Review

Tibetan Buddhism and Mystical Experience, by Yaroslav Komarovski. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 285pp., £86 (hb). ISBN: 9780190244958

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In *Tibetan Buddhism and Mystical Experience*, Yaroslav Komarovski brings the insights of his primary Tibetan Buddhist interlocutor Shakya Chokden to bear on the Western academic category of mysticism, to argue for a reorientation of the field. As part of the author's ongoing project of explicating the teachings of the Sakya school member, this work argues that Chokden's emphasis on separating the descriptive and practical dimensions of mystical experience—in order to focus on the latter—can serve as a fruitful way forward as the field of mysticism faces uncertain terrain with the fall of perennialism as a credible model.

The first chapter surveys the state of the field of mysticism studies, explaining the divide between 'constructivists' on the one hand and 'perennialists' on the other, while also making the case for the applicability of the term 'mystical' to Tibetan Buddhist spiritual experience. The second and third chapters respectively give remedial overviews of Tibetan Buddhist theories of mind and the path, showing that Tibetan Buddhist thinkers share many core assumptions on the nature of both while also disagreeing on the nature of mystical experiences and the ability of different spiritual paths and philosophical schools to offer the same results. The fourth chapter covers mediation and polemics in describing mystical experiences in Tibetan Buddhism, and illustrates how Shakya Chokden saw the competing schools of Niḥsvabhāvavāda and Alikākāravāda both reach the same result—an unmediated mystical experience of emptiness—even while disagreeing entirely on the descriptive level of that same experience. Finally, chapter 5 applies Shakya Chokden's method of separating the descriptive and practical levels of mystical experience to argue for a rapprochement between Tsongkhapa and Gorampa's respective philosophical schools, in which both traditions

reach their common goal in spite of their polemic antagonism. The conclusion then argues for the utility of this approach within mysticism studies, such that the scholar can analyse the specific methods in comparative mystical traditions rather than focusing on deceptively similar descriptions, a method of analysis that has come under fire in previous decades.

As the book is aimed primarily at scholars of mysticism (and not scholars of Tibetan Buddhism), most of the chapters serve as useful primers on many core ideas and assumptions within Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. Komarovski presents a compelling argument for a reorientation within mysticism studies to avoid the pitfalls that have plagued the field since the postmodern and postcolonial turn in the 1970's. This reorientation, focusing on the practical means of spiritual practice which give rise to mystical experience, offers a potentially fruitful way forward in comparative mysticism, and should prove exciting for scholars of the field. Furthermore, Komarovski makes a compelling case for the applicability of Buddhist theories of mind to enrich Western and non-Buddhist theories of the same.

However, at the same time the work is somewhat underdeveloped in specific ways. Given that the author acknowledges early on in the book that a core critique of mysticism studies is postcolonial in nature, it is curious that this work devotes so little space to addressing this issue. Komarovski states in the conclusion that his work that he aimed to problematize the tendency to apply Western models to non-Western phenomena, however this then begs the question of why the author should find it unproblematic to apply the term 'mystical' to Tibetan Buddhism at all. The current author wonders whether this line of inquiry could lead to the common existential issues endemic to mysticism studies more broadly, thus undermining Komarovski's project. However, in the end this is a minor quibble.

All told, this is an accomplished work that threads the needle between the current deadlock in mysticism studies as well as the internal polemics of Tibetan Buddhism, capably intervening in several arguments and fields at once. While Tibetan Buddhist scholars would probably be more drawn to the author's other works on Shakya Chokden, this book should help inspire mysticism scholars as they face the field's currently uncertain terrain.