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Ocean of Nectar: Wisdom and Compassion in Mahāyāna Buddhism, by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso. London: Tharpa Publications, 1995. Pp. viii + 592. £16.95/\$29.95 (paper).

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Geshe Kelsang Gyatso is best known among Western students of Buddhism for his numerous works outlining various key aspects of dGe lugs pa scholastic tradition. He is perhaps best known by Tibetans for his staunch advocacy of the protector rDo rje shugs ldan, believed by Tibetan tradition to be the vengeful spirit of Pan chen bSod nams grags pa, one of the principal textbook authors of 'Bras spungs Monastery. This advocacy has led to conflicts with the Tibetan religious hierarchy, including the Dalai Lama, who has urged Buddhists to abjure the propitiation of rDo rje shugs ldan because this protector has become a symbol of sectarianism.

In *Ocean of Nectar*, Kelsang Gyatso provides a commentary on Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*, one of the seminal works of the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism. What is presented here, however, is a distinctly dGe lugs pa understanding of Candrakīrti, one that is at odds not only with most contemporary Western scholarship, but also with much of Tibetan scholasticism. The editors seem to be aware of this, and in the preface make the rather remarkable claim that this work is "the first authoritative commentary in the West to Candrakīrti's *Guide to the Middle Way*."

That this attitude is based on faith in their lama rather than in any critical study of Western-language materials on the subject is indicated by the statement, "From the depths of our hearts we thank Venerable Geshe Kelsang Gyatso for his inexhaustible determination, compassion, and wisdom in writing such a clear and complete commentary and in preparing a completely new and authoritative translation of Chandrakirti's root text."

This opening statement sets the tone for the work, which abounds with superlative adjectives to describe Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, Madhyamaka, and the Buddhist tradition in general. It follows Candrakīrti's presentation linearly, presenting each verse of the root text and adding commentary by the author. This commentary is typical of the understanding of Candrakīrti by dGe lugs pas in general and by traditional scholars of 'Bras spungs in particular, but despite the claims of the editors and the author, little new is to be found here. Similar material has already been presented in other works, most notably *The Emptiness of Emptiness*, by C.W. Huntington and Geshe Namgyal Wangchen (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1989)—which also contains an oral commentary by a *dge bshes* of 'Bras spungs—and *Compassion in Tibetan Buddhism*, by Jeffrey Hopkins (London: Rider & Co., 1980), which presents the oral comments of Kensur Lekden (Mkhan zur Legs ldan, former abbot of the Lower Tantric College) on Tsong kha pa's commentary on the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, entitled *dBu ma la 'jug pa'i rgya cher bshad pa dgongs pa rab gsal*.

In spite of the limitations of *Ocean of Nectar*, it does provide a wealth of information concerning the dGe lugs pa interpretation of Candrakīrti and Nāgārjuna. Following the structure of the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, Kelsang Gyatso's

commentary is structured according to the system of the ten "levels" (*sa, bhūmi*), equating progressive levels of spiritual attainment with deeper levels of understanding of emptiness (*stong pa nyid, śūnyatā*). He begins with an analysis of the meaning of the title of Candrakīrti's work, and then proceeds to a discussion of the role of compassion in the path. Of central importance to students of Madhyamaka are his discussions of the two truths (*bden pa, satya*) and the object of negation. According to the dGe lugs pa system, the two truths—conventional truths and ultimate truths—are related in the sense of being one entity but different isolates (*ldog pa*). They are undifferentiable in reality, but may be separated by thought, as the whiteness of a conch may be differentiated by thought from the conch itself, although ontologically they are one entity.

The object of negation for Madhyamaka, according to the dGe lugs pa system, is inherent existence, the false notion of independence that is superimposed onto phenomena by "ordinary beings"—those who have not directly perceived emptiness. This superimposition gives rise to the false view of a permanent, partless, autonomous self, which is the root cause of continued transmigration within cyclic existence.

This reading of Madhyamaka is at odds with much of current Western scholarship, but it represents a commentarial tradition with a high degree of internal consistency that deserves to be evaluated on its own merits, rather than being uncritically rejected, as it all too often is by Buddhologists.

Unfortunately, much of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso's presentation will put off contemporary scholars, particularly his uncritical acceptance of miracles attributed to Buddhist masters and his presentations of traditional dGe lugs pa genealogies, which hold that Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti lived for hundreds of years. Those who are able to look beyond those details will find a wealth of information concerning dGe lugs pa commentarial traditions, although contemporary readers would be well advised to familiarize themselves with the above-mentioned works and with David Seyfort Ruegg's *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981) for an overview of the Madhyamaka tradition before plunging into this sectarian and uncritical work.

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