The eighth century marks a period in which the Buddhist Madhyamikas were challenged to express the great truths of their tradition in new ways, in response to the changing intellectual climate of sixth to eighth century Indian thought. Their challenge was threefold. First, they were called to respond to the critiques of Madhyamaka made by the Yogacarins Sthiramati and Dharmapala. Secondly, their response needed to grant a subtle accommodation to the epistemological terminology and style popularised by the great Buddhist logicians Dinnaga and Dharmakirti. (By the time of Dharmakirti, the school of Buddhist epistemology had become powerful enough to affect the way any Buddhist philosopher shaped arguments and posed questions.) Finally, these challenges had to be met in a form that remained true to the convictions of the Madhyamaka tradition itself.

It is in this context that we place the work of the eighth century philosopher Jñanagarbha. His insights are important not only as an authoritative and original expression of the heart of Svatantrika Madhyamaka. In addition, his work highlights the extent to which the Madhyamakan tradition had, by Jñanagarbha’s time, absorbed the preoccupations and terminology of the Buddhist epistemologists. Jñanagarbha accepts their terms and precepts at the conventional level, only to deny them at the level of the ultimate. As such, his work presents a distinctively Madhyamakan twist on Buddhist epistemology.

As a necessary prelude, I’ll begin by discussing the notion of dependent arising as the factor that differentiates an ultimate truth from a merely conventional one. I’ll then explicate Jñanagarbha’s account of the difference between conventional truth and conventional falsity, which depends upon a characterisation of the conventional truth as that which: (i) corresponds with appearances, and (ii) is capable of effective action (arthakriyā).

The second part of my paper will form an attempt to compare Jñanagarbha’s account of conventional truth with the Western notion of contextual truth popularised by the later Wittgenstein, Rorty, and, more recently, by figures like Williams, Norman and Annis. Contextualism in epistemology refers to a cluster of views sharing a family resemblance, rather than a set doctrine. A key claim of the contextualist is that whether some or other belief is justified is dependent upon the context in which it is asserted. A context consists of all relevant information and evidence that supports the belief in question (and may be relativised to an individual, a pair of interlocutors, or a community, depending on one’s philosophical interests and purposes).

I want to discuss three similarities between conventional and contextual truth. Firstly, that both notions relativise truth to the information and evidence available to the claimant at the time. Secondly, that both conventionally true beliefs and contextually true beliefs can lead one to perform effective action, even if such truths are not of ultimate or absolute status. Thirdly, the assessment of whether an action is effective or not is, itself, a merely conventionally true, or context-bound, judgment.
My intention will be to show that, despite temporal and geographical distance, Jñanagarbha’s epistemological position has some significant affinities with the brand of contextualism popularised by Williams and Norman. These similarities may be used as stepping-stones to help one intellectual tradition come to understand the concerns and values of another. Nonetheless, the soteriological and humanistic concern of the Madhyamikas will always differentiate their brand of epistemology from the purely philosophical concern of the Western epistemologist.