

Translator's Introduction

Distinguishing the Views and Philosophies brings to light a number of significant philosophical and doctrinal issues in the Nyingma (*rnying ma*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. In this text, Bötrül (*bod sprul mdo sngags bstan pa'i nyi ma*, 1898–1959) lays out a systematic exposition of Mipam's (*'ju mi pham rgya mtsho*, 1846–1912) voluminous writings on the Middle Way. While addressing a number of specific issues of Buddhist philosophy and doctrine, Bötrül situates Mipam's Nyingma views amidst a plurality of positions held by competing sects in Tibet. By juxtaposing opposing traditions, Bötrül's presentation helps his readers navigate the breadth and depth of the intricate world of Buddhist Tibet.

Bötrül considered his *Distinguishing the Views and Philosophies* to be a “meaning-commentary” (*don 'grel*) on Mipam's *Beacon of Certainty*.¹ The *Beacon of Certainty* is a Tibetan classic of philosophical poetry that integrates the view of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) with the Middle Way. Like the *Beacon of Certainty*, *Distinguishing the Views and Philosophies* presents a distinctively Nyingma view of the Middle Way, and addresses several key points of Buddhist philosophy—spanning both Sūtra and Mantra.

Bötrül's text offers a remarkable window into the dynamics of Tibetan scholarship by providing a catalogue of a wide range of views that are held within Tibetan traditions. His approach gives a clear picture of issues at stake that otherwise tend to be obscured when only a single tradition's interpretative system is presented. Moreover, looking at different traditions side-by-side reveals the considerable differences between various schools of Buddhist thought in Tibet. Scholarship in English has just begun to uncover the depth and range of competing voices within the different sectarian traditions in Tibet. In particular, the works of José Cabezón, Georges Dreyfus, and Jeffrey Hopkins have

furthered our appreciation for the extent to which views differ among Tibetan monastic traditions.² From the antirealist epistemological tradition of the Sakya (*sa skya*) to the “semirealist” Geluk (*dge lugs*)—and from the Middle Way of the Geluk to the “other-emptiness” of the Jonang (*jo nang*)—the gulf dividing Buddhist sects seems to be vast.

Although Bötrül highlights the differences between distinct interpretations of Buddhist doctrine, he advocates a position that he calls “nonsectarian.” His model for nonsectarianism is certainly not one that compromises distinctions between the traditions. Rather, by contrasting his own views with the claims of several different traditions, he represents his Nyingma tradition within a rich constellation of diverse views. Such a “nonsectarian” work thus involves an explicit intertextuality through which the author defines his own (sectarian) identity by means of explicitly drawing upon others’ texts.

We should keep in mind that the term *nonsectarian*—particularly as it applies to a scholarly movement in Tibet that stems from the nineteenth century—is multivalent. It certainly does not refer to a single system of interpretation. Also, it need not mean that all traditions are necessarily taken as equal on all levels. Rather, a general characteristic of what it means to be “nonsectarian” in Tibet is a broad-based approach to Buddhist traditions that contrasts with a more insular model of scholarship that frames the boundaries of discourse within a narrowly delineated tradition of interpretation. Thus, we can understand what came to be known as the “nonsectarian movement” as a broad set of traditions, stemming from eastern Tibet in the nineteenth century, which developed a common interest in preserving a variety of Buddhist traditions as a response to the singular dominance of the Geluk school.

Like the primary target of Mipam’s polemics, most of the positions Bötrül argues against are endorsed by followers of the Geluk tradition. Even so, he describes Tsongkhapa (*tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*, 1357–1419), known as the founding father of the Geluk tradition, as like a second Buddha. This reveals an intricacy to his agenda that is easily overlooked in the polemical rhetoric. Bötrül also distinguishes his Nyingma tradition’s claims from Gorampa (*go rams pa bsod nams seng ge*, 1429–1489) in the Sakya; the Eighth Karmapa Mikyö Dorjé (*mi bskyod rdo rje*, 1507–1554) in the Kagyü (*bka’ brgyud*); and Tāranātha (*jo nang rje btsun tā ra nā tha*, 1575–1634) in the Jonang (however, he rarely mentions names). Some of the positions he argues against are also held by followers of the Nyingma tradition. Bötrül aligns himself with the Nyingma tradition of Mipam, which he traces back through Lochen Dharmaśrī (*lo chen dharmasrī*, 1654–1717), Longchenpa (*klong*

chen rab 'byams, 1308–1364), and Rongzom (*rong zom chos kyi bzang po*, ca. eleventh century).

Bötrül contends that most monastic textbooks of other traditions offer merely a simple sketch of the claims of the Nyingma tradition, “merely the understood meanings of an old grandfather”³ as he puts it. He cites this as part of what inspired him to write the text. He writes in his autocommentary that he initially had no intention to write a commentary on his text, due to the fact that it might appear to be “perpetuating pointless attachment and aggression.”⁴ He reportedly composed the root text while traveling in the summer,⁵ and later wrote the autocommentary at the request of his disciples while he was on an excursion doing village rituals.⁶ Both the root text and his autocommentary are translated below.

These two texts are an important source for understanding the contemporary traditions of scholarship within Tibetan monastic colleges. In his texts we can find a wide range of topics on complex points of Buddhist doctrine, which are clearly presented within a beautifully structured composition in verse and prose. Since Bötrül's root text is an independent composition, not an exegesis on a single scripture, he does not have the constraints of Tibetan commentarial prose, and is thereby free to weave together the views of many texts and traditions. He composed the texts in the period immediately prior to the devastation of Buddhist monasteries in Tibet under Chinese Communism, and thus, his works offer us a window into Buddhism in Tibet at the end of an era. His work represents a golden age of Buddhist scholarship in eastern Tibet in the first half of the twentieth century.

Bötrül's Works

Bötrül's writings should be seen in light of the development of monastic colleges in eastern Tibet in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a significant way, his texts are an extension of those of Mipam, the most influential figure in the Nyingma tradition of this era. Before Mipam, the Nyingma did not have their own authoritative corpus of commentaries on exoteric texts (i.e., sūtra). Mipam made a robust contribution to his Nyingma tradition by providing commentaries of sūtra topics (e.g., the Middle Way) based on the works of Longchenpa and Rongzom. His texts came to be used in the newly established monastic colleges across eastern Tibet.

It is significant that Bötrül wrote two commentaries on the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, an important treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom,

given that Mipam did not write a complete commentary on this text. By providing the Nyingma tradition with its own distinctive commentary on this central treatise, Bötrül extended Mipam's project of producing distinctively Nyingma commentaries on important exoteric texts.

Bötrül's biography conveys that he wrote his *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* commentaries inspired by a vision he had in a dream when he beheld Maitreya holding two mirrors, in which he saw the words of the root text and commentary.⁷ Here we are reminded that the tradition of revelation is not limited to the tantric tradition of treasure texts (*gter ma*) but is a characteristic of Mahāyāna in general.⁸ Unfortunately, it appears that Bötrül's *Ornament of Maitreya's Viewpoint* is no longer extant. His other commentary on the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra*, the *Words of Maitreya*,⁹ has been recently republished in his *Collected Works*.

His two commentaries on Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvātara*¹⁰ are also currently unavailable, as is his *Key to the Provisional and Definitive*, a text he references in *Distinguishing the Views and Philosophies*. He additionally wrote a commentary on Āryadeva's *Catuḥśataka*¹¹ (another important Middle Way text for which Mipam wrote no commentary), as well as a commentary on a prayer to be born in the Buddha-field of Sukhāvātī,¹² a short commentary on Mipam's *Lion's Roar: Exposition of Buddha-Nature*¹³ (entitled *Notes on the Essential Points of [Mipam's] Exposition [of Buddha-Nature]*¹⁴), and other short texts, including a beautiful devotional text that is a guru yoga for Rigzin Chödrak (*rig 'dzin chos grags*, 1595–1659), a prominent figure in the Drigung (*bri gung*) Kagyü lineage.¹⁵ These texts are included in his *Collected Works*, recently published in Sichuan.¹⁶

Bötrül had many students in the course of his life who were among the most influential figures in the past generation of the Nyingma tradition. His students include Khenpo Chökhypap (*chos dbyings khyab brdal*, 1920–1997), Khenpo Dazer (*lza ba'i 'od zer*, 1922–1990), Khenpo Petsé (*padma tshé dbang lhun grub*, 1931–2002), Khenpo Jikmé Püntsook (*'jigs med phun tshogs*, 1933–2004), and Tarthang Tulku (*dar thang sprul sku kun dga' dge legs*, 1935–) among several others. Khenpo Chökhypap, who was a prominent teacher in Tibet after the Cultural Revolution, studied with him for over ten years and remained in eastern Tibet. Khenpo Dazer, after fleeing for India in 1959, came to teach at the Ngagyur Nyingma Institute in India, which is the largest Nyingma monastic college in exile. He later returned to teach at the Śrī Singha monastic college at Dzokchen monastery in Tibet.¹⁷ Khenpo Petsé, apparently the first to compose a biography of Bötrül,¹⁸ also taught at the Śrī Singha monastic college and in India and Nepal, too.¹⁹ Khenpo Jikmé Püntsook founded Larung Gar (*bla rung gar*) in Serta (*gser rta*),

a thriving Buddhist community in eastern Tibet that is currently the largest monastic college in the world.²⁰ Tarthang Tulku settled in the United States,²¹ and has been instrumental in publishing a number of Buddhist texts in Tibetan and English, including Tibetan editions of the root text and autocommentary of Bötrül's *Distinguishing the Views and Philosophies*.

Distinguishing the Views and Philosophies continues to be widely taught and studied in Nyingma monastic colleges across Tibet and India. In preparing my translation, I have had the fortune to consult an audio recording of a commentary on the text spoken by Bötrül's close student, Khenpo Chökhyap. Having access to Khenpo Chökhyap's commentary has given me a wonderful opportunity to delve deeply into this text, and the recording has been an invaluable source for identifying other traditions that Bötrül frequently cites, but without mentioning names. Before turning to the contents of the text, I will offer an account of Bötrül's life.

Life of Bötrül

Typical of Tibetan biographical accounts, or hagiography (*nam thar*), the events of Bötrül's life portayed in his biography are embedded within a mythos of Buddhist culture in Tibet.²² In a land of divine intervention—of miracles, visions, and prophecies—no events are left to mere chance. In light of this, these accounts perhaps tell us more about the context of Bötrül's life than a rigidly "historical" list of names and dates. I will now present some of the important events in Bötrül's life as they are conveyed in his biography.

Bötrül was born in Dakpo²³ in central Tibet in 1898. He was the oldest of four children and had two brothers and a sister. He was a remarkable child; there are even said to be handprints that he left in rocks while playing as a child, like impressions in the mud that can be seen today.²⁴

As a boy, Bötrül studied with his father, who was a tantric practitioner, at Benchok hermitage (*ban cog ri khrod*). From his father, he learned to read, and he also received empowerments, reading transmissions, and instructions. His father told him that he should go to Domé (*mdo smad*) to study, but his father did not have provisions to provide for him, such as food or a horse. Instead, his father gave him a skull cup and told him that if he did not lose it, he would not go without food and clothing.²⁵

When Bötrül was about fifteen, his father passed away, at which time auspicious signs of rainbow lights are said to have appeared in the

sky. When his father was on his deathbed, he told his son that he should go to Kham (*kham*s). Based on this—and the fact that from a young age, whenever he heard the name “Kham Dzokchen,” he had a special feeling from the awakening of his predispositions—he felt compelled to go to Kham. He asked his mother for permission to go; however, she did not grant it. She told him that he would have to stay because she had a dream that she thought might be a bad sign: some riders (*skya mi*) had carried off a crystal stūpa that she had in her hand.²⁶

Around the year 1916, he again asked his mother for permission to leave, this time for permission to go to nearby Lhasa on a pilgrimage. Instead of going to Lhasa, however, he secretly ran off to Kham with some pilgrims from there. At one point on the way to Kham, he stayed at an old woman’s house. She told him not to stay long, but to go on quickly. She then gave him a big sack of dried meat to offer for teachings. When he later got to Kham, this offering for teachings turned out to be very beneficial. Later when he was staying in Drigung (*bri gung*), he thought that this old woman was probably a divine emanation.²⁷

He arrived at the Śrī Singha monastic college at Dzokchen where he studied with Khenpo Tupten Nyendrak (*mkhan chen thub bstan snyan grags*) and Khenpo Genam (*rto ru mkhan po dge rnam*) beginning with the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. In his time there studying, he did not even take tea breaks; he just drank cold water mixed with roasted barley flour for both food and drink.²⁸ Due to the fact that he was very young, and far away from his homeland, he could not provide provisions for his studies. He underwent incredible hardships reminiscent of the life story of Milarepa.²⁹ Since he had ragged clothes, some shameless monks ridiculed him. However, when they got to the Wisdom Chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, he was the most intelligent student, and the harassment stopped.³⁰

He took full ordination from Abu Lhagong (*a bu lha dgongs*) and received the name “Tupten Shedrup Tösam Gyatso” (literally, “ocean of study, contemplation, explanation, and practice of the Buddha’s teachings”). For his entire life, he upheld the foundation of the Vinaya discipline, such as not eating after noon.³¹ The Fifth Dzokchen Rinpoché, Tupten Chökyi Dorjé, recognized him as an incarnation of a sacred being, and henceforth, everyone called him “Bötrül” (“the incarnate lama from [central] Tibet”). He received many empowerments, reading transmissions, and instructions from Dzokchen Rinpoché—foremost of which he received was Longchenpa’s compilation called *Heart Essence in Four Parts* (*snying thig ya bzhi*).³²

He had great confidence in Mipam’s tradition, and decided that it was indispensable for him to meet a teacher who upheld Mipam’s

own tradition.³³ Dzokchen Rinpoché told him that it would be good to go to Dzatö (*rdza stod*), where Khenpo Künpel (*kun bzang dpal ldan*, 1870/2–1943) was staying.³⁴ Khenpo Künpel, who taught at Gegong (*dge gong*) Monastery, was a direct disciple of both Peltrül (*dpal sprul o rgyan chos kyi dbang po*, 1808–1887) and Mipam.

Bötrül went to meet Khenpo Künpel on a very auspicious occasion. He arrived carrying a sack, and Khenpo Künpel recognized Bötrül as an incarnation of Peltrül. Previously, when Peltrül was about to die, Khenpo Künpel requested him to come back soon. He asked Peltrül how to find his reincarnation, but Peltrül replied that he was not going to have a reincarnation. He then told Khenpo Künpel that he need not look for his reincarnation, but said, "It is certain that a monk carrying a sack will arrive whom you think is me—claim him." This turned out to be Bötrül.³⁵

Khenpo Künpel taught Bötrül the texts of Longchenpa, Rongzom, Peltrül, and mainly those of Mipam. When Khenpo Künpel was dying, he told Bötrül to take over the responsibility of teaching at Gegong Monastery, which Bötrül did.³⁶

One day at Gegong Monastery, a strange bird perched on the roof of a house and made various sounds. The bird spoke in *ḍākinī* language—telling Bötrül that his teacher from a previous life was in Domé, and that he should go there and "eliminate superimpositions regarding the instructions." He wondered which teacher was in Domé, and then realized that Chöying Rangdröl (*chos dbyings rang grol*, 1872–1952) was teaching the Great Perfection there; so Bötrül prepared to leave for Serta in Domé.³⁷

He met Chöying Rangdröl, and they compared experiences and had discussions about the Buddhist vehicles in general, and the Great Perfection in particular. There, Bötrül was able to "eliminate superimpositions regarding the quintessential instructions." Chöying Rangdröl praised Bötrül's knowledge of Mipam's tradition, and Bötrül stayed there for a few months teaching to the monastic community. He taught texts such as Mipam's *Overview: Essential Nature of Luminous Clarity*³⁸ and *Lion's Roar: Exposition of Buddha-Nature*. Also, it was at this time that he wrote his *Notes on the Essential Points of [Mipam's] Exposition [of Buddha-Nature]*. After he had accomplished the purpose of his visit, he went back to Gegong monastery. On the way back, he cried at the top of the mountain when Chöying Rangdröl's house was no longer in sight.³⁹

He continued to teach at Gegong monastery, giving empowerments, reading transmissions, and instructions on the *Kālacakra* and the *Heart Essence in Four Parts*, among others. He came a few times to the hermitage at Padma, at the request of Khenpo Petsé, and also visited

Kaḥtok (*kaḥ thog*) monastery. He also visited Zhechen (*zhe chen*) monastery at the request of Zhechen Kongtrül (*zhe chen kong sprul padma dri med*, 1901–1960), and stayed at Zhechen teaching for some time.⁴⁰

Bötrül also visited monasteries of other sectarian traditions in the direction of Sershül (*ser shul*) monastery. He discussed philosophy with many renowned scholars in other traditions such as Litang Lekden (*li thang legs ldan*). He debated with many scholars about the fine points of scripture and philosophy; in the end, it is said that he left his opponents “with nothing to say.”⁴¹

After spending nearly thirty years in Kham, the Sixth Dzokchen Rinpoché, Jikdral Jangchup Dorjé (*'jigs bral byang chub rdo rje*, 1935–1959), told Bötrül that his mother was sick, and that her doctor wanted to see him. Dzokchen Rinpoché told him that it would be good to go back to central Tibet soon. Since Bötrül’s eyes were quite bad, he had previously wanted to go back to central Tibet to seek medical attention. He had asked Khenpo Tupten Nyendrak several times for a divination about his trip, but it had not turned out well. This time he asked again for a divination, and Khenpo Tupten Nyendrak said that this divination showed it to be a good time for him to go.⁴²

Around 1957, two years before the Tibetan uprising against the Chinese in Lhasa, he left for central Tibet with many monks and attendants. When he got to Drigung, Khenpo Ayang Tupten (*a yang thub bstan*), a student of the famed Khenpo Zhenga (*mkhan po gzhan dga'*, 1871–1927), was teaching at the monastic college there. This Khenpo, along with the head monastic office at Drigung, requested Bötrül to stay there and teach. He declined, saying that he needed to go on to see his mother. However, it then snowed many times, making the road between Drigung and Dakpo treacherous. Seeing it as a sign that he should stay, he thought the snowfall was due to the miraculous power of Achi (*a phyi*), the Drigung protector deity.⁴³

He stayed at Drigung for a little over a year teaching at the Nyima Changra (*nyi ma lcang ra*) monastic college. While there, he had a vision of Achi and composed a ritual text for propitiating her.⁴⁴ The next year, in 1958, he finally got on his horse and went to Dakpo to see his mother. When he arrived, however, his mother had already passed away. He performed the ritual offerings of the *Peaceful and Wrathful* (*zhi khro*) and gave teachings and empowerments there in his birthplace. He then returned to continue teaching at the monastic college at Drigung.⁴⁵

He had taught at Drigung for nearly three years when the uprising occurred in central Tibet in 1959. Many Tibetan lamas, such as his student Khenpo Dazer, who had accompanied him to central Tibet from Kham, left for India during this violent time. Bötrül fled

northwest, toward Nakchu (*nag chu*), and stayed near Begu (*be gu*) monastery.⁴⁶

He died in that year, in the morning of the full-moon day of the ninth lunar month. He passed away sitting in meditative posture, as if he had no sickness. When he died, some local people saw white lights and rainbow lights in the sky, and many other miraculous signs such as the red form of a bird flying toward the west.⁴⁷

When we consider the details of Bötrül's life, we may find ourselves struck by the fact that the philosophical rigor of such a scholar takes place in a world where rational philosophy and magic appear to coexist seamlessly. This is a striking feature of the rich culture of the Tibetans, the "civilized shamans,"⁴⁸ where a sophisticated intellectual tradition is embodied within scholars who, along with rigorous rational analyses, participate in a richly mythic dimension of reality. We can see how Bötrül's life is depicted against a backdrop of a divine landscape—a world seen to be alive and pregnant with symbolic meanings. This is not only evident in the way that others viewed him, but also in his own reflections on the events portrayed in his life story. We also find here a moving story of a man who underwent great hardships far from his homeland in order to study Buddhism. In any case, a tangible result of this remarkable individual's life is present in the texts he left behind.

Summary of Important Issues in *Distinguishing the Views and Philosophies*

The bulk of *Distinguishing the Views and Philosophies* is structured into three main sections: the ground, the path, and the fruition. The ground can be said to deal with ontology, what is; the path depicts the (apparent) process of transformation, how one becomes a Buddha; and the fruition concerns eschatology, the end result of a manifest Buddha. Or, as Bötrül states it: the ground is the unity of the two truths (relative and ultimate); the path is the unity of the two accumulations (merit and wisdom); and the fruition is the unity of the two exalted bodies (Form Bodies and Truth Body). I will briefly summarize some of the topics that he addresses in the text.

In one of the first sections of the text, Bötrül distinguishes the Mahāyāna from the Hīnayāna. He makes a distinction between the Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna by means of:

1. the view—whether or not it has perfected the twofold selflessness

2. the meditation—whether or not its method and insight are exceptional
3. the conduct—whether or not it is endowed with the six transcendent perfections, and
4. the fruition—whether or not it accomplishes the great awakening

Throughout his text, Bōtrül primarily deals with distinctions in the view. In terms of the view, he distinguishes Mahāyāna from the Hīnayāna by means of the Mahāyāna realizing the view (1) clearly, (2) extensively, and (3) completely. He uses these same three elements to distinguish Sūtra and Mantra: in Mantra, luminous clarity (*'od gsal*) is shown (1) clearly, (2) extensively, and (3) completely. However, in Sūtra, it is merely shown (1) by means of a metaphor, (2) as a brief summary of the possession of Buddha-nature, and (3) as a mere luminous clarity that is the suchness of mind.

Early in the text, an important topic he discusses is valid cognition (*tshad ma, pramāṇa*), the theory of knowledge. He states that different views and philosophies developed in Tibet because of the different presentations of valid cognition. Thus, valid cognition is the key factor by which he distinguishes the different views of Buddhist sects in Tibet.

Following Mipam, he delineates four valid cognitions: two that are ultimate and two that are conventional. The two ultimate valid cognitions are respectively based on (1) the uncategorized, or nonconceptual, ultimate (*rnam grangs ma yin pa'i don dam*) and (2) the categorized, or conceptual, ultimate (*rnam grangs pa'i don dam*). The categorized ultimate is an absence, the lack of true existence; in contrast, the uncategorized ultimate is beyond the mind and so is not even a negation. These two ultimate valid cognitions are particularly important in philosophical discourses pertaining to Sūtra, and are also the primary means of distinguishing Svātantrika and Prāsāngika in this Nyingma tradition.

The two conventional valid cognitions are: (1) confined perception (*tshur mthong*) and (2) pure vision (*dag gzigs*). Confined perception is the domain of ordinary modes of being in the world. The domain of pure vision, on the other hand, pertains to an undistorted reality of authentic experience—the culminant experience of postmeditation. The conventional valid cognition of pure vision is particularly important in tantra, as the means to legitimate a divine reality.

In contrast to pure vision, confined perception concerns ordinary experiences of the world, those which are distorted and dualistic. While

there is a degree of validity to ordinary experience, like seeing a rope in front of you as a rope and not a snake, in the end even our ordinary perceptions of a rope do not remain valid. That is, an ordinary experience of the world (for example, as a separate self interacting with an external world) is only true as long as we sustain the working assumptions of *samsāra*—namely, ignorance. When our ignorant perspective, our “confined perception,” gives way to a divine world of pure vision, the ordinary world will no longer be ordinary or valid for us; rather, we will inhabit a world that is divine, a world that is pure. Bötrül describes the conventional valid cognition of confined perception as that which is laid out in the works of Dharmakīrti (600–660), who had articulated a sophisticated system of knowledge in his texts on valid cognition. The conventional valid cognition of pure vision, on the other hand, he says is found in such texts as the *Uttaratantra*, and in tantras such as the *Guhyagarbhatantra*.

The fourfold scheme of valid cognition adds a second tier to each of the Buddhist two truths; thus, there are two tiers of the two truths. The second tier plays an important part in his comprehensive interpretation of Buddhism—an interpretation that integrates valid cognition, the Middle Way, and tantra. Incorporating the discourse of tantra within a comprehensive theory of knowledge is an important part of his exegesis, and is a principal factor that distinguishes the Nyingma view.

We can see how this comprehensive approach to truth plays out in his interpretation of Candrakīrti (600–650), the definitive voice of Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka in Tibet. Bötrül points out that Candrakīrti's explicit characterization of the two truths—the ultimate as “the object of authentic seeing” and the relative as “false-seeings”⁴⁹—is incomplete.

Table 1. Two Truths and Four Valid Cognitions

<i>Valid Cognition</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Domain of Observation</i>	<i>Primary Associations</i>
<i>Conventional</i>	confined perception	way things appear	Sūtra (Dharmakīrti)
	pure vision		Mantra (<i>Guhyagarbhatantra</i>)
<i>Ultimate</i>	uncategorized	way things are	Prāsaṅgika (Candrakīrti)
	categorized		Svātantrika

The dotted line represents that while there is a provisional distinction between the two truths (appearance and emptiness), in fact they are a unity.

He says so because this characterization only encompasses the ordinary way that non-Buddhas understand, not the extraordinary way of the Buddha's wisdom. That is, in contrast to ordinary beings, Buddhas fully know both truths simultaneously, without separating meditative equipoise and postmeditation. For this reason, in the way Bötrül characterizes the ultimate truth, he says that the ultimate is beyond the domain of the distorted mind, but not beyond the domain of undistorted wisdom. Also, he defines the relative truth as the domain of mind in general—undivided into mind and wisdom, because both confused sentient beings and enlightened Buddhas perceive the relative truth (by mind and wisdom respectively).

Here we can see the importance of distinguishing between truth from (1) a *Buddha-centric* presentation, which emphasizes reality as known by a Buddha, and (2) a *sentient being-centric* presentation, which emphasizes reality as seen by benighted sentient beings. Bötrül wants an interpretation that accounts for both, and the two tiers of the two truths provide him with a perspectival means to do so. The integration of different perspectives on truth—the Buddha's, bodhisattvas', and sentient beings'—is a central issue that confronts all commentators who seek to articulate a unified and consistent Buddhist tradition. Significantly, the distinctive ways these perspectives are weighted is a primary factor that distinguishes the different Buddhist sects in Tibet. As such, rather than a radical disparity between traditions, as is often conveyed in the polemics of sectarian rhetoric, the distinctions between the sects in Tibet can be seen as one of *emphasis*—an emphasis on a certain perspective, or a particular aspect, of a Buddhist worldview.

In solely a sentient being-centric discourse, there is a danger of confining reality to mistaken perceptions—as inescapably caught up in a self-spun web of conceptual constructs. An appeal to a Buddha-centric presentation supplements this. However, a presentation that solely describes reality in terms of a Buddha's experience, without reference to a world as perceived by sentient beings, loses grounding in an inconceivable realm without any verifiable criteria for truth. Bötrül, following Mipam, seeks to forge a middle way between these two polarities. An important means for doing this is through a presentation of the two truths, and in this particular case, two models of the two truths. His presentation of the two truths is found in the first major section of the text: the ground.

Ground: The Unity of the Two Truths

Bötrül discusses the two truths in the section on the ground of the Middle Way, which is the longest section of the book comprising

nearly one half of the entire text. The central topic of this section is a twofold delineation of the two truths into (1) the two truths as appearance/emptiness (*snang stong bden gnyis*) and (2) the two truths as authentic/inauthentic experience (*gnas snang bden gnyis*). The former scheme delineates ultimate truth in terms of the mode of reality (*gnas tshul*)—the way things are—as known by ultimate valid cognition. The latter scheme delineates ultimate truth in terms of the mode of appearance (*snang tshul*)—the way things appear—as known by conventional valid cognition. This twofold delineation of the two truths, which follows Mipam's presentation, is an important means by which Bötrül offers a unified interpretation of Buddhist doctrine.

Bötrül states that the first two-truth model (appearance/emptiness) is the one found in the middle wheel of sūtra and in Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*—the doctrines that treat *the explicit teaching of emptiness*. The second two-truth model (authentic/inauthentic experience) is the one found in the last wheel of sūtra and in the *Uttaratantra*—the doctrines that deal with *the explicit teaching of the appearing aspect of Buddha-nature*. The harmony between the *Madhyamakāvatāra* and the *Uttaratantra*, as noncontradictory texts, is an important theme in this section on the ground. A central issue at stake here is the relationship between emptiness and Buddha-nature.

Based upon these two models of the two truths, Bötrül argues that there are two criteria for delineating the definitive and provisional meanings. Distinguishing the category of “the definitive meaning,” as opposed to “provisional meanings,” is a common means for Buddhists to distinguish what is really true from what is merely *provisionally*, or *heuristically* true. According to Bötrül, emptiness alone is the ultimate according to the appearance/emptiness model of the two truths, while anything that appears is a provisional meaning. However, according to the authentic/inauthentic experience model, pure appearances—deities, maṇḍalas, etc.—of authentic experience are the ultimate and thus the definitive meaning. In this way, he says that the middle wheel (emphasizing emptiness) and the last wheel (emphasizing appearance, or clarity) are both the definitive meaning.

Bötrül cites a delineation of the definitive meaning from middle wheel sūtras, such as the *Samādhirājasūtra*, in accord with Candrakīrti's statement in his *Madhyamakāvatāra*:

Whatever sūtras have a meaning that does not explain
thusness,
Know these to explain the relative, what is provisional.
Know those that have the meaning of emptiness as the
definitive meaning.⁵⁰

Candrakīrti delineates the sūtras that mainly express the topic of emptiness as the definitive meaning, and sūtras that mainly express the topic of the relative truth as provisional meanings. Bötrül accepts this delineation and argues that just because appearances are provisional meanings according to this division, it does not follow that all appearances—pillars, pots, the presence of wisdom, etc.—are necessarily nonexistent conventionally.

In another delineation of the definitive meaning, he cites Buddha-nature Sūtras of the last wheel, such as the *Dhāraṇīśvararāja*. These sūtras treat the sequence of the three wheels of doctrine as a hierarchy, likened to the process of cleansing a jewel using progressively refined means. In this delineation, understanding emptiness in the middle wheel is seen as a step toward understanding the more complete representation of Buddha-nature in the last wheel. In this way, Buddha-nature is positioned as the most comprehensive disclosure of ultimate truth in sūtras.

Although he accepts sūtras of the last wheel as the definitive meaning, he makes a distinction within it. He separates the sūtras of the last wheel into those of (1) Mind-Only and (2) Middle Way. He states that the Mind-Only refers to the four Mind-Only Sūtras,⁵¹ such as the *Samādhinirmocana*—the tradition of vast activity—in which the definitive meaning is accepted as:

- sūtras that teach three consummate vehicles, and
- sūtras that mainly teach the three natures in the Mind-Only tradition.

In contrast, the Middle Way in the last wheel refers to the ten Buddha-Nature Sūtras,⁵² such as the *Dhāraṇīśvararāja*—the tradition of profound view—in which the definitive meaning is accepted as:

- sūtras that teach a single consummate vehicle, and
- sūtras that mainly teach Buddha-nature.

In the Middle Way Sūtras of the last wheel, Buddha-nature—the unity of appearance and emptiness—is the definitive meaning.

Bötrül cites the *Uttaratantra*, which is a commentary on the Buddha-Nature Sūtras of the last wheel, to support that ultimate truth is not only a mere emptiness:

The basic element (*kham*s) is empty of those adventitious [phenomena] that have the character of separability,

But not empty of the unexcelled qualities that have the character of inseparability.⁵³

He explains that the first line refers to the relative, and the second refers to the ultimate. Distorted phenomena, which are adventitious and separable from the nature of reality, are empty; they are the relative truth. The ultimate truth, however, is not empty of those qualities that are inseparable from the nature of reality.

In addition to the above stanza from the *Uttaratantra*, another source commonly cited to support the interpretation of the empty quality of Buddha-nature is found in Candrakīrti's autocommentary on the *Madhyamakāvatāra* (VI.95). In this citation, originally found in the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, Mahāmati asks the Buddha how Buddha-nature is different from the Self proclaimed by non-Buddhists, and the Buddha answers as follows:

Mahāmati, my Buddha-nature teaching is not similar to the non-Buddhists' declaration of Self. Mahāmati, the Tathāgatas, Arhats, and completely perfect Buddhas teach Buddha-nature as the meaning of the words: emptiness, the authentic limit, nirvāṇa, non-arising, wishlessness, etc. For the sake of immature beings who are frightened by selflessness, they teach by means of Buddha-nature.⁵⁴

Bötrül states that from the empty aspect, Buddha-nature is not like the Self of the non-Buddhists because it is inseparable from the great emptiness distinguished by the "three gates of liberation" (i.e., empty essence, signless cause, wishless effect). He says that from the aspect of appearance, Buddha-nature is not without qualities because it has a nature with the qualities of luminous clarity, distinguished by knowledge, love, and powers.

Thus, Buddha-nature is not like the Self of the non-Buddhists *due to its empty aspect*. The emphasis on the empty aspect of Buddha-nature reflects the ultimate in the two truths of appearance/emptiness, which Bötrül delineates as the manner that Candrakīrti posits the two truths, in accord with the middle wheel. The *unity* of the empty and appearing aspects of reality, known in authentic experience, reflects the ultimate in the two truths of authentic/inauthentic experience, which he delineates as the manner that the two truths are posited in the *Uttaratantra*, in accord with the last wheel. In this way, he integrates Candrakīrti's treatment of Buddha-nature in the *Madhyamakāvatāra* (which emphasizes the *empty* aspect) with the description from the *Uttaratantra* (which emphasizes the aspect of *appearance*).

Moreover, Bötrül regards both the *Madhyamakāvatāra* and *Uttaratantra* as expounding the view of Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka. He states that a unique quality of Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka is this non-contradiction, or unity, of (1) the empty essence and (2) the nature of clarity. This unity, described as “compassionate resonance” (*thugs rje*), reflects the characteristic triad of the Great Perfection: empty essence (*ngo bo stong pa*), natural clarity (*rang bzhin gsal ba*), and all-pervasive compassionate resonance (*thugs rje kun khyab*). As with Mipam, Bötrül’s interpretation of the exoteric scriptures of Sūtra is infused with the esoteric view of the Great Perfection. He also echoes the Great Perfection in his explanation of a verse from the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras:

The mind is devoid of mind;
The nature of mind is luminous clarity.⁵⁵

He states that the first line shows the empty essence and the second line shows the nature of clarity. Bötrül presents luminous clarity—the unity of appearance and emptiness—as the common subject matter of Sūtra and Mantra. In this way, his presentation of the unity of the two truths functions to synthesize Sūtra and Mantra.

Another way he shows the continuity between Sūtra and Mantra is by including both within a single integrated system. He states that the hierarchy of views in both cases of Sūtra and Mantra—in the philosophies (*grub mtha’*) and vehicles (*theg pa*)—is based on the manner of ascertaining the view, gradually or instantaneously. The higher views are distinguished from the lower views due to their being less gradual. Such an integration of Sūtra and Mantra, and attributing Mantra with a higher *view* than Sūtra, is a principal feature of Bötrül’s Nyingma view.

Distinguishing the Middle Way View

Bötrül notably distinguishes his Nyingma view from (1) a view that considers the last wheel to be a provisional meaning and the Buddha-nature to be a mere absence—like the mainstream Geluk presentation of Prāsaṅgika; and (2) a view of “other-emptiness” that considers Buddha-nature taught in the last wheel to be truly established, while rejecting Prāsaṅgika as inferior to the Great Middle Way—like the teachings of the Jonang school. By doing so, he makes an interpretative move similar to the one made by the fourteenth-century Sakya scholar

Gorampa in his text with a similar title, *Distinguishing the Views*.⁵⁶ In *Distinguishing the Views*, Gorampa places his own Sakya view, which he aligns with “the proponents of the freedom from extremes as the Middle Way,” in contrast to the two extremes of “the proponents of eternalism as the Middle Way” of the Jonang and “the proponents of annihilationism as the Middle Way” of the Geluk.

An important way that Bötrül distinguishes the Nyingma tradition from these two traditions is through his characterization of emptiness. In Dölpopa's Jonang tradition, there is a distinction between “other-emptiness” and “self-emptiness” and a preference for “other-emptiness”—ultimate reality that is empty of relative phenomena. Ultimate reality is pure and unchanging in the Jonang tradition; it is “empty” only in the sense that it lacks all that is other—all the impure and impermanent phenomena that comprise relative reality. In contrast, the Geluk tradition following Tsongkhapa criticizes the Jonang. Proponents of the Geluk tradition consistently argue that the ultimate truth is necessarily a mere absence. According to a Geluk interpretation, emptiness is not an ultimate metaphysical presence that is above and beyond phenomenal reality; rather, emptiness means simply the *absence* of inherent existence in any particular phenomenon.

A third meaning of emptiness is articulated in the Nyingma tradition that Bötrül represents. According to Bötrül, emptiness is an inconceivable unity of appearance and emptiness. In this way, emptiness is represented in these three traditions as respectively (1) a real presence (Jonang), (2) an absence (Geluk), and (3) a nonconceptual unity (Nyingma).

Following Mipam, Bötrül expresses a unique quality of Nyingma exegesis by not taking an either/or position on either of the dichotomies of: (1) emptiness in the middle wheel versus Buddha-nature in the last wheel, and (2) Prāsaṅgika versus the “Great Middle Way” of other-emptiness. Rather, he integrates the two sides of these dichotomies into a tradition that he calls the “Great Prāsaṅgika” (*thal 'gyur chen po*). His depiction of the “Great Prāsaṅgika” and his treatment of the Prāsaṅgika-Svātantrika distinction are important topics in this section on the ground.

Distinguishing Prāsaṅgika and Svātantrika

In his characterization of Prāsaṅgika, Bötrül notably rejects Tsongkhapa's eight unique features of Prāsaṅgika⁵⁷ and distances himself from the more radical Svātantrika-Prāsaṅgika distinction that Tsongkhapa made. Bötrül depicts how Svātantrikas represent the empty nature

of reality through qualifying the negation of phenomena, such that a negation of phenomenon is held to refer to its ultimate status, not its conventional existence. Indeed, he says that to negate appearances when the two truths are divided would be to overextend the object of negation (*dgag bya*), which is an extreme view of annihilationism. Nevertheless, he says that the unique Prāsaṅgika arguments negate appearances directly, without qualification. Thus, in establishing the nature of reality, Prāsaṅgikas cut straight to the empty nature of everything. In contrast, he depicts the process of coming to know reality for Svātantrikas as gradual.

Bötrül presents the main object of negation for Svātantrikas as true existence, not appearances. In this way, the Svātantrikas divide the two truths and their discourse distinguishes between the ultimately nonexistent and the conventionally existent. Also, they establish their claims of conventional existence and ultimate nonexistence through autonomous arguments (*rang rgyud kyi sbyor ba, svatantraprayoga*). Whereas the object of negation for a Svātantrika is merely true existence, the object of negation for a Prāsaṅgika is *any conceptual reference*. Consequently, the Prāsaṅgika's object of negation (i.e., all extremes) is more comprehensive than the Svātantrika's primary object of negation (i.e., extreme of existence).

While Svātantrikas separate the two truths, the two truths are not separated in the discourse that defines the Prāsaṅgikas. The unique discourse of Prāsaṅgikas—which emphasizes the way things are in meditative equipoise—has no claims and uses consequences to negate wrong views. The difference between Svātantrika and Prāsaṅgika, however, is not simply in logical form (i.e., autonomous arguments vs. consequences) but involves an emphasis on a distinctive view.

Moreover, what is established (*bsgrub bya*) for the Svātantrikas is the categorized ultimate, an absence of true existence, whereas what is established for the Prāsaṅgikas is the uncategorized ultimate. Bötrül's statements that Prāsaṅgikas have something to establish contrast with other prominent figures in his tradition, who distinguish Prāsaṅgika by stating that the Prāsaṅgikas only negate, but do not *establish* a freedom from constructs.⁵⁸ In any case, Bötrül states that there is no *referent object* established for the Prāsaṅgikas.

Bötrül not only distinguishes Prāsaṅgika in terms of ultimate emptiness, but also in terms of relative appearance. He makes a distinction between the way the relative truth is asserted in the traditions of (1) Mind-Only, (2) Yogācāra-Madhyamaka (Śāntaraṅgita), and (3) Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka. He says that appearances are held to be mind in the Mind-Only tradition, and that the mind is conceived as

truly established. In Yogācāra-Madhyamaka, the conventional mode of reality (*tha snyad gnas tshul*) is mind, but that mind is not held to be ultimately real. In Prāsaṅgika, the appearances of relative truth are “merely self-appearance” (*rang snang tsam*).

There is no reality *behind* conventional appearances to ground reality in the Prāsaṅgika tradition. In contrast to the way that conventional reality is presented in the Mind-Only and Yogācāra-Madhyamaka traditions, “merely self-appearance” seems to be the concise and comprehensive delineation of conventional truth in the context of what is a *uniquely* Prāsaṅgika account of conventional reality. We are not given an elaborate discussion of conventional truth beyond this—perhaps necessarily so—because when we engage in discourses that theorize about reality, we are no longer in the domain of Prāsaṅgika as it is defined: namely, within the domain of discourse that accords with the uncatagorized ultimate, the “content” of nonconceptual meditative equipoise. Nevertheless, he explains that Prāsaṅgikas do make a distinction between what is correct and mistaken from merely a conventional perspective, and that self-appearance is constituted by mind. Yet significantly for Bötrül's Nyingma tradition, the unique arguments of Prāsaṅgika function to undermine the substantialist and discursive presumptions that system-building discourses such as Yogācāra involve.

Bötrül further argues against substantialist explanations of causality in the Prāsaṅgika tradition such as the “entity of disintegration” (*zhig pa dngos po*) set forth by Tsongkhapa among his eight distinguishing features of Prāsaṅgika. In contrast, Bötrül argues that the causality of dependently-arisen appearances *just is*; it cannot be conceived. The law of karma cannot be fully known, except by a Buddha.

Valid Cognition

As we saw above, valid cognition and the Middle Way are brought together within the two tiers of the two truths: the two ultimate and two conventional valid cognitions. The categories of valid cognition also come into play within Bötrül's threefold presentation of appearance and emptiness. He respectively delineates three types of appearance and emptiness and shows how each is validly known. Drawing from valid cognition's dichotomy of nonconceptual perception and conceptual inference—and supplementing what is unknowable (by ordinary means) as a third—he delineates three types of appearances:

- appearances that are manifest, which are known through valid cognitions of sense-faculty direct perceptions,

- appearances that are hidden objects, which are known by inference, and
- appearances that are extremely hidden, such as the causal processes of karma, which are known through valid testimony (e.g., scripture).

He makes a parallel division regarding emptiness, making a three-fold distinction in terms of emptiness and delineating how each is respectively known:

- emptiness that is manifest, which is known in meditative equipoise through a Sublime One's yogic direct perception,
- emptiness that is hidden, which is known by the valid cognition that examines the categorized ultimate, and
- emptiness that is extremely hidden, which is known by the valid cognition that examines the uncategorized ultimate.

These three emptinesses can be seen to respectively correspond to other-emptiness (the Jonang), emptiness of true existence (the Geluk), and self-emptiness (the Great Prāsaṅgika of Nyingma).

Moreover, these three interpretations of emptiness are reflected in Bōtrül's delineation of three types of Middle Way traditions based on how the object of negation is identified: (1) other-emptiness (Jonang/Yogācāra), (2) emptiness of true existence (Geluk/Svātantrika), and (3) self-emptiness (Nyingma/Prāsaṅgika). He states that the primary object of negation in "other-emptiness" is inauthentic experience, the primary object of negation for the Svātantrika is true existence, and the primary object of negation in "self-emptiness" (Prāsaṅgika) is any conceptual reference. Accordingly, he says that the two truths can be said to be (1) "different in the sense of negating that they are one," in the context of other-emptiness⁵⁹; (2) "the same with different contradistinctions," in the contexts of Svātantrika discourse; and (3) "neither one nor many," in Prāsaṅgika discourse. In this way, he outlines three different approaches to emptiness in the Middle Way.

Reflections on the Ground

Despite the differences on the surface between these three traditions' discourses on emptiness, it would be a mistake to accept their often