

## Review

*MIPHAM'S BEACON OF CERTAINTY: Illuminating the View of Dzogchen, the Great Perfection*

John Whitney Pettit

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A review has been long overdue for Pettit's impressive and pioneering analysis and translation of *Nges shes rin po che'i sgron me* by the Tibetan polymath, 'Ju Mi pham rGya mtsho (1846-1912). Since its appearance, Pettit's book seems to have attracted a wide range of readership among Buddhist and Tibetological circles both in the West and Asia. I had written this review soon after the book came out but because of other pressing obligations, it has not made it to the publishers. The rubric of Pettit's book can be summed in the following verses:

As the sage reflected thus,  
A mendicant who happened along  
Asked these seven questions. (p.194) ...  
According to which of the two negations do you explain the view?  
Do *arhats* realize both types of selflessness?  
Does meditation involve modal apprehension?  
Does one meditate analytically or transically?  
Which of the two realities is most important?  
What is the common object of disparate perceptions?  
Does Madhyamaka have a position or not? (p. 195)

The answers to these questions form the subject matter of Mipham's *Nges shes rin po che'i sgron me*, or the *Precious Beacon of Certainty*, as John Pettit translates it. The entire text is set as a dialogue between a judicious sage and an inquisitive mendicant, on these seven crucial topics of Tibetan Madhyamaka scholarship. Whether someone actually posed these queries to Mipham or this rather unusual setting for a Tibetan philosophical work is a creation of Mipham's imagination is not certain. We are told by Mipham, through a colophon written when he was fifty-seven, that he wrote the entire work in one session as it fortuitously came to his mind when he was very young and at an early stage of his educational career (*nges shes rin po che'i sgron me 'di rang lo shin tu gzhon zhing slob gnyer gsar bu ba'i dus zhig na 'phral du yid la shar rtsom stan gcig par bris pa yin*). His followers in Tibet claim that this was written when he was seven and thus consider it a literary feat of a child prodigy.

Since his days, Mipham's *Beacon* has attracted much scholarly interest and become a subject of rigorous study; it was adopted as a text book in many monastic colleges. So far,

five commentaries have been written on it: by Kun bzang dPal ldan, mKhan po Nus ldan, Khro shul 'Jam rdor, Khang dmar Rin chen, and most recently by sLob dpon Theg mchog. *Mipham's Beacon of Certainty* is a revised version of Pettit's doctoral dissertation, *Theory, Practice and Ultimate Reality in the Thought of Mipham Rinpoche*, which he wrote for Columbia University. Pettit's book is a groundbreaking effort in that it makes this masterpiece of Mipham available for the first time to a wider audience in a non-Tibetan language. He provides the entire text and the commentary by Khro shul 'Jam rdor in a very fluent translation with a thorough analysis of the text which places it in its historical and philosophical context.

In the Introduction, Pettit discusses some general things about Mipham and the *Beacon*, especially touching upon the significance, purpose, editions, etc. of the *Beacon*, and his own sources and methodological considerations. A point he underlines in the course of his introduction is the *Beacon* as a treatise primarily concerned with Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*) and its inclusivistic and ecumenical approaches. In the chapter entitled "The Life and Works of Mipham", he presents a brief account of Mipham's life and a translation of the *Essential Hagiography* by Kun bzang dPal ldan, a student of Mipham. Notwithstanding the chapter title, hardly any serious discussion of Mipham's monumental oeuvre is undertaken.

Chapter 3 undertakes a historical and doxographical survey of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. The synopsis, albeit a brief and sketchy description of topics which could easily fill volumes, provides a substantial contextual information and a clear setting for the delineation of Mipham's Madhyamaka theories in general and the topics of the *Beacon* in particular. The next chapter explores the religious and intellectual history of Nyingma (*rnying ma*) tradition, the tradition to which Mipham belonged, spanning from its rise at the height of Yarlung Empire to the nineteenth century *ris med* ecumenical movement, of which Mipham was a leading figure. Pettit displays extensive knowledge of the Tibetan Buddhism and great familiarity with the Dzogchen teachings of the Nyingma school.

Pettit's exposition of the ontological, epistemological and gnoseological aspects of Mipham's philosophy in Chapter 5 is articulate and penetrating, and the juxtaposition of Mipham's thought with those of his precursors and opponents (*pūrvapakṣa*, *phyogs snga*) is very effective in helping readers understand Mipham through comparison and contrast. The two main lines of thought crucial for such contradistinction are the Gelukpa (*dge lugs pa*) and Zhantongpa (*gzhan stong pa*) schools. Mipham, with his reconciliatory and inclusivistic attitude, attributes some propaedeutic value to their theories of ultimate but ultimately rejects both as untenable. Pettit elucidates Mipham's position, approach and dissent vis-à-vis these

two schools and successfully unpacks many distinctive features of Mipham's thought. However, it may be mentioned that had Pettit undertaken a more thorough study of Mipham's various works on Madhyamaka, and given his reading on Mipham a wider coverage, some doctrinal ambiguities and complexities he faced could have been clarified.

For instance, Pettit understands Mipham to take 'the ultimate *cum* absolute negation to be a special emphasis of the Svātantrika system while the Gelukpas consider it to be a distinguishing feature of Prāsaṅgika' (p. 109). To Mipham, both the *paryāyaparamārtha* and *aparyāyaparamārtha*, which Pettit respectively renders as conceptual and non-conceptual ultimate, are by dialectical definition absolute negations. The Svātantrika Mādhyamikas emphasized the former, as did the Gelukpas from Mipham's viewpoint, but the ultimate Emptiness is the latter, which Prāsaṅgikas excelled at formulating. Thus, Mipham's qualms about Gelukpa understanding is not about their understanding of Emptiness as absolute negation but rather about not being negative enough to overcome all subtle forms of reification (*prapañca, spros pa*). Theirs is a provisional Emptiness which they erroneously maintain as the final. Similarly, Pettit presents a strong case for Mipham's inclination toward the Rang stong pa understanding of Tathāgatagarbha theory but considers Mipham's position as potentially ambiguous (p. 112). Mipham defends the Zhantong position not only in his *gZhan stong khas len seng ge'i nga ro* as Pettit asserts (p. 114) but also in his *Dam chos dogs sel* in which he also remarks that he is not obliged to defend the Zhantong position. However, his repeated and systematic criticism of it in many of his Madhyamaka writings including the *Beacon*, as Pettit notes, outweighs his rather meagre defense of Zhantong. Beside, in his *dBu ma'i gsung sgros (Mi pham gsung 'bum, vol. 22, p. 450)* he categorically declares his tradition to be Rangtong (*rang stong*) as elucidated in his rejoinder to dPa' ris Rab gsal (*rang lugs rab lan du gsal te rang stong smra ba'i lugs so*).

In Chapter 6, Pettit provides a comprehensive but nonetheless an in depth analysis of the topics covered by the *Beacon*. He does this by juxtaposing Mipham's position with that of Tsongkhapa, one of the major targets of the polemical strands in the *Beacon*, and Go rams pa, a harsh critic of Tsongkhapa who may have influenced Mipham's ideas. Pettit discusses some of the most central and hotly debated issues of Madhyamaka in Tibet comparing the differing positions. Such issues include (1) the identification of the negandum (*dgag bya*) of Madhyamaka analysis, a hermeneutic specification which Tsongkhapa and his Gelugpa school underscored, (2) the application of the tetralemma methodology, (3) the definition of the ultimate as a reality which is neither existent nor non-existent (*yod min med min*), free

from fabrications (*niśprapañca, spros bral*) and a Coalescence of Emptiness and appearance (*snang stong zung 'jug*), (4) the viability of modal apprehension in the cognition of the ultimate and (5) the role of conceptuality and analytical thinking in Mādhyamika soteriology. In addition to the *Beacon*, Pettit uses the arguments in Mipham's annotations to *Madhyamakāvātāra* and Yon tan rGya mtsho's commentary on 'Jigs med Gling pa's *Yon tan rin po che'i mdzod* to clarify Mipham's stance on the above issues. However, a reference to Mipham's dichotomy of positive determination (*yongs gcod*) and negative determination (*rnam gcad*) could have further illuminated his understanding of modal apprehension and perception of the ultimate, as could have a little more detail on the dual concepts of the two truth theory – the two truths of appearance vs. Emptiness (*snang stong bden gnyis*) and the two truths of the ontic vs. the appearing (*gnas snang bden gnyis*) – advocated by Mipham helped reduce the intricacies in explaining what is the ultimate – emptiness of absolute negation, pure appearance, coalescence – in Mipham's thought.

Chapter 6 deals with certainty (*niścaya, nges shes*), which is the central theme of the *Beacon* as the title suggests. Inasmuch as it has a philosophical content, it is also, according to Mipham, the philosophical view (*dr̥ṣṭi, lta ba*), which belongs to the triad of view, practice (*bhāvanā, sgom pa*) and conduct (*caryā, spyod pa*). Mipham defines 'view' in his *Exegesis on Guhyagarbha: Essence of Clear Light* as absolute certainty about an object, having eliminated all imputations about it through discriminative knowledge (*Mi pham gsung 'bum*, vol. 19/66: *gzhal bya yul gang la shes rab kyis sgro 'dogs bcad nas mtha' gcig tu nges par 'dzin pa'i blo*). Similarly Mipham observes in the *Beacon* that 'view' is the certainty about the ontic mode of being as it is (Question 5/43: *ji ltar ji ltar gnas lugs don // mthong ba'i nges shes lta bar brjod//*). Mipham thus takes view in this case to be a subjective faculty, the way it was originally understood in the Abhidharma literatures. However, Mipham uses in other contexts, as do other Buddhist scholars, the same term for the object of certainty, the act of ascertainment and the theory and system developed from such ascertainment.

He also classifies views into those discerning the phenomenal [world] (*chos can lta ba'i lta ba*), the reality (*chos nyid lta ba'i lta ba*) and self-awareness (*rang rig lta ba'i lta ba*). Pettit's discussion of *darśana* and his three layer understanding of it as expressible 'theory', epistemic 'looking' and gnosemic 'seeing' clearly reflect Mipham's distinction of certainty *qua* view (p. 105). However, he does not exploit these references and categories to elucidate Mipham's concept of certainty *qua* view and its epistemological and soteriological roles and thereby clarify complex issues surrounding the topics, such as the difference between *sūtra*

and *mantra* viewpoints and whether the view is absolute negation or coalescent gnosis (*zung 'jug ye shes*).

Pettit does however give as words of conclusion a stimulating exposition of Tsongkhapa's ascertainment (*nges pa*) and Mipham's certainty (*nges shes*) *apropos* the ultimate truth. Though etymologically and functionally similar, Pettit goes on to demonstrate a gnoseological difference between the two, which is to a large extent influenced by the philosophical orientations of their respective proponents: Tsongkhapa and his Geluk school to rationality and *sūtra* Buddhism and Mipham and the Nyingma school to Dzogchen and tantric Buddhism. He explains that while Tsongkhapa's ascertainment, deeply embedded in philosophical analysis, involves modal apprehension and conceptual determination of its object, i.e. absolute negation of inherent existence, and a subject-object dichotomy, Mipham's certainty is less determinate in its philosophical orientation letting go all apprehensions and dichotomizing tendencies, and merging with the ultimate, that is described as Great Coalescence free all fabrications (*zung 'jug spros bral chen mo*). Through making this distinction, Pettit not only captures at one stroke the doctrinal, ontological, epistemological and gnoseological dimensions of the topics he discusses in his book, but he also introduces an effective new way of looking at the variations of the 'view' among divergent schools.

Pettit's emphasis on the association of the *Beacon* with Dzogchen is slightly superfluous and the subtitle of the book an exaggeration. No Tibetan author or work, to my knowledge, describes the *Beacon* as a Dzogchen treatise *per se*. As far as its content and pedagogical approach goes, the *Beacon* is a Madhyamaka work and no more akin to Dzogchen than *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* and *Ratnagotravibhāga*. Of the binary components of Dzogchen thought – the Primordial Purity (*ka dag*) and Spontaneity (*lhun grub*) or Breakthrough (*khreg chod*) and Transilience (*thod rgal*) in terms of practice – the Primordial Purity is dealt frequently in the context of Emptiness but in a minimal Dzogchen style of presentation. The Spontaneity aspect of Dzogchen is hardly discussed and the term occurs only in passing (Question 4/45-7).

Moreover, the *Beacon* is not given the esoteric status of a Dzogchen teaching even in Mipham's own school. Unlike proper Dzogchen teachings and practices, no empowerments, rituals or preliminary rituals are required to study the *Beacon*. Hence, its connexion with Dzogchen is overstated; at the most the *Beacon* could be described as a Madhyamaka philosophical treatise with a comparative approach which repeatedly touches upon Dzogchen in order to link the two. Pettit clearly mentions this comparative approach in the *Beacon*,

especially 'its hermeneutical reconciliation of all systems of *sūtra* and *tantra*, culminating in the Great Perfection, in accordance with the ecumenical (*ris med*) approach' (p. 100).

Having said all that, Pettit's emphatic orientation of the *Beacon* with Dzogchen, from a traditionalist point of view, can still be applauded as a different, and perhaps a more profound, reading of the *Beacon* from what is generally known. It can be considered a new approach and it accords with the traditional viewpoint of hermeneutics that there are various degrees of meaning to be imbibed from pithy and profound discourses such as the *Beacon* (p. 128). Like many other Nyingma writings, the *Beacon* defies any doxographical taxonomy.

The last three chapters are translations of the *Beacon*, its commentary, '*Od zer dri med*, by Khro shul 'Jam rdor and Mipham's *gZhan stong khas len seng ge'i nga ro*. Adopting the 'interpretive' of the two approaches he describes (p. 187), Pettit gives a lucid but rather free translation by choosing to read between lines (p. 187). This helps make his translation fluid and comprehensible, but frequently at the cost of accuracy and precision. The translations are followed by close to a thousand notes, index and an impressive bibliography. Supplementary diagrams and glossary are added bonuses.

*Mipham's Beacon of Certainty* is undoubtedly a remarkable scholarly achievement produced with profound understanding of the subject and academic rigour. It is a classic for the study of Mipham and his thought in a non-Tibetan language and an invaluable contribution to scholarship on the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. In this regard, Pettit stands as the first western author to explore Mipham's polymathic literary output and unravel the central issues in his Madhyamaka thought. With his intellectual verve and passionate engagement in the subject, Pettit has taken the philosophical discussion and the comparative study of the *Beacon* beyond any height and depth it has ever seen through its exponents and commentators.