditionally attributed to Aśaṅga but believed to have been inspired by the Bodhisattva Maitreya. These texts came to be referred to in Tibet as the *Five Treatises of Maitreya*.⁶

The various designations of the Yogācāra school: Yogācāra (Yoga Practice), Vijñānavāda (Doctrine of Consciousness), and Cittamātra (Mind Only) indicate the importance given to the mind and meditation practice in the school; however, it should be remembered that Yogācāra is also an elaborate philosophical system and analysis of how the world is mentally “constructed” on the basis of a false subject–object duality.⁷ The aim of its philosophical analysis and other spiritual practices is the transformation of distorted dualistic consciousness (*vijñāna*) into non-dual enlightened awareness (*buddhajñāna*). Key ideas of the Yogācāra system include *ālayavijñāna* (store consciousness), *trikāya* (three dimensions of Buddhahood — the so called “three bodies”), *trisvabhāva* (the three natures), *tathāgatagarbha* (buddha nature or the womb/

4. On the applicability of the terms “philosophy” and “religion” to Buddhism, see B. Faure, (trans. by Janet Lloyd), *Double Exposure: Cutting Across Buddhist and Western Discourses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 64–72.

5. Other key texts are the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, the *Yogācārabhūmi*, and the *Daśabhūmikāsūtra*.

6. *byams chos sde lnga*. The five in their Sanskrit titles are: *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, *Madhyāntavibhāga*, *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*, *Abhisamayālamkāra*, and *Ratrogotravibhāga*, also known as the *Uttaratantra*.

7. Lambert Schmithausen has argued that much of the terminology used in Yogācāra philosophy was originally confined to the context of meditative practice but came to be established as technical terminology in the philosophical theories of Aśaṅga and, more particularly, Vasubandhu. See his “On the Problem of the Relation of Spiritual Practice and Philosophical Theory in Buddhism,” in *German Scholars on India Vol. II*, ed. Cultural Department of the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1973–1976), 243–50.

embryo of the Buddha), *cittamātra* (mind only), *cittaprakṛtiprabhāsvaratā* (natural luminosity of mind), and a particular reading of *śūnyatā* (emptiness), which emphasises the positive qualities of enlightenment.

The approach of the school generally, and its approach to *śūnyatā* in particular, contrasts with the consistent approach via negation taken by its sibling, and sometimes rival school, the Madhyamaka. Yogācāra and Madhyamaka are considered the two main *siddhānta* or philosophical positions of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India.

The interpretation of Yogācāra as a form of absolute idealism and its subsequent place in the doxographical system as a teaching of only provisional meaning (*neyārtha*) is an issue addressed in Indian materials of the Madhyamaka school, such as chapter 6 of Chandrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra* and chapter 9 of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* with its commentary by Prajñākaramati. In these texts, Yogācāra, identified as *Cittamātra* (Mind Only), is presented as idealism that denies the existence of external objects and asserts the ultimate existence of mind. The conclusion reached by these Mādhyamika⁸ critics is that such Yogācāra teachings are of provisional meaning only, not of ultimate or definitive meaning (*nītārtha*), and were taught by the Buddha simply in order to undermine any misplaced belief in substantialism, a belief in the independent existence of external objects. If taken as definitive, it is argued, such statements of mind's ultimacy would reduce Buddhism to a form of absolute idealism, an eternalistic extreme, not far removed from the Hindu Vedānta philosophy, which takes *Brahman*, pure consciousness, as the sole reality of the universe.

Debate in Tibet

The arguments on the classification of Yogācāra, which were first articulated in India, assumed even greater significance in Tibet where they were further developed within the scholastic environment of the great monastic universities with their curricula of logic and epistemology. A description of the elaborate philosophical developments that occurred in Tibet is beyond the scope of the present work. For our purposes, it is sufficient that we provide some broad historical information as background to the main focus of this paper on La Vallée Poussin and Stcherbatsky.

The most influential reading in the Tibetan tradition concerning the relation of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka, and the placing of the *Five Treatises of Maitreya* into separate doxographical categories, is that of Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) who founded the Gelug school⁹ early in the fifteenth century (1410).¹⁰ Tsongkhapa followed the doxographical classification of Bu ston Rin chen grub (1290–1364) who, in the compilation of the earliest complete redaction of

8. "Mādhyamika" refers to followers of the Madhyamaka school.

9. dGe lugs.

10. The Gelug school would later become a dominant political force in Tibet with the support of the Mongols under the rule of the Dalai Lamas with the power to determine orthodoxy and censor, suppress, or limit the distribution of rival schools' publications.

the Tibetan Buddhist canon, attributed texts to different philosophical positions and arranged them in a hierarchy of views culminating in pure or uncompromising Madhyamaka.

At the heart of Tsongkhapa's approach is a dispute with the older interpretative system, that of the Yogācāra-Madhyamaka synthesis of Śāntarākṣita, as well as with the positive interpretation of emptiness offered by Dolpopa (1292–1361), which was central to the Jonang school, the "emptiness of other" (*gzhan stong*) interpretation. Tsongkhapa draws a sharp distinction between Yogācāra and Madhyamaka and emphatically rejects positive interpretations of emptiness found in the writings of the Jonangpas and others. Tsongkhapa attempts to establish the non-nihilistic character of Madhyamaka, the pre-eminence of Madhyamaka over Yogācāra, and the correct reading of emptiness as intrinsic or self-emptiness (*rang stong*) on the basis of his reading of Candrakīrti's interpretation of Madhyamaka, which he identifies as "Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka."¹¹ At a later stage, the dispute became entangled with politics with the suppression of the Jonang school in the mid-seventeenth century by the fifth Dalai Lama.¹²

Dolpopa's position entails the notion that there must be an Ultimate Reality, pure, permanent, changeless, and beyond conventional appearances. Without this, conventional appearances themselves would be established as ultimately real, and if conventional appearances were real, they would be the Ultimate Truth. If they were the Ultimate Truth then, since the truth is that which is not deceptive, conventional appearances would not be deceptive.¹³ But, of course, according to Buddhist teachings, conventional appearances are deceptive. Far from holding the Ultimate to be emptiness in the sense of the mere negation of the self-existence of phenomena, for Dolpopa, what is Ultimately Real is distinct from what is unreal, mere conventional appearances, and conceptual designations. In Dolpopa's teachings, this Ultimate Reality which is empty of all that is unreal is the basis which remains after negation, eternally and unchanging. Ultimate reality is understood as "empty of other" (*gzhan stong*) since it is empty of error and what is not itself but is not a mere intrinsic emptiness, a mere nothingness which would entail, he argues, the extreme of nihilism. Tsongkhapa adamantly rejected this view and asserts intrinsic emptiness (*rang stong*), a non-affirming negation, as the correct understanding of the Ultimate.¹⁴

Proponents of intrinsic emptiness (*rang stong*) such as Tsongkhapa, in disallowing any ontological basis to phenomena and, in particular, in rejecting consciousness in the form of *ālayavijñāna*, or indeed any other form of mind

11. This followed a division implicit in India but only made in Tibet between Mādhyamikas who use independent inference (*Svātantrikas*), that is, positive arguments, to establish emptiness (*sūnyatā*) and those who only negate error through drawing out the logical consequences of their opponents' errors (*Prāsaṅgikas*) without trying to positively establish emptiness.

12. J. Hopkins, *The Essence of Other-Emptiness by Tāranātha* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2007), 10.

13. The idea that the truth is that which is not deceptive (*satyam amithyatvāt*) is found in the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdayasūtra*. In his final work, the *bKa' bdus bzhi pa*, Dolpopa expresses this idea: "If everything manifest is relative *samsāra*, the manifestation of the absolute would also be relative *samsāra*. If everything empty is absolute *nirvāna*, all that is empty of self-nature would be absolute *nirvāna*." Quoted in Cyrus Stearns, *The Buddha from Dolpo* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002), 130.

14. *gzhan stong* and *rang stong* can also be translated as "other-emptiness" and "self-emptiness."

(*citta*), as such a basis, were intent on denying mentalistic idealism and other forms of absolutism or eternalism. But in identifying the Ultimate with a non-affirming negation, they drew the criticism that they could not avoid nihilism. Conversely, emptiness of other (*gzhan stong*), as asserted by Dolpopa and others, in presenting emptiness as an affirming negation and identifying the Ultimate with pure awareness beyond the conventional mind, avoided nihilism but laid itself open to the charge of eternalism and absolutism.

Part of the argument hinged on the understanding of the doctrine of *cittamātra* (lit. mind-only) found in the Yogācāra texts. Scholars disagreed as to whether the Yogācāra texts do in fact expound a form of absolute idealism, and are to be classified as belonging to a “Mind Only” (*cittamātra*) system or whether these texts simply present *cittamātra* within a more general concern for the primacy of consciousness, as simply a stage on the path towards realisation of the Buddha’s actual definitive meaning. Many who adhered to the *gzhan stong* position considered the *Five Treatises of Maitreya* and the works of Asaṅga as the main sources for their interpretation and yet rejected the assertion that the system expounded in these texts is absolute idealism or *cittamātra* as it is ordinarily understood.

Tsongkhapa’s objective was to demonstrate that the entire Yogācāra system conforms to the doxographical principles of *Sandhinirmocanasūtra*, the foundational *sūtra* of the Yogācāra system, and that the definitive meaning indicated in this text was the teaching of emptiness of self, intrinsic emptiness (*rang stong*). Tsongkhapa argues in his very influential work, *Legs bshad snying po*, that emptiness is a non-affirming negation (*prasajyapratishedha*, *med dgag*) and tries to demonstrate that this emptiness is the definitive teaching of the *Sandhinirmocanasūtra*, and hence of the third and final turning of the wheel of the doctrine (*dharmacakrapravartana*). In *Legs bshad snying po* he says, “it is very clear (in the *Samdhanirmocanasūtra*) that the thoroughly established nature (*pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*), which is the selflessness of phenomena, is posited as the non-affirming negation (*prasajyapratishedha*, *med dgag*) of [dualistic] proliferations that is a mere elimination of a self of phenomena.”¹⁵

Tsongkhapa believed that some texts from the *Five Treatises of Maitreya* do not conform to this definitive meaning and are therefore not derived from the definitive teaching of the *Sandhinirmocanasūtra*. He argues that the position presented in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, *Madhyāntavibhāga*, and *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga* is, in fact, a calculated divergence from the true intention of the *Samdhanirmocana* as a skilful means (*upāya*) to guide those of lesser understanding away from more seriously wrong viewpoints, and hence can only contain a teaching of provisional meaning.¹⁶

15. Quoted in J. Hopkins, *Emptiness in the Mind-Only School of Buddhism*. (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal. 1999), 92. Information in parentheses is our addition while that in square brackets is added by Hopkins.

16. This argument does not account for the lack of any citation of either *Samdhanirmocanasūtra* nor *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* in either of the authoritative Indian commentaries on *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, the *Bhāṣya* of Vasubandhu, and *Vṛtibhāṣya* of Sthiramati, whereas *Akṣamatinirdeśasūtra* — a core text for the determination of provisional and Ultimate teachings in the Mādhyamika system — is cited as many as forty-four times in Sthiramati’s

Dolpopa claimed to propound a doctrine called “Mahāmadhyamaka” (*dbu ma chen po*) or “Great Madhyamaka,” the distinctive feature of which was its understanding of an Ultimate Reality beyond conventional appearances entirely empty not of itself but of anything other than itself, hence *gzhan stong*, empty of other. For Dolpopa, the term “madhyamaka” is not merely the dialectical position of the Madhyamaka school but is rather a synonym for Ultimate Reality itself, a kind of awareness that is stationed between the two extremes of existence and non-existence (or nihilism and eternalism). In Great Madhyamaka, he says, such a division is improper, “because it is an improper division of thushness (*tathatā*).”¹⁷

In contrast to the doxography adopted by Bu ston and Tsongkhapa, Dolpopa maintains all the “five treatises” of Maitreya-Asaṅga are definitive teachings, not divided into provisional or definitive teachings from any perspective. As he says in his last great work, the *bKa' bsdu bzhi pa*, “All the sublime *sūtras* of the third Dharma Wheel, and all the treatises of Maitreya are the same as the Great Madhyamaka.”¹⁸ In constructing his doxography, Dolpopa used the account of the four aeons of the Dharma presented in the *Kālacakratantra*, arguing that the teachings on the perfectly established nature of Ultimate Reality are the tradition of the first age, the *kr̥tayuga* (perfected age). He described teachings on self-emptiness as characteristic of subsequent degenerate ages, the *tretayuga*, and so on. Dolpopa argues that this particular teaching on emptiness is inadequate because in understanding the Ultimate as mere negation, it paradoxically ends up by affirming illusion (since there is nothing else). Furthermore, proponents of this position, he argues, misunderstand the nature of the Ultimate by confusing it with ordinary *Cittamātra* (mind only), a form of absolute idealism. As a consequence, they have misunderstood the intent of these texts and their status among the “five treatises.” In his auto-commentary on *bKa' bsdu bzhi pa*, he specifically cites *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* and *Madhyāntavibhāga* as two such texts which have been mixed up with *Cittamātra*.¹⁹

Dolpopa used a Dharma language, which placed emphasis on terms such as *dharmadhātu*, *dharmakāya*, and *tathāgatagarbha* referred to as the Self (*ātman*), permanent (*nitya*), substantial (*dhruva*), and eternal (*śāsvata*), which he drew from various authoritative Mahāyāna *sūtras* and *śāstras* and from the Vajrayāna *tantras*. Tāranātha, the last of Dolpopa’s successors at Jonang to openly advocate the *gzhan stong* view, describes how many scholars, on first hearing Dolpopa use this Dharma language, found it “incomprehensible.” According to Stearns, these scholars probably experienced a state of “herme-

commentary. Tsongkhapa also ignored the fact that the term *ālayavijñāna* (one of his “eight difficult points” that he regarded as of provisional meaning only) never appears in the root verses of *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, which does moreover refer to an emptiness which is a “mere elimination of a self of phenomena.” (*Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* ch. 18 verses 81 ff.) Such an emptiness, however, is not presented in *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* as Ultimate Truth of Reality; rather, it is presented as the self-nature of the imagination of the unreal (*abhūtaparikalpa*). Here, Ultimate Reality has a Truth of Emptiness other than that, and this is the emptiness at the centre of Dolpopa’s thesis.

17. Quoted in Stearns, 147.

18. Quoted in Stearns, 150.

19. Stearns, 90 and fn. 26.

neutical shock.”²⁰ It could be argued that Dolpopa used cataphatic language to induce this state in his audience who were used to the apophatic negational language of Nāgārjuna’s Mādhyamika dialectic. In particular, for those trained in the view of non-self (*anātman*), Dolpopa points out the numerous instances in the *sūtras*, *śāstras*, and *tantras* where Ultimate Reality is referred to as Supreme Self (*paramātman*), *Tathatā* Self (*de bzhin nyid kyi bdag*), and Pure Self (*dag pa’i bdag*). Such a self is described at *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* IX. 23, which Dolpopa quotes in his most influential work, *Ri chos nges don rgya mtsho*:

In this pure emptiness the Buddhas attain the highest self which is non-self. Therefore, because they have attained the pure self, they arrive at the greatness of self.²¹

It was not until the non-sectarian (*ris med*) movement of the late nineteenth century and the scholarship of its pre-eminent philosopher, Mipham²² (1846–1911), who embraced the idea of “Great Madhyamaka” used by Dolpopa but gave it a more nuanced interpretation while seriously treating the objections of Tsongkhapa and others, that anything like an adequate reconciliation of these positions was presented;²³ however, Mipham’s presentation resulted in controversy and remains contested until the present day.²⁴

We are here not directly concerned with what might be considered the “correct” understanding of this literature. Rather we seek to explore some of the readings that have been offered and reflect on the significance of them to modern scholars’ approaches to Yogācāra and to Buddhism more generally.

La Vallée Poussin and Theodore Stcherbatsky

Let us turn to the disagreement early in the twentieth century between the Belgian scholar Louis de La Vallée Poussin and the Russian scholar, Theodore Stcherbatsky, on the place of the absolute in Yogācāra. This an interesting episode in Buddhological studies and hopefully, in addition, it also holds some lessons for the present day. We will begin this section of the paper by briefly exploring the historical background to the debate that emerged not merely from a clash of personalities, but also due to a fundamentally different

20. Stearns, 48 and fn. 26.

21. MSA IX. 23 *śūnyatāyām viśuddhāyām nairātmyātmaṅgralābhataḥ, buddhāḥ śuddhātmalābhītvāt gatā ātmamahātmatām*. Accepting the amendment to Lévi’s edition (*nairātmyān mārgalābhataḥ to nairātmyātmaṅgralābhataḥ*) by L. Jampal et al. (trans.), *Universal Vehicle Discourse Literature: Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* (New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies, Columbia University Press, 2004), 82, fn. 35.

Tib. *stong pa nyid ni rnam dag na // bdag med mchog gi bdag thob pas // sangs rgyas dag pa’i bdag thob phyr // bdag nyid chen po bdag tu ‘gyur //* See J. Hopkins, *Mountain Doctrine: Tibet’s Fundamental Treatise on Other-Emptiness and the Buddha Matrix* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 2006), 133, 466.

22. Jam mgon ‘Ju Mi pham rgya mtsho.

23. See John W. Pettit, *Mipham’s Beacon of Certainty* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999), 229–30; Thomas H. Doctor (trans.), *Speech of Delight. Mipham’s Commentary on Śāntaraksita’s Ornament of the Middle Way*. (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2004), 131–35.

24. See E. Gene Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature of the Himalayan Plateau* (Boston, Wisdom Publications, 2001), 227–34; and Karma-phun-tshogs, *Mipham’s Dialectics and the Debates on Emptiness: To Be, Not to Be Or Neither* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 51–54.

methodological approach adopted by what became two distinct schools of Buddhist Studies in the West, a distinction which, we argue, continues to have a bearing on scholarship today.

Louis de La Vallée Poussin and Theodore Stcherbatsky each played a monumental role in the development of Western Buddhology. La Vallée Poussin was a student of the great French scholar Sylvain Lévi who was a pioneer of Yogācāra studies and the first to translate *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* into a European language. La Vallée Poussin is probably best known for his translation of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*,²⁵ a translation considered by many to be one of the greatest achievements in Buddhist studies.²⁶ His numerous other works include a translation and study of Hsüan-Tsang's (Xuanzang) *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* from Chinese, which provided much of the vocabulary for subsequent Yogācāra studies.²⁷

Stcherbatsky, in conjunction with his renowned student Eugene Obermiller, was among the first to examine the complexities of the *Abhisamayālamkāra* and also produced the earliest translation of *Madhyāntavibhāga*, or part thereof, together with the commentary of Vasubandhu and Sthiramati.²⁸ Stcherbatsky is most famous for his work on Buddhist epistemology and logic, the *pramāṇavāda*, of Dignāga (500 CE) and Dharmakīrti (600+ CE), culminating in his two-volume *Buddhist Logic* (1930–1932).²⁹ This included material from as far back as 1903 when he had published on epistemology and logic in later Buddhism.³⁰

La Vallée Poussin and Stcherbatsky may be taken respectively as representatives of the French and Russian schools of Buddhist studies, which had been established in the nineteenth century. The French school was established by Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852), who with his *Essays on Pāli* (1826)³¹ and *History of Indian Buddhism* (1844)³² effectively launched Buddhist Studies in Western Europe. Isaak Jakob Schmidt (1779–1847) is considered to be the founder of the Russian school of Buddhist Studies. Although born in Amsterdam, he spent most of his life in Russia and, early in the nineteenth century, worked on the living traditions of Buddhism among the Kalmyk Mongols residing there.

The French approach, generally adopted throughout Western Europe, stressed Pāli and Sanskrit. The Sanskrit materials were drawn from the Sanskrit

25. *L'Abhidharmakosa traduit et annoté par Louis de la Vallée Poussin* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1921–1931), 5 vols.

26. J. W. de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America*, 41.

27. *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi: la siddhi de Hsuan-Tsang*, traduite et annotée par Louis de La Vallée Poussin (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1928–1929).

28. Th Stcherbatsky (trans.), *Madhyānta-Vibhanga: Discourse on Discrimination between Middle and Extremes*, Bibliotheca Buddhica XXX (Leningrad: Akademia Nauk SSSR, 1936), Reprint (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992).

29. (New York: Dover, 1962), 2 vols. Unabridged and corrected republication of the work first published, circa 1930. v. 1 and v. 2 were originally published as v. 26, pts. 1 and 2 of the *Bibliotheca Buddhica* series.

30. *Teorija poznanija i logika po uceniju pozdneysich buddhistov*, 2 vols. (St Petersburg, 1903/1909) Trans. into German by Otto Strauss, *Erkenntnistheorie und Logik nach der Lehre der späteren Buddhisten* (München-Neubiberg: Oskar Schloss, 1924).

31. *Essai sur le-pāli* (Paris: Dondey-Dupre pere et fils, 1826).

32. *L'Introduction à l'histoire du buddhisme indien* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1844).

texts preserved in Nepal, some eighty-five of which had been received by Burnouf in 1837 from the British Resident in Kathmandu, Brian Houghton Hodgson. It was this collection that formed the core of European studies of the Mahāyāna. The approach could be said to be biased towards “originalism” — the belief that original Buddhism could be uncovered by critical investigation of the textual evidence. Commentaries and interpretations preserved in the traditions of the Mahāyāna, especially indigenous non-canonical Tibetan and Chinese works, were largely ignored or marginalised by the English and Continental schools during this early period. Indeed, it was generally believed that Europeans were better placed to evaluate the significance of the canonical texts from the vantage point of objective scholarship.³³

This approach, which tended to see Tibetan and Chinese sources primarily as adjuncts in editing and reconstructing Sanskrit originals, was widely adopted by the French school throughout the next century. It is evident, for instance, in the works of La Vallée Poussin’s teacher, Sylvain Lévi, in his use of Chinese and Tibetan translations as adjuncts in his landmark translation of the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*. It is also evident in La Vallée Poussin’s own work when, for example, he largely managed to “reconstruct” the Sanskrit *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* on the basis of Chinese and Tibetan versions, and also in La Vallée Poussin’s student Étienne Lamotte’s translation of the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*. This approach placed great emphasis on philology and the methodical reconstruction of the original versions of texts.

The Russians, in contrast, had long-standing ties with Asia and had direct access to the Tibetan Buddhist materials in the Gelugpa monasteries among the Buryats and Kalmyks in the Transbaikal and Kalmykia. The Russians were less inclined to discount Asian achievements than were the Western Europeans whose contact had been primarily in the context of colonialism. The Russians had, after all, once been conquered by an Asian power, the Mongols, and by the time of Stcherbatsky had suffered a defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. The Russian school, unlike the Western Europeans, stressed the importance of indigenous sources in arriving at a correct understanding of Buddhism. Work had been done on Buddhism in Kalmykia as early as 1802–1804 by Benjamin Bergmann and Isaak Jakob Schmidt, the founder of the Russian school.³⁴

Vasily Vasilyev (1818–1900), a leading figure in the Russian school working in the mid-nineteenth century, actively encouraged the use of Tibetan indigenous resources. By this method, he claimed to have arrived at the precise meaning of the central Buddhist teachings. For instance, in 1857, he claimed to have identified the true meaning of *śūnyatā*, the emptiness of the

33. By the late nineteenth century, Mahāyāna Buddhism was seen by many as a corruption of “true” Buddhism. It was widely believed that the Buddhism of Tibet, or “Lamaism” as it was widely known, was a totally degenerate form of Buddhism, which had become totally contrary to the earlier Buddhism. For a fuller discussion of early portrayals of Tibetan Buddhism and the use of the term “Lamaism,” see Donald S. Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 15–45.

34. Significantly, Schmidt criticised the use of the term “Lamaism” as early as 1835 with the comment, “It hardly seems necessary to remark that the term ‘Lamaism’ is a purely European invention and not known in Asia.” Cited in Lopez, 15.

Prajñāpāramitāsūtras, and Buddhist philosophy, which he equated with Hegel's Absolute idea.³⁵ Later, Stcherbatsky following in this tradition, at the suggestion of his teachers (Ivan Minayev and Sergey Oldenberg), visited Transbaikal, studied texts preserved in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries there, and improved his language skills with the guidance of Mongolian lamas. He also visited India and Tibet.

La Vallée Poussin and Stcherbatsky share many of the general characteristics of their schools. In addition, in each we find some inclination that flavoured their approach and led them into conflict with the other. La Vallée Poussin, like his Western European counterparts at the time, was dismissive of much of Indian and Buddhist philosophical thinking. He once claimed that "incoherence" was one of the "chief features" of Indian thought³⁶ and described traditional Buddhist scholasticism as the confused product of men who never clearly realised the principle of contradiction.³⁷ Burnouf, long before him, had characterised the works of Nāgārjuna and Madhyamaka philosophy, as "nihilism," and La Vallée Poussin's study of that school's texts forced him to agree with this opinion;³⁸ however, he did not support the contention that Buddhism in its entirety was nihilistic; rather, his personal inclination coupled with his study of tantric literature with its richness of imagery and emphasis on spiritual praxis, led him to affirm the sacerdotal religious life of the monk practitioner and the optimistic and soteriological character of Buddhist mysticism. The real aim of the Buddhist life, he argued, is *sanctity*, not the annihilation that defective philosophy would have one accept.³⁹ By emphasising its optimistic and soteriological character, La Vallée Poussin hoped to rescue Buddhism from a nihilistic orientation many believed evident in the work of some of its philosophers. La Vallée Poussin believed he had found support for a more positive interpretation of Buddhism in the Yogācārin works of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu. He believed their emphasis on praxis, their use of positive notions such as *ālayavijñāna*, and their apparent concern for the primacy of consciousness, which seemed to entail a "soul-like" spiritual absolute, provided evidence in support of his religious and mystical presentations of Buddhism.

La Vallée Poussin's early interest in Buddhist praxis is evidenced by his 1892 study of Śāntideva's meditation manual entitled *Le Bodhicaryāvatāra de Śāntideva* and, after an intervening decade and a half of study in *tantra*, in 1905, he published an edition of Prajñākaramati's commentary also. This natural inclination towards mysticism and an interest in the esoteric traditions of Buddhism, with their emphasis on religious life, coloured La Vallée Poussin's conception of Buddhist Studies throughout his career and forms a principle point of disagreement between him and Stcherbatsky.⁴⁰

35. In *Buddhism, ego dogmaty, istorija i literatura* (St. Petersburg, 1857) cited in Th Stcherbatsky (trans.), *Madhyānta-Vibhanga: Discourse on Discrimination between Middle and Extremes*, v.

36. Hastings, vol. 9, 379.

37. *The Way to Nirvāna* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1982), 272.

38. J. W. de Jong, "Emptiness," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 2 (1972): 7–15, 7.

39. *The Way to Nirvāna*, 118.

40. Some of La Vallée Poussin's earliest work was in the field of *tantra*, an aspect of Buddhism particularly neglected and reviled by Pāli scholars. His *Une pratique des Tantras* (1897), *Boud-*

With an idealistic and mystical interpretation of Yogācāra, which downplayed the abilities of Indian scholar saints for rational and coherent philosophy, La Vallée Poussin aimed to present Buddhism in a light that is neither nihilistic nor atheistic. In 1917, he contributed a number of seminal articles to the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, establishing definitions for core Buddhist tenets and ideas at a time when Buddhist Studies was still in its formative stages.⁴¹ Throughout these articles, he frequently associates Yogācāra with idealism and identifies Vijñānavāda, or at least the “genuine Vijñānavāda” as he described the teachings of Aśaṅga and Vasubandhu, as akin to Vedānta.⁴² He further identifies “soul-like” characteristics in the notions of *dharmakāya* and *tathāgatagarbha* concluding that “a Buddha is a saint in whom we can . . . distinguish what the Europeans call a “soul.”⁴³ For La Vallée Poussin, the “idealism” of Yogācāra asserts an absolute and counters nihilistic tendencies found in Buddhism generally and in Madhyamaka philosophy particularly. He believed that the religious quest that finds expression in Yogācāra helps counter the failings of Buddhist philosophy; however, he was forced to admit that in order to do so, he had to envisage a whole new form of “idealism” unlike any seen before in philosophy, either in the East or West.⁴⁴ It is La Vallée Poussin’s favouring of language loaded with the connotations of absolutism and highlighting tenets such as *ālayavijñāna* and *tathāgatagarbha* drawn from Yogācāra texts and interpreted in conjunction with the tantric material to present the final intention of the Buddha’s teachings not as nihilism but rather as a sanctified state accessed through the intuitive insight of mystic visionaries that allows comparison of his approach with that of Dolpopa. Dolpopa, in the Tibetan context, pursued a similar strategy. Long before La Vallée Poussin, Dolpopa had drawn a distinction between mere philosophical systems (Skt. *siddhānta*, Tib. *grub mtha*) and the view (Skt. *darśana*, Tib. *lta ba*) of noble beings who discern reality. This is evident in the use of his “Madhyamaka” to designate the mere philosophical system of Madhyamaka and his use of “Great Madhyamaka” (Skt. *Mahāmādhyaṃka*, Tib. *dbu ma chen po*) as the awareness of Ultimate reality, or even that reality itself. Of course, Dolpopa is not discrediting philosophical systems in the manner of La Vallée Poussin, but he is saying that philosophical analysis is limited and must be superseded by direct meditative insight.⁴⁵

dhisme: Etudes et Materiaux (1898) and *The Four Classes of Buddhist Tantras* (1901) explored the ritual and asceticism of Indian *tantra* and its place in Buddhism. This study was criticised by scholars such as M. E. J. Rapson, then professor of Sanskrit at Cambridge University, who, like Stecherbatsky, wished to maintain the image of Buddhism as pure philosophy. See M. Lalou and J. Przyluski, “A Brief Biography of Louis de La Vallée Poussin” in L. M. Pruden. (trans.), *Abhidarmakośabhāṣyam*. 4 vols. (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press. 1988–1990), vol. 1, xvi.

41. James Hastings, with the assistance of John A. Selbie (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908–1926). La Vallée Poussin’s articles dealt with here are: “Madhyamaka,” vol. 8, 235–37, “Nirvāna,” vol. 9, 376–79, “Nihilism (Buddhist),” vol. 9, 372–73, “Philosophy (Buddhist),” vol. 9, 846–53, “Mysticism (Buddhist),” vol. 9, 85–87.

42. Hastings, vol. 9, 852.

43. Hastings, vol. 9, 852.

44. Hastings, vol. 9, 849.

45. Brunnhölzl, 183–84.

La Vallée Poussin's discrediting of Indian Buddhist philosophy in preference for a mystical and religious interpretation was at odds with the opinion of Stcherbatsky who believed he had found close parallels in Buddhism with European philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, and others, whom he personally admired and who were still regarded as the apotheosis of European intellectualism and hence the foremost product of human civilisation. Stcherbatsky aimed to demonstrate that Buddhist philosophy ought to be treated on a par with that of Europe and that Indian philosophers should be recognised as rightly belonging among the pantheon of the great thinkers of human history.⁴⁶ To further this purpose and to rectify the prejudiced attitude that regarded Indian spiritual endeavour as idolatry and superstition, Stcherbatsky played down the "religious" and "mystical" elements evident in the material and focused on Buddhism's critical dimension.

Stcherbatsky was unsympathetic with La Vallée Poussin's inclination towards religion and mysticism which, although intended to absolve Buddhism of the charge of nihilism, overlooked the subtlety and sophistication of its philosophical systems. Although Stcherbatsky recognised the mystical element, he sought, in line with his predecessors and teachers, to present Mahāyāna Buddhism in scientific terms as a system of pure logic and reason. For Stcherbatsky, the critical analysis in Madhyamaka and the logical theories of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, were the pinnacle of Buddhist thinking. While the study of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti gave Stcherbatsky the opportunity to demonstrate the advanced state of Indian logic, he feared the apparent mystical and religious approach of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu might undermine his argument. Therefore, he describes their school, which La Vallée Poussin had proclaimed to be "genuine Vijñānavāda,"⁴⁷ as an "extreme idealism" and contrasted it with the "critical idealism" of the later logicians.⁴⁸ According to Stcherbatsky, only in this later phase did Buddhist philosophy achieve the kind of sophistication found in the works of Kant. For Stcherbatsky, the early Yogācārin position is at best a transitional stage on the way towards the more sophisticated position of the Buddhist logicians.

Stcherbatsky was also attempting to defend the critical philosophy of Madhyamaka from the charge of nihilism levelled at it both by historical Yogācārin and by many of his own contemporaries, some of whom had argued that the presentation of *śūnyatā* in Madhyamaka left no basis for spiritual practice or for any kind of ontology. But Stcherbatsky was able to use the Tibetan materials at his disposal, especially those of the Gelug school composed by Tsongkhapa who had integrated the logical and epistemological principles of the Buddhist logicians into the Madhyamaka framework, in his defence.⁴⁹ He combined this with the language of German idealism to reinter-

46. Th Stcherbatsky (trans.), *Madhyānta-Vibhanga: Discourse on Discrimination between Middle and Extremes*, iv.

47. Hastings, vol. 9, 851

48. *Buddhist Logic*, vol.1, 13.

49. As Steinkellner has noted, "For Tsong-kha-pa it can then be said that the 'fruit' of *tshad ma* [logic and epistemology] is the highest insight into Ultimate reality which, of course, may be understood in terms of *stong pa nyid* / *śūnyatā* conceptions of the dBu ma [Madhyamaka]

pret the fundamental doctrine of emptiness as “relativism” (or “scepticism”) in place of nihilism and accepted a doxography that affirmed the ascendancy of Madhyamaka over Yogācāra.⁵⁰ This close interest in Tibetan classificatory and interpretative schemes led to Stcherbatsky’s pre-eminent student Eugene Obermiller translating Bu ston’s *History of Doctrine (Chos ’byung)* in Transbaikal in 1927.⁵¹ Bu ston’s classification of texts was an important element in making it possible for Tsongkhapa to undertake his critical scholarship, which surveyed the entire body of literature in Tibetan.

While Stcherbatsky agreed with La Vallée Poussin’s association of Yogācāra with idealism, La Vallée Poussin’s rendering of Buddhism in religious terms at the expense of philosophy was criticised by Stcherbatsky because it belittled the sophistication of Indian thought, reducing it to a veneer of incoherent scholasticism attendant to the pursuit of a religious life. The intellectual condescension towards India’s philosophical achievements by La Vallée Poussin and others was a cause for outrage on the part of Stcherbatsky,⁵² as he sought to place Buddhist philosophy on a par with Western secular thought.

It would be too easy to depict the controversy between Stcherbatsky and La Vallée Poussin as simply the clash of a Romantic and a Marxist. La Vallée Poussin was far too sophisticated a scholar to fall into the oversimplifications of the earlier Romantics. Nor did he accept the idea of those who believed original Buddhism could be recovered. He took a cautious historical approach avoiding essentialist characterisations of Buddhism. Stcherbatsky, for his part, was over fifty at the time of the 1917 revolution. He is representative of a classically educated scholar of the pre-revolutionary era, but he wrote in the anti-religious environment of Soviet Russia where Marxism defined itself against religiosity and German idealism, particularly that of Hegel. Comparing Yogācāra to Hegel, Stcherbatsky is both praising and criticising the Yogācāra system: praising it because it is worthy of consideration along with the absolute idealism of Europe; criticising it because it falls short of the critical or “transcendental” idealism of Kant, to which Stcherbatsky favourably compared Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and the Madhyamaka analysis, particularly as it was developed in Tibet in the Gelug school.⁵³

Although it is unfair to characterise Stcherbatsky’s work as Marxist, some of his attitudes fitted well in the Soviet environment and were favourably received

tradition.” E. Steinkellner, “The Buddhist Tradition of Epistemology and Logic (*tshad ma*) and Its Significance for Tibetan Civilisation,” in *Der Rand und die Mitte*, ed. Andre Gingrich and Guntram Hazod (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2006), 206. Explanatory material in square brackets is our addition.

50. Stcherbatsky did assert the “thing-in-itself” and thus an absolute beyond the level of phenomena. Relativity applies on the empirical level. See Tuck, 37. Only in his later years did he assert that Madhyamaka “denies every kind of an ultimate real.” *Madhyānta-Vibhanga: Discourse on Discrimination between Middle and Extremes*, vi.

51. E. Obermiller, trans., *History of Buddhism by Bu-ston*, Part I (Materialien zur Kunde des Buddhismus, Heft 18) (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1931).

52. D. Chattopadhyaya (ed.), *Papers of Th. Stcherbatsky: Translated for the first time from Russian by Harish Gupta* (Calcutta: Indian Studies Past and Present, 1969), Introduction iii, x–xi. Also T. Stcherbatsky, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), Reprint 6–8.

53. On this development, see G. Dreyfus, *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakīrti’s Philosophy and Its Tibetan interpretations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

on the political level. Steinkellner, an eminent contemporary scholar of Buddhist epistemological and logical traditions, observes that Stcherbatsky “found this logical tradition most useful for exemplifying — in the first post-revolutionary years at Leningrad University — that Buddhism was the kind of atheistic and thoroughly rationalistic religion that could be allowed to survive within the newly established Marxist society”.⁵⁴ Lenin was very keen on Orientalism and on Indology in particular. He even met with the great Orientalist S. F. Oldenburg, founder of the *Bibliotheca Buddhica*, later Minister of Education in the Russian Provisional Government, to discuss the importance of Indology for the Soviet. When Maxim Gorky proposed to establish an Oriental Institute, Lenin decreed that the Moscow Institute of Oriental Languages and the Petrograd Institute of Modern Oriental Languages be immediately founded. Stcherbatsky and his colleagues embraced this enthusiasm for Indology and gave their support to the new Institutes.⁵⁵

The reasons for the favourable reception of Stcherbatsky by the Marxists are obvious. An Indian scholar, Chattopadhyaya, who is favourable to the Soviet model, has written that Stcherbatsky’s interest “was not any romantic fascination for the half unknown mystic East in which some of his European contemporaries were seeking an escape from the sickness and degradation of their own capitalist society. . . . On the contrary he showed definite distaste for any romantic fascination for the mystic East and he was the first among the European scholars to have insisted on the importance of recognising India’s contribution to science and rationalism.”⁵⁶

Stcherbatsky used German idealism to reinterpret the fundamental doctrine of emptiness in Madhyamaka as a form of critical idealism while rejecting the “extreme idealism” of Yogācāra doctrines. He wished to avoid the characterisation of Buddhism as sacerdotal and mystical in order to present Mahāyāna Buddhism in scientific terms as a system of logic and reason akin to that of the West. To the extent that he was the first Westerner to present this material in the light of Tsongkhapa, Stcherbatsky’s work could be described as an early example of the modern Gelugpa-influenced interpretation of Buddhist doctrines and doxographical presentation of Asaṅga’s and Nāgārjuna’s works.

La Vallée Poussin, on the other hand, was attempting to present Buddhism as non-nihilistic and as a religious endeavour with sanctity as its goal. In order to counter what he saw as the potentially devastating nihilism of Madhyamaka, La Vallée Poussin stressed what he understood as absolutism and idealism in the Yogācāra to reveal what he took to be the true religious intent of Buddhism.

It is somewhat ironic that an interesting reversal of opinions appears to have taken place on the part of both La Vallée Poussin and Stcherbatsky. La Vallée Poussin, who had maintained that the philosophical negativism of Madhya-

54. E. Steinkellner, “The Buddhist Tradition of Epistemology and Logic (*tshad ma*) and Its Significance for Tibetan Civilisation,” in Andre Gingrich, Guntram Hazod (ed.), *Der Rand und die Mitte* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2006), 197.

55. D. Chattopadhyaya (ed.), *Papers of Th. Stcherbatsky: Translated for the first time from Russian by Harish Gupta* (Calcutta: Indian Studies Past and Present, 1969), xviii–xix.

56. D. Chattopadhyaya, xx–xxi.

maka left no room for the Absolute, in the last year of his life (1938), published a short note in the *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies* apparently capitulating to Stcherbatsky, confessing, “je me dispose à admettre que le Madhyamaka reconnaît un Absolu.”⁵⁷ But Stcherbatsky’s opinion had also changed. In 1934, in the Russian journal *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, he claimed that Madhyamaka denies Absolute Reality.⁵⁸ Also in the preface to his 1936 *Madhyāntavibhanga* he stated that, alone among the many schools of Buddhism, Madhyamaka, “denies every kind of an ultimate Real.”⁵⁹ Madhyamaka’s monistic Absolutism had been at the heart of Stcherbatsky’s argument against its nihilism. What could have caused his confidence in this assertion to finally collapse?

Observations on Recent Scholarship and the Legacy of La Vallée Poussin and Stcherbatsky

The legacy of La Vallée Poussin and Stcherbatsky remains with us today in many ways. We will finish by commenting briefly on some aspects of that legacy.

In the context of Australian Buddhist studies, Jan Willem de Jong (1929–2000), founding professor of South Asian and Buddhist Studies at the Australian National University (1965–1986), typified the European approach. Not surprisingly, de Jong revered La Vallée Poussin as the model for an ideal scholar of Buddhism. Professor de Jong stressed the independent study of the texts, especially those in Sanskrit and Pāli, and was very scornful of those scholars of Buddhism with insufficient mastery of these languages, particularly those who seemed to think knowledge of Tibetan was sufficient for the study of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. He always wanted the texts to “speak for themselves” and was very wary of cooperation with Tibetan scholars who in his view would introduce all kinds of anachronistic ideas into the work. Professor de Jong was also cautious about cross-cultural comparison particularly in relation to philosophy and favoured operating within narrow limits with careful attention to philology. Of course, more recently, scholars in Europe and Australia primarily concerned with textual studies are adopting a much broader approach that takes account of developments in other disciplines. Nevertheless, it is true to say that the “European” approach is still differentiated from approaches which engage with living Buddhist traditions in the way characteristic of Stcherbatsky.

The approach of Stcherbatsky, which gave greater attention to commentaries and to later developments in the tradition, has continued in various guises until the present day. Significantly, to draw out what he regarded as the central ideas of Buddhism, Stcherbatsky relied primarily on the Buddhist commentator Vasubandhu and produced the book *The Central Conception of Buddhism*, which takes Abhidharma — a kind of proto-philosophy within Buddhism — and its theory of *dharmas* (constituents of reality) as crucial to a proper

57. “Buddhica,” *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies* III (1938): 148. Quoted by J. W. de Jong, “Emptiness,” 7.

58. T. I. Stcherbatsky, “Die drei Richtungen in der Philosophy der Buddhismus,” *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* X (1934): 1–37. Cited by J. W. de Jong, “Emptiness,” 7.

59. Stcherbatsky, *Discourse on Discrimination between Middle and Extremes*, vi.

understanding of Buddhism.⁶⁰ As we have seen, Stcherbatsky also believed in the value of later sources in Tibetan tradition for understanding the development of Buddhism as a whole and placed great value on contact with living representatives of the tradition. He also advocated philosophical engagement with the texts and in relating his material to contemporary philosophical concerns. Stcherbatsky's principal concern in rendering Madhyamaka in Kantian terms and Yogācāra in Hegelian terms was not to diminish Buddhism's philosophical importance by association with outmoded idealism. On the contrary, he saw this as elevating Buddhism in the esteem of scholars, who until then had largely considered it as merely crude superstition.

This approach became the intellectual inheritance of Stcherbatsky's student Obermiller. But with Obermiller's death in 1935, followed by that of Stcherbatsky himself in 1942, and with the devastation of the Second World War, Buddhist Studies died in Russia. The debate about Yogācāra and Madhyamaka did not re-emerge until the 1960s and then largely in America. In this new environment where so many Buddhist scholars were confessional Buddhists, often influenced by Tibetan teachers, the association of German idealism with ancient Indian philosophy made little sense. Perhaps because of this, recent scholarship in the West, including North America, has tended to disown the immense influence of Stcherbatsky. Stcherbatsky's legacy is strongest among Indian scholars who see him as restoring the legitimacy of their philosophical heritage. D. Chattopadhyaya says, "Stcherbatsky did help us — the Indians — to discover our own past and to restore the right perspective of our own philosophical heritage."⁶¹

Although perhaps not fully recognised, features of Stcherbatsky's approach are evident in much recent North American scholarship on Yogācāra and Madhyamaka. Much contemporary scholarship has been directly inspired, or strongly influenced, by contact with the living tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, which resulted from the Tibetan diaspora which began in the late 1950s. Perhaps an even stronger connection with Stcherbatsky can be made: two of the most influential American scholars, Jeffrey Hopkins and Robert Thurman, were first taught by the Kalmyk Mongolian lama, Geshe Wangyal, who had trained at the great Gelugpa monasteries of Drepung in Lhasa and who had settled in the USA in 1955. Wangyal had even worked in St Petersburg with his teacher Lama Dorjjeff before the suppression of Buddhism in the Soviet Union in the 1930s.⁶² Through Wangyal, Hopkins and Thurman were schooled from the beginning in Tibetan language and Tibetan dialectics, especially as presented by Tsongkhapa and the Gelug school. A whole generation of scholars have studied with Hopkins and Thurman and most of them have worked together with Tibetan lamas and spent significant periods of time in Dharamsala, Mysore, Sarnath, and other centres of Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism in South Asia. Many other American scholars who were not students of Thurman

60. (Delhi: Indological Book House, 1970), Reprint.

61. Chattopadhyaya, i.

62. Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Boston: Shambala, 1992), 290–94.

and Hopkins have followed a similar trajectory. Not only have they valued the Tibetan expertise but have, to a significant degree, come to interpret Buddhism through the doxographical schemes developed by Tsongkhapa and others. Like Stcherbatsky, they have tended to dismiss the association of Madhyamaka with nihilism and to see Yogācāra as a stage on the way to the pure Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka of Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa. It was not until very recently that the alternative discourses to these predominantly Gelugpa-influenced approaches had begun to be published in significant numbers.

Hopkins has continued to play a major role. Following the publication of his *Emptiness in the Mind-Only School of Buddhism* (1999)⁶³ which presented a translation of the section of Tsongkhapa's *Leg bshad snying po* dealing with the question of *Cittamātra*, Hopkins followed up with two further works which completed a planned trilogy of works on *Cittamātra*.⁶⁴ Together, these three works are the most thorough presentation published to date of the issues that concerned Dolpopa and Tsongkhapa and their disagreement. Hopkins continued with his translation of Dolpopa's most influential work *Ri chos nges don rgya mtsho* of 1333 in his *Mountain Doctrine: Tibet's Fundamental Treatise on Other-Emptiness and the Buddha Matrix* (2006), followed in 2007 by a translation of Tāranātha's famous synopsis of the Jonangpa school's position, *gZhan stong snying po* as *The Essence of Other-Emptiness*. His 2006 edition and translation of a small work by Mipham, published under the title *Fundamental Mind: The Nyingma View of the Great Completeness*, presents Mipham's final word on the definitive meaning.

Thurman too has recently guided work of importance to publication as chief editor of a long overdue translation of Maitreya-Asaṅga's *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* together with Vasubandhu's commentary, which finally provides a reliable and readable English translation of this difficult text.⁶⁵ Gareth Sparham has recently begun the publication of a multi-volume series of Maitreya-Asaṅga's *Abhisamayālamkāra* with the commentaries of Haribhadra and Vimuktisena,⁶⁶ which will bring to conclusion the work on this text left unfinished by Stcherbatsky's great, but tragically short lived, student Obermiller.⁶⁷

In recent years, a number of scholarly works have appeared presenting the perspectives of other Tibetan scholars and Schools on issues seminal to the debate in Tibet about the place of the absolute in Yogācāra and Madhyamaka. One notable example is Karl Brunnhölzl's 2007 translation and study of Nāgārjuna's *Dharmadhātustotra* with the commentary of the Third Karmapa

63. (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1999).

64. *Reflections on Reality: The Three Natures and Non-Natures in the Mind-Only School*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); *Absorption in No External World: 170 Issues in Mind Only Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

65. L. Jampal *et al.* (trans.), *The Universal Vehicle Discourse literature: Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* by Maitreyanātha/Āryasaṅga. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

66. G. Sparham (trans.), *Abhisamayālamkāra* with *Vṛtti and Ālokā*, Vol. 1 & Vol. 2 (Fremont: Jain Publishing, 2006, 2008).

67. *Analysis of the Abhisamayalamkara* (Calcutta Oriental Series, No. 27) (London: Luzac & Co., 1936).

Rangjung Dorje (1284–1339).⁶⁸ Rangjung Dorje was an influential contemporary of Dolpopa and Bu ston and an important lineage master in both the Kagyu and Nyingma schools. Brunnhölzl has also made a detailed exposition of the Kagyu tradition of Madhyamaka.⁶⁹ This work brings to light many of the crucial differences between the Kagyu and Gelug schools over the interpretation of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra and treats at length the other-emptiness/self-emptiness (*gzhan stong/rang stong*) controversy with much fresh material. Mention should also be made of Matthew Kapstein, who was instrumental in the retrieval of the collected works of Dolpopa from Tibet and who has continued to make important contributions to our understanding of Dolpopa's system through several articles and books.⁷⁰

The debate on the status of mind and the absolute in Yogācāra has continued since the time of La Vallée Poussin and Stcherbatsky. Many of the less sophisticated scholarly interpretations of Yogācāra see mind in Yogācāra as an absolute or the Absolute. Taking passages such as “the three dimensions of existence are only *citta*” (*traidhātukaṃ cittamātram*), they conclude that mind (*citta*) is the only reality.⁷¹ Consciousness or mind is here presented as analogous as the Advaitan *brahman*, the one true existent or substance; the basis for manifold illusory appearance.⁷²

These characterisations are plainly unsatisfactory, and more discerning scholars have objected to them. Adequate interpretation has been hindered by overreliance on the works of critics of Yogācāra (such as Candrakīrti), as well as on overreliance on Tibetan doxographies. As Herbert Guenther notes, by the time of the systematisation of Buddhist systems by the doxographers, the original intent of Aśaṅga and Vasubandhu had become problematic.⁷³ Scholars, such as Walpola Rahula, have pointed out that statements such as “the three dimensions of existence are only *citta*” (*traidhātukaṃ cittamātram*) have a precedent in non-Yogācāra works — even in the non-Mahāyāna *nikāyas* and *āgamas*.⁷⁴

Clearly early Yogācāra cannot be characterised as a form of absolute idealism. Nevertheless, more sophisticated approaches still argue that the mind has special status vis-à-vis the external world or objects of mind and thus it is correct to characterise Yogācāra as idealism. Typical of more sophisticated

68. *In Praise of the Dharmadhātu* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2007).

69. *The Centre of the Sunlit Sky: Madhyamaka in the Kagyu Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2004).

70. For example, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 106 ff; *Reason's Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 301 ff.

71. Chatterjee, for example, claims “Yogācāra holds that consciousness is the sole reality.” Ashok Kumar Chatterjee, *The Yogācāra Idealism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 39. E. J. Thomas likewise concludes: “There is an ultimate reality . . . This is thought or mind (*citta*).” *The History of Buddhist Thought* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1951), 233.

72. For example, Chatterjee, 148.

73. H. Guenther, *Buddhist Philosophy in Theory and Practice* (Baltimore: Penguin 1972), 16. See also Guenther's “Mentalism and Beyond in Buddhist Philosophy,” in *Tibetan Buddhism in Western Perspective* (Emmeryville: Dharma, 1977), 170 ff.

74. W. Rahula, “Vijñaptimātratā Philosophy in the Yogācāra System — Some Wrong Notions,” in *Zen and the Taming of the Bull: Towards the definition of Buddhist Thought* (London: G. Fraser, 1978), 84.

approaches are those of Paul Griffiths,⁷⁵ Paul Williams⁷⁶, and Jay Garfield.⁷⁷ Griffiths states: “The basic ontological question — what is there in the world is answered unambiguously by Indian Yogācāra theorists . . . there is nothing but mind.”⁷⁸ Unlike the less sophisticated commentators, he recognises that mind cannot be portrayed as an eternal substance and so clarifies his basic claim, stating that there are only “mental events.” Paul Williams, in substantial agreement with Griffiths, styles Yogācāra as “dynamic idealism.”⁷⁹

It is not our purpose here to test the tenability of these arguments but rather to note that issues raised in the controversy between La Vallée Poussin and Stcherbatsky have not been definitively resolved in Western scholarship and that important aspects of their legacy remain with us. We can still profitably study the works of these great scholars and reflect on the factors that influenced their thinking. We might also recognise that our approach to Buddhist studies, whatever it is, probably has a complex and interesting provenance both within Buddhist tradition and outside it.

75. P. Griffiths, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-Body Problem*, (Illinois: La Salle, 1986), 91–96.

76. *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London: Routledge 1986), 86–90. See also his comments on the status of mind in *The Reflexive Nature of Consciousness*, (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998), 11–15.

77. “Western Idealism through Indian Eyes: Reading Berkeley, Kant and Schopenhauer through Vasubandhu,” *Sophia* 21, no. 1 (1998): 10–41, reprinted in *Empty Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 152–69.

78. Griffiths, 80.

79. Williams, 87.