The Position of Mipham
in the Indo-Tibetan Debate on Emptiness

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Abstract

This thesis explores the theories of Emptiness that Ju Mi pham rNam rgyal rGya mtsho (1846-1912), one of Tibet’s brightest and most versatile minds, formulated in his diverse writings. It reconstructs the stimulating and complex debates between Mipham and his dGe lugs pa opponents by juxtaposing their theories, arguments and counter-arguments on the three themes of (1) the dialectical/logical procedures for establishing Emptiness, (2) the nature of Emptiness so established, and (3) the viability of epistemological and linguistic operations pertaining to Emptiness. Thus, it undertakes a thematic and selective discussion of Mipham’s qualms about the dGe lugs pa understanding of Emptiness in a mixture of narrative and analytic style, with the aim of capturing Mipham’s philosophical mood and improving our knowledge of this extraordinary polymath.

The first three chapters set the background for the debates. Chapter 1 discusses Mipham’s position among the Tibetan religious hierarchies and surveys his writings so as to gain a complete overview of his output and assess its significance as a whole. Chapter 2 discusses the significance of Emptiness in Buddhism by looking at its soteriological, ontological, doctrinal and historical importance. Chapter 3 sets the historical backdrop to the debates by recounting the debates on Emptiness that have occurred in India and Tibet and have led to the debates triggered by Mipham.

The next three chapters deal with the contention between Mipham and his opponents in their understanding, interpretation, approach and application of Emptiness. Chapter 4 discusses the debates on the delimitation of the negandum and Chapter 5 is on the theory of the ultimate qua Emptiness. Chapter 6 delves into the issues of the unknowability and ineffability of Emptiness. A list of primary citations Mipham quotes and a summary of his three polemical writings are appended to provide the textual context for the debates.