

## [Garfield on Sheehy and Mathes, 'The Other Emptiness: Rethinking the Zhentong Buddhist Discourse in Tibet'](#)

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**Michael R. Sheehy, Klaus-Dieter Mathes, eds.** *The Other Emptiness: Rethinking the Zhentong Buddhist Discourse in Tibet*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019. 448 pp. \$100.00

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**Reviewed by** Jay L. Garfield (Smith College, Doris Silbert Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Philosophy, Logic and Buddhist Studies) **Published on** H-Buddhism (November, 2020) **Commissioned by** Jessica Zu (USC Dornsife, School of Religion)

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There is a lot to like about this scholarly anthology, and there is nothing like it on the market. I will begin by saying that it is a must-read for anyone interested in the history of Tibetan philosophy or in the debates within Madhyamaka regarding whether emptiness is to be understood as intrinsic nature (*rang stong*) or extrinsic (*gzhan stong*), and whether emptiness itself is empty, or instead is a positive phenomenon—a buddha-nature, or a domain of reality empty only of the conventional, but not of its own pure nature. Each of the thirteen essays collected here—all by leading scholars of Tibetan Madhyamaka—is a significant contribution to the scholarly literature on this topic, and taken together, they are truly impressive.

Nonetheless, *caveat lector!* The blurb on the back describes the book as “highly accessible,” and the publisher claims that it would be a good “textbook for teaching graduate and undergraduate courses on Buddhist philosophy.” That claim is seriously misleading. This collection is uniformly highly technical, and each essay presupposes that the reader is already pretty deeply immersed in the world of Tibetan Madhyamaka studies. It is most definitely not aimed at a student audience, nor is it suitable for classroom use except in advanced graduate seminars. For the specialist in Tibetan philosophy or in Madhyamaka studies more generally, however, it is a gold mine of historical information, textual references, and very insightful discussion of the philosophical issues and debates regarding the *rang stong/gzhan stong* controversy in Tibet.

Three features of this volume deserve mention as outstanding virtues. The first is the uniformly impeccable scholarship and erudition of the contributions. Each essay is meticulously documented, and each sheds new light on important texts. The translations are precise, accurate, and clear. The references are complete and helpful. The philosophical and historical acumen brought to the analyses is impressive. There are no weak links.

Second, the doctrinal coverage is remarkable, and indeed, one might say, complete. This is not an easy thing to have accomplished, and both the editors and the contributors deserve credit. Although some associate the *gzhan stong* position exclusively with the Jonang tradition of Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen, *gezhan stong* analyses are present in most of the Tibetan traditions, and have different

flavors depending on the scholastic lineages in which they are articulated. The fact that this collection comprises essays on *gzhan stong* in the Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu, and *Ris med* traditions, with careful attention to specific figures and texts in those traditions, makes it especially valuable. The anthology as a whole, by attending to these different manifestations of *gzhan stong* thought, demonstrates the richness of the insights it encodes, as well as the variety of ways in which it can be articulated. It is also safe to say that very few readers, if any, will be familiar with each of the philosophers and texts addressed in this collection. So, nearly every scholar of Tibetan philosophy will have something to learn from it.

Third, the historical sweep of the anthology is truly impressive. After a very helpful synoptic essay by the co-editors, we find attention first to the fourteenth-century pioneer of this doctrine, Dolpopa, but then a historical progression takes us through the heyday of Tibetan debate on this topic in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, and on to the nineteenth-century *Ris med* (nonpartisan) movement, and even into some twentieth-century Tibetan thought through consideration of the work of Dudjom Rinpoche. This second dimension of diversity substantially enriches the presentation, allowing the reader to appreciate the evolution of *gzhan stong* thought and the impact of ongoing debates both between *rang stong* and *gzhan stong* philosophers and among *gzhan stong* philosophers themselves. The fact that this volume is so complete doctrinally and historically sets it apart from any other resource on this topic.

Consideration of each essay in this text would make this review far too long, but it might be useful to cite a few as examples of the value of the volume. David Higgins lets us know that *gzhan stong*-like ideas were already present in Dzogchen accounts of buddha-nature well before the time of Dolpopa, suggesting that Tibetan philosophers were wrestling with these ideas well before what is normally regarded as the start of this debate. Dorje Nyingcha explores Dolpopa's disciple Garungpa's (fourteenth century) mapping of accounts of buddha-nature onto the rubric of the three turnings of the wheel of Dharma, showing how entwined this idea is with hermeneutic theory. Klaus Dieter-Mathes explores the history of *gzhan stong* thought in the Kagyu order. He shows that this approach to *gzhan stong* is very different from that of the Jonang school, and is akin to that developed by Sakya Chokden, albeit intertwined with Mahāmudrā thought. This essay connects directly with that of Yarolsav Komarovskiy, who explains Sakya Chokden's understanding of the *dharmadhātu*. Matthew Kapstein translates two little-known Nyingma texts that demonstrate the influence that *gzhan stong* thought had in that tradition as well as the distinctive inflection it receives there, and discusses the reverberations of these ideas in contemporary Nyingma thought. Douglas Duckworth, Dorji Wangchuk, Marc-Henri Deroche, and Michael Sheehy address Mipham's understanding of buddha-nature and its relation to his synthesis of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra in the context of the *Ris med* movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As I have said, there is a great deal to applaud in this volume. But there are also some problems to note, and I hope that by noting them I can suggest practice to other editors of anthologies. First, the volume is inconsistent both in its translation practice and in its transliteration practice. Of course, we all know that translators are willing to dig in their heels to defend a pet translation choice, or a way of rendering Tibetan phonetically. But it is part of the job of the editors to ensure that the authors conform to a uniform style in both domains.

While the primary readers of this book, as I suggested above, will be Tibetologists or Buddhologists

who can read through the diverse transliteration schemes and translation choices one will encounter in this volume, those who are not expert are bound to be confused. When names are transliterated differently, one might wonder whether one is reading about the same person or two different people. Is the embodiment of reality the same as or different from the Dharma-body? To be sure, sometimes these inconsistencies are reconciled by the parenthetical insertion of the underlying Tibetan, but, alas, even this is inconsistent. Some authors overuse the parenthetical Tibetan, inserting this material when it is really otiose; others err in the opposite direction, leaving the reader wondering what a particular technical term in English is translating. Fortunately, the majority are in the middle. In any case, it is clear that no uniform policy was enforced on this matter as well, and it should have been. The book would then be more accessible to the nonspecialist.

My only other complaint is the way that notes are handled. The notes are all endnotes, and they are located at the end of each chapter. I think that in a text such as this, notes are most useful as footnotes, so that one does not always have to have a moving bookmark when reading. Barring this, at least put all of the notes together in one place where they can easily be found. This is particularly an issue in the case of this book, in which notes are used for a wide variety of purposes, and again, are used in different ways by different authors. Some notes are further explorations of an issue; some simply provide the Tibetan that has been translated in the main text. Some are references. So, one might fumble in the text trying to find a note that one hopes will explain a difficult point, only to find a reference; or, one might hope for a reference, and find instead a Tibetan phrase. If the notes were at the bottom of the page, these frustrations could be avoided.

I was particularly disturbed by Dorji Wangchuk's practice of using a footnote to document or to defend an interpretative claim, but which contains only the Tibetan text of a different treatise than that under discussion, with no translation or gloss. These notes are fine for those of us who read philosophical Tibetan, but they really shut out many readers of a book that is, after all, in English. These notes should have been translated. Once again, I take the failure to establish a reasonable and uniform policy regarding the use of notes and the deployment of Tibetan in the text to be an abdication of the responsibilities of editors. Editorial discipline would have made the fine book even better.

These last critical comments do not undermine my assessment of the scholarship represented in this book, or of its value to our field; they are only a plea that we work to make what we collect easier for our readers to handle. This is an extraordinary anthology, and should be on the bookshelf of anyone interested in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy.

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