

Yaroslav Komarovski, *Tibetan Buddhism and Mystical Experience*, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 304, \$ 35.00, ISBN 9780190244903

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Yaroslav Komarovski's latest book attempts at articulating an inspiring connection of a variety of Tibetan Buddhist experiences to the "vague but vogue" (p.10) issue of mystical experience, as it is debated by contemporary scholars of religion. Despite the fact that his enquiry links the broad category of mysticism to only two Tibetan approaches, the outcome of this study will likely have a decisive impact on further research on the notion of mystical experience. Since Komarovski deals with the nature of such experiences from the point of view of the Tibetan tradition, this book dramatically enriches and problematizes our understanding not only of the tradition itself, but also of mysticism in general. Komarovski shows both a mastery of the Tibetan literature and ingenuity in going beyond the Western interpretative models and basic assumptions regarding mystical experiences, borrowing from a distinct approach used by Tibetan thinkers. According to this different framework, the author suggests to shift the focus of analysis from mystical experiences *per se* to the conditioning processes leading to them, as well as and from the descriptive dimension to the practical one. This crucial refocusing discloses unexpected similarities between different traditions as well as making generalizations about mysticism more problematic.

This study is the outstanding result of Komarovski's admirable attempt not only to address the delicate issue of the ineffable but also to link it to the specific context of Tibetan Buddhism. This field of enquiry is in fact particularly challenging in that it lacks the notions of "mysticism" and "religion" and holds a different idea of what "experience" is. The author, with philological and philosophical expertise and his in-depth knowledge acquired at Tibetan monastic universities, lets the Tibetan tradition speak for itself and express what the nature of those experiences means to it. This book, then, allows us to appreciate Tibetan mysticism on its own terms, accessible in a singularly clear and consistent presentation. Moreover, this commendable research will hopefully inspire further studies on current theories of

mysticism in general, leading to mutually beneficial dialogue with Buddhist philosophies.

The study is divided into five chapters. The first four “provide necessary background” (p.9) for the last chapter, where Komarovski actually demonstrates the efficacy of refocusing the analysis of mystical experiences on the practical dimensions rather than on the descriptive ones. Nevertheless, it is in the first four chapters that we find all the elements that challenge the contemporary scholarly debates on mysticism and suggest new perspectives. Then, their concrete application in the last chapter is primarily relevant to those interested in Tibetan Buddhist Studies.

The first chapter, *The Mystical Panorama*, links the broad issue of mystical experience to Tibetan Buddhism. After a brief overview of the structure of the book, the author identifies within the Tibetan tradition those elements most closely related to the Western notion of mysticism. Thus, he finds that in Buddhism what approximates to our category of “mystical experience”, and in particular the unmediated one, is in general the deconstructing process that demolishes conceptuality and dualistic thinking; especially its culmination: the direct realization of ultimate reality or emptiness, an indispensable component of awakening. Out of the author’s philological survey on the terms “mysticism” and “experience” in the Tibetan literature, it is worthwhile pointing out his findings about the category of “experience”. To have a proper equivalent in Tibetan terms, we have to consider not only experiences (*nyams myong*) *per se*, conceived as by-products of spiritual progress, but primarily realizations (*rtogs pa*) or insights into reality. Therefore it has to be acknowledged that the realization of ultimate reality has an indisputable experiential quality: “experience” and “realization” are here interchangeable. The last part of the chapter appraises the two rival theories that, in the Western contemporary debates, address the issue of unmediated mystical experience: Stephen Katz’s constructivist position and Robert Forman’s essentialist one. Komarovski systematically argues that both parties’ general schemas, that claim to be applied to various mystical experiences across diverse religions, are not compatible with the specific Tibetan Buddhist ones.

Since Western general categories are not applicable to them, in the second and third chapters the author demonstrates the

indispensability of the Buddhist specific models when we are to analyse their experiences. He addresses two crucial dimensions that interdependently converge in describing and shaping the mystical experience of ultimate reality: mind and Buddhist paths. The latter are progressive mental transformations connected to mystical experiences, and those mental processes are to be understood as located on some level of the paths.

The second chapter, *The Mind Dimension*, addresses the most common models of mind in the Tibetan tradition. They suggest a conception of mind not as a container, to be somehow emptied of thoughts, but rather as a multi-layered dimension of diverse states arising from a base of luminosity and awareness. The author then addresses the important distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual mind: even if a conceptual understanding of reality is unable to be the direct antidote to the obscurations that prevent one from achieving nirvāṇa or Buddhahood, conceptuality itself is the necessary means to reach the direct realization of ultimate reality and, afterwards, describe it. Lastly, the chapter targets the issue of an alleged cross-cultural contentless consciousness – as advocated by Forman – in the Tibetan tradition. Komarovski argues effectively that such a mind cannot be found in any type of consciousness posited by Tibetan thinkers. Therefore, there appears to be no unmediated mystical experience that could be considered (by them at least) common to both Buddhists and non-Buddhists, a possible basis for a cross-cultural mysticism.

The third chapter, *The Path Dimension*, first offers a brief overview of the different paths, sketching the so-called “ten grounds – five paths” (*sa bcu – lam lnga*) general model and relating it to more experiential and personal models. The chapter aims at showing the function of the paths dimension: explaining when and why certain mystical experiences and realizations are believed to occur. Those paths are thus progressive mental states, the previous ones conditioning the following ones, eventually leading to spontaneous and high-level experiences. Offering various references for his arguments, Komarovski brilliantly contends that each mystical experience has to be mediated and conditioned by specific processes and therefore needs causes and conditions, both direct and indirect. Thus, the direct realization of emptiness, even if not conceptually mediated when it actually occurs, is necessarily mediated by a conditioning process, namely, the Buddhist paths. In the last

pages of the chapter, Komarovski shifts the focus to the deconstructive or negative process of realization of ultimate reality. Although it is depicted by most of the Tibetan thinkers as ineffable and inconceivable, some consider it as a sheer negation and others include positive elements.

The fourth chapter, *Mystical Complexities*, opens by addressing the topic of the ineffability of ultimate reality in Tibetan Buddhism. Although inexpressible and non-conceptually realized, it can be pointed at in different ways: right and wrong ones. Its partial descriptions, when correct, are said to be fully useful for us to correctly engage the object of contemplation and get closer to the direct realization of emptiness. Moreover, Komarovski makes a crucial point explaining that philosophical polemics, rather than mere scholastic or sectarian debates, are intended to efficaciously affect mystical experiences and, in turn, are also triggered by them. Although conceptual in nature, polemics can be important tools if internalized during the contemplative practice in order to deconstruct our grasping to reality. Lastly, the chapter focuses on the commonalities that some Tibetan thinkers believe they share despite the wide range of positions and practices: in some cases, the same experiences are said to be achievable in different ways. Therefore, for an in-depth analysis of the topic of Tibetan mysticism, the author provides a list of three elements for comparing different outlooks and practices: 1. processes leading to the realization of ultimate reality; 2. descriptions of them; 3. corresponding results of abandonments of certain negative qualities and ideas. While the second element is descriptive, the first and the third belong to the practical level. Komarovski bases this division into two levels, the descriptive and the practical, on the works of Shakyas Chokden. This Tibetan scholar's perspective on the two philosophical systems of Alīkākāravāda and Niḥsvabhāvavāda goes against the common trends of Tibetan scholarly thought: he is alone in proving them as equally valid and efficient Madhyamaka systems, both able to achieve the same realization of ultimate reality despite providing different means and different philosophical outlooks. Thus he argues that different processes and descriptions nevertheless lead to the same outcome, since their different tools are equally efficient to access the same level of realization.

In the final chapter, *Contesting the Ultimate Experience*, Shakyas Chokden's original approach is applied by Komarovski to two

other Tibetan systems that are so radically divergent and rival that they have been asserting their own identity through this very reciprocal criticism. In fact, the Geluk and Sakya traditions, following Tsongkhapa and Gorampa respectively, when addressing the topic of direct realization of ultimate reality in the context of Niḥsvabhāvavāda, have incompatible philosophical accounts. But to what extent do they really diverge? The author argues that they would differ only in terms of articulations of the process leading to the mystical experience of ultimate reality but not on the practical level of its actual contemplation, since they provide similar processes and eliminate hindrances in order to achieve the same result. The author presents the Geluk position first and then the Sakya one, positing three main elements for each, which sketch how the process of contemplation of emptiness is seen in each system. With admirable philological rigour the author argues that, when carefully examined, those differences do not affect the actual contemplation of emptiness despite their irreconcilable philosophical outlooks. In order to establish the compatibility of the two stances on a practical level, so that they are able to achieve the same level of realization, Komarovski claims that the means provided by both target the very mode of appearance of phenomena to ordinary mind.

In *Conclusion and Final Remarks* we can perceive the crucial importance of the approach the author has adopted, shifting the focus of the analysis from the description of mystical experiences to the practical approaches conditioning and leading to them. Revealing unlikely similarities between different systems, such as the Sakya and Geluk, Komarovski's interpretative model borrowed from Shakya Chokden has the fortunate impact of making generalizations about mysticism much less appealing. Not only does it drive our attention towards the mystical aspects of the Tibetan tradition, it also questions the applicability of alleged general categories on a cross-cultural scale. Such claims will hopefully challenge the contemporary debate to loosen its grip on Eurocentric assumptions and grow to appreciate the relevance of emic theories.