

Two Models of the Two Truths: Ontological and Phenomenological Approaches

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Abstract Mipam (*'ju mi pham rgya mtsho*, 1846–1912), an architect of the Nyingma (*rnying ma*) tradition of Tibet in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, articulates two distinct models of the two truths that are respectively reflected in Madhyamaka and Yogācāra Buddhist traditions. The way he positions these two models sheds light on how levels of description are at play in his integration of these traditions. Mipam positions one kind of two-truth model as the product of an ontological analysis while another model can be seen as resulting from a phenomenological reduction. He accommodates *both* models into his systematic interpretation, and for him, each one has an important role to play in coming to understand the nature of the Buddhist truths of emptiness and Buddha-nature. Since each model reflects a different style of analysis, or a different perspective on truth, his presentation reveals how neither model alone has the last word on the nature of what is and how it is experienced. This paper analyzes the means by which he lays out these two models of the two truths, and explores the implications of their integration in his philosophical works. A primary concern for Mipam, and a factor that guides his attempt to integrate these two approaches to truth, is his aim to both induce authentic experience and true knowledge on the one hand, and represent reality and the experience of it on the other. These competing and complimentary objectives are a central focus around which both styles of critical reflection, and both models of the two truths, revolve.

Keywords Madhyamaka · Yogācāra · Mipam · Buddhism · Phenomenology

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Introduction

Mipam (*'ju mi pham rgya mtsho*, 1846–1912), an architect of the Nyingma (*rnying ma*) tradition of Tibet in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, articulates two distinct models of the two truths that are respectively reflected in Madhyamaka and Yogācāra Buddhist traditions. The way he positions these two models sheds light on how levels of description are at play in his integration of these traditions. Mipam positions one kind of two-truth model as the product of an ontological analysis while another model can be seen as resulting from a phenomenological reduction. He accommodates *both* models into his systematic interpretation, and for him, each one has an important role to play in coming to understand the nature of the Buddhist truths of emptiness and Buddha-nature. Since each model reflects a different style of analysis, or a different perspective on truth, his presentation reveals how neither model alone has the last word on the nature of what is and how it is experienced. This paper analyzes the means by which he lays out these two models of the two truths, and explores the implications of their integration in his philosophical works.

Two Models

Mipam shows how the two truths should be understood in two distinct ways. In one model, he represents the two truths as appearance and emptiness; in his other model, he depicts the two truths as two modes of experience.¹ In the first model, which I will call “the ontological model,” the ultimate truth of emptiness is not qualitatively different from the relative truth of appearance. He states:

The unreal appearances are called ‘relative’ and the emptiness that is the lack of intrinsic nature is called ‘ultimate.’ Without being regarded with a qualitative difference, both of these are equally applied [to all phenomena] from form to omniscience. If you know this, there is certainly nothing more important to know within the sphere of what can be known.²

¹ In his extended commentary on Śāntarakṣita’s *Madhyamakālamkāra*, Mipam states as follows: “There are two ways in which the two truths are stated within the [Buddha’s] Word and śāstras: (1) from the perspective of valid cognition analyzing the ultimate abiding reality, emptiness is called ‘ultimate’ and appearance is called ‘relative,’ and (2) from the perspective of conventional valid cognition analyzing the mode of appearance, the subjects and objects of the incontrovertible accordance between the modes of appearance and reality [i.e., authentic experience] are called ‘ultimate’ and the opposite [i.e., inauthentic experience] are called ‘relative.’” Mipam (1990, pp. 55–56): *bka’ dang bstan bcos nams na bden gnyis ’jog tshul gnyis su gnas te/ gnas lugs don dam la dpyod pa’i tshad ma’i dbang du byas de/ stong pa la don dam dang/ snang ba la kun rdzob ces bzhas pa dang/ snang tshul la dpyod pa kun tu tha snyad pa’i tshad ma’i dbang du byas te/ gnas snang mthun pa mi bslu ba’i yul dang yul can la don dam dang/ ldog phyogs la kun rdzob tu ’jog pa’i tshul gnyis*. See also Mipam (1993c, pp. 304, 549).

² Mipam (1990, pp. 57–58): *mi bden pa’i snang ba la kun rdzob ces gdags shing/ rang bzhin ma grub pa’i stong pa la don dam zhes btags pa/ de gnyis po la rtsis che chung med par gzugs nas nam mkhyen gyi bar du mgo snyoms su sbyor ba’ di shes na shes bya’i khong na de las shes rgyu gal che ba gcig kyang med par nges so*.

In fact, the two truths are actually inseparable here; they are not really different, but are only conceptually distinct.³ An important feature of this model is the fact that the relationship is not hierarchical. There is no appearance-reality distinction such that ultimate truth is understood as hidden behind the concealing veil of relative truth.

In this ontological model, appearing phenomena are necessarily the relative truth in contrast to the ultimate truth, which is exclusively emptiness.⁴ Being empty and appearing are just two modes of what can otherwise be expressed as an inseparable unity in reality, and fully realizing this unity is the culminating insight of this model. According to Mipam, the dichotomy of appearance and emptiness unravels in authentic experience, where they are experienced as a unity.

In the other model of the two truths, which I will call the “phenomenological model,” authentic experience is the ultimate truth. Here, Mipam represents the experiential unity of appearance and emptiness in a way that sustains an appearance-reality distinction. Here he represents the ultimate truth as authentic experience and the relative truth as inauthentic experience. In this model, authentic experience—or more literally, perception that accords with reality (*gnas snang mthun*)⁵—is ultimate, and perceptions that do not accord with reality are relative. In this model, Mipam states that “it is suitable to posit that all phenomena of *nirvāṇa*, which are attained through the power of appearance in accord with reality, are ultimate; and that all phenomena of *samsāra*, which arise through the power of appearance that does not accord with reality, are relative.”⁶ Thus, the two truths in the phenomenological model are such that the ultimate truth is reality experienced without duality or reification, while the relative truth is the world experienced within a distorted framework.

In contrast to the ontological model of the two truths as appearance and emptiness, the dichotomy of the two truths as authentic and inauthentic experience sustains a qualitative distinction between two truths (as disparate modes of experience). We can see that the ultimate truth here is something positive and the relative truth is something negative; they are two qualitatively different ways of experiencing reality. In contrast to the ontological model, the ultimate truth in this context is not simply emptiness (the lack of true existence in things), because here the experiential presence of reality, known as it is, is the ultimate. Thus, the two truths in this latter model are distinguished based on the way the world is present in experience (phenomenologically) rather than the way it is absent (ontologically). Here, ultimate truth is authentic experience (e.g., the unity of appearance and emptiness not bifurcated into a

³ Mipam (1997, p. 27): “From the perspective of insight’s analysis of what is authentic, both appearance and emptiness—together present, together absent—are asserted as essentially the same, and divisible into different contradistinctions.” (*yang dag dpyod pa’i shes rab ngor/ /snang dang stong pa ’di gnyis po/ /yod mnyam med mnyam ngo bo gcig/ /ldog pa tha dad dbye bar ’dod*).

⁴ See, for instance, Mipam (1993a, p. 6).

⁵ This Tibetan word for “perception” (*snang ba*) also means “appearance.” “Appearance” connotes an objective aspect and “perception” connotes a subjective aspect of “perceived appearance.” In attempt to convey both aspects of “perceived-appearance,” and translate the import of its meaning here, I use the word “experience.”

⁶ Mipam (1987b, p. 466): *gnas snang mthun pa’i stobs kyis thob pa’i myang ’das kyis chos thams cad don dam yin la/ mi mthun pa’i stobs kyis byung ba’i chos thams cad kun rdzob tu bzhas rung*.

dichotomous structure), whereas inauthentic experience (i.e., distorted, dualistic modes of thought and existence) is the relative truth. Moreover, the relative truth as inauthentic experience conveys the meaning of the relative (*saṃvṛti*) as that which is *concealing*, whereas in the ontological model, the relative truth of appearance reflects the meaning of *saṃvṛti* as *conventional* (interchangeable with *vyavahāra*), as opposed to the negative connotation of something that conceals the ultimate.

According to Mipam, these two models of the two truths need not conflict, but represent different contexts or *perspectives* for relating to the two truths:

In the great scriptures there are two ways in which the two truths are posited: (1) the term ‘ultimate’ designates reality as non-arising and the term ‘relative’ designates the conventional mode of appearance, and (2) in terms of conventional apprehension, the term ‘ultimate’ designates both the subject and object of authentic experience and the term ‘relative’ designates both the subject and object of inauthentic experience. In this way, whether in *sūtra* or *mantra*, the term ‘ultimate’ also applies to the subject. . . although the terms ‘ultimate’ and ‘relative’ are the same in these two systems, the way of presenting the meaning is different. Therefore, if one does not know how to explain having made the distinction between the viewpoints of each respective system, the hope of fathoming the great scriptures will be dashed—like a mind as narrow as the eye of a needle measuring space.⁷

Mipam consistently points out the importance of identifying context: particularly, whether the context is an analysis of two separate truths or represents the indivisible unity of authentic experience in which there is no distinction between two truths. Thereby, he integrates these two models into a dialectical unity.

Two Approaches

Mipam’s two models reflect two styles of analysis. The first model—in which emptiness is the ultimate truth and appearance is the relative truth—is a product of an analysis into the ontological status of appearances, whereby the nature or essence of an apparent phenomenon has been determined to be indeterminate or nonexistent. The second two-truth model is the product of another kind of inquiry, an inquiry into “the mode of appearance” (*snang tshul*), or in other words, the process of experience itself.

The means to arrive at truth in Mipam’s first model involves an analysis of a phenomenon’s ontological status in which no real essence of anything is found. What is negated by this analysis is *inherent existence* (*svabhāva*). That lack (or

⁷ Mipam (1993b, p. 304): *gzhung chen po mams su bden pa gnyis kyi ’jog tshul mi ’dra ba gnyis bshad pa’i dang po gnas tshul skye med la don dam dang/ snang tshul tha snyad la kun rdzob kyi ming gis bstan pa de yin la/ gnyis pa gnas snang mthun par gyur pa’i yul dang yul can gnyis ka la don dam dang/ mi mthun par gyur pa’i yul dang yul can gnyis ka la kun rdzob kyi ming gis bstan pa ni tha snyad nye bar bzung ba’i dbang du yin la/ lugs ’di’i dbang du byas na mdo sngags gang yin kyang yul can la’ang don dam gyi ming ’jug pa dang. . . lugs de gnyis kun rdzob dang don dam zhes ming mthun yang don gyi nmam gzhag byed tshul mi ’dra bas so so’i lugs kyi dgongs pa phye nas ’chad ma shes na gzhung chen po mams khab mig ltar dog pa’i blos nam mkha’ gzhul bas ’jal re zad par ’gyur ro.*

emptiness) is the ultimate truth, and the analytic “object” of that analysis (i.e., any phenomenon) is the relative truth. Thus, this model primarily reflects the domain of deconstructive analysis, that is, a reductive analysis that seeks to pin down the essence of things, the true nature of reality. When the nature of a phenomenon is analyzed in terms of its ultimate status, how it *really* is, nothing whatsoever is found. This is the ultimate truth. In contrast, the appearance of things, anything that may appear, is the relative truth.

In contrast to the ontological model, Mipam’s other model of the two truths is not based on this kind of object-*ifying* analysis, but on a phenomenological reduction. In his phenomenological model, the ultimate truth as authentic experience is not a byproduct of a subject’s false construction of a distinct “object” (imposing such a duality is an unwarranted presumption of a phenomenological inquiry). Rather, according to Mipam, for authentic experience to fully unfold, as it is, the field of inquiry cannot be thematized by dichotomous thought, and what is to be overcome is not simply the grasp of some separate *svabhāva*, but *duality* (i.e., the distorted structure of experience). Therefore, in contrast to the process of negating a falsely constructed *svabhāva*, deconstructing duality does not presume any object in the mind, since an *object* entails a (subject-object) duality. Since the intentional structure of an *analysis of objects* is hinged upon a dichotomy, to expunge this structure calls for another means, a phenomenological reduction that suspends the metaphysical presumptions of dualism (and the byproducts of dualism such as idealism and materialism, mentalism and physicalism).

In light of this kind of phenomenological inquiry, we can see how in the ontological model of the two truths what is negated is an object, like an inherently existing table (a table that is held to be truly real), and how the negation takes place with reference to that object. The process to arrive at ultimate truth is for a subject to negate an object. That is, reason takes an object of (deconstructive) analysis, and while doing so, presumes a subject-object structure as the starting point through which the analysis necessarily takes place.

In the case of the phenomenological two-truth model, however, unlike in the ontological model, there is technically no “object” of negation in the disclosure of ultimate truth. This is because such an object of analysis presumes a subject-object structure and a phenomenal “object” abstracted from the lived-world of experience. Thus, rather than engaging an ontological analysis to come to an understanding that phenomena are empty, this latter model is rooted in phenomenology;⁸ it results from a procedure that seeks to suspend distorted presumptions to access the fundamental structure of experience, which in Mipam’s case is the unity of appearance and emptiness.

⁸ I am using the term “phenomenology” in a way that reflects important elements of Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of phenomenology in the opening page of his preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*: “Phenomenology. . . does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their ‘facticity’. It is a transcendental philosophy which places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude, the better to understand them; but it is also a philosophy for which the world is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins—as ‘an inalienable presence’; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status.” Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. vii).

Whereas one arrives at the ultimate truth in the appearance/emptiness model of two truths when a falsely imputed *svabhāva* is negated through deconstructive analysis, the false presumption of duality cannot be negated by this kind of reason alone, but involves a restructuring, or *destructuring*, of the way of relating to the lived-world, in which duality no longer structures experience and there is no longer a provisional division between two separate truths. This style of inquiry calls for a participatory process that is distinctively meditative, or in other words, it calls for a uniquely phenomenological inquiry.

While in Mipam's presentation, the absence of both *svabhāva* and duality can be understood to various degrees in study, contemplation, and meditation, we can see how the lack of *svabhāva* is derived from *analytic meditation* (*dpyad sgom*), whereas the lack of duality is rooted in a distinctive form of *resting meditation* (*'jog sgom*). Analytic meditation involves object-oriented reasoning and analysis. In contrast, resting meditation is a contemplative practice that carries out focused attention on an object or sustained awareness without an object. Significantly, for Buddhists like Mipam, meditating on an object (like an image, a sound, or the sensation of one's breath) may lead to peaceful states and stability of attention (in *śamatha*), yet it is only within the unthematized space of objectless awareness where the nature of perception can be completely seen (in *vipaśyanā*). Such object-less awareness is not intentional in an ordinary sense and is devoid of representational thought.

Unlike the contentless ultimate of the lack of *svabhāva* (in the sense of an empty- or null-set), the phenomenological ultimate is content-less only in the sense that there is no *representational* content. Accessing this content calls for a participatory orientation with and in the life-world, a radical shift from ordinary modes of relating to the world. Thus, rather than simply an abstract truth, the phenomenological ultimate represents truth that must be embodied—or rather, *enminded*. For this reason, coming to know it entails more than simply unmasking the agents of inherent existence, but calls for something akin to closing the curtains on the “Cartesian theatre.”⁹

Conclusion

We have seen in these two models of truth how the way emptiness (of *svabhāva*) is understood analytically contrasts with the way emptiness (of duality) must be experienced phenomenologically. These two modes of analysis, ontological and phenomenological, undoubtedly reflect two main schools of Mahāyāna thought, Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. According to Mipam, the culminating insight of Madhyamaka is perfectly compatible with the Yogācāra insight of nonduality. Mipam synthesizes Yogācāra and Madhyamaka in a way that each supplements the other.

In Yogācāra, negating *svabhāva* can be seen as going too far, particularly if the facticity of authentic experience is negated by a reductive, object-ifying analysis. However, for a Madhyamaka approach, negating duality has not necessarily gone

⁹ I borrow this apt metaphor from Daniel Dennett. See, for instance, Dennett (1991, p. 107).

far enough. In Madhyamaka, one must negate the realism of *svabhāva* globally, so even an appeal to a nondual experience is subject to its uncompromising critique. The dialectic interplay between these two models steers the middle way for Mipam. Thus, neither model of the two truths is complete on its own; or rather, each model entails the other.

The ontological model by itself, with solely an absence as the ultimate truth that ignores the phenomenological experience of unity, is simply an abstraction. Emptiness, understood as solely an absence, reflects a description divorced from the event of understanding; on its own it represents a sterile view of metaphysical absence, isolated from the dynamic reality of a lived-world. In other words, it is a view of nihilism. Yet the phenomenological model alone is not sufficient either. Its appeal to the ultimate truth of an experiential unity that dispenses with analysis and ontological critique tends toward reification. Without being curtailed by the negative dialectic of emptiness, the ultimate truth of authentic experience easily congeals into a naïve, mystical realism, otherwise known as “the extreme of eternalism.” It is in and through both models of the two truths through which Mipam forges his “middle way” view.

We can see an extreme of eternalism at play when the two models of truth get conflated and the boundaries of phenomenology stray into the realm of ontological claims. For instance, in the case of the Yogācāra idealism represented in the philosophical system known in Tibet as “Mind-Only”: To claim that the mind alone is (ontologically) real in the wake of a phenomenological discovery that the mind is constitutive of any experience of phenomena is to confuse levels of discourse; it is akin to making a category mistake. Yet the central insight of “Mind-Only,” or rather, Yogācāra—that mind is integral to all experience—*when not ontologized* is essential to a proper understanding of Madhyamaka in Mipam’s view.¹⁰

¹⁰ Mipam states as follows in his commentary on the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*: “When the appearance of apprehended [objects] is established to not have an essence that is separate from the apprehending [subject], the appearance of the apprehending subject is also established as nonexistent. If [one wonders] why, it is because the apprehending [subject] is established in dependence upon the apprehended [object]; it is never established on its own. In this way, if proponents of Mind-Only have to realize the lack of all duality, the awareness free from subject and object, naturally luminous and clear, inexpressible and non-distinct from the nature of the thoroughly established nature (*yongs grub, pariṣpanna*) free from the twofold self, then it is needless to mention that the proponents of Madhyamaka realize this! . . . Merely the slight philosophical assertion that posits the essence of ineffable cognition as truly established remains to be negated; authentic proponents of Madhyamaka assert the unity of the primordially pure luminous clarity of one’s mind and the emptiness of that nondual cognition. Therefore, other than the distinction of whether this slight fixation is eliminated or not, Madhyamaka and Mind-Only are mostly the same in terms of the practices of meditative equipoise and postmeditation.” Mipam (1987C, pp. 626.2–627.2): *de ltar gzung bar snang ba de ni rang gi ngo bos 'dzin pa las gzhan du med par grub na' 'dzin par snang ba de yang med par grub bo/ /de ci'i phyir na 'dzin pa ni gzung ba la ltos te grub kyi yan gar du nam yang mi grub po/ de ltar na gzung ba dang 'dzin pa gnyis kyi rnam pa thams cad dang bral te yul dang yul can med pa'i rig pa rang bzhin gnyis 'od gsal ba brjod du med pa tsam ni bdag gnyis kyi stong pa'i yongs grub de bzhin nyid dang tha mi dad pa de ni sems tsam pas kyang rtogs dgos na dbu ma pas lta ci smos so. . . brjod med kyi shes pa de yi ngo bo la bden grub du 'jog tshul gyi grub mtha' phra mo tsam zhig lhang mar lus pa de nyid rigs pas sun phyungs te gzung 'dzin med pa'i shes pa nyid kyang bden pa med pa'i stong pa dang zung du zhugs pa'i rang sems gdod nas dag pa'i 'od gsal nyid du 'dod na dbu ma yang dag pa yin te/ des na theg chen dbu sems 'di gnyis zhen pa'i gnad phra mo zhig chod ma chod kyi khyad par las/ myam rjes kyi nyams len phyogs 'dra ba lta bur 'ong bas. See also Duckworth (2008, pp. 46–48).*

Monological interpretations of the two truths, fed by the polemic rhetoric between Yogācāra and Madhyamaka, only lend credibility to one model or the other.¹¹ In the ontological model, if it is the case that “the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth,” as Mark Siderits has said,¹² then we can see that there is only one truth, the relative (or conventional) truth. In the phenomenological model, too, there is only one truth—yet in this case, the one truth is not the relative, but the ultimate truth—because inauthentic modes of being are unreal in contrast to the reality of authentic experience. In contrast to these monological interpretations of the two truths, in Mipam’s dialectical interpretation neither one of the two-truth models is held above the other.

Mipam does not hold the ontological model of the two truths, with emptiness as the ultimate truth, in a privileged place. Nor does he privilege the phenomenological model of authentic/inauthentic experience. Each model is simply one account of knowledge. Ontology is not primary because emptiness alone, as a lack of true existence, is an abstraction from the reality of unity, empty appearance. This unity must be experienced phenomenologically, which is the meaning of authentic experience.

Given this to be the case, we may be led to believe that for Mipam, phenomenology trumps ontology. Yet we can see that phenomenology is not the primary foundation of knowledge for him, either, as it appears to be the case for the proponents of Yogācāra idealism represented in the philosophical system called “Mind-Only.” Rather, for Mipam, the phenomenological model is no more legitimate than the ontological one, but represents simply another form of inquiry and another account of truth. Phenomenology is not primary for him because he subjects the insights of phenomenology to ontological critiques.¹³ The ultimate of authentic experience in the phenomenological model is, from the aspect of appearance, the relative truth in the ontological model; when analyzed in terms of its true essence, authentic experience, like everything else, lacks true existence and so is empty. On the other hand, emptiness—simply the lack of true existence that is the ultimate of the ontological model—is merely the relative truth in the phenomenological model, because, as a product of abstract, distorted thought, it is unreal, inauthentic experience. In this way, Mipam synthesizes these two models of truth as a dialectical unity. He forges this “middle way” of (nonconceptual) unity as his Nyingma view.¹⁴

¹¹ For instance, we can see how the ontological model alone is prominent in the Geluk (*dge lugs*) school following after Tsongkhapa (*tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*, 1357–1419) and only the phenomenological model is dominant in the Jonang (*jo nang*) school stemming from Dölpopa (*dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan*, 1292–1361).

¹² Siderits (2003, p. 133).

¹³ For instance, Mipam states in his commentary on the *Madhyamakālaṅkāra*, “The latter ultimate [authentic experience] also is empty of essence.” Mipam (1990, p. 56): *phyi ma’i don dam yin kyang ngo bo stong pa yin la*.

¹⁴ For more on Mipam’s synthesis of (Prāsaṅgika-)Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, see Duckworth, “Mipam’s Middle Way Through Prāsaṅgika and Yogācāra” (2010a). For the way that Mipam forges his distinctively Nyingma view of emptiness (as nonconceptual unity) in contrast to the way that emptiness is represented in the Jonang and Geluk traditions, see Duckworth, “De/Limiting Emptiness and the Boundaries of the Ineffable” (2010b).

We have seen how Mipam lays out two models of the two truths based on different ways to arrive at the ultimate truth in two prominent schools of Mahāyāna thought. We can appreciate the different functions played by these discourses on truth when we consider how they respectively function to *represent* the ultimate or *evoke* it. The discourse of ultimate truth in the phenomenological model systematically re-presents the experience of unity in meditative equipoise, that is, the ultimate truth of unity, *after* it has been experienced. In contrast, the discourse of emptiness, the ultimate truth in the ontological model, has another function: to *evoke* the experiential insight by pulling the rug out on any attempt to pin down reality and determine its essence. Thus, rather than simply distinguishing between levels of description, we also need to take into account the difference between the descriptive and performative functions of language. A primary concern for Mipam, and a factor that guides his attempt to integrate these two approaches to truth, is his aim to both induce authentic experience and true knowledge on the one hand, and represent reality and the experience of it on the other. These competing and complimentary objectives are a central focus around which both styles of critical reflection, and both models of the two truths, revolve.

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