

Lion of Speech

The Life of Mipham Rinpoche

Dilgo Khyentse

TRANSLATED BY THE
Padmakara Translation Group



SHAMBHALA

FOREWORD BY ALAK ZENKAR RINPOCHE

Mipham Rinpoche was a master of the most wondrous qualities of study, reflection, and meditation. Through his activities of explanation, debate, and composition, he did an unsurpassed service to the Buddha's teaching of both transmission and realization. Even if hundreds of scholars were to discourse on his achievements for an entire kalpa, there would still be more to say.

Adorned with every glorious quality, the noble being Mipham Jamyang Namgyal Gyatso Pelzangpo was Manjushri in person, appearing in the form of a teacher in this degenerate age. And since the story of his life is so difficult for us to comprehend, it is here set forth by the vajra master and lord of refuge Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Rabsel Dawa—the very life tree of the most secret teachings of the Old Translation school—a master as learned as he was accomplished, a lord of all enlightened families and of an infinity of mandalas, whose name (but for the present necessity) I scarcely dare even to pronounce. He has composed an essential distillation of the life of Mipham Rinpoche, to which he gave the name *The Light of Wondrous Nectar*. And since he has revealed therein its quintessential significance, as though he had refined the purest gold, the text itself is perfect and adorned with a glory of poetic metaphor. It is the life story of a truly extraordinary master; it is utterly immaculate both in content and expression; it is free of the slightest imperfection.

I believe that to translate this most precious gem, this biography so replete with meaning, into other languages will without a doubt be of service to the Doctrine. It will kindle faith and devotion in the hearts of many and will plant therein the seed of liberation. So it is with an immense joy that I received the news that the life story of this great master has been translated into English. What an excellent, what an extremely excellent,

what a supremely excellent thing to do! Joining my hands before the chakra of my heart, I cast upon this book a hundred times the flowers of my joy.

This was written by Thubten Nyima, otherwise known as Zenkar Tulku, for the publication both in French and English of *Lion of Speech*, the condensed biography of the omniscient Mipham Rinpoche.

TRANSLATORS' INTRODUCTION

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche composed his biography of Jamgön Mipham in 1939 at the behest of Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö and Jedrung Karma Chökyi Nyinje. Incorporating much of the material gathered in an earlier biography by Khenpo Kunzang Pelden,¹ one of Mipham's closest disciples, Khyentse Rinpoche enlarged and enriched his account from two important sources: oral accounts preserved in notes kept by his elder brother Shedrup Tendzin and, most especially, the personal recollections of Lama Ösel Jalü Dorje, who had been Mipham's devoted personal attendant for thirty-seven years.

With the passage of time, the unpublished manuscript was displaced among its author's papers and disappeared. Left behind in Tibet when Khyentse Rinpoche went into exile in 1959, it was not included in his collected works when these were assembled and published thirty-five years later in 1994. To all intents and purposes, the biography was lost beyond recovery and, were it not for a single chance occurrence, would have passed completely out of memory. In the winter of 1986–87, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche himself presided over the publication of Mipham Rinpoche's collected works. One day, as he was perusing Kunzang Pelden's biography of Mipham, which was to be included in the seventh volume of the collection,² he casually remarked to Dakpo Tulku, one of his students who happened to be standing close by, that he himself had written a biography of Mipham many years before, which while containing most of the information supplied by Kunzang Pelden but with added supplements, was actually more detailed.³ There, for the time being, the matter rested. Khyentse Rinpoche died a few years later in 1991 and, apart from the startling piece of information received by Dakpo Tulku, no one had either seen or heard of the long lost biography.

By an extraordinary stroke of good fortune, however, the text came to light in 2010. Brought to Larung Gar in Serta by an old monk from Gyarong, it was offered to Khenpo Chime Rigdzin, one of the professors there. The manuscript was circulated among several readers, but seeing that the author had identified himself simply as Tashi Paljor, no one recognized its provenance. Eventually, however, it came into the hands of Gelong Gyurme Senge, a young monk of Shechen in Kham, who at the time was a student at Larung Gar. He immediately realized that Tashi Paljor was the personal name of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche—given to him shortly after his birth by Mipham himself. A copy of the text was sent to Nepal to Dakpo Tulku, by then the distinguished editor of the new and definitive edition of the Rinchen Terdzö, the collection of Nyingma treasure texts. After careful examination by several scholars, it was unanimously decided that the text was indeed the long lost biography of Mipham composed by Khyentse Rinpoche seventy years before. It was brought to Shechen Rabjam Rinpoche, Khyentse Rinpoche’s grandson, who immediately arranged for it to be published, just in time for it to be distributed during the reading transmission of Mipham’s works, which Rabjam Rinpoche himself gave at Bodhgaya in India in 2013 to mark the centenary anniversary of Mipham’s death.

Khyentse Rinpoche’s biography of Mipham is in many ways a traditional *namthar*, an account of the “life and liberation” of a man who is widely considered to be among the greatest scholars and accomplished masters in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. Profoundly reverential in tone, the text is composed in a rich, honorific, literary style, filled with the kind of poetic elegance for which its author is famous. It is rare to find references to even quite ordinary events, persons, and places that are unaccompanied by at least some kind of rhetorical flourish. According to the dictates of polite Tibetan protocol, for instance, no person of note is referred to merely by name without some additional expression of fulsome praise. The text is arranged in long, complex periods, beautifully constructed according to the canons of traditional literary composition but often difficult to construe and certainly quite foreign to the taste and practices of twenty-first-century English. But even though a measure of simplification is inevitable when casting the translation into shorter English sentences, it would nonetheless

have been undesirable, as well as impossible, to try to disguise the style and linguistic register of the text and to attempt to rewrite it in simpler form. On the contrary, it is hoped that, in the final result, the reader will have a biography that while being clear in sense, will preserve many of the rhetorical features and reflect the majestic power of the original.



Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche as a young monk. This picture was taken a few years after the composition of his biography of Mipham. Shechen archives, used with permission.

As an indication of the origins of the nirmanakaya that appeared in the form of Mipham Namgyal, the first chapter of the text is a rhapsodic celebration of the nature and role of Manjushri within the vast supramundane context of Mahayana Buddhism.⁴ Conceived in terms of multiple universal systems in the course of immense lapses of cosmic time, the account is presented with all the mind-numbing hyperbole of the Mahayana scriptures, the purpose of which seems to be to bring the minds of the readers into a state of silent wonder by forcing their imaginative powers literally to their breaking point. The nature and exploits of Manjushri, paradoxically both the sire and disciple of all the buddhas, are considered from the beginningless past, through the present, and on into the horizonless future until the very emptying of samsara. This stupendous backstory is not simply an expression of hagiographical reverence dictated by tradition. It sets the scene for the life of a man who is widely regarded as one of the defining figures of his home tradition, a scholar and master of meditation who, despite the lateness of his appearance on the historical scene, is often placed on the same level as the greatest personages in Tibetan history—Longchenpa, Sakya Pandita, Tsongkhapa, and so on—all of whom have been traditionally regarded as manifestations of Manjushri.

Be that as it may, the vision is gradually scaled down until, by the end of the first chapter, we reach the manageable dimensions of a human being—even if a man of superlative gifts—whom the author encountered while he was still a baby in arms, and whose memory lived on powerfully in the recollections of a whole generation of scholars and meditators whom the author knew personally. Thanks to the testimony of these witnesses, Khyentse Rinpoche has bequeathed to us a vivid, almost firsthand description of Mipham’s extraordinary qualities as a scholar, teacher, and spiritual master—marks of greatness that were plain for all to see. “It is thus,” he says, “that, on the basis of the valid cognition of direct perception, we know with certainty the causes that made him a noble and sublime bodhisattva. In this life, his qualities of elimination and realization were immaculate—and this is something I find even more amazing than the record of his many hundreds of incarnations in times gone by.”

The ensuing biography focuses very much on the man: the strong and courageous boy of good family, full of promise and already marked for

greatness by his place of birth and illustrious pedigree; the young monk and diligent student who with astonishing precocity would rapidly blossom into a scholar, teacher, and author of truly spectacular genius; and the dedicated practitioner of many years of solitary retreat.

As the previous quotation indicates, one of the striking features of Khyentse Rinpoche's account is a marked tendency, despite its opening chapter, to downplay the "miraculous" aspects of Mipham's life and activities—perhaps as a means of bringing into sharper focus the impact in human terms that he had on his contemporaries as a spiritual master, scholar, and teacher. It is entirely plausible that, as a tantric yogi of high accomplishment, Mipham acquired all manner of preternatural powers. But, from the age of thirty, we are told that he became extremely secretive about his own inner dealings and very rarely manifested or even spoke of them even to his closest attendants. As we learn from the biography, he once composed a whole volume describing his yogic exploits and signs of accomplishment, only to consign it to the flames before it could be published. In any case, it was Mipham's supreme intelligence and scholarship, coupled with amazing diligence and integrity as a master of meditation, that was for Khyentse Rinpoche the real miracle of his life—an unquenchable source of inspiration for disciples like himself. By comparison, "simply to talk according to our common perceptions about a great being such as this—whether in terms of the deities that he beheld or the minor miracles that he worked—is to do only what is liable to lead childish beings astray."

Another aspect that the biographer does not dwell on in any great detail, but that is sure to impress the Western reader, is that the achievements of Mipham's later life were played out against a background of relentless pain, the result of a serious and gradually worsening illness (apparently some kind of acute neuralgia), which, as some of his verses suggest, sometimes drove him almost to the brink of madness. Perceived in traditional terms, this illness was indeed a reflection of the declining merit and virtue of a decadent age—severely hampering, to our great and irreparable loss, the composition of his works.

Nevertheless, particularly in the springtime of his adult life, Mipham was closely involved in the rime, or nonsectarian, movement inaugurated by his

teachers, notably Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (1820–92), Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye (1813–99), Patrul Rinpoche (1808–87), and others. The purpose of this extraordinary and much-discussed initiative was to preserve and invigorate the vast range of teachings and practices of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition—particularly those of the older schools—that, by the late nineteenth century, had largely fallen into abeyance, principally for social and political reasons, and were in an advanced state of decline. New centers of learning were founded and older establishments were restored. Great collections of texts were assembled, edited, published, and transmitted. And in the attempt to overcome the spirit of sectarian intolerance that for centuries had crippled the intellectual and spiritual life of Tibet, conscious efforts were made to create an atmosphere of tolerance and exchange in which members of all schools were encouraged to study and deepen their understanding and practice of their own traditions, coexisting with others in a climate of open inquiry and mutual respect. To this collective effort, Mipham gave his wholehearted support and made an unparalleled contribution to the revival of the teaching tradition of his own Nyingma school, reaching back through the writings of Longchenpa and Rongzom Pandita to the heroic age of the founding fathers of the Tibetan tradition (Guru Rinpoche, Abbot Shantarakshita, and the dharma king Trisong Deutsen). He produced a range of commentaries on all the main sutra topics, thus creating an unprecedented body of philosophical textbooks that have since provided the core curriculum for the modern *shedra*, or commentarial colleges, of the Nyingma school.

On the sutra level, he wrote commentaries on the Abhidharma compendia of both Asanga and Vasubandhu. In the area of logic and epistemology, he explained the classic texts of Dignaga, Dharmakirti, and Sakya Pandita. His work on Madhyamaka included commentaries on the writings of Nagarjuna, Shantarakshita, Chandrakirti, and Shantideva. Finally, he composed important presentations of the five Yogachara texts of Maitreya-Asanga.

These endeavors by no means exhausted Mipham's energies. For he also composed numerous important works on tantric topics such as his famous overview of *Dispelling the Darkness in the Ten Directions*, Longchenpa's great commentary on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*. One should also mention

his *Discourse on the Eight Great Mandalas*, and of course his immense two-volume commentary on the *Kalachakra Tantra*. He also produced important works on the Great Perfection, notably his *Trilogy of the Uncontrived Mind* (which though unfinished was completed from notes taken by his disciples) together with his vast collection of essential pith instructions for practitioners. Mipham also took a particular interest in the epic of Gesar of Ling and attempted to reconcile its different versions. Recognizing the importance of Gesar to the folkloric identity of Tibet and especially of Kham, where to this day he occupies an important position in the collective imagination, Mipham composed liturgical rituals based on him and devised a sacred dance sequence in his honor.

These are just a few examples taken from the vast corpus of a master whom Gene Smith described as “one of the most imaginative and versatile minds to appear in the Tibetan tradition.”⁵ His *Ka’bum* (collected works) is one of the largest in Tibetan literature and reflects the interests of a truly universal scholar. In addition to religious and philosophical topics, Mipham’s interests extended also to all the secular sciences, including medicine, politics, poetics, technology, divination, and even sorcery.

Mipham spent almost his entire life in remote hermitages in the wilds of Kham, the eastern province of greater Tibet that borders upon the Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan. Reading the biography, which focuses exclusively on the details of his scholarly and spiritual life, one would scarcely guess that Mipham lived through a period of catastrophic social and political unrest—in China and Tibet and particularly in Kham, which in the latter half of the nineteenth century must have been in a state of almost permanent crisis. The civil conflict in Nyarong (1863–66), provoked by the warlord Gonpo Namgyal and eventually crushed by the direct intervention of the Lhasa government, is scarcely mentioned. We hear only of the unusual displacement of nomads from Golok and the fact that, in order to avoid potential danger, it was thought expedient for the eighteen-year-old Mipham to make a pilgrimage to the holy places of central and southern Tibet—a journey that brought him to Lhasa and the great monastery of Ganden, where he witnessed with admiration the teaching and debating practice of the Geluk school.

Mipham was almost an exact contemporary of the Dowager Empress Ci Xi (and for that matter Queen Victoria). He lived through a period that saw the collapse of the Ming dynasty, which brought to a calamitous conclusion two thousand years of Chinese imperial rule. The signs of impending change were everywhere apparent as the modern world pressed in on all sides. In China itself, there had been the opium wars and the Boxer Rebellion. And in the early years of the twentieth century, Tibet itself was disturbed by the British military expedition to Lhasa in 1903, soon to be followed by an invasion of Chinese forces, provoking the flight of the thirteenth Dalai Lama, first to Mongolia and China, and then to India. Having little direct impact upon Mipham himself, who in any case spent most of his adult life in retreat in the remote fastness of the mountains, these momentous events are passed over in silence or are referred to by Khyentse Rinpoche only in the most oblique terms.

Provoked by a Tibetan uprising in Kham in 1905, the Ming government sent a punitive expedition that restored order through a campaign of unprecedented brutality. On the orders of its leader, Zhao Erh Feng, monasteries were destroyed and large numbers of monks and lamas were summarily executed. The Chinese soldiers mentioned in the biography,⁶ whose presence in Chamdo so alarmed Lama Ösel, almost certainly belonged to this ferocious army, even if they are not so identified. And when the Chinese battalion, passing along the valley road far below Mipham's hermitage, encountered the mysterious opposing force, perhaps it was the horse of Butcher Feng himself that lay down and refused to move. We shall never know. Likewise the identity of the mysterious foreigners, whose saddlebags, filled with what seem to have been geological samples, were scattered in the snow, remains a matter of complete surmise. Could the hapless travelers have belonged to the expedition of William Rockhill, the American explorer, whose journey through western China and Kham in the early 1890s brought him to the neighborhood of Dzogchen and Derge?⁷

Mipham was of course aware of the general atmosphere of social decay. He had noticed, perhaps more than most, the lengthening shadows. But when he spoke of the decadence of his time, he was referring not so much to social and political upheavals as to the decline of the Buddhist tradition: to the progressive loss and diminution of authentic and effective practice, to

the misinterpretation of key doctrines, and to the divisions and sectarian intolerance that existed between the various schools, casting a pall of suspicion and discord over the sacred land. These same sentiments are echoed in the reactions of Khyentse Rinpoche himself, who on several occasions pauses to reflect with amazement on the fact that a scholar of such magnitude and a master of such perfect integrity as Mipham should have appeared in these end-times.

To be sure, Mipham, his teachers, and his immediate disciples, including the author of the biography himself, were imbued with a tradition and worldview that had remained virtually unchanged for more than a thousand years. And by the end of the nineteenth century they were living, so to speak, in a parallel universe. Their world of ancient tradition, of learning and intense spiritual endeavor, and the coarse environment of modern politics and international relations were merely juxtaposed. They touched but did not interpenetrate. The hidden kingdom of Shambhala of the North was a far more pressing reality to Mipham than, say, the machinations of the Kuomintang, which, in the very year of his death, would usher in the short-lived Chinese Republic, itself destined to fall, within a few years, to the followers of Mao Tse-tung.

Which of these parallel worlds was the more real? From the point of view of modern history, it is impossible to overlook the existence of the forces that within decades were to overwhelm and sweep away forever the traditional life of Tibet. And yet for Mipham, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, Jamgön Kongtrul, and others—that entire generation of great tantric masters and the generation that followed—what we take for reality is nothing but a tissue of shifting appearances, where the truth of the Dharma either shines or is obscured, depending on the fluctuating merit of beings. The world that seems to us so clear and solid is for such great yogis no more than a cinematic projection on a screen that, however opaque, is as thin as paper. For them, and even for the ordinary disciples who frequented and still frequent their presence, the screen itself may at times become diaphanous and no longer a barrier between this and other dimensions. By way of illustration, we may conclude with a story about Mipham himself, passed down in oral tradition but not included in Khyentse Rinpoche's account. Early one morning, during one of Mipham's retreats in the

hermitage of Gothi, Lama Ösel, busy with his daily duties, suddenly entered his master's quarters unannounced. There, on the table, he was astonished to see a beautiful fresh blue flower and asked in amazement where it had come from. For it was in the dead of winter, and all around the hermitage, the blanket of snow that had fallen in the night was deep and undisturbed. Surprised perhaps by the sudden appearance of his attendant, which had left him no time to conceal the prodigy, Mipham replied, after what one imagines to have been a slight pause, "I have just returned from Shambhala. The flower is a gift from the king."

THE SELECTION OF WRITINGS BY JAMGÖN MIPHAM

On the several occasions in the biography when Khyentse Rinpoche expresses his profound admiration for Mipham's commentaries, he speaks in tantalizingly general terms. In the hope of satisfying, if only partially, the curiosity of the reader thus aroused, and in the belief that the character and personality of authors are often made manifest in their writings, we have made a small selection of sample texts taken from Mipham's collected works. The texts in question cover both sutra and tantra topics. Some have been newly translated for the present occasion (*The Lion's Roar* and a pith instruction entitled *A Lamp to Dispel the Dark*), while others have been taken from texts already translated and published.⁸ Needless to say, this supplement is not intended as an adequate reflection of Mipham's work as a whole, for it is only a tiny fragment of his vast and varied output. Nevertheless, we hope that it will afford the reader a taste of the clarity, precision, and eloquence of Mipham's style. Intended as a humble complement to Khyentse Rinpoche's biography, the texts in question address profound issues and are in some places inescapably technical.

In keeping with the identification of Mipham as an emanation of Manjushri, the lion of speech, these selected writings have as their centerpiece a new translation of *The Lion's Roar: A Comprehensive Discourse on the Buddha-Nature*. The doctrine of the buddha-nature (Skt. *sugatagarbha*) is one of the central unifying themes of Mahayana Buddhism, with important ramifications on the level of both the sutra and tantra teachings. The passages chosen to accompany *The Lion's Roar*—the

texts on Madhyamaka that precede it and the passages of a tantric nature that follow—are intended to reflect this twofold orientation.

Mipham's position on this important doctrine goes to the heart of his complex and nuanced presentation of the Nyingma view, in which he fully aligns himself with the teachings of the two great luminaries of the Old Translation school, Rongzom Pandita (1012–88) and Longchen Rabjam (1308–63). One of the most striking features of Mipham's compositions is their thematic unity: the fact that whatever may be their level or variety of subject matter—sutra, tantra, Madhyamaka, Yogachara, and so on—they seem invariably to be conceived within the parameters of an overarching and cohesive system. Adopting the position and outlook of whichever text he is commenting on, Mipham is at all times careful to emphasize their complementarity, pointing out ways in which the various facets of Buddhist doctrine, correctly understood and assigned to their proper position, are interrelated—even those that at first sight seem unconnected and even contradictory. Contrasting categories such as Hinayana and Mahayana, the three turnings of the dharma wheel, Madhyamaka and Yogachara, Svatantrika and Prasangika, sutra and tantra, and so on are all brought together into a perfectly concordant unity. Where other scholars have seen differences leading to fragmentation, Mipham emphasizes relatedness and harmonious consistency.

As well as serving to exemplify a compositional style, the selected passages also illustrate this remarkable gift for synthesis. The important ideas discussed in the excerpts from Mipham's Madhyamaka commentaries prepare the way for, and naturally lead into, his characteristically Nyingma understanding of the buddha-nature as expounded in *The Lion's Roar*. Subsequently, the Madhyamaka teachings (belonging to the scriptures of the second turning of the dharma wheel) and the doctrine of the buddha-nature (belonging to the third turning), brought together in synthesis, form the natural basis for the view of the Vajrayana. This is clearly evoked in the excerpt from the *White Lotus*, Mipham's profound and beautiful commentary on the Seven-Line Prayer to Guru Padmasambhava. Finally, in the teachings of the Great Perfection, exemplified in the concluding pith instruction, the buddha-nature—cleansed through the teachings on

emptiness of any possible reification as a truly existent entity—is equated with awareness, or *rigpa*.

The texts on Madhyamaka are taken from Mipham’s magisterial commentary on Shantarakshita’s *Madhyamakalankara* and from the *Ketaka Jewel*, his shorter explanation of the ninth chapter of Shantideva’s *Bodhicharyavatara* (*The Way of the Bodhisattva*). Of these two compositions, it was the second that proved particularly controversial. Mipham’s Nyingma interpretation of this well-known scripture provoked sharp critiques from several Gelukpa scholars who sent him written refutations and challenges to debate. To two of these, Mipham composed brilliant and incisive replies, thus entering into a polemical exchange that, at first sight, seems strangely at odds with his commitment to the nonsectarian movement. For this reason, we have chosen as the first item in the supplement what might be regarded as Mipham’s rime manifesto. It is the opening preamble of his reply to the critique of Drakar Tulku of Drepung Loseling, in which he explains the reasons for his allegiance to the Nyingma tradition and his natural desire to express and defend its view. In this preface to his tightly argued riposte, Mipham enunciates one of the essential aims of the nonsectarian movement as he saw it: the cultivation of an environment of tolerance and mutual respect in which contending positions could be freely aired and debated before the tribunal of impartial reason unclouded by sectarian animosity—and without fear of opprobrium or persecution. Disagreement, Mipham contends, may be respectful and need not imply denigration. And he sums up his remarks by stating very clearly that his rejection of Tsongkhapa’s Madhyamaka teaching does not in any way call into question the sincerity of his admiration for, and devotion toward, the “Jewel Ornament of the Land of Snow.”

The history of the development of Madhyamaka in India and Tibet is long and fascinating, but it would be out of place here to attempt even a summary account of the twists and turns of its complicated evolution. Fortunately, there exists a large and ever-growing literature on Madhyamaka in the English language: original texts in translation as well as a rich supportive secondary literature, to which interested readers can easily refer.⁹

In the passages selected, the reader will need to take account of three important points. The first is the distinction—which Mipham emphasizes but did not invent—between two kinds of ultimate truth: the *nonfigurative ultimate* and the *figurative, or concordant, ultimate*. The nonfigurative ultimate is the ultimate truth in itself—a state of sublime realization experienced in meditation and characterized by a profound mental silence, the freedom from all conceptual elaboration. By contrast, the figurative ultimate is an idea, a state of intellectual understanding of the ultimate truth, which arises discursively in the mind on the basis of hearing and reflecting on the teachings as well as on the study of texts. Even though the figurative ultimate is described as secondary and of a lesser kind, its importance—as a stepping-stone to the ultimate in itself—is obvious when one reflects that the majority of people need to be introduced to the doctrine of the two truths by intellectual means. The conceptual understanding that results from this, enhanced by careful reflection and supported by considerable reserves of merit, produces a profound sense of intellectual certainty that lays the ground for the direct meditative experience of the ultimate truth in itself.

The second point that the reader should notice is that the distinction between the figurative and nonfigurative ultimates constitutes for Mipham the principal criterion of difference between the Svatantrika and Prasangika subschools of the Madhyamaka tradition. Rejecting the opinion of Tsongkhapa that the Svatantrikas and Prasangikas are divided by a divergence of view (the former being considered inferior to the latter), Mipham affirms that the real difference between them is a matter of pedagogical method. He contends that, in expounding the Madhyamaka teachings, Svatantrikas like Shantarakshita stress the figurative ultimate and cater to those who need a gradual approach to the ultimate in itself. By contrast, Prasangikas like Chandrakirti speak directly in terms of the nonfigurative ultimate in a manner suited to those who are able to enter directly into the state of freedom from conceptual elaboration. Moreover, since pedagogical methods are devised according to the needs of disciples and do not reflect the understanding of their proponents, Mipham does not hesitate to declare that, in terms of individual realization, the views of Shantarakshita and Chandrakirti are exactly the same.

Be that as it may, while in no way questioning the excellence of Chandrakirti as a commentator, Mipham considered that among all the great Madhyamaka masters, Shantarakshita occupied a position of particular eminence. For his Madhyamaka-Yogachara synthesis—the last major development of Buddhist philosophy in India—brought the two tenet systems of the Great Vehicle together into a meaningful and harmonious relation. And since, according to the traditional classification, Madhyamaka and Yogachara correspond respectively to the teachings of the second and third turnings of the dharma wheel, Shantarakshita’s synthesis also points to the equal importance and complementarity of these two streams of Mahayana doctrine. Bringing together the traditions of Nagarjuna and Asanga, and also the logico-epistemological tradition of Dignaga and Dharmakirti, Shantarakshita was, in Mipham’s estimate, the third great charioteer of the Mahayana. This positive assessment of Yogachara, and also of both the second and third turnings of the dharma wheel, are important features of Nyingma teaching, affecting not only its presentation of Madhyamaka but also, as the reader will discover, its approach to the doctrine of the buddha-nature. As Mipham says in *The Lion’s Roar*, “The omniscient Longchen Rabjam held that the meanings of both the second and the third turnings—together and without separation—constituted the definitive teaching, and this is precisely the position that we too should hold.”¹⁰

The third point that the reader should be aware of is Mipham’s strenuous rejection of the position, held by Tsongkhapa, that the realization of the actual ultimate truth corresponds to a “nonimplicative negation”—that is, the simple refutation of phenomenal existence. For such a refutation is, in Mipham’s view, an essentially intellectual position. It is in fact the figurative ultimate—the outcome of reasoned analysis performed by the discursive intellect. Admittedly, it is of great importance in that it constitutes the refutation of the first—but only the first—of the four ontological extremes (existence, nonexistence, both, and neither) delineated by Nagarjuna in his famous *catuskoti*, or *tetralemma*. It is not, however, the nonfigurative ultimate in itself, since freedom from conceptual elaboration can occur only when all four ontological extremes are simultaneously refuted. Only then does a state of realization manifest in which the

discursive intellect is stilled, the nature of the mind revealed, and the path of seeing attained. It is at this point, moreover, that self-cognizing primordial wisdom arises; and this, in Mipham's view, is none other than the buddha-nature itself.

As the reader of *The Lion's Roar* will discover, the interpretation of the doctrine of the buddha-nature by the various Tibetan schools was just as controversial as their views on Madhyamaka. Briefly stated, Mipham's Nyingma presentation plots a middle course between the definition of the buddha-nature as mere "emptiness" and the view that reifies it as an ultimately existing entity, empty of extraneous characteristics but not empty in itself. *The Lion's Roar* is an extremely interesting and truly masterful extrapolation of a single stanza taken from the *Sublime Continuum*, the text known in Sanskrit as either the *Uttaratantrashastra* or *Ratnagotravibhaga*. Mipham's purpose is to show that whereas it is only in the state of final enlightenment that the buddha-nature is fully manifest and activated, nevertheless, this same buddha-nature (being a permanent and immutable state of perfection) is necessarily present, fully accomplished and primordially endowed with the qualities of enlightenment, even in sentient beings. It is present and yet completely hidden by the obscuring veils of adventitious defilement. Therefore, what seems to be a step-by-step acquisition of realization and accomplishment on the path is in fact the removal of obscurations that adventitiously conceal an already present—indeed, primordially present—state of perfection. Through scriptural authority and reasoning, Mipham endeavors to demonstrate the truth of this characteristic position of the Nyingma school. On the side of scripture, he appeals to the sutras and shastras of the third turning of the dharma wheel but also to texts such as Nagarjuna's *Praise of the Dharmadhatu* (*Dharmadhatu-stava*). His appeal to reasoning is somewhat more complicated. Rational proof is necessarily based on evidence, and evidence is a matter of valid cognition. Of course, for ordinary beings, the presence of the buddha-nature is not something that is directly perceived; its presence must be inferred on the basis of reliable evidence. Mipham proceeds accordingly but adds that the kind of reasoning that *incontrovertibly* establishes the primordial and fully accomplished buddha-nature is grounded in the "valid perception of pure vision"—that is, the valid

cognition operative in the postmeditative experience of bodhisattvas who are on the grounds of realization. The doctrine of the sugatagarbha is extremely profound. And since, in the final analysis, it is difficult to fathom even for great bodhisattvas on the path of vision and above, it is hardly necessary to say that in practice it lies beyond the scope of ordinary beings. “It was for this reason,” Mipham says, “that the Buddha told his disciples to trust his teaching, saying that it was undeceiving, however difficult it was for them to understand it using their own strength.”¹¹

Nevertheless, Mipham’s demonstration of the doctrine of the buddha-nature primordially endowed with the qualities of enlightenment is of vital importance, since in the manner in which he presents it, the sugatagarbha is simply the nature of the mind itself. Spanning both the sutra and the tantra vehicles, it is in fact none other than the “ground tantra,” the unchanging continuum that becomes manifest as obscurations are purified and the result attained.

In conclusion, the reader should note that in the excerpts taken from Mipham’s commentaries on the *Madhyamakalankara* and on the Seven-Line Prayer to Guru Rinpoche, (figuring in *Adornment of the Middle Way* and *White Lotus*, respectively) the wording has occasionally been modified for the sake of editorial consistency in the present publication. The reader should also note that in the interests of typographical consistency, diacritics and other forms of accentuation have been reduced to a minimum. Readers unfamiliar with the phonetic rendering of Tibetan words should be aware that the final letter *e* is never mute but is always pronounced separately. For example, *nyingje* and *rime* are consequently words of two syllables, “nying-je” and “ri-me,” and are not pronounced as if they rhymed with *cringe* and *time*, respectively.

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The fifteenth day of the Saga month, the feast of the mahaparinirvana of
Shakyamuni Buddha,

June 16, 2019