

MIPHAM'S



BEACON of CERTAINTY

ILLUMINATING

THE VIEW OF

DZOGCHEN

The Great Perfection

JOHN WHITNEY PETTIT

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Mipham's *Beacon of Certainty*

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BEACON OF CERTAINTY

*Illuminating the View of Dzogchen,
the Great Perfection*

By John W. Pettit



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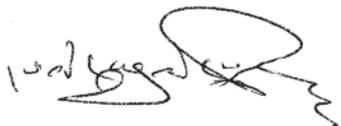
Foreword

His Holiness Penor Rinpoche

LAMA MIPHAM was a great Nyingma scholar of the nineteenth century who wrote a prodigious number of works on all subjects, including numerous brilliant commentaries on both sūtra and tantra. His work translated here by John Whitney Pettit as the *Beacon of Certainty* is particularly famous and is one of the most beneficial for clearing away confusion and doubt regarding views, paths, and meditation.

It is my earnest hope that John Pettit's translation will bring great benefit to foreign students and scholars in the study of both philosophy and meditation practice.

This work is valuable indeed. I pray that all sentient beings may benefit from this text and ultimately attain enlightenment.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Drubwang Pema Norbu', written in a cursive style.

Drubwang Pema Norbu

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Acknowledgments

I MUST FIRST DEDICATE the merit of this work to my parents, Jack and Anne Pettit, whose unfailing support, both emotional and financial, has made it all possible; and to my wife, Victoria, for keeping faith in my ability to finish this seemingly interminable project.

For empowering blessings textual transmissions, elegant explanations, and personal guidance, there is no way to repay the kindness of my root teacher, the late Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He was a peerless master of the scriptures and realizations of sūtra and tantra, and a nonsectarian holder of all the lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. Khyentse Rinpoche dedicated his life to preserving Buddhist traditions, saving many of them from oblivion. He collected, edited, and published many volumes of rare texts, and restored dozens of Tibetan temples and monasteries destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Khyentse Rinpoche's own teachers, and the many great scholars and yogis among his colleagues and disciples, knew him as the manifestation of the wisdom mind of Mañjuśrī, as the unobstructed voice of countless Indian and Tibetan siddhas, and as the bodily rebirth of the nineteenth-century master 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse dbang po. There is no doubt that he was a brilliant moon (*rab bsal zla ba*) in the starry sky of the paṇḍitas and siddhas of India and Tibet; that in accomplishing the benefit of self and others, he was endowed with a brilliant wealth of auspiciousness (*bkra shis dpal 'byor*); and that, by realizing and transmitting the Great Perfection teachings, he raised the victory banner of the teaching of the changeless supreme vehicle (*gyur med theg mchog bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan*) in many countries around the world.¹

As an infant, Khyentse Rinpoche received blessings and prophecies of future greatness from Mipham Rinpoche, who conferred upon him the name bKra shis dpal 'byor (*Mangalaśrībhūti*). As the heart disciple of Mipham's main student Zhe chen rgyal tshab Pad ma rnam rgyal, Khyentse Rinpoche was a principle heir to Mipham's teachings. I was extremely fortunate to receive teachings from Khyentse Rinpoche in the years 1985–1990, including a precious few teachings of Mipham's tradition. In one of my first meetings with him, Rinpoche encouraged me to combine study and practice. I believe it is only due to Khyentse Rinpoche's constant inspiration that I have been able to digest a small portion of Mipham's writings—not merely as an intellectual challenge, but as a key for opening a door to the living teachings of the Buddha.

In this very preliminary exploration I can hardly hope to have done justice to the profound and vast wisdom of masters such as Mipham and Khyentse Rinpoche, so for the distortions and omissions that my efforts will undoubtedly evince, I beg the pardon of the enlightened beings. It is my fervent wish that the efforts of other scholars will improve upon my own, and that the Nyingma and other traditions of Buddhadharma will spread and develop, benefitting countless beings.

I must also express boundless gratitude for the guidance and support of these excellent spiritual teachers and friends, whose wisdom and compassion have never failed to inspire: H.H. the Dalai Lama, H.H. Penor Rinpoche, Kyabje Trulshik Rinpoche, Tulku Pema Wangyal, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, Tulku Thondup, H.H. Sakya Trizin, Kyabje Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, Lama Tharchin Rinpoche, Khenpo Palden Sherab, Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, Tulku Jigme Khyentse, Shechen Rabjam Rinpoche, Bhakha Tulku, Ugyen Thinley Rinpoche, Tulku Thupten, Lama Pema Wangdak, and Mathieu Ricard. In particular, I must acknowledge Khensur Lobsang Tharchin, who introduced me to the teachings of Je Tsong kha pa, and Gyalse Tulku, who conferred the reading transmission (*lung*) of the *Beacon of Certainty*, answered my preliminary questions about the text, and gave me a copy of Khro shul 'jam rdor's *Beacon* commentary.

Were it not for my academic mentors, those pioneers on the frontiers of Western culture, I would never have been inspired to approach Buddhism through scholarship. In 1981 Prof. Ashok Gangadean of Haverford College introduced me to the Madhyamaka philosophy of Nāgārjuna, and has been unstintingly supportive of my efforts ever since. It is thanks also to Ashok that, as a Haverford undergraduate, I was able to study closely with three eminent Buddhist scholars: Prof. Lal Mani Joshi, Prof. Gunpala Dharmasiri, and Prof. Lobsang Lhalungpa. My thanks go especially to Prof. Lal Mani Joshi, the author of *Studies in the Buddhist Culture of India*, for introducing me to the intellectual and historical context of Buddhist philosophy in India, and to Kungö Lhalungpa, for introducing me to the spirit of impartial (*ris med*) study and practice in Tibetan Buddhism.

The late Prof. Paul Desjardins convened a Madhyamaka conference at Haverford in 1982, where I witnessed a brilliant lecture on Candrakīrti by my future dissertation advisor, Prof. Robert A. F. Thurman. This was a pivotal event that inspired my choice of career in Buddhist Studies. While I was a graduate student Prof. Thurman was uncompromising—even wrathful—in his insistence that I do my best. Without his tutelage and inspiration, this work would never have reached fruition. My deepest thanks go also to Prof. Matthew Kapstein, whose insightful editorial comments and vast bibliographical knowledge were essential to the development of the central themes of my dissertation.

My thanks go also to Lopen Karma Phuntsho, for his generous encouragement and erudite comments on the translations, to Carl Yamamoto for countless stylistic and grammatical improvements, to David Strom for his patient and tireless

editing, and to Tim McNeill, for undertaking this unwieldy publication project.

Last, and certainly not least, I must express my deepest gratitude to Gene Smith. Were it not for Gene's many years of tireless effort to preserve Tibetan literature, many of the texts I have consulted might never have been published, much less been available in the Columbia University library collection. In addition, Gene's essays on Tibetan religion and culture were the first to introduce the *Ris med* tradition and the writings of Mipham to a Western scholarly audience and were essential in laying the groundwork of my research. As fate would have it, Gene has acted as an editor for this book. For his encouragement and generous help here, and in other ways, I am most thankful.

Source Abbreviations³

ACIP	Asian Classics Input Project ³
BA	<i>Blue Annals</i> (Roerich, 1988)
BCA	<i>Bodhicaryāvatāra</i>
BSG	<i>Byang chub sems bsgoms pa rdo la gser zhun</i> (Mañjuśrimitra, in Norbu and Lipman)
CD	<i>Chos dbyings rin po che'i mdzod</i> (in Klong chen rab 'byams, 1983)
DR	<i>The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism</i> , vol. 1 (Dudjom Rinpoche, 1991)
DRG	<i>Don rnam par nges pa'i shes rab ral gri</i> (Mipham Rinpoche, in lHag bsam bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, 1984)
GD	<i>Grub mtha' rin po che'i mdzod</i> (in Klong chen rab 'byams, 1983)
KJ	<i>Nges shes rin po che'i sgron me'i rnam bshad 'od zer dri med</i> (Khro shul 'Jam rdor)
KNG	<i>d'Ka' ba'i gnad chen po brgyad</i> (Tsongkhapa)
LRC	<i>Byang chub kyi lam rim che ba</i> (Tsongkhapa)
LT	<i>Lung gi gter mdzod</i> (commentary on <i>CD</i> by Klong chen rab 'byams)
MA	<i>Madhyamakāvatāra</i>
MAL	<i>dBu ma rgyan gyi rnam bshad 'jam dbyangs bla ma dgyes pa'i zhal lung</i> (in Mipham Rinpoche, 1990)
MAZL	<i>dBu ma la 'jug pa'i 'grel pa zla ba'i zhal lung dri med shel phreng</i> (in Mipham Rinpoche, 1990)
MK	personal communication of Matthew Kapstein
MMK	<i>Mūlamadhyamakakārikā</i> by Nāgārjuna (Sanskrit in Kalupahana (1986), Tibetan in ACIP:\TEXTS\BYAUTHOR\TSASHE)
MTPH	<i>Man ngag lta ba'i phreng ba</i> (Rong zom Paṇḍita, 1974)
NK	<i>Shes rab kyi le'u 'grel pa nor bu ke ta ka</i> (Mipham Rinpoche, n.p., n.d.)

- NLG *gSang sngags rdo rje theg pa'i tshul las snang ba lhar grub pa* (in Rong zom Paṇḍita, 1974)
- NRC *sNgags rim chen mo* (Tsongkhapa, Sherig Parkhang, n.d.)
- NyS *Nyugs sems skor gsum* (Mipham Rinpoche, 1972)
- NyZ *Yon tan rin po che'i mdzod kyi 'grel pa zab don snang byed nyi ma'i 'od zer* (Yon tan rgya mtsho)
- SM *sGom gyi gnad gsal bar phye ba bsam gtan mig sgron* (gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes)
- SNy *Guhyagarbhatantra* (*gSang snying rgyud*)
- TDC *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*
- TGSB *lTa grub shan 'byed gnad kyi sgron me* (mDo sngags bsTan pa'i nyi ma)
- ThCh *Theg pa chen po'i tshul la 'jug pa* (in Rong zom Paṇḍita, 1976)
- ThD *Theg mchog rin po che'i mdzod* (in Klong chen rab 'byams, 1983)
- TJB *lTa ba'i brjed byang* (in Rong zom Paṇḍita, 1974)
- TSB *lTa ba'i shan 'byed theg mchog gnad kyi zla zer* (Go ram pa bSod nams seng ge)
- TTC *bDe gshes snying po stong thun chen mo seng ge'i nga ro* (in Mipham Rinpoche, 1990)
- VBD *Victorious Battle Drum* ('Jigs med phun tshogs)
- WTL Edition of *Nges shes rin po che'i sgron me* published by Waṇa mTho slob (Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Vārāṇasī); with commentary of mKhan po Kun bzang dpal ldan
- YD *Yid bzhin rin po che'i mdzod* (in Klong chen rab 'byams, 1983)
- ZT *gZhan stong khas len seng ge'i nga ro* (Mipham Rinpoche, 1975)

Annotations, Diacritics, and Transcription

THE BOOK'S CHAPTERS and subsections are accompanied by section numbers; cross-references for these are given in the text and footnotes as “§6.1.1,” etc. The translated verses of the *Beacon of Certainty* are accompanied by the outline heading numbers of Khro shul 'jam rdor's commentary and will be indicated by *Beacon* (for example, *Beacon* §8.1.1). Where a specific passage of Khro shul 'jam rdor's commentary is intended, the heading number will be preceded by the letters “KJ” (for example, *KJ* 0.1.1.0).

All Sanskrit words are given with diacritics. Sanskrit words that are well known outside the fields of Buddhist and Indian Studies (for example, Prajñāpāramitā), those that are used frequently in lieu of English equivalents (for example, Mādhyamika), and proper names (for example, Śāntarakṣita) are given without italics. Sanskrit equivalents for Tibetan terms that are reconstructed, unattested, or conjectural are marked with an asterisk (for example, **lākṣanya*).

All Tibetan words are in Wylie transliteration, with the exception of some commonly used words such as Mipham (*mi pham*), Tsongkhapa (*tsong kha pa*), Nyingma (*rnying ma*), Gelug (*dge lugs*), Rinpoche (pronounced “rin bo chay”), Lama (*bla ma*), Tulku (*sprul sku*), Khenpo (*mkhan po*), etc. To refer to followers of Tibetan religious traditions, or as an adjective referring to their views and practices, I have followed the conventions of Tibetan grammar and used the *pa* suffix, for example, Nyingmapa, Sakyapa. Tibetan head letters (*mgo yig*) are capitalized for the names of persons and places, which are sometimes combined, (for example, Khro shul 'Jam rdor = 'Jam rdor of Khro shul, 'Ju bla mDo sde = mDo sde Lama of 'Ju). Individual names within the composite names of famous lamas are capitalized, for example, *bDud 'jom 'Jig bral Ye shes rdo rje*. The names of Tibetan acquaintances are given, wherever possible, in their preferred phonetic spellings. Head letters of the first word of Tibetan book titles are likewise capitalized.

To locate some of the quotations and references found in my research materials, I have used Release Two of the CD-ROM issued by the Asian Classics Input Project (ACIP), which contains numerous texts from the Derge edition of the bKa' 'gyur and bsTan 'gyur and from the collected works (*gsungs 'bum*) of Tsongkhapa and other Gelug masters. Using various search programs, I have been able to locate several quotations on the CD that would have been difficult or impossible to locate otherwise. All quotations researched with the ACIP CD-ROM are given in the following format: ACIP:\CD\TEXTS\...\[TEXT NAME]\[DOCUMENT

NAME]@[PAGE NUMBER], where "CD\TEXTS\...\\" is the directory path, "TEXT NAME" is the name of the directory containing the text in question (for example, the YENYING subdirectory contains Āryadeva's text, the *Ye shes snying po kun las btus pa*), "DOCUMENT NAME" is the text document on the disk, and PAGE NUMBER is the page of the edition volume where the text is found (for example "@42b,") as it appears in the online text. On the CD-ROM, page numbers are always given with the "@" symbol, so readers wishing to consult the CD-ROM for quotations given may search the directory path quoted for the page number in the @[PAGENUMBER] format. This will quickly locate the quotation and its surrounding text.

I. Introduction

I.I. Mipham Rinpoche and the *Beacon of Certainty*

ALL MAJOR RELIGIONS have witnessed philosophical and theological transformations in their belief systems.⁴ This is an exploration of the critical philosophical approach of Tibetan scholasticism,⁵ especially its traditions of interpretation of Madhyamaka (Middle Way) philosophy, and the relationship of Madhyamaka to Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*) or the Great Perfection, one of the most important and controversial Tibetan traditions of mystical philosophy and meditation practice. In particular, this study examines Mipham Rinpoche’s polemical defense of the Nyingma school’s Great Perfection teaching, his resolution of philosophical controversies that are historically associated with the Great Perfection, and the epistemological and gnoseological⁶ distinctions he uses to that end. Mipham’s brilliance in this undertaking, and his (historically speaking) privileged perspective on the similar efforts of those previous scholars renowned as emanations of the Buddha of Wisdom Mañjuśrī—Rong zom Paṇḍita (11th–12th century), Sakya (Sa skya) Paṇḍita (1182–1231), Klong chen rab ’byams (1308–1362), and Tsongkhapa (1357–1419)—certainly merits his inclusion alongside the doctrinal system-builders (*shing rta*, literally, “charioteers”) of India and Tibet.⁷

Comparison, contrast, and reconciliation of different philosophical positions have always figured in Buddhist literature, especially in philosophical commentaries (*śāstra*, *bstan bcos*) written by Indian and Tibetan scholars. Comparative philosophical analysis is also important in Great Perfection literature, where it serves both pedagogical and polemical purposes. The main source for this study is a short verse text of recent origin, the *Precious Beacon of Certainty* (*Nges shes rin po che’i sgron me*), which utilizes both critical comparison and hermeneutical rapprochement in the service of teaching and defending the Great Perfection system of the Nyingma school.

The *Beacon*’s author, Mipham Rinpoche (’Jam mgon ’Ju Mi pham rnam rgyal, 1846–1912), was one of the greatest scholars of the Nyingma (*rnying ma*) or “old school” of Tibetan Buddhism. Mipham’s “root” teacher (*mūlaguru*, *rtsa ba’i bla ma*), the incomparable scholar and visionary ’Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse dbang po (1820–1892), entrusted him with the preservation of the Great Perfection teaching. Mipham was an indefatigable scholar, debater, and meditator. He mastered the major scholastic traditions of Tibetan Buddhism and composed commentaries

and treatises (*śāstras*, *bstan bcos*) based upon them, and during numerous meditative retreats, he cultivated a profound experience of the Vajrayāna practices taught in both the older and newer traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. He also debated extensively with adherents of Tibet's quintessential scholastic tradition, the Gelug (*dge lugs*). In the course of his writings, and due in no small part to these debates, Mipham developed the philosophical traditions of the Nyingma school to an unprecedented level of sophistication. The *Beacon* is a relatively short text, but it is a very complete expression of Mipham's integrated approach to philosophy and meditative practice.⁸

1.2. Outline

The four chapters following the introduction provide biographical, historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts for the translations of the *Beacon* and its commentary. Chapter 2 introduces Mipham's life, his most important writings, and the extraordinary teachers of the Eclectic Movement (*ris med*) of the nineteenth century who taught and inspired him. Chapter 3 identifies the philosophical and religious aspects of Indian Buddhism that were most significant in the development of Tibetan Buddhism and introduces the philosophical perspective (*darśana*, *lta ba*) of the Buddhist tantras. Chapter 4 discusses the historical, cultural, and literary background of the Nyingma and Great Perfection traditions and places the *Beacon* and its author in their intellectual-historical context. Chapter 5 examines hermeneutical, epistemological, and gnoseological issues that are points of contention for Mipham, Gelug scholars, and exponents of the extrinsic emptiness (*gzhan stong*) theory. Chapter 6 concerns the philosophical issues addressed in the *Beacon*. The first, third, and fourth topics, which exemplify Mipham's interpretations of philosophical theory (*darśana*, *lta ba*), meditative practice (*bhāvanā*, *bsgom pa*), and ultimate reality (*paramārthasatya*, *don dam pa'i bden pa*) in the Nyingma and Great Perfection traditions, are the focus of discussion here. Chapter 7 considers the significance of Mipham's thought—its unique contributions, historical significance, and relevance for understanding the roles and relationships of texts, reason, and personal experience in religious traditions.

Chapters 8 and 9 contain complete translations of the *Beacon* and its commentary by Khro shul 'Jam rdor (*KJ*). Chapter 10 is a translation of Mipham's short text on extrinsic emptiness, *The Lion's Roar Proclaiming Extrinsic Emptiness*, followed by explanatory diagrams and tables and a glossary.

1.3. The *Beacon of Certainty*: Context and Significance

1.3.1. Dialectical Philosophy and the Great Perfection

The Madhyamaka⁹ or Middle Way school of Indian Buddhist thought was first expounded by the philosopher Nāgārjuna (c. 1st–2nd centuries C.E.), who sys-

tematized the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness (*śūnyatā*, *stong pa nyid*) of the Prajñāpāramitā (Perfection of Wisdom) scriptures and applied it as a rigorous critique of the metaphysical categories of Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools. Essentially, the Mādhyamika teaching of emptiness is that all phenomena (*dharmāḥ*) ultimately (*paramārtheṇa*, *don dam par*) have no intrinsic reality, no status as things-in-themselves. Conventionally (*vyavahāreṇa*, *tha snyad du*) they are dependently originated (*pratīyasamutpanna*, *rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba*) and conceptually designated (*prajñāpta*, *rten nas gdags pa*). Because Mādhyamika logic negates any philosophical position that assumes an independent, self-existent entity through rigorous exhaustion of logical alternatives, Madhyamaka may be said to be the Buddhist dialectical philosophy *par excellence*. Madhyamaka employs exhaustive critical analysis to induce rational certainty (*[vi]niścaya*, *nges pa* or *nges shes*), which, combined with meditation, leads to enlightenment.

While Madhyamaka is concerned primarily with establishing the nature of reality, the tradition of Buddhist logic, *pramāṇa*, is concerned with how we know reality, in both its ultimate and relative senses. To that end the Buddhist logicians Dignāga (5th–6th centuries) and Dharmakīrti (6th–7th centuries) elaborated what would become the most elegant and influential system of valid cognitions (*pramāṇāḥ*) to appear in India. Unlike their Buddhist and non-Buddhist predecessors, they taught that sources of knowledge (*pramāṇā*) could be assimilated to two types: direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*). In addition they established the various subtypes of these valid cognitions, as well as the complex relationships between them, in the contexts of ordinary life, the Buddhist path, and forensic debate. Later Indian and Tibetan philosophers incorporated the *Pramāṇa* system of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti into their Madhyamaka exegeses. The Madhyamaka and *Pramāṇa* systems of Indian Buddhist philosophy are the most important sources for Mipham Rinpoche's discussion of critical philosophy in the *Beacon*, and are discussed in chapter 3.

The Great Perfection teaching belongs to the tantric traditions of Buddhism. The revealed scriptures of esoteric Buddhism, or *tantras*, are understood to comprise a soteriological approach or conveyance (*yāna*), the Vajrayāna or “Indestructible Vehicle.” Though Vajrayāna is firmly rooted in the philosophical conventions of critical Buddhist philosophy, its texts epitomize mystical or speculative philosophy. Vajrayāna meditation is based on the principle of the immanence of ultimate reality, which is a coalescent continuum (*tantra*, *rgyud*) of gnosis (*jñāna*, *ye shes*) and aesthetic form (*rūpa*, *gzugs*, *snang ba*). Exoteric Buddhist scriptures (*sūtras*) know this immanence as buddha nature or *tathāgatagarbha*, while tantric scriptures describe it as the pervasive, unfabricated presence of divine form, divine sound, and gnosis-awareness. For this reason, tantric meditation does not invoke the logical syllogisms of dialectical philosophy. Instead, it uses special methods that force normal conceptuality to subside and cause gnosis to manifest spontaneously.

In the Nyingma tradition, the Great Perfection is regarded as the most direct

and powerful way to access the continuum (*tantra, rgyud*) of reality, and as the highest form of Vajrayāna practice. Though the personal instructions of a qualified teacher of the Great Perfection may on very rare occasions suffice to induce “sudden enlightenment” in a disciple, it has generally been practiced alongside more conventional forms of Buddhism. “Great Perfection” variously indicates the texts (*āgama, lung*) and oral instructions (*upadeśa, man ngag*) that indicate the nature of enlightened wisdom (*rdzogs chen gyi gzhung dang man ngag*), the verbal conventions of those texts (*rdzogs chen gyi chos skad*), the yogis who meditate according to those texts and instructions (*rdzogs chen gyi rnal 'byor pa*), a famous monastery where the Great Perfection was practiced by monks and yogis (*rdzogs chen dgon sde*), and the philosophical system (*siddhānta, grub mtha'*) or vision (*darśana, lta ba*) of the Great Perfection.

The Great Perfection teaches that reality (*dharmatā, chos nyid*) is not an object of verbal expression or conceptual analysis. Reality and enlightenment are identical; in the final analysis “being” and “knowing” are the same. If one truly knows, there is no need to discuss or analyze philosophically how one knows, or what one knows. Great Perfection meditation is described as effortless, free of concepts (*vikalpa, rnam par rtog pa*) and subtle distortions (*prapañca, spros pa*); in this way it conforms to the radical immanence of ultimate reality taught in Vajrayāna. In the *Beacon* and elsewhere Mipham argues that all philosophical views, including the Great Perfection, are resolved in the principle of coalescence (*yuganaddha, zung 'jug*). Though coalescence is defined in different ways in different philosophical contexts, in essence it is the nonduality of conventional (*saṃvṛtisatya, kun rdzob bden pa*) and ultimate realities (*paramārthasatya, don dam pa'i bden pa*). Coalescence is the immanence of ultimate reality, which in Madhyamaka philosophy is known as the inseparability of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.

In advocating nonconceptual meditation the Great Perfection might seem to contradict the Mādhyamika method of discerning reality through critical analysis and the contemplative enhancement of rational certainty (*nges pa* or *nges shes*) that analysis makes possible. The Great Perfection (and certain other traditions which have been practiced in Tibet, including Ch'an) has often been criticized by Tibetan scholars who thought it utterly incompatible with the critical philosophical approach of Madhyamaka. This perceived incompatibility is based on the assumption that the very different philosophical views (*darśana, lta ba*) and practical methods (*upāya, thabs*) that typify the subitist approach of the Great Perfection and the gradualist approach of the Madhyamaka cannot both access ultimate meaning (*paramārtha, don dam*). Mipham's writings suggest that this perceived contradiction reflects a one-sided (*phyog lhung*) or impoverished (*nyi tshe ba*) understanding of the Mādhyamika philosophical view. In the *Beacon*, certainty (*nges shes*) mediates the causal connection between theory (*lta ba* in the critical philosophical context) and gnostic vision (*lta ba* as experience that is the result of successful practice), and between soteric methods (*upāya, thabs*) and the ultimate reality that those methods reveal (*upeya, thabs byung*). Thus, the *Beacon*

teaches that certainty belongs to both reason and experience, to ordinary consciousness and sublime gnosis, and to Madhyamaka as well as the Great Perfection.

1.3.2. The *Beacon's* Purpose

According to Nyingma scholars, the main purpose of the *Beacon* is to elucidate the teaching of the Great Perfection. The Great Perfection method of meditation assumes the possibility of sudden enlightenment, based on the principle of coalescence. In the Great Perfection teaching, enlightenment is the recognition or unveiling of one's original nature, not, as Buddhist dialectical philosophy understands it, a gradual development or result. Likewise the Great Perfection cannot be established through logical proof, because its proof is found in personal experience. The Great Perfection is nonconceptual (*nirvikalpa*, *rnam par mi rtog pa*) gnosis, which must be realized for oneself (*pratisamvid-jñāna*, *so sor rang rig ye shes*). Thus, the *Beacon* should not be read simply as an attempt at rational demonstration of the viability of the Great Perfection against the objections of its critics. It is also an affirmation of the necessity to leave rational affirmations and negations aside once critical philosophical certitude has been attained.

Scholarly treatises (*sāstra*, *bstan bcos*) of Buddhist philosophy often begin by identifying their purpose (*prayojana*, *dgos pa*) and intended audience. The narrative format of the *Beacon* suggests that Mipham wrote it to inspire his personal intuition of the Great Perfection; it is presented as an exercise in self-edification. Why would the *Beacon*, with its thorough dialectical critiques of mistaken philosophical positions, begin on such a personal note? And what role, if any, does the critical philosophical analysis found throughout the *Beacon* play in elucidating the meaning of the Great Perfection? The teaching of the Great Perfection is not a critical philosophy; if it is a philosophy at all, it is of the most speculative or mystical variety. If the Great Perfection is not amenable to rational proof, how can it be meaningfully established as a meditation method or as a spiritual path? Does practicing the Great Perfection require the suppression of rationality, or a flight toward escapist quietism?

These questions do not admit of simple or formulaic answers, and will be gradually addressed in the chapters to follow. For the moment, it should suffice to indicate some conclusions that seem reasonable in light of careful study of the *Beacon* and other materials related to the Great Perfection. First of all, if considered as a handbook for scholars who wish to meditate, the *Beacon* does not seem to have been conceived as a rational justification of the Great Perfection. Instead, the *Beacon* effectively charts the applicability of reason in the practice of the Great Perfection and other systems. Like Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Mipham affirms the utility of reason while setting limits to its role in creating religious meaning. Unlike Kant, he does not consider ultimate religious meaning to be an object of faith, but rather as that which is only known in the cessation of all conceptual elaborations—hence also of philosophical speculation—in

the state of experiential certainty about the nonreifiable (*anupalabdhi, mi dmigs pa*) nature of things. Secondly, the polemical arguments of the *Beacon* should not be taken as one-sided rejections of other philosophical interpretations or religious traditions. Rather, the *Beacon's* polemics are meant primarily to refute the misinterpretations of the Great Perfection's critics and resolve the doubts that these might raise for Nyingma scholars and, perhaps more importantly, to alert Nyingma practitioners to their own potential misunderstandings of the Great Perfection. Finally, the *Beacon* is meant to show that reason, as employed in critical philosophical study, and personal intuition of gnosis, as the principle of the Great Perfection, are complementary paradigms that converge in the same soteriological goal.

1.3.3. The *Beacon's* Comparative Method

The philosophical view of the Great Perfection tradition is said to be enlightened awareness (*bodhicitta, byang chub kyi sems*), which is none other than the state of enlightenment. Thus, the Great Perfection is not only compatible with all paths, but implicitly contains the practices and qualities of all paths. The Great Perfection does not render other approaches obsolete, because to understand the Great Perfection is to master all methods.

The Great Perfection inculcates a spirit of inclusivity, which is reflected in the ecumenical approach to study and practice of its great exponents, such as Mipham. However, the *Beacon's* pragmatism and inclusivity are not indiscriminate. The important points of the text are made with reference to the traditional Nyingma doxography of higher and lower philosophical systems, and with a clear and consistent focus upon the Great Perfection as the highest system. The *Beacon's* polemical refutations do not imply a wholesale rejection of other philosophical systems; rather, they serve to establish a philosophical perspective—that of the Great Perfection—that tends to accept the validity other systems in spite of their philosophical differences, while also maintaining the unique view of the Great Perfection.

The comparative philosophical component of the *Beacon* has an important pedagogical function. The *apoha* theory of the logician Dignāga maintains that correct understanding of the unique character of something is predicated on the knowledge of what it is not. In other words, by knowing how something is distinct from all things that resemble it, one truly knows its uniqueness. Although in principle the Great Perfection is a unique and self-sufficient way to reach enlightenment, it is generally understood in the context of the other philosophies and methods it claims to transcend. Thus it could be said that, through a thorough knowledge of what the Great Perfection is *not*, one can begin to appreciate its essential intuition of enlightenment.

1.4. Methods and Sources

The pivotal moments of my research were consultations with Tibetan scholars on the subtleties of Mipham's *Beacon of Certainty* and other texts. That process began auspiciously in New York in the fall of 1992 when I met Gyalse Tulku, an incarnate lama of sMin sgrol ling Monastery near Dehra Dun, India, who gave me the reading transmission (*āgama, lung*) for the *Beacon* and explained the fundamentals of Mipham's position in the *Beacon's* seven topics. Later Gyalse Tulku kindly sent me a copy of Khro shul 'Jam rdor's commentary from Bhutan. I did not realize how fortunate I was to come across this text until I determined that it is not to be found in the Library of Congress PL 480 collection or any other collection in the U.S. and is little known outside of the community of Nyingma scholars at the Ngagyur Nyingma Institute in Bylakuppe, where it was published.

During my stay in Himachal Pradesh in the summer of 1993 I began to study the *Beacon* with Khro shul 'Jam rdor's commentary (*KJ*) and translated most of another commentary on the *Beacon* by Mipham's close disciple mkhan po Kun bzang dpal ldan (1872–1943)¹⁰ (*KP*). *KP* is favored by many scholars as a commentary on the *Beacon*, and its author was supposedly commended by Mipham himself for his expertise in the *Beacon*. However, the format of Kun bzang dpal ldan's commentary is largely that of a *mchan 'grel*, or compilation of short glosses on selected words and phrases, leaving many of the original verses intact as parts of much longer sentences in the commentary. This made translating Kun bzang dpal ldan's text difficult in places; he often leaves unexplained passages in the *Beacon* that, prior to reading *KJ*, seemed obscure. *KJ* is rather detailed; it comments on most verses word for word and occasionally digresses into long discussions of important issues. I was delighted to find that Kun bzang dpal ldan's and Khro shul 'Jam rdor's commentaries together clarified virtually all of the obscure points in the three sections of the *Beacon* discussed in detail here. This and other considerations, such as “Delhi belly,” led me to pursue the bulk of my research in the U.S. I first translated Khro shul 'Jam rdor's commentary, having decided upon it as a superior source for understanding the *Beacon* because of its generous inclusion of quotations from Indian and Tibetan sources and its extensive topical organization (*sa bcad*), which I have used to index the translation of Mipham's verses.

While translating the mere words of the Tibetan texts was a relatively straightforward task, it has been much more difficult to research and organize the background materials for the earlier chapters. In a monastic curriculum the *Beacon* is studied only after many years of study and debate of Mahāyāna philosophical texts. Needless to say, I have not been able to study all those primary sources, which would have made it much easier to analyze the philosophical concerns of the *Beacon*. In lieu of pursuing the exhaustive studies of a Tibetan *mkhan po* or *bge gshes*, I have relied heavily on the research of other scholars of Tibetan Buddhism, and on a limited number of Tibetan texts that seemed to be most relevant

to understanding the *Beacon*. My research focus shifted many times between the primary and secondary sources. As I accumulated the information and ideas required for a reasonably balanced and thorough discussion of the *Beacon's* historical and philosophical context, chapters 1 through 6 gradually took shape. The material here thus evolved in a way quite opposite to that of the writings of Mipham Rinpoche himself, who is said to have written spontaneously, with little or no editing, and quoting all original sources from memory. Though I can hardly hope to have sounded a lion's roar of Buddhist philosophical exegesis, it is hoped that this tentative meow will nonetheless beckon the reader to fathom the writings of Mipham Rinpoche more deeply.

1.4.1. Tibetan Language Sources

1.4.1.1. Editions of the *Beacon*

The basic primary sources for this work are the several editions of the root text of the *Beacon* and the two commentaries by Mipham's disciples, Kun bzang dpal ldan (*KP*) and Khro shul 'Jam rdor (*KJ*). The Vārāṇasī edition of *KP* includes a helpful anonymous index and introduction. *KJ* is more extensive and has an excellent topical outline (*sa bcad*), so it has been translated here. There is said to be another commentary by Mipham's disciple mKhan po Nus ldan, but it has remained unavailable outside of Tibet. More recently, a very detailed commentary on the *Beacon* has been published by sLob dpon Theg mchog of Dodrup Chen Rinpoche's monastery in Gangtok, Sikkim, India.¹¹ Though I have not been able to study it at length, it is even more detailed than *KJ* and should definitely be consulted by serious students of the *Beacon*.

In translating the root text I have consulted four editions of the *Beacon*. The first two versions are found in the *Nges shes rin po che'i sgron me'i tshig gi don gsal ba'i 'grel chung blo gros snang ba'i sgo 'byed*¹² published by the Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies in Vārāṇasī (Tib. *Wa na mtho slob*; hereafter *WTL*), which contains the commentary on the *Beacon* referred to as *KP* and the root text embedded in *KJ*.

KP's commentary in *WTL* contains lengthy quotations of the root text with annotations of textual variants from an unknown edition of the collected works (*gsung 'bum*) of Mipham; these are followed by a succinct word-for-word commentary. The root text embedded in the commentary is much at variance with the annotated root text that precedes it. It is possible that the quoted portions preceding the commentary were not part of Kun bzang dpal ldan's original edition and were added by the editors of the *WTL* edition to facilitate study. In any case, since the verses and commentary in effect provide two different versions of the root text, I have referred to them separately as *WTL* and *KP*, respectively.

The *WTL* version is nearly the same as the Tashi Jong edition (*PL*, see below). The *gsung 'bum* referred to in the critical annotations of the *WTL* is nearly the same as the sDe dge edition (hereafter *DG*), though the first annotation (page 3)

reads *phyi lo 1975 gar dbang bskrun zhus pa'i mi pham rin po che'i gsung 'bum* (*gsung*) *nang bzang zhes gsal* (“In the *Collected Works* commissioned in 1975 by Gar dbang, this read ‘bzang’”). I am not sure to whom this refers; 1975 is certainly too early to be Dilgo Khyentse’s edition. This might refer to Sonam T. Kazi’s edition (see below). Many of the variant readings seem to be spelling errors.¹³ The *DG* edition also seems to be full of spelling variations and/or errors, but the *WTL* correction of these seems to be arbitrary in places, and in many places contradicts both *KP* and *KJ* versions. When it contradicts both *KP* and *KJ*, and these latter two are identical, I have generally used the *KP-KJ* version. Since *WTL* and *PL* are nearly identical, I assume that they are either copied one from the other or rely on a third, as yet unknown edition. This edition would in any case be a revised and relatively recent one, since *WTL* and *PL* often are at odds with the other three—*DG*, *KP*, and *KJ*. That *KP* and *KJ*, like *DG*, represent a fairly early edition is suggested by the fact that their authors were both direct disciples of Mipham. On the other hand, both of these texts are recent publications and may well have been edited prior to publication, so under these circumstances it is practically impossible to determine how the original text actually read. This is of little consequence, since, with only one or two exceptions, the variants do not require different readings of the text.

The second version I have consulted, *DG*, is found in the sDe dge mGon chen edition¹⁴ of Mipham’s writings, which was originally published in sDe dge, of the Kham region of Tibet. It is twenty-seven folios in length, and the folios are hand-numbered with Tibetan numerals 36–63. Arabic numeral pagination in the opposite right margin runs 71–124. The *Beacon* folios contain an additional pagination, spelled out in the traditional fashion: *gcig* (1), *gnyis* (2), and so on, to *nyer bdun* (27). This is apparently the original pagination of the wood blocks. Each spelled numeral is preceded by the word *nges* and followed by the word *sgron*, so the left margin of the first side of each page reads something like this: *śrīḥ nges gcig sgron 36*, etc. This indicates that it originally belonged to volume *śrīḥ* of the sDe dge edition and was numbered separately from other texts in the volume. A copy of this volume along with most of Mipham’s other writings was recently published in Nepal by the late Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and then acquired by the Library of Congress PL480 program, which provided for the acquisition of foreign language texts with government surpluses of foreign currency. This edition of the text was recommended to me by Gyalse Tulku as the most reliable edition available. However, many of the spellings in *DG* as well as its use of the particles *gi*, *gis*, *su*, *-r*, and their equivalents are highly irregular, so in many such cases I have followed readings found in the other editions, especially *PL*. Again, these variants generally do nothing to change the meaning of the text.

In addition to the sDe dge mGon chen edition, there is the incomplete edition of Mipham’s writings entitled *The Collected Works of 'Jam-mgon 'Ju Mipham rgya-mtsho* (part of the *Ngagyur Nyingmay Sungrab* series), edited by Sonam T. Kazi. It is also available in the Library of Congress PL 480 collection. As mentioned

above, the version of the *Beacon* there was found by Gyalse Tulku and me to be riddled with scribal errors, so it has not been included here for comparison.

The third version I have used is a woodblock print from Phun tshogs gLing (*PL*), a monastery in the Tibetan refugee community of Tashi Jong in Himachal Pradesh, India. The colophon of the text reads simply *phun gling gsung rab nyams gso rgyun spel las byed nas dpar du bskrun pa dge*. This edition is thirty-five Tibetan folios in length. The ink is somewhat messy in places, but it seems to be nearly free of obvious spelling errors. As mentioned above, it is nearly identical with *WTL* and appears to be well edited.

The fourth version is that found in the commentary by Khro shul 'Jam rdor, the *Nges shes rin po che'i sgron me'i rnam bshad 'od zer dri med*. The root text is not printed separately but is somewhat irregularly marked with *bindus* (◦) in the text of the commentary. This makes identification of the root text difficult in places, so variations have only been noted where the root text is clearly marked or otherwise evident.

In addition to the *Beacon* and its commentaries, I have also consulted Mipham's commentaries on Padmasambhava's *Man ngag lta ba'i phreng ba* and Mañjuśrī-mitra's *Byang chub sems bsgom pa rdo la gser zhun*; his commentaries on Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*, Śāntaraṅgita's *Madhyamakālamkāra*, and the *Nor bu ke ta ka* commentary (*NK*) on the Wisdom Chapter (*prajñāpariccheda*) of Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*; his original text, the *Don rnam par nges pa'i shes rab ral gri* (*DRG*), with his interlinear commentary (*mchan*), and also with a commentary by Lhag bsam bTan pa'i rgyal mtshan; his study of tathāgatagarbha, the *bDe gshegs snying po stong thun chen mo seng ge'i nga ro* (*TTC*); the various materials, including Mipham's Great Perfection lecture notes compiled by his student Zhe chen rGyal tshab Padma rnam rgyal as the *gNyug sems skor gsum*; his reply to Brag dkar sprul sku's criticism of the *Nor bu ke ta ka*, entitled *brGal lan nyin byed snang ba*; his defense of extrinsic emptiness in the *gZhan stong khas len seng ge'i nga ro*; and the collection of Mipham's short instructions (*gdams ngag*) on the Great Perfection, which occupy about two-thirds of the volume labeled *dhiḥ* in the sDe dge edition of Mipham's writings (*Thun min rdzogs chen skor gyi gdams pa phyogs bsduḥ zab don snying po sangs rgyas lag ster*). There are a number of other titles that I would have consulted but, for lack of time, could not, such as the *dBu ma'i gsungs gros*, a collection of essays on Madhyamaka, Mipham's commentaries on the Five Dharma Texts of Maitreya (*'byams chos sde lnga*), and so forth.¹⁵

mDo sngags bTan pa'i nyi ma (died 1959), a student of Kun bzang dpal ldan, is the author of a systematic exposition of Mipham's thought, the *lTa grub shan 'byed* (*TGSB*). It includes numerous comparisons of Mipham's philosophical interpretations with their Gelug counterparts. To my knowledge it is the only textbook exposition (*yig cha*) of Mipham's thought available. It demonstrates that, in terms of originality and systematic completeness, Mipham's work ranks on a par with the work of Tibetan luminaries Sakya Paṇḍita and Tsongkhapa.¹⁶

Among the available works of Rong zom Paṇḍita, I first consulted his *Theg pa*

chen po'i tshul la 'jug pa,¹⁷ which is a polemical defense of the Great Perfection. For the present study, of special interest among the *Selected Writings* (Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po, 1974) is the *sNang ba lhar grub pa*,¹⁸ where Rong zom attempts to prove the Vajrayāna doctrine of universal divinity by means of four types of reasoning,¹⁹ and his *lTa ba'i brjed byang*,²⁰ where he compares the philosophical views of Madhyamaka, Vajrayāna, and the Great Perfection.

Among the writings of Klong chen rab 'byams, I have consulted his *Seven Treasures* (*mdzod bdun*), especially the *Yid bzhin mdzod*, *Grub mtha' mdzod*, *Chos dbyings mdzod*, and *gNas lugs mdzod*. The first two are of interest here because in them Klong chen rab 'byams sets forth his interpretation of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka and differentiates the approaches of sūtra and tantra. The latter two titles are treatises on the view, meditation, and conduct according to the Great Perfection. The influence of Madhyamaka is apparent throughout.

Chapter 6 includes translations of several lengthy passages from the works of three scholars representing Mipham's *anupakṣas* (philosophical allies) and *pūrvapakṣas* (philosophical opponents). Sakya scholar Go ram pa bSod nams seng ge (1429–1489), whose *lTa ba'i shan 'byed* (*TSB*) is largely devoted to refuting Tsongkhapa's Mādhyamika interpretation, is an important source for understanding Mipham's approach to the problems of negation (*dgag pa*, *Beacon* topic 1) as well as modal apprehension (*'dzin stang*, *Beacon* topic 2). Yon tan rgya mtsho, belonging to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, wrote a commentary on 'Jigs med gling pa's *Yon tan mdzod*, the Mādhyamika portion of which contains one long passage that is representative of the Nyingma tradition's response to Gelug critiques of meditation practices similar to the Great Perfection.

For understanding Mipham's pūrvapakṣa, I have used mainly Tsongkhapa's *Lam rim chen mo* (*LRC*)(*Great Stages of the Path*);²¹ especially its *lhag mthong* chapter, his disciple rGyal tshab Dar ma rin chen's (1364–1432) commentary on the Prajñāpariśeda of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* in his *rGyal sras 'jug ngog*, and the *dKa' ba'i gnad chen po brgyad*. The final chapter of the *LRC* concerns insight (*vipāśyanā*, *lhag mthong*), which Tsongkhapa understands as the cultivation of the philosophical view of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka by means of analytical meditation. It also contains the basic arguments Tsongkhapa uses to refute the erroneous views and practices of his Tibetan predecessors.

In addition to English language sources for Mipham's life and works, I have used Kun bzang dPal ldan's *Essential Hagiography of the Lion of Tibetan Philosophers*²² and the *Victorious Battle Drum* (*VSB*),²³ a biography of Mipham written in 1965 by mKhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs, a contemporary Nyingma master of the Golok region.

1.4.2. English Language Sources

The most useful English language sources for understanding the intellectual and historical aspects of the Nyingmapa and the Great Perfection traditions are

Thondup (1986), Karmay (1991), Dudjom Rinpoche (1991), and the companion volume to Dudjom Rinpoche's work by Kapstein and Dorje. These have provided an excellent historical and philosophical framework for understanding Mipham's Mādhyamika interpretation and the importance of his *Beacon*. Special mention should be made of a recent landmark publication, *The Life of Shabkar*, translated by Matthieu Ricard and others under the inspiration of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, which presents in great detail the life and times of an illustrious eighteenth-century Tibetan saint belonging equally to the Gelug and Nyingma traditions. Shabkar's autobiography, which integrates the teachings of the two schools without controversy, provides an interesting foil to the scholarly debates between Mipham and his Gelug opponents. Shabkar's life demonstrates that the philosophical differences between the Gelug and Nyingma, which might at times seem insurmountable to scholars engaged in passionate study and debate, were of no practical concern for Shabkar or for his Gelug and Nyingma teachers, who, following Tsongkhapa's example, took all teachings as "practical advice" (*gdams ngag*), studying, teaching, and practicing them without a trace of cognitive dissonance.

For providing basic autobiographical and bibliographical information, the lion's share of credit goes to E. Gene Smith (especially 1969(a),(c), and 1970) and to Steven Goodman (1981). Smith was the first to introduce the debates between Mipham and Gelugpa scholars that arose in reaction to Mipham's *Nor bu ke ta ka* commentary on the ninth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (*NK*). He also suggests that the *NK*, in spite of being a Madhyamaka commentary, was in effect an exposition of the philosophical view of the Great Perfection. It was this hypothesis that originally stimulated my interest in Mipham and has informed my reading of his writings ever since.

Summaries of Mipham's life have appeared in several different places. Dudjom Rinpoche's is the most detailed,²⁴ while Smith's²⁵ offers valuable detail about his debates with Gelugpa opponents. Both of these accounts appear to be largely based upon the work of Mipham's disciple mKhan po Kun bzang dPal ldan, the *Essential Hagiography of the Lion of Tibetan Philosophers*, which I have also consulted. Dudjom Rinpoche's account seems to have drawn almost entirely upon this material. Dieter Schuh²⁶ has outlined a chronology of Mipham's travels based on the colophons of his collected works; it has been incorporated into the biographical sketch in the second chapter. The *VBD* by mKhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs has been translated by Ann Helm, who kindly sent me a copy of her work, which is annotated with comments by two prominent Nyingma scholars, Ringu Tulku and Khenpo Palden Sherab.

My dissertation topic was inspired by a paper by Franz-Karl Ehrhard (1988), which brought the uniqueness of Mipham's Mādhyamika interpretation to my attention. Ehrhard's paper summarizes the findings of his M.A. thesis,²⁷ which includes a German translation of the *Beacon*, and examines the sources for Mipham's Mādhyamika interpretation in the writings of Klong chen rab 'byams.

Ehrhard corroborates Smith's hypothesis about the *NK*, with reference to the *Beacon*, and discusses the *Beacon's* seventh topic, concerning whether the Madhyamaka has a philosophical position (*khas len, pratijñā*). He also draws attention to the fact that this problem is resolved in what seems to be a distinctly Nyingma fashion with reference to meditative practice, particularly the gnosis (*ye shes*) of meditative equipoise. I am much indebted to Ehrhard's work for pointing out one of the most important features of Mipham's thought and its historical precedent in the works of Klong chen rab 'byams.

Kapstein (1988) has observed that the conception of the absolute as involving the coalescence of noetic agent and object in Mipham's thought establishes a link between the Buddhist epistemological paradigm (Knowing) and the inseparable reality of the two truths (Being).²⁸ This paper also introduces the unique features of Mipham's system of pramāṇas. Elsewhere Lipman (1992) provides a very helpful introduction to Mipham's system of Buddhist logic and his concept of "conventional valid perception of pure phenomena" (*dag pa'i gzigs pa'i tha snyad dpyod pa'i tshad ma*). Lipman (1980) makes note of Mipham's resolution of a classic interpretive problem in Tibetan tathāgatagarbha theory through the application of Great Perfection terminology. Lipman (1981) also quotes a passage from Mipham's commentary on the *Madhyamakālaṃkāra*, which compares the thought of Candrakīrti with the Great Perfection concept of *ka dag*, or original purity, and clarifies Mipham's position on the Svātantrika/Prāsaṅgika distinction. Sweet (1979) refers to Mipham's interpretation of a controversial line in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* concerning the coalescence of object and subject in meditation upon ultimate reality.²⁹

Thapkhay (1992) is the only English language source where Mipham's and Tsongkhapa's views are explicitly compared. Most of Thapkhay's paper is dedicated to points of contention between Tsongkhapa and other philosophers that do not concern us here,³⁰ but it does provide a helpful synopsis of the Gelug position on the two different kinds of ultimate (*paryāya-* and *aparyāyaparamārtha*).

The work of several other scholars has been very useful in coming to an understanding of the complex relationships among philosophical systems, hermeneutical paradigms, and methods of practice in Tibetan Buddhism. Paul Williams (1989) has pointed out the importance of intellectual-historical context in assessing Tibetan Mādhyamika interpretations. He has also explored some of the basic features of Tsongkhapa's Mādhyamika interpretations (1982) and the controversies surrounding them (1983, 1992). More recently he has discussed Mipham's commentary on the ninth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.³¹ Broido (1985) has discussed the influence of tantra in the Mādhyamika works of Padma dKar po (1526–1592) and Mi bskyod rdo rje (1507–1544). Ruegg (1963) was the first to draw attention to the extrinsic emptiness tradition of Tibetan philosophy and the syncretization of Vajrayāna concepts with dialectical philosophy; Ruegg (1989) highlights the importance of the tathāgatagarbha concept for gradualist and subitist soteriological paradigms. Thurman (1991), Lamotte (1936, 1988), Lopez

(1988b), and N. Katz (1984) have been valuable sources for understanding the definitive/provisional (*nītārtha/neyārtha*) distinction of Buddhist hermeneutics.

The books and articles of H.V. Guenther have been helpful in gaining access to some of the more obscure aspects of the Great Perfection texts and terminology. Whether or not one accepts the thesis of *From Reductionism to Creativity* (1988) that the Great Perfection is the culmination of the history of Buddhist thought, Guenther has clarified how the Great Perfection system is a product of intellectual-historical evolution. Mipham's *Beacon* may be seen as the product of a related process, in this case, the trend of harmonizing dialectical-philosophical and Vajrayāna paradigms (especially the Great Perfection) in Tibetan Buddhism and its Nyingma school. Guenther (1984, 1988) has also noted the "process orientation" of the philosophical aspects of the Great Perfection. In process-oriented thinking, there is no radical break between what we misperceive as existent and what actually exists; truth and falsehood, delusion and enlightenment are part of a continuum that is irreducible to any dichotomy. In this respect, Guenther's understanding of the Buddhist philosophical view is practically the same as Mipham's.

The comparative aspect of my introduction to the three topics of the *Beacon* below (§6.3ff.) would not have been possible without the excellent studies of the Gelug Madhyamaka tradition by Hopkins (1984), Lopez (1987), Napper (1989), and Thurman (1991). An especially useful source has been Newland's *The Two Truths* (1992), a discussion of several Gelugpa scholars' interpretations of that important topic, which like Napper's study includes a detailed discussion of Gelug pūrvapakṣas.

1.5. The Contributions of this Work

While the aforementioned studies all clarify issues prominent in Mipham's thought, there is still much work to be done. The literature of the Nyingma tradition is vast, and very few of its important texts have been subject to thorough study. In the present book I have tried to incorporate the most important contributions of other Western scholars in the area of Nyingma scholarship, and to further explore some of the important issues they have raised.

The *Stainless Light* commentary on the *Beacon* by Mipham's student Khro shul 'Jam rdor (§9) has never before been translated from Tibetan. Though it does not seem to be as well known among Nyingma scholars as that of Kun bzang dpal ldan, it is a valuable resource for understanding Mipham's philosophy and its sources. It contains a number of long excurses and abounds in quotations that link Mipham's thought to the writings of his Nyingma predecessors, Klong chen rab 'byams and Rong zom Paṇḍita, to important Indian sūtras and tantras, and to Pramāṇa and Mādhyamika treatises. Mipham's *Lion's Roar Proclaiming Extrinsic Emptiness (ZT)*, which is included as an appendix (§10), appears to be a unique interpretation of the Tibetan extrinsic emptiness (*gzhan stong*) interpretation of

Madhyamaka, and to my knowledge has not been studied in previous research.

In these translations, Mipham emerges as a syncretist and hermeneutician of the highest order; I think it is fair to say that he was the last great philosopher of pre-Communist Tibet. Tsongkhapa has been widely regarded among Tibetans and in the community of Western scholars of Tibetan Buddhism as having the final word on many points of philosophical interpretation. Though Mipham is by no means Tsongkhapa's equal in historical and cultural significance, this study suggests that he was the most coherent philosophical opponent ever faced by exponents of Gelug philosophy. It is my hope that this work, together with the valuable contributions on which it is built and others that it might inspire, will lead to a wider recognition of Mipham's contributions.

Whether Mipham's thought constitutes a landmark development in the history of Tibetan philosophy remains to be determined. Among the horrible tragedies suffered by Tibet in the last fifty years is the nearly total destruction of the monastic culture, where its greatest intellects were forged in a cauldron of diverse viewpoints sustained by prodigious study, debate, and literary composition. Without such conditions favoring the creative development of philosophy, it is not certain that Mipham's thought will be fully tested in the fire of critical evaluation, which was instrumental in establishing Tsongkhapa's work as the standard against which all subsequent philosophers were measured. In any case Mipham never posed as an innovator, but considered himself to be a caretaker of existing traditions. In this respect his intention has been realized in the numerous Nyingma monasteries, colleges, and retreat hermitages where both his philosophical and liturgical writings are widely used today.

In order to elucidate the interpretations of theory, practice, and ultimate reality set forth by Mipham and his Nyingma predecessors, this work explores various aspects of Buddhist epistemology, hermeneutics, and meditation practice brought to my attention by English-language sources mentioned earlier. Though some relevant features of Mipham's philosophy have been explored by other scholars, the present study attempts to be more comprehensive and inclusive. The only previous published study of Mipham's *Beacon of Certainty* (Ehrhard, op. cit.) deals primarily with the sources of Mipham's Mādhyamika interpretation in the writings of Klong chen rab 'byams, specifically in the context of the seventh topic of the *Beacon*. I have incorporated the most important findings of Ehrhard's research here (§6.2.2), and have also considered the Sakya scholar Go ram pa bSod nams seng ge's *TSB*, which represents, to a large extent, the source of Mipham's Mādhyamika interpretation.³²

Scholarly studies of Nyingma philosophy are few, and those of Mipham Rinpoche even fewer. With the exception of the essays of E. Gene Smith and Yeshe Thabkay, none have made more than passing reference to the relationship between Mipham's philosophy and that of the Gelug school. No previous study has examined the differences between Gelug Madhyamaka and Mipham's thought in detail, and in this respect the present research has broken important ground.

To understand Mipham's thought, it is essential to understand Tsongkhapa, founder of the Gelug tradition and the most influential philosopher in Tibetan history. In order to present Tsongkhapa's views accurately, I have tried to consult all the relevant Western language contributions on Gelug philosophy available. It would have been helpful to discuss the opinions of Tsongkhapa's commentators, as their divergent interpretations were apparently the focus of many of Mipham's critiques;³³ however, sorting out the subtle differences of opinion among Tsongkhapa's commentators would be a daunting task even for seasoned Gelug scholars and is happily left to them. I have used phrases like "Gelug philosophers" and "Gelug philosophy" only where, to the best of my knowledge, the positions ascribed are universally accepted in the Gelug school. However, without being an expert in Gelug philosophy, I do not expect always to have represented its positions adequately. In the detailed discussion of Mipham's and Tsongkhapa's positions in the sixth chapter, I have mainly used the *LRC*, which is one of the most accessible sources for Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka thought, and the most important source for his approach to Mādhyamika analytical meditation. The *LRC* is widely studied outside the Gelug tradition and is not unknown to Nyingma scholars, as Yon tan rgya mtsho's discussion (§6.3.3.1.1) demonstrates.

This study also touches upon one of the most popular subjects in recent Buddhist studies, the dichotomy of "sudden" vs. "gradual" enlightenment. In Tibetan Buddhism, the Mahāmudrā and Great Perfection traditions both allow the possibility of sudden awakening, but two of the most important Indian masters to teach in Tibet, Kamalaśīla (eighth century) and Atiśa (eleventh century), disallowed or ignored this possibility, emphasizing instead a gradual approach. Later scholars such as Sakya Paṇḍita³⁴ and Tsongkhapa³⁵ were likewise wary of subitist approaches, which they considered to be philosophically incoherent.

I would suggest that this dichotomy is false. At the very least, it should not be understood to imply parallel but mutually exclusive universes of philosophical discourse and religious practice. One of Mipham's interesting points about Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka, normally considered the quintessential philosophy of the gradualist vehicle of philosophical dialectics, is that it has a relatively "sudden" approach to eliminating all four extremes of elaboration (**catuṣkoṭiprapaṅca, sprospa*), and is in this respect similar to the Great Perfection, which establishes *ka dag*, or primordial purity. The *Beacon* demonstrates that, as far as Mipham was concerned, a sudden or intuitive approach (the Great Perfection) can be understood in the context of a gradual and rational approach (typified by Madhyamaka), and vice versa. The *Beacon* is, in part, a philosophical justification of the theoretical possibility of sudden enlightenment in the Great Perfection. At the same time, it is an exploration of how gradualist theory and practice can make that possibility a reality.

A related problem that the *Beacon* elucidates is the relationship between reason and enlightenment. The stereotype of Gelug scholars that Nyingmapas sometimes present is one of speedy intellectuals averse to meditation. On the other

hand, Gelug scholars have sometimes accused the Great Perfection and its Nyingma practitioners of holding nihilistic philosophical views and engaging in quietist meditation and antinomian behavior. The *Beacon* clearly demonstrates that Mipham considered philosophical analysis to be an essential tool for the paths of both sūtra and tantra, including the Great Perfection; without it, one risks falling into one or another of these stereotypical extremes.

Mipham's affirmation of reason undoubtedly reflects the influence of Gelug thought. Though no Tibetan scholar has ever denied the necessity of reason, few if any Nyingma scholars have ever affirmed its utility in the same way or to the same degree as Mipham does in the *Beacon*. Mipham defends the Nyingma philosophical system on the basis of the logical and epistemological system of Dharmakīrti and the *reductio ad absurdum* (*prāsaṅgika*) methods of Candrakīrti, the same sources claimed by Tsongkhapa as the foundations of his philosophy. Throughout the *Beacon* and other works, Mipham attempts to show that the Great Perfection is the quintessence of philosophical systems, but with extensive reference to the logical and epistemological concepts of Madhyamaka and Pramāṇa. The *Beacon* indicates that even though reason alone is insufficient to realize the full meaning of the Great Perfection in personal experience, the philosophical view of the Great Perfection can and should be approached through the concepts and methods of critical philosophical analysis.

In spite of their numerous philosophical differences, Mipham and his Gelug opponents shared the following assumptions: (i) Madhyamaka philosophy is essential to understanding the philosophical views of both sūtra and tantra, (ii) a correct philosophical view is essential for correct practice, and thus (iii) logical reasoning plays a crucial role in the Buddhist path. In particular, Mipham and Tsongkhapa have a very similar understanding of the function of rational determination (*nges pa*) and rational-experiential certainty (*nges shes*) in philosophical analysis and meditation practice. Based on these and other reasons, the concluding section of chapter 7 considers the feasibility of asserting the “gospel truth” of Tibetan ecumenism (*ris med*): that Mipham and Tsongkhapa, like all the great saints of Tibetan Buddhism, had a common philosophical understanding (*dgongs pa gcig*).