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*Is Reality Beyond Good And Evil?*  
*Tibetan Buddhist Inquiry Into The Ultimate Virtue*

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# A Review of *Is Reality Beyond Good and Evil?* *Tibetan Buddhist Inquiry into the Ultimate Virtue*

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*Is Reality Beyond Good and Evil? Tibetan Inquiry into the Ultimate Virtue.* By Yaroslav Komarovski. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2024, ISBN 9780813952154 (paperback), \$24.50.

The title of Yaroslav Komarovski's latest work raises a fundamental and provocative question for the field of Buddhist studies. It is a question that has in fact, been debated throughout the history of the Mahāyāna, from India to East Asia, to Tibet, and now, in both the academic and religious circles of contemporary Western Buddhism. Moreover, this is a question that is particularly relevant for those concerned with interpreting the possible meaning(s) of Buddhist ethics. But it is the subtitle of this text that provides the reader with the main intentions of the author. Komarovski's purpose is not to answer his question, but rather to evaluate how the question was debated within the narrow historical-cultural context of medieval Sakya Tibetan Buddhism and provide a polemical record of argument and counterargument. His purpose is to present an account of

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these arguments in all their subtlety and complexity, allowing the textual record to reveal its lack of unanimity.

In a short introduction, Komarovski lays out the project of his book as an analysis of Sakya Buddhist debates over two consequential issues regarding ultimate reality. The first of these issues is whether or not our true nature can be understood as virtuous, and the second is on the ultimate nature of mind. The subsequent chapters are then organized according to key contributors to these debates, and the book ends with the author's concluding remarks on the findings of his study. While a number of contrasting arguments are given equal measure and discussed in great detail throughout the chapters, without any clear victor identified in the end, Komarovski acknowledges in his introduction that his focus is primarily on the positions of the Fifteenth century Sakya thinker, Shakya Chokden. Indeed, the work of Shakya Chokden is the author's main area of expertise, having published previous works on the former's thought, including, *Visions of Unity: The Golden Paṇḍita Shakya Chokden's New Interpretation of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka* (2011), and *Radiant Emptiness: Three Seminal Works by the Golden Paṇḍita Shakya Chokden* (2020).

Komarovski begins Chapter one, "Tibetan Virtuosi Positions Compared: Four Approaches to the Ultimate Virtue," by outlining the main arguments of the four interlocutors included in his study. These begin with Dorjé Sherap, a Thirteenth century commentator on Kagyü master Jikten Gönpö's teaching of the *Single Intent*. Dorje Sherap's work functions for Komarovski as an opposing view to Sakya Pandita's *Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows* (ca. 1232), the second of these thinkers. Third is the work of Shakya Chokden, who, in 1475 wrote *Good Questions about the "Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows,"* posing over one hundred probing questions for Sakya adherents to consider regarding Sakya Pandita's writings. Next is the work of Gorampa, Shakya Chokden's contemporary, who contributed a critical response to the latter's *Good Questions* in 1476 with the *Elimination of Mistakes about the Three Types of Vows: Answers to the Polemics and Questions Regarding the "Three Types of Vows"*

*Treatise*. Finally, in 1481, Shakya Chokden produced another text, *Golden Lancet*, responding to the very same questions he had raised in his previous work. In this first chapter, Komarovski provides brief overviews of each contributor in the debate in order to familiarize the reader with their underlying positions and ends the chapter with a useful table showing how each of the four compare regarding their respective positions on the nature of the ultimate. In later chapters he goes into much greater detail, providing example verses, and evaluating how each of these major works compare and contrast as to the central concerns of virtue and the nature of mind. The great majority of these comparisons are dedicated to the debates between Shakya Chokden and Gorampa on the *Thorough Differentiation* and the former's *Good Questions*.

Chapter two, "Virtual Ambivalence," introduces important Indian philosophical texts that are addressed in the Tibetan commentaries included in Komarovski's study. He places the Indian materials into three topical categories: "classificatory materials," in works like the *abhidharmas* of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu; "deconstructive texts," such as Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, and finally, "positively articulating innate awakening" sources, as in Maitreya's *Sublime Continuum of Mahayānā*. While Tibetan thinkers recognized these texts as authoritative, Komarovski points out two major differences in their approach to analyzing ultimate reality and virtue. The Indian sources tended to take a very broad approach while cataloguing the many forms of virtue (Skt. *kuśala*) identified in the Indian Buddhist canon. In contrast, Tibetan Buddhists took a narrower approach, primarily based on the assertion that a virtue must function as a positive good, and so the question of whether ultimate reality could produce a positive result gave birth to a high volume of debate. In addition, when assembling this large corpus of Indian texts, the various lineages of Tibetan Buddhism established divergent approaches to interpretation, while emphasizing certain texts over others, leading to a multiplicity of views on the matter and giving rise to a variety of polemical traditions. It is also important to note that while the title of Komarovski's book could lead the reader to assume he would be assessing the ethical

implications of holding differing views on the relationship between virtue and ultimate reality, the interlocutors in his study do not exhibit much interest in ethics, and so the book is focused instead on questions of epistemology and ontology.

In Chapter three, Komarovsky begins a detailed analysis of the chosen texts for his study. First is Dorjé Sherap's *Illuminating Lamp of Primordial Mind: Great Commentary on the Single Intent*. As an exposition of Jikten Gönpo's *Single intent*, Dorjé Sherap presents an assessment of ultimate reality that contrasts with Sakya Pandita. The main point of the chapter is Dorjé Sherap's claim that ultimate reality is itself a virtue, containing all the accumulated virtues of practitioners throughout time, and can therefore be dedicated just as any individually cultivated virtue can be dedicated on the bodhisattva path. Central to this debate is whether one can make such a claim given that ultimate reality is itself changeless whereas virtue requires change. In the following chapter, Sakya Pandita's opposing views are presented from the *Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows*. This text essentially serves as the key source for all the discussions between the authors in Komarovski's book. Dorjé Sherap serves as a pointed opposition to Sakya Pandita, and both Shakya Chokden and Gorampa carried out debates over the meaning and implications of the *Thorough Differentiation*.

Komarovski distinguishes the work of Dorjé Sherap and Sakya Pandita by pointing out that the former mainly cited third vehicle works and based his arguments on the authority of these materials, while Sakya Pandita predominately relied on systems of logic taken from second vehicle sources. Because Dorjé Sherap relied less on logical arguments, Komarovski argues that his work was therefore more exposed to criticism. While Sakya Pandita's *Thorough Differentiation* was written decades before Dorjé Sherap's commentary and hence could not have been the subject of his criticism, he seems to be confronting doctrines common to the Kagyü school that derive from Jikten Gönpo's *Single Intent*.

The arguments presented in Sakya Pandita's *Thorough Differentiation* are taken up in Komarovski's fourth chapter, "The Ultimate is Not a Virtue Unless You Do Not Mean It," providing example verses from the work germane to the former's contrast with Dorjé Sherap. Sakya Pandita contests the Kagyü notion that ultimate reality can be dedicated by asserting that ultimate reality as suchness is changeless and uncompounded, not producing any positive good and therefore beyond virtue. One might then argue that ultimate reality is virtuous *because* it is beyond good and evil, but for Sakya Pandita, that only assumes that the absence of evil is a virtue, not the actual existence of virtuous qualities. A keen logician, Sakya Pandita also argued that because there are no dharmas apart from the dharma-sphere (*dharmadhātu*), if the dharma sphere were a virtue, all non-virtuous and unspecified dharmas would also be made virtuous by the dharma-sphere, and lower rebirths would not be possible.

While both Dorjé Sherap and Sakya Pandita equated the *tathāgata-garbha* and the dharma-sphere as one and the same ultimate reality, Dorjé Sherap argued that the virtuous qualities identified with the *tathāgata-garbha* are therefore the virtues of the dharma-sphere. But Sakya Pandita, citing Indian *Madhyamaka* and *Perfection of Wisdom* texts, did not accept the claim that the *tathāgata-garbha* is virtuous because the *tathāgata-garbha* is a non-entity and so, cannot be identified with virtue. Yet Dorjé Sherap also employed forms of logic to support his own case. He cited the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts as well in order to counter the argument that if the ultimate is virtue, it must also mean that the ultimate is subject to change and is therefore impermanent. He concluded that if, as these texts assert, the mind is originally changeless, all phenomena must also be changeless. Cause and effect occurring within the ultimate reality of the dharma-sphere is only operating on the conventional level of appearance. Once the suchness of phenomena is realized one finds there is no contradiction between the virtue and changelessness of ultimate reality.

In Chapter five, citing twenty-four example verses pertinent to his project, Komarovski introduces the work of Shakya Chokden who, in the

*Good Questions about the “Thorough Differentiation of the Three Types of Vows,”* raised more than one hundred questions in response to Sakya Pandita. While the *Thorough Differentiation* was recognized as authoritative in the Sakya school, Komarovski points out that the work presented a rather one-sided, uncompromising examination of virtue. As such, more than two centuries later, Shakya Chokden recognized a need to contribute a critical reevaluation of the text in order to correct possible misinterpretations and to expand on his predecessor’s stance. However, while this indeed may have been his intended purpose, Komarovski reveals that on a number of key issues the *Good Questions* actually contradicts Sakya Pandita’s positions. The resulting thrust of Shakya Chokden’s contributions to the meaning of ultimate virtue is presented in the remaining chapters of *Is Reality Beyond Good and Evil?*, where the polemical debates between Shakya Chokden and Gorampa over the former’s questions are compared in extensive detail.

Chapter six, “What Colors are Virtues?” takes up the question of the nature of white and dark karmas, and how these might be understood from the standpoint of ultimate reality. This chapter is followed by, “Is the Ultimate an Actual Virtue?” the central question in Komarovski’s text, and finally, “Who Owns the Highest Virtue?” concerned with the meaning of virtue in relation to *tathāgatagarbha*, or Buddha-essence. In each chapter the author summarizes the debates by usually beginning with Gorampa’s response to a question posed by Shakya Chokden, followed by the latter’s reply to his own question in the *Golden Lancet*. Gorampa’s arguments were recorded in his *Elimination of Mistakes about the Three Types of Vows*, a text that is recognized in the Sakya school as a sound explanation of Sakya Pandita. Yet Komarovski argues that Gorampa is mainly concerned with refuting Shakya Chokden, at times resulting in dismissive, undeveloped responses to the latter’s question. In contrast, and possibly in many ways *because* Shakya Chokden had raised the question, he is much more attentive to its doctrinal implications, providing greater detail, and willing to consider multiple positions. In this sense, for Komarovski,

Shakya Chokden's approach provided a more original and multi-faceted contribution to the debate.

These three chapters reveal the lack of uniformity among the four interlocutors examined in Komarovski's text. Gorampa's critical response to Shakya Chokden's *Good Questions* placed him in lockstep with Sakya Pandita and was mainly concerned with supporting the authority of the latter's *Thorough Differentiation* by bringing into question Shakya Chokden's need to cross-examine Sakya Pandita's assertions. While Shakya Chokden did not overtly dispute the authority of the *Thorough Differentiation*, he put forward a number of propositions that conflicted with Sakya Pandita through his judicious query of the work. These included arguments fundamental to the central concerns in the *Thorough Differentiation*, asserting that ultimate reality is in fact, a virtue and does exhibit change. He questioned the consistency of Sakya Pandita's logic, for example, in asserting that there are no phenomena apart from the dharma-sphere without clarifying how virtuous, non-virtuous, and unspecified phenomena contribute to the reality that is the dharma-sphere. Primarily citing Indian canonical texts identifying the dharma-sphere as a virtue, Shakya Chokden argued that if, as these writings assert, suchness is ultimate reality, then it must also be the case that suchness is the ultimate virtue of the dharma-sphere, and not simply an imputed virtue, as Sakya Pandita claimed. Ultimate virtue could not simply be due to the absence of evil either because there is also an absence of evil in unspecified phenomena, but these are not assumed to be virtues.

Much of the disparity between the views of ultimate reality in the works of Shakya Chokden and Sakya Pandita derives from a debate particular to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy regarding Indian Mahāyana sources. Sakya Pandita aligned with self-emptiness (T. *rang stong*) views of the dharma-sphere based in Madhyamaka thought, arguing that the dharma-sphere is non-productive—nothing more than the absence of proliferations, and therefore beyond any notions of virtue and non-virtue. In response, Shakya Chokden offered an other-emptiness (T. *gzhan stong*) view

of ultimate reality primarily based in Yogācāra philosophy, where the dharma-sphere exists as the non-dual primordial mind, actively functioning as a virtue giving rise to *ārya* dharmas. As such, the ultimate undergoes momentary changes of production and cessation. The dharma-sphere as other-emptiness is therefore a productive cause and is both impermanent and permanent; it is impermanent, exhibiting momentary change, and permanent in its continuity of change.

Given Shakya Chokden's questions and alternative perspectives in his response to the *Thorough Differentiation*, the unsuspecting reader might return to Komarovski's table provided at the end of Chapter one and assume that Shakya Chokden was apparently more in agreement with the Kagyü positions of Dorjé Sherap than he was with his fellow Sakyapa, Sakyapa Pandita. But the author warns against jumping to such a conclusion. While both thinkers assert that the ultimate is a virtue, they arrive at their conclusions through contrasting sources and arguments, ultimately resulting in a central disagreement regarding the nature of primordial mind and whether or not the ultimate can be dedicated. As Komarovski explains in his final remarks, while the polemical debates discussed in his book are rigorous and intense, all four contributors were operating within narrow textual confines. They each relied on Indian sources to a great extent and were only focused on the six Tibetan texts from which their debates arose. However, each of their attempts to accurately assess the meaning of ultimate reality as elucidated in these sources gave birth to the great expansion of their ideas and insights. The fruit of this polemical labor is not in ultimately arriving at a definitive truth but in generating the creative growth of varying perspectives. Komarovski's preference for Shakya Chokden's contributions to these debates emerges from his capacity to ask challenging questions and to reflect on these questions in original, multifaceted, and thought-provoking ways.

Altogether then, *Is Reality Beyond Good and Evil?* is a valuable contribution to the fields of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and textual criticism, providing both a meticulous and illuminating study of a medieval

sectarian debate over the nature of ultimate reality and an illustrative examination of historical texts, where the goal of investigating a plurality of philosophical truth claims is not to choose winners and losers but to reveal the plurality itself. Komarovski's analysis of these works, especially of Shakya Chokden's and Gorampa's debates over the content of Sakya Pandita's *Thorough Differentiation*, is complex and expansive, comparing the divergences of their thought on ultimate reality in subtle, yet clear, descriptive language. The aim of the author's project is to reveal these arguments as they were presented, without delving into the ethical implications of their positions. The thinkers who are included in this work do not seem to have been concerned with ethics, yet one cannot necessarily avoid the ethical significations of adopting particular truth claims about the nature of reality. If one asserts that reality is, or is not, beyond good and evil such significations may be unavoidable. However, Komarovski makes it clear to the reader that these questions are not the point of his study, but rather, the elucidation of medieval Sakya polemics. The success of this work derives from having this singular objective and endeavoring to offer these debates to the reader in all their brilliance and creativity.

### Works Cited

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